



# Literary Enigma

*The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*  
(Peer-reviewed and Indexed)

Vol. 1, Special Issue: 7

July 2025

Article No 10

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Page No: 58-69



## Indianising the Bard: The Role of Cultural Context in Bollywood Adaptations of Shakespeare

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16478676>

### Abstract

Shakespeare's works are a global treasure, be it for their timeless appeal or their capacity to resonate across different cultures. His plays, particularly the four great tragedies (Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth), have been adapted into various forms across the world. In India, they have been reimagined not as mere translations but as reinterpretations that engage deeply with local realities. They reflect India's unique cultural, political, and social landscapes.

This research paper shall focus primarily on the following four adaptations: Haider (Hamlet), Omkara (Othello), Natsamrat – in Marathi and Gujarati (King Lear), and Maqbool (Macbeth). The aim is to explore how the Bollywood adaptations of four great tragedies reinterpret

Shakespeare's universal themes to reflect the unique challenges and realities of Indian society. Haider places Hamlet in the politically charged and unstable region of Kashmir, weaving a narrative around themes of revenge, betrayal, and the personal toll of conflict. Omkara shifts Othello to the rural heartland of Uttar Pradesh, where issues of caste, honour, jealousy, and power dynamics are the key themes. Natsamrat reimagines King Lear within the Indian joint family system, focusing on themes of aging, fading legacy, and an undying devotion towards art. Meanwhile, Maqbool transposes Macbeth into the underworld of Mumbai, offering a stark portrayal of ambition, moral corruption, and the challenges in the pursuit of power.

This research will use a comparative analysis approach, looking at both the original Shakespearean texts and their Bollywood adaptations. The films will be studied in relation to their historical and cultural backgrounds to understand how key themes—such as revenge, power, jealousy, family dynamics, ambition, etc. are adapted to fit Indian social and political settings. Specific elements like character development, thematic adjustments, plot changes, and cinematic techniques will also be examined to show how the filmmakers use Shakespeare's works to portray and critique modern Indian issues. By comparing the original plays and the films, the paper will highlight the ways in which these adaptations bridge the gap between global literature and local culture.

The argument is that these Bollywood adaptations do much more than transplant Shakespeare's narratives into an Indian context. They actively engage with and critique local societal issues, transforming the original plays into narratives that speak directly to contemporary Indian audiences. The significance of this study is reflected in how it shows that Shakespeare's works, written centuries ago, can still be relevant today when adapted into different cultural settings. Bollywood's reinterpretation of his tragedies not only introduces Shakespeare to Indian audiences but also uses his themes to reflect on issues that are deeply rooted in Indian society, like caste, political conflict, and family roles. This research helps us understand how literature and cinema can work together to engage with contemporary social issues and bring global stories to local platforms.

This research will help in understanding how Shakespeare's tragedies have been Indianized, and therefore benefit adaptation and cultural studies. Moreover, this paper further enriches the field of cultural studies by analysing how Bollywood both mirrors and influences Indian society. And it can serve as an educational resource to students of literature, film, and cultural studies since it explores the intersection of literature and cinema in today's globalized world.

**Keywords:** Adaptations, Bollywood, Cultural Studies, Revenge, Power, Jealousy, Family Dynamics, Ambition, Great Tragedies, Vishal Bharadwaj, Morality, Human Condition.

## Indianising the Bard: The Role of Cultural Context in Bollywood Adaptations of Shakespeare

### Introduction

William Shakespeare's works have been celebrated worldwide for their timeless exploration of human nature, universal themes, and intricate character studies. Their journey across cultures has led to diverse reinterpretations that shape these works to reflect local narratives and values. In India, Shakespeare's four great tragedies—Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth—have found a unique resonance through Bollywood adaptations such as Haider, Omkara, Natsamrat, and Maqbool. Three out of these four (exception being Natsamrat) have been directed by Vishal Bharadwaj. These films, rather than offering direct translations, engage in a process of transcreative, cultural adaptation, transforming Shakespeare's narratives to speak to the complexities of Indian society, Indian ways of being, Indian beliefs, drives, politics, and familial structures.

This study conducts a comparative analysis of these four pairs of works, exploring how each adaptation preserves and transforms Shakespeare's themes of morality, power, betrayal, madness, ambition, etc. to reflect uniquely Indian experiences and societal issues. By focusing on themes, character reinterpretation, and setting, the study examines how these adaptations make Shakespeare's works relatable to Indian audiences while adding layers of cultural and social significance. To illustrate, Haider reimagines Hamlet's existentialism against the politically charged backdrop of Kashmir, while Omkara reimagines Othello's racial tensions into the caste dynamics of rural India. Meanwhile, Natsamrat shifts King Lear's tragedy from the downfall of a king to the heartbreaking journey of an aging theater actor confronting familial betrayal, and Maqbool transforms Macbeth's ambition into the ruthless world of Mumbai's criminal underworld.

Through this comparative lens, the study explores how these adaptations not only localize Shakespeare's tragedies but also pay homage to India's own rich storytelling traditions. The analysis seeks to understand the underlying motivations for these cultural shifts, investigating how cinematic techniques, language, and character development make Shakespeare's tragedies accessible and impactful for Indian viewers. In doing so, this study highlights the continued relevance of Shakespeare's work across time and culture, emphasizing how universal themes can be reinvented to reflect the nuanced realities of diverse societies.

### Literature Review

Pokhriyal examines the evolution of literary adaptations in Indian cinema, highlighting filmmakers' reinterpretations of narratives from ancient epics to modern literature, underscoring the cultural importance of these adaptations in preserving literary heritage and shaping national identity amid the current diversity socio-political contexts. The study also traces Indian cinema's development from mythological films to contemporary adaptations, influenced by historical and social factors, focusing on figures like Dadasaheb Phalke and Satyajit Ray, evaluating how adaptations connect literature and cinema, and reflect societal changes and audience expectations. The study also discusses the balance between fidelity to source texts and creative reinterpretation for modern audiences.

Notable filmmakers like Vishal Bhardwaj have successfully localized Shakespearean narratives, as seen in his adaptations of "Macbeth" into "Maqbool," "Othello" into "Omkara," and "Hamlet" into "Haider," each recontextualizing the original texts within distinct Indian settings and societal issues (Kowsar and Mukherjee) (Maitra and Mukherjee). Additionally, films like Gulzar's "Angoor," an adaptation of "The Comedy of Errors," exemplify how intertextuality can enhance comedic elements while maintaining thematic fidelity (Siwach). Furthermore, adaptations such as "10ml Love" challenge traditional narratives by addressing contemporary issues of caste and identity, thus reflecting the complexities of Indian society through a Shakespearean lens (Jayakumar). This interplay between Shakespeare's universal themes and Indian cultural contexts fosters a dynamic dialogue that enriches both literary and cinematic landscapes (Young).

Nicklas and Lindner discuss adaptation as a vital cultural strategy, highlighting how texts like "Hamlet" and "Pride and Prejudice" demonstrate aesthetic recycling, which is essential for forming cultural identity. Indian adaptations of Shakespeare reflect this dynamic interplay of culture and identity.

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* exemplifies Indian cultural adaptation of Shakespeare by intertwining tragic love and violence, utilizing religious rituals and cinematic micro-genres, thereby linking Indian

cinematic history with Shakespearean themes, reflecting the complexities of contemporary Indian society (Hogan).

Kumar discusses the Bollywood movie *Maqbool* as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, highlighting how it incorporates Indian cultural elements while reflecting contemporary social and political situations, thus offering a unique perspective on Shakespeare's themes through a cultural materialist lens.

*Haider* uses the haunting of Kashmir's political landscape to explore themes of loss and state violence, diverging from traditional portrayals of the region (Kowsar and Mukherjee).

While these trans-creative adaptations celebrate cultural specificity, they also raise questions about fidelity to the original texts, challenging the notion of cultural appropriation versus appreciation in the context of Shakespeare's legacy.

### **Confronting the Ghosts of the Past: Justice, Mortality, and Madness in *Hamlet* and *Haider***

*Hamlet*, one of Shakespeare's most profound tragedies, examines the human condition through the lens of grief, revenge, moral paralysis, and existential dread. In Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, this story is transplanted into the politically volatile landscape of 1990s Kashmir. While the adaptation retains the essence of Shakespeare's original, it diverges in significant ways, reshaping themes to reflect its contemporary and cultural context. Together, these works navigate the ghosts of the past—both literal and metaphorical—to interrogate justice, morality, and the descent into madness.

Hamlet, the brooding prince of Denmark, is caught in a whirlwind of grief, doubt, and revenge, grappling with the question of whether to act or let fate run its course. Centuries later, Haider, the Kashmiri young man in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, echoes Hamlet's struggles, but his world is shaped by a harsh political reality rather than a metaphysical moral order. Both stories are about loss and betrayal, but they ask us to reflect on justice in different ways—one universal, the other deeply personal. At its heart, *Hamlet* is the story of a young man trying to make sense of his father's death. When Hamlet meets the ghost of King Hamlet, the truth is revealed: his uncle Claudius, now married to his mother Gertrude, murdered his father to seize the throne. Haunted by this revelation, Hamlet vows revenge but hesitates, questioning the morality of his actions and the meaning of life itself.

In *Haider*, the setting shifts to 1990s Kashmir, a region torn by conflict. Haider's father, Dr. Hilaal Meer, is taken away by the military after sheltering a militant. Haider returns to find his mother, Ghazala, seemingly complicit in his father's disappearance and now married to his uncle, Khurram. Like Hamlet, Haider meets a mysterious figure—in this case, Roohdar—who accuses Khurram of betraying his father. With this revelation, Haider is set on a path of vengeance, though his motives feel more tangled in personal pain than moral duty.

Both stories use dialogue to dig deep into the characters' minds. Take Hamlet's soliloquies—those moments where he steps aside to wrestle with his doubts. "To be or not to be," he ponders, weighing the pain of living against the unknown of death. Every word is a window into his soul.

In *Haider*, the dialogue is sharp and often political. When Haider cries out, "Hum hain ki hum nahin hain?" (Are we, or are we not?), it's not just a nod to Hamlet's famous question—it's a cry for identity in a land ravaged by violence. While Hamlet's words feel timeless, Haider's lines are tied to his specific reality, making his struggle more immediate but less universal.

Madness is a key thread in both stories, but it takes on different shades. Hamlet pretends to be mad to distract his enemies while he plots revenge, but over time, the line between feigned and real madness blurs. His interactions with Ophelia, especially the cruel way he pushes her away, show how his grief and rage consume him.

Haider's madness, on the other hand, feels raw and untethered. He shaves his head and publicly mocks the military in a powerful scene reminiscent of Hamlet's play-within-a-play. But while Hamlet's madness is a strategy, Haider's feels like a natural outburst of grief and frustration.

This difference highlights their contrasting worlds: Hamlet is trapped in his own mind, while Haider is trapped in a physical and political prison.

The women in both stories—Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Arshi in *Haider*—serve as mirrors to the protagonists' emotional states. Ophelia is caught between her love for Hamlet and her loyalty to her father, Polonius. Hamlet's erratic behavior and eventual rejection drive her to madness and death, a tragedy that reflects Hamlet's own unraveling.

Arshi, a blend of Ophelia and Horatio, is more grounded. She tries to bridge the gap between Haider and his family, but her role lacks the depth of Ophelia's tragic arc. While Arshi's death echoes Ophelia's, it doesn't carry the same emotional weight, leaving a gap in Haider's emotional journey. Claudius is one of Shakespeare's most complex villains. He's cunning and ruthless but also deeply human. His guilt over murdering King Hamlet adds layers to his character, especially in the famous prayer scene.

Khurram, by contrast, is more straightforward. He's ambitious and self-serving, but his relationship with Ghazala lacks the depth and complexity of Claudius and Gertrude's bond. This simplification makes him less memorable, though it suits the grounded, real-world setting of Haider.

Ghosts are central to both stories, but they take different forms. In *Hamlet*, the ghost of King Hamlet is a literal specter from beyond the grave, embodying the idea of divine justice. It sets Hamlet on his tragic journey, but it also raises questions about fate and free will.

In *Haider*, Roohdar serves as the ghostly figure. He's not supernatural but represents the unresolved trauma of Kashmir's conflict. His revelations are more ambiguous than the ghost's, leaving Haider—and the audience—unsure of what to believe. This uncertainty shifts the focus from moral justice to the chaos of political betrayal.

Both stories end in blood, but the tone of their conclusions couldn't be more different. In *Hamlet*, the final act is a cascade of death: Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes all fall. It's tragic, but there's a sense of closure. Horatio survives to tell Hamlet's story, ensuring his legacy endures.

In *Haider*, the ending is more ambiguous. Haider spares Khurram, breaking the cycle of violence but leaving his revenge incomplete. The choice feels abrupt, almost unearned, and it denies the audience the catharsis they expect from a tragedy. It's a bold departure from Shakespeare, but it leaves Haider's journey feeling unresolved.

*Hamlet* endures as a masterpiece of human psychology, a story that speaks to anyone who has faced grief, doubt, or the weight of a moral dilemma. *Haider* is a powerful adaptation, but its focus on political commentary sometimes overshadows the emotional depth of its characters. Where *Hamlet*'s struggles are universal, *Haider*'s are deeply tied to the specifics of his time and place.

Both stories ask us to reflect on the nature of justice, the impact of betrayal, and the cost of revenge. But while *Hamlet*'s questions linger in the mind, *Haider*'s leave us grappling with unfinished business—much like the ghosts of Kashmir that haunt its protagonist.

### **Irreversible Consequences of Impulsive Decisions: Jealousy, Honor, and Deceit in *Othello* and *Omkaara***

The destructive impact of jealousy, impulsive decisions, and misplaced honor is at the heart of both Shakespeare's *Othello* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkaara*. Though set in vastly different worlds—Venice and rural India—the core themes in both tragedies are strikingly similar, providing a compelling cross-cultural exploration of human vulnerability and the devastating consequences of unchecked emotions. In *Othello*, Shakespeare presents a powerful military general, Othello, whose sense of honor and love for his wife Desdemona blinds him to the manipulations of Iago, his ensign. Iago's jealousy of Cassio and his personal vendetta against Othello drive him to weave a web of lies, convincing Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful. Consumed by jealousy, Othello becomes increasingly paranoid, ultimately murdering Desdemona. Upon discovering the truth, Othello is overcome with guilt and regret, ending his life in despair.

In *Omkaara*, Bhardwaj transposes this tragic narrative into the social and political backdrop of rural India. Omkara Shukla, a powerful political enforcer, is manipulated by his trusted lieutenant Langda Tyagi. Langda, resentful of Omkara's rise and his own relegation, exploits Omkara's insecurities—chiefly his lower caste status—and feeds him false suspicions about his wife, Dolly, and his trusted lieutenant, Kesu. As Omkara is drawn deeper into Langda's deceit, he becomes consumed with jealousy. This results in Omkara smothering Dolly to death, mirroring Othello's tragic actions. The film concludes with Omkara's remorse as he grapples with the irreversible consequences of his jealousy.

While the narratives follow a similar trajectory, the transformation of *Othello*'s Venetian court into *Omkaara*'s rural, caste-driven politics reflects the cultural specificity that Bhardwaj brings to his adaptation. Despite these differences, the core of both tragedies remains: the destructive power of jealousy, manipulated by external forces, leading to irreversible harm.

In *Othello*, the titular character's tragic flaw lies in his deep insecurities, primarily related to his race and outsider status in Venetian society. His nobility and valor as a general are overshadowed by his

fears of being undeserving of Desdemona's love. Iago exploits these insecurities, turning Othello's love into a weapon that he uses to destroy the very thing he cherishes. Othello's tragic flaw is his inability to reconcile his love with his self-doubt, which ultimately makes him vulnerable to Iago's manipulations.

Similarly, Omkara's tragic flaw lies in his sense of inferiority due to his caste background. Despite his power in the rural political world, Omkara's lower caste origins make him feel like an outsider in a society obsessed with caste hierarchy. Langda's manipulation of these insecurities leads Omkara to misinterpret the loyalty of those around him, particularly Dolly and Kesu. Omkara's honor, tied to his caste status, becomes the force that blinds him to reason, much like Othello's honor blinds him to truth. In both stories, the manipulation of a noble character through their insecurities leads to tragic outcomes. Where Othello's inner conflict revolves around race, Omkara's centers on caste, but the effect is the same: both men are driven by a need to assert their honor, resulting in their tragic downfall.

The theme of jealousy is central in both *Othello* and *Omkara*. Iago's manipulation of Othello's emotions is the key to the tragic events that unfold. Iago's jealousy toward Cassio and his desire for revenge on Othello fuel his deceit. He carefully plants the seeds of doubt in Othello's mind, using Desdemona's innocence to provoke Othello's jealousy. This jealousy clouds Othello's judgment, leading him to murder Desdemona in a fit of rage.

In *Omkara*, Langda Tyagi's jealousy of Kesu's rise to power and Omkara's growing affection for Dolly drives him to use Omkara's insecurities to create a false narrative of infidelity. Just as Iago manipulates Othello by showing him "evidence" of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, Langda uses Omkara's vulnerability about his caste to make him believe that Dolly is unfaithful. The intense jealousy that both Othello and Omkara feel leads to their respective acts of violence, reinforcing the devastating consequences of unchecked emotions.

In both narratives, the characters' sense of honor is tied to their ability to control and protect their perceived status. Othello's honor is linked to his role as a general in a foreign land, while Omkara's is inextricably tied to his position in a rural caste-based society. Both men's actions are driven by the need to maintain their honor, and their tragic decisions highlight the destructive impact of this misplaced sense of pride.

The handkerchief in *Othello* is a central symbol of love, trust, and betrayal. It becomes a tool for Iago to manipulate Othello, falsely presenting it as proof of Desdemona's infidelity. The handkerchief's symbolism intensifies Othello's jealousy and represents the fragile bond of trust between the characters. Othello's obsession with the handkerchief ultimately leads to Desdemona's death, emphasizing the destructive power of false evidence.

In *Omkara*, the *kamarband* (waist ornament) serves a similar function as the handkerchief, symbolizing love and fidelity. It is not just a symbol of Dolly's loyalty to Omkara, but also a marker of her status in their caste system. When Langda manipulates Omkara into believing Dolly's infidelity, the *kamarband* is presented as a symbol of her betrayal. This object, like the handkerchief, becomes a trigger for the tragic violence that follows. The *kamarband* reflects the intersection of personal emotions and societal pressures in Omkara's world, where caste and honor play a pivotal role in shaping personal relationships.

Both symbols underscore the theme of trust and the consequences of its breakdown. In *Othello*, the handkerchief becomes an emblem of doubt, while in *Omkara*, the *kamarband* represents the intersection of personal and social identity, with Omkara's jealousy ultimately destroying the trust he had in Dolly.

While *Othello* is grounded in the racial dynamics of 17th-century Venice, *Omkara* takes place within the rigid caste system of rural India. Othello's status as a Moor in a predominantly white society makes him an outsider, and his jealousy and insecurities about his race are exploited by Iago. In *Omkara*, Omkara's lower caste background is the source of his vulnerability, manipulated by Langda's insinuations about his wife's loyalty. Both Othello and Omkara, despite their outward power, are marginalized due to their outsider status, and their efforts to assert control through jealousy and violence ultimately lead to their downfall.

The social structures of race in *Othello* and caste in *Omkara* serve as powerful backdrops that shape the characters' actions. While *Othello* addresses the racial tensions in a colonial world, *Omkara* reflects the enduring impact of caste-based social stratification in India. Both adaptations use these social

frameworks to deepen the emotional and psychological conflicts of the characters, making their struggles with jealousy and honor all the more poignant.

The tragic endings of both *Othello* and *Omkara* highlight the irreversible consequences of jealousy. In *Othello*, Othello's remorse after killing Desdemona is both profound and futile. His recognition of his mistake—"I kissed thee ere I killed thee"—is a heartbreaking moment of self-awareness, but it comes too late. Othello's suicide, prompted by guilt and regret, underscores the tragic finality of his actions. Similarly, Omkara's remorse after killing Dolly is equally devastating. His cry of regret—"Now, I am being punished, Dolly... punished"—shows that, like Othello, he recognizes the weight of his impulsive decision only after it is too late. Omkara, too, is trapped by his actions, and the film ends with his emotional collapse. The inability to undo the damage caused by jealousy and impulsive actions defines the tragic nature of both stories.

In both cases, the characters are left to confront the futility of their violence, as their attempts to restore honor only deepen their remorse. The tragedy lies not only in the actions themselves but in the characters' inability to reconcile their internal conflicts with the irreversible consequences they face.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of *Othello* and *Omkara* reveals how both adaptations explore universal themes of jealousy, honor, and deceit within culturally specific contexts. While *Othello* examines the racial and social tensions of its Venetian setting, *Omkara* delves into the complexities of caste and rural politics in India. Both stories ultimately demonstrate the destructive power of jealousy and the irreversible consequences of impulsive decisions, making them timeless tragedies that resonate across cultures and eras. Through these adaptations, Shakespeare's works remain deeply relevant, offering profound insights into the human condition and the perils of unchecked emotions.

#### **Fall of the King: Passion, Loyalty, and Blindness in *King Lear* and *Natsamrat***

William Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a profound exploration of power, betrayal, madness, and human vulnerability. The play follows the tragic downfall of an aging king who desires a peaceful old age yet fails to understand how the abdication of his authority will irrevocably impact his relationships with his daughters. Seeking to divide his kingdom, Lear conducts a flawed test of loyalty by asking his three daughters to declare their love for him in words. When his youngest daughter, Cordelia, refuses to flatter him, Lear disowns her, granting his realm instead to his elder daughters, Goneril and Regan. He hopes that they will continue to honor him as king even without his power. However, instead of being treated as a respected monarch, Lear is stripped of dignity and cast aside, faced with the brutal consequences of his misjudgement.

In a powerful parallel subplot, Lear's loyal nobleman, the Earl of Gloucester, fails to recognize the true intentions of his sons—Edgar, his legitimate child, and Edmund, his illegitimate son. Gloucester is deceived by Edmund's manipulation, turning against Edgar, just as Lear is fooled by Goneril and Regan's insincere declarations of love and fails to appreciate Cordelia's honesty. Both Lear and Gloucester are ultimately exiled from their own homes, forced to confront their mistaken judgments. As the play reaches its climax, Lear is driven to madness during a raging storm, while Gloucester is blinded for his loyalty to Lear. The final scenes, steeped in violence and despair, portray the cost of human folly and pride: Lear reconciles with Cordelia but loses her soon after, and Edgar kills his treacherous brother, Edmund, inadvertently causing his father's death. Lear himself dies cradling Cordelia's body, a harrowing image of loss and regret.

Lear's tragedy is marked by its philosophical questions about justice and fate. The play challenges the assumption that the natural world has a system which works parallel to our socially and morally convenient notions of justice. Gloucester's anguished words — "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" — express his realization of the indifference/hostility of the universe towards the humans. Edgar insists that "the gods are just," suggesting that individuals receive due rewards and punishments. But the resolution of *King Lear* offers no definitive answer; both the good and the wicked meet similar fates. While there is goodness in the world of the play, it is intermingled with madness and death, leaving the audience with a profound uncertainty about the nature of justice and fate.

This timeless tragedy has inspired countless adaptations, and in India, it finds a powerful counterpart in *Natsamrat*, a Marathi film directed by Mahesh Manjrekar. *Natsamrat* transposes the story of a fallen king into the deeply relatable tale of Ganpatrao Belwalkar, a celebrated actor who, after years of glory on stage, retires and entrusts his wealth and legacy to his children. Rather than the political kingdom of *King Lear*, *Natsamrat* centers on Ganpatrao's legacy in the world of theater, where he reigns as a "king"

in his own right. This transformation makes the story more relevant to an Indian audience, where the bonds of family and personal legacy often hold greater significance than political power.

Ganpatrao, like Lear, is blind to the true nature of his children until it is too late. He assumes that his former glory and the respect he commanded on stage will translate into continued honor at home, but he faces only betrayal and neglect. This adaptation speaks deeply to Indian audiences, where respect for elders and the preservation of family honor are central to cultural identity. The decision to portray Ganpatrao as a Natsamrat, or “king of theater” serves as a tribute to India’s own theatrical tradition, blending Shakespeare’s universal themes with a specific cultural resonance. The film’s emphasis on the tragedy of lost dignity and respect allows it to explore the profound challenges that aging parents face in contemporary society, where traditional family structures are eroding, and elder care is no longer guaranteed.

In Natsamrat, Ganpatrao’s descent into madness is portrayed through intense monologues that echo his past roles on stage. The film uses these monologues as a vehicle to express his inner turmoil, and his profound passion for art and the human desire to be seen, understood, and appreciated. His rage and confusion spill over in a monologue where he questions his existence: “To live or to die, that is the only question. Is it wise to live a useless, shameless, and helpless existence, in this unbearable situation? Or should I end the suffering of this body and fling it into the abyss of death?” Here, Ganpatrao echoes Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy, but through the lens of an aging artist tormented by his children’s betrayal and a

sense of looming oblivion. Like Lear’s cry, “I am a man more sinned against than sinning,” Ganpatrao’s monologue highlights his belief that life has become an unbearable punishment. For Ganpatrao, the theater is more than just a profession—it is the essence of his identity, a place where he has experienced the most intense fulfillment of his life. His retirement speech, given with Shakespearean grandeur, reveals how deeply the stage has shaped him: “This stage makes me feel as secure as I did in my mother’s womb; it comforts me.” Here, he equates the stage to a sanctuary, a place of nurturing and creation, underscoring his intimate connection to his craft.

Ganpatrao’s yearning to be remembered and valued for his artistry is captured in his reflection on the audience’s engagement with his performances. “While standing on the stage, I could see many faces, sitting in the 15th or 16th row. Shakespeare, Tatyasaheb, Deval, and Gadkari! They held a pack of chips in one hand, and a single chip in another. The mere sight of it had me raging. All I wanted was to do something extraordinary that they should forget to eat the chip.” Here, Ganpatrao’s commitment to his craft is made clear—he sought to be so compelling on stage that his audience would forget even the simplest of distractions.

His passionate soliloquies reflect the depth of his connection to his craft, but they also serve as a haunting reminder of his isolation, as he is left alone in his memories of past glory. The storm of emotions he undergoes parallels the external tempest in *King Lear*, capturing the unraveling of a man stripped of all he holds dear.

The film also addresses existential questions of justice and fate, drawing from Indian philosophical perspectives. Much like *King Lear*, Natsamrat raises questions about divine justice. Ganpatrao wonders if his suffering is the result of some cosmic indifference, or if it is simply his fate. In one poignant conversation with his friend Ram, where Ram quotes the mythological character Karna from the *Mahabharata*, “A man should spend his entire life solving and battling the mysteries of life. And you put an end to this journey in the name of fate. This is not justice. I protest this scheme called fate.” The film incorporates reflections on karma, destiny, to raise questions about cosmic injustice and the seeming randomness of human suffering — questions also posed by *King Lear*.

*King Lear*’s central themes of power, family, and betrayal are retained in Natsamrat, yet the adaptation uses the specifics of Indian society to deepen these themes. Ganpatrao’s relationship with his son and daughter echoes the breakdown of Lear’s bond with his daughters, but the cultural emphasis shifts. While Lear’s daughters, Goneril and Regan, challenge traditional gender roles, Ganpatrao’s children represent a more modern conflict between generational expectations and individual desires. This cultural adaptation reflects the complexities of the Indian joint family system, where younger generations increasingly prioritize personal ambitions over familial duty. Ganpatrao’s experience as a neglected elder resonates deeply with Indian audiences, who understand the emotional weight of familial betrayal and the isolation faced by aging parents. While Ganpatrao’s family fails to care for him, a tea stall owner named Raja steps in with unwavering support and loyalty, embodying the role of

a surrogate son who offers respect and empathy when others have turned away. Raja's quiet yet profound friendship with Ganpatrao offers a stark contrast to the betrayal of Ganpatrao's own children. This adaptation of Shakespeare's *Fool* adds an Indian cultural context, as Raja's loyalty towards Ganpatrao and his care and concern provide solace.

In *King Lear*, the scene with the storm symbolizes both external chaos and Lear's internal struggle, while in *Natsamrat* Ganpatrao quite literally compares himself with the storm in his monologue after his wife dies, underscoring his profound loneliness. "Can you give me a shelter?" he says, looking at an idol of Lord Ganesha in a small temple, gesturing at it scornfully, he continues, "No, you can't. Can someone provide me shelter? A storm is in need of shelter. The storm doesn't need a mansion nor the set of a palace, neither laurels nor garlands, nor costly gifts. Just a tiny house to rest in," Ganpatrao's humble request encapsulates his yearning for basic human dignity and belonging. Similar to how Lear sought solace in a world that has denied him both familial love and political honor.

The language of *Natsamrat* is rich with Marathi expressions and references to Indian theater, grounding the adaptation firmly in its cultural setting. Ganpatrao's soliloquies in Marathi often reference Shakespearean characters, bringing a universal element to the dialogue while retaining local flavor. His impassioned speech, where he cries, "Oh, Almighty, why have you been so cruel? On one hand, the children we gave birth to have abandoned us. And on the other hand, you who created us, deserted us too," mirrors Lear's own existential despair. In another scene, after his theater is reduced to ashes, Ganpatrao exclaims, "No, you ungrateful wretches, I won't cry. My heart will shatter to pieces before I shed a tear." This evocative language evokes the passion and intensity of Indian drama, enhancing the emotional connection for Indian audiences familiar with the vibrancy of Marathi theater.

The film's visual and cinematic techniques contribute to its emotional impact. Close-ups and dramatic lighting emphasize Ganpatrao's suffering, while flashbacks to his theater days evoke his lost grandeur. The use of traditional Marathi music heightens the emotional resonance, and the pacing of the film mirrors the deliberate, intense rhythm of a stage performance, paying homage to Ganpatrao's life in theater. In scenes of quiet reflection, ambient sounds and silence capture the depth of his loneliness, mirroring the emotional isolation experienced by Lear on the heath.

Ganpatrao's character arc, like Lear's, culminates in a powerful meditation on the fragility of human dignity. Despite the tragedy, *Natsamrat* offers moments of resilience and hope, particularly in the love Ganpatrao shares with his wife, Kaveri. Their bond endures even as he descends into despair, offering a glimpse of redemption that contrasts with Lear's solitary end. This portrayal resonates with Indian values, where the endurance of love and family ties is celebrated, even in the face of severe adversity. In the scene where they run away together after having had enough from their sons and daughter, they have a heartwarming conversation while hitchhiking in a truck, "In the last 50 years, there's one thing I forgot to tell you."

"Oh, dear! Now what?"

"You make me very happy. I love you very much."

"Don't I know that already? You don't have to tell me."

"But I wanted to say it aloud." and

"What should we do once we reach Morwadi?"

"We'll call someone to clean the house. Make it new and shiny! Until it is ready, we'll build a little fireplace in the backyard. The food will be delicious when you cook on it."

"No. First, we'll pay a visit to the Moreswar temple."

"Okay."

"Before going to the temple,

I'll take a dip in the river. All that is evil shall be washed away."

"Yes, it will. The river will purify us."

"Once we get to Morwadi, I will paint the walls with my own hands. Once I put my mind into it, I can transform the hut into a palace. You must not interfere or lecture me. I am warning you. And I want to plant the holy basil in the backyard."

These moments of hope highlight a cultural difference between the two works. In Indian society, themes of resilience and rebirth and new beginnings are often celebrated, reflecting the belief that, no matter how dire the situation, there is always an opportunity for redemption and a return to dignity. Which is why at the very end of the movie, in a state of utter overwhelm, and unyielding passion, even after



having lost everything and being in a pitiable physical state, Ganpatrao announces at the top of his lungs, and becomes as big as the room, “Now, I strive to be like the immovable North Star. Just like Julius Caesar did in his own time. And I am the chosen one. Standing tall before you. I am Julius Caesar! I am Prataprao. I'm Othello. Sudhakar and Hamlet and...I am Ganpat Ramchandra Belwalkar, the King of Theater! All the great men reside in my body now. And a great man's heart tempts the daggers of his killers. All the killers have surrounded me. They have their daggers drawn, but I must face them.” He doesn't say he is King Lear, even though he quite literally is. He roars that he is not helpless, and the Indian audience believes him. Because the belief that all things must fall into place by the end is deeply ingrained in the Indian culture. The movie ends with these final words on a black screen, after the end credits have rolled out, “...A NEW ROLE AWAITS.

Natsamrat captures the essence of Shakespeare's tragedy while creating a story uniquely attuned to the Indian context. Ganpatrao's journey as an aging theater legend brings Shakespeare's themes of power, betrayal, and madness into the cultural heart of India, transforming King Lear into a deeply personal and socially relevant narrative. Through this adaptation, Natsamrat serves not only as a tribute to Shakespeare's work but also as an homage to India's rich theatrical tradition, highlighting the enduring relevance of universal themes when they are interwoven with cultural identity.

### **Fate vs Free Will: Ambition, Corruption, and Conscience in Macbeth and Maqbool**

The tension between fate and free will, ambition and morality, lies at the core of both William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare probes the psychological consequences of unchecked ambition as the eponymous protagonist grapples with his desires, the prophecy of witches, and his conscience. Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* transposes this narrative into the cutthroat underworld of Mumbai, retaining the essence of the original while exploring the interplay of ambition and morality in a contemporary Indian context. Through their respective explorations of fate, ambition, corruption, and conscience, these works illuminate universal truths about human nature while being deeply rooted in their specific socio-cultural settings.

At their core, *Macbeth* and *Maqbool* follow a similar narrative trajectory, but the differences in cultural, historical, and societal contexts shape the telling of each story. In Shakespeare's

*Macbeth*, the eponymous protagonist begins as a valiant Scottish general and loyal servant of King Duncan. Upon encountering three witches who prophesy his rise to power, Macbeth succumbs to ambition, driven further by his wife, Lady Macbeth. His journey into tyranny begins with the murder of Duncan, followed by a series of increasingly ruthless acts to secure his throne. Macbeth's reign is marked by paranoia, hallucinations, and guilt, culminating in his death at the hands of Macduff, fulfilling another aspect of the witches' prophecy. The play ends with the restoration of moral order as Malcolm, Duncan's rightful heir, ascends the throne.

*Maqbool*, on the other hand, transports the narrative to Mumbai's underworld, replacing kings and thanes with dons and henchmen. Maqbool is a trusted lieutenant of Abbaji, the mafia don who rules the criminal underworld. His love for Nimmi, Abbaji's mistress, and the prophecy of corrupt police officers Pandit and Purohit, lure Maqbool into betraying his mentor. Unlike the broader political themes in *Macbeth*, *Maqbool* personalizes the narrative, focusing on loyalty, love, and the fragility of human relationships. After assassinating Abbaji, Maqbool assumes control but faces betrayal, guilt, and retribution, mirroring Macbeth's descent into paranoia and ruin. The film ends in Maqbool's tragic death, completing his downfall as a tragic hero.

Bhardwaj retains the essential elements of Shakespeare's story while embedding them in a culturally resonant setting. The emotional depth of *Maqbool* stems from its intimate portrayal of characters and their relationships, offering a nuanced take on Shakespeare's classic tragedy.

In both *Macbeth* and *Maqbool*, prophecy acts as a catalyst for the protagonists' moral decline.

The witches in *Macbeth* plant the seed of ambition in Macbeth with their cryptic greeting:

“All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (Act one, scene three)

Their prophecy awakens in Macbeth a desire for power that he had not consciously acknowledged, prompting him to contemplate regicide. While the witches do not directly instruct Macbeth to commit murder, their ambiguous words manipulate him into believing that fate demands action. Macbeth himself recognizes this internal conflict: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir.” (Act one, scene three)

In *Maqbool*, the prophetic role is transferred to corrupt police officers Pandit and Purohit, whose forecast of *Maqbool*'s rise to power reflects the socio-political dynamics of modern India. Pandit's declaration, "Jo raah Raja ki hai, wohi raah *Maqbool* ki hai" ("The path of the king is also *Maqbool*'s path"), parallels the witches' prophecy and serves to lure *Maqbool* into imagining a future beyond his subservience to Abbaji, the gang leader. However, unlike *Macbeth*, who initially hesitates, *Maqbool* is more decisively drawn to the prospect of power, hinting at an already simmering ambition.

While both prophecies set the stage for the protagonists' moral corruption, they also highlight the interplay between fate and free will. The characters' choices—not the prophecies—ultimately determine their tragic outcomes.

Ambition is the driving force behind the actions of *Macbeth* and *Maqbool*, but it also serves as their undoing. *Macbeth*, initially a valiant and loyal soldier, is urged by Lady *Macbeth* to seize the throne through murder. Her taunts, such as: "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Act one, scene seven)

Shame *Macbeth* into acting against his better judgment. Lady *Macbeth*'s manipulations reflect the toxic partnership that feeds his ambition and hastens his moral decline. Once he commits regicide, *Macbeth* becomes consumed by paranoia, confessing: "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (Act three, scene two)

In *Maqbool*, Nimmi (the Lady *Macbeth* counterpart) serves a similar role, persuading *Maqbool* to murder Abbaji. Nimmi's motivations, however, are more layered, driven by her dual desires for power and liberation from Abbaji's control. Her plea, "Duniya khatam ho jaaye tab bhi tum mere rahoge" ("Even if the world ends, you'll always belong to me"), underscores the personal dimension of her manipulation. *Maqbool*'s decision to kill Abbaji marks his descent into moral corruption, as he betrays a man who is both his leader and father figure.

Both *Macbeth* and *Maqbool* demonstrate how ambition, when left unchecked, erodes loyalty, love, and morality. The characters' initial hesitations give way to an all-consuming desire for power, blinding them to the consequences of their actions.

The psychological torment of guilt and conscience is a central theme in both *Macbeth* and *Maqbool*. *Macbeth*'s guilt manifests almost immediately after Duncan's murder. His hallucination of a bloodstained dagger before the act—"Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?" (Act two, scene one) reflects his inner turmoil and foreshadows his eventual unraveling. Post-regicide, he becomes increasingly paranoid, haunted by visions of Banquo's ghost and Lady *Macbeth*'s growing instability. His despair reaches its zenith in the nihilistic soliloquy: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time." (Act five, scene five).

*Maqbool*, too, is haunted by guilt, which takes the form of Abbaji's spectral presence. Unlike Lady *Macbeth*, who descends into madness, Nimmi remains outwardly composed but grapples with her own inner demons. *Maqbool*'s guilt becomes a psychological prison, isolating him from those around him and eroding his capacity for trust.

Both characters' struggles with conscience add depth to their tragedies, transforming them from villains into deeply human figures overwhelmed by their moral failings.

The settings of *Macbeth* and *Maqbool* play a crucial role in shaping their narratives and thematic resonance. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is steeped in the political and social hierarchies of medieval Scotland, a setting rife with violence, betrayal, and superstition. The barren landscapes and frequent references to darkness underscore the play's themes of moral and political decay.

*Maqbool* transposes this story to the urban sprawl of Mumbai, reimagining the feudal power struggles of Scotland within the framework of organized crime. The murky alleys, dimly lit interiors, and corrupt police officers create an atmosphere of moral ambiguity, mirroring the protagonist's internal conflict. Bhardwaj's decision to replace the supernatural with human agents (Pandit and Purohit) also grounds the narrative in the realities of modern India, where corruption and ambition are systemic rather than mystical forces.

Shakespeare's language in *Macbeth* is richly symbolic, with recurring motifs of blood, darkness, and unnatural phenomena. The line, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (Act two, scene two) encapsulates *Macbeth*'s guilt and recognition of the irreversible nature of his crime. Similarly, Bhardwaj uses visual symbolism in *Maqbool*, such as the recurring imagery of

water and blood, to convey Maqbool's moral decay. The film's dialogue, delivered in colloquial Hindi and Urdu, retains the emotional weight of Shakespeare's text while making it accessible to Indian audiences.

Abbaji (Pankaj Kapur), modeled after King Duncan, is a commanding yet fatherly figure whose murder marks Maqbool's moral fall. Pankaj Kapur's performance imbues Abbaji with an aura of authority and vulnerability, making his betrayal by Maqbool all the more poignant.

Pandit and Purohit (Om Puri and Naseeruddin Shah), play the corrupt police officers echo the witches in Macbeth, but their motivations are rooted in human self-interest rather than mystical malevolence. Their playful yet sinister presence highlights the pervasive corruption within the system.

Kaka (Piyush Mishra), Maqbool's loyal ally, dies underscoring the theme of cost of loyalty and betrayal, adding emotional depth to the narrative.

Bhardwaj masterfully reimagines Shakespeare's narrative in the Indian context, making it accessible and relatable to modern audiences. By setting the story in the gritty, morally ambiguous world of Mumbai's underworld, Maqbool universalizes the themes of ambition, betrayal, and conscience while offering a fresh perspective. The shift from royal politics to organized crime emphasizes the universality of Shakespeare's ideas, proving their relevance in varied cultural milieus.

The adaptation excels in its portrayal of complex relationships, particularly the dynamic between Maqbool and Nimmi. Their relationship adds layers of vulnerability and moral conflict absent from the original Lady Macbeth-Macbeth dynamic. Nimmi is not merely a manipulative figure; her love for Maqbool and fear of Abbaji humanize her, adding emotional depth to her character.

Maqbool delves into societal hierarchies, the tension between loyalty and ambition, and the moral decay within power structures. By integrating social commentary, Bhardwaj elevates the narrative, making it more than just a tale of ambition gone awry.

The stellar performances, especially by Pankaj Kapur (Abbaji) and Tabu (Nimmi), lend authenticity and gravitas to the adaptation. The dialogues are rooted in colloquial Hindi, retaining the essence of Shakespeare's poetic cadence while making it accessible.

One critique of Maqbool is its omission of the overt supernatural. In Macbeth, the witches symbolize fate and the unknown, adding layers of ambiguity. While Pandit and Purohit fulfill this role metaphorically, the lack of explicit supernatural presence alters the tone and reduces the mystical allure of the original.

Another concern-worthy factor is the slower pace in some parts of the film may detract from the tension and urgency that characterize Macbeth. While the soliloquies in the play provide psychological insight, their cinematic equivalent sometimes lacks the same intensity, potentially disengaging viewers. But on the other hand, Bhardwaj translates the power of language, soliloquies, and dramatic irony to convey themes and emotions into visual storytelling, using lighting, framing, and music to evoke a similar psychological depth. For instance, Maqbool's paranoia is portrayed through dreamlike sequences and haunting imagery, substituting for Macbeth's verbalized inner turmoil.

While Macbeth reflects the anxieties of Jacobean England—especially regarding kingship and divine right—Maqbool speaks to contemporary issues in India, including systemic corruption and the fragility of moral values in pursuit of power. Is Macbeth entirely to blame for his downfall, or is he a victim of fate? Similarly, is Maqbool driven by love, ambition, or societal pressures? The moral ambiguity in both works ensures their timeless appeal. Cultural resonance and moral ambiguity give Maqbool a unique identity while remaining faithful to its source.

### **Conclusion**

The Bollywood adaptations of Shakespeare's great tragedies—Haider, Omkara, Natsamrat, and Maqbool—stand as compelling examples of cultural transcreation. These films do not merely replicate Shakespeare's narratives; instead, they reimagine them within the fabric of Indian socio-political and cultural contexts. By doing so, they maintain the universal relevance of Shakespeare's themes while making them deeply resonant for Indian audiences.

Each adaptation enriches the original plays by embedding them with local complexities, whether it is through Haider's exploration of identity against the backdrop of Kashmir, Omkara's engagement with caste politics, Natsamrat's homage to Indian theater, or Maqbool's critique of power within the Mumbai underworld. These narratives reveal the adaptability of Shakespeare's works and underscore the global appeal of his exploration of human emotions and moral dilemmas.

Ultimately, these adaptations highlight how Shakespeare's timeless themes—ambition, love, betrayal, and justice—can be interwoven with the cultural and social nuances of a different milieu, creating stories that are both universal and uniquely local. They reaffirm the enduring relevance of his works while celebrating the richness of Indian storytelling traditions.

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