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CULTURE, MEDIA & FILM | CRITICAL ESSAY

Absence and repetition in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*

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Abstract: Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* set in the politically volatile Kashmir of the 1990s was one of the most anticipated Hindi movies of 2014, and in the weeks leading up to and after its release, spawned a media frenzy. Both as a Shakespearean adaptation and as a film about Kashmir, *Haider* has had to deal with the exacting standards and accompanying political discourse and debates of both fields. This paper will be moving away from the dominant discourse of fidelity in adaptation studies to focus on an extended close reading of the film on its own terms. I argue that, repetition and absence, terms that are fundamentally tied to the ontology of a translation or adaptation, are politically reimagined in this film, providing a lens with which to view the film. I borrow Spivak's formulation of the "training of the imagination of the reader" to demonstrate that this adaptation, similarly, trains and equips the viewer to read it. This paper enters a larger debate in the field of translation and adaptation studies, suggesting that placing an emphasis on a comparison with the putative original and the unidirectional process of adaptation can result in overlooking both an adaptation's political ramifications and its role as an interpretation of the original.

Subjects: Theatre & Performance Studies; Film Studies; World Cinema; Shakespeare; Literature & Translation

Keywords: adaptation; global Shakespeare; Bollywood; theories of translation; performance and repetition; Kashmir; political disappearance; absent presence; foreignness in the arts

Haider, Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is set in 1995, in the politically volatile region of Kashmir, on the border between India and Pakistan, at the height of the insurgency and the corresponding brutal response on the part of the Indian army. A few minutes into the film, Ghazala (Gertrude) interrogates her husband, Hilaal Meer, who has just smuggled a known militant into their house for an emergency appendectomy. She asks him: *Kis taraf pe hoon aap?* (Which side

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This essay closely examines *Haider*, a 2014 filmic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* set in the politically volatile Kashmir of the 1990s. By focusing primarily on the structure and imagery of the film, this paper demonstrates for a different approach to analysing adaptations of literature, an approach that is not limited to examining the changes and differences between the original and the adaptation. Broadly speaking, focus on the film as a discrete entity, rather than as an imperfect representation of a Shakespearean "essence" highlights both its political valences and its value as an interpretation or intimate reading of the original.

are you on?) His laconic response—*zindagi ki* (life's)—sums up the approach that the film seems to adopt when faced with the uncomfortable questions of political intent and allegiance (*Haider*, 2014, 0.06.25).¹ By hiding behind a lofty moral ideal—the paramount importance of human life and the repeated mantra, *Intiqam se sirf intiqam paida hota hai* (Revenge only breeds revenge)—the film sidesteps and, as several reviewers have noted, undermines the larger narrative that portrays the gritty and harsh reality of Kashmir at the height of the insurgency. Both as a Shakespearean adaptation and as a film about Kashmir, *Haider* has had to deal with the exacting standards and accompanying political discourse and debates of both fields. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the criticism that has been levelled at the film focuses either on its lack of fidelity to the “essence” of the Shakespearean original, or on its supposed political impotence.

In terms of the film's relationship to the Shakespearean original, it is the ending that has caused the most debate. *Haider*, the film's eponymous protagonist, is portrayed as struggling between his father's wish for revenge and his mother's dying proclamation: *Intiqam se sirf intiqam paida hota hai. Jab tak hum apne intiqam se azad nahi ho jati, tab tak koi aazadi humein azad nahi kar sakti* (Revenge only breeds revenge. As long as we are not free from our desire for revenge, no “freedom” is going to be able to free us). *Haider*, ultimately, does not kill his maimed uncle who, in turn, pleads for the mercy of death (*Haider*, 2014, 3.09.00). One reviewer points to this as the film's fundamental flaw, that it “is a revenge melodrama featuring a suicidal reckless hero who neither kills the villain nor dies in the end” (Kesavan, 2014). He goes on to rightly point out that this moment is a “curiously selective abjuring of revenge”, especially in contrast to every other action that *Haider* has undertaken in the film. Another review presents the fundamental flaw of the movie as its attempt “to marry the Kashmiri narrative” to *Hamlet* as the former is fundamentally about aspiration, while the latter is about revenge (Bhat, 2014). Ultimately, these reviews persist in comparing *Haider* to the putative Shakespearean original but, more importantly, this comparison is based almost entirely on a dominant critical interpretation of *Hamlet* as a revenge drama. This “dominant or authoritative interpretation of the text” is what Lawrence Venuti has identified as being a constitutive, though often ignored, element in the process of translation and adaptation (2007, p. 26). He sees an adaptation as a hermeneutic model that is both engaging with, and being assessed on the basis of, a critical interpretant: “a dominant interpretation or critical methodology applied without reflection by many critics in their analyses and critiques” (2007, p. 31). The multi-layered complexity that is central to academic criticism of Shakespeare's plays is often reduced to a simple one-dimensional understanding of what the play is “about” when considering the adaptations of these plays.

One of the film's biggest stumbling blocks is that it has to deal with the “crowded field of ghosts” that not only accompany every iteration of *Hamlet*, but also those that attach to representations of the Kashmiri experience (Carlson, 2003, p. 81). This results in inevitable comparisons, evident in the criticism of the film that focuses on absences, gaps and lacunae in the representation both of *Hamlet* and of Kashmir: the absence of the Kashmiri pandits; the disappearance of the army towards the climax of the film; the absence of Horatio; the absence of clear political motivations. This leads to the question of whether *Haider* can be watched, understood and enjoyed without a knowledge of both Shakespeare and the Kashmiri context? Is there a way to avoid a hierarchical structure between the putative original and an adaptation; can we conceive a two-way flow between them? And what is the purchase of Shakespeare in a film that is clearly engaging with a period of political ferment in the history of the region and of the nation?

Haider, released globally in October 2014, was one of the most anticipated Hindi movies of the year, and in the weeks leading up to and after its release, spawned a media frenzy. Bollywood has a rich, and often unacknowledged, tradition of adapting Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, in particular, has a special history as what was probably the first ever talkie film of the play, *Khoon ka Khoon*, was produced in 1935. However, the controversial reception of *Haider* had a lot more to do with its Kashmiri context than its Shakespearean source. Basharat Peer, one of the scriptwriters of the film, has authored a memoir, *Curfewed Night*, that details the lived experiences of Kashmiris during the 90s; it is a book that self-identifies as an attempt to make up for “the absence of [their] own telling, the

unwritten books about the Kashmiri experience” (Peer, 2008, p. 98). By its very presence, this memoir identifies the lack of literature attesting to life in contemporary Kashmir. Kashmir’s relationship with the Indian state has been a fraught one. Its very inclusion at the time of Partition was marked by a promise for a plebiscite that was never fulfilled and remains a driving force in the region’s campaign for self-determination. In the almost 70 years since Independence, Kashmir has remained on the social and geographical boundaries of the Indian nation—a territory that is at the heart of contentious diplomatic relations with Pakistan, it is a region that has been subjected to militarization, political repression and arbitrary state violence.

During the early-90s, the time at which the events in the film take place, the tensions in this region had escalated as frustration mounted in response to rigged elections and violence on the part of secessionist groups. From this period on, this situation in the state of Jammu and Kashmir “has been framed in public as well as scholarly discourse as an instance of insurgency/counter-insurgency conflict necessitating the suspension of constitutionally guaranteed rights” (Duschinski, 2010, p. 117). Basharat Peer lived through this tumultuous period and there are several elements of the author’s personal life, and by extension of the book, that have been worked into the film. Its depiction, in particular, of the pervasive state of emergency in the region, characterized by crackdowns and curfews and the impunity enjoyed by paramilitary forces, all point to this “suspension of constitutionally guaranteed rights” of the Kashmiri people. The extent to which this constant surveillance permeated the quotidian lives of Kashmiris is encapsulated in a short, easily overlooked, scene in the film. A Kashmiri man is unwilling to enter his own home, he appears frozen in place and no amount of cajoling from his wife will cause him to budge. He is diagnosed with “New Disease”—incapable of crossing the threshold of his house without being frisked and given permission to enter, he has been psychologically conditioned to expect this level of juridical intervention in his life.

One might read this depiction of the consequences of militarization as an indictment of the role of the Indian Government in Kashmir. Along with scenes that portrayed, in graphic detail, the methods of torture employed by security forces interrogating suspected militants, this provided evidence for the charge that *Haider*, in criticizing governmental policies was undermining the authority of the nation and the ontological status of a homogenous national identity. On the other hand, one might make the argument, as many critics have done, that the film does not take this critique far enough, that in its portrayal of the violent militants it provides a justification for the use of excessive force in the region. *Haider* does not clearly align itself with one camp in this hostile conflict and it is this absence of allegiance exemplified in Doctor Meer’s reluctance to choose a side that opens the film up to criticism. I would argue, conversely, that this ambiguity compels the viewer to evaluate the film on its own terms. It forces us to ask not merely where the film’s political allegiance lies, but whether it is essential for it to be allied with a particular ideology in the struggle?

In her most recent monograph, *Readings*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak criticizes the tendency in literary criticism to “apply” theory to texts, a tendency founded on both the dismissal or lack of recognition of text as theory and of theory as text. She suggests instead that texts “put us in a position, if we are reading carefully and following signals, to know what to look for when we are reading” (2014, p. 56). For her, reading “prepares” us and an “entry into the textuality of an unusual writer”, in her example Fanon on Hegel, “makes the muscles of the ethical reflex stronger” (2014, pp. 56–57). She goes on to clarify, later in the book, that these texts do not provide us, as readers, with general theories that are easily transferable and applicable to other contexts, but rather that a good political text trains its reader, “teaching the reader how to read *this* text, not all texts” (2014, p. 118). “Film as language” and “viewing as reading” are concepts that have been central to film theory and I argue that *Haider* is engaged in what Spivak calls the “training of the imagination of the reader”, teaching the viewer how to “read” this film through visual, aural and thematic clues (2014, p. 118). It is through the technique of repetition that forces us to return to and re-experience moments of trauma in the narrative of the film, and the absent presence that haunts this narrative, that the film trains and equips the viewer to read it.

Haider does not only join the field of Shakespearean filmic adaptations, but also slots itself into the very particular archive that articulates the Kashmiri experience. This is in line with the defining characteristic of Bhardwaj's Shakespearean adaptations: an extremely specific context that is grounded in reality.² A large part of his process of adaptation, therefore, involves the reworking or refashioning of supernatural elements to fit within the parameters of this world. The catalytic plot element in *Hamlet*, the Ghost of the murdered King, is skilfully re-imagined in *Haider* as Doctor Meer is "disappeared" by the authorities. The use of the verb "disappear" in the transitive sense has become increasingly common in political discourse, particularly in the Kashmiri context where the phenomenon of "enforced and involuntary disappearance" is estimated to have between 8,000 and 10,000 victims (Rashid, 2011, p. 14). Arrested as suspected militants or to serve as cautionary examples to those around them, these disappeared people were often victims of torture and extra-judicial killing, resulting in the absence of marked graves—the acknowledgment of the finality of death.

This disappearance is perceived only in terms of an absence from everyday life: a gap or blank around which everyone else's life is defined. Disappearance, as a liminal state between life and death, is only experienced by those who remain, those who have not been disappeared. Ghazala joins the community of women dubbed "half-widows", defined by a condition of perpetual anticipation, awaiting the unlikely return of their husbands or a confirmation of their death. *Haider* remains in a state of mourning and denial; he does not receive confirmation of his father's death until more than halfway through the film, thus collapsing the prolonged period of vacillation that characterizes Hamlet's indecisiveness. Even Khurram (Claudius), the mastermind behind this situation, is identified as the disappeared doctor's brother. This repeated articulation of an absence, an inescapably dominant presence of absence, runs through the film, controlling the viewer's response from the opening sequence on.

The first five minutes of *Haider* present Hilaal Meer as a somewhat naïve but good-hearted doctor, firmly establishing a sympathetic character that is violently excised both in the narrative and from the structure of the film before the main story begins. In what is one of the most chilling scenes of the movie, a "masked mukhbir, a Kashmiri man who had become a collaborator and identified militants and their supporters" sits in an armoured car and with a small flick of his head or the jarring honk of the horn decides the fate of the men lined up in front of him (Peer, 2008, p. 52). As Meer comes to the head of the line there is a long pause before the *mukhbir* makes his decision, a moment in which we can see his reflection in the rear-view mirror occupying a small section of the frame. The majority of the frame comprises the rather mundane and ordinary interior of the car rendered different by the grills that serve as indexes not only of militarization, but also reinforce the divisions, borders and hierarchies of power that underpin this narrative. The camera zooms in on the *mukhbir*'s face, one can only interpret the expression in his eyes, slight facial movements under the mask—recognition, hesitation, decision. The car horn sounds. The camera cuts to Meer's eyes, framed by his glasses. This deliberate parallel gestures at some form of similarity, one of the many signposts the film sets up. The face of the man behind that mask remains anonymous, but there remains a very strong implication that it is Khurram, his brother. A few minutes later, before Hilaal is dragged off to an unknown fate, he watches his home go up in flames (*Haider*, 2014, 00.12.30-16.01). It is at this moment that the screen fades to black and the opening credits of the film begin. Graham Holderness uses the term "vanishing point" to forward his reading of *Hamlet* where the "reality of the play is ... constituted by the unseen, by what vanishes" (2005, p. 158). For Holderness, one of the starkest examples of this is in the literal vanishing of the Ghost that marks the border between the living and the dead, a moment that demonstrates a reading of the play as one characterized by bereavement. This pervasive sense of loss is a characteristic feature of *Haider*. The "vanishing point", the explosive loss of the childhood home and the chilling and uncertain loss of the father, structures the rest of the film both as an attempt to retrieve this loss and as an extended bereavement, placing the viewers in a similar position to Haider before they even encounter the character.

In his seminal book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida uses the figure of the Ghost in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a springboard from which to theorize the neologism "hauntology". He writes, "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time" (Derrida, 1994, p. 202). For Derrida, hauntology replaces the primacy of its near homonym ontology and it is the indeterminacy of the figure of the Ghost in *Hamlet* that straddles the border between the present and the absent, the living and the dead, the past and the future that provides the first step for Derrida's extended exegesis. He points out that the play begins with the appearance of the Ghost, or rather, with the anticipation of the re-appearance of the Ghost. The paradoxical repetition and singularity inherent in the appearance, disappearance and re-appearance of the Ghost demonstrates that hauntology "harbor[s] within itself eschatology and teleology themselves" (Derrida, 1994, p. 10).

In contrast, *Haider* replaces the apparition of a spectre with the enforced disappearance of Hilaal Meer. The catalytic plot element is not the Ghost's injunction, but is, instead, its very opposite: the unexplained and merciless arrest of Hilaal Meer. We never hear Meer's story from his own lips and are forced, as a consequence, to construct our image of this man from other characters' fragmented memories. For the better part of the film, his motivations remain opaque and his political allegiance unclear. What propels the narrative forward, therefore, is not the knowledge or suspicion of foul play, but rather its very absence. As viewers we are forced to contend with these questions: Why has he been arrested? Where was he taken? Will we ever see him again? The Ghost in *Hamlet* occupies an indeterminate ontological space, at once both physically present and absent. At the outset of *Haider*, Hilaal Meer is thrust into an indeterminate politico-juridical space where he is, by social and legal standards, at once present and absent, alive and dead. This paradigm shift from spectrality in the material domain to that in the juridico-political one points to a central concern of the film, and of the Kashmir issue at large, where people are not merely subjected to physical state-mandated violence, but where the very definition of a person as a legal, political and social entity, i.e. a citizen, is called into question.

However, like the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Hilaal "continues to exist" outside the chronological narrative of the film, in memory and in "signs employed to represent that lost presence" (Holderness, 2005, pp. 165, 160). Hilaal Meer haunts the rest of the movie not only in his position as a disappeared person—perceived to be neither living nor dead, or simultaneously both living and dead—but in the form of his flesh and blood, satellite phone wielding, ghost: Roohdaar. The most overdetermined character in the film, every aspect of Roohdaar contributes to his identity as the analogous Ghost. In his first appearance, halfway through the film, he is dressed entirely in white, blending into the snow-covered background, and remains slightly out of focus for a section of the shot thereby appearing both washed out and ephemeral (*Haider*, 2014, 1.17.03). After diagnosing a man with the New Disease, Roohdaar denies being a doctor and instead identifies himself as "the soul of a doctor" (*Haider*, 2014, 1.19.47). The first syllable of his name (Rooh) translates roughly to spirit or soul, while the second syllable (Daar) translates roughly to one who owns or possesses. His name identifies him not as the "soul of a doctor" but rather one who keeps, possesses or even protects the doctor's spirit, his essence. Khurram later informs Haider, even this name is part of a "ghost" identity, an endlessly deferred sign that hints at but never fully represents his character (*Haider*, 2014, 1.52.35). A double agent whose repeated switches in allegiance have made it impossible to discover his true identity, Roohdaar's untrustworthiness reflects the political vacillations of the film and we, as viewers, are never certain that we can trust him.

This otherworldly quality that Roohdaar seems to possess is not limited to the external signifiers of identity. It is through the shared experience of imprisonment and torture that he becomes the confidante, the other half, of Hilaal Meer and it is through escaping their shared death that he becomes the "keeper" of his friend's spirit and the mouthpiece of his wishes. Unlike the Ghost in *Hamlet* who remains unable to "tell the secrets of [his] prison-house", in all likelihood a reference to purgatory, Roohdaar explicitly details the conditions of their imprisonment—"A tale whose lightest word/ Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,/ Make thy two eyes like stars start from their

spheres” (*Hamlet*, 2006, 1.5.15–17). The torture undergone in these detention centres often resulted in physical disfigurement and impotence, effects perceived as diminishing to one’s masculinity and humanity.

These camps are what Giorgio Agamben in his seminal theorization *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* has referred to as the paradigmatic “state of exception” of the modern state. Agamben describes the concentration camps of Nazi Germany as “the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life without any mediation” (1998, p. 171). He elaborates, in his book, on the distinction drawn by the Greeks between biological life (*zoe*) and political life (*bios*) and the liminal figure in Roman law of the *homo sacer*—the sacred man who could not be sacrificed but could be killed with impunity. For Agamben, it is in the camps, where the normal juridico-political order is suspended, that its inhabitants are reduced to “bare life”, stripped of their constitutional rights as citizens and subjected to the power of the state. This space of exception that is the camp is not separate to the political order or outside of it, but rather provides the foundation for the norm. The camps for disappeared people in *Haider* operate under the same principle—people accused of militancy or harbouring militants are stripped of their constitutional rights. This group of non-citizens are, therefore, *homines sacri*—“Life that may be killed without the commission of homicide” (Agamben, 1998, p. 159). Hilaal Meer is treated in this manner as he loses his rights to his property, his family and finally his body. However, the last glimpse we get of the imprisoned Hilaal, via Roohdaar’s subjective narration, is one of a politically defiant captive. His refusal to shout *Jai Hind* (Victory to India) results in him being placed in a separate cell with Roohdaar. While Hilaal’s death is emblematic of the sovereign power of the state—his scheming brother is now an elected government official—Roohdaar survives the encounter, scarred and crippled. His ghostliness lies not merely in his name and wardrobe but also in his physical and psychological losses. In the last interaction between Hilaal and Roohdaar, conveyed from Roohdaar’s subjective perspective, Hilaal asks him whether he is a Shia or a Sunni. Roohdaar responds: *Dariya bhi mein, darkhat bhi mein. Jhelum bhi mein, chinar bhi mein. Mein der hoon, haram bhi hoon. Shia bhi hoon, Sunni bhi hoon. Mein hoon Pandit. Mein tha, mein hoon aur mein rahoonga. Varna kaun suneyga yeh sacchi kahaaniya vakt ko?* (I am the river and the tree. I am the Jhelum and the poplar. I am sacred, I am also forbidden. I am a Shia and a Sunni. I am a Pandit. I always was, I am and I will always be. Who else will relate these true stories for all of eternity?) (Bhardwaj & Peer, 2014, p. 122). Roohdaar, then, slots himself into the both-and-neither space of the spectre, seemingly outside of and unaffected by the forces of history. By occupying an Archimedean point outside of history, he invests himself with the authority to retell and later manipulate the narrative. Thus, the figure of the Ghost in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is split into two in Bhardwaj’s adaptation: the disappeared doctor and his cellmate, one deprived of his rights and the other seemingly imbued with a supernatural immunity from, and power to influence, history.

As viewers, we are compelled from the outset of the film to identify and sympathize with Haider. And, for Haider, the disappearance of his father is inseparable from the destruction of their house—it is both a site of trauma and a site of mourning. The fate of the home in the film is a palindrome. It is blown up in the opening sequence; Haider then returns to it to mourn and to remember; the burnt shell is then the setting for the farewell scene with Ghazala; and finally, the house by the graveyard, the one place Haider manages to find refuge, is blown up at the end of the film in a shot that is strikingly similar to the first. The two returns to the ruins of the house, however, further this notion of ghostliness, the haunting that suffuses the film. The unusual camera angles and the cutting between Haider’s point of view and that of a third person, often from within the house, give a voyeuristic tinge to the scene. The camera is often placed behind furniture or follows him as he excavates the ruins of the house. The house has a presence: it is the physical site of memories; it is “always ghosted by previous experiences and associations” (Carlson, 2003, p. 2). The physical structure of the building and its function—to serve as a home to a family—are intertwined and though this is the most fully explored example, the film repeatedly draws our attention to the misappropriation of buildings away from their designed function. It starts with this very house doubling as a clandestine operating theatre; the primary school is occupied by the military and used as their primary

interrogation centre; the film theatre houses the tortured disappeared. This trope of ghosting, a term borrowed from Carlson who explores this notion in relation to the production and reception of the-
atrical performance, affects both Haider and the audience of the film. For Haider, the physical site of
his home, transformed as it is, triggers particular memories. For us, the appearance of familiar build-
ing types, grotesquely reconfigured, sharpen and intensify our responses by virtue of the incongruity
between what we see and what we traditionally associate with these buildings. This appropriation of
buildings was not unusual in Kashmir at the time, the Papa-2 detention centre, one of the most
feared and hated facilities, was a former hotel:

It was closed down in the late nineties. A top government official got the Papa-2 building
renovated and turned it into his residence. Before moving in, the Oxford-educated officer
called priests of all religions to pray there and exorcise what might have been the “ghosts”
of the people killed there during interrogation. (Peer, 2008, p. 141)

At one level, this merely points to the effects of militarization where “elegance is granted little
space in the age of war” and every building has a double military function, but it also points to the
absent presence of the original purpose of these buildings, where the “very signs employed to rep-
resent that lost presence announce the absence of the presence they signify” (Holderness, 2005,
p. 160; Peer, 2008, p. 111). This is most apparent in the section of the film that roughly corresponds
to the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*. The song “Bismil”, aimed at “catch[ing] the conscience” of
Khurram, is filmed on the ruins of the Martand Sun Temple, built in the 8th century (*Hamlet*, 2006,
2.2.540). This is a different kind of haunting, a reminder that Kashmir’s history is not confined to the
conflict that has consumed it since 1947. The desolation of the ruins is mirrored in the camera move-
ments in which every pan seems to be cut off before it is completed.

Other mainstream Bollywood films that take Kashmir as its setting consistently juxtapose it with
the depiction of the other India, the Indian nation, or depict Kashmir as a battleground for Indian
and Pakistani loyalties. In *Haider*, however, the use of the Martand Sun Temple, Liyaqat’s (Laertes’)
job at a multinational corporation in Bangalore and the bumbling interaction of Salman and Salman
with foreign tourists are rare reminders of the existence of the larger world, another world. This was
also the world that Haider was exiled to by his family, afraid that, by remaining in Kashmir, he would
be tempted to join the militants. The majority of the film takes place in Kashmir, and despite the
numerous shots of wide, open spaces, the viewer is left with a feeling of curious constriction. There
is something that is not shown, that remains beyond, *oos taraf* (on the other side). At the level of the
individual narrative, Hilaal Meer is the absent presence that haunts the film. At the level of the re-
gional narrative, Pakistan is the largest and most pervasive absent presence. While Pakistan is never
named, its presence and its function in the larger Kashmiri narrative cannot be ignored. This “other
side” signifies the Pakistani camps that supposedly trained and armed militants of the Kashmiri in-
surgency, a place Haider was prevented from going to, sent instead to the university in Aligarh.
However, this desire does not seem to have been eradicated, he returns, having studied the revolu-
tionary poets of British India, and in a deliberate “slip” of the tongue identifies his destination as
Islamabad—another name for his hometown of Anantnag, but more present in the cultural imagi-
nary as the capital of Pakistan.

This is Ghazala’s great fear, that her son will choose to join the militants and in doing so ensure his
eventual death. She utilizes the euphemism *sarhad paar* (crossing the border) to encapsulate both
the departure and the journey, repeatedly asking Haider if he wants to go “there”. As a teenager in
a community where “the border and crossing the border ... had become an obsession, an invisible
presence” Haider is tempted to become a militant, curbed only by his mother’s emotional blackmail
(Peer, 2008, p. 31). The Haider who returns from college is entirely different. He remains without a
permanent home and in one of the largest deviations from Shakespeare’s characterization; Haider is
unceasingly active in his search for his father. Almost always in the company of Arshia, his strong-
willed and independent lover (a composite of Ophelia and Horatio), Haider is seen out on the streets
in protest or gathering support. A number of the establishing shots of the film reinterpret this phrase

sarhad paar visually—Haider on a boat crossing the river, Haider walking across his uncle’s courtyard, Haider talking to his mother in the middle of an empty, tree-lined avenue. He is continually placed on some form of long and often, deserted, path without a clearly defined destination. These “paths” often bisect the screen or extend out of the frame towards infinity further reinforcing Haider’s lack of guidance. Given Kashmir’s location and the tense political situation of the time, the relative absence of actual references to the border is surprising, but this is balanced by an excessive visual focus on barbed wire, fences, grills and so on that serve as reminders of both international and interregional divisions. Thus, the film hints not only at Haider’s desire to cross the border, but reflects this unrealized journey in its visual sphere, possibly reinforcing the inevitability of this border crossing—one that is both spatial in terms of an actual physical shift, and as the first step of a transformation.

The narrative of insanity in the film is not the same as that of *Hamlet*, Haider’s descent into madness is his transformation into a militant.³ Over the course of the film his physical features alter, his clothes lose their Westernized veneer. At the very end of the film, having chosen not to kill his maimed and bleeding uncle, Haider walks through a graveyard littered with bodies. Dressed in dark monochromatic clothing, with a pronounced limp, after the loss of every remaining marker of his identity—his lover and his mother—Haider is transformed into the photo negative of washed out, pale and ghostly Roohdaar (*Haider*, 2014, 3.09.00). This visual evocation of Roohdaar’s first entrance halfway through the film is the culmination of the film’s signposting, its training of the imagination of its viewer. Haider is at once an imitation and an opposition of Roohdaar. He limps off, not free from the cycle of revenge, but in order to link himself to what remains of his father, to fill the absence in the Roohdaar–Hilaal pair, to cross the border. This reading of the ending, and indeed of the entire narrative, is one that the film invites and one that it guides the viewer towards through the interplay between its visual and verbal repetition and absences. Through the process of adapting it across genres, media, language, time and space, Bhardwaj has articulated an intimate reading of the play in which Hamlet’s journey is not one that is defined by revenge, but rather by a deep and pervasive desire to regain or remake his lost father. This provides an alternative mode of analysing an adaptation, approaching it, as Venuti suggests, as an interpretation of the putative original, not merely comparing it with the accepted reading of the play but allowing for the possibility that an adaptation might shed new light on or provide a different reading of the play.

While the film itself ends with Haider limping off a body-strewn graveyard, the published script indicates that there were two other options on the cards for the filmmakers: “*Option 1—After a few steps he falls on the ground. Option 2—Roohdaar emerges from smoke. Smiling he opens his arms, Haider falls into his embrace*” (2014, p. 212). While the film does not shut down either of these options, it does not depict one. Most reviewers have questioned or criticized the film’s open ending, but I would argue that this is one of the film’s strengths as it forces the viewer to arrive at some form of conclusion or interpretation. It compels us as viewers to move beyond a simple and superficial categorization, forcing us to interrogate the very system that underpins the binary of political allegiance, where to critique the Indian army is to automatically undermine the nation and to depict the violent struggles of the Kashmiris is to deny their right to self-determination. The answer, I would argue, lies in Bhardwaj’s manipulation of the trope of the body politic that is central to *Hamlet*. *Haider* is not the narrative of an individual tragic protagonist who stands in for a nation-state, Haider’s is one story among many. This is a tragedy of a region. The sense of collective tragedy is exemplified by the presence of crowds during what would correspond to soliloquies in the Shakespearean version. Hamlet’s most famous line—“To be or not to be” with its implied singular agent is translated into a slogan chanted by the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons—*hum hain ki hum nahin* (Shall we be or not be?). Haider’s path in the film requires him to challenge institutional authority—the police, the army, the law—and to join a collective moment. He chooses to describe both the flagrant violation of the law and his continuing provocation as “chutzpah”.

Appropriated from Yiddish through the conduit of OSHO talks, “chutzpah” is instituted as one of the central tropes of the film—a characteristic that Haider alternately criticizes and adopts. Incongruous usage of the word “chutzpah” peppers the film. Mispronounced and often misunderstood, it serves as a placeholder, its meaning constantly shifting. It is never translated, never defined as a word, remaining permanently in the abstract, it requires demonstration to be made intelligible. Unlike the other English words that pepper the film—crackdown, curfew, militant, etc.—this remains marked by its foreignness, resisting translation or definition. In the drunken perception of Salman and Salman, the ridiculously over-the-top analogues to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, it is both a homophone and a synonym of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) the draconian legislation that grants immunity from prosecution to the military, allowing them a degree of unprecedented authority and freedom (Haider, 2014, 0.44.10). AFSPA allows members of the military to kill militants with impunity, a law that continues to be abused today as “fake encounters”, or the rewriting of extra-judicial killings as necessary force for the maintenance of public order, protect the military from prosecution. It is this legislation that is predicated on the suspension of constitutionally mandated juridico-political order that creates the “state of exception” Agamben has identified. A state of exception that is therefore not limited to the camps, but encompasses the entire region—Kashmiris can and have been killed by the state without it being classified as homicide. Additionally, AFSPA is a homophone of Hindi profanity “chutiyaapahn” (bullshit) providing the filmmakers with the ability to get this particular critique of structures of authority past the censor board. By placing this association between “chutzpah” and AFSPA in the mouth of a stoned buffoon, the film similarly sidesteps criticism.

This gap between the word as traditionally understood in English and the use to which it is put in the film repeats or mirrors the already discussed gap between the designed function of a building and its current purpose. It sums up the situation of the Kashmiris, where the authorities seem to have the audacity to punish them for crimes committed on them, but it also seems to present that path that Haider takes—the audacity of performing on the street and encouraging protestors; the audacity of performing “Bismil” at his mother and uncle’s wedding. More than *intiqam* or revenge, this is Haider’s mantra, he revels in the ability to shock, to beat others at their own game. *Intiqam*, is what Roohdaar, on the behalf of Hilaal, demands but chutzpah is what Haider delivers.

During Haider’s scene of “madness” at Lal Chowk in Srinagar, he shouts out to the crowd—*Hum kya chahta?* (What do we want?). The almost Pavlovian reply is *Azadi* (freedom); a call and response that is deeply embedded in the Kashmiri psyche. This scene marks a turning point in Haider’s mission, his focus is no longer solely revenge but rather an opposition to the larger corrupt system. He is slowly giving himself over to the cause—the fight for self-determination and a separate state. By the end of the film, Haider is completely one of the militants and his decision not to kill Khurram seems inconsequential in comparison to the ideological transformation he has undergone. Echoes of his father appear once again, the politically neutral doctor of the opening sequence transformed into the stubborn prisoner who refused to shout *Jai Hind* just as the grieving son transforms into an insurgent (Haider, 2014, 1.30.32). The film has remade its lost object.

Criticism surrounding modern adaptations of Shakespeare, particularly those that have some form of political inflection, often reference this closing couplet of one of Hamlet’s soliloquies: “The play’s the thing/Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (Hamlet, 2006, 2.2.539-40). This notion, that watching a performance can somehow influence or reveal something about its intended audience, has remained a prominent thread in theories of performance and even more so in defining the processes and intentions of adapting or appropriating canonical works. Shakespeare, perhaps more than any other playwright, has been utilized as a Trojan Horse: masking a pointed critique of power or particular political message with the veneer of a known, supposedly antiquated, classic, in situations where oppressive regimes and censorship have made freedom of speech impossible. One almost automatically, therefore, searches for the hidden message in *Haider*, a film that has generated more political opposition in the media than its predecessors *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, both of

which also approached contentious social issues. The Hindu Right in India called for its boycott for its alleged anti-nationalism, Kashmiri reviewers bemoaned the lack of a sustained critique of the military; simultaneously, it did not pass the censor board in Pakistan.

Despite its volatile subject matter, *Haider* takes pains to avoid explicitly aligning itself with any political agenda. The opening credits thank the Kashmiri people for their cooperation and point out that filming in the region was completed without disruption. The closing credits highlight the heroism of the Indian army in evacuating and providing relief to those affected by the floods in Jammu and Kashmir in September 2014. However, given that this film has gone further than any other in its depiction of the reality of the Kashmir insurgency, it begs the question of whether such a step would have been possible without the label and accompanying cultural capital of Shakespeare. The attested likeness to Shakespeare, which was once a deterrent to financiers in mainstream Bollywood, now provides a cultural cachet that ensures what might otherwise be simply a mainstream Bollywood film receives international exposure. *Haider* belongs to the oeuvre of Shakespeare adaptations that requires the cultural cachet of Shakespeare to tell a story that needs to be heard. However, it does not merely provide a vehicle that allows the film to cross borders—across languages and cultures. Over the last few years there have been several incidents that have sparked debates on the governmental suppression of freedom of expression and the right to dissent. It is arguable that India is now a country in which oppressive state authority makes it dangerous to speak truth to power, and continuing unrest in Kashmir today has demonstrated that the incidents depicted in the film cannot be relegated to the annals of history.

In July 2016, the Kashmir Valley exploded in protests after the killing of Burhan Wani, a militant leader, in an encounter with Indian security forces. These protests led to months of unceasing curfew and the injury and deaths of civilians and security personnel. The use of pellet guns, in particular, on the part of the police and Indian paramilitary forces resulted in thousands of civilian injuries. India's relationship with Kashmir continues to be a fraught one and, as Kesavan rightly asserts, for all its political vacillations, *Haider's* success lies in the fact that it brought "Kashmir out of the closet". *Haider*, therefore, is not solely (and arguably not primarily) an adaptation of *Hamlet*. It is a continued attempt to narrate, represent and bear witness to the Kashmiri experience.

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Notes

1. This and all subsequent transcriptions and translations are my own.
2. *Haider* is the third in his Shakespearean trilogy and the previous two *Maqbool* (Macbeth) and *Omkara* (Othello) were set in the Bombay underworld and rural western Uttar Pradesh, respectively.
3. This trope of portraying Hamlet's descent into madness as a move towards militancy and more specifically fundamentalism was also adopted by Sulayman Al-Bassam, a Kuwaiti theatre director who has, over the last decade, produced an Arab Shakespeare trilogy.

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