

Review

S Viswanath

Macbeth: Myopic, Miasmatic ‘Inspirations’

Dileesh Pothan's Joji comes across as enterprising & engaging cinema, while others turn out rather salacious, slapdash (mis)adventures.

Literary adaptations by film-makers have always been a tricky proposition. While some stay true to the text to the 'T'. Others revel in making suitable (some obnoxious) departures, retaining just a sliver of the original inspiration. As if to stamp their own individuality on the inspired text. One may well argue it is film maker's prerogative how one interprets the text that has triggered its visual retelling in the film form. However, just retaining the kernel of an otherwise classical literary work, glibly garnishing the film to suit the maker's febrile interpretation is not a done thing. Nothing can be more insulting and demeaning than that to the author – dead or alive.

That unfortunately, and woefully, has been the case with the Bard of Avon William Shakespeare's very many plays. Not that the revered Indian epics – *The Ramayan* and *The Mahabharat* – have not fallen prey to puerile, pitiable and pathetic renditions.

Primarily pandering to baser instincts of mass audiences to have cash registers clinking.

Actually, Shakespeare must have turned in his grave every time there was an Indian version of his play, specifically *Macbeth*, in this case. Until of course, director Dileesh Pothan and screenwriter Syam Pushkaran's "inspired" *Joji* joined the scroll of film makers, by interpreting the Bard's play to delectable and ensemble effect. For prior to Pothan-Pushkaran's "not a direct version of *Macbeth*" but "inspired by its theme," as Fahadh Faasil film's producer and lead actor (bravura performance) puts it, making *Joji* a pleasurable engaging experience.

You had the great (pun intended) music composer turned film director Vishal Bharadwaj foisting *Maqbool*, irrepressible Malayalam director Jayaraj's grandiloquent martial art epic *Veeram*, and young Kannada film director Abhaya Simha's

modern day rendition with *Paddayi*. Mind you, besides the Indian filmic transpositions of the nearly 415 years old play, you have had at least six international adaptations/ inspirations by various directors in the last five years itself.

These being – *Macbeth* (2015, 2018), *Lady Macbeth* (2016), *Ghost Light* (2018), and *Stained* (2019). You have also had renowned auteurs Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa and Roman Polanski, bring their own versions of the famous, fatalistic play. There is one more in the making by Joel Cohen of Cohen brothers titled *The Tragedy of Macbeth* with recent Best Actress Oscar winning *Nomadland* star Frances McDormand playing Lady Macbeth.

But the “tragedy” of gargantuan proportions, the three Indian versions of *Macbeth*, by Bharadwaj, Jayaraj and Simha, which, incidentally, each director, proudly claims in title credits to having been “adapted,” sadly flatters to deceive. Their emphasis on overtly “sexual”, “explicit body show” and “lust play” with overzealous pursuit of the “sex quotient” than subtle, serious and sober look at how overarching “avarice,” “ambition,” “guilt”, leading to “penitence” spells doom of the murderous person and his co-conspirator, makes one roil at their audaciousness to alter the text to their whimsy fancies.

In fact, a cursory revisit of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as part of this treatise, one found nowhere has the playwright overtly or covertly dwelt upon “lust” or “sexual trysts” at all as a trigger. It only bespeaks of the prophesy / oracle of three witches, goading of his “opportunistic” over-zealous wife to gird himself to “greed” and “ambitious” action bringing death and doom of both once their conscience are stricken with guilt and remorse at their deeds is what the play is all about.

Each of Indian filmic “adaptations” “inspiration” have done away with witches per se but not the occult or oracle portion which are perfunctory to the plotline pursued. If Bhardwaj transposes them (witches) as corrupt, gun-toting, trigger happy buffoonery horoscope reading cops.

Jayaraj conveniently supplants his with exploitative naked, nubile virginal lass to up the male gaze “voyeur-lust” quotient who mouths the forecast, while Simha invokes local *Bootha Kola* spirit to deliver the prophesy (at least this is tastefully done)

and in keeping with the local cultural and folklore traditions.

Given that theirs is more of a modern day film that speaks of family’s “expectation” of ancestral property, Pothan-Pushkaran have done away with witches and oracle bit, finding it superfluous to their “inspired” and inventive narrative, cleverly concentrating on scheming persona and inner psyche of people populating PK Kuttapan Panachel household.

Yes, as Simha posits: “it is not necessary to be honest to the text, but be honest to life being represented.” Sure. But Bharadwaj, Jayaraj and Simha, have, however, conveniently done away with what was not “sellable” part of *Macbeth*.

Sexing up their films with “sultry, sensual play” to eyeball popping proportions, unlike Pothan-Pushkaran who have wisely grounded their film on how greed could stir up even the most lethargic male into affirmative and destructive action.

If Bhardwaj believed in dressing up *Maqbool* with illicit comeuppance cupid-play of Irfan and Tabu (note they are not husband-wife, she being wedded to an aging don who satiates his sexual needs).



Likewise, you had Jayaraj introducing two nymphets pleasuring and goading Chandu Chekaver to avaricious action denuding and disrobing for lascivious viewers’ voyeuristic pleasure. One could even term it as virtually semi-porn stuff.

Simha, on his part, while faithfully retaining original kinship (newlywed husband-wife) conveniently spices it up with their sensuous love play and body show besides the ‘bawdy’ dialogues between not only husband and wife but also the two fishermen friends, to supplant the film’s amorous quotient. Further, embellishing it with needless eroticism with the wife enamoured by a Dubai scent that sends her to ecstatic and esoteric imaginations as an allegorical afterthought.

Pothan has, however, cleverly and subtly constructed an “understated, unwritten, undercurrent sexual frisson” between *Joji* and his sister-in-law, without any indulgent physicality to stir audiences perverse imagination. Their matter-of-fact encounters predominantly in the kitchen with *Joji* gorging on her cooked meals in no way vitiates viewer’s aesthetic experience, while others have stooped to tasteless vulgarity besmirching film’s rendition of the tragic play.



Furthermore, while others have taken to highly stylised, violent and bloody narrative structure in keeping with the general ambience their films have been set in. Pothan, has, however, eschewed such overt, visual exhibitionism, minimalistically rendering *Joji* more relatable and realistic sedate tale of destructive “greed,” which is what *Macbeth’s* all about. There is no over the top situations at all in *Joji* with each of the players going through their dull, diurnal duties waiting for the demise of the family head so that they can inherit their respective portions and settle each other’s dire financial commitments.

For example, you have Bharadwaj conveniently locating his Bollywoodian *Macbeth* (*Maqbool*) in the familiar corruptive Mumbai underworld, its scheming dons, their lieutenants, rivalries, and bloody gang war, with two cops as convenient cogs to oil and grease the gangland warfare.

Jayaraj, on the other hand, transports one to 13th Century with Kalaripayattu warrior snared into

“avaricious ambition” by two self-serving women – Unni Archa and Kuttimani - drawn from the Kerala folklore based on the ballads of North Malabar.

A tale, tradition, and terrain he is so familiar and appreciable evoked through both art, set and production design with music adding sheen to the richness of the visual appeal.

Simha, conveniently sets his in the rough and tough, ebb and flow of the high tide sea washed shores of Mangaluru and the fishing community, the fishing trawlers, their business rivalry benign and contended traditionalists vs money minded mechanised owners, a milieu he knows hands down himself being from that part of Karnataka.

Pothan has situated *Joji* in the familiar everyday setting of a joint family wherein the disciplinarian and doughty patriarch, robust as ever, still building his biceps, despite his failing health, defying death standing rock solid between their expectation and inheritance that would change their lives for the better.

Where subtlety mattered as in *Joji*, wherein each of the emotions is conveyed through nuanced body language, as they go about their daily chores in mundane manner, Bharadwaj, Jayaraj and Simha, on the other hand, take recourse to embellishing it with seductive, incestuous and salacious screenplay with needless bloodletting that, in no way, justifies Shakespeare’s play of royal subterfuge of vaulting ambition and calamitous downfall.

Therein, lies the triumph of Pothan’s pure play, fluid and fascinating *Joji*, unlike the earlier three lavish productions. Their directors concentrating more on the vacuous atmospherics, wanton theatrics and audacious adult play than get into the meat and pith of Shakespearean’s tragic, political and moralistic royal drama whose import being greed and vaulting ambition can bring one’s ruin and downfall. Sad!

■ *Mr. S Viswanath is a Member of FIPRESCI-India, based in Bangalore.*