

**Rethinking World Literature through Film Adaptation:
Cultural Translation of Macbeth in the Films of Akira Kurosawa
and Vishal Bharadwaj**

Jayesh H Chaudhary
Temporary Assistant Professor
Department of English (VNSGU) - Surat



Abstract:

In this paper, the role of film adaptations in revising and enlarging the concept of world literature will be investigated using a comparative approach to *Macbeth* in *Throne of Blood* by Akira Kurosawa and *Maqbool* by Vishal Bhardwaj. Whereas in film adaptation studies, adaptations have been traditionally seen as faithful representation of the source text, the adaptation theory under discussion here considers adaptation as cultural translation, with meanings being changed in the process according to the specific historical and social context. Using adaptation theory and the world literature concept of how literature travels globally, this paper argues that cinema is an important vehicle for adapting classic literature into a format that can reach a more extensive audience than just readers of the original work. Accordingly, director Akira Kurosawa's adaptation of the Scottish tragedy inside the context of feudal Japan through his film *Throne Of Blood* has transformed the concepts of ambition, destiny, and morality in relation to the samurai code of ethics and his interpretation of Japanese philosophy. Similarly, filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of *Macbeth* to the Mumbai underworld through his film *Maqbool* has redefined the conflict over power as a narrative focused upon crime, authority, and corruption in contemporary India. The paper makes the case that movies enable world literature to reach people other than academics and the intelligentsia. Through adaptation, individuals who may never come into direct contact with Shakespeare's writing experience the issues and narratives associated with him. From this perspective, movies can be seen as a powerful medium through which world literature is disseminated globally, survives, and receives new meanings.

Introduction:

Over the past few decades, research into world literature has increasingly been focusing on the dynamic process through which texts traverse national borders in terms of language, culture, and medium. Whereas the previous view of literary works was limited to their identity as the products of a unique national literary heritage, researchers now emphasize the travels of texts, as well as transformations of their meanings within a particular cultural environment. Such an approach suggests that canonical literature can be studied anew in light of its role in the process of cultural transfer worldwide. Besides translation as a traditional means of disseminating literature in foreign contexts, theatre productions, movies, and digital media have become equally important vehicles for this purpose. Of particular interest is the power of film to reinvent literary texts.

Many literary pieces that currently belong to the category of "World Literature," have been visualized as "World Literature" in many formats and in many different places, not solely

through translation, but additionally through adaption in others' artistic mediums. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, for example, has inspired numerous theatrical and Film adaptations; likewise, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* has inspired several theatrical and Film adaptations, as well. In addition, contemporary literature, such as Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, can now be found throughout the world through Film and Television adaption. The existence of these adaptations suggests that literary works are not tied or limited to their original context; rather they take on new meaning in their new historical and artistic context. Within this larger scope of world literature as it exists in our society today, the written works of William Shakespeare seem to have the most significance. Due to the theme of ambition, political power, and moral conflict in the play *Macbeth*, *Macbeth* has been particularly adapted to numerous social contexts and historical contexts, since all cultures and times can relate to the content of *Macbeth*. The purpose of this analysis is to explore how adaptations of novels into films change and enlarge our notion of what constitutes world literature by comparing the film versions of Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, directed by Akira Kurosawa and Indian director Vishal Bhardwaj.

Using a cultural translation framework (as opposed to a textual fidelity presumption) when studying *Throne of Blood* and *Maqbool* as adaptations of *Macbeth* illustrates that film adaptation serves a much broader purpose than merely reproducing the original source material; it opens further access to world literature for audiences outside academia and provides opportunities for the many canonical stories classified as world literature to transfer their meaning from one culture to another.

The Concept of World Literature:

There is a lengthy intellectual background of the topic of World Literature and its many interpretations from authors and academics across the globe. In the 1800's, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who coined the term "Weltliteratur," was the first person to define and discuss the idea that literature, instead of being geographically confined to one country, is now existing in a context of internationalization and dialogues between different cultures. In essence, Goethe predicted that in the future the development of World Literature would be influenced by the interactions between the different literary traditions. He created this idea at the same time as the development of the spread of translation and globalization began connecting the literature throughout Europe and beyond. In modern Literary Criticism, issues of World Literature have been further defined and developed by many prominent theorists. David Damrosch defines world literature as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 4), suggesting that literature becomes

“world literature” only when it crosses national or linguistic boundaries. In this sense, world literature is not a static canon but a dynamic process in which texts are continually reinterpreted as they move across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Other authors focus on the idea of circulation to explain the phenomenon of world literature. As Franco Moretti notes, world literature is a system that operates globally, being “one and unequal” in the sense that literary forms migrate into new environments and are transformed there (Moretti 56). Similarly, Pascale Casanova describes it as “the world republic of letters,” a place where the works of different cultures are brought into contact with each other (Casanova 4). All these approaches emphasize the fact that literature does not remain unchanged at the moment of creation, but continues to change during its subsequent development.

The writings of Rabindranath Tagore also present a humanistic view which encompasses a universal aspect of literature, according to him, to be truly appreciated; literature should communicate to all people instead of just one country or community. Writers create literature as individuals, but the broader collective nature of humanity should guide literature. Thus, literature is considered a part of the common cultural experience that transcends the borders of any one country. These ideas suggest that world literature should not only consist of the most famous works globally, but rather develop over time as a means of expressing and sharing different cultures. Literary work is considered world literature, as it moves among and through cultures, languages and artistic expressions, and acquires new meanings as a result. This helps to develop an understanding of how classic works such as *Macbeth* will continue to move globally, and will continue to be transformed through adaptations into film or other cultural representations.

Shakespeare and the Global Circulation of *Macbeth*:

One of the most interesting ways to see how literature moves between different cultures and historical periods is to look at how Shakespeare is viewed globally. While his plays were written for the theatre of England in the early modern period, they have been performed and interpreted in many other locations. Today, Shakespeare's works can be found in numerous languages and cultural traditions all over the world. A number of scholars therefore characterize him as an important author in the canon of world literature. They illustrate that a literary work can go beyond the borders of its country of origin and be part of a larger cultural conversation among various societies.

Macbeth is one of the most well known tragedies written by Shakespeare, among all his works. The play deals with several themes, such as ambition and power, tyranny, moral

degradation, and the psychological impact of violent action (political violence). Each of these themes can be applied universally and historically as they all have something in common; they are related to issues of power and individual moral foundations. Because of the adaptability of the themes, Macbeth has been read from many different perspectives in numerous cultures. For example, some scholars see the play as a commentary on political situations because the text addresses the theme of illegitimate authority and the potential for instability in relation to power. While in other cultures, the play is seen primarily as an exploration of guilt and ambition, but as a psychological study and not a political one.

Academics studying Shakespeare's global impact have commented on how these different interpretations show how flexible Shakespeare's stories really are. Any time Macbeth, for example, is presented in a different culture, the characters, symbols, and style of the production created by the director/translators/performers are altered to correspond to the particular traditions of that culture. In doing so, we see how continuously Macbeth exists in the wider literary world as a "living" text that will create new meanings for itself every time it exists in a new place or at a different time.

Adaptation Theory: Beyond Fidelity

For years, discussions of adaptation have been concerned with fidelity, meaning that reviewers look at how closely a film follows its source material. The literary work is treated as the original and, therefore, superior to the film adaptation. A review of adaptations is typically based on the similarities and differences of the two texts while paying little attention to the fact that movies are independent art forms and are meant for different audiences.

Modern theorists of adaptation have questioned this narrow definition of adaptation. In her book, *The Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon states that adaptation should be looked at as a process of creative and interpretative production as opposed to an act of replication. She describes adaptation as “repetition, but repetition without replication,” (Hutcheon 7) meaning that while an adaptation has a direct connection to its source text, it also will alter the source material in some way by the artistic form in which it is expressed, the way in which it is understood by a culture, and the expectation of the audience. According to Hutcheon, the creative freedom of the adaptor permits them to reimagine the narrative instead of reproducing it verbatim.

Fidelity theory is viewed as flawed by Robert Stam because it assumes that literary works hold more weight than films and favours an intertextual approach to adaptations (Stam). Cinema, as much as it is a visual medium created from images and sound is also a form of expression created from editing and acting. A film adaptation will therefore alter the

intersection of the literary work to take advantage of the possibilities of the cinema medium; thus, making adaptation an intertextual dialogue and not merely a translation of written work.

From the perspective of Julie Sanders, adaptation should be seen as “the process of reinterpreting and recontextualizing literary works” (Sanders 26) and that, as a result of this process, the stories have been altered and now reflect new, contemporary cultural and historical context. Therefore, adaptations should not be perceived as the inferior copy of the original work, but as being an original work of creativity that gives rise to new meaning for literature in the different types of media and cultures.

Cultural Translation in Kurosawa's Throne of Blood:

Throne of Blood showcases how a canon of literature can be changed culturally through its translation from literature into film via an incredibly notable instance. Kurosawa has taken the play Macbeth written by Shakespeare (which was published much earlier than Throne of Blood) and placed it into a historical and cultural perspective of Japan during the feudal period. Rather than simply taking Shakespeare's story and putting it on the screen, he changed the story of Macbeth into an entirely different tragedy, using elements of Japanese history and customs, aesthetics, and traditional theatres – thus proving how a piece of literature can receive new meaning and interpretation when looked at through a different cultural perspective.

The film's use of Japanese theatrical forms, especially Noh theatre, is one of its most notable features; Lady Asaji (the parallel to Lady Macbeth) demonstrates controlled gesture, stylized movements, and an almost mask-like facial expression during her performance, all characteristic of Noh drama, in which emotional intensity is generally expressed through restraint rather than overt expression. By employing this stylistic approach, Akira Kurosawa reinterprets William Shakespeare's psychological drama into an expression with direct resonance to Japanese forms of cultural performance. Similarly, the film's setting offers evidence of the cultural reworking of the story; rather than the medieval Scotland of the play, the film's narrative unfolds in a feudal Japanese society characterised by the dominance of warlords, samurai loyalty, and codes of honour that parallel the moral and social systems of Japan's feudal society. The portrayal of Washizu, the equivalent of Macbeth Character, is as a samurai whose ambition and moral conflict unfold within the ethical framework of Bushido, the code of loyalty and duty of samurai. The tragedy of ambition and betrayal is therefore given new cultural dimensions while continuing to express the thematic concerns of Shakespeare's original text. The process by which David Damrosch details how a piece of literature is transformed into world literature through surpassing its home of origin when it travels beyond its home to acquire new meanings in additional cultural contexts is shown through the film.

Simultaneously, the film retains the timeless motifs that permit Macbeth to operate as a piece of world literature. Issues such as power, destiny, moral accountability and desire of man are central to the storyline, and as a result, audiences from various societies will have similar experiences with the fundamental construction of Shakespeare's tragedy. This artistic re-imagining of the text *The Throne of Blood* is an illustration of how a literary work can move between cultural locations; thus, reshaping itself with respect to the local customs, but nevertheless maintaining connections with the international flow of literature as world literature.

Cultural Translation in Bhardwaj's Maqbool:

Maqbool is an exceptional case of cultural translation-the adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy as a contemporary Indian tale. The film presented by Vishal Bhardwaj presents a re-interpretation of Macbeth in Mumbai's underworld instead of using the characters from medieval kings and noblemen, it presents an adaptation of criminals and other outlaw elements, politics-based around organized crime. Bhardwaj provides a lens for viewing the struggle for the Scottish throne in Macbeth through the battle for power among the Mumbai mafia.

The character of Maqbool, portrayed by Irrfan Khan, serves as palace chief Abbaji's (Pankaj Kapur) right-hand man. In a very similar way that Macbeth serves King Duncan in Shakespeare's play of the same name, Maqbool is to Abbaji and aids in achieving his goals. However, as Maqbool's ambition grows, so does his willingness to betray and murder those he used to serve. Nimmi (Tabu), in a very similar manner as Lady Macbeth does for Macbeth, provides Maqbool with the resources necessary to achieve his ambition. While the film differs from Macbeth in many ways, Bhardwaj has been able to take the original form of Shakespeare's tragedy and maintain the structure while creating an artistic reflection of the current sociopolitical environment in India.

The movie also uses supernatural elements from Macbeth through a distinctively Indian lens. In Maqbool, the three witches have been replaced with two corrupt cops, who act as prophetic figures shaping Maqbool's actions and contributing to the atmosphere of inevitability and fate that pervades the movie's narrative. By taking out the witches and replacing them with morally ambiguous characters from the contemporary urban milieu, the film relocates Shakespeare's supernatural aspects into a realistic socio-political setting, reflecting what Linda Hutcheon calls adaptation as "repetition without replication." The narrative framework of the original text is retained; however, its meaning is reconceptualized new cultural and historical contexts.

The universal themes of ambition, guilt, betrayal and corrupting nature of power are what allow the play Macbeth to be considered world literature. By placing these themes into the Mumbai underworld, Bhardwaj shows that the tragedy of Macbeth can be reinterpreted in a different cultural context, yet still retain its basic concerns about mankind. It is this type of artistic reinterpretation that illustrates how the continuing evolution of world literature comes through the transfer of meaning from one culture to another.

Representation of Power and Ambition in the Two Adaptations:

In both Throne of Blood and Maqbool we see two different re-interpretation of Shakespeare's work called Macbeth. Each film's reinterpretation contains a re-telling of Shakespeare's journey through ambition into a different social & political context therefore showing that universal themes can be altered through cultural contexts.

In Throne of Blood (Akira Kurosawa), the ambition of the character Washizu (Kurosawa's response to Macbeth) is tied in closely with the feudal stratification of Japan. Washizu, who is a samurai, discovers his violent ambition after meeting a spirit that foretells future events. As Washizu's ambition grows, his disregard for the moral obligation of loyalty and honour that governs the samurai's code disrupts the moral fabric of samurai society. In the end stage of Washizu's ambition, he is forced to leave his samurai brothers and is completely isolated, culminating in his eventual demise. Curiously enough, the climax of the film, when Washizu is killed by the arrows of his own men, demonstrates that unjustly gained power will surely collapse into ruin. While Bhardwaj's Maqbool views ambition within the context of the underworld criminal and political networks of contemporary Mumbai, Bhardwaj emphasizes that power (the articulation of one's will) comes through controlling crime rather than royal authority as articulated by Shakespeare. Additionally, the character of Maqbool is influenced by the corrupt police officers (replacing Shakespeare's witches) and by Nimmi, whose predictions lead to Maqbool's ambition and eventual downfall. In this context of modern urbanity, ambition is also linked to a culture of corruption, violence and political manipulation.

Neither film adaptation is culturally immune from the theme of how unchecked ambition leads to destruction, with both films portraying the protagonist of each film experiencing guilt, paranoia and ultimately, destruction as a result of the protagonist's pursuit of power; thus illustrating the enduring truth of Shakespeare's vision of tragedy and tragedy's universality.

Cinema as a Medium of Global Literary Circulation:

The connection between world literature and film is also particularly important when literary works are given new life through their adaptation into films, thus making them

available to a broader and more varied audience across different cultures and countries than simply through translation or scholarly readership alone. Film, as opposed to more conventional ways of circulating literature among readers such as translation and academic study, has increased the amount of movement of literary works around the world by transforming literature into visual forms of storytelling. Due to this ability of film to serve as an artistic medium that moves canonical literature beyond borders and across cultures, scholars of world literature have identified the act of circulating literary works as being one way of defining the term “world literature.” As an example, author David Damrosch notes that “world literature” exists when a written narrative from one culture leaves its country of origin and is received in situ in other (new) places. The adaptation of literary works into film significantly enables this process to take place because it allows them to be included in popular culture—that is, for most people to have the opportunity to experience them—as opposed to remaining confined to the realm of scholarly or elite literature. In addition, by adapting literary narratives into film production, the same stories can now be made available to individuals who do not have the opportunity of direct access to the original written text or narrative.

Macbeth’s adaptations show how film helps with the global movement of this work. Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* takes the setting of Shakespeare’s tragedy from Europe to Japan’s feudal period, and changes the views on the themes of the work, to show the impact of samurai ethics and the aesthetics of Japan’s culture. Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool* interprets the story of Macbeth to fit a socio-political framework that is based on the Mumbai underworld. While the basic narrative of Macbeth in both films ultimately preserves the structure of the story, the cultural meanings attached to it have changed.

The film has become a strong instrument for cultural mediation. Cultural mediation provides literary works to move from one area to another throughout time and place. Film adaptations employ visual storytelling, performance, and culturally-based locations, to re-create classical works in a way to connect with new audiences. Therefore, by keeping the storytelling of world literature intact, film enables literature to grow and have wider significance. Moreover, by facilitating literary works to move across language and audience, film is an important element in maintaining the worldwide existence of literature.

Conclusion:

The comparison between *Throne of Blood* and *Maqbool* shows that film adaptations can help literary works survive after they are created by helping the works exist after the end of their own times and places in humanity’s past. By creating different ways to understand Macbeth in both the abusive society of feudal Japan and in the 21st-century Mumbai gangland,

the adaptations illustrate that adapting a work means to not just reproduce it but to also provide an opportunity to develop one's culture: The adaptations change the fundamentals of Shakespeare's play through their own historical, social, and visual traditions, while they also keep the basic dramatic conflict which is in both plays.

When analysing these adaptations, it is evident that literature can be adapted into other cultures through mediums other than linguistic translation. The way literary narratives circulate is also through many forms of expression that create a discourse that reinterprets these texts for new audiences. Utilizing film as a visual and performing medium provides an opportunity for literary texts to move from being read to a larger and wider cross-section of global society beyond the boundaries of print culture. Through the medium of film adaptation, there are new spaces created for canonical texts to be experienced, re-envisioned and interpreted through the lens of many cultural systems.

Literary adaptations of a play will remain relevant to us for as long as human beings exist, regardless of the time, place, or culture in which they are experienced. Why does this remain true? Because many of the themes and issues that Shakespeare dealt with as a playwright (ambition, the struggle for power, moral/ethical issues, and the fallibility of humanity) are themes/ideas all people continue to deal with no matter where they live or when they live, even in completely different societies, which all affect how people interact with one another. It is amazing that such changing forms of literature are able to carry/shatter through time, geographical regions, language barriers and even artistic boundaries to still have relevance to other cultures/languages/artistic forms. In short, the ways in which a story can be "told" are limitless. Literature lends itself to various mediums, allowing for different forms of literature that continue to adapt and develop across the globe in ways that have no beginning and no end.

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