

TEXTUALIZING A REVENGE TRAGEDY: HAIDER-HAMLET

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Abstract

William Shakespeare was a brilliant playwright and writer of the Elizabethan era. Among several of his greatest works, Hamlet was one of his most famous. Haider (2014), an Indian adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet set in Kashmir in 1955 during militancy and a brutal Indian counter-insurgency, caused controversy almost immediately after its release. He is well-known for his admiration of William Shakespeare's writings. He based his 2003 blockbuster film Maqbool on Macbeth and reappeared in 2006 with Omkara, his adaptation of Othello. According to critics, Bhardwaj has succeeded in bringing out the raw emotions of Hamlet in the film while remaining firmly focused on Kashmir. The film offers, this paper suggests, an example to probe much debated metaphors of adaptation theory, global Shakespeare studies and postcolonial studies, with special regard to understanding adaptation as 'revision'.

The theme of surveillance has been explored in much-politicized Hamlet adaptations. In Haider, traumatic psychological subjugation of the individual living under surveillance is shown. Most of the analysts feel that earlier films based on Kashmir largely failed to highlight the real issues and Haider tries to fill that gap. Catastrophe is an important aspect of Shakespearean tragedy that is responsible for all tragic flaws. Haider's search for his father, his mental disorder and death of Arshiya are the never-ending sources of catastrophe. This paper presents a detailed comparative analysis between the source text (Hamlet) and the adaptation (Haider) to explore the various points of contact and departure between the two.

Keywords: Indian Adaptation, Insurgency, Surveillance, Psychological Subjugation, Catastrophe.

Vishal Bhardwaj's award-winning film Haider (2014), an Indian director completes his trilogy of adaptations of Shakespearean tragedies, that continues to receive critical attention of 'global Shakespeare' studies (Sen 2019). After Maqbool (Macbeth) and Omkara (Othello), Haider tackles Hamlet, displacing the action from Denmark to Kashmir, which is the Himalayan mountain region and war zone between India and Pakistan since the Partition in 1947. Considering that renewed unrest and conflict in the area, the film appears hauntingly timely and darkly realistic. The film offers, this paper suggests, an example to probe much debated metaphors of adaptation theory, global Shakespeare studies and postcolonial studies, with special regard to understanding adaptation as 'revision'. Withdrawing from Peter Widdowson's definition of the term as combining, in 'strategic ambiguity', "the meaning of revise, that is, producing a new,

corrected version of, and re-vision, in the sense of seeing an ‘original’ in another light and thus re-evaluating it” (Widdowson 164), revision appears as both critical activity and artistic/filmic practice.

Being a generic fusion of realist docu-drama, Bollywood movie, and espionage thriller, Haider intersects the Hamlet -inspired revenge plot with references to journalist Basharat Peer’s memoir *Curfewed Night* (2011). It details the harsh realities and human rights violations in insurgency-torn Kashmir in the mid-1990s. Basharat Peer collaborated with Bhardwaj on the screenplay, which is published in both Hindi and English. Taking its cue from the film’s controversial reception that runs the gamut from censorship, criticism that Indian movie does not need the high-art ‘crutch’ of Hamlet. Haider presents an adaptation of two source texts: one ‘global’ and one ‘local’, first an Elizabethan revenge tragedy, and the second a contemporary war memoir. The tension between global appeal and ‘regional paradigms’ continues in the strategic fusion of cultural, filmic, and theatrical traditions. The result, this paper argues, “drawing also on Amrita Sen’s reading of the film’s aesthetic politics” (Sen 2018, 2019), it is a transcultural adaptation that transcends metaphors such like ‘appropriation’ or ‘indigenization’. Instead, it can be rather understood as a transcultural ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1991, 2008) and ‘cross mapping’. The latter concept highlights the need for negotiation across differences, an element of dialogic intertextuality and of conversation between pervasive ‘thought figures’, ingrained in the global cultural imaginary, such as Hamlet, and revisions that attest to their ‘afterlife’. By placing a great emphasis on communality and having the ending turn from revenge to forgiveness, Haider interrogates the transcultural appeal of Hamlet and draws attention to histories and realities of the violent local conflict. It reveals a revisionist agenda that captures both hidden political realities and a haunting refiguration of Shakespeare, also transcending what might conventionally be conceived as a Bollywood adaptation.

This seems challenging to find a source text that rivals the cultural authority of William Shakespeare’s famous revenge tragedy. While Hamlet is arguably the Shakespeare play, or even work in the whole “western literary canon” (Crowl 1), that has seen the most adaptations, it has certainly inspired so many movie versions across the globe that “the attempt to catalogue them amounts to a book in itself” (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin 17). Especially in India, where Shakespeare is an integral part of its literary history, Hamlet remains among the most popular plays to be staged and adapted into different media. More than half a century ago, Jan Kott famously compared Hamlet to ‘a sponge’ which “immediately absorbs all the problems of our time” (Kott 64), and the play continues to serve contemporary versions as a means to grab attention to recent political turmoil.

It’s most important reclamation is thus perhaps that of Kashmir as a location in contemporary Hindi film, rather than that of Shakespeare i.e Denmark. Haider, this paper suggests, appears primarily as a trans-cultural ‘contact zone’ and suitable case to explore

strategies and conceptions of revision text more generally. I shall begin with the answer to question of how it has been and might be categorized as a ‘Shakespeare film’ through a brief literature review. This first part shows the wide array of critical and analytical metaphors available which complement each other but each involves a different pitfalls, in order to then introduce the conceptual value of the ‘contact zone’.

In the second part, the analysis will engage in more detail with the movie and its reception. For it being both a Shakespearean adaptation and a film about location Kashmir, from its first release onwards Haider movie has had to deal with the accompanying debates about its politics and ethics of adaptation in more than one way. Finally, drawing on Elizabeth Bronfen’s notion of cross mapping allows me to conclude the particular strategies of adaptation as revision in Vishal Bhardwaj’s film. The global nature of William Shakespeare’s plays complicates many debates of cultural belonging and appropriation from the onset, renders the contested opposition of original—adaptation particularly which is hard to uphold. With Shakespeare coming with a huge inter-textual apparatus and having been absorbed into the pop culture and adapted into every possible medium, “there is no ‘original’ or ‘masterpiece’ against which the adaptation might be evaluated and interpreted” (Burt 2003, 17).

Hamlet, in particular, has been set against an incredibly “wide range of historical periods or national landscape” (Crowl 24). This makes it difficult to decide what is ‘indigenized’, and, from the point of postcolonial criticism, even harder to determine what should be called subversive in a Shakespeare film. Robert Burt and Lydia Boose emphasize:

There is no point, at which we cross a border clearly marking (Western) Shakespeare in Asian films from Asia in (Western) Shakespeare films, the indigenous Shakespeare from the foreign. (Burt and Boose 7)

The disintegration of oppositions between foreign/native, local/ global and the debates of if and how Shakespeare is used as a means of ‘writing back’ or being employed irreverently for ‘local’ purposes, complicates evaluations as well as attempts at ‘localisation’ (Burt 2003b, 266, 296). Haider, as will be shown in the following, exemplifies this challenge to ‘critical notions of “localization” (Young 380). What is more, all adaptations, in particular are so-called ‘postcolonial’ ones and are as much in dialogue with other adaptations with as Shakespearean source text, especially where there is a long tradition of adapting Shakespeare, from the beginnings in Parsi theatre to Bollywood films, which both have a special affinity, stylistically and thematically, with the bard’s plays. (Paterson 63; Jess-Cooke 4).

Bhardwaj’s film may serve as example for some of the contested issues allhinging on the fact that adaptations studies as it does many other fields: categorization requires simplification which runs counter to the study object’s (here the artwork’s) ontology. As critics note, though there is hardly a lack of scholarship in the field, models of post-

colonialism and diasporas imaginary do not adequately address the complexities of global Shakespeare transnational cinema and transcultural adaptation studies. Aside from theoretical pitfalls, "the critical field has yet to take due account of worldwide depth and diversity" (Burnett 2012, 2; see Burt 2003a, 2003b), although this is changing very rapidly. Still, even if 'Shakespeare film' has long been recognized independent genre and as global, which renders, theoretically, the metaphor of 'appropriation' redundant, alternative categories. Consequently, Mark Thornton Burnett concludes, "Much ink has been spilled in recent years debating the most appropriate language to capture the relationship between the Shakespearean 'original' and its filmic reinvention" (Burnett 2012, 4).

Where transnational cinema is usually lauded to foster transnational understandings and to arise "in the interstices between the local and the global" (Ezra and Rowden 4), notions of the transnational or the transcultural, which imply the loss of borders or at least a continual crossing of them, sit, at least on the geo-political level, uneasily with Haider. Above all, the film deals with the reality of borders; the action is determined by the Line of Control between India and Pakistan and crossing them equals loss and death, rather than cause for celebration. Similarly, in my opinion, it would be a stretch to classify Haider as a 'postcolonial' adaptation, despite the fact, of course, that the Kashmir conflict is inseparable from British colonialism and its aftermath.

However, "the application of terms such 'domestication' or 'indianization' which have been applied to describe Haider" (Dutta 145; Chakraborti 153), that primarily highlights the film's use of Indian setting and character names, suggesting removal of traces of foreignness and a favouring of Indian cultural counterparts. Meanwhile the descriptive label 'indigenous', which might offer itself as another suitable alternative, runs the risk of perpetuating assumptions about cultural hegemony and authenticity, especially with regard to Indian Shakespeare film. As Sandra Young argues in her study of Haider, this privileges the association with the return to a native tradition over the function of 'making current' within a complex and twisted globalized world. In this Indian context, it is furthermore hard to pin point a beginning for Afrocentrism or to identify which people/culture count as indigenous in the first place.

Agreeing with Young and Sen's conclusions, the best example in my opinion to illustrate why Shakespeare is not merely translocated (to India/Kashmir) and then indigenized in Haider is the 'Bismil' scene in movie. It functions as the film's the famous play-in-the-play, 'Mousetrap' scene, originally staged by Hamlet to accuse this uncle of having murdered his father in order to take over power and marry his mother.

Staged outdoors in front of the old temple site in Srinagar, 'Bismil' is the movie's performance highlight and mixes several theatrical and dance traditions in a choreographed spectacle, featuring singers, dancers, and three life-sized puppets. While the music blends Bollywood song and Kashmiri folk music with western opera. The choreography presents a dynamic fusion of Bollywood dance movements, Martial arts,

and Western contemporary dance. In the second half of the scene, several theatrical distancing techniques are employed in an almost Brechtian manner: life-size puppets appear throughout, symbolizing Haider's uncle, and his parents, and not just the love triangle, personal betrayal and murder but also atrocious war crimes, the hundreds of dead bodies being thrown in the Jhelum River. The amalgamation of artistic traditions which are simultaneously trans-local and localized which achieves a tragic grandeur that hauntingly underlines the movie's political and aesthetic agenda. It epitomizes why Bhardwaj's film, in its totality, presents viewers with a "complex creative encounter" (Young 387)

Following Burnett (2019), who recently proposes a regional prototype or methodology for investigating Indian Shakespeare films, we might still see Bhardwaj's film as a 'regional' adaptation of Hamlet. This allows for theorization in a framework with distinct cultural features without favouring the nation-state as a point of reference; it calls for taking account of "regional distinctiveness" (Burnett 2019, 157; see Burnett 2012, 6), of local traditions and belief systems; it acknowledges the film as adaptation in close alliance with (Bhardwaj and Peer's) 'articulation of a regional politics and pride' (Burnett 2019, 159). Apart from the movie's treatment of the 'Mousetrapscene' in 'Bismil', which also pays admiration to regional theatrical traditions such as the Kashmiri bhand pather, examples include Haider's 'to be, or not to be' speech, in which the soliloquy and existential crisis is reframed as a collective one in a public scene, symptomatic of 'a regional condition that cuts across political and personal categories' (Burnett 2019, 169). Taking a slightly different attitude, Sen takes Bhardwaj's allusion to the memory of indigenous performance tradition as both political critique (resisting any one nation's heritage and choice of political allegiances) and a gesture of emancipation, if "read as the filmmaker's homage to the emergent Kashmiri Shakespeare that has recently gained global critical attention" (Sen 2019, 394).

Taking into account Haider's obvious engagement with the Bollywood folklore, yet another genre label thus needs examining in this context, namely that of paraphrasing it as a 'Bollywood Shakespeare' film. Though Bollywood appropriations of Shakespeare offer a distinct 'coupling of two transnational global phenomena', "which, at a first glance, sets them apart from other kinds of Shakespeare adaptations, it quickly becomes hard to identify what this categorization actually means" (Dionne and Kapadia 2014, 11–12). More crucially, the use of Bollywood as a descriptive catch-all term generally risks homogenizing a wide range and diversity of Indian cinematic engagements with Shakespeare and disregarding "regional differences and traditions of film and theatre" (see Trivedi and Chakravarti; Burnett 2019, 157). Still, Bollywood movie is an inherently hybrid and high quality art form mixing multiple generic and Western and Indian traditions of film, drama, and dance which has reached globally worldwide.

The Bollywood-inspired and much encouraged song-and-dance-episode in Haider (e.g., ‘Bismil’, or the ‘grave-digger’ song) challenge national/cultural identification and create what Gopaland Moorti call a ‘contact zone’ in the context of the globalization of Bollywood. Taking the sign from these studies, the metaphor of the ‘contact zone’ call up Homi Bhabha’s well-known concept of the ‘Third Space’, as a dialogic meeting ground and a space where processes of negotiation of different cultures as well as periods of history take place. The idea was first introduced by Mary Louise Pratt (1991) in her essay “Arts of the Contact Zone” but is most commonly transformed to her study *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), which sawan updated and expanded edition in 2008. Pratt explains ‘contact zones’ are “spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths” (Pratt 2008). Transculturation, the second key term in her work, Pratt understands as a phenomenon or circumstance produced by the contact zone and as processes of selection and interposes from materials transmitted to (once) subordinated, marginal groups by a dominant, metropolitan culture. Despite Pratt’s pivot on contact as both negotiation and conflict, her concept has also been condemned, and not unjustly, for its implication of ‘contact’ as a peaceful meeting among equals which risks glossing over colonial violence, while enforcing the very binaries it seeks to eradicate (Loomba 69).

In other words, the contact zone creates ‘newness’, as and through discursive aesthetic practices, as Bhabha employs the term in *The Location of Culture* (212–35). It is this part of the concept of the contact zone transcending literal geographical spaces which are relevant in the context of global Shakespeare and Indian Shakespeare film studies. In this sense, Pratt’s concept illuminates the filmic strategies and the reception of Haider discussed in next part. Conceiving of the film as a ‘contact zone’ a metaphor particularly apt on the level of content and setting maintains a critical gist that allows side stepping the limitations of terms such as indigenization and links the focus on regional methodologies with that on global forms and forces. Bhardwaj’s adaptation of Hamlet can thus be understood as a transcultural contact zone, as well as an ‘auto ethnographic’ text/artwork to bring in Pratt’s third key term auto ethnography where the latter;

Involves partly collaborating with and appropriating of the idioms of the conqueror. Auto ethnographic texts are typically heterogeneous on the reception end as well. That is, they are usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sectors of the speaker’s own social group. They are bound to be received very differently by these different readerships. (Pratt 2008, 9)

Specifically Bhardwaj’s Statement:

‘Kashmir is the Hamlet of my film’ has been criticized for reducing Kashmir to stereotypes of violence and threatening to reduce the region and the people’s sufferings to

‘theatrical characters’ and ‘mere Shakespearean fictions’, even more problematic in light of the bard’s implication in India’s colonial history (Sen , 87–88).

Similarly, Brian Walsh acknowledges, “Making the struggles of Kashmiris visible through an over determined cultural classic like Hamlet is potentially a difficult task given that many viewers might be inclined to prioritize the supposedly “timeless” Shakespearean insights into humanity over the local details of governmental oppression and sectarian violence” (Walsh). At the same time staying loyal to a position commending an independent Kashmir, the triumph of Haider lies perhaps in managing “to tell the story of the long-running conflict in Kashmir without trying to please anyone”, as Waraich proclaims. Set in Kashmir, but using Hindi and Urdu as the main film languages, Haider does not require any precursory knowledge of Hamlet; this, in turn, has given rise to debates of whether such a politically motivated film, focused on realities on the Indian subcontinent, actually needs what critics have referred to as “the crutch of Shakespeare” (Ahmed, Ammar, and Ayaz 122). Sen puts this question poignantly in his reading and asks if the film uses Shakespeare as “a neo-colonial apparatus” (Sen 2019, 388). Despite the evident value of Shakespeare as a global cultural material and its long-standing complication with Indian artistic production, this also reflects persisting (patriotic or postcolonial) evaluation about the continued use of Shakespeare as a source of admiration in light of India’s own rich literary or published tradition. This brief survey may serve to underline the film’s intrinsic ambiguity reflected in its reception. Haider congregates elements of Shakespeare, popular Indian cinema, and “a reporter’s sense of realism” (Modak and Roy 160). It engages Bollywood conventions such as song-dance numbers, especially in the complicated choreographed ‘Bismil’, which features dancers and life-sized marionettes (puppet) symbolizing the love triangle between Khurram (Claudius), Ghazala (Gertrude) and Haider/Hamlet’s father. As mentioned earlier, the scene presents as a powerful mixture of Western operatic, Bollywood and Kashmiri folk traditions. Accordingly;

It especially the focus on regionally based artistic practices, that is, the Kashmiri folk theatre *bhand pathar*, which traditionally fuses dance, dramatic dialogue and puppetry, that functions to subvert the globalized Bollywood aesthetic in this scene. (Burnett 186 and Sen 390)

Haider duplicates several iconic moments of Hamlet, such as the grave-digger scene with the conciliation on Yorick’s skull (V, 1), Hamlet’s accidental killing of Polonius (Parvez, Arshia’s father) (III, 4), and Hamlet’s aborted attempt to kill his praying uncle (III, 3), as well as the ‘play-within-the play’ (III, 2), staged to reveal his uncle’s and mother’s guilt. With few deviations, all Shakespearean characters have a correlative in Haider, but Indian names: Haider/Hamlet’s father is Dr. Hilaal Meer, a medical doctor who, out of humanitarianism, performs an appendix surgery on a leader of a regional militant separatist organization in his own house. During a repression, he is ‘disappeared’ by the police and his house is burned to the ground. Hearing the news,

Haider, a student at university in India, returns home to Kashmir to search for his father. In this, he is supported by his girlfriend Arshia (Ophelia), who is a journalist and whose father, Pervez (Polonius), is the police commissioner. He finds his beloved mother, Ghazala, living with his uncle Khurram, who is a local political leader struggling for power.

The archetypical ghost only appears in the second half of the movie, as the mysterious Roohdar figure (Rooh-meaning spirit in Urdu), who is real and not his father's ghost, but, apparently, his father's inmate in the detention torture camp, who get through being thrown into the river. Roohdar puts Haider on the revenge mission, transferring his father's last words to him: "Tomy son, Haider. Tell him to avenge my betrayal by my serpent of a brother" (Bhardwaj 126). Thus, Haider is repositioned from his grief and the community of protesters he had joined to "the personal, and mostly solitary, violent revenge trajectory familiar from Shakespeare's play" (Walsh). The movie never makes clear if Roohdar is a friend or foe, for he is an agent of young men, exploiting their temper for political ends and he later gives Haider the armaments to kill Khurram.

Equivalently, hauntingly chilling and ironic at the same time, Haider's variation of the 'to be, or not to be' soliloquy appears in several apperances. In one of the scene, Haider is shown among a crowd of protesters, holding banners in their hands which read: "Shall we be or not be?" (Bhardwaj 106; see Walsh). In the central 'to be, or not to be' scene, Haider, who is seen visibly distraught by the search for his father, gives a speech on the streets of Srinagar:

Can you hear me? Hello...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 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? Our suffering comes from their chutzpah. (Bhardwaj 143)

Haider turns the prototypical Shakespeare an question into a political slogan and assertion and Brian Walsh notes, it is thus transformed from an individual existential crisis into a collective one. Haider's words catch the Kashmiris' sense of victimization and oppression, a state of (non) being without national rights and helpless against family members being 'disappeared' by the military or the police. Haider's obviously traumatized state reflects Hamlet's 'madness.' The quest for his father, as well as the rising sense of betrayal and distrust that shatters his family and by extension, the entire region causes Haider's mental instability and political radicalization. Haider here becomes a focalizer for the communal suffering set against the political backdrop of violence and 'rotteness' in Kashmir.

Haider's modification is thus inspired by current politics rather than the past or a 'writing against' Shakespeare's tragedy, and it authenticates the tentative note of optimism for survival and the people of the region. Blending together rather than juxtaposing both pretexts, the ending illustrates the film's "strategic ambiguity" (Widdowson 164) in a nutshell, the result is a revision that re-evaluates the pretexts and produces something new.

To conclude, Haider's 'cross mapping' of Hamlet on to contemporary Kashmiri reality, an approach that supports the entirety of this article's view of Haider as 'contact zone.' At the end of Haider, we see a reconstruction of Hamlet's revenge tragedy, but the focus is on an area, Kashmir, where it normally does not linger. Haider attests to Hamlet's haunting after life as a thought figure, the effects of which transcend simplistic cultural binaries of 'us' against 'them'

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