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From Denmark to Kashmir: A Cinematic Adaptation of *Hamlet* into *Haider*

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Abstract— Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* is a modern cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It reimagines Hamlet's story in a new setting, time, and style. This film presents boldness of the filmmaker for two reasons; first, it adapts a very serious revenge tragedy of Shakespeare and second, it sets the story in the sensitive region of Kashmir, which gives it new meaning and importance. Just as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a very serious play, *Haider* also keeps this seriousness when dealing with the problems in Kashmir and the struggles of its people. The film expresses the uncertain situation of people dealing with a crisis of who they are in a turbulent society and political environment with special reference to Armed Forces Special Power Act (ASFA). It offers a captivating movie experience along with an important intellectual challenge within a completely different cultural setting. This movie bravely changes Hamlet, a troubled character, into Haider, which is incredibly daring. It appears to be purposefully made to highlight the terrible situation in Kashmir valley. This paper aims to highlight how *Haider* as a film allows us to understand and look at *Hamlet's* story in a new way. Additionally, it offers a fresh way to look at the well-known story of Hamlet within the world of books and art.

Keywords— Cinematic Adaptation, Kashmir, Revenge Tragedy, ASFA.

I. INTRODUCTION

The film *Haider* is Vishal Bhardwaj's recreation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The film delves within a strong social, political, and cultural setting which is a stark contrast to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. From the beginning the film questions and disproves political strategies of the state and Indian Army. Bhardwaj's adaptation effectively reframes and reveals various social, political, and individual viewpoints. Despite the significant time difference between *Hamlet* and *Haider*, both convey a similar message and offer a modern interpretation that better understands human nature and society. *Haider* is Vishal Bhardwaj's third movie based on Shakespeare's tragedies; he previously adapted *Macbeth* as *Maqbool* and *Othello* as *Omkara*. His skill as a director is evident in how he recreates these stories in entirely different cultural settings.

In *Haider*, the setting is particularly serious and requires a brave approach, demonstrating his artistic freedom. *Haider* in Kashmir leads to many political interpretations and highlights the instability and political turmoil in the region over recent decades. Basharat Peer, as a co-writer of the film, aims to reveal the social, political, and fluctuating difficulties faced by people living their challenging lives in the valley. Stephen Alter talks about the selection of Kashmir as the setting for *Haider*, as he states:

When Vishal was beginning this project, he and I disagreed about the setting. I urged him to make *Hamlet* into an espionage thriller, with intelligence operatives flying around the globe—a cool, taut action flick in which secret agents and underworld arms merchants chased each other through the transit lounges of international airports. We brainstormed about making something that looked and felt like *The Bourne Identity* or *Mission Impossible*. However, in the end, Vishal chose Kashmir instead with its contested borders and fluid lines of actual control, as well as the dreaded torture chambers of PAPA 2, a military interrogation complex in Srinagar, which represents the moral sinkhole of India's Kashmir policy (Alter xv).

The movie opens in Kashmir in mid-nineties, amidst the Kashmir conflict. Hilaal Meer, a doctor and Haider's father, agrees to operate on a separatist leader's appendix at his home. During a military raid, he is arrested by the Indian army for harboring terrorists. Haider, a poet and scholar studying at Aligarh Muslim University, returns to Anantnag after learning of his father's disappearance. He finds his home destroyed and discovers his mother, Ghazala, is having an affair with his uncle, Khurram. Feeling betrayed by his mother, Haider, with the help of his girlfriend Arshia, searches for his father in police stations and detention centers. Just as he is about to give up hope, a stranger named Roohdaar approaches him, offering information about his father. He narrates the account of being jailed alongside Hilaal in a prison camp. Eventually, through a dramatic sequence of events, he discloses that his father has passed away. He informs Haider that his father desired revenge against his brother, Khurram, for his betrayal, and wished to leave Ghazala to fate. He then



becomes uncertain, torn between difficult choices, and his internal struggles begin.

The film beautifully shows the connection between Haider and his mother. When Haider questions her about betraying his father, she explains that she was tricked and charmed by Khurram, not knowing he was an Indian Army informant. She admits that she revealed details about a terrorist hiding in her house to Khurram out of fear. Having lived like a half-widow since her husband disappeared, her choice to live life on her own terms is understandable from a woman's perspective; she is a strong-willed woman forging her own path, simply trying to survive. In contrast, Arshia (Ophelia) initially appears strong and brave. She assists Haider in finding his father, always supporting him due to her love for him. Hamlet's 'Play within a Play' is transferred into a lovely song called 'Bismil'. Bismil acts out a Kashmiri folk song about a falcon and a nightingale, hoping to make Ghazala and Khurram admit their wrongdoing. Just like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Haider tries to murder his uncle, but he could not dare to execute his plan. Arshia's father orders Salman and Salman to kill Haider, but he manages to get away.

The film's most impactful moment is when the main character, among gravediggers, ponders death, a fate everyone faces. Haider realizes how pointless life can be and reflects on the meaninglessness around him. This scene is a brilliant part of the movie, deeply moving the audience. Later, he sees a body being brought in and realizes it's Arshia. Meanwhile, Khurram finds out where he is and arrives with the Indian army to attack the location. While burying Arshia, Haider fights with her brother, Liyaqat. The movie's action at this point was very intense. Ghazala then appears, trying to persuade Haider to give up. However, Haider's tragic situation worsens when he discovers his mother is wearing a suicide vest. She detonates the bomb, severely injuring Khurram and ending her own life. It's possible she felt guilty for being unfaithful to her husband. Subsequently, Haider chooses not to kill his uncle Khurram, instead leaving his fate to chance. This alteration at the film's end highlights forgiveness and self-awareness. The movie ultimately rejects the idea of Hamlet's revenge.

The political setting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been faithfully recreated. The political unrest and plots in Denmark have been updated and redefined to fit the social and political situation in Kashmir. In fact, Bhardwaj discovered a suitable political scenario in Kashmir that could be reinterpreted and reimagined through *Hamlet*, giving it a more pressing significance. The film brings up a significant concern about the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).

This law is highly disputed and allows special authority to Indian military. It enables them to designate any area of Kashmir as troubled or suspicious, detain individuals without a warrant, and demolish camps, among other things. The movie challenges whether AFSPA's powers are still appropriate, questioning if the law, after so much time, really can't be improved, or if it amounts to organized brutality. Mustabshira Siddiqui talks about AFSPA act, as she states:

...the film delves into the subject of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), a strict legislation that grants the Indian Army the authority to "fire upon or otherwise use force, even to the causing of death where laws are being violated." Anyone who has taken any kind of action by this act shall not be subject to criminal prosecution. [The Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958]. Law proponents would argue that these safety measures were essential for the safety of the soldiers. Even while this might be the truth, it does not excuse the crimes that the security guards committed while abiding by the law. No army or paramilitary official or soldier has ever faced charges for any sort of criminal activity since the law was passed in Jammu and Kashmir in 1991. India understands little and cares much less about this terrible and horrifying history. In contrast to other films that have addressed the Kashmir Conflict, Haider proves that history does exist, which is what makes it such a unique work (Siddiqui 56).

There are some strong scenes that have been depicted in the film with all the beauty of Kashmir and yet maintain the seriousness of the play. Further the signature line of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*- To be or not to be- has been dealt beautifully which exposes Haider's dilemma and internal conflict of conscience. He is perplexed by the conflicting statements from Khurram and Roohdaar, struggling to make a quick choice. His indecisiveness ultimately causes him pain and ongoing mental distress. He contemplates the certainty of death and the insignificance of life, experiencing a crisis of existence.

A notable part of the film is the play-within-a-play. Similar to Hamlet, Haider stages a play about a nightingale and a falcon, illustrating betrayal and disloyalty, specifically to observe the discomfort of his mother and uncle. His intention was to provoke them. While this scene has a dramatic flair typical of Bollywood, it effectively contributes to the film's impact. *Haider* offers a captivating movie experience along with a significant intellectual challenge, set in a unique cultural environment. Haider's bold recreation, where he jokes about the mispronounced word 'chutzpah' sounding like AFSPA, is particularly striking.



This film fearlessly transforms the troubled character of Hamlet into Haider to highlight the harsh truth of the valley. Additionally, it offers a fresh perspective on the well-known story of Hamlet within the broader scope of art and literature.

II. CONCLUSION

The modern adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, particularly those with recent political ideas, have received both praise and criticism. Shakespeare, more than any other playwright, has shown universal human feelings like love, hate, and revenge. Because of this, *Haider* is inherently a political movie. *Haider* doesn't just show the main character; it represents all of Kashmir, revealing hidden truths beneath the pristine snow. Bhardwaj wove the story of Hamlet into the movie, specifically using Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Night*, to deeply connect the film to Kashmiri culture and make it relevant to the local setting. Bhardwaj moved away from the typical Indian masala film style, opening the door for other directors to adjust Shakespeare's plays to an Indian setting, making them local and relevant to current regional problems. Bhardwaj's inventive work in *Haider* demonstrates that a creative piece can combine different ideas and show the experiences, feelings, and emotions of a person or people in a new way.

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