
FROM STAGE TO SCREEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH AND VISHAL BHARDWAJ'S MAQBOOL AS A FILM ADAPTATION

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ABSTRACT

Film adaptation is not simply the transfer of a literary text into another medium; it is a process of reinterpretation, relocation, and cultural re-creation. In adaptation studies, scholars increasingly reject the old idea that a film must remain faithful to its source in order to be successful. Instead, adaptation is now understood as an act of transformation in which a text survives in a new context, with new meanings, new audiences, and new social pressures. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* is one of the finest Indian examples of this process because it does not merely retell Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; it reimagines the tragedy within the Mumbai underworld, changing the setting from royal Scotland to a world of gangsters, corrupt policemen, and political violence. This paper examines *Maqbool* as a cinematic adaptation of *Macbeth* through the lens of film adaptation theory. It argues that Bhardwaj's film works through both continuity and difference: the central moral fall of the protagonist remains intact, but the cultural framework, character relations, gender dynamics, and visual language are transformed to suit an Indian social environment. In *Macbeth*, ambition for kingship motivates murder, while in *Maqbool* ambition is entangled with criminal hierarchy, desire, jealousy, and emotional dependence. The witches are replaced by two corrupt policemen, supernatural atmosphere gives way to political realism, and the tragic outcome is shaped by a world of organized violence rather than royal succession. The study shows that *Maqbool* is not inferior to *Macbeth* because it departs from the source; rather, its creative power lies in its ability to translate Shakespearean tragedy into an Indian cinematic idiom that speaks to contemporary cultural realities. The paper therefore concludes that adaptation is best

understood as a dialogue between texts, media, and cultures, and *Maqbool* stands as a strong example of how Shakespeare can be meaningfully reinvented for modern cinema.

KEYWORDS: Adaptation, Over Ambition, Criminal Hierarchy, Violence, Tragedy

INTRODUCTION

Film adaptation has long been one of the most discussed areas in literary and film studies because it raises a basic question: what happens when a story moves from one medium to another? Earlier criticism often judged adaptations by how closely they copied the original text, but modern adaptation theory has moved beyond this limited standard. The new approach sees adaptation as a creative process in which a story is reshaped by the demands of a different medium, audience, and historical moment.

Linda Hutcheon argues that adaptation is a product and a process, involving reinterpretation, re-creation, and reception within a new context. Her famous formulation that adaptation is “repetition, but repetition without replication” captures the idea that an adapted work repeats a story while also changing it in meaningful ways. Robert Stam similarly challenges the “fidelity” model, suggesting that adaptation should not be judged as a loyal copy or a betrayal but as a transformation that creates new possibilities of meaning. In this sense, *Maqbool* should be read not as a diluted version of *Macbeth* but as a new artistic text in conversation with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is among the most adapted of all tragedies because it combines universal themes with a compact, powerful structure. It explores ambition, guilt, fate, masculinity, power, moral collapse, and the destruction of order. Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool* uses the same tragic arc but repositions it in the Mumbai mafia world, where political authority, criminal networks, and personal desire produce a modern equivalent of Shakespearean catastrophe. This relocation is not decorative; it changes the meaning of the story by making it speak to Indian social realities such as corruption, class hierarchy, and the collapse of ethical authority.

Adaptation theory helps explain why *Maqbool* is more than a retelling. According to Hutcheon, adaptation is an “announced and extensive transposition” of a work into another medium or context, and it involves both reinterpretation and recreation. This means the adapted work is not judged only by closeness to the source but by the quality of its transformation. In a similar spirit, Julia Sanders emphasizes that adaptation often involves

“reinterpretation” and “appropriation,” especially when old stories are relocated to new cultural settings.

A useful way to understand adaptation is through Intertextuality. The adapted film does not erase the original text; it carries it forward as a memory, echo, or palimpsest. Viewers familiar with *Macbeth* see *Maqbool* through double vision: they watch the film itself while also sensing the Shakespearean structure beneath it. That layered experience is central to adaptation as a form of reception. The pleasure lies partly in recognition and partly in surprise.

The debate over fidelity is especially important here. Traditional criticism often asked whether a film was “faithful” to the source. But this question can be misleading, because different media work differently. A stage play depends on language, performance, and dramatic compression, while cinema can use editing, sound, framing, and location to generate meaning visually. Therefore, Bhardwaj’s changes are not failures of loyalty; they are necessary cinematic choices that make Shakespeare legible in a different historical and cultural setting.

Film adaptation means turning a literary work, such as a play or novel, into a film. But adaptation is not only a matter of copying the original story into another form. It is a process of rewriting, reshaping, and reinterpreting the source text according to the demands of a new medium, new audience, and new cultural setting. When a drama becomes a film, the story changes in form because the stage and the screen work differently. A play depends mainly on dialogue, live performance, and imagination, while a film depends on camera movement, visual design, sound, editing, and location. This is why adaptation theory is important. It helps us understand that a film should not be judged only by how faithfully it follows the original. Instead, it should be studied as a new creative work that carries traces of the original text but also adds its own meaning. In the case of *Maqbool*, Vishal Bhardwaj does not simply retell *Macbeth*. He re-creates the tragedy in the setting of the Mumbai underworld, making Shakespeare relevant to Indian social and political realities.

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is one of the greatest tragedies in English literature. It tells the story of a brave Scottish warrior who becomes obsessed with power after hearing the witches’ prophecy. Encouraged by Lady Macbeth, he kills King Duncan and takes the throne, but his rise leads to guilt, fear, violence, and eventually destruction. The play explores ambition, fate, guilt, moral decay, and the breakdown of order. One of the most important features of *Macbeth* is its language. Shakespeare uses powerful soliloquies and poetic imagery to reveal Macbeth’s mind. The audience is able to follow his inner struggle closely because he speaks

directly about his fear, desire, and hesitation. This gives the play strong psychological depth. The tragedy therefore works not only through action but also through thought and language. Another major feature of the play is the supernatural atmosphere. The witches create a feeling that evil is present from the beginning. Their prophecies influence Macbeth's mind and make the audience feel that he is being drawn toward disaster by both external and internal forces. In this way, Macbeth combines personal responsibility with the idea of fate.

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* is a Hindi film inspired by *Macbeth*, but it is also a very original work. The film shifts the setting from medieval Scotland to the Mumbai underworld. The royal court becomes a world of gangsters, political deals, corruption, and violent power struggles. This change is not accidental. It allows the story to reflect a modern Indian reality in which power often works through fear, influence, and illegal networks.

Maqbool, the central character, is not a Scottish nobleman. He is the loyal right-hand man of gangster Abbaji. His conflict begins when he falls in love with Abbaji's mistress, Nimmi. Like Macbeth, he is caught between loyalty and desire, but his world is different. He is not trying to become king; he is trying to survive and gain control within a criminal hierarchy. This makes the film more grounded in social realism than the play. Bhardwaj's film also changes the role of fate. In *Macbeth*, the witches are supernatural figures. In *Maqbool*, they are replaced by two corrupt police officers who act like worldly manipulators rather than magical beings. This is a major example of adaptation because it localizes Shakespeare's idea of temptation and prophecy into a modern institutional setting. The film suggests that corruption in society can work like a prophecy, pushing people toward destruction.

Even though the play and film are different in form, they share many important features. These similarities show why *Maqbool* is still deeply connected to *Macbeth*. Both works are about ambition and its destructive power. *Macbeth* wants the crown, while *Maqbool* wants power and control in the underworld. In both texts, ambition begins as a hidden desire and ends in moral ruin. The protagonist crosses an ethical boundary and cannot return to innocence. In both works, murder changes everything. Macbeth kills Duncan, and *Maqbool* becomes involved in the killing of Abbaji. Lady Macbeth and Nimmi both play a major role in pushing the male protagonist toward action. They are not identical, but both women become emotionally and psychologically linked to the fall of the hero. Both works show that crime does not bring peace. After the murder, Macbeth is haunted by guilt and fear, and *Maqbool* also experiences emotional and moral disturbance. The final result in both cases is destruction, proving that violent power cannot remain stable.

The biggest difference between the two works is the setting. *Macbeth* takes place in royal Scotland, a world of kings, castles, soldiers, and formal authority. *Maqbool*, on the other hand, takes place in Mumbai's criminal underworld. This change is very important because it changes the meaning of power. In *Macbeth*, the murder of a king is a political and moral crime against divine order. In *Maqbool*, the murder happens in a world already full of illegality and corruption. So the film creates a more modern and socially realistic kind of tragedy. It is not about the fall of a noble court; it is about the collapse of a gangster system that already exists outside lawful morality. The characters in *Maqbool* are clearly inspired by Shakespeare's characters, but they are reshaped to fit the film's world. Macbeth is a warrior and nobleman whose ambition is linked to political authority. He is proud, brave, and deeply reflective. Maqbool is more of a criminal insider who works within a mafia structure. His struggle is not only about ambition but also about personal loyalty and emotional confusion. He is less a ruler-in-waiting and more a man trapped in a violent system. Lady Macbeth is often seen as the stronger and more ruthless force in the play. She pushes Macbeth to act by attacking his masculinity and ambition. Nimmi, however, is different. She is not simply a manipulative woman. She is emotionally vulnerable, passionate, and desperate for love and recognition. Her motivation is more complex and more human. She is not only seeking power; she is seeking emotional belonging.

Another major difference between drama and film is the way they use language. *Macbeth* depends heavily on Shakespeare's poetic speech. The audience hears Macbeth's soliloquies and the dramatic power of verse. This language helps reveal his mind and creates a deep emotional effect. *Maqbool* uses much less poetic language and more visual storytelling. Instead of long speeches, the film relies on facial expression, gesture, background score, lighting, and location. This is natural because cinema communicates through images as much as through words. A film can show fear in a close-up or tension in silence, while a play often needs spoken language to create the same effect. This is one of the key differences between stage and screen. Drama is often more verbal, while film is more visual. That does not mean one is better than the other. It simply means they use different artistic tools. Bhardwaj understands this very well, so he does not try to copy Shakespeare's language exactly. Instead, he turns the story into a cinematic experience.

Both *Macbeth* and *Maqbool* are psychological tragedies. Their heroes are not only acting in the outside world; they are also fighting internal battles. Macbeth is torn between loyalty and ambition, while Maqbool is torn between duty to Abbaji and love for Nimmi. However, Macbeth's inner life is expressed more fully through soliloquy. The audience knows exactly

what he is thinking because he speaks his mind on stage. *Maqbool*'s inner conflict is shown more indirectly through acting, silence, and visual mood. Some critics feel that *Macbeth*'s introspection is stronger, while others believe that *Maqbool*'s emotional struggle is more realistic for cinema.

Violence is central in both works. In *Macbeth*, violence destroys natural and moral order. The murder of Duncan is not just a crime; it is a sign that the whole world has become unstable. Strange events, guilt, and chaos follow the murder. In *Maqbool*, violence is already part of the underworld world. The gang system depends on fear, murder, and betrayal. So the film presents violence as a social condition rather than a sudden moral shock. This makes the film feel more realistic, but it also creates a different kind of tragedy. The audience sees that the characters are trapped in a world where violence is already normalized. Still, both works show that violence destroys the person who uses it. *Macbeth* becomes paranoid and lonely. *Maqbool* also loses peace, trust, and emotional stability. The message is clear in both cases: power gained through murder cannot last.

One of the most valuable things about *Maqbool* is its cultural transformation of Shakespeare. The film does not simply place Shakespeare's story in India; it makes the story belong to Indian social realities. The underworld setting, the police corruption, the political background, and the emotional dynamics all reflect a contemporary Indian context. This is what adaptation theory calls reinterpretation. The original text is preserved in spirit, but the new work speaks in a different cultural language. The audience does not need to know Elizabethan history in order to understand the film. At the same time, those who know *Macbeth* can see the deeper connection and enjoy the layered meaning. Bhardwaj's achievement is that he respects Shakespeare without imitating him mechanically. He shows that classical literature can be alive in a different country, language, and era. This is why *Maqbool* is such an important adaptation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, **Macbeth** and *Maqbool* are connected by the same tragic core, but they express that core in very different ways. Shakespeare's play shows how ambition, temptation, guilt, and murder destroy a powerful man from within, while Bhardwaj's film reworks the same pattern in the violent world of the Mumbai underworld. Both works reveal that the desire for power can corrupt human relationships and lead to a complete moral downfall. This comparative study also shows that *Maqbool* is not a simple copy of *Macbeth*. It is a creative film adaptation that changes the setting, characters, and social context so that the story feels

real and meaningful for a modern Indian audience. The witches become corrupt police officers, Lady Macbeth becomes Nimmi, and royal politics turn into gang rivalry. These changes do not weaken Shakespeare's original idea; instead, they help the tragedy speak in a new language and a new time.

Another important finding is that the play and the film use different artistic tools. *Macbeth* depends on poetic language, soliloquies, and stage performance, while *Maqbool* depends on visuals, sound, acting, and cinematic atmosphere. Because of this, the film cannot and should not be judged only by how closely it follows the play. It should be appreciated as an adaptation that creates its own emotional and cultural meaning. Overall, the study proves that great literature can live in new forms without losing its power. *Maqbool* shows that Shakespeare's tragedies still matter because their themes are universal, but their expression can change according to culture, medium, and historical situation. The film therefore stands as a strong example of how a classic drama can be successfully transformed into a modern cinematic work.

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