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The Rebirth of Denmark's Soul as Kashmir's *RooH*: A Comparative Reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Bhardwaj's *Haider*

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Abstract: *Haider*, directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, is a powerful and thoughtful reimagining of Shakespeare's classic tragedy *Hamlet*. The story takes place in Kashmir during the 1990s, a time when the region was undergoing a political turmoil, and emotional struggle for the local people. This paper is an attempt to explore the psychological unrest experienced by conflict zones like Kashmir and how *Haider*'s tragic flaw (much like *Hamlet*'s) is his overwhelming desire for vengeance, which causes him to lose his judgment and results in his destruction. The paper discusses how cinema acts as a stage to showcase the mental health of Kashmiris, which is often ignored by the social and political environment.

Keywords: - *Haider*, *Hamlet*, Shakespeare, Kashmir, Bhardwaj

Haider is an Indian film directed by Vishal Bhardwaj who is known especially for his critically acclaimed adaptations of William Shakespeare's tragedies. He is celebrated for adapting Shakespearean plays into contemporary Indian socio-political context, making them more impactful and relatable for Indian audiences. *Haider* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's one of the most proclaimed plays, *Hamlet*. It is a classical English tragedy focused on personal and royal revenge by William Shakespeare. Both *Hamlet* and *Haider* share similar themes of betrayal, identity and grief, though they both are completely different in terms of political and historical context. Bhardwaj also made two more magnificent adaptations of William Shakespeare's tragedies; *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*) set in the Bombay underworld and *Omkaara* (*Othello*) whose leading character is a half-caste criminal in the dirty heartland.

Haider unfolds in present-day India, with its backdrop set in the tense and heavily militarized region of Kashmir. The film reflects real-life political struggles, shedding light on human rights violations, such as disappearances and military crackdowns, while portraying the deep emotional and psychological impact these conflicts have on ordinary lives. On the other hand, *Hamlet* is set in Denmark which was written during Elizabethan era in England around 1600. The play reflects the era's concerns with power, religion, and the nature of human existence. We can observe that both *Haider* and *Hamlet* shares deep and similar psychological and philosophical ideas of existentialism, feminism and post colonialism. Both stories show how personal pain and problems in society can affect how people think and act.

Comparative Study of Source and Setting

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* endures as a masterful portrayal of grief, revenge, and moral ambiguity, written in the early 17th century. The play takes inspiration from older tales, such as the



medieval Danish story of Amleth, along with aspects of Renaissance revenge dramas, establishing it as a foundational work in Western literature.

In contrast, Bringing Shakespeare to the snow-cloaked valleys of Kashmir, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) offers a hauntingly modern take on *Hamlet*. This adaptation places the story within the contemporary socio-political landscape of India, particularly Kashmir, while maintaining the essential themes found in the original play.

Hamlet is set in the Elsinore Castle of Denmark during a time that looks like the Middle Ages. Every castle holds the secrets, memories and mysteries which remain in the walls of the palace. It demonstrates the cold and dark atmosphere in the play which symbolises the castle's decay and captivity. On the other hand, *Haider* is set in Kashmir during the 1990s, when the region was full of violence and military conflict. The story shows how this troubled environment affects people's lives and mental health. In *Haider*, the setting plays a big role in showing the pain and fear caused by war and political issues. Bhardwaj used Kashmir not just as a backdrop, but as a character in itself, where the autumn season in the beginning of the film, signifies the end of the innocence and every snow-covered path echoes the silence, fear, numbness and violence central to both the plot and the setting. While *Hamlet* takes place in a fictional royal world that explores personal and emotional struggles, *Haider* is based in a real place with real problems, where personal pain is connected to the political situation around it.

Psychological and Philosophical Thoughts (Existentialism)

The theme of existentialism is deeply woven into the narratives of both *Hamlet* and *Haider*, as each protagonist is caught in a struggle to understand life, identity, and the meaning of their actions in a world that seems chaotic and unjust. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the central character reflects on life's worth and the fear of the unknown after death, especially in his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy. He is torn between the duty to avenge his father and his growing doubts about morality, justice, and the consequences of his choices. In a similar vein, *Haider* portrays a young man returning to conflict-torn Kashmir, where the disappearance of his father and the silence of his family push him into emotional and psychological turmoil. His need for revenge becomes tangled with questions about right and wrong, as he realizes that violence may not bring clarity or closure. This can be seen when he says, "*Hai ki hai nhi, bas yahi sawaal hai, aur sawaal ka jawaab bhi, sawaal hai*". It clearly signifies that Haider is confused whether to trust Roohdaar or Khurram's tale. He is torn between morality and justice. Both characters experience deep inner conflict, not just because of their personal losses, but also due to the larger, broken systems they are part of—royal politics in *Hamlet*, and militarized oppression in *Haider*. Ultimately, both stories reflect the existential idea that individuals are responsible for making choices in a world where meaning is not given, and that freedom often comes with isolation, confusion, and painful consequences.

Female Characters as Victims and Catalysts in *Hamlet* and *Haider*

In both *Hamlet* and *Haider*, the female characters play significant roles, but their voices are often silenced or overshadowed by the actions and emotions of the male protagonists. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is caught between her loyalty to her father and her love for Hamlet. She is manipulated by the men around her and is not given the freedom to express her own desires, which eventually leads to her mental breakdown and death. Her fate reflects how women were expected to obey without question, lacking agency over their own lives. Similarly, in *Haider*, Arshia, who mirrors Ophelia, is caught between her love for Haider and her role as the daughter of a police officer, Parvez Lone. She is torn by emotional conflict and, like Ophelia, faces tragedy without much control over her fate and shot herself. Arshia's act of unravelling the scarf before her death reflects her desire to undo the chain of events set into motion by Haider's



actions. This is because Arshia has knitted the scarf lovingly and later it was used by Haider to strangle Pervez. This shows how much oppressed women feel around men that they decide to accept death rather than facing the consequences of the decisions made by men which are more painful than death.

Ghazala, Haider's mother and the counterpart to Queen Gertrude, is portrayed with more complexity. Unlike Gertrude, Ghazala is more actively involved in the story's progression and makes significant choices, though her actions are still framed by her relationships with the men in her life. We can see this in the initial scenes of *Haider* where Ghazala showed hesitation in keeping the militants in the house, but Dr. Hilaal Meer decided to treat them. This decision highlights Hilal's deep commitment to his cause and his willingness to pursue revenge and resistance regardless of the personal risks or the emotional turmoil it causes to those around him. Both works highlight how women are often reduced to symbols or emotional triggers within male-driven narratives, reflecting broader feminist concerns about the lack of female agency, voice, and independence in both literature and society.

Resistance and Trauma in militarized Settings

Both *Hamlet* and *Haider* can be read through a postcolonial lens, where colonial history and its aftereffects shape the characters' identities and actions. In *Hamlet*, Denmark's royal court, though not a direct representation of a colonized society, can be seen as a microcosm of colonial power struggles, where the throne becomes a symbol of dominion and control. Hamlet's indecision and internal conflict reflect the effects of a ruling power's corruption and the challenges faced by individuals in oppressive systems. On the other hand, *Haider* explicitly deals with the post conflict trauma of Kashmir, which has been caught between India and Pakistan's territorial tension. Haider struggles with his identity and the loss of his father are compounded by the socio-political violence of the region. The militarization, the forced disappearances, and resulting psychological damage represent the traumatic condition of Kashmir, where the state violence legacies have created long-lasting scars.

The film shows few instances where military excesses have been exercised in the valley due to which the common public also bore the brunt of it. In the film, Pervez shot the militants and exhibits it as an encounter. He confides in Khurram that, nowadays, a dead militant is worth one lakh rupees. The application of [Armed Forces \(Jammu and Kashmir\) Special Powers Act \(AFSPA\) 1989](#) in the valley provides the armed forces special powers to ensure peace in the region. But, sometimes the provisions of law have been misused by the few armed officials for various administrative, political and economic reasons. Cases like fake encounter have been reported in the valley. However, whenever such cases are reported, the armed forces have taken quick action against the accused by ensuring conviction of the same through their respective military tribunals and court martials. Therefore, Indian Armed Forces have always been our shield and protected us from every external enemy. They are the reason that there is a sense of peace in the valley and country as a whole.

Both works highlight the psychological turmoil and fractured identities that arise from conflicted societies, showing how both characters are shaped by the oppressive forces of their environments. While *Hamlet* hints at these ideas, *Haider* clearly shows the pain and problems faced by people living under political and military control. This can be seen by the ghost (Roohdaar) carrying the colonial memory of torture and loss. Roohdaar's first appearance in the film was at the Cemetery which symbolises death, loss and trauma.

Roohdaar is the one who was with Haider's father in detention centre known as MAMA-II where one can feel death and suffering in every breathe. MAMA-II symbolises oppressive machinery of the state and the dark side of the law enforcement. It represents torture, loss and



death while being alive. There is this striking scene in the film where people of Kashmir got used to scrutinising so much that their mental state shuts the consciousness and works according to the power ruling in the territory. Roohdar is not just carrying his own grief but the collective anguish of the people around him.

Flawed Path to Revenge in *Haider* and *Hamlet*

Every tragedy is a success when there is a tragic flaw in the protagonist which makes the tragedy more appealing by making an emotional connection with the audience. This is used as an essential element in classical and modern tragedies and is known as Hamartia. The protagonist is always of the high status or nobility due to which there is a wilful suspension of disbelief, and it makes the audience feel pity or fear which helps to deliver the message that even high nobility individuals can fall due to one wrong decision.

In *Haider*, the tragic flaw of the hero is his obsession with revenge. He is so dedicated in taking the revenge from his uncle Khurram that he doesn't even give a thought that there will be consequences of his actions which will swallow every loving being around him. In the film, Haider is shown as an educated and thoughtful young man, studying in Aligarh Muslim University before returning to Kashmir. He is knowledgeable, insightful and questions everything which has initially become his strength but eventually it has turned out to be his burden. Much like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Haider's educated mind leads him into deep philosophical struggles, making him think himself as a "rebel" caught between personal pain and political chaos. There is this famous line in *Haider*, "*Inteqaam se sirf inteqaam paida hota hai*". This means that revenge only breeds more revenge. It clearly demonstrates the endless cycle of violence in Kashmir and in Haider's personal life.

In *Hamlet* too, we can observe similar kind of tragic flaw in the protagonist where the hero is of the high nobility as he is the prince of Denmark. His status helps to give his decisions and choices a sense of credibility which are considered significant not only to himself but to his entire kingdom. This noble position fits the idea of a tragic hero—someone with a high rank whose downfall creates a strong emotional response of pity and fear in the audience. Hamlet was determined to seek the revenge from Claudius which resulted in losing his loved ones. He questions about life, death, mortality and existence. This shows that his downfall was not only due to the external enemies but there was an inner conflict going on within his mind.

Conclusion

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* offers more than a retelling of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—it reframes the tragedy within the complex realities of Kashmir. While both protagonists face emotional turmoil and a thirst for revenge, Haider's pain is shaped by real political violence and collective trauma. The film reveals how personal grief becomes inseparable from social conflict. By placing Shakespeare's timeless themes in a modern context, *Haider* gives new meaning to Hamlet's struggle, turning a royal dilemma into a story of human survival in a fractured land.

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