

Cultural Relocation and Cinematic Transformation in Shakespeare's Hamlet and Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider

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Abstract: This paper examines Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) as a culturally situated adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Rather than evaluating the film only through fidelity to its source, the study compares how both works organise grief, family conflict, political authority, uncertain knowledge, performance, and revenge. Using qualitative comparative textual and film analysis, it considers the relocation of the Danish court to Kashmir, the transformation of the Ghost into a witness to disappearance, the reconfiguration of Gertrude and Ophelia through Ghazala and Arshia, and the cinematic use of landscape, music, editing, and public performance. Particular attention is given to the "Bismil" sequence, which adapts the play-within-the-play into an act of accusation, and to the ending, where the possibility of refusing revenge complicates the tragic pattern. Scholarship available through JSTOR, especially Brian Walsh's reading of nonviolent struggle and Taarini Mookherjee's study of Indian Shakespeare adaptations, helps situate the film within debates about political allegory and cultural relocation. The paper argues that *Haider* preserves recognisable dramatic relations while changing their social and ethical implications. Its differences from *Hamlet* are therefore not merely departures from an original but the means through which the adaptation creates a distinct interpretation for a new historical and cinematic context.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *Haider*, adaptation, Kashmir, Indian cinema, political allegory

1. Introduction

Adaptation allows literary works to move across historical periods, languages, cultures, and artistic media.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has proved especially open to reinterpretation because its central concerns—mourning, uncertain knowledge, family loyalty, political legitimacy, surveillance, and revenge—can be reworked in settings far removed from the Danish court. Vishal Bhardwaj's Hindi-language film *Haider* (2014) relocates this tragic structure to Kashmir during the conflict of the 1990s. The result is not simply a modernised *Hamlet*. It is a film in which private grief is entangled with the disappearance of people, military power, political uncertainty, and the struggle to establish what has happened to a missing father [3], [4].

Adaptation theory provides a useful framework for understanding this relationship. Hutcheon describes adaptation as both a recognisable repetition and a creative variation, while Leitch cautions against treating fidelity as the only measure of an adaptation's value [1], [2]. From this perspective, a film need not reproduce every plot point or character in order to remain in dialogue with its source. It may retain a narrative pattern while changing the meanings that pattern carries in a new context. Mookherjee's account of Indian Shakespeare adaptations similarly frames localisation as a process through which familiar dramatic materials become available for contemporary debates about nation, identity, and belonging [5].

This paper asks how *Haider* retains and transforms the dramatic structure of *Hamlet*, and how its political setting and cinematic form alter the meanings of the source play. It focuses on five connected areas: cultural relocation, character relationships, knowledge and surveillance, performance and film language, and the ethics of revenge. It argues that the film's strongest adaptation choices emerge where recognisable Shakespearean structures meet the specific experiences represented in Kashmir. The comparison therefore treats *Hamlet* and *Haider* as related but independent works, rather than ranking one as superior to the other.

2. Methodology and Conceptual Framework

The study uses qualitative comparative textual and film analysis. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is examined as a dramatic text, with attention to dialogue, soliloquy, dramatic irony, the Ghost, the play-within-the-play, and the tragic conclusion.

Haider is examined through narrative structure, characterisation, performance, mise-en-scène, framing, editing, sound, music, and the use of public space. The comparison is organised by shared dramatic functions rather than by assuming that every character or event must have an exact equivalent.

The method follows a three-stage process: identifying a feature in each work, explaining its narrative or formal function, and interpreting the significance of the similarity or difference. For example, the Ghost in

Hamlet and Roohdaar in Haider both deliver crucial information about the father's fate and encourage the protagonist to act. Yet their stories and authority are shaped by different contexts. This difference matters as much as their structural resemblance.

The paper is interpretive rather than empirical: it does not claim to measure audience responses or to provide a comprehensive history of Kashmir. Political context is considered insofar as the film itself represents it and as relevant scholarship helps clarify its significance. Walsh's study of Haider is particularly useful because it examines the film's movement between revenge and nonviolent political action [4]. The analysis also draws on scholarship about adaptation and Shakespeare on screen to avoid reducing cinema to a visual illustration of a written play [1], [6].

3. From the Danish Court to Kashmir

In Hamlet, the death of the king and Gertrude's rapid marriage to Claudius unsettle both the royal family and the state. The private event carries public consequences because Hamlet is not only a grieving son but also a prince whose place in the political order has been altered. The Ghost's account of murder turns mourning into a demand for revenge, but the truth remains difficult to verify. Family, succession, and political authority are therefore inseparable [7].

Haider transfers this structure to a Kashmir marked by conflict and the disappearance of civilians. Haider Meer returns home after his father, Hilaal, has been taken away following his involvement in treating an injured militant. The destruction of the family home and the absence of an official account of Hilaal's fate transform the search for a father into a search for information withheld by powerful institutions. In Shakespeare, the court's secrecy makes knowledge uncertain; in Bhardwaj's film, uncertainty is also connected to detention, missing persons, and the inability of families to obtain reliable information [4].

This relocation changes the scale of the tragedy. Hamlet's investigation is focused primarily on the royal household, although the play repeatedly links the condition of the state with the conduct of its rulers. Haider begins with a family crisis but gradually connects Haider's loss to the suffering of other families. The sequence in which he searches facilities and graveyards and encounters people carrying photographs of missing relatives gives his grief a collective dimension. Walsh argues that this movement toward a community of the disappeared opens a path different from the solitary revenge plot associated with Hamlet [4]. The film's political significance lies partly in this shift from an isolated son seeking a private answer to a young man who recognises a wider pattern of loss.

4. Character, Family, and Loyalty

The principal character relationships in Haider are recognisable from Hamlet, but they are reorganised to suit the film's emotional and political concerns. Haider corresponds broadly to Hamlet; Ghazala to Gertrude; Khurram to Claudius; Arshia to Ophelia; and Roohdaar performs a function similar to that of the Ghost. These parallels help viewers recognise the adaptation, but one-to-one equivalence can obscure the changes Bhardwaj makes. The characters are not simply Shakespearean figures wearing new names; they possess motivations shaped by their own narrative circumstances [3], [4].

Ghazala is particularly complex. Like Gertrude, she is connected to a new relationship with the brother of her missing or dead husband, and her actions become a source of suspicion for her son. Yet the film also presents her as a woman whose marriage was unhappy and whose choices cannot be understood only through Haider's injured perspective. The early scene in which Haider sees Ghazala and Khurram through a curtain makes the limits of his knowledge visible. The partial obstruction of the image corresponds to his inability to understand his mother's situation fully. Walsh discusses how the scene's shifting camera positions and editing communicate Haider's disorientation, using cinematic form to externalise an inward disturbance that Shakespeare often conveys through language [4].

Arshia, like Ophelia, is caught between affection for the protagonist and the authority of her family. However, her position as a journalist initially gives her a professional relationship to public information and political power. As the story develops, family pressure and personal loss narrow the space available to her. Her trajectory illustrates one of the film's central tensions: women are often placed at the intersection of private loyalty and public conflict, but their agency is constrained by the demands placed upon them by male relatives and by the revenge plot itself.

5. Knowledge, Appearance, and Surveillance

Uncertainty drives both works. Hamlet questions whether the Ghost can be trusted and arranges a performance to test Claudius's response. He must interpret signs, words, silences, and behaviour in a court where people observe one another and conceal their intentions. The problem is not simply that Hamlet lacks

information; it is that information is filtered through unreliable witnesses and a political order in which truth may threaten those who hold power.

Haider's search for his father similarly depends on partial accounts and uncertain testimony. Roohdaar brings information about Hilaal's fate and identifies Khurram as an informant, but the information arrives through a figure whose own history and motives require interpretation. Haider must decide whether to accept Roohdaar's account and whether accepting it obliges him to take revenge. The Ghost and Roohdaar thus serve similar structural purposes, but the film's version of the problem of knowledge is embedded in the politics of disappearance and the struggle over public narratives [4].

6. Performance, Music, and Cinematic Form

The play-within-the-play in *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most revealing dramatic devices. *Hamlet* stages a representation of the murder he believes Claudius committed, hoping that the performance will expose guilt through the king's reaction. Theatre becomes a means of testing reality: a fictional event produces evidence about a hidden crime. The episode also draws attention to the power of performance itself, since the audience watches *Hamlet* watch Claudius and must interpret the reactions of both characters [7].

In *Haider*, this function is transformed in the "Bismil" sequence. Rather than reproducing the stage play literally, Bhardwaj uses a choreographed musical performance in which Haider tells a story that points toward his father's murder and his mother's remarriage. The sequence adapts the function of the *Mousetrap*—publicly making concealed guilt visible—through the conventions of Hindi cinema, including music, movement, costume, rhythm, and spectacle. Walsh reads "Bismil" as a significant example of how the film both recognises Shakespeare and reshapes his theatrical device for a local cinematic language [4].

The contrast between stage and screen is important here. Shakespeare's drama depends on spoken language, the physical presence of actors, and the audience's interpretation of a live event. Film can guide attention through close-ups, changes in perspective, montage, music, and editing. Sheppard's study of Shakespearean screen adaptations notes the significance of cinematic choices such as setting, gender, music, rhetoric, and editing in producing interpretations of older plays [6]. In *Haider*, the camera does not merely record a performance; it controls what the audience sees and when it sees it. The result is an adaptation of dramatic function rather than a simple reproduction of dramatic form.

The film's use of landscape also contributes to its interpretation. Snow, ruined spaces, roads, checkpoints, homes, and public gathering places give the story a material environment that repeatedly links private emotion with political conditions. Music can shift the focus from an individual character to a broader community, as in the search for the disappeared. These techniques allow the film to communicate meanings that would require different strategies in a stage production. Its form is therefore central to its argument: cultural relocation occurs not only in the plot but in the visual and auditory means through which the story is experienced.

7. Revenge, Nonviolence, and the Ending

Revenge structures *Hamlet*, but the play does not present it as a simple or uncomplicated duty. *Hamlet* delays, tests evidence, questions his own motives, and becomes increasingly entangled in consequences that extend beyond his original target. The final sequence brings the revenge plot to a catastrophic close. The deaths resolve the immediate conflict but also expose the destructive effects of a political and familial order governed by deception and retaliation [7].

Haider initially appears to follow the same path. Roohdaar tells Haider that Khurram betrayed Hilaal and urges him to avenge his father. Haider's grief becomes a demand for action, and the revenge plot draws others into a chain of violence. Yet the film also establishes an alternative moral position through Haider's grandfather, who argues that revenge cannot deliver freedom. Walsh's central intervention is to show how the film opens a possibility of nonviolent struggle before drawing Haider back toward personal vengeance [4]. Haider's participation in a protest with families of disappeared people suggests that collective action and public testimony may provide an alternative to an isolated cycle of revenge.

The ending makes this alternative explicit. When Haider has the opportunity to kill Khurram, he remembers the argument that revenge does not bring freedom and chooses to walk away. This choice differs sharply from the tragic resolution of *Hamlet*. It does not erase the losses that have occurred or offer a simple reconciliation, but it refuses to make another killing the necessary completion of the story. The difference is important because it changes the ethical question addressed to the audience. Rather than asking only whether the son will fulfil the command to avenge his father, the film asks whether refusing vengeance can interrupt a cycle of violence.

This ending should not be understood as a rejection of Shakespeare so much as a reworking of the tragic structure. *Haider* uses the recognisable revenge plot to create expectations and then revises the terms of

resolution. The shift also shows why fidelity alone is inadequate as a critical standard: a change in ending can be the most significant way an adaptation articulates its own concerns [1], [2], [4].

8. Discussion

The comparison reveals three connected forms of transformation. First, cultural relocation changes the political meaning of the family crisis. The Danish court's struggle over succession becomes a Kashmiri story about a missing father, state power, and the limits of official knowledge. Second, character relationships are revised so that the film can explore women's agency, family loyalty, and the pressures of political uncertainty in ways specific to its narrative. Third, cinematic form transforms dramatic devices: the Ghost becomes a witness to disappearance, the play-within-the-play becomes "Bismil," and the final revenge action is replaced by a refusal to kill.

These transformations support a dialogic understanding of adaptation. Hamlet remains recognisable in Haider, but recognition does not mean that the film must preserve the source's every detail. The source provides a structure through which the film can ask different questions. Mookherjee's account of "desified" Shakespeare is relevant here because it situates Indian adaptations within a process of making inherited material locally meaningful and politically resonant [5]. Walsh's analysis further shows that Haider's political dimension cannot be separated from its reworking of the revenge plot and its tentative movement toward nonviolent resistance [4]. This focused interpretive comparison does not claim to represent the full history of Kashmir or the complete reception of the film.

9. Conclusion

Haider demonstrates how a canonical tragedy can be reinterpreted without losing its relationship to the source. Bhardwaj preserves the central pattern of a son investigating his father's fate, confronting a compromised family order, and facing the demand for revenge. Yet the relocation from Elsinore to Kashmir changes the political and emotional significance of that pattern. Disappearance, surveillance, public protest, and the suffering of families broaden the story beyond a private conflict within a royal household.

The film's cinematic language is equally important. Through framing, editing, landscape, music, and choreographed performance, Haider translates the functions of Shakespearean drama into a different medium. "Bismil" turns performance into accusation, while the ending revises the expected conclusion by allowing Haider to reject revenge. Read alongside adaptation scholarship and JSTOR-indexed criticism, the film emerges as both an interpretation of Hamlet and a distinct work in its own right [1]–[6]. The movement from Shakespeare to Bhardwaj is therefore not simply a journey from an original to a copy. It is a cultural and artistic dialogue in which continuity makes transformation legible, and transformation makes the continuing relevance of the source visible.

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