

TRAGEDY REIMAGINED : CINEMATIC RETELLING OF HAMLET IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's tragedies have long functioned as cultural myths, continually adapted and reimagined across time and space. Among their many cinematic afterlives, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) stands out as a powerful retelling of Hamlet within the fraught political landscape of insurgency-torn Kashmir. More than a straightforward adaptation, *Haider* transforms Shakespeare's narrative of revenge, betrayal, and existential conflict into a contemporary tragedy that resonates with the anxieties of modern India.

This paper examines how *Haider* preserves the mythic essence of Shakespearean tragedy while reconfiguring it through local histories and political realities. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism, the analysis highlights the enduring relevance of Hamlet's archetype—the anguished son torn between duty and morality—in a setting shaped by violence, militarization, and loss. The paper also considers how Bhardwaj's film humanizes and reshapes Shakespeare's characters: *Haider* as the archetypal tragic hero whose madness becomes political critique, Ghazala as a complex reworking of Gertrude, and Arshia as a fragile yet resistant Ophelia.

By situating Shakespeare's universal myth within the specificity of Kashmir, *Haider* demonstrates how cinema can breathe new life into canonical texts, making them urgent commentaries on identity, violence, and resistance. The film not only affirms the timelessness of Shakespearean tragedy but also proves the transformative power of adaptation to bridge cultural boundaries and voice contemporary concerns.

Keywords: *Archetypal criticism, Historiographic meta fiction, mythic retelling*

INTRODUCTION

Few writers have achieved the adaptability of William Shakespeare, whose plays have been reimagined across centuries, languages, and media. In cinema, Shakespeare has become a global presence, finding voice in contexts far removed from Renaissance England. Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations—*Maqbool* (*Macbeth*), *Omkara* (*Othello*), and *Haider* (*Hamlet*)—represents one of the most acclaimed attempts to translate Shakespeare into the idioms of contemporary India. Of these, *Haider* (2014), co-written with Basharat Peer, remains the most politically charged, relocating the drama of Hamlet's grief and revenge to Kashmir in the 1990s, a region scarred by militancy and state violence.

This paper seeks to read *Haider* through two intersecting theoretical frameworks. First, Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* reminds us that adaptations are not derivative but autonomous works, reshaping prior narratives to address new audiences and contexts. Second, Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism highlights the underlying mythic patterns of tragedy, where characters and

settings assume symbolic significance. By applying these approaches, the paper demonstrates how Haider is both an intertextual dialogue with Hamlet and a mythic retelling of timeless archetypes within the political landscape of Kashmir.

Hamlet and the Archetype of Tragedy

Shakespeare's Hamlet is the paradigmatic revenge tragedy, centered on the archetypal figure of the avenging son. In Frye's model of the "mythos of tragedy," the hero is ensnared by cycles of vengeance, betrayal, and inevitable downfall. The play resonates with archetypal images: the ghost as the return of the repressed past, the corrupt court as a diseased body politic, the mad prince as truth-teller. Hamlet's indecision, oscillating between action and hesitation, becomes emblematic of the tragic condition itself.

Jungian psychology further enriches this reading: Hamlet's descent into madness and confrontation with mortality dramatize archetypal encounters with the shadow, death, and the collective unconscious. These patterns allow the play to transcend its original setting, becoming a universal myth of grief, revenge, and moral ambiguity.

Haider as Adaptation

In Haider, Bhardwaj transposes this tragic framework into the troubled landscape of Kashmir. Haider (Shahid Kapoor) returns to find his father "disappeared" after being detained by the Indian army. His mother Ghazala (Tabu) has grown close to Khurram (Kay Kay Menon), his father's brother. The narrative parallels Hamlet, but the setting amplifies its tragic stakes: instead of a royal court, the corruption is political and systemic, implicating the machinery of state power.

Hutcheon's theory of adaptation emphasizes that adaptations are not about fidelity but reinterpretation. Haider exemplifies this principle: while it retains key characters and plotlines, it transforms soliloquies into musical sequences, ghosts into silences, and Denmark into Kashmir. For instance, the famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy becomes the song "Bismil," staged in ruins—a performance that blends Shakespearean introspection with Kashmiri cultural forms. Similarly, the graveyard scene echoes Hamlet's meditation on mortality but in a distinctly Kashmiri idiom.

Most significantly, Bhardwaj alters the ending. Instead of completing the cycle of revenge, Haider refrains from killing Khurram. This departure from the archetypal tragic closure suggests an ethical refusal of vengeance, reconfiguring Hamlet's myth into a plea for peace in a context of unending violence.

Archetypal Patterns in Haider

The Avenging Son

Haider, like Hamlet, embodies the archetype of the son compelled to avenge his father. Yet, his journey is complicated by the collective trauma of Kashmir—his personal grief merges with the suffering of countless others whose fathers, brothers, and sons have vanished. The archetype expands from an individual's quest to a community's struggle.

The Ambivalent Mother

Ghazala is perhaps Bhardwaj's most radical reinterpretation. Unlike Shakespeare's Gertrude, she

is given agency, desire, and interiority. Archetypally, she reflects Jung's "Great Mother"—both nurturing and destructive. Her choices destabilize Haider's identity, and her eventual death cements her as the tragic center of the narrative.

The Wasteland

Frye describes tragic settings as wastelands—sterile, ruined landscapes where human corruption is mirrored in nature. Bhardwaj visualizes this archetype through Kashmir's snow-covered ruins, graveyards, and abandoned homes. The landscape itself becomes a character, embodying loss and desolation.

Madness as Archetype

Haider's public outbursts and erratic behavior mirror the archetype of the madman as prophet. His madness, whether feigned or real, becomes a vehicle of truth-telling—exposing both family betrayal and political violence.

Politics of Retelling

By situating Hamlet's archetypal story in Kashmir, Haider engages with both myth and history. It is not merely a cultural translation but a political intervention. The archetype of revenge becomes a metaphor for cycles of violence in Kashmir; the archetype of the wasteland reflects the devastation of a militarized zone; the archetype of the avenging son is redefined when Haider chooses restraint over vengeance.

In doing so, Haider challenges the tragic inevitability of Shakespeare's ending. Instead of affirming the myth of revenge, it interrupts it, suggesting that true resolution lies not in death but in the refusal to perpetuate violence.

CONCLUSION

Haider is both faithful and transformative: it retains the tragic essence of Hamlet while reframing it through Kashmiri politics and archetypal imagery. Using Hutcheon's adaptation theory, we can see it as an autonomous work that creatively reinterprets Shakespeare for a new audience. Through Frye's archetypal lens, we recognize how Haider taps into universal patterns of tragedy—the avenging son, the ambivalent mother, the wasteland landscape—while also subverting them to resist cycles of revenge.

In this fusion of adaptation and archetype, Haider demonstrates how timeless myths are continually reborn, acquiring new urgency in the face of contemporary realities. It is at once a Shakespearean tragedy, a Kashmiri allegory, and a universal myth of grief, madness, and resistance.

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