

From *Hamlet* to *Haider*: Transcultural Shakespeare and Ethics of Authority

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Abstract

Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of *Hamlet* as *Haider*, the final film of his Shakespearean trilogy involving *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*) and *Omkaara* (*Othello*), offers a gripping portrayal of the manifold crises experienced by people in the conflict-ridden valley of Kashmir, a flashpoint in India-Pakistan relations since the Partition, in the wake of insurgency, counter-insurgency operations by the Indian army and consequent collapse of normalcy from the early 1990s. Reconfiguring Hamlet's "To be or not to be" as the anguished voice of an entire ethnic population in struggle for survival, who ask 'Hum hainke hum nahin?' (Do we exist or not?), *Haider*, as the Kashmiri avatar of Hamlet, re-weaves Shakespearean questions about ethics and authority onto Kashmir's ongoing history of violence, loss and agony, as personal trauma merges with the collective horror of an entire community where the Shakespearean expression of the rotten state is no longer metaphoric and the entire valley, manned by numerous soldiers, indeed becomes a haunting prison of untold torture. Rather than being only portrayed as a victim of chronic melancholy or a young man in the throes of an unresolved oedipal complex, *Haider* emerges as a rebellious protagonist whose personal quest for justice also entails a powerful critique of the Indian nation state and its repressive apparatuses. Focusing principally on *Haider*'s reconfiguration of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech, the paper would seek to trace Hamlet's evolution as a radical antagonist to the state as a crucial component of that transcultural adaptation which *Haider* as a film attempts.

Keywords: *adaptation, nation, trauma, ethics, authority.*

Martin Orkin remarks that, "Since their first performances, Shakespeare's texts have been and are, in a manner of speaking, travellers to countless and always different locations."¹ And just as travellers are often altered by their

From Hamlet to Haider:
Transcultural Shakespeare and Ethics of Authority

experiences, so are Shakespearean texts and the stature of Shakespeare himself, who no longer remains just the Bard of Avon. The journeys have of course been inflected with considerations of race and power, especially in the former colonies where the study and production of Shakespeare have often been born of a matrix of hegemonic intent and interpellated intellect. However, just as Shakespeare's plays are remarkable for their capacity to resonate on multiple levels, the inexhaustible popularity of Shakespeare in diverse cultural contexts across the globe, several decades after the collapse of the British Empire, cannot simply be explained by a lingering effect of colonial discourses. As Dionne and Kapadia explain, "Today, reconstructions and revisions of Shakespeare's works continue as the plays are co-opted by postcolonial and minority cultures, further shattering the notion of the universalist interpretation that privileges Western experience as primary. As such, Shakespeare's plays can no longer signify an exclusively British, or even Western, identity; instead, they function as sites of contest reflecting a manifold of cultures."²In fact, Shakespeare himself had uncannily presaged as much when in *Julius Caesar* Cassius remarked:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
In states unborn and accents yet unknown (3.1. 111-13).³

Such a statement was not only prophetic of the nature of political developments but also of the global appeal of Shakespeare's own creations. The example of *Julius Caesar* is particularly appropriate because it is one among a number of plays in which Shakespeare tests the limits of authority and the extent to which human actions are motivated by what Greenblatt calls, quoting Bill Clinton, "an ethically adequate object". Further elaborating this exploration of freedom and authority Greenblatt also states:

What is striking is that his work, alert to every human fantasy and longing, is allergic to the absolutist strain so prevalent in his world, from the metaphysical to the mundane. His kings repeatedly discover the constraints within which they must function if they hope to survive. His generals draw lines on maps and issue peremptory commands, only to find that the reality on the ground defies their designs. So too his proud churchmen are

TRIVIUM

mocked for pretensions, while religious visionaries, who claim to be in direct communication with the divine, are exposed as frauds.⁴

This is precisely why, it is Claudius, the regicide king who utters that “There’s such divinity doth hedge a king/That treason can but peep to what it would” (4.5. 119-120) and Henry V must pray for victory by confessing to God—”Not today, O Lord, / O not today, think not upon the fault / My father made in compassing the crown” (4.1.274–76). Such deft strokes of irony are complemented by various other examples, which highlight Shakespeare’s persistent engagement with the ethics of authority which is shot through with scepticism and defiance. The one play which perhaps renders this engagement most powerfully manifest is *King Lear*. Here, not only do the characters who demand our moral sympathy actively support an invading army against their own monarchs but a servant even dares to take up arms against a reigning monarch out of moral outrage and with no personal interest. Most importantly, it is in this play that we come up with mad Lear’s most sensible and scathing assaults against an oppressive world order. He asks Gloucester, if he has seen a farmer’s dog bark at a beggar and the creature run from the cur and adds, “There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog’s obeyed in office” (4.6.154-55). Such remarks are not only endowed with a potent subversive energy but the subversiveness itself stems from what Kiernan Ryan calls a “revolutionary universalism” which articulates “the *potential* of all human beings to live according to principles of freedom, equality and justice”⁵ (emphasis original), perceived from what Ryan calls “an egalitarian perspective that is still in advance of our time”⁶ (emphasis original). As Ryan fervently asserts,

It’s my contention that this profound commitment to the universal human potential to live otherwise is the secret of the plays’ proven ability to transcend their time. This is what drives their radical dissatisfaction with Shakespeare’s world, divorcing their vision from the assumptions and attitudes that held sway in early modern England, and opening them up to the future and the prospect of the world transfigured. That prospect — the tidal pool of futurity that inflects their language and form at every turn — is what propels Shakespeare’s plays beyond the horizon of his age to speak with more authority and power than ever to ours.⁷

From Hamlet to Haider:
Transcultural Shakespeare and Ethics of Authority

It is this particular aspect which operates as one of the most potent reasons behind the consistent and incisive adaptations of Shakespeare in various different postcolonial contexts as Shakespeare becomes the matrix through whom is launched a scathing critique of both imperial machinations as well as the authoritarianism that continues to plague post-independence national or regional governments in different parts of the world. This is perhaps why India itself has seen so many politically significant Shakespearean productions and adaptations, whether during the imposition of Emergency or during other periods of political volatility, regional and national, where the Shakespearean exploration of ethics of authority has been suitably subjected to processes of local appropriation and resultant transcultural modifications. Such incarnations of Shakespeare are characterised by what Gerard Genette called “heterodiagetic transpositions” which “redeploy the reworked plot and resolutions in a medium that allows the theme to affect its audience in a way consistent with the original.”⁸ Vishal Bhardwaj’s reworking of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the context of the troubled and tormented valley of Kashmir operates in the same way. The rest of the paper would explore in brief the nature of the ongoing conflicts in Kashmir and their deeply traumatic consequences and then analyse the ways in which the film foregrounds such issues and thereby offers a trenchant critique of the postcolonial nation-state.

The problem of Kashmir is in many ways a consequence of colonial cartography and the disastrous Partition of the Indian subcontinent. India and Pakistan have remained locked in ceaseless animosity over control of Kashmir since 1947 and the ongoing conflicts in the valley are akin to the suppurating pores of a long-festering wound. The situation has been complicated even further by the callous high-handedness of the Indian state which has neither held a plebiscite, as once promised, nor has paid any heed to the consistent demands of autonomy raised by a population that has relentlessly resisted all those who sought to conquer Kashmir. While on the one hand, elections have been rigged from the very beginning, the statesmen of Delhi have also been blatantly authoritarian, as evident from the successive imprisonments of Sheikh Abdullah and other key political leaders. The simmering discontent, fomented by such political blunders boiled over during the 1980s as electoral malpractices again took centre-stage and the Governor, a Hindu nationalist named Jagmohan, further

TRIVIUM

exacerbated the condition through his failed attempts to crush legitimate dissent. All of this escalated an already complicated political problem into a bloody quagmire marked by the eruption of an armed insurgency against India by terrorist organisations like HijbulMujahideen or Lashkar-e-Toiba, consistently supported by Pakistan, the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from their own homelands, the launching of extensive military operations and a series of endless tortures, massacres, disappearances and deaths.⁹ As ReshmiSahgal points out, “the number of people having lost their lives during the past two decades of Kashmir is overwhelming with some agencies putting the number at around 89,000 and the number of enforced disappearances at 10,000.”¹⁰ Such losses are as much due to the destructive machinations of the terrorists as they are to the cruelty of the nation-state. In fact, several Human Rights organisations, newspaper reports and scholarly studies have successively blamed the Indian forces for perpetrating several atrocities including torture of detainees, rapes against women, ‘disappearance’ of detained boys, fake encounters, unlawful arrests and multiple massacres. A panel report of the Press Council of India itself stated:

Human rights cannot be safe in (the rest of) India if they are trampled upon...in Kashmir. Such violations are brutalising and threaten the democratic edifice of the country. More precisely, far from subduing aggrieved communities, Kashmiris in this case, they can only alienate them further, especially if their women are dishonoured and their collective psyche hurt.¹¹

Almost two decades after that particular observation, Kashmir continues to reel under a world of similar ongoing trauma without any light at the end of the tunnel. As Pankaj Mishra remarks,

With more than eighty thousand people dead in an anti-India insurgency backed by Pakistan, the killing fields of Kashmir dwarf those of Palestine and Tibet. In addition to the everyday regime of arbitrary arrests, curfews, raids, and checkpoints enforced by nearly 700,000 Indian soldiers, the valley’s four million Muslims are exposed to extrajudicial execution, rape, and torture, with such barbaric variations as live electric wires inserted into penises.¹²

It is this ‘rotten’ state of affairs that provides the context for the

From Hamlet to Haider:
Transcultural Shakespeare and Ethics of Authority

transmutation of Hamlet into Haider.

The film opens with Haider's father, Dr. Hilal Meer operating on a terrorist at home in consequence of which there is a surprise raid by the Indian army at their village. Not only is Haider's father apprehended but their house is destroyed in the ensuing gunfight as well. But as a traumatised Haider returns home, from Aligarh Muslim University, Wittenberg's Indian equivalent, he is confronted by scenes of intimacy between his mother Ghazala and uncle Khurram, the man he would later learn was the informant responsible for his father's arrest, torture and subsequent death. Like Hamlet, Haider too thus becomes thrust into a tragic condition not of his own making. His response to this condition is marked by embittered anti-authoritarian resentment that reveals itself through sardonic quips, puns and a rather deft marshalling of bawdy innuendoes in the manner of his Shakespearean original. This is evident from the way in which he deliberately identifies his hometown as Islamabad, the name of the Pakistani capital but also another name for Anantnag or his sardonic use of the word 'chutzpah', ironically rhyming with AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Act)¹³ which endows Indian soldiers with impunity for various atrocities in Kashmir and other insurgency-hit regions, and also alluding to a Hindi slang that operates as the equivalent of 'fuck' or 'screwed'. And just as Hamlet would identify Denmark as a goodly prison, Haider also realises "Pura Kashmir kayedkhanahai mere dost" (All of Kashmir is a prison my friends).¹⁴ The subsequent scenes operate as vivid signifiers of this realisation as we come across a desperate Haider searching for his father amidst a truck full of massacred bodies, or corpses floating across river Jhelum or in countless army camps, prisons and interrogation centres, at times located in cinema halls, which cumulatively offer a surreal vision of an occupied land where everyday lives are marked by unheeded tears for relatives who have been tortured, killed or have simply 'disappeared' – a term that encompasses both young and old. It is through such scenes, where we see Haider meeting several others like him, that he becomes a part of the suffering multitude of Kashmir and unlike Hamlet, who, conditioned by his own princely status and the nature of Elizabethan drama, remains mostly dissociated from the larger populace, Haider grows to become a representative figure of tormented Kashmiris, a democratized version of the Shakespearean

TRIVIUM

original.

It is in this context that the Shakespearean question of “To be or not to be” becomes modified into “hum hainke hum nahin?” - do we exist or not? Chanted by Haider with others as part of his participation in various non-violent protests, sparked by his solidarity with other agonised Kashmiris, this modified version of the famous Shakespearean statement eventually becomes the resonant refrain in one of the most stirring episodes of the film where an apparently crazed Haider, in a Hamletesque mood of feigned madness, utters a monologue in front of a group of ordinary Kashmiris, which offers an excoriating critique of both the geopolitical tangles between India and Pakistan over Kashmir as well as the atrocities performed by the state in the name of law and order.¹⁵ He begins in the guise of a naive narrator aiming for maximum satirical impact and asks:

UN council resolution no. 47 of 1948, Article 2 of the Geneva convention, and Article 370 of the Indian Constitution. Bas eksawaaluthatahai, sirfek. Hum hai, ya ham nahi. Hum hai to kahanhain ,aurnahihain to kahangaye ? Hum hain to kisliyeaurkahan to kab? Janaaaaaab... Hum thaybhi, ya hum thay hi nahi?

[According to the UN council resolution number 47 of 1948... Article 2 of the Geneva convention and article 370 of the Indian Constitution... There is but one question! Do we exist or do we not? If we do... then who are we? If we don't... then where are we? If we exist, then why do stand here? If we don't exist, where did we lose ourselves? Did we exist at all? Or not]¹⁶

Through such successive rhetorical questioning, filled with quasi-legal citations, Haider sarcastically underscores the farcical nature of legality in an occupied land, a state of exception, and through an evocation of every nation's right to self-determination, challenges the way in which the very existence of the Kashmiri people, along with their rights are being placed under erasure. This becomes all the more obvious as Haider moves ahead with his gripping monologue:

Law and order...Law and order...Order order...- Law and order...There is no law, there is no order. Whose laws? Whose order? Made on order...Law and order...India! Pakistan! A game on the border. India clings to us.Pakistan leeches on... What of us? What do we want? Freedom! Freedom from this side...-

From Hamlet to Haider:
Transcultural Shakespeare and Ethics of Authority

Freedom! Freedom from that side...- Freedom! We will be free! -
Freedom!¹⁷

In keeping with the change in tenor and dimension already noted above what we see here is that the Shakespearean soliloquy with its emphasis of ethical and metaphysical conundrums within the psyche has been substituted by a deeply moving political monologue, resonant with carnivalesque energy, delivered in front of a crowd which joins Haider's performance and carries it forward.

However, one of the fundamental conflicts within Hamlet itself is about the nature of his motivation, compounded by complex debates surrounding religion, revenge and the nature of law and justice. Critics like Eleanor Prosser have argued about how it is possible to see the ghost as a diabolical agent which contributes to a gradual degeneration of Hamlet's moral nature which he, however, eventually recovers as he realises that not only is there a great providence even in the fall of a sparrow but that "readiness is all" (5.2.162), as opposed to any deliberate quest for revenge and the destructive consequences associated with it. The same conundrum reappears for Haider as well in his own political context. The revenge-seeking ghost in Haider only appears in the form of a character called Roohdaar ('Rooh' literally means spirit or soul), who claims to have been the cell-mate of Haider's father, Dr. Hilal Meer and instigates Haider to avenge his death by murdering Khurram, who by now has become an MLA and is also a part of administrative actions against suspected Kashmiri terrorists. Incidentally Khurram also shows Haider photographs about Roohdaar being a Pakistani ISI agent sent to India to aide terrorist organisations. In the process, much like the entire Kashmiri population, Haider too becomes one who is caught between the machinations of the Indian and the Pakistani state which repeatedly thwart his own quest for justice. What complicates the viewers' response even further is a haunting doubt about how a doctor willing to defy the state to be "on the side of life" can become an advocate of revenge. Even after Khurram's lies and connivances are exposed, the doubts regarding Roohdaar continue to persist. These doubts are very much a part of the thematic of Hamlet itself where the bloody image of Pyrrhus slaying Priam(2.2. 448-493) or the discussion of Fortinbras who finds "quarrel in a straw" (4.4.54) and has no qualms about sending twenty thousand men to their graves for a land not large

TRIVIUM

enough to even contain their graves, operate as strong caveats against revenge. Hamlet himself understands this to a certain extent and therefore admires someone like Horatio, whom he describes thus:

...thou hast been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en with equal thanks: and blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well commedled
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee. (3.2.63-75)

In the polarised world of Kashmir it is indeed difficult to find a man of such temper and naturally therefore there is no Horatio in *Haider*, even though Arshia, Haider's Ophelia, does perform many of the same functions. The 'commedled' voice, instead appears through the figure of Haider's grandfather, who despite lamenting the shackled nights and days of Kashmir yet recognises that "Intekamse sirf intekam paida hai" (revenge only begets revenge)¹⁸ and therefore warns against both revenge and guns. It is this voice that again gains prominence at the end because despite the concluding bloodbath, Haider neither accepts the logic of Roohdar and the associated terrorists nor accepts the deceit and violence of the state. Instead, unlike both warring parties, he abjures the path of revenge and as he leaves the bloody cemetery, it is his grandfather's voice that keeps resonating within him and also the viewers. Despite being an antagonist to the state, Haider therefore does not succumb to the logic of violence and revenge, even though he does not deter from killing those who seek to kill him. Vishal Bhardwaj retains the violence of the original along with Shakespeare's problematising of revenge in order to offer a representation of Kashmir that exposes the atrocities of both the state and the militants pitted against it, explains the circumstances that compel people to take up violence against the state and espouses an abrogation of revenge as the only way out of the impasse.

The matrix of *Hamlet* thus finds renewed relevance in the context of postcolonial India and conflicts in Kashmir. Despite the obvious shifts in

From Hamlet to Haider:
Transcultural Shakespeare and Ethics of Authority

plot and characterisation, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* yet again highlights the inexhaustible significations Shakespearean texts continue to generate and that the Bard of Avon, even four hundred years after his death, remains very much, our contemporary.

Endnotes:

- ¹ Martin Orkin, *Local Shakespeares: Proximations and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.1.
- ² Craig Dionne and Paramita Kapadia. "Introduction" in *Native Shakespeares: Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage*. Eds. Craig Dionne and Paramita Kapadia (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.6.
- ³ Shakespeare, William. *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*. Revised Edition. Eds. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998.) All quotations from Shakespeare are from this edition.
- ⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.3.
- ⁵ Kiernan, Ryan. *Shakespeare's Universality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p.9.
- ⁶ Ryan, p.15
- ⁷ Ryan, p.9.
- ⁸ Quoted in Dionne and Kapadia, p.4.
- ⁹ This very brief summary of the political context of the crisis in Kashmir is principally derived from Suranjan Das' chapter on "The Kashmir Imbroglio" in his book *Kashmir and Sindh: Nation-building, Ethnicity and Regional Politics in South Asia*, pp. 21-89.
- ¹⁰ Rashmi Sehgal. 'Kashmir Conflict: Solutions and Demand for Self-Determination' *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1 (2011): 188.
- ¹¹ Suranjan Das, *Kashmir and Sindh: Nation-building, Ethnicity and Regional Politics in South Asia* (Kolkata: K.P. Bagchi, 2001) 66.
- ¹² Pankaj Mishra, 'Introduction: Kashmir – The Case for Freedom' in *Kashmir – The Case for Freedom* (London: Verso, 2011), p.10.
- ¹³ The Act was originally implemented in 1958 for the deployment of the Army to tackle insurrections in various parts of North East India and was applied to Jammu and Kashmir in 1990, granting extraordinary draconian powers to

TRIVIUM

shoot and arrest with impunity.

¹⁴ Vishal Bhardwaj and Basharat Peer. *Haider: The Original Screenplay with English Translation* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2014), p. 64.

¹⁵ The fact that this monologue is delivered in the same LalChowk from which Nehru had delivered his conditional promise of plebiscite infuses the scene with even greater irony.

¹⁶ Bhardwaj and Peer, p. 143.

¹⁷ Bhardwaj and Peer p. 145.

¹⁸ Bhardwaj and Peer pp. 88-89.