

STRETCHING THE SPECTRUM: FROM HAMLET TO HAIDER

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ABSTRACT

Haider is an ambitious film adaptation of William Shakespeare's play Hamlet by Vishal Bhardwaj. It is a recreation of the narrative of Hamlet in different time, space and genre. It is a daring effort on two levels-first, adapting the most serious tragic play of a legendary dramatist and second, executing it in the most sensitive scenario of Kashmir where it gets new relevance and fresh urgency. Haider, as a young man returns home to Kashmir after receiving news of his father's disappearance. His character has also been delineated as a scholar and thoughtful man like Hamlet. My paper is a sincere attempt to propagate and explore the points in Haider where we get tremendous opportunity to interpret and reinterpret the text of Hamlet from a different perspective. Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play of high seriousness and Haider too maintains that seriousness in dealing with Kashmir's issue and Kashmiris' dilemma. It has given vent to the pendulating condition of the people grappling with identity crisis amid the chaotic social and political milieu. It leaves us with a charming cinematic experience with a pivotal intellectual exercise in an entirely distinct cultural background. Haider jokes about the word 'chutzpah', mispronounced as 'chootspaa' and making a homophone with 'AFSPA' is more than a daring deed of recreation. This film transmutes Hamlet, a disturbed soul into Haider with unprecedented fearlessness. It is intentionally designed, seems to me, to point its finger at the gruesome reality of the Valley. Moreover, it provides a platform for a new perusal of the narrative of much discussed play Hamlet in the gamut of literature and art.

INTRODUCTION:

Haider is the film Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by the well-known director of Bollywood- Vishal Bhardwaj. Like William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* presents the absurd situation of man in this world. It is a daring effort by Vishal Bhardwaj to recreate the whole narrative of *Hamlet* in to new genre with prominent visual effect. Shakespeare's *hamlet* focuses on intricate human relationships emphasizing a quest for

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identity and harmony. Though Bhardwaj's Haider seems to explore those issues in intense social, political and cultural milieu. He has not recreated the text of *Hamlet* but he has tried to give prominent relevance and fresh urgency choosing his location in Kashmir-the paradise of Earth. It is a daring effort on two levels-first, adapting the most serious tragic play of a legendary dramatist and second, executing it in the most sensitive scenario of Kashmir where it gets new relevance and fresh urgency. Haider, as a young man returns home to Kashmir after receiving news of his father's disappearance. His character has also been delineated as a scholar and thoughtful man like Hamlet. He is also torn between the shattered relationships around him and perplexed by the scattered situations.

Haider is a film which challenges and debunks political game. His film adaptation of the theme of Hamlet recontextualizes and exposes certain social, political and personal perspectives successfully. Both Hamlet and Haider has such a long-time gap even though they carry a connotation and proposes a latest reinterpretation with better understanding of human nature and our society. The film Haider is not Vishal Bhardwaj's first adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedies but before it he has made film on *Macbeth* as Maqbool and *Othello* as Omkara. His genius as a director lies in the recreation of the narrative in completely different cultural milieu and this time in Haider the milieu is all the more serious and demands bold approach which showcases his freedom of art. The setting of Haider in Kashmir raises many political interpretations and displays the unrest and political upheavals of the state during the last few decades. Bashart Peer as the co-writer of the screenplay of this film tries to expose the socio political and consequential pendulating condition of people living their troubled life in the valley.

On being asked how he was able to translate the 17th century writings of Shakespeare, which were of a very political nature, into the contemporary reality of the Kashmiri conquest and politics in Haider, Bhardwaj said "It's about the politics behind humanity, their emotions and their conflicts. The politicians or ministers have changed. But the person behind the minister or the person behind the politician, remains the same. The conflict remains the same." (5)

A critical issue which has been questioned in this film is Armed Forces Special Powers act (AFSPA). The AFSPA is an act of the parliament of India which was passed on 11 September 1958. It is much debated and controversial law which permits special powers to the Indian Armed Forces. It can declare any part of Kashmir as a disturbed and suspected, can arrest any person without warrant and can destroy camps and many more. This film poses and proposes questions regarding the relevance of this power of AFSPA or is there no room for improvement in the law after such a long time or is this not an act of organized violence?

"Bhardwaj picks the drama of human follies from Shakespeare's works and places them in a completely different scenario, but he stays true to the emotions of the bard's works. The director ensures that the emotions of a

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troubled soul (Haider), subtle sexual undertones of the mother-son duo relation, the eternal human follies of treachery and adultery are showcased on the canvas of his cinema.” (Sweta Kaushal)

The film starts portraying Kashmir during the Kashmir Conflict in 1995. Hilaal Meer (Haider’s father in the film) a doctor by profession gives his consent to perform an appendicitis operation for the leader of a separatist group at his house at his house. During a crackdown, he is found guilty of giving shelter to terrorists and is taken away by Indian army. Haider (as Hamlet, played by Shahid Kapoor) a poet and a research scholar who is pursuing his research on “ The Revolutionary Poets of British India in Aligarh Muslim University comes home in Anantnag after getting the news of his father’s disappearance and finds his home in ruins and debris. He finds his mother Ghazala (Gertrude, played by Tabu) developing an affair with his uncle Khurram(Claudius, acted by Kay Kay Minon). He found himself betrayed on his mother’s infidelity and twitches a search for his father in various police station and detention camps with the help of his beloved Arshia, when Haider was about to lose hope for not getting any clue of his father’s he encounters a stranger Roohdaar (Irfan Khan) who offers him to provide some information about his father. Roohdaar narrates the whole story of his imprisonment with Hilaal in one of the detention camp. He reveals in the long run in a dramatic series of hide and seek that his father is no more in this world and he is dead. He tells him that it was his father’s wish to avenge his brother’s Khurram for his betrayal and leave Ghazala for God’s mercy. He becomes inconclusive and starts pendulating in dilemma of what to do. To be or not to be- his conflicts starts.

There is a beautiful song *bismil* in which he plays a small play of falcon and nightingale and tries to provoke both Ghazala and his uncle Khurram to confess their sin. Like Hamlet in Shakespeare, Haider also tries to kill his uncle but gets caught. Salman and Salman (Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) were asked to murder Haider by Arshia’s father but any how he escapes and runs away.

Haider’s relationship with his mother has been delineated in the play beautifully. When Haider asks about her betrayal to his father she tries to justify her point that she was also got trapped and allured by Khurram ‘s words. She was quite unaware of the fact that he is the informer of Indian Army in the state. She tells him that she had disclosed about terrorist hiding in her house and out of fear she told everything to Khurram. She is the lady who was living the life of half-widow after the disappearance of her husband.From a feminist point of view her decision to live her life according to her choice is fully justified, she is a woman of strong will who is trying make her own way. She was just trying to keep well with life. On the other hand another woman character Arshia (Ophelia, acted by Shraddha Kapoor) in the beginning seems to be very strong and bold personality. She helps Haider in search of his father. She is always beside him. She is in love with him. But as the moment she comes to



know that her own father and her brother want to murder Haider she is totally shocked and depressed and moreover shattered in her hope and commits suicide.

The climax of the film is even more thought provoking. Here he is with some gravediggers and contemplates on the issue of death which is indispensable to all. No one can escape. All are subject to death. She becomes serious and realizes the futility of our existence and broods over absurdity around us. That scene is really a masterpiece in the entire film which provokes and affects audience to take them as a whole. After some time, he sees some people are bringing some dead body which he discovers none other than Arshia's. Meantime Khurram comes to know about his place and comes with Indian army to blow the whole place. Haider has a fight with Arshia's brother while burying her dead body. The action on this stage of the movie was proceeding in a very dramatic way. Ghazala comes in the scene here, intervenes and tries to convince Haider to surrender but the tragedy of Haider intensifies her when she comes to know that she is wearing a suicide bomb as her vest. She blows the bomb due to which Khurram got badly injured and she herself ends her life. Here we get a hint that it might be possible she was bearing a sense of guilt in her heart for betraying her husband. After this Haider decides to kill his Uncle Khurram but he let him go and leave him on his fate. This change in the climax of the film gives a way to humanity and emphasizes on repentance and realization. The film actually does not nod with the dictum of blood for blood.

The political recreation of the context of the narrative of Shakespeare's narrative of Hamlet has been given justice. The political Danish turmoil and conspiracy has been revised and redefined in the socio-political context of Kashmir. In fact, Bhardwaj found an appropriate political situation in the valley of Kashmir that could be reinterpreted and recreated through Hamlet with more urgent meaning. As Andre Bazin in his easy Adaptation or Cinema as Digest says, "In an adaptation what matters is not faithfulness to form but the equivalence in meaning of the form." Geoffrey Wagner has classified adaptation in to three categories- transposition, commentary and analogy. "A transposition follows the novel closely; a commentary alters the novel slightly and analogy uses the novel as a point of departure." If we analyze Bhardwaj's Haider on this view it stands somewhere between commentary and analogy. He keeps the plot and the theme of the film as same as *Hamlet* has but he has rewedded the narrative in an entirely different milieu retold and rethought and has been given fresh urgency by redressing it and moreover he sustains a bold approach.

The much-debated issue of Oedipus complex has also been given an undertone through the relation of Ghazala and Haider (mother-son sexual relationship). There are some strong scenes related to this which has been depicted in the film with all the beauty of Kashmir and yet maintains the seriousness of the play.

Further the signature line of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*- To e or not to be- has been dealt beautifully which exposes Haider's dilemma and internal conflict of conscience. He is

confused between Khurram's words and what Roohdar said. He is not able to take decision promptly. His vacillation leads him towards his suffering and a kind of mental agony he faces in the long run. He broods on the inevitability of death and triviality of our existence. He encounters an existential crisis. He is on the verge of breakdown when he speaks these words before Arshia," To trust the surging beats of the heart/ or to head the sober mind/to kill or to die/ to be or not to be."

"Bhardwaj keeps the Hamlet inspiration on track with a few changes here and there but what he plays wonderfully with are the relationships. The mother and son relationship that goes through a lot of emotional ups and downs Haider relationship with Arshia and her relation with her father and brother are very real and relatable. Ghazala's relation with her brother-in-law is of love, lust and tension." (Rohit Khilanani)

Another interesting striking scene in the film is the play within play. Like *Hamlet*, Haider too arranges a play where he tells the story of Nightingale and falcon and narrates the act of treachery and unfaithfulness just to note the uneasiness and discomfort on the faces of his mother and his uncle. He wanted to provoke them. Though this scene has its own dramatic inclination in Bollywood way yet it's an important part which plays its role successfully to make this film more effective.

Haider leaves us with a charming cinematic experience with a pivotal intellectual exercise in an entirely distinct cultural background. Haider jokes about the word 'chutzpah' mispronounced as choospaa and making a homophone with AFSPA is more than a daring effort of recreation. This film transmutes Hamlet, a disturbed soul into Haider with unprecedented fearlessness. It is intentionally designed, seems to me, to point its finger to the gruesome reality of the valley. Moreover, it provides a platform for a new perusal of the narrative of much discussed play hamlet in the gamut of art and literature. This kind of effort must be applauded and appreciated by the academia.

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