Between Text and Screen: The Hindi Film Industry's Engagement with English Novels

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Abstract

This paper examines the dynamic process through which the Hindi film industry adapts English literary classics, moving beyond direct translation to culturally rooted transcreation. It investigates how and why English novels—particularly from the British canon—resonate with Indian filmmakers and audiences, and what specific strategies are employed to localize these narratives within Indian socio-political and aesthetic contexts. Key research questions include: What historical and cultural factors drive the appeal of English classics in Hindi cinema? How do filmmakers navigate the space between fidelity ("adaptation") and transformative reinterpretation ("transcreation")? What role do shifting Indian contexts of gender, class, identity, and politics play in reshaping these narratives? The analysis reveals that the enduring appeal stems from India's colonial education legacy, which embedded these texts in the elite consciousness, coupled with their exploration of universal themes (love, ambition, betrayal) that echo Indian social narratives. Filmmakers like Vishal Bhardwaj (Maqbool/Macbeth, Omkara/Othello, Haider/Hamlet) and others (Aisha/Emma , Lootera /The Last Leaf) employ transcreation, radically relocating settings (e.g., Scottish highlands to Mumbai underworld, Venice to UP badlands, Denmark to Kashmir), replacing core conflicts (racial tension with caste politics), and infusing local aesthetics, language, and music to make the stories resonate deeply with contemporary Indian realities. It leads to the transformation of English archetypes into the Indian prisms of gender expectations, feudal dissolution, postcolonial trauma, and regional identity and proves that Hindi cinema relates to these classics not as a source material, but as an equal partner in a cross-cultural conversation, constructing a story that is simultaneously global and unmistakably Indian. The future indicates the direction of additional hybridization through the digital platform and modern reinterpretation.

Keywords: Screen, Hindi Film Industry, English Novels, Maqbool/Macbeth, Haider, hybridization.

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Introduction

The relationship between cinema and literature has never been weak, as directors tend to resort to ageless novels, to find some inspiration. Hindi cinema, also known as Bollywood in India, has often looked upon the classic English novels and recreated them as culturally grounded yet emotional heavy stories. The adaptations do not retell the stories, they are reinterpretations, creative efforts that show the Indian ethos, values and complexities of the society. This paper discovers the ways in which the classic English texts are reworked on the Hindi screen, trotting the line between a loving tribute and a radical reinterpretation. Prominent among them are Vishal Bhardwaj films Maqbool, Omkara, and

Haider, based on Shakespearean *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*, respectively. But the tendency is not confined to Shakespeare. *Aisha* (adapted in *Emma* by Jane Austen), *Lootera* (adapted in The Last Leaf by O. Henry) and The Hungry (a contemporary adaptation of Titus Andronicus) are some of the examples of how diverse English texts have gained a Hindi film expression. Even such films as Saawariya (based on the story White Nights by Dostoevsky) and Dil Diya Dard Liya (based on Wuthering Heights) testify of this constant conversation between the literary classics and Indian narration. Through the analysis of such films, this research will seek to investigate how Hindi cinema localizes world literature to make stories that are familiar yet new to the Indian audiences.

Literary Crossroads: The Appeal of English Classics in Indian Popular Culture

The reason why English literary classics are so long-lastingly popular in Indian popular culture, especially in Hindi cinema, lies deep in the colonial past of India, as well as in its English- medium education system and postcolonial identity construction. There is a curious response by Indian filmmakers to these works, particularly those of the British literary canon, not simply as an adaptive source text but as a cultural text containing both closeness and remove. This cultural intersection was set up through the colonization history of India. British literature was introduced as part of the colonial education system to "civilize" the colonized subjects, as famously articulated by Thomas Babington Macaulay in his Minute on Indian Education (1835), where he stated the aim was to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." English novels thus became part of the intellectual fabric of India's emerging elite. As a result, many Indians grew up reading works like Shakespeare's tragedies, Jane Austen's comedies of manners, and the Brontë sisters' gothic romances. These texts, while distinctly English, explore themes like love, ambition, betrayal, class, and gender—universals that find deep echoes in Indian social narratives. For instance, the brooding tragedy of *Hamlet* ("Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" [Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.iv.90]) easily mirrors the political decay and moral dilemmas explored in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014), set in conflict-ridden Kashmir. Similarly, Wuthering Heights (1847), with its intense emotional turbulence and doomed love, resonates strongly with Indian sensibilities. In Emily Brontë's words: "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same" (Wuthering Heights, ch. 9)—a line that could easily find place in a Hindi film monologue. Its Hindi adaptation, Dil Diya Dard Liya (1966), recreated the passionate suffering of Heathcliff and Catherine within a feudal Indian setting. Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) was reimagined in *Aisha* (2010), set in Delhi's upper-class milieu. Austen's self-important heroine declares, "I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up

with any other" (*Emma*, ch. 10). This reflects the privileged, romanticized world of *Aisha* Kapoor in the movie, and it is an example of how the irony of Austen lives in modern Indian narration. There is also the moral and psychological richness of these texts that is quite appealing. O. The Last Leaf (1907) by Henry, as an example, is a story about hope, sacrifice, and art; fundamental human feelings that *Lootera* (2013) kept alive in a Bengal Partition setting. Because filmmakers do not simply borrow, but change the English classics mixed with Indian cinemas. They take these international texts to the Indian readers not as exotic objects but as narratives that are alive and breathing, recontextualized in terms of local aesthetics, language and feeling. It is here at this literary juncture that the English novels survive in great numbers in Indian popular culture.

Transcreation vs. Adaptation: Strategies of Cultural Translation in Hindi Cinema

Breathing new life into a literary work on the big screen of cinema is not a simple act of adaptation, particularly when the task is to transfer the English literary classics to the world of the Hindi film where context is king and colour is queen. Whereas adaptation aims to the reproduction of the narrative structure of a text as accurately as possible, transcreation aims one step further. It re-drafts the narrative, language, and setting and even the very moral epicenter, to suit the sensibilities of the target culture. It is not uncommon that in Hindi filmmakers' adaptation of English novels, they would prefer to go this route of transcreation to ensure that the film could relate more to the Indian audience. Take Omkara (2006), Vishal Bhardwaj's reimagining of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Instead of placing the story in 17th-century Venice, Bhardwaj shifts the setting to the politically charged badlands of Uttar Pradesh. While the jealous villain Iago in *Othello* cunningly remarks, "I am not what I am" (Shakespeare 1.1.65), Langda Tyagi, his Hindi counterpart, operates through caste politics and regional power struggles. The cultural motivations are transformed but the core manipulation remains, illustrating a successful transcreation where themes of jealousy and betrayal are refracted through an Indian lens.

Similarly, *Lootera* (2013), inspired by O. Henry's short story The Last Leaf, turns a simple narrative of hope into a deeply romantic period drama set in post-Independence Bengal. In the original, Sue says of Johnsy's belief that her life is tied to the last leaf on a vine, "She is very ill and weak, and the fever has left her mind morbid and full of strange fancies" (Henry). *Lootera* elevates this to a visual metaphor, transforming the leaf into a symbol of redemption and enduring love, where the dying protagonist draws hope not from illness but from emotional and historical trauma.

Transcreation also involves thematic reinvention. In Haider (2014), Bhardwaj's take on *Hamlet*, the famous existential line "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (Shakespeare 3.1.56) is reimagined through the political turmoil of 1990s Kashmir. The film not only retains *Hamlet*'s dilemma but embeds it in the larger questions of identity, nationalism, and rebellion. Here, Haider doesn't just ask whether life is worth living, it asks whether life under constant surveillance and violence life at all is truly.

The difference between adaptation and transcreation becomes especially visible in how these films handle socio-political shifts. The English texts, rooted in their own historical and cultural moments, are often reoriented to comment on contemporary Indian realities: caste, gender, feudalism, nationalism, and postcolonial trauma.

Therefore, transcreation as a form of cultural translation is frequently used in Hindi cinema not only in the name of artistic freedom but in the name of cultural relatability. These are not films that merely retell stories, but that recreate them within an Indian context, and within a frame that proves that literature has no borders, and that stories, when transcreated with sensitivity can address the hearts of a variety of people.

Case Studies in Adaptation: Shakespeare on the Subcontinent

William Shakespeare and his works have always been boundary, language, and culture crossers. His plays have received a special platform of reinterpretation in the Indian cinematic scenario, especially in the form of the acclaimed trilogy by Vishal Bhardwaj: *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014) adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*, respectively. These cinemas are not just the adaptations of the Shakespearean plots but the re-creations of the same set in the rich and turbulent socio-political milieu of modern India, particularly the underworld, caste politics and the rebellious Kashmir. The adaptations of Bhardwaj are considered effective case studies of the way literary narratives can be adapted to represent new realities and still bear the tragic essence.

In Maqbool, the Mumbai underworld replaces the Scottish Highlands. Maqbool, the Indian *Macbeth*, is the loyal henchman of Abbaji (Duncan figure), whose downfall begins with the prophecy of two corrupt policemen echoing the witches: "Aage jaane waala Maqbool hai." Shakespeare's original line "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!" (Macbeth 1.3.48–49) finds a grimly humorous echo in this modern prophecy. The psychological torment Maqbool undergoes after assassinating Abbaji mirrors Macbeth's inner descent: "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep'" (Macbeth 2.2.35–36).

Omkara shifts *Othello* into the political backwaters of Uttar Pradesh, with the titular character being a local enforcer for a politician. The racial tension in *Othello* is replaced by caste conflict. Langda Tyagi (Iago) manipulates Omkara with a similar venomous precision: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy; / It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (Othello 3.3.165–167). This warning is twisted into poisonous insinuation in Omkara, leading to a devastating climax where love is destroyed by suspicion, just as in the original.

In Haider, Bhardwaj brings *Hamlet* to insurgency-stricken 1990s Kashmir, arguably his boldest adaptation. The film captures *Hamlet*'s existential agony and moral dilemma amidst political chaos. When Haider learns of his father's betrayal and his uncle's guilt, he delivers an adaptation of the famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (*Hamlet* 3.1.56). In Haider, this becomes a deeply political moment, as the protagonist questions not just life and death but resistance and silence under tyranny.

These productions testify to the fact that the themes which Shakespeare explored ambition, betrayal, love, jealousy, and revenge are universal. Bhardwaj does not simply re narrate these stories, he Indianizes them and makes Shakespearean tragedy part of the fabric of Indian social and political reality. What you get is a heady mix of classic form and modern immediacy that has made Shakespeare not only approachable, but also strangely familiar to an Indian audience.

Gender, Class, and Identity: Reconstructing English Archetypes in Indian Situations

The identities of the classic English literary characters do not come intact when they are modified into Hindi films. They are rather re-formed in the prism of Indian gender positions, social orders, and postcolonial realities. Whether it is the tragic hero, the rebellious heroine or the tormented aristocrat, English archetypes are absorbed into local values and tend to reflect the desires and fears of Indian society.

Take Omkara (2006), Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The original *Othello* is a Moor—racially othered and socially elevated, yet constantly insecure about his position in white Venetian society. Shakespeare writes: "Haply for I am black, And have not those soft parts of conversation that chamberers have" (Shakespeare, Othello 1.3.263–265). In Omkara, this sense of being an outsider is transposed to caste politics. Omkara is a half-caste, navigating power in a corrupt, patriarchal political system. His racial alienation in Venice becomes a caste-based marginalization in Uttar Pradesh, making the conflict not just personal, but systemically Indian.

Similarly, Jane Austen's sharp, independent *Emma* Woodhouse is reimagined in *Aisha* (2010) as a wealthy Delhi socialite. While Austen writes, "I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other" (Emma, vol. 1, ch. 10), this self-assuredness is softened in *Aisha*, where gender expectations compel the character to navigate romance and agency within the boundaries of Indian femininity. *Aisha*'s modernity is not radical—it is aesthetic, social, and ultimately conservative. Unlike Austen's *Emma*, who ends up empowering others while growing into herself, *Aisha* remains tethered to romantic resolution, mirroring the pressures still felt by contemporary Indian women.

In *Lootera* (2013), adapted loosely from O. Henry's The Last Leaf, the class divide plays a significant role in reshaping identity. The original short story centers on two struggling artists in New York, with one sacrificing herself for the other. In *Lootera*, the artist becomes a conman from a lower class who deceives and abandons the wealthy zamindar's daughter, Pakhi. The movie satirizes the colonial nostalgia as well as the rottenness of the classes in the post-independent India. Pakhi is identified with a collapsing feudal past and her love is not only emotional but symbolic submission to a new India where class privilege could not guarantee safety and permanence.

These changes show that the characters of English literary works are not just transferred to the Hindi films- they are recreated to show the Indian way of conflict. Gender is a field of conflict between custom and desire. Class is a story of breakdown or struggle. And identity is hammered out by postcolonial pasts and local politics.

And with such rearrangements, Hindi cinema does not merely adapt literature, it translates it. It gives a dense, localized reading of universal human struggles, through the kaleidoscope of Indian society.

Aesthetic and Narrative Convergences: Cinematic Language and Literary Influence

The transfer to the screen is never a mere translation of a novel to the screen- it is rather a transformation, a combination of literary and cinematic aesthetics to a hybrid form of art. The Hindi filmmaker who remakes English classics thus runs a thin line between paying homage to the original by maintaining its essence and redefining its shape, feel and its themes to accommodate the Indian viewers. This part deals with the presentation of how the devices of the narrative, symbols, and literary elements of style are either maintained or recreated in Hindi adaptations with particular reference to films such as Maqbool, Haider, *Lootera*, and *Aisha*.

Among the brightest manifestations of this intersection is Haider (2014) by Vishal Bhardwaj, the daring adaptation of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Madness, betrayal and political corruption, the motifs of the play are shifted form the Danish royal court to the militarized unstable atmosphere of the Kashmir of the 1990s. While the famous line "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I) is never quoted verbatim, its existential weight echoes in Haider's monologue at his father's grave, where he questions not just life and death, but justice and revenge. The visual language used by Bhardwaj, desolate and snow filled landscapes, heavy shadows, and slow-motion gun fire intensify the inner pain that Shakespeare projected through soliloquy. In place of classical iambic pentameter, we have Urdu-inflected verses and haunting musical motifs that evoke sorrow and silence more than words.

Similarly, in *Lootera* (2013), director Vikramaditya Motwane reinterprets O. Henry's short story "The Last Leaf" with a subtle yet emotionally resonant aesthetic. In O. Henry's version, a dying woman's hope is anchored in the last ivy leaf on a wall: "It is the last one... I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind." (O. Henry, The Last Leaf). The Hindi adaptation transforms this into a poetic romance set in post-Independence Bengal, where the falling of leaves becomes a metaphor for heartbreak and endurance. Motwane preserves the symbolic essence of the original but retools the narrative with layered characters, a melancholic score, and a slower, more lyrical cinematic pace. The visual metaphor of a single painted leaf mirrors the literary device but is infused with Indian aesthetics—classic costumes, folk art, and soft lighting that creates a sense of fading hope.

Another fascinating case is *Aisha* (2010), adapted from Jane Austen's *Emma*. Austen's original novel employs irony, free indirect speech, and a tightly woven social commentary: "I always deserve the best treatment because I never put up with any other" (*Emma*, Vol. I, Ch. 10). *Aisha* takes this voice of self-assured privilege and transposes it into the Delhi elite, using contemporary fashion, glossy cinematography, and rapid-fire dialogue. The visual flamboyance becomes a modern stand-in for Austen's sharp wit. The narrative structure remains somewhat faithful—*Aisha*'s meddling, her growing self-awareness—but the pacing is quickened, and romantic subplots are expanded, offering a more dramatized, Bollywood-style narrative arc. In this case, the aesthetic of the film substitutes interior monologue with costume, set design, and musical numbers to convey character psychology and evolution.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* also finds a gritty avatar in Maqbool (2003), another Bhardwaj adaptation. The play's dark supernatural elements—like the witches' prophecy—are symbolized in the film through

two corrupt policemen who manipulate the underworld hierarchy. The line "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene I) transforms into a broader commentary on moral ambiguity within crime and politics. The chiaroscuro lighting, fog-drenched Mumbai docks, and suffocating interiors capture the claustrophobia and paranoia that Shakespeare suggested through dialogue and dramatic irony. Maqbool's gradual unraveling mirrors *Macbeth*'s descent, but with cultural nuances—loyalty, honor, and karma—embedded in the Indian context.

Instead of merely re-telling these stories, these films re-use them, with the specific ingredients of cinema: lighting, mise-en-scene, sound design, and editing rhythm. The adaptation, in most instances, entails losing the narrative of the novel and re-conceptualizing its tone in imagery. As an example, a novel may refer to the inner conflict of a character by means of the third-person omniscience, whereas a cinematographic adaptation may refer to the close-ups, absence of sound, or background music as the means of creating the same tension. So that what looks like deviation is often an aesthetic approximation, one medium Stevenson borrowing the soul of another and re-forming the body.

In sum, the intersection of the aesthetic and narrative strategies in these adaptations indicates the creative compromising of faithfulness and creativity. The Hindi filmmakers do not just borrow the plots- they do a profound cultural translation in which symbols are refigured, stylistic devices are localized, the story telling is transformed into a cooperative affair between the global and the local, the textual and the cinematic.

From Canon to Contemporary: The Future of English Literary Adaptations in Hindi Cinema

With the Indian cinema undergoing a digital revolution, the future of the Hindi film industry adaptation of English literary classics is all set to undergo a phenomenal change. These adaptations are no longer limited to the theatric platform or the mainstream cinema halls and are getting a new lease of life with OTT, international distribution and experimental story-telling. This development marks a transition between the strictly canonical notion of literature and a more modern, interpolated version of it in which the spelling of the text becomes less important than its applicability and its ability to sound and appear relevant to a contemporary audience. Historically, Hindi adaptations of English novels have leaned on canonical texts. Shakespeare's plays, in particular, have long been a favorite. Vishal Bhardwaj's Shakespeare trilogy—Maqbool, Omkara, and Haider—set a benchmark for Indianized adaptations of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*. Each film took liberties with the original text while preserving its core existential and ethical dil*Emma*s. In *Hamlet*, the Prince famously declares, "To be, or not to be: that is

the question" (Shakespeare 3.1.64). In Haider, this soliloquy is reborn through Shahid Kapoor's haunting performance as a young man torn between revenge and self-destruction, echoing the timeless torment of indecision but situated in the politically charged Kashmir of the 1990s.

However, in the contemporary media landscape, audiences no longer demand literal faithfulness to the source. Instead, they welcome adaptations that reframe the classics in ways that speak to today's cultural and emotional climate. Films like *Lootera*, inspired by O. Henry's The Last Leaf, do not directly quote the original story but carry its sentiment and subtlety through new characters and contexts. "I've known a man to sit out the cold for days to finish a painting that would save a girl's life" (Henry 72) becomes, in *Lootera*, a visual metaphor of hope, sacrifice, and love in a post-colonial Bengali setting.

OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Zee5 have unlocked new possibilities for storytelling. These online platforms do not only enable someone to be more creative but also promote the creation of limited series, which is a format that is more adaptive to complex literary stories. A thick novel, such as *Jane Eyre* or *Great Expectations*, could now be made into an 8-part series, in which the development of the characters and the development of side plots could be more elaborated, an endeavor that is close to unachievable in the framework of a two-hour movie.

This digital transformation is also serving the interests of the global consumers. The Indian viewers are becoming more and more cosmopolitan and require the content that lies between the familiar and the foreign. A well-crafted adaptation of, say, George Orwell's 1984—reframed in a dystopian Indian surveillance state—could find resonance both locally and internationally. Orwell's chilling line, "Big Brother is watching you" (Orwell 3), could take on new meaning in an India grappling with debates on privacy, censorship, and digital surveillance.

Another trend shaping the future is hybrid storytelling—where the line between text, performance, and culture blurs. These adaptations no longer aim to merely retell a story but to converse with it, critique it, and sometimes subvert it. For example, a future adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* could interrogate its colonial subtext by shifting the narrative focus to Bertha Mason, the "madwoman in the attic." In Jane Eyre, the narrator states, "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë 293). Yet Bertha—a Creole woman imprisoned and othered—has no such voice. A Hindi adaptation could recast this silence into a central plot, exploring madness, gender, and postcolonial identity from an Indian perspective.

Conclusion

The journey from classic English novels to Hindi cinema is not merely a matter of translation but one of transformation—cultural, emotional, and narrative. As we have seen, Hindi filmmakers have engaged with English literary texts both reverently and rebelliously, reshaping them to reflect Indian realities and aesthetics. From the gritty adaptations of Shakespeare in the works of Vishal Bhardwaj to the tender retelling of O. Henry in *Lootera*, and the modern-day Austenian flair in *Aisha*, these cinematic endeavors demonstrate how literature continues to inspire, challenge, and evolve across borders. With the rise of OTT platforms, increasing global audiences, and a hunger for hybrid storytelling, the future holds even greater promise for such adaptations. English literary classics, once symbols of colonial prestige, are now being reclaimed and reimagined in ways that speak to contemporary India. These adaptations not only preserve the essence of the original works but also infuse them with new meanings—bridging the gap between the universal and the local, the canonical and the contemporary. In doing so, Hindi cinema asserts its voice in global literary discourse, proving that between text and screen lies a vast and vibrant creative territory yet to be fully explored.

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