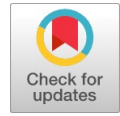


# Films as a Medium of Politics: Haider - Representation of Kashmir Politics in Shakespearean Tragedy

Khalid Wasim Hassan



**Abstract:** Films are an important medium for the portrayal and representation of politics. Kashmir, known for its natural beauty, became an essential destiny for Bollywood films. Many films were made in the 1960s with Kashmiri protagonists. Most of the films made in the 1960s era were apolitical, but in the post-1990s period, the films made on Kashmir reflected on the politics too. One of the films on Kashmir and its post-1990s is Haider, based on the Shakespearean play - Hamlet. This film was acclaimed by film critics as the bold job by the director to adopt the Shakespeare play in the context of Kashmir. This paper will analyze the story, dialogues, characters, and cinematography of the Film- Haider and explore how much it represents the politics of the 1990s in Kashmir. Using the content analysis approach, this paper will explore the relationship between the plot in the Shakespearean play and the political context of Kashmir.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Shakespeare, Hamlet, Haider, Kashmir

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the major conflicts in South Asia for more than six decades is the Kashmir Conflict. The conflict has taken many forms - being a bone of contestation between the post-colonial nationalism of India and Pakistan (Varshney, 1991). In post-1990s period this conflict turned a violent conflict when many political and militant groups started challenging the sovereignty of India in Kashmir (Bose, 2003; Hassan, 2009) [3]. In turn, the Indian State took all the coercive measures to suppress this movement which led to the Human rights Violations in the form of tortures, killings, and enforced disappearances.<sup>i</sup> There has been a close connection between the leading Film Industry in India - Bollywood with Kashmir, as many films were shot in Kashmir Valley; in some films, the main protagonist is a Kashmiri man or woman. Some Bollywood films (Raja 1992; Mission Kashmir, 2000; Yahaa, 2005) [4][14][16][17] on the post-1990s situation in Kashmir touching the themes of radical Islamic militancy supported by Pakistan and its confrontation with Indian nationalism, representing more of a Statist version of the Kashmir problem. In October 2014, Vishal Bhardwaj released the film Haider, an adaptation of Shakespeare's Hamlet, set in the mid-1990s Kashmir. The period corresponded with the height of the political turmoil in Kashmir. Bhardwaj previously adapted two Shakespeare

tragedies - Maqbool (2003), which set Macbeth within Mumbai's underworld, and Omkara (2006), which took Othello into India's badlands. The visuals and narration, as well as monologues and dialogues of various characters in the film Haider, not only provide the viewer with a historical trajectory post-1947 Kashmir but also reflect upon how the Indian State turned into the *State of Exception* (in Angaben's sense) where Kashmiris were denied of constitutional rights. This paper will not be a literary critique as to how close or distant is Haider an adaptation of the Shakespearean play, rather it will look at how this film presented a harsh reality of post-1989 Kashmir in the heights of the Azadi (Freedom) movement and the corrosive apparatus adapted by the Indian State to control the political situation. In this paper, I used secondary sources - mainly the works on post-1990s Kashmir politics to understand the depiction of reality as it existed and the projection of the same on the camera. At the same time, the paper uses primary sources, such as the original text of Hamlet and memories of the people, witness to 1990s situation during this period in Kashmir, to analyse different scenes and dialogues. The content analysis method is used to determine and understand how the Shakespearean drama is adopted in the Kashmir context and how the politics in Kashmir is portrayed. The script, role of different characters, dialogues among the various characters, choreography and the cinematic techniques in the film, are used as the variables for the content analysis.

## II. KIS TARAF HO AAP! EITHER YOU ARE WITH US OR WITH THEM

In the film's opening scene, one of the characters Hilal Meer, a doctor by profession (Doctor Sahab in the Film), is shown sneaking a militant leader into his house to operate on him for appendicitis. This was the reflection of the period when the armed struggle in Kashmir had mass support where on the one hand, students, lawyers, and doctors supported the movement (Schofield, 1996, Bose, 1997) [2][15], and on the other hand, the Indian military and police force did not differentiate between militants and their sympathisers in punishing them (Noorani, 1996). His wife Ghazala, while helping him with the operation, asks him, Kis Turf Ho Aap (Which side are you on?), and he replies Zindagi Ki (life's) (Haider, 2014, 0:05:11). The following scene shows the combing operation by Indian armed forces in their village. The combing operations by military forces known as *crackdowns* were a norm in the mid-1990s in which the army cordoned the whole locality in the early morning and made male members of the household parade in front of informers in military vehicles.<sup>ii</sup>

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The identification of Doctor Sahab by a masked informer lead to his arrest and the military forces are shown moving towards his house.<sup>iii</sup> The brief encounter between military forces and militants ends up when military forces blast the home of Doctor Sahab, and he is made witness to this loss. Damaging the property/house continues to be the reality on the ground in Kashmir, where hundreds of homes sheltering militants have been raised to the ground. After this scene, there are no whereabouts of Doctor Sahab; we come to know about him through the narration of other characters. Some of the Film critiques (Kesavan, 2014; Mookherjee, 2016) [8][10] point out the absence of any ideological leaning of Doctor Sahab. This will be a simple reading or viewing of the film. Though aware of the repercussions of helping a militant, Doctor Sahab is ready to take the risk and operate on the militant leader in his house instead of taking him to the hospital. From the narration of another character Rooh-Dar about him, we get to know that he was ready to face the brutality of the military rather than saying *Jai Hind* (Hail India) (Haider, 2014; 1:13:14). In contrast to him, his brother Khurram has a different ideological leaning. In the later part of the film, as a viewer, we know it was Khurram who had informed the military about the presence of militants in their house. He becomes instrumental in the making of Ikhwan-ul-Mukhbareen, a Government-sponsored militia to fight against militants, and he takes part in the election under the auspicious of the Indian constitution.

### III. HUM HAI KE HUM NAHI! TO BE OR NOT TO BE

In his first entry in the film, the main protagonist-Haider - is shown travelling in a bus in Kashmir Valley, which is stopped at a checkpoint by military forces, and he obeys their order by revealing his identity card. Frisking and checking identity cards were prevalent all across the Kashmir Valley in the mid-1990s. Most Kashmiris relate to this scene while pointing out that 'outsiders' doubted *our identity in our land*.<sup>iv</sup> The major portion of the film revolves around Haider, who is in search of his father - Doctor Sahab - arrested by the military forces in broad daylight in front of many witnesses. He goes to different jails and military camps within the Kashmir valley but finds no traces of his father. He tries to file an *FIR* in the Police Station against the military forces, but it that he is denied to file it by a Senior Police officer, Parvez Lone. Haider is advised *not to irritate the military forces; otherwise, he will lose all chances of finding his father* (Haider, 2014; 0:45:47). Enforced disappearances have been one of the main instruments used by the military forces in *Kashmir* to suppress the *Azadi* (freedom) movement. As per the reports, there are about eight to ten thousand young Kashmiri arrested in crackdowns or nocturnal raids, and since their arrest, they have disappeared.<sup>v</sup> The family members of these disappeared Kashmiris keep on searching for them in jails, police stations and military camps, but they are untraceable (Peer, 2009) [12]. Police refuse to register the complaints of these parents by giving an excuse that these boys might have crossed the Line of Control to the other side of Kashmir to join militant ranks. Some of the parents of these disappeared persons formed an organization - the Association of Persons of Disappeared Persons (APDP)<sup>vi</sup> who meet up on the 10th of every month in a park near city-centre of Srinagar with banners

saying, *where are our loved ones*, to mark their protest against the State authorities. A similar scene in this film shows Haider and other people outside the building of *United Nations' Council for India and Pakistan* with a placard in his hand saying *where my father is* and murmuring the slogan - *Hum Hai Ke Hum Nahi* (Haider, 2014, 1:06:09). No one is sure as to what has happened to these disappeared people. The family members want to believe that all of them are still alive, and they keep on waiting for their return. The women whose husbands have disappeared cannot marry again; they are called Half-Widows, and some of them have been waiting for their husbands for more than a decade (Fatima, 2015) [5].

### IV. CHUTZPA HOGAYA HAI HUMARAY SAATH - PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

There is no narration about the genesis of the Kashmir conflict, how it started or what political changes in the late 1980s led to violence in Kashmir; the viewers get to know this through a particular character's dialogue or a dialogue between characters. In one of the scenes, Haider is shown in conversation with the Police Officer, Parvez Lone, when he goes to file an *FIR* for his disappeared father. While talking to Haider, he refers to the referendum's promise that the first Prime Minister of India had made in his speech at Lal Chowk and points out that the present crisis in Kashmir is the result of a tussle between two big States surrounding Kashmir. (Do Haathi Jab Ladtey Hai tu Gass He Kuchli Jaati Hai - When two elephants fight, the grass gets damaged). Even most scholars who have worked on the Kashmir conflict for the last two decades believe that the Kashmir conflict is a result of a tussle between India and Pakistan and broken promises that were made to the people (Puri, 1996; Basharat, 2009) [7][13]. Looking back to this history, Jammu and Kashmir was one of three princely States not to accede to either India or Pakistan after the British granted independence to India. The then *Maharaja* of Kashmir - Hari Singh, signed an *Instrument of Accession* on October 27, 1947, to India in the backdrop of the *tribal invasion* from the North-West Frontier of Pakistan and requested India's military assistance to free the state from tribal invasion (Lamb, 1991; Shofield, 1996) [9]. In accepting the offer of an accession under special circumstances, both Governor-General Lord Mountbatten and the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru, informed Maharaja to settle the question of accession by referring to the people once law and order situation is restored in Kashmir. One of the film's remarkable scenes is Haider's monologue (1:26:29). Dressed in torn clothes, holding a tape-recorder and rope hanging around his neck, he is shown addressing a crowd at the Ghanta-Ghar (Clock-Tower) in Lal Chowk, where he recites, India Pakistan ne milkar Khela Humse border border Ab na humey choday Hindustan Ab na humey Choday Pakistan Arrye Koi Hume Bhi tu Poochay - Ki hum Kya Chahetay - Azaadi Iss Par Bhi Laigay - Azaadi, Uss Par Bhi Laiygay - Azaadi Hum Lai Kar Rahegay - Azaadi India and Pakistan have played border games with us Neither India nor Pakistan leaves us No one asks us, what do we want - Freedom We demand from this side - Freedom.



We demand from that side –Freedom We shall have one day - Freedom<sup>vii</sup> In this monologue, he gives reference to United Nations resolution on Kashmir, the Geneva Convention and Article 370 of Indian Constitution. The UN resolution of 1948 on Kashmir about the referendum, the Geneva convention of respecting human rights during armed conflict and Article 370 of the Indian Constitution have become the reference points for the various political groups in Kashmir. The UN intervention started in January 1948 when there was a full-fledged war between two newly born states of India and Pakistan over Kashmir. The war ended with the division of the territory of Kashmir divided into two parts, each under the control of the States of India and Pakistan, respectively. The United Nations Security Council passed many resolutions in subsequent years for holding a referendum *on the State's accession to India or Pakistan*.

The governments of India and Pakistan expressed strong reservations over some of the conditions for implementing the resolutions passed by the United Nations. From then onwards, Kashmir became a bone of contention between two broad nationalisms - the secular nationalism of India and Islamic nationalism (Varshney, 1991) [18]. Many constitutional and political changes were made during the post-1948 period to integrate Kashmir into the Indian Union further. Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which was by the conditions of the Instrument of Accession (whereby the Indian State was only to have control of the defence, foreign affairs, and communications), was diluted and changed in form.<sup>viii</sup>

In the same monologue, Haider talks about the legal Act - Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) which provides immunity to the military forces in Kashmir.

*Chutzpah hogaya hai humaray sath, Chutzpa Jantay Hai App, Jersey Besharam Gustakh AFSPA.....* (Do you know Chutzpah has happened to us, You know what Chutzpah is, It is similar to shambles brutal AFSPA.....)

Through this monologue, Haider points out that it would not have been possible for military forces to arrest his father, blast his house, torture his father in jail or kill him without the impunity they enjoy under AFSPA. This legislative provision has been operative in Kashmir since 1990, under which the Indian military could make preventive arrests, search premises without a warrant, and shoot and kill civilians. AFSPA provided complete immunity to the soldiers from military forces guilty of any of the violations (torture, killing, rape or damage to property); their acts could not be challenged by anyone in court except with the prior approval of the Government of India. So post the 1990s, the military forces in *Indian Administered Kashmir* are immunised from public or private prosecution, thereby preventing victims of torture, enforced disappearances and rapes from accessing justice. The victims of violence - families of persons tortured, disappeared and killed or women assaulted or raped by the military forces- cannot file a *First Information Report* (FIR) in the respective Police Stations of their locality.

## V. TALASHI LO ISKI: ABNORMAL BECOMES NORMAL

In the name of counter-insurgency operations, there was complete surveillance of people. The combing operations, frisking and barded wires blocking the roads became a daily experience for Kashmiris to the extent that it became

‘normal’ for them. This psychological condition of accepting surveillance as normalcy is summarised in a scene where a Kashmiri man (acted by Basharat Peer, one of the scriptwriters) is unwilling to enter his own house even when his wife insists. One of the characters of the film *Rooh-Dar* (acted by Irfaan Khan), moves towards this man and starts frisking while saying *Talashi lo I-ski (frisk him) Kaha se aye..Kaha Ja raha Ha, Kurtay mai kya ha, ID, Jaav* (Frisk him, where have you come from, where are you going, what is in your Kurta, show me your identity card...alright go now). This person then goes inside. *Rooh-Dar* explains this as a *New Disease* that Kashmiris have developed, and he says, *Talashi ki itni aadat hogiye hai yaha logo ko Jab tak koi Tatoon na lai, Tab Tak apney Gharoo mai bhi Jaani ki Himat nahi hooti* (Here people are so much habituated with fishing that unless you frisk them well they do not dare to even to enter their own house). (Haider, 2014; 1:04:03).

## VI. CONCLUSION: REPRESENTATION OF A PLAY OR POLITICS

Film critics praised as well as criticized the film for its story, acting of different characters, cinematography and as an adaptation of the Shakespearean Play *Hamlet*. On terms of fidelity, film critic Kesavan, (2014) [11] strongly point out the lack of fidelity. According to them, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* revolves round the notion of revenge which results into the death of all main characters whereas in the Film, the main protagonist – Haider is made to give up the revenge; neither he kills the main villain, nor does he die. While Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* had a clear end where everyone including *Hamlet* dies, *Bhardwaj* leaves *Haider* open ended. Unlike Queen Gertrude who consumes the cup of poison unknowingly, Ghazala commits suicide. *Khurram* is left to bleed in a pool of blood while *Haider* slowly walks away into the smoke. In opposition to this, *Mokherjee* (2016) argues that the film was well received by the audience, not because it was an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, but because of its Kashmir context. *Bhardwaj* also intended to depict the realities of Kashmir along with the revenge tragedy. Many scenes in the film project the events which are close to the reality as acknowledged by Kashmiri people who lived in that context.<sup>ix</sup> Therefore, sometimes it appears as if ‘Kashmir’ is the protagonist in *Haider*. This line of argument believes that *Vishal Bhardwaj* has succeeded in bringing out the raw emotions of *Hamlet* in the film, while keeping his focus firmly on Kashmir. But his representation of Kashmir politics also faced the criticism. *Bhat* (2014) [1] argues about the mismatch of the narrative of politics of Kashmir to that of the plot of the *Hamlet*. He points out that the political narratives of post 1990s Kashmir revolves round the aspiration of political rights while as *Hamlet* is all about revenge. The paper did not touch upon the questions of fidelity as how much the film is close to the original plot of the *Hamlet*, instead, the focus was to analyze the representation of the post-1990s period Kashmir through the medium of Film. Though the connection of Bollywood with Kashmir dates back to 1960s, but most of these films were silent about the political upheavals that Jammu and Kashmir experienced in that era; rather, these films merely represented Kashmir valley as a modern playground for Indian metropolitan youth (*Kabir*, 2009) [6].



The films (*Roja*, *Mission Kashmir*, *Yahaa*) made in post 1990s era on Kashmir touched upon the politics but it had more tilt towards the statist narrative. Haider provides a balanced narrative; on one side it shows the graphic details torture inflicted on suspected militants by the Government armed forces, while on the other side, it but at the same time it has shown the violence perpetuated by the militants. One of the script-writers, Basharat Peer, being a Kashmiri himself, has helped to give an insider view of the story and the locations, nomenclature, and symbols used in the film. The coercive state apparatus is discussed not only in the conversations among the various characters but in detailed graphics pictured for the viewers. Turning the whole of Kashmir into a Jail (*Sara Kashmir ek Jail Khana Hai*) through heavy militarisation and the Indian State becoming a *State of Exception* visa-a-via Kashmiris with the denial of their constitutional rights is what is film represented. As pointed out by Kesavan (2014), the *greatest achievement of this film is to bring Kashmir out of the closet* where many other Bollywood Films made in post-1990s Kashmir presented only the Statist version. Through different scenes, dialogues and monologues, the film has shown the post-1990s picture of Kashmir so well that many Kashmiris who have lived through that period relate.

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<sup>i</sup> For a long time, these violations were not documented, only posts 2000 that some of the Human Rights groups - both local and international - started documenting the testimonies.

<sup>ii</sup> In a telephonic interview with a Kashmiri Student who witnessed these crackdowns as a young boy (05/12/2021).

<sup>iii</sup> The masked Mukhbirs (informers) used to blow a horn if they identified a militant or sympathiser. We used to cross our fingers till pass the last vehicle without the blow of a horn - interview with Kashmiri student.

<sup>iv</sup> In an interview with Kashmiri Man who teaches at University of Kashmir (10/12/2021).

<sup>v</sup> Documented by the human Rights groups like JKCCS and APDP in Kashmir valley.

<sup>vi</sup> APDP is headed by Parveena Ahaanger whose son also disappeared after being arrested in 1995.

<sup>vii</sup> In one of the monologues by the main protagonists Haider in the film gives the crux of the Kashmir problem and the future aspirations of the people of Kashmir.

<sup>viii</sup> Under Article 370 Jammu and Kashmir could have its own flag and retain the titles of Prime Minister and *Sadr-i-Riyasat*, unlike Chief Minister and Governor in other states in India.

<sup>ix</sup> Interviews with the senior journalists in Kashmir who were covering the politics in Kashmir in mid-1990s.