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Political Re-Contextualization and Contemporanization: A Cine-Theatrical Journey from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Vishal Bharadwaj's *Haider*

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Abstract:

With the usage of the term 'politics', the fundamentals of 'deputation', 'diplomacy' and 'conspiracy' automatically flashes around. Power politics have always been extremely exploitative and hegemonic in its function. Keeping aside all forms of critical and philosophical definitions, practically politics appears as a game of public exploitation meeting self ends. The ancient autocratic system of exercising power through outright violence has undergone changes. Presently, a symbiosis between coercion and psychological manipulation is heralded as the ultimate strategy for wielding power. Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is based on a Danish political controversy and conspiracy where the uncle of a Danish prince murders his father and marries his mother to become the heir. Renowned Indian film director Vishal Bharadwaj has made a screen adaptation of this play as *Haider* which re-contextualizes and contemporanizes the political situation of India through the upheavals in Kashmir. This paper intends to analyze the wonderful thematic transcendence of an Elizabethan play into the contemporary screen.

Keywords: deputation, diplomacy, conspiracy, symbiosis, transcendence.

The evolution of Indian film industry was weaned by the British 'colonial mothers' who spread their massive wings of socio-cultural or religio-political domination over India since the early quarters of the nineteenth century. Primarily in 1896, the *Lumiere* moving pictures which had already created a mass wide sensation in London was imported to Bombay. But the post-colonial cultural historians have strictly ignored its inclusion in their historical records because of its oriental connectivity. With the appearance of a towering figure like Dadasaheb Phalke Indian movies slowly untied themselves from the clutches of the colonial influence and gradually travelled back to the various socio-cultural and historical elements that has been violated and destroyed under the treacherous colonial influence. Indian colonial and postcolonial history seems to be ambiguous in nature with innumerable documentation and interpretations evoking the unresolved oriental-occidental dispute. The Britishers and the Indians have structured Indian history in different frames which are often contradictory in nature. Thus in the process of authenticating Indian history and culture, Indian film industry struggled to de-Occidental themselves through their occidental weapon.

Media, print culture and e-communication plays a pivotal role in the era of postmodernism. But due to political vagabondism and administrative loopholes the accesses to the various technological advancements have remained bounded within definite metropolitan elite. But the introduction of cinema houses has confirmed more or less a balanced distribution across the various urban and rural corners of the country. But the Indian cultural circle was pegged with a new cultural conflict between cinema and theatre. Though the existence of theatre dates back much before cinema yet it was unable to create a universal impact upon the Indian

masses. Moreover, there have been innumerable shifts and changes regarding onstage thematic representations which have failed to create a concrete psychological impression. Initially Indian theatre has always been ripped apart over colonial and the post-colonial question which was apparently absent in the Indian cinema. The continuous conflict between the theatre directors and producers has majorly dissected the Indian stage into Commercial theatre and the Theatre of Roots which was further subdivided and impinged with eternal conflicts. The primary focus of the commercial theatre was mass profit and as a result their plays were solely designed to satisfy the public desire for power packed music and highly ornated hyperbolic dialogues. The theatre of roots on the other hand made a promising effort to revive and revitalize the 'original' Indian cultures and traditions.

During the pre-media era, 'drama' or 'theatre' played an ambivalent yet a concrete role to create socio-cultural and political mass awareness amongst both the rural and the urban folk. The settings, characterization and plotification allowed the spectators to relate themselves with the play. But with the arrival of films and television, theatre's prestige faced dethronement and has largely been alienated in the periphery of the performing arts structure. The easy accessibility and the swift versions of entertainment provided by films or television cannot be appropriated by theatre. In order to keep pace with the mass media theatre has started adopting a lot of cinematic techniques to rebuilt postmodern spectatorship. The continuous tussles between the various traditional and the modern forms of art have found a solution through 'artistic fusions.' Fusion art has been playing a crucial role to bridge all the artistic discrepancies that persist both nationally and internationally. As a result, the concepts of 'traditionalism' or 'originality' have faded away paving towards newly constructed path of indigenous cultural revivalism.

Recently, adaptation has emerged as a highly feasted genre in Indian cinema. In the post-independence era movies were mostly fashioned to belch out a nationalistic moral and appease the ignited soul of the spectators. But since few years Bollywood has undergone a massive mechanical and technical evolution often messing up with the western cinematic techniques. In terms of music, plot or cinematography, the hollywoodic sparks are often visible in Indian picturization. The music, dialogues or the acting techniques in the Indian movies are often blended with various classical and modern Hollywood movies thus carving out a pan-Indian image in the universal platform. The music in the recent Hindi movies demands a lot of attention. the genres of 'sufi-rock', 'baul-rock' or 'folk-metal' has shattered all forms of national, political and linguistic barriers. It has not only expanded the boundaries of Indian music across the world but has also reimbursed the socio-cultural richness of our nation. All the previous dissections of traditional/modern and occidental/oriental have got intermingled with each other.

Very recently, Indian movie lovers have observed a completely unique and widely encompassed version of adaptation and re-contextualization of a highly acclaimed Elizabethan play by the prolific playwright William Shakespeare. Despite belonging to a time when literature was not so well advanced and intellectualized, Shakespeare has drilled through the shields of time to emerge immortal. The superb power and enigma of his creativity is very much embedded in the contemporary significance of his plays. Through the adaptation of *Hamlet* as *Haider*, director Vishal Bharadwaj seems to spade out several new forms of adaptation which has been left unexplored till now. Initially, the play seems not to be a blind adaptation but a deep political

contemplation with the premises of the 16th century Elsinore Castle of Denmark being restructured and re-contextualized into 21st century Kashmir.

Shakespeare conceptualized Hamlet as an upholder of justice who struggles to unroll the red carpet social laws and order but fails to do so similar to all other 'just' men. The play inaugurates with a typical Shakespearean supernaturalism where the ghost of Hamlet's father shadows the castle and finally reveal the mystery behind his death and motivates his son to take revenge. Hamlet learns that his father has been a victim of his Uncle Claudius' conspiracy. Claudius assassinated his brother to get hold of the kingship and marry Gertrude. But Claudius' fulfillment becomes a nightmare for Hamlet, who continuously attempts to outstep Claudius by murdering him and avenge his father's death. Gertrude has been convicted by Hamlet and is very much portrayed as a 'culprit' figure. But from a political perspective, Gertrude appears to be a mere object of exploitation, emotionally and physically exploited by Claudius under the false mask of trust, love and care. Claudius utilizes Gertrude's psychological blindness to promote her as a mask of deputation which forces Hamlet to victimize her mother.

The dilemmatic psychological state in Hamlet is an outcome of the immense burden of the pseudo-ethics and moralities which has contaminated his eternity. This has landed him to the unresolved dilemma of 'To be or not to be, that is the Question' has pervaded the entire play. Often the modern critics observe this soliloquy from an existential point of view. Hamlet seems to lose his self into the vast cauldron of existential confusion. His mind is pestered with taking revenge of his father's death on one side and respecting 'justice' on the other. Behind all forms of political and familial complicacies, Justice seems to be a major character and the evil which wrenches Hamlet apart and results into his partial insanity which finally gets overcome with his death and apocalypse of the entire royal lineage, planting a new political order with an optimistic vision and a promising dream.

Vishal Bharadwaj has smoothly steered the time wheel from the royal politics of 16th century Europe to the contemporary political state of Kashmir. Preceding *Haider* there has been several other Indian movies been produced till now circling around the religious and political rifts in Kashmir like *Mission Kashmir*, *Lakshya*, *Tango Charlie* etc. But none of these were able to portray such an intricate and meticulous picture of the various eternal conflicts as shown in *Haider*. The controversial socio-cultural and political scenario in Kashmir has been very well highlighted through the contemporary adaptation of *Hamlet*. The character Hamlet has been transformed into Haider who is subjected to severe harassment for being a Muslim. After completing his studies from Aligarh, Haider returns back to Kashmir to find that his ancestral home has been completely burnt to dust and his father Dr. Hilal Meer and his mother Ghazala is missing. With the support of his love interest Arshia who is a major newspaper reporter by profession he undertakes a lifelong journey to unfold the mystery behind his father's absence or death. Despite several efforts Arshia is unable to convince Haider that his father is dead and the cherishing childhood memories he experienced with his parents starts haunting which initially takes him to the residence of his wicked uncle Khurram.

In the house of Khurram, Haider comes across a shocking sight where his uncle is playing a *Dafli* and romancing with her mother. This turns Haider utterly flabbergasted and in spite of his mother's emotional breakdown Haider leaves the spot. This very scene motivates

Haider to restructure his previous suspicions and plants a deep element of doubt against both his uncle and his mother. As time passes Haider comes to know that Khurram has been primarily responsible for the imprisonment and the torturous death of his father and which was very much in the knowledge of his mother. This ignited the fire of vengeance in Haider which was further nourished with Roohdar's story about how his father was tortured by the state laws and order who are nothing but political puppets. This finally confirms Hamlet that Khurram is the major culprit and he starts designing strategies to murder him but the evil of 'justice' constrains him continuously. The movie concludes with the suicide bombing of Ghazala which pronounces the conclusion of Khurram's corruptive politics.

The various Shakespearean characters has been very well painted with contemporariness and Bharadwaj's incredibility lies in amalgamating the 16th century characters with the current Kashmir scenario. Haider feigns madness even in this play but his motive of taking revenge seems to be much more violent and strong as compared to Hamlet who usually possessed a very passive attitude. Arshia appears to be a total contradiction to Ophelia. Ophelia always appeared in a dilemmatic state over accepting or rejecting Hamlet's proposal. But Arshia and Haider already appears to be in a well bonded relation but their relationship has been portrayed in the typical orthodoxical socio-cultural context of India. Their romancing falls prey to Arshia's father (Pervez Lone) and brother's (Liyaqat) fury who even threatens to kill Haider. Meanwhile Khurram is very displeased with the reappearance of Haider in Kashmir and regards him as a major obstacle along his political ambitions. The ignorant attitude of Khurram and dual personality of Ghazala confuses Haider. Haider's futile search for his father rips him apart and partial insanity envelops him. His inner soul gets involved into a divulging conflict which prevents him from drawing any firm conclusion. The sudden emergence of Roohdar, becomes the ultimate turning point of the story. The designing and manifestation of this character ensures Bharadwaj's oceanic creativity.

Roohdar has been introduced in place of the character Ghost in the original play *Hamlet*. The ghost was none other than Prince Hamlet's father who unveiled the secret of his death to him. The character Roohdar seems to be a re-incarnated alter ego of Haider's father who was quite inhumanly and unethically charged with terrorism. Dr. Meer appears to be a universal manifestation of divine values that not only champions the cause of human rights by remaining faithful to his profession but also emerges as a Jesus like figure trying to cleanse the evils of political, cultural and religious conflicts form the crest of Kashmir. But humanism and politics always exist in binary opposition with each other and mostly the latter triumphs. As the meeting matures Haider is confirmed about the involvement of Khurram's political diplomacy behind his father's death. Since then he starts chalking out multiple plans to avenge the death of the King. The play within a play that was specifically organized in *Hamlet* in order to confirm Claudius' guilt has got wonderfully transfused into the Kashmiri marriage tradition. In *Haider* Bharadwaj introduced a dance drama on the occasion of Khurram and Ghazala's marriage to closely study their study their reactions.

It's seems almost the first time that traditional theatrical techniques has been experimented in a film. A carnivalesque is achieved when the elitism and highly authoritative attitude of movies are deconstructed and intermingled with theatrical cults and practices. The director not only seems to find an appropriate solution over the inconclusive cinema-theatre

conflict but also lays the founding stone of a completely new genre in the field of Indian cinema. The dance drama enacted by actor Shahid Kapoor was embellished with every theatrical technicality. The huge open-air platform of the Martand Sun Temple, hundred feet tall puppets, infusion of *Dumhal* folk dance which originally belongs to the *Wittal* tribes of Kashmir enriches the viewers with a cine-theatrical wonder. All these techniques not only uphold the priceless Kashmiri traditions but also fulfill its original purpose of evoking guilt conscience in the newly married couple. Thus Vishal Bharadwaj wonderfully transcends the play within a play into an extravagant cine-theatrical version. In the middle of all forms of political diplomacies and pretensions, the play rightfully demands a feminist interpretation especially through the character Ghazala. Ghazala is not only a contemporary adaptation of Gertrude but seems to be her continuation.

Vishal Bharadwaj has revitalized and revived the Shakespearean female characters, especially Gertrude. In *Hamlet*, Gertrude exists in subalternity, whose voice remains embalmed under the black tar of masculinity. Neither any magical divine intervention nor any sudden promethean power, blazes the soul of Ghazala. But she uses the very weapons of patriarchy like deception, depositions and diplomacy to unlock the heavy fetters of masculinity that has been binding her for a long time. With the passage of time she soon realizes that she has been used as a political bait and sexual object by Khurram. Finally, unknown to anybody, she adorns a jacket packed with explosives and after making a last effort to persuade her son she explodes herself in the middle of the entire army of Khurram. Khurram and Haider both survive in the explosion but the former's feet are blown off. Here, Haider gets the golden opportunity to take his revenge in an unhindered manner but seems to realize the ultimate value of 'justice.' Despite, Khurram's pleading Haider deserts him and forces him to suffer in the most excruciating pain.

The cinema beginning with a political motive concludes with a duality by championing the cause of justice and femininity. *Hamlet*'s dilemma of 'to be or not to be' seems to pervade the soul of every character in their individual way. The soliloquy enforces a universal impact on the entire socio-cultural or political situation of Kashmir. In a nutshell, Vishal Bharadwaj successfully attempts to provide a definite solution to the thematic ambiguities left unattended and unanswered by Shakespeare, delicately painting the eternal conflicts of Kashmir which is not confined within the political or religious reservoir but engages a wider canvas.

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