

Hamlet-Haider: From Rotten Denmark to Rotten Kashmir

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Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to explore the success of depicting miserable situation in Kashmir in Vishal Bharadwaj's Bollywood movie Haider, an adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Hamlet's Denmark was a rotten state and the same we can express to some level is a foremost diversion from the paradigm of the conventional cinema to shoot artistically and attractively the internal disasters and clashes that have propelled the peace and harmony in Kashmir. How and to what extent is Vishal Bharadwaj Successful in adopting Shakespeare's Hamlet and shifting its setting from Denmark to Kashmir? And what are its consequences on the contemporary cinema and the audience? Employing quantitative research method the research reveals that Bharadwaj was successful in transporting Shakespeare's Hamlet from Denmark to Kashmir which was a challenging task to show the viewers the other side of the coin in case of Kashmir issue which is in rotten state.*

Key words: *Bharadwaj, Haider, Hamlet, Kashmir, Shakespeare.*

Introduction

Among all the plays of Shakespeare, *Hamlet* appears to be the most popular in India (Das, 2001, p. 52). This popularity is not confined to reading and doing research only but it has also entered the cinema which is the most popular industry in India. Shakespeare's plays are universal and it can break the geographical and cultural boundaries as Mohanty (2010) asserts that:

Throughout the whole of the colonial and the post-colonial period of far-reaching political and cultural transitions, extending over about two centuries, Shakespeare had maximum impact on the Indian literary and cultural circles. This impact is, in fact intertwined with the larger questions of politics and culture (p. 198)

Haider is one of the first ever Bollywood movie that endeavoured to stage the revenge play Hamlet of Shakespeare on the unceasing tragedy of Kashmir. The audience, chosen for this movie were always enthralled and entertained over the grievances and miseries of the Kashmiri victims which are considered as a part of their national interest.

Bhardwaj has the honour to be the director of two other permissive Shakespeare adaptations. Both of them the magnificent adaptations; *Maqbool* a *Macbeth* set in the Bombay underworld and *Omkara* an *Othello* whose leading character is a half-caste criminal in the dirty heartland. These movies work as a prism to view the reflected image of India making Shakespearean tragedies its lenses (Saltz, 2014). *Haider* which embeds its foundation chronicle less realistically to its setting does not surge as organically. It finds its setting in violence wracked state of Kashmir much in the same way as Hamlet is set in the rotten state of Denmark. The movie was written by Vishal Bhardwaj with the Kashmiri journalist Basharat Peer who is the author of *Curfew Nights* as well (Saltz, 2014).

Most of the Shakespearean tragedies follow certain set patterns and elements. These include vengeful ghosts, mad scenes, play within a play, gory scenes and above all the protagonist has a grave grumble against an alarming opponent. Vishal Bhardwaj with the help of his innovative and ingenious team has productively tailored a Shakespearian tragedy into a Hindi movie pursuing all the traditional essentials and the brass tacks of Kashmir conflict in the history of Indian cinema. To keep the rotten Kashmir pot blazing, elements like war hysteria, fanatic patriotism and jingoism are thoroughly stimulated in the name of commercial entertainment. So far Indian cinema has only glamorized and romanticized the cooked up scripts when the fierce and bleak reality of Kashmir imbroglio is dealt in a movie.

Haider, as Ramnath (2014) asserts, is a foremost diversion from the paradigm of the conventional cinema to shoot artistically and attractively the internal disasters and clashes that have propelled the peace and harmony in Kashmir. This is not the first time Vishal Bhardwaj was handling with the blending of literature and cinema. Therefore, his *Haider* broke a new argument and confronted the narratives of conventional media and their fictional myths about Kashmir.

In the fat of irrational disagreements both on the record and off the record, *Haider* was finally released and was successful in all cinemas not only all over the India but also across the border. The day one after its release *Haider* by hook or by crook succeeded to beat a note in the contemplative intellectuality and produced catharsis in audience and left the Indian youngster speechless. It was the first ever attempt to courageously carry out a comparative study between the Hamlet's rotten state of Denmark with the Haider's rotten state of Kashmir, where vigorous despair is termed as 'peace and order.'

Haider sets its actions in the past, in the mid-nineties, apparently to shun any disagreement among the audience in the present. Based on a play by journalist Basharat Peer, and integrated elements from his wonderful memoir *Curfewed Night*, *Haider* introduces some of its key themes; treachery, oppression, unlawful disappearances, the personal price paid for political leanings, in a pre-credits sequence that sees good-hearted doctor Hilaal Meer come under attack from the army for attempting to treat an ailing militant. Hilaal disappears, setting the stage for the return of his

son Haider, a soulful young man who is attempting a doctorate on colonial-era poets in Aligarh (Ramnath, 2014).

Rationale

Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* set around Kashmir's conflicts and AFSPA or Armed Special Forces Power Act. It is relatively grave and sensitive topics to deal with but the director deals with it in a very aggressive, rigid and a brilliant way (Shukla, 2014). The way one of the most tragic plays has been captured, is itself laudable as Faiz Ahmed Faiz says:

Chalay bhi aao keh gulshan ka kaarobaar chalay
Gulon main rang bharay baad-e-naubahaar chalay (as cited in Shukla, 2014).

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was from Denmark but Vishal's *Haider* is a Kashmiri who returns home from the Aligarh after his father strangely vanishes in the detention of security forces. He is neither allied with any terrorist group nor has any political positions but just being a physician and the representative of 'life' turn into the subject of torture and misfortune between the conflicts of epic fractions of Kashmir.

The state of affairs unfolding empower the protagonist Haider to take the affairs into his own hands and hunt for vengeance secretly much in the same line as *Hamlet* does when he finds King *Hamlet* dead on his returning Denmark after fair dealing has failed both of them in the state of Denmark and community and power corridors of Kashmir. The movie *Haider* is not only anticipated to the exterior world but it also reveals the reflection of the individuals of disastrous land where we still have the plentiful yield of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern always waiting and watching in the group to bleed their own people. The Claudius like diabolical characters in the movie are still wandering without restraint in the cloak of civil servants and politicians playing the game of 'Chutzpah' with the feelings and emotions of Kashmiri people. In this movie the game of 'Chutzpah' is associated with the AFSPA; an additional executioner game accountable for the horrific human rights violation in the valley of Kashmir.

It is a draconian law under which any soldier of the Indian Army can shoot upon or otherwise use power, even to the reason of fatality where laws are being dishonoured. No scandalous trial will take place against any person who has taken action under this act. Proponents of this law will tell you that these methods were crucial to defend soldiers in an unpredictable milieu of Kashmir. They may be justified in their pleadings but it does not defend the offences committed by the defence forces beneath the range of this law. History fails to reveal a single case of trial on paramilitary officers and soldiers for destruction of property, rape, murder and other crimes like these since this law was enforced in 1991 in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is a shocking and terrible history, about which India knows slightly and cares even in miniature. What makes

Haider such a special movie is that, unlike other works that have dealt with the Kashmir conflict, it does not pretend that history does not exist (Ashok, 2014). The fact is beyond suspicions that the security forces in Jammu and Kashmir afflicted the captives with severe punishments in detaining compartments all over the state. The movie has a scene where detained Kashmiris are tortured. Laws were warped to such a degree that it ended up serving the tyrants and not the exploited ones.

Haider's speech at the historic Lal Chowk is remarkable. The choice of this chowk is intentional on the part of Bharadwaj because the political leaders of Kashmir deliver their speeches here. Though they vow and pledge to the unfortunate people of Kashmir yet these shrewd political leaders and their betrayal has put the lives of ten million people on the everlasting ambers of fire (Nazir, 2014). Haider's rebellious soliloquy plants a new twist in the idea of being and not being of *Hamlet* as both of them are in somewhat the same situation. The movie might experience an execution, but there is no doubt on Bharadwaj's objective. His audacity is creditable in portraying painful realities about the behaviour of the Jammu and Kashmir police and the army (Ramnath, 2014).

The renowned line of Haider's monologue "Hum hain ki hum nahin" (Bharadwaj, 2014) or Hamlet's soliloquy "To be or not to be" (Shakespeare, 1982) is in fact a metaphor. 'Is it more noble to just endure and suffer life and be passive in the face of this sadness and suffering?' or is it more noble 'to actively look to end that suffering?' (Bharadwaj, 2014 & Shakespeare, 1982). It is a matter of bitter fact an interesting phenomenon to observe that both the doorway competitors of sub continent that claim Kashmir as their 'jugular vein' and the 'integral part' were under no circumstances concerned about the miseries of Kashmiris who lives in this beautiful prison. Even the misfortunes of these people are taken as a chance to achieve diplomatic ends. It is clear from their indifference from the recent floods when the entire valley was under the blockade of river Jehlum and the inhabitants were left at the pity of God (Nazir, 2014).

Haider, the protagonist probes deep into the internal monologue of misery, pain, grief and tragic events because of his father's vanishing and mother's hurried second marriage with his uncle. He resembles Hamlet in the situation but he is not the prince of rotten Denmark but an inhabitant of rotten Kashmir. Again the metaphorical elements are incorporated if we look into the second part of the movie we come across the betrayal of Kashmiri political leaders and their disappearance from the stage when their people were badly in need of them to take courageous decisions. The hasty marriage of Hamlet's mother can be compared to the hurried and impetuous affiliation of Kashmir to a country by the old custodians like the great Sheikh and the Maharaja. Haider is more subtle and complex than Hamlet as his dialogues are full of paradoxes, irony, and cold shrewdness.

The previous movies which circled around the themes and issues of Kashmir were just intended to rage and fane excited nationalism but the movie *Haider* at least represents the sordid, somber

and true picture of 1995 Kashmir in a natural typical plot. The fictional venture of Vishal Bhardwaj and Basharat Peer is simply courageous, thought infuriating, novel and splendid. But disappointment from across the nation welcomed Bharadwaj because unveiling the truth and reality *Haider* faced a vigorous boycott drive on the social media and dissents on the street to interdict and boycott the movie, which at least persuaded people to think in isolation. The plans and the agenda of such elements are for once crystal clear to deceive and abstain the masses from the reality. But will this time the young India and intelligentsia listen to their rhetoric will be very interesting to see? (Nazir, 2014)

To say that *Haider* accomplished better as an account of Kashmiri turmoil and official violence, men and women disappear, are tortured, killed for sport, as compared to its enlightenment of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is not completely a thump. "All of Kashmir is a prison," (Bharadwaj, 2014) and Bharadwaj show the charge on the prisoners. In one frightening scene a man, his face covered in a balaclava, acts judge and jury from a Jeep, as civilians are lined up in front of him. In a flesh of time and with the movement of his eyes he makes a decision about their fates, "dismissed or detained" (Saltz, 2014). The rotten state of Denmark were not that much grim as they are shown in the case of *Haider*.

The brilliance of this movie is how its director Vishal Bharadwaj has handled to adapt *Hamlet* to an entire new setting and yet, as an audience, one speculates if they are watching a completely new story. Bharadwaj has skilfully used the 'show but do not tell' procedure to provide us an implied peep into the lives of common Kashmiris who have borne the burden of the Indo-Pakistan line of control conflicts (Ashok, 2014). This is the huge achievement of the movie.

Though the political milieu often overpowers and twists the family tragedy, Bharadwaj supplies the sporadic intelligent reminder of how cinematically he can assemble Shakespearean flashes. When Haider first returns home, we observe him as he spies, through a scrim of shining gauze, a friendly, mischievous moment between his uncle and his mother who sings a Kashmiri folk song. Watching all this Haider directly recognize the score (Saltz, 2014) while in *Hamlet*, Hemlet has to wait for next proof of his uncles guilt.

It is possible to rewrite *Julius Caesar* omitting the appeal of Mark Antony to the Romans and friends much in the same way *Romeo and Juliet* can be adopted without the famous balcony scene though it would not be ideal but conceivable. But a portrayal of *Hamlet* excluding the prince Hamlet's most renowned soliloquy is unimaginable. Bharadwaj knew this and he changes Hamlet's soliloquy into a part of dialogue in the case of Haider which pretty much summed up *Haider* (Rangan, 2014). A tremendously internal play is unlocked and an exceptionally solipsistic protagonist is reconstructed into a politically conscious youth who is engaged with the forces in outside world to the extent that he encounters the agony within. At various stages in the movie, the predicament also turns into a public protest as he says, "Hum hain ki nahin" (Bharadwaj, 2014). Like Hamlet, Haider is missing during the events that initiate the story. As

Hamlet was sent away to get education but the reason in the case of Haider was that while at school he had begun to accompany with militants and had brought a pistol to home. Ghazala, Haider's mother, was hopeful that he would become a better and peaceful citizen if he is sent out of Kashmir to some place where "na din pe pehre hain, na raat pe taale" (Bharadwaj, 2014). This militant flicker has not been smothered which is apparent in the scene where he returns to Srinagar and is bunged at a check post. When asked where his home is, he says, 'Islamabad.' He is annoying the authorities. Islamabad is a nickname of Anantnag but even if not, he keeps intimidating to go "across the border" (Bharadwaj, 2014) for militant training. In comparison with Hamlet, Haider is an uncomplicated fellow he knows what he wants i.e. to avenge his father and cleverly goes after it (Saltz, 2014) but Hamlet was a philosophical man who was confused what to do. This difference between Hamlet and Haider is the result of their upbringing environments.

Haider is back because his father Hilal has gone missing. Hilal, as a doctor, objects that it is not heal for this 'illness' "is marz ki dawa nahin" (Bharadwaj, 2014). Hilal is a well mannered man who deems to restore the health of his ill town. He is not concerned with the identity of a patient and he would try to heal a militant and a civilian alike. When he ends up treating a militant, it is for appendicitis, something has got to be removed if health is to be restored (Rangan, 2014). Being a sympathizer of the humans was not allowed in the rotten Kashmir and he got missing. Humanitarians would always disappear in rotten states if it be King Hamlet of Denmark or Hilal of Kashmir. As for Ghazala is concerned, the audience meet her the first time when she teaches children what a home is, something with "brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers" (Bharadwaj, 2014). The home in her example does not mean any home in the world but Kashmir. When the armed forces take her husband away they destroy their home with a rocket launcher as the militant was inside it.

Hamlet reaches his palace in Denmark with missing his father only but in the case of Haider when he reaches Srinagar and asks Arshia to show him his home, she tells him, "Tumhare ghar mein ghar jaisa kuch bacha nahin hai" (Bharadwaj, 2014). Not only his father but also his home was no more. The home he knew, the Kashmir he knew, does not exist anymore. This is a Kashmir where you would rather be thrown into jail because the alternative is worse, you could 'disappear' (Rangan, 2014). Adaptation of *Hamlet* and transforming its setting to the Kashmir of 1995 was a brilliant idea of Bharadwaj. Men and women can 'disappear' in Kashmir without any reason. It is the narrative of a Kashmiri student who's doctor father 'disappears', which is a euphemism for the authorities picking up people they believe have information about militants. It is a dreadful drama which revolves around a troubled Haider speculating how he can take vengeance on his father's disappearance or even believed death (Purie, 2014). Human lives are insignificant here. An explicitly insightful Hamlet as a child of hostilities, who has had continuous contact with aggression and rebellion, can be deranged, uncertain and so apart from reality that he can see ghost. It could have been an outstanding idea (Purie, 2014).

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare hit the ground running, the ghost appears, the treachery is made known and revenge is sought. But in *Haider*, the 'ghost/Roohdar' appears only at interval point with grandeur. Roohdar should have been a chilling spectral presence; instead, he is the abstracted spirit of Kashmir as he says, "Main tha, main hoon aur main hi rahoonga" (Bharadwaj, 2014). So the play, as we know it, is mostly crammed into the second half, while the first half concentrates on presenting a 'realistic' picture of the situation in Kashmir.

Bharadwaj's *Haider* continues to make words unnecessary but *Hamlet* is all about the words, so why *Hamlet*? The answer to this question lies in the last scene of *Haider* in an emotional limbo, mirroring the state of Kashmir, does not need the crutch of Shakespeare.

A movie about the politics of Kashmir is a sensitive issue. Indian audience has shut the calls by from the conservatives in India to ban the movie for ostensibly being anti-national and for presentation the armed forces in an unconstructive way. Indian audiences watched *Haider* and taken what it has shown on the face, no matter how painful it has made them. They need not to deceive themselves and the youth. There are other things for them to be concerned and uncomfortable about (Ashok, 2014). One can only hope that supports other daring filmmakers to make more unbiased movies on the region. For as Polonius says, "To thine own self be true." (Shakespeare, 1982)

Conclusion

Despite all the criticism from nationalist Indian community, Bharadwaj's *Haider* succeeded in gaining warm welcome from the audiences not only from across the borders but also from within the India. Bharadwaj succeeded in transporting Shakespeare's Hamlet from Denmark to Kashmir. As the rotten state of Denmark was the best place from the development of Hamlet the same rotten state of Kashmir proved to be the breeding place for *Haider*'s revenge on his uncle and the authorities of Kashmir. This was an honest and bold attempt of Bharadwaj to unveil the miseries of Kashmiris through the lens of Shakespeare's adaptation. This is a contribution, on his part, to give voice to the Kashmiris against the tyranny of Indian forces in films which is one of the biggest industries of India.

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