



Article

“Are Ye Fantastical?”: Shakespeare’s Weird W[omen] in the 21st-Century Indian Adaptations *Maqbool*, *Mandaar* and *Joji*

Subarna Mondal ^{1,*}  and Anindya Sen ²¹ Department of English, The Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata 700 073, India² Department of English, Assam University, Assam 788 011, India; anindya.mail@gmail.com

* Correspondence: subsar510@gmail.com

Abstract: Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* has traveled a long way from its original milieu. This paper takes three major 21st-century Indian adaptations of *Macbeth* as its primary texts. The city of Mumbai in the west in *Maqbool*, an imaginary coastal Bengal village in the east in *Mandaar*, and the suburbs of Kerala in *Joji* in the south of the subcontinent become sites of “creative mistranslations” of the play. In this paper, we take the ambiguity that Shakespeare’s witches evoke in the early 17th-century Scottish world as a point of entry and consider how that ambiguity is translated in its 21st-century Indian on-screen adaptations. Cutting across spatiotemporal boundaries, the witches remain a source of utmost significance through their presence/absence in the adaptations discussed. In *Maqbool*, Shakespeare’s heath-hags become male upper-caste law-keepers, representing the tyrannies of state machinery. *Mandaar*’s witches become direct agents of Mandaar’s annihilation at the end after occupying a deceptively marginal position in the sleazy world of Gailpur. In an apparent departure, *Joji*’s world is shorn of witches, making him appear as the sole perpetrator of the destruction in a fiercely patriarchal family. A closer reading, however, reveals the ominous presence of some insidious power that defies the control of any individual. The compass that directs *Macbeth* and its adaptations, from the West to the East, from 1606 to date, is the fatalism that the witches weave, in their seeming absence as well as in their portentous presence. We cannot help but consider them as yardsticks in any tragedy that deals with the age-old dilemma of predestination and free will.

Keywords: adaptation; witches; Weird Sisters; predestination; free will; James I; *Daemonologie*; *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*; *Macbeth*; *Maqbool*; *Mandaar*; *Joji*



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1. The “Witch” World of 17th Century Europe

... [Y]ou unnatural hags,

I will have such revenges on you both

... I will do such things—

What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be

The terrors of the earth. (Shakespeare’s (2013) *King Lear*, 1605–1606, II. ii. ll. 467–71)

The raving of Shakespeare’s old Lear is followed by Cornwall’s warning: “Let us withdraw; ‘twill be a storm” (II. ii. l. 476). And there is a storm.

Shakespeare’s wronged old men seem to have the same powers that the “witches” of the time were suspected of possessing. The cruelty of Lear’s daughters prompts a rage in Lear that finds a corresponding sympathetic turmoil in nature similar to nature’s response after the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* (1606), where the sun darkens, and an owl kills a falcon in Scotland. Storm-raising is also a favorite with Prospero in *The Tempest* (1610–1611). However, unsurprisingly, being a man, he is not labeled a “witch” for his “mischief” in the play. In 16th- and 17th-century Europe, the sudden spurts of wind and their consequent effect on seamen were commonly attributed to coastal “witches”.¹ Shakespeare’s England

was no exception. Towards the end of the 16th century, witchery was a much-discussed issue in England. Two significant texts of the time attest that myths associated with “witches” were a topic of keen debate among both the elites and the masses. While Scot’s (2019) *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (first published in 1584) refuted the existence of witchery, King James I’s (2008) *Daemonologie* (first published in 1597) railed against the evil of “witches” and their pact with the Devil.

Alleged attempts at regicide, supposedly carried out by a group of famous Scottish coastal “witches” along with James I’s cousin, Francis Stewart Hepburn, 5th Earl of Bothwell, became a subject of a raging controversy in late-16th-century Scotland. Consequently, from November 1590 to May 1591, numerous trials for sedition by sorcery took place in Scotland. King James I himself was an avid follower of these trials. Larner (2019) in *The Reign of James VI and I*, states,

During the course of these trials, it was alleged that over 300 witches had gathered at various times to perform treason against the king. They were supposed to have raised storms while the king and his bride were at sea, to have attempted to effect his death by melting his effigy in wax, to have indulged in hitherto unheard-of obscene rituals in the kirk of North Berwick in the physical presence of their master, the devil. (Larner 2019, p. 79)

Several factors at the time led to extensive interrogations and witch-hunts: three botched attempts to bring King James I’s wife from Denmark to Scotland, James’ six-month stay in Denmark (a place popular for witch-hunting), his hazardous journey back, and a series of tempests coupled with the death of Jean Kennedy, the lady-in-waiting of James’ mother (Mary Queen of Scots) by a shipwreck. The questionings uncovered a plot that was supposedly planned by a coven of Scottish and Danish “witches” to kill the King with the assistance of the Devil himself. Robert E. Moore (1961) in “The Music to ‘Macbeth’” reminds us of Sir William Davenant’s introduction of “a new musical scene in the second act” (p. 22) that is a direct reference to the witches’ proclivity for regicide in his 1663 adaptation:

We should rejoice when good Kings bleed.
When cattle die, about we go,
What then, when Monarchs perish, should we do? (p. 27)

In line with James I’s premonition, Davenant shows them as almost parasitic on the lifeblood of the king: “We gain more life by Duncan’s death” (p. 28). Davenant’s adaptation pays closer attention to this anti-royalist aspect of the “witches”, reminding us of the treason trials in James I’s realm (see Larner 1981, pp. 80–82).²

These treason-cum-sorcery trials were followed by James I’s publication of his *Daemonologie* in 1597, which attests to the power of the witches’ incantations and their ability to destroy “God’s subjects” by melting wax images. The publication of Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, its condemnation by James through his *Daemonologie*, the rise in the number of witch-hunts after the publication of *Daemonologie*, and a new stringent English Witchcraft Act passed in 1604 all had a profound influence on the playwrights of the time. Middleton, Jonson, Dekker, Ford, and Heywood all dabbled in Elizabethan and Jacobean witch lore. Shakespeare, unsurprisingly, with his love of the theatrical, gladly exploited the sensational, violent, and comic potential of this world of witches, devils, fairies, conjurers, and wizards. *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597) invokes a feigned fairy world around Falstaff in the last act, while *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595–1596) shows Oberon directly intervening in the lives of the love-struck young Athenians.

Shakespeare’s use of the magic world assumes a darker shade in his history plays. He follows Holinshed closely and draws Joan of Arc in the mold of a vindictive witch in the first part of *Henry VI* (1589–1592). In the second part of *Henry VI* (1591), we have a typical sorcerer’s scene where the witch Margery Jordan and Roger Bolingbroke summon the apparition of Asmath, who predicts the future course of the King’s life (much like *Macbeth*’s Apparition Scene). Again, Edward’s wife is called “that monstrous witch” (III. iv. l. 73) by

Gloucester in [Shakespeare's \(2009\) *Richard III*](#) (1592–1594) and is accused of being responsible for the maiming of Gloucester's limb. Repeated references to conjurers, tricksters, and witches show contemporary English audience's familiarity with and fascination for the damned. Shakespeare caters to that fascination, not only in his comedies and his chronicle plays but also in his tragedies, the most significant among them being *Macbeth*, staged in 1606.

Shakespeare's storm-raising vindictive witches, their pact with the devil, and the protagonist's counsel with the apparitions all form a significant part of the play that opens with the inverted witch world upon a blasted heath. Despite the powerfully malevolent presence of the witches, *Macbeth's* world oscillates between belief and skepticism about witchery, as espoused by King James and Reginald Scot, respectively. Shakespeare's deliberate attempt at ambiguity about the witches and their power over Macbeth reflects the dilemma of late-Elizabethan and early-Jacobean audiences' response to the witch myth. The myth of the witch is inextricably linked with the myth of prophecy—the supposed ability to look into “the seeds of time”. A witch, therefore, is often interpreted as an agent of Fate or as Fate itself, drawing us to one of the most popular debates about Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies—the debate over predestination and free will.

Macbeth does not wholly fit into the “tragedy of character” grand narrative. What stands in the way of a clear fit is the ambiguous, perhaps intentionally ambiguous, nature of the role played by the witches in Macbeth's career. A sense of inevitability makes the story of Macbeth archetypal. The protagonist transgresses against his King, against Nature, against God, thereby unleashing forces of disorder and malevolence until he is brutally punished, and order in Nature and God's will is restored. The archetypal nature of the story is not the only factor that lends a sense of inevitability to *Macbeth*. The witches act to reinforce the feeling that this is all destined, that this is the *only* way and there could not be any other way.

The various adaptations of the play testify that interpretations of Macbeth's story depend significantly on how one reads the Weird Sisters' role. Alexa Alice [Joubin \(2022\)](#), in “Sinophone Shakespeare”, speaks of Lü Po-shen's *huaju* musical adaptation, *The Witches' Sonata* (2007), where the adaptation excludes the battle scenes and the male characters of the play. It concentrates on the three masked witches, who, assuming the roles of “other personas” of the play, underlining the fluidity and adaptability of the witches that reflect the very spirit of a Shakespearean text ([Joubin 2022](#), p. 13). In his attempt to read the adaptations of *Macbeth* as part of a larger cultural lexicon, [Carroll \(2022\)](#), in *Adapting Macbeth: A Cultural History*, points out that “the ruling themes for *Macbeth* seem to be the witches, Lady Macbeth, blood, and a handful of the more famous speeches” (p. 3) It follows that the “witches” are not only significant in the plot of the play but are also bound to be an integral part of the myriad metamorphoses that the text and its cultural connotations undergo. The adaptations vary wildly and widely in how they integrate the witches into their narrative. This one element ends up transforming the entire tenor and significance of the adapted version.

2. The “Witches” of *Macbeth*: From Welles to Coen

[Kurosawa's \(1957\)](#) witch is old and wasted. She is a part of the intricate forest that plays a significant role in Washizu's (Macbeth's) life in *Throne of Blood*. Based on the Noh and Kabuki traditions, Kurosawa's tale of medieval Japan shows the old, withered woman in a hut spinning thread. Her act of spinning the spindle reminds us of the Three Fates-Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos of Greek mythology. Kurosawa's witch, unlike Shakespeare's, is not associated with the idea of evil or good. She suggests inevitability. She is at one with the forest, a forest whose labyrinthine ways and layers look like Washizu's distorted corridors of power. When the same forest comes forward to swallow Washizu at the end, we understand the inexorability of its forward march.

[Welles' \(1948\)](#) witches in *Macbeth*, again, are a part of the darkness, the fog, and the craggy hills around. They are introduced to us through close shots of their fingers shaping

a figurine of Macbeth (much in the spirit of making a voodoo doll)³. We may find a visual equivalence of their “choppy” twisted fingers in the gaunt bare branches of the barren trees that adorn Macbeth’s castle and that appear and reappear at several crucial junctures of the film. Macbeth states:

Ere the bat hath flown
His cloistered flight; ere to black Hecate’s summons
The shard-borne beetle, with his drowsy hums,
Hath rung night’s yawning peal, there shall be done
A deed of dreadful note. (Shakespeare’s (2008) *Macbeth*, III. ii. ll. 40–44)

With these disconcerting words, the camera follows Macbeth closely. As he looks up at the twisted leafless tree that predominates the scene, the boughs seem to transform from the warped fingers of the witches into almost the figures of witches dancing and weaving their spell around him (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Macbeth before the leafless twisted boughs, *Macbeth* (1948), screengrab.

Macbeth addresses them, “Come, seeling Night,/Scar’f up the tender eye of pitiful Day” (III. ii. ll. 46–47). This addressing of his dark ambitions to a barren set of branches portends his perverse career. He moves from committing regicide to killing his friend to massacring children and women of Macduff’s family. Welles’ witches, unlike Kurosawa’s, are sketched as agents of the Devil.

Polanski’s (1971) *Macbeth* toes the line of Welles, as his witches are straight out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Polanski’s witches are malevolent and quirky. In a remarkable departure from other adaptations, Polanski shows Lady Macbeth (in the sleepwalking scene) and the witches (in the apparition scene) naked. Both these scenes, closely following each other, are a direct reference to Lady Macbeth being read as the Fourth Witch. As popularly believed, while the witches lend purpose to Macbeth’s career as a usurper, Lady Macbeth gives it direction. But the nude sleepwalking scene focuses on the difference between Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters by foregrounding Lady Macbeth’s powerlessness over life and over Macbeth. We find Macbeth turning his back to her and seeking the Weird Sisters in a cave brimming with naked witches. The witches have gained what Lady Macbeth has lost—her husband’s faith and dependence.

Kurzel’s (2015) *Macbeth*, unlike Welles’ *Macbeth* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, is not preoccupied with fertility and barrenness. Kurzel’s film opens with the death of Macbeth’s child. Kurzel’s *Macbeth* is concerned with the destruction of young vibrant lives. The first

battle of the film shows the relentless slaughtering of young soldiers, with the camera paying close attention to the butchering of young boys in the prime of life. Amidst it all, Macbeth sees the three witches. Kurzel includes a fourth witch—a very young girl by their side. The young girl resembles the “Daughter of a Witch” in a legend famous in “Ireland, Scotland, Norway, and Denmark” (Mac Cárthaigh 1992, p. 271), who has learned the tricks of Black Magic from her mother. She may also represent another facet of Kurzel’s fixation on the young and their devastation. Several other instances indicate Kurzel’s focus on the young and their plight—frequent shots of the warmth shared by Banquo and Fleance, the recurrent shots of several children playing in and around Inverness, Lady Macbeth’s song for Duncan accompanied by a host of young girls, her hallucination of her young child in the sleepwalking scene, the infant in the lap of one of the witches, the young dead boy leading Macbeth to Duncan’s tent in the dagger hallucination scene, and close shots of Macduff’s young boys tied to the stakes are a few. These images of young and adolescent characters, often on the brink of destruction, serve as constant reminders that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are, after all, bereaved parents. Kurzel’s witches do not scheme or plot. They are neither vindictive nor tempting. They exonerate the grieving parents from the sins they are about to commit. Macbeth in Kurzel never becomes evil, and the witches’ reaction reflects the viewers’ reaction here.

Joel Coen’s (2022) *The Tragedy of Macbeth* hints at the viewers’ reaction to the witch and the world she presents. Like Kurosawa, Coen experiments with a single witch. The witch of Coen is grotesque. She can split herself into three identical figures. She can also transmute from a midnight hag to hordes of crows and ravens. She is identified with “the crow” in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* that “makes wing to th’ rooky wood” (III. ii. ll. 50–51). This “night’s black agent”, in short, fits seamlessly into Coen’s cinematic world of transgressors, offenders, and rebels. She tempts Macbeth, but she also signifies the universal nature of the bleakness of life.

3. Balance of Power: The “Witches” in *Maqbool*

Speaking on adaptation studies, Robert Stam addresses the problem of “fidelity”. From Stam’s significant question, “Fidelity to what?” (Stam 2000, *Beyond Fidelity*, p. 58), we have moved to “Shakespearean adaptation post-fidelity” (Lanier 2014 in “Shakespeare Rhizomatics”, p. 27). The focus has shifted from Shakespeare texts and their adaptations to a dialogue perhaps among the adaptations. Taking a cue from Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the “rhizome”, Lanier describes these adaptations as “a process of endless ‘becoming’” (Lanier 2014, p. 27). We may now turn to the 21st-century Indian adaptations of this early 17th-century tale of an ambitious Scottish thane and see how three powerful adaptations set more or less in contemporary times with three different loci trace this course of constant “becoming”.

Bhardwaj’s (2003) *Maqbool*, reimagines Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* as a struggle for power within the hierarchy of organized crime in 21st-century Mumbai⁴. In *Maqbool*, Duncan becomes Jahangir Khan aka Abbaji (Pankaj Kapoor), Miyan Maqbool (Irfan Khan) is Macbeth, and Nimmi (Tabu) is a counterpart of Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth. Macbeth proceeds from being a thane to the king of Scotland, while Maqbool merely shifts from being a loyal follower of Abbaji to a pseudo-head of Mumbai’s mafia world. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is set in Scotland, a country that shared a troubled political relationship with England when the play was written. This sense of veiled animosity is intriguingly brought forth in *Maqbool* by replacing Scotland and its king (Duncan) with the illegitimate grim underworld of Mumbai ruled by a Muslim patriarch, Abbaji.

The most intriguing departure is Bhardwaj’s depiction of Shakespeare’s three hags—a duo of immoral comic police officers called “Pandit” and “Purohit” (Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah, respectively). Unlike the ambiguity of Shakespeare’s witches, these corrupt law-keepers actively chart the careers of all the prominent characters in *Maqbool*, justifying their actions as efforts at balancing the forces of Good and Evil in the larger scheme of things—“*shakti ka santulan*” (balance of power) as they like to call it.

Bhardwaj's law-keepers are depicted as staunch Hindu Brahmins. They have a keen interest in "Jyotish" (astrology). They sport red vermillion on their foreheads. They incessantly refer to "Shani" (Saturn), "Mangal" (Mars), and "Shukra" (Venus), and they strongly believe in the power and portentousness of "Chandra Grahan" (lunar eclipse). These constant verbal and visual references forebode that this movie, peopled predominantly by Muslims, but ultimately controlled by two policemen who continually remind us of their religion, is blatantly pointing at the recurrent tempests of religiously generated animosity in the Indian subcontinent (Mondal 2017). Bhardwaj's hags are a significant part of the state machinery, unlike the harassed and much-maligned "witches" of James' reign and the liminal grotesque Weird Sisters of Shakespeare. Perhaps in no other adaptation of *Macbeth* have the "hags" enjoyed so much power and privilege and so overtly brought about the downfall of the protagonist. The two law-keepers are the final determinants of destiny in multiple ways: one, they represent law and order—legal power over illegal power; two, they represent the state, which, unlike in Shakespeare's England (where it was God), is the repository of all modern power. They represent the majority community exercising power over the minority, whose legitimacy is constantly under review.

While these law-keepers continue to dabble with the positions of the planets, they also work perniciously to provoke Maqbool—a task made easy after the fulfillment of the prophecy made by Pandit that Maqbool will control Bollywood. They then systematically and surreptitiously function to undermine his power. They abstain from killing Guddu (Malcolm) and Boti (Macduff), despite having ample opportunity to do so. With their help an alliance is forged between Palekar (a Hindu Brahmin politician) and Guddu (the son of Abbaji's trusted henchman, Kaka, who is again a Hindu Brahmin) against Maqbool. They calm Maqbool by predicting that no harm can come to him until the sea enters his home and that he should only wait for the passing of the "grahan" (lunar eclipse). They only seem to help him while causing him more harm. They convince Maqbool to deal with explosives that come to the Mumbai shore with the aid of Maqbool's vessel. This act proves fatal as his men are arrested, his vessel is seized, and his house is flooded by customs officers (the coming of the sea to his home).

Amidst a world peopled mostly by Muslims, with repeated references to Islam and its rituals, a rectangular astrological diagram (a blatantly prominent Hindu symbol) surfaces and resurfaces at several crucial junctures of the film (Mondal 2017). By referring to "Jyotish" (astrology) frequently, Bhardwaj takes power, in its many forms, wielded by these two upper-caste Hindu law enforcement officers, to a symbolic level, that of Fate or destiny. "Jyotish", an ancient Indian pseudo-science that claims to predict and resolve issues of individual human destiny thought to be controlled by the position of the planets and the constellations, directly associates the two police officers with Fate. Without this direct association with prophecy and prediction, the two police officers would have remained mere state functionaries trying to influence the fate of criminals through political and legal manipulations.

In keeping with the film's deliberately warped preoccupation with astrology, the opening sequence begins and ends with the quadrilateral "Jyotish" chart, where Pandit etches the destiny of Mumbai (see Figure 2). The chart, in the beginning, drawn on a foggy police van window, is sprayed at the end of the sequence with the blood of a Muslim henchman (see Figure 3). This cyclic journey of the film's opening sequence serves as a hybrid metaphor for both the cycles of violence in the Mumbai underworld kept in constant motion by the police inspectors, with a trend towards a phasing out of the Muslim characters of the Mumbai mafiadom.

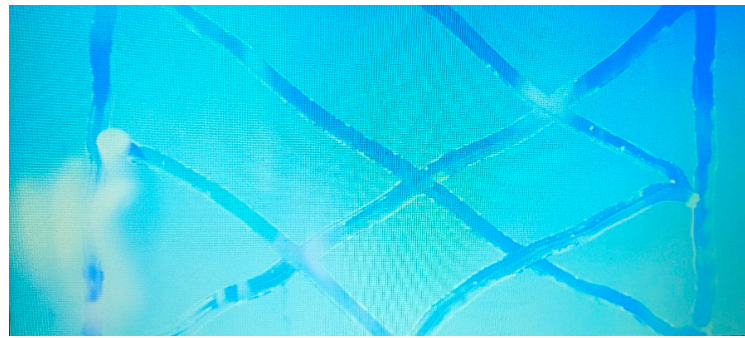


Figure 2. The prophetic chart of Mumbai prepared on a foggy police van, *Maqbool* (2003), screengrab.



Figure 3. The same chart washed by the blood of a Muslim henchman, *Maqbool* (2003), screengrab.

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, there is a possibility that Macbeth could gain the throne by continuing his career as "noble Macbeth", as he knows: "If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (I. iii. ll. 144–45). But he deliberately chooses evil as an option. Neither Maqbool's character arc nor the initial motivations of Bhardwaj's protagonist exactly match this sequence of development. Maqbool initially does not show any proclivity to succumb to Pandit's prophecies. He continues to show indifference until he is desperate to save his skin at the end. The control wielded by the police duo is, therefore, independent of Maqbool's doings. Maqbool is reduced to the archetypal marionette, buffeted by the whims of an inexorable Fate, represented by the comical yet menacing police officers, Pandit and Purohit.

Shakespeare's hags following the archetype of James' *Daemonologie* were women guided by familiar spirits who, in turn, were controlled by the Devil. Bhardwaj's corrupt law-keepers are directly involved in the film. They do not merely act as agents of Fate. They become Fate itself. On more than one occasion, the astrological diagrams drawn by Pandit are made of food (condiments, dry fruits, and kebabs) to be consumed by him and his partner in crime (see Figures 4–6).



Figure 4. The chart being prepared with chutneys and other condiments when Pandit predicts that Maqbool will replace Abbaji, *Maqbool* (2003), screengrab.



Figure 5. The chart being prepared with dry fruits at Sameera and Guddu's engagement when Pandit predicts the killings about to happen, *Maqbool* (2003), screengrab.



Figure 6. The chart being prepared with kebabs when Pandit predicts the restitution of the balance of power, *Maqbool* (2003), screengrab.

Bhardwaj's malevolent male duo seems to ingest the life courses of others who populate the film, reminding us of Shakespeare's witches' spite, "I will drain him dry as hay" (I. iii. line 18). On one such occasion, Pandit restrains Purohit from consuming a kebab that represents "Shani" in the chart because "Shani" is ill-reputed as a consumer of human beings (see Figure 6). "Whom will it eat this time?" enquires Purohit ominously. Pandit quips, "Whom do you want to be eaten?" They are thus dangerously close to being Fate itself. These men who play Fate are aptly named "Purohit" and "Pandit". In "All the King's Men and All the King's Women: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* as a 'Creative Mistranslation' of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*" (2017), Subarna Mondal points out,

"Purohit" may be defined as a sanctioned practitioner of religion with immense power-wielding capacity in society. And "Pandit" is an erudite/a producer of knowledge, and one who is entrusted with the task of rationalizing and thereby legitimizing the power the "purohit" wields.

If we revisit the opening scene with the destiny chart of Mumbai splattered by the blood of a Muslim henchman with this reading in mind, we realize that Bhardwaj's witches do not merely control *Maqbool*. They also have the power to control the entire fateful city. Purohit kills Mughal, the henchman, at the very outset and sprays the destiny chart of the city with his blood. Expectedly, Pandit predicts, and Purohit executes.

The sly machinations of the “law-keepers” indicate the politicization of the police force and their frequent obvious or clandestine participation in communal violence as they act for the bigoted interests of the State. Bhardwaj subverts the basic power structure of *Macbeth*. The witches of Bhardwaj, unlike the unkempt heath-hags of Shakespeare, are right at the center of the mainstream—privileged, malevolent, and capable of shaping the destiny of an illicit half-caste Muslim henchman and the city he lives in.

4. The Old Hag and the Foundling in *Mandaar*

While *Maqbool*’s policemen are influential individuals belonging to the privileged echelon of the power hierarchy, Bhattacharya’s (2021) witches in his five-episode web-series *Mandaar* are marginal characters who are mostly defined by omission and silence until almost the climactic episode. Bhattacharya does not merely revisualize and recontextualize the witches. His adaptation of *Macbeth* directly involves its own version of the witches in the main action and goes against the original Shakespearean text and the tradition of *Macbeth* adaptations by making one of the witches murder Mandaar (Macbeth). The varied history of *Macbeth* adaptations, either on stage or on screen, yields not even another instance where Macbeth attacks and kills one of the supernatural beings. Nor is there an instance, we believe, where Macbeth’s final defeat and demise come not through Macduff but through one of the “unnatural hags” in the narrative. These two major departures make *Mandaar* an outlier in the history of *Macbeth* adaptations.

In the story of *Macbeth*, transposed and recontextualized in 21st-century rural South Bengal, Duncan, King of Scotland, becomes Dablu bhai (Debesh Roy Chowdhury), the owner of the extensive fisheries in the seaside village of Gailpur. Mandaar (Debasish Mondal) and Bonka (Sankar Debnath)—Macbeth and Banquo—are his most trusted henchmen, used by him to guard the fisheries and keep the workers in line. Laili (Sohini Sarkar) is Bhattacharya’s version of Lady Macbeth.

Mandaar is the only adaptation that brings the short section of Act I Scene iii of *Macbeth* to the fore by making the sea its setting and the figure of a man dealing with the sea its main protagonist. The characters in *Mandaar* deal with water and fish. The “bheri”⁵ and the business of fish associated with it breed corruption, greed, and murder. The tempest-tossed sailor and his bark alluded to by Shakespeare’s witches in Act I Scene iii of *Macbeth* surface as a significant motif in several crucial junctures of *Mandaar*. The dead fish is a recurrent image in the web-series. Mokai (Macdonwald) is murdered at sea. The corpse of Dablubhai is washed to the shore. The “bheri” becomes a site of sleaze and exploitation. Mandaar’s nightmares and hallucinations always have the sea as a background. Laili’s suicide and Mandaar’s murder all take place on the seashore. Mandaar, like Macbeth, may be seen as a sailor in his personal sea sailing towards a sanguinary summit that leads to his ultimate destruction.

Towards the beginning, the camera takes a close shot of a fish writhing on the seashore while a semi-naked adolescent vagrant, Pedo (a version of Shakespeare’s hag, played by Sudip Dhara), dances in slow motion, and a black cat comes and sits patiently, waiting for the fish to die. The fish is finally killed by Majnu Buri (the other hag of the pair) with her spear. The close shot of the pierced fish is followed by another shot of the same fish, now dead. This shot is divided into three parts. The first part shows the fish seemingly watching the entry of Mandaar with its dead eyes. It is a rack shot where the fish is first in focus and a blurry Mandaar riding a motorcycle enters the frame from the left side (see Figure 7). This is followed by the second part where the camera blurs the fish and focuses on Mandaar riding from the left to the right side of the frame (see Figure 8). This again is followed by the third part, with the focus being shifted to the dead fish as Mandaar, now blurred, whizzes past the frame (see Figure 9).



Figure 7. Mandaar enters the screen for the first time as the fish faces him with dead eyes, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

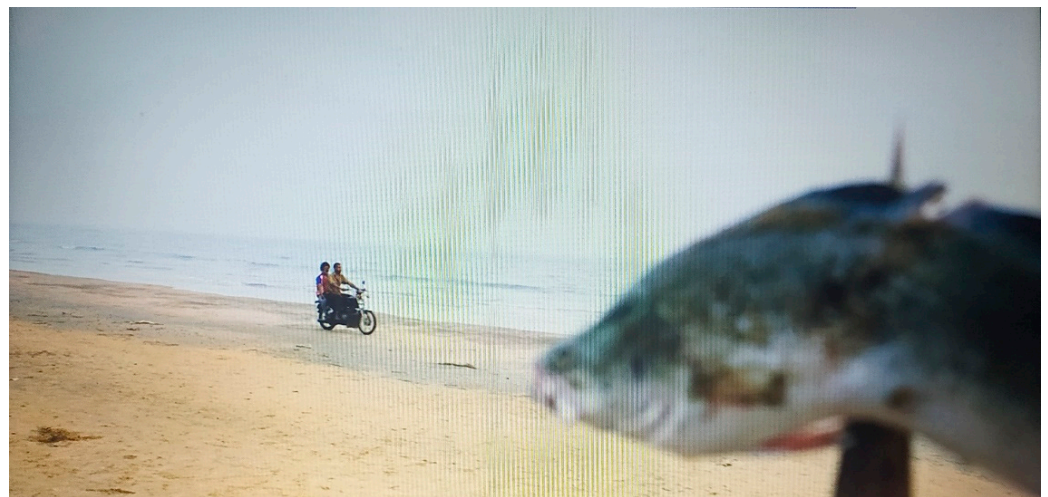


Figure 8. The fish is blurred while Mandaar comes into focus, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

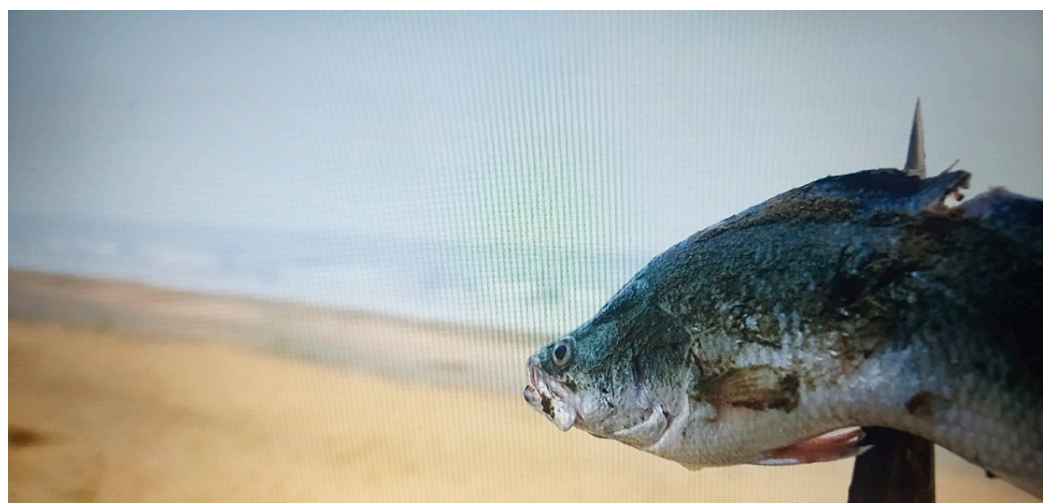


Figure 9. The fish is back in focus as Mandaar exits the shot, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

The dead fish—a victim of Majnu Buri’s whims (or perhaps a part of a ritual)—witnesses the beginning of Mandaar’s journey and foreshadows its end. Majnu Buri and Pedo, thus, assume ominous proportions at the very opening of this disturbing series.

As far as looks go, Majnu Buri perfectly fits the popular imagination of the “Daini Buri” (old witch) common in the Indian psyche. Majnu Buri is androgynous (the role is assayed by a male actor). With her dark forehead splattered with red vermillion, her strawy white hair matted with dirt, her yellow uneven teeth with black spots, her dazzlingly bright eyes, and her unearthly grin, she looks something right out of a horror movie involving Tantric cults (see Figure 10). Her ward, Pedo, a fourteen-year-old young boy, presents an equally intriguing sight, with his close-cropped hair, and bare body, covered in dirt and mud, with phlegm permanently hanging from his nose (see Figure 11). One of his eyes is odd, a cat’s eye (or a snake’s eye), with a scar running vertically across it.

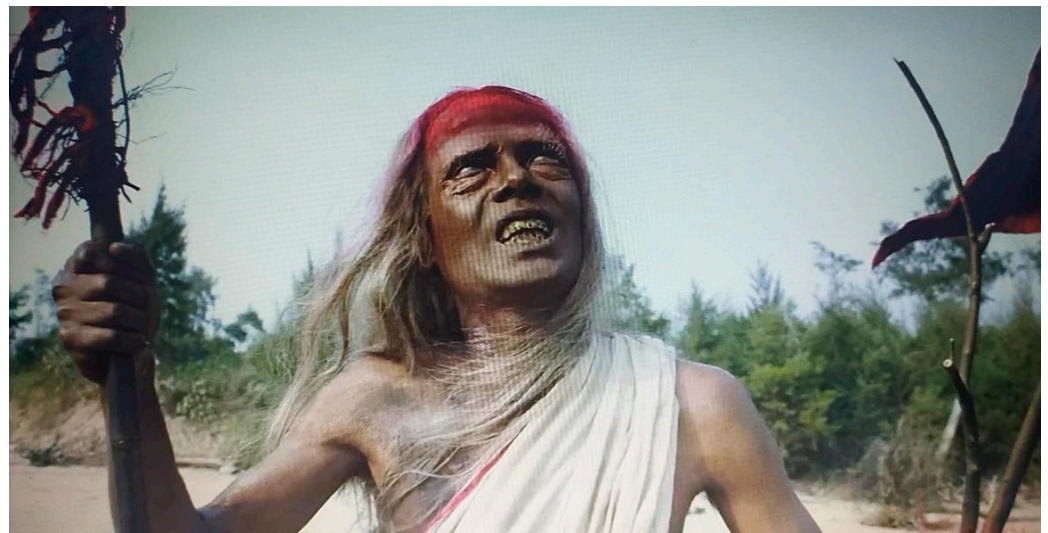


Figure 10. Majnu Buri as a version of one of Shakespeare’s hags, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 11. Pedo, the other hag of Shakespeare, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

Banquo in *Macbeth* describes the witches as “wither’d” and “wild in their attire”. They have “choppy finger(s)” and “skinny lips” (Act I sc. iii. ll. 40, 44–45). They “should be women” and yet have beards (Act I sc. iii. l. 45). The rationale behind imagining “witches” as deformed lies deep in human social history that has established a simple equation between the depravity of the soul and the deformities of the body. This was true also for Shakespeare’s time, and Bhattacharya’s visualization of the duo, Majnu Buri and Pedo, does justice to Shakespeare.

However, the similarities between Shakespeare’s witches and Bhattacharya’s conception of the duo end there. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare explicitly associates the witches with evil and dark magic. Shakespeare’s witches are usually imagined as dancing around cauldrons, voicing incantations, and casting spells. In contrast, in *Mandaar*, no overt instances project Majnu Buri as a “Daini” or a practitioner of Tantric cults apart from the visual cues of Pedo’s evil eye, the speared fish, the black cat, Pedo’s hypnotic dance, and Majnu Buri’s rhymed speeches that have the feel of a continuing ritual. In an interview with the authors, Pratik Dutta, the scriptwriter of *Mandaar*, states that the director did not conceive of the characters of Majnu Buri and Pedo as outright witches. His focus was primarily on their marginal identities, two outcasts commenting on the harsh selfish world around them. Dutta’s statement notwithstanding, one cannot deny that the appearance of Majnu Buri and Pedo, their meanderings in and around the major junctures of the plot, their ominous jingles, and the creatures with them (the dead fish and the black cat) hint at a carefully choreographed feel of the uncanny on the part of the director’s part. But, in keeping with Pratik Dutta’s view, Bhattacharya’s witch, Majnu Buri, and her accomplice, Pedo, are never shown actively practicing black magic. This is despite the Tantric cults of Bengal being very much alive in literature and popular culture. To contextualize Majnu Buri as a “Daini” would have been easy. This omission, one can conclude, is Bhattacharya’s conscious attempt to carve out a liminal space for his version of the Weird Sisters.

This liminality pervades Bhattacharya’s conception of the witches. The director, it seems, refuses to place Majnu Buri and Pedo in any identifiable category. He achieves this ambiguity through silence and omission. He sheds no light on their past, and as a family (or a mother-son duo), they appear more to mock the mainstream family units one encounters in the web-series. For most of the series, they occupy the edges of the screen, observing, from a distance, the unfolding of a human drama. Bhattacharya’s Majnu and Pedo approximate Terry Eagleton’s reading of *Macbeth*’s witches in *William Shakespeare* (1986) as the only ones who embody the play’s “positive value”. The witches, according to Eagleton, play the significant role of exposing the “self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare.” (Eagleton 1986, p. 2). He reads them as “exiles from that violent order, inhabiting their own sisterly community on its shadowy borderlands . . .” (Eagleton 1986, p. 2). In *Mandaar*, as in Shakespeare, they are outsiders living at the margins of the village, outsiders to the overwhelming passions of greed and lust that wreak havoc in the lives of the central characters of Gailpur.

Yet they are prescient. Similar to the witches of *Macbeth*, they predict the rise of Mandaar to power, his temporary revival of potency, and his final fall and demise. In keeping with the general tone of ambiguity and liminality, no clue emerges as to the nature or source of their supernatural abilities. Again, the predictions of the witches (particularly the first predictions) have a different effect and perform a different structural function in the original play: that of temptation. The prophecies in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* tempt Macbeth, flaring in him the flame of ambition. This temptation, this soul racked with ambition, this constant vacillation between temerity and fear that is the hallmark of Macbeth under the influence of the witches are not translated into *Mandaar*. Majnu Buri’s words do not fill Mandaar with greed to overreach. Majnu Buri does not mean to tempt Mandaar in the first place. Buri’s words in the web-series convey more of a general foreboding; they presage upheavals that would challenge and destabilize the power structures of Gailpur. Mandaar does not look tormented by the prophecy. Unlike Macbeth, Mandaar’s motivations behind

the murder are found primarily in Laili (Lady Macbeth), in her illicit relationship with Dablu Bhai (Duncan), and in his newfound potency.

Perhaps Bhattacharya is not using the “Daini Buri” trope popular in Bengal. Another common character in rural as well as urban Bengal that Majnu Buri can be perceived as is the “Pagli Buri”, the mad woman who has been turned away by family and society and who now lives at the margins, left to her own devices. From this perspective, Majnu Buri resides in the liminal space between sanity and insanity. This might also explain why her words about Mandaar becoming king do not evoke the same response as that of the witches in *Macbeth*. The trope of the “Pagli Buri” is convenient, for no one will take the mad woman seriously, dismissing her words as insane ramblings. Bhattacharya’s Majnu Buri could be a cross between the “Daini” and the “Pagli”, the two marginalized female figures of rural Bengal, one feared and reviled, the other laughed at and dismissed, but both silenced.

The visual prominence of sweat (Mandaar is introduced to us as sweat drips off his body in his futile effort at sexual performance), vomit, phlegm, and blood in *Mandaar* associates most of the characters with filth. But of all the characters, Majnu Buri and Pedo look the grimmest. Pedo is introduced to us as half-naked, his body covered with sand and grime, with phlegm in his nose. Majnu Buri appears on screen for the first time as the camera takes a close shot of her dirty legs and travels up to reveal a body, hands, and face patched with sweat and dirt. Her straw-like hair is unkempt and dirty. Her sari is reduced to a bit of rag that somehow manages to cover her. The close shots of her dry huge eyelashes, blackened teeth, and gaunt features stir uneasiness in viewers when they confront her. The Pagli Buri and her undernourished mucky foundling/son embody the unsavory “unsightliness” of the “undesirables”. They are the kind of people whom the “decent” passersby steer clear of. Majnu Buri and Pedo point to the complex and layered rapport between structures of revulsion and social exclusion. The mad woman and/or the beggar woman, in addition to lending a weird ambiance to the text, point at society’s deliberate erasure/avoidance of bodies that unabashedly exhibit their corporeal filth by rendering them invisible or unacceptable.

How apt that the prophecy about great and powerful men and their impending doom should come through these silenced (or ignored) voices. And they carry out this task effectively. In *Mandaar*, for instance, the logic in their rhymed lines is impeccable. Their conduct, though apparently disordered, has an underlying pattern. The inspector’s discovery of Mokai’s (Macdonwald’s) key chain and Mandaar’s discovery of Laili’s dead body all result from Pedo’s apparently aimless running. Pedo, the madwoman’s child, evil-eyed to boot, a freak, marginalized figure in Bengali imagination, performs a significant function in unraveling the plot. In keeping with the satiric undertone of the text, these are the only two creatures of Gailpur who share a certain tenderness, as rightly pointed out by the screenwriter, Pratik Dutta. The warmth shared by Majnu Buri and Pedo, the two abject characters of the text, ironically, provides sharp relief to the audience from the cold and transactional world of Bhattacharya’s Inverness.

Bhattacharya’s conceiving of the witch as a mother ironically points to the lack that bedevils Laili (Lady Macbeth) throughout the web-series. Apart from Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth*, where a witch is shown nursing an infant, other adaptations do not bring forth the Witch-Mother figure. Bhattacharya in *Mandaar* revisits the early modern association between witchcraft and motherhood. [Callaghan \(1992\)](#) in “Wicked Women in Macbeth: A Study of Power, Ideology, and the Production of Motherhood” speaks of the threat posed by patriarchy:

The logical antithesis of James’s patriarchal, patrilineal government is not actually demonism at all, as it is, in fact, matriarchy—government by women in a social system where descent is traced through the line of the mother. In *Macbeth*, two crucial cultural conflicts are played out: one between patriarchy and the rule of the mothers, represented by the witches, and the other between skepticism about witchcraft practices and witch belief (p. 357).

Callaghan's interpretation of the power of the witches within the 16th- and 17th-century political discourse has a literal rendition in the climax of *Mandaar*. The ending of *Mandaar* turns these marginalized characters on their head and brings them right at the focal point of action. Predictably, in the final episode of the series, Mandaar loses his grip over reality after Laili commits suicide. In a mad rage, Mandaar attacks Majnu Buri's lair and kills Pedro, thereby making their final prophecy about the arrival of a "Rakhshas" (monster) in Gailpur come true. Mandaar himself has transformed into the eponymous monster of the prophecy. At the end of the series, Dablu Bhai's son (Macduff) and Bonka's son (Fleance) ambush Mandaar on the beach, and a great fight follows. But Mandaar is too strong in his mad rage, too powerful to be beaten by these young mortals. And just when he seems undefeatable, he is impaled by Majnu Buri's spear. Not "demonic pact" (Callaghan 1992, p. 358), as Callaghan suggests, but "maternal power is given its most virulent sway" (Adelman 1987, p. 111) as Majnu Buri spears Mandaar.⁶

The choreography, the camera movement, and the whole mise en scène blatantly recall Majnu Buri's stabbing of the fish at the opening of *Mandaar* (see Figures 12 and 13).



Figure 12. Majnu Buri throwing the spear to pierce the fish at the beginning of *Mandaar*, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 13. The pierced fish at the beginning of *Mandaar*, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

The piercing of the fish at the beginning may, in retrospect, seem like a forewarning that, at the end, Mandaar will be killed “as our rarer monsters are, / Painted upon a pole, and underwrit, / ‘Here may you see the tyrant.’” (V. viii. ll. 25–27). [Burnett \(2002\)](#), in *Constructing Monsters in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, speaks of Macbeth as being “baited with a ‘monster-like’ Fate that reifies him into spectacle” (p. 14). Mandaar’s identification as the “Rakshas” (Monster) of Gailpur by Majnu Buri echoes Burnett’s words. Mandaar’s neck is pierced. His eyes bulge out (see Figure 14). His fall, exaggerated by a low-angle shot of his huge dying body, “reifies him into spectacle” (see Figure 15). This spectacle is predicted throughout the web-series by the repeated image of the dead fish secured on a pole, reminding us of the final scene of Shakespeare’s play, when Macbeth’s head, fixed on a pole, is carried onstage.

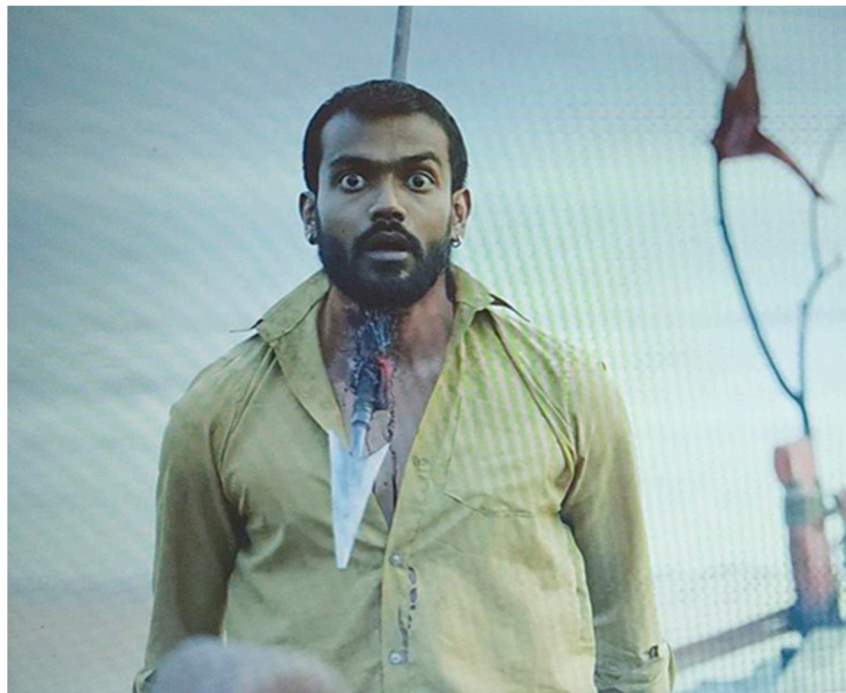


Figure 14. Killing of Mandaar at the end, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

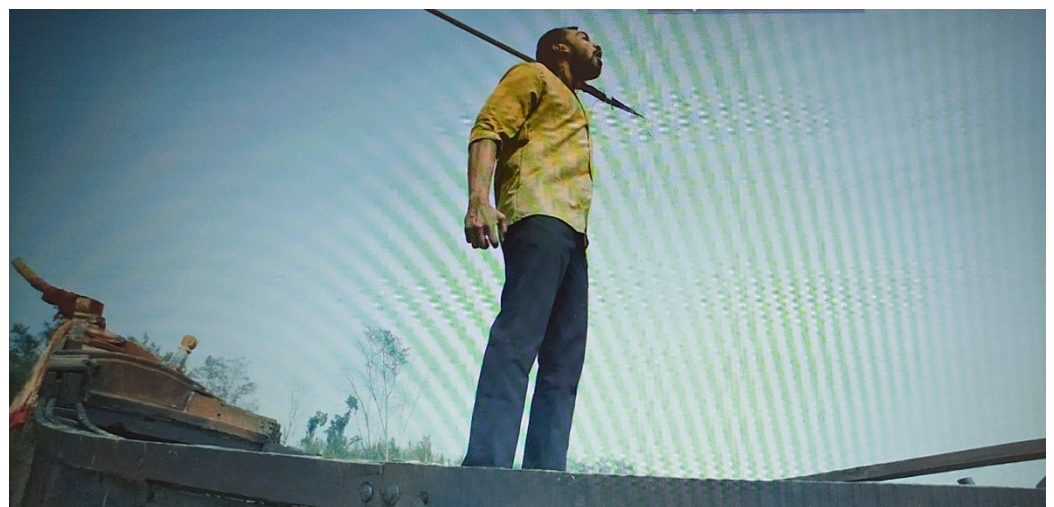


Figure 15. The fall of the monster exacerbated by a low-angle shot, *Mandaar* (2021), screengrab.

5. Nature, Omen and Joji

Maqbool turns the witches into contemporary police officers who are actively involved in manipulations and machinations that directly determine the protagonist's Fate, with symbolic references to destiny in the form of astrology. *Mandaar* transforms them into ambiguous multivalent characters with signals of the supernatural in their grotesqueness. They are marginalized by the society in which they play the role of observers until the critical climactic moment. Pothan (2021) in his Malayali adaptation of *Macbeth* titled *Joji*, as a marked departure, does away with the witches. This is a critical, crucial move as far as the story of *Macbeth* is concerned, as it replaces the prophecies of the witches with a subtle layering of ominousness through the use of masks, the death rituals and warnings posed by religion, the invading power of civil authorities, nightmares, whisper campaigns of the neighbors, the careful prodding of Bincy (Lady Macbeth, played by Unnimaya Prasad), and most, significantly, the fatality presented by Nature. Unlike *Maqbool* and *Mandaar*, in *Joji* not a single tangible character can be blamed for what Joji (Macbeth, played by Fahadh Faasil) does to his father, Kuttapan Panachel (Duncan, played by P.N. Sunny), and to his elder brother, Jomon (Banquo, played by Baburaj). No external temptation or reference to fate or destiny can lighten Joji's crime. This is a crucial departure from the original that *Joji* is supposed to be retelling. In *Maqbool*, a large part of what happens to Maqbool is caused by the manipulations of Pandit and Purohit. In *Mandaar*, since Majnu Buri and Pedo foretell Mandaar's actions and Fate, albeit in veiled language with mystic underpinnings, a strong sense of inevitability still drives the plot forward. *Joji*, on the other hand, does away with these blatant manipulations, replacing them with the ominous and sustained presence of Nature.

As an adaptation, *Joji* is perhaps the one that is most loosely based on the original. As has been observed in critical circles, the film could also pass as an independent one—with the power politics within an affluent family in suburban Kerala and the criminal transgressions of the youngest son who is the runt of the litter as its subject—without specific mention that the film is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The counterparts of the witches and Lady Macbeth go missing in the cast. The only female presence in the film is Joji's elder brother's wife, Bincy Jaison. Lady Macbeth's primary role of egging Macbeth whenever he is in doubt is barely hinted at. Joji kills his father and then his eldest brother Jomon, not his king, his boss, or a mafia don. Neither is Joji the valiant warrior that Macbeth is. Looked down upon as an archetypal loser, he nowhere commands the respect that Macbeth does in Duncan's court. He can never hope to replace his father and become the patriarch of the family, having two elder brothers, Jomon and Jaison (Joji Mundakayam), who are more powerful than he in every way. All that he can hope for by killing his father is his share in the family property, independence, and perhaps respite from being insulted and mocked at every turn. The story is that of his patricide, the gravest but perhaps also the commonest of sins in a patriarchy, and how he further entangles himself in crime and finally falls in his attempt to hide the original one. The similarity with *Macbeth* begins and ends there and might go unnoticed, unless specifically mentioned. However, Dileesh Pothan does just that—the film opens with a title card specifically mentioning Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as an inspiration, forcing the audience to read the film with the *Macbeth* template in mind.

This strategy gives the film an intertextual, extratextual dimension, bringing in comparisons, not only with the original play but its multiple film adaptations since. It also adds particular significance to even the smallest of actions in the film. When Bincy chides Joji for his need to ask permission for everything from his elder brothers, one sees in her a little of Lady Macbeth chiding Macbeth for his lack of manliness. When she is seen silently approving Joji's administering of wrong medicines to his father, one sees her as an accomplice in Joji's patricide. When a passing shot shows Bincy googling fertility clinics, one notices her childlessness and connects it with the same in *Macbeth*. However, there is no attempt whatsoever to bring in the three witches. This unwavering focus on character, sin, and punishment reminds one of another classic text—Dostoevsky's *Crime*

and *Punishment*. However, what is missing in this case is the concomitant guilt. Joji does not seem to suffer from the guilt of Raskolnikov or even the conscience-stricken speeches of Macbeth that characterize Shakespeare's play. In both the cases of Raskolnikov and Macbeth, an external force is at play: a kind of idealism in the case of Raskolnikov, and the witches and Lady Macbeth in the case of Macbeth. These external forces create a space where the protagonist can reconsider, regret, and even resent his action, partially blaming the external force. Without the actual presence of witches (or even a far-fetched version of the witches), without an explicit Lady Macbeth, Joji lacks such a space. His actions, he is bound to admit, are his own. Consequently, Joji only displays fear, the fear of getting caught, and becomes progressively desperate in his attempts to hide his crime.

But, read closely, fatalism has been finely infused in *Joji* by Pothan. It seamlessly coheres with the lush green property of Kuttapan Panachel, the patriarch of the well-to-do South Indian family of Kottayam. The constant presence of Nature at the most crucial junctures of the film, sometimes soothing, sometimes ominous, verges on the supernatural and performs almost the function of a choric character. The pond, the tall trees, the twisted labyrinthine plantation, the stream, and the thick dark forest of the night silently brood over the tragedies that befall the Panachel family. Of all these, the pond dug in a deep pit away from the house with high walls of stones surrounding it and a net above becomes a crucial site of prophecies where destinies are decided. The pond has seven prominent appearances in the film. It proves fatal for Kuttapan Panachel in its first appearance. As Kuttapan surveys his men trying to pull out a clogged valve from the pond, the low-angle shots show him dominating the entire space of the pond and its surrounding area (see Figures 16 and 17). He watches over the failure of young strong men, dismisses them, and pulls out the clogged valve himself. The next shot shows Kuttapan from a high angle, wavering and falling flat in the muddy water of the pond (see Figure 18). His hubris and consequent fall are captured brilliantly through the careful juxtaposition of shots.



Figure 16. Low-angle shot of Kuttapan looking down at the pit of the pond, *Joji* (2021) screengrab.



Figure 17. Low-angle shot of Kuttapan approaching the valve in the pond-pit, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 18. High-angle shot of Kuttapan falling in the pit, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.

The pond, therefore, becomes the locus that first stirs hope in Joji of a better independent future. However, his hopes are dashed as Kuttapan recovers fast after an operation and regains strength enough to physically throttle Joji, even while in his wheelchair. Joji seeks shelter in the surrounding pit of the pond (where the pond is shown for the second time) to vent his frustration through futile gestures of anger. Here the idea of committing patricide dawns on him. He is seen sitting by the side of the pond, cradling his head as if seeking solace from the water before him, when his expression gradually hardens. The ominous background score hints at what he plans. As Joji meticulously and routinely replaces his father's medicines with other ineffective tablets, the pond is shown a third time.

We see Joji fish-baiting on the pond, waiting patiently for his catch. Fish-baiting involves patience and hope. The pit where Joji waits for his catch thus becomes significant in more ways than one as he unwearingly waits and hopes for the fish to bite the fateful bait. The hook of the fishing rod gleams amid the moss and mud of the shallow pond (see Figure 19). Sunrays entering the pit are mirrored in Joji's features as well. The pond and Joji seem perfectly tuned to each other (see Figure 20).



Figure 19. The fishing hook gleams in the pond signifying Joji's bait waiting for its victim, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 20. Joji's fish-baiting signifies patience and hope. Joji seems attuned to Nature around him, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.

Unsurprisingly, calls of alarm reach Joji when he is beside the pond. This is the fourth occasion when we see Joji near the pond. The plan, as the viewer now knows, has succeeded. The crisis (the severe stroke of Kuttapan) that begins inside the shallow water of the pond reaches its climax through shouts that we hear at the pond, from the bungalow, leave no doubt as to Kuttapan's death. The first movement of the film comes to an end. Nature seems peaceful as Joji sprints around his plantation. The track shots following his footsteps show his joy, followed by a long static shot where Joji surveys the bungalow nestled amidst acres of greenery that he has inherited. His face is aglow with the rays of the sun. Joji reaches his apex.

The counter-movement begins almost immediately as the pond suddenly assumes an ominous proportion in Joji's nightmare. It becomes an agent of his nemesis in its fifth appearance. A low-angle shot of Joji sitting at the bank of the pond with a fishing rod in his hand appears through the waves of the water. Joji appears vague and distorted as the camera captures him from under the water (see Figure 21). Unlike the other characters who visit the pond and are shown from various angles, Joji is almost always presented in low-angle shots or eye-line-matching shots when he is at the pond pit. Somebody seems to be watching him from the pond. The fishing rod gives a tug, and Joji tries to pull up his catch. But the catch is too heavy. He tries hard, pulling with all his might, and out comes his father, staring straight at him from the same pond (see Figure 22). The pond that was Joji's place of shelter and hope abruptly becomes menacing and a harbinger of his fall. It becomes a willing agent of his destruction in his nightmare as it wells up the man Joji has destroyed.



Figure 21. Joji being shown from beneath the water, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 22. The dead Kuttapan emerging from the pond, staring straight at Joji, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.

The pit of the pond practically becomes Joji's nemesis as it turns out to be a repository of the evidence of his crime, as Joji has concealed, within the cracks of the surrounding stones, the medicines of his father—the proof of his guilt. On the sixth occasion, while Joji attempts to destroy the evidence and burn the medicine packets, a great fire erupts and burns the nets above and blackens the walls beside the pond (see Figure 23). The site of the pond, thus, becomes an incriminating spot that arouses suspicion in Joji's eldest brother Jomon when the pond is shown for the seventh time (see Figures 24 and 25). Jomon's suspicion of Joji leads Joji to kill him as well, and this murder makes Joji's path to safety impossible. Unlike Kuttapan's death, Jomon's death is violent and direct. Joji actively participates in the process of murder by pulling the trigger of the air gun and throwing an explosive at Jomon. He is directly mired in crime.



Figure 23. Fire erupts at the pit while Joji tries to destroy the evidence of his guilt, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 24. Jomon examining the burnt net above the pit, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.



Figure 25. Jomon inspecting the blackened walls of the pond-pit, *Joji* (2021), screengrab.

Nature has a constant presence in *Joji*. The film opens with bird's-eye-view shots as a delivery person rides through the twisted paths of the surrounding forest to deliver an air gun to Popy (Fleance, played by Alex Alister) that ultimately proves fatal for both Jomon and Joji. Popy shoots at the bark of a tree that oozes sap, which resembles the slow oozing of blood. Joji receives news of Kuttapan's recovery, and what follows is a series of three consecutive shots—autumnal leaves falling on the ground, fish gliding in the pond, and trees swaying gently on a sunlit day, with a melancholic strain in the background. Nature seems to reflect the hopelessness of Joji and Bincy as they are seen sitting dejectedly at the entrance of the house waiting for the arrival of a recuperating Kuttapan. In the end, Popy retrieves the air gun pellets from the bark of the tree (that Popy had shot at) to prove beyond doubt that Joji murdered his elder brother. Nature reflects the vicissitudes of

the Panachel family. Like the equivocation of the witches, they, at times, encourage and, at times, threaten, concealing, within the apparent lush, the lurking darkness. Like the sea in *Mandaar* and the forest in *Throne of Blood*, the beautiful, lush estate of the Panachel family plays a clandestine role in Joji's life. The moving of Birnam wood to Dunsinane in Shakespeare becomes unnecessary in this film as Dileesh Pothan situates Joji's "Dunsinane" at the heart of "Birnam wood" itself.

6. We Need Our Witches When We Transgress

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* uses the Weird Sisters to play on contemporary beliefs about the supernatural, advocated by the King, but leaves Macbeth with enough agency to be at least partly responsible for his fall. This ambiguous space left open by the source text itself constitutes a textual "gap" (Iser)⁷ that not only encourages creative interpretation on the part of the reader but also makes the story depend on such interpretive choices. Thus, the answers to these critical questions determine one's appreciation of the Macbeth story—whether the witches have the power to affect Macbeth's life or merely to see the future; to what degree the words of the witches influence Macbeth's actions and to what extent Macbeth himself is responsible for it; if Macbeth is a good man trapped in the machinations of evil forces around him or an essentially evil man destined to transgress.

Therefore, any contemporary adaptation of *Macbeth* will revolve around the director's interpretation of the role played by the witches in the narrative. Since the witches constitute a textual "gap", a narrative ambiguity, the scope of interpretation is also wide. Each of the adaptations referred to in this paper interprets and presents the witches differently while adapting *Macbeth*, bearing evidence of the potential for a great variety of possible adaptations. The adaptations range from that of Orson Welles, who shows the witches controlling Macbeth through a voodoo doll and focusing on the juxtaposition of the witches' barrenness against the fertility of Nature, to that of Kurosowa, whose witch with a spinning wheel is herself presented as part of Nature that plays a crucial role in *Throne of Blood*. While Polanski almost "sexualizes" his witches, Kurzel shows the witches as more serious, somber creatures, almost empathetic towards Macbeth and his tragic destiny.

The three Indian adaptations of *Macbeth* also testify to the scope of the source, as they vary wildly in their conception and visualization of the Weird Sisters. Vishal Bharadwaj transcreates *Macbeth* in a Muslim Mumbai underworld scenario and imagines the witches to be two corrupt Hindu policemen, driving Maqbool to his bloody tragic end. Anirban Bhattacharya, on the other hand, imagines his witches as outcasts in Gailpur. Bhattacharya's witches are oddities in every sense of the term. They are grotesque, talk in rhymed verse (reflecting the trochaic tetrameter used by Shakespeare to distinguish the witches' speech from the blank verse in the rest of the play), live at the margins of society, and have the uncanny ability to see the future. Bhattacharya breaks from tradition by directly involving Majnu Buri and Pedo in Mandaar's demise.

The third adaptation, *Joji*, takes another extreme route in dealing with the witches. Dileesh Pothan and his scriptwriter, Syam Pushkaran, by doing away with the witches and Lady Macbeth to a large extent, refrain from providing any explicit temptation in the film. The temptations in *Joji* are more visual and circumstantial than explicit or verbal. The "omen" that the Weird Women represent occupies center-stage in *Joji*. The low pit with its pond seems to conspire with the entire terraced opulent outdoor space of *Joji*, which is more sinister since Joji has no witch in this 21st-century world to save him from being labeled a deliberately scheming murderer.

The three major 21st-century Indian adaptations situated in three separate cultural loci—the grimy Mumbai underworld, the volatile Gailpur sea coast, and a South Indian serene lush plantation—reiterate the restlessness of a usurper. While *Maqbool* subject to the buffets of predestination, *Mandaar* shifts the responsibility ever so slightly onto the shoulders of the usurper as he unleashes his inner demon, and *Joji* heaves full responsibility on the protagonist, incapable as Joji is of even hiding behind the schemes of equivocating witches. Unlike the other two usurpers, Joji survives, literally and figuratively, paralyzed

by the burden of crime. Shakespeare's shortest crime narrative provides Bhardwaj, Bhattacharya, and Pothan with wide-ranging options to choose from. Their choices of inclusion and exclusion make us realize that we need our witches, in some form or another, when we transgress.

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Notes

- ¹ Recent scholarship on these coastal storms suggests that they were the effects of the “Little Ice Age” that engulfed early modern Europe, after a comparatively warm Medieval Period. This climate crisis, and its consequent effect on public health, had a deep socio-political impact resulting in rebellions, revolutions, and wars. The persecution of the “witches”, often held responsible for the foul unpredictable weather in the 16th and 17th century Europe is also linked to the same. See <https://theconversation.com/the-original-climate-crisis-how-the-little-ice-age-devastated-early-modern-europe-178187> (accessed on 16 June 2023).
- ² See Christina Lerner's *Enemies of God: the Witch-hunt in Scotland* (Lerner 1981) and B.P. Levack's *The Witch-hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Levack 1987) for further details.
- ³ In Charles Marowitz's 1969 version, *A Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth (identified as one of the witches) blinds a wax effigy with a poker. Desmet (2014) in “Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity” asks, “[w]ho does this effigy represent? The doomed Duncan, who enters immediately after? Or Macbeth, who is represented by a similar effigy in the Orson Welles film version of Macbeth, and whose reason and ambition are the particular targets of Lady Macbeth's machinations?” (p. 47). Unlike many other versions, where Lady Macbeth as the fourth witch is hinted at, Marowitz shows Lady Macbeth as a witch who is even given the witches' words, “I'll drain him dry as hay/Sleep shall neither night nor day/ Hang upon his penthouse lid” (I.iii. 18–20).
- ⁴ The first film that situates *Macbeth* within the gangster film genre is Hughes' (1955) *Joe MacBeth*. In this film the three witches become one—a tarot card reader (much in the spirit of Pandit's Jyotish in *Maqbool*) delivering her foresights in a derelict basement apartment.
- ⁵ “Bheri” is a shallow embanked fish-breeding water body usually used for shrimp aquaculture. They are mainly found in Southeast Asia.
- ⁶ Trivedi (2019) in “Woman as Avenger” reads Nimmi's motherhood as a redeeming feature in *Maqbool*. She points out, “[t]hough the paternity of Nimmi's child remains uncertain, it takes on the form and function of the most famous image in the play, of ‘Pity’, which ‘like a naked new born babe’ drives the ‘horrid deed[s]’ (I.7.21, 24) in *Maqbool*'s own eyes, creating a moment of anagorisis [sic], making the very sight of the babe, being lovingly cradled by Sameera and Guddu, overwhelm him” (*Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: ‘Local Habitations’*, ed. Trivedi 2019, p. 31). In *Mandaar*, ironically, it is the “unsightly” Majnu Buri and her cradling of Pedo that perhaps remains the only redeeming shot in a web-series of constant reprisals and counter-reprisals.
- ⁷ See Iser's (1972) “The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach” in *New Literary History*, p. 285.

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