

Shakespeare On The Indian Screen And Stage: Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider and Sir William Shakespeare's Hamlet

Dr Saptorshi Das

Assistant Professor Institute of Engineering & Management Kolkata

ABSTRACT: - *Vishal Bhardwaj's third remarkably brilliant endeavour to recreate William Shakespeare's texts, characters and plots for the Indian social and political realities, Haider is a visual treat, set against the violent insurgency in the snow-wrapped Kashmir of 1995. Mr Bhardwaj has earlier recreated two other freewheeling Shakespearean heroes, (or anti-heroes), both brilliant: Maqbool (2004), a Macbeth, who is part of the Bombay underworld, and yet suffers too intense a guilt and self-loathing for someone born into ruthlessness and complete autonomy over life, and Omkara, an Othello whose title character is a half-caste gangster general soiled in the heartland crime of Uttar Pradesh. However, in Haider, Bhardwaj, with co-writer Basharat Peer, more than simply translates and recreates the Bard's work for and to an Indianised setting and audience – he adds resplendent shades of colour, texture, and context to them, what eventually make Haider not just the best film in his trilogy but the finest film of his career.*

Performances in Haider are so fine that slowly but steadily, we come to identify the characters as real flesh-and-blood people. However, instead of Haider, Bhardwaj might have considered calling his Indianised adaptation of Hamlet, Ghazala, after his beautifully recreated and spellbindingly enacted Gertrude. Painstakingly played by Tabu (whose melancholic eyes take your breath away), the character of Ghazala has such depths of intensity and mystery that she hijacks the movie, while by comparison, Haider (Shahid Kapoor) is a simple fellow. In an un-Hamletlike way, he knows exactly what he wants — to avenge his father — and determinedly goes after it. As for the rest of the cast, Kay Kay Menon is mesmerising as always in his menacing and conniving avatar. Narendra Jha is equally impressive as the doctor who in his selfless attempts at putting his profession before self, ends up being perceived by people as a militancy supporter. Even characters with miniscule roles are as impressive as the actors with full-fledged ones. Take for instance, that one scene in which Shahid meets an old woman at a government office where they have both come searching for their missing family members. They show pictures of their missing loved ones to each other. The pained, traumatised-and-yet-caring look on the woman's face as she touches Shahid's head in that brief but poignant scene is striking in the aftermath of emotions it leaves behind. In another chilling scene, a man, his face covered in a balaclava, plays judge and jury from a Jeep, as civilians are paraded in front of him. A movement of his eyes and their fates are decided: dismissed or detained. No words. Period.

The political backdrop of a violently torn Kashmir often overwhelms or even distorts the family drama. Yet, Mr Bhardwaj never fails to justify critics' appreciation of how cinematically he can reconstruct Shakespearean moments. Haider is not just another stereotypical Bollywood movie but a brilliant cinematic experience that surpasses the melodrama, unrealistic fantasies and clichés that characterise Indian cinema.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Bhardwaj, Kashmir, Haider, Hamlet, Characters, Reconstruction and Recreation*

Introduction

It is no surprise that given his stature as one of the greatest writers in the English language, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) has, in myriad ways, paved the way for a huge number of screen

interpretations across the globe. Shakespeare sells: counterintuitive, but seemingly true. The first onscreen Shakespearean adaptation was a simple photographic record of a miniscule part of Sir

Herbert Beerbohm Tree's stage performance of *King John*. In the next three decades, a number of Shakespearean adaptations were released on screen, from the highly imaginative tableaux-style mime of Percy Stow's *The Tempest* (1908) to encapsulated versions of the major tragedies (*Richard III*, 1911; *Hamlet*, 1913). These were all, however, silent reproductions of Shakespeare's works.

The first straight adaptation with sound, *As You Like It*, didn't appear until 1937. The next one, released in 1944, was Laurence Olivier's intensely patriotic *Henry V*, with the next decade witnessing Olivier dominating British Shakespeare film with similarly commendable and memorable onscreen adaptations of *Hamlet* (1948) and *Richard III* (1955).

From the 1960s, a number of well-famed directors attempted filming Shakespeare against varied backgrounds. Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* (1969) essentially aimed a camera at his Roundhouse stage production, while Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1970) moved the action to an ice-capped Denmark, and Roman Polanski's aggressively and excessively violent, gory *Macbeth* (1971) was a distinctive reflection of the pessimism of the age. On the other hand, Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) was a beautifully crafted costume drama, perfectly balanced in its loyal adherence to the original plot and its overall appeal to the younger audiences.

The 1970s was a time for a more innovatively experimental attempt at recreating Shakespeare on screen, with Celestino Coronado's avant-garde *Hamlet* (1976) and Derek Jarman's radical recreation of *The Tempest* (1979), followed by Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) and Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1990), adapted from *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* respectively.

Kenneth Branagh, more recently, has made a number of much acclaimed Shakespearean adaptations. His directorial debut - a rather somber vision of *Henry V* (1989) - to the 1930s musical

version of *Love's Labours Lost* (1999), Branagh's films have been well appreciated across the globe.

The endurance of Shakespeare in theatre has its roots in the magnificence of his language and the talent-defining roles offered to performers, which virtually catapult them to name and fame. But while the latter factor also applies to the cinematic versions – the desire of actors to record great stage roles is one reason that the shows have been filmed so often – the poetic speech can become problematic on screen, with the success of movie adaptations dependent on how deftly the performers deal with the intricate verse and meaning-laden soliloquies. However, taken together, all Shakespearean onscreen adaptations orchestrate how richly imaginative Shakespeare films can be when they have the courage of their convictions.

Shakespearean Adaptations on the Indian Screen

While some of the greatest adaptations of Shakespeare's plays on screen are British, in India no one does it better than Vishal Bhardwaj. Bhardwaj literally pushes the limits of Bollywood's creative energy, not just by ingeniously and dexterously reinterpreting Shakespeare to an Indianised setting but also by authentically and skilfully bringing to life a whole new landscape and culture.

The first two of Bhardwaj's Shakespeare trilogy with their freewheeling Shakespearean heroes, (or anti-heroes) show ingenuity not just in dealing with the nitty-gritty of contemporary small-town society and politics but also in incorporating into the Shakespearean narrative structure elements of Indian mythology, traditions and customs. We are spellbound by *Maqbool* (2004), a *Macbeth*, who is part of the Bombay underworld, and yet suffers too intense a guilt and self-recrimination for someone born into ruthlessness and complete autonomy over life, and *Omkaara*, an *Othello* whose title character is a half-caste gangster general soiled in the heartland crime of Uttar Pradesh. However, it is *Haider*, the third part of the trilogy, that is the finest of all and

devastatingly beautiful, just like the snow-wrapped Kashmir of 1995 it is set against. In *Haider*, Bhardwaj, with co-writer Basharat Peer, more than simply translates and recreates the Bard's work for an Indianised setting and audience – he adds resplendent shades of colour, texture, and context to them, what eventually make *Haider* a visual treat.

Performances in *Maqbool*, *Omkaara* and *Haider* are so fine that slowly but steadily, we come to identify the characters as real flesh-and-blood people. *Maqbool* has powerhouse performances from most of its cast, but the scene-stealers are Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri. Playing the lead, the charismatic Irrfan Khan never fails to impress with his acting prowess, while tour de force performances by Pankaj Kapoor and Bhardwaj's staple, Tabu, captivate you with the force of their individual roles. In *Omkaara*, we witness a brilliant transposition of Shakespeare's schemers from Venice to an Indian gangster milieu. Ajay Devgan is extraordinary as Omkaara, Kareena Kapoor as mesmerising as ever, while Saif Ali Khan is wonderfully loathsome, right down to the tiniest detail. While, in *Haider*, all performances, in brief roles or long, showcase the brilliantly deft histrionics of the performers. Intelligent casting, superbly realised.

Bhardwaj never fails to justify critics' appreciation of how cinematically he can reconstruct Shakespearean moments. Wrought with great intellectual and technical finesse, *Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, *Haider* are pure poetry in motion, proving to be not just stereotypical Bollywood movies but a brilliant cinematic experience that surpasses the melodrama, unrealistic fantasies and clichés that characterise Indian cinema.

Hamlet and Haider

Written sometime between 1599 and 1602, Sir William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* has been described as the world's most filmed story after *Cinderella* and has been interpreted from time to time in different contexts and media. The best

cinematic adaptation of *Hamlet*, however, was perhaps the 1964 film directed by the Russian filmmaker, Grigori Kozintsev, based on the Russian translation by Boris Pasternak. —The society portrayed in *Hamlet* is frightening neither by its resemblance to the savage existence of beasts of prey nor by the particular cruelty of bloodthirsty fiends, but by its callous emptiness. The noble and the spiritual have vanished from life. It is not bestial crimes that arouse horror; it is normal human relations that have lost their humanity, said Kozintsev in an interview. Back home in India, director Vishal Bhardwaj takes up an almost herculean task in recreating *Hamlet* for an Indian audience in *Haider*. Let's face it. However visually beautiful the movie may be, *Haider* is not Hamlet. Neither is Hamlet, *Haider*. Denmark is not Kashmir. And Kashmir is not Denmark. However, there is much in *Haider* that rightly and rightfully deserves a standing ovation. Let's start with the courage of the director. *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most complex and ambiguous texts. It's also his longest—it takes over four hours to deliver.

The action of *Haider* takes place in 1995. Paradise on earth is rotting. And amidst the sordid ugliness of political turmoil, Haider returns home from Aligarh, to find his father, a doctor who tries to save a militant's life, imprisoned by the army and his house razed to the ground. His mother, Ghazala, played by Tabu, has moved into his uncle's house. Deceit and hypocrisy abound in the atmosphere around. Shocked, bereaved and furious, Haider, the poet, slowly transforms into Haider, the murderer.

Haider was shot almost entirely in Kashmir, but Vishal isn't interested in only presenting the picturesque beauty of Kashmir. Instead, we are confronted with narrow lanes that leave you with an impression of suffocation, emotionally as well as physically, unadorned homes and swathes of snow that turn red as corpses pile up. Vishal never shirks from brutality – for him it is another facet of the reality that is Kashmir. Men are murdered and

abducted by Indian forces. Women weep. A strange madness pervades the land.

At times, *Haider* seems stretched and structurally disjointed. At one point, a romantic song randomly interrupts the serious flow of action. The Kashmiri accents are inconsistent. In places the narrative meanders. But the one thing that never falters is the talent. However, instead of *Haider* the director might have considered calling his fast-and-loose adaptation of *Hamlet* — Ghazala, after its Gertrude character.

As played by the sad-eyed Tabu, Ghazala has such depths and mystery that she totally dominates over the movie, pushing Haider (Hamlet) to the sidelines in his own story. It's the drama inside her mind that draws you in: Where does her loyalty lie? What thoughts go on in her mind? Will she raise arms against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, change the tale?

By comparison Haider, played by Shahid Kapoor, is a simple fellow. In the beginning, Shahid seems out of his depth; this is, after all, one of the toughest roles in literature.; one that actors like Sir Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh practically wrestled with. But slowly Shahid comes to inhabit Haider, veering from rage to jealousy to madness in a heartbeat. In an un-Hamletlike way, he knows what he wants — to avenge his father — and determinedly goes after it. Sadly though, the remaining frame of the movie in the second half is not supportive of Haider's full-fledged development into Hamlet. A little more space is required for realisation of Haider's character like a true Shakespearean tragic hero with a 'fatal flaw'. Consequently, the intensity of Hamlet's mental conflict due to his indecisiveness or procrastination (a psychic folly or fatal flaw) which William Shakespeare had summed up in —To be or not to be is missing from the portrayal of Haider by Bhardwaj.

To say that *Haider* succeeds better as a tale of Kashmiri unrest and official brutality — people disappear, people are tortured, people are shot for

fun — than it does as a re-telling of *Hamlet* is not entirely true. —All of Kashmir is a prison, Haider says, and Bhardwaj and Peer show the toll on the inmates. In one spine-chilling scene, a man, his face covered in a balaclava, plays judge and jury from a Jeep, as civilians are paraded in front of him. With just a movement of his eyes he decides what their fate is to be: dismissed or detained. Dead or alive.

Though the political backdrop often takes over or even distorts the family drama, Bhardwaj never fails to remind us how cinematically he can construct Shakespearean moments. When Haider first returns home, we watch him as he eavesdrops, through a veil of shimmering gauze, on an intimate, playful banter between his mother, who sings a Kashmiri folk song, and his uncle. Haider instantly knows the erstwhile unknown. As is often the case in Hindi cinema, the mother-son relationship here, too, is all-important, with Ghazala having the upper hand. *Haider* may not be the equal of Mr Bhardwaj's other Shakespeare films, and it may be deficient in the *Hamlet* department, but it certainly gives good Gertrude.

Shakespeare's tragic protagonists always succumb to their own characteristic follies which conspire with the cruel forces of fate and adverse circumstances to plot their deaths. *Haider* differs to some extent because Hamlet's psychic folly of procrastination is not amply manifested in the portrayal of *Haider* on screen. Thus, *Haider* is an interface between a poignant tale of Kashmir and the tragic story of Hamlet.

Whether Vishal Bhardwaj picked up the tragedy of Hamlet as a medium to tell his story of Kashmir of the 1990s, or if he chose the turbulent Kashmir as setting of his delineation of Hamlet is not absolutely clear. But, the story of Kashmir and the story of Hamlet complement each other in the climax of *Haider*. Written towards the end of the 15th century, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* would not have been convincingly adapted in the Indian context without such a haunting setting as Kashmir of the 1990s. At the core of *Haider* is the love between a passionate, complex woman who seeks a hint of happiness

Dr Saptorshi Das/ Shakespeare On The Indian Screen And Stage: Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider and Sir William Shakepeare's Hamlet

amidst overwhelmingly unpleasant circumstances, and her son, who both loves her with an unnatural intensity and hates her for her betrayal of his father. Bhardwaj handles the Oedipal undertones with exquisite daring and understanding. This is what powers the film. This and the truth of Kashmir of the 1990s. *Haider* must be seen for this alone.