"So Jao": Sound, Death and the Postcolonial Politics of Cinematic Adaptation in Vishal Bhardwaj's "Haider" (2014)

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Abstract

The beginning of this year witnessed a significant reportage on films inspired by the Kashmir conflict in India, occasioned by the release of Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* on March 11, 2022.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), South Asian Cinema and Culture (Topic), Visual Arts and Performing Arts (Subfield), Aesthetics, Article, Asian And Asian American Studies, Film/Movies/Cinema, History



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The beginning of this year witnessed a significant reportage on films inspired by the Kashmir conflict in India, occasioned by the release of Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* on March 11, 2022. The polarized reaction to the film, which single-mindedly focuses on the exodus of Kashmiri pandits from the valley and the violence they were subjected to at the hands of their Muslim counterparts, makes visible the complexity of the understanding of Kashmir's political history in contemporary India. While Agnihotri's film, whose propagandist agenda in favor of the state won approvals from the ruling political party in India, Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 film *Haider*, despite its extremely sensitive and responsible treatment of the problem of militancy in Kashmir was targeted for passing over the plight of Kashmiri pandits. But eight years after its release, *Haider*, which won five National Awards in 2015, still wields the power to move its audience regardless of their religious and communal bearings through its portrayal of a terrible human tragedy in the wake of Kashmir militancy in the 1990s.

Bharadwaj's *Haider* completes his trilogy of cinematic adaptations of Shakespearian tragedies: *Macbeth*, *Othello,* and *Hamlet* translate as *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014) respectively, in their Bollywood avatars. Bhardwaj, in his unique style, imports the original tragic plots into an identifiable and contemporary Indian context, through the assimilation of the plot material with the personal life stories he tells in his films. The plot of *Haider* centers around the disappearance and death of Haider's father, which exposes the dark menagerie of political corruption and murders that Haider's uncle is embroiled in. The pursuit of this traumatic truth sets the stage for Haider's alienation from his mother and the motherland.



https://youtu.be/ZmN_VSo8DOo

Integral to Bhardwaj's style is the use of music in a typical Bollywood blockbuster formula, with song and dance sequences interrupting the linearity of cinematic storytelling. While certain film adaptations of Shakespeare operate simply as vehicles for the transmissions of ideology, Graham Holderness argues in "Radical Potentiality and Institutional Closure" (published in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*), others "block, deflect or otherwise work on ideology in order partially to disclose its mechanisms." Holderness evaluates the possibility of the film form to be a radical medium to challenge dominant ideologies or value systems. Analyzing Akira Kurosawa's film adaptation of *Macbeth*—*Throne of Blood* (1957)–he argues in favor of the film's dynamism to be able to liberate the original text.

Holderness' reading of Kurosawa raises important questions for the postcolonial film importing from the English literary canon to speak uniquely to a postcolonial audience. In Bhardwaj's undertaking, this import is singularly anchored and strengthened in a powerful musical idiom. Instead of containing the meanings of the original text, Bhardwaj's *Haider* expands and pluralizes the levels of signification that *Hamlet* produces. By making the stock *Hamlet* plot be the medium for staging the tragic history of Kashmir, Bhardwaj's film is a direct address, on one level, to the former imperial master discourse. On a more immediate and radical level, the film hits back very strategically at the Indian state and the numerous killings that have been sanctioned in the name of controlling terrorism in the recent past. In this capacity, the film liberates the textual *Hamlet*, making its echoes reverberate in a new sound and a new linguistic register.

Through a strategic integration of dance and music–both diegetic (within the frame of the film) and non-diegetic (for the audience's listening only)– Bhardwaj's film not only succeeds in delivering its radical political message to a popular film audience, it also speaks back to the former imperial discourse. Non-musical sounds are also key to *Haider* (2014) as a careful sonic anchoring of the story. The abstract potential of musical and non-musical sounds open up new horizons of meaning in the film, exceeding the confines of the original verbal register of the literary text. The loud, blaring and constant sound of the army car's horn, for example, signals the death of Hilal in the beginning scenes of the film triggering the tragic plot. The unsettling tones of

despair, melancholia and death which open the film remain a haunting and pervasive presence throughout.



https://youtu.be/ynWAfb1yKU8

"Jhelum" the song that sings the lament of Hilal's tragic loss, invokes the river that passes through the valley. The song describes the elemental quality of the river into whose womb-like depths Hilal's body receded till it was posthumously discovered by villagers. The fading melancholic melody of the song seems to suggest the slow disintegration of Haider's sanity, as he is seen staring into blankness in several shots as well as attempting to merge with the river in an act of suicide. The opening sounds evoke a song that comes later in the narrative, "Bismil," that stands in place of the play within a play sequence in *Hamlet* and expands the affective reach of the themes of death, love and betrayal.

One of the most intriguing moments in the film is the musical rendition of the gravedigger scene, an archetypal commentary on human mortality in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Performed by three old men in a snow-covered graveyard in conspicuously tired voices, the song "So Jao" ("Sleep!") has a deceptively bare and sparse quality. The song opens with the rough, scratching of the gravedigger's shovel scraping the cold hard ground, a sound that becomes the acoustic base for the bizarre lullaby-like deathsong. The choppy, staccato-like rhythmic impact of the metal on the resistant icy ground announcing "the final rest" is executed with a disturbing sonic clarity and certitude. This gritty foreground sound is supported by the reverberating sound of the *rubab* that transports the tune from an immediate closed verse recitation into an expanded musical interlude, as the vocals echo "*Arey ao na*...!" (O come...!) stretching the last syllable into a dying, falling note. "*So Jao*"'s loaded simplicity dispassionately delivers this bare truth: that all life is inevitably moving towards its end, or as Freud says in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) towards its inanimate origin.



https://youtu.be/H-km32aDmxY

While the men who perform "So Jao" are past their prime in life, they are far from being incidental characters in the film as they are in Shakespeare. They are woven into the narrative as militants who protect Haider and do not hesitate to wield heavy duty weapons when the time comes. It comes as no surprise that they are digging their own graves, even as the seriousness and fear of death are subsumed in the larger political cause they serve in the plot. The sound of the shovel overlaps with Gazala's first phone call to Roohdaar, the embodied ghost who brings Hamlet's father's message to the son (the Urdu word *rooh* literally translates as soul or spirit), signifying an ominous anticipation in the narrative at this point. The grave, as the song says, is ultimately where you sleep your longest sleep. The scene is one of the three men lying supine each in his own hole, with one in the center housing the little boy who enters the frame perkily dancing into the gray and barren scene. His sprint-like entry walk carrying bread and sustenance for the gravediggers, the well-choreographed lifting of his body to the beat of the song heightened just very slightly by the clinking bell sound once every four beats is an unsettling reminder of the happy ignorance that we immerse ourselves in being simultaneously aware and oblivious of the inevitable imminent end. These stark juxtapositions in the gravedigger's song works as a telling sonic metaphor for the state of hopelessness, confusion and despair that has historically assailed Kashmir for many, many decades. The song is also a commentary on the futility of violence instigated in the name of religion, when man must ultimately surrender to one common fate, one common remainder.



screen capture from Haider created by SO!

Haider's presence in the graveyard song introduces the inevitable vectors of vengeance and death that awaits his fate following the knowledge of the truth of his father's institutional murder. The further breakdown of his psyche and the increasing dissociation from his world is dramatized brilliantly in the song "Bismil" that publicly calls out Khurram on his crime (1.44.59). The song marries the allegorical with folk costumes, and incorporates exaggerated and physically intense dance steps to impose the serious weight and inescapable gravity of the accusation of murder that Haider ascribes to Khurram. The song and dance sequence are staged as a public performance, one that happens a few scenes before in the film too, when Haider is seen surrounded by a crowd in a new avatar with shaved head and grown beard (1.25.53). This distinct change in appearance along with the masques he uses later in Ghazala's wedding (1.40.51) and the "Bismil" song are markers of Haider's increasing dissociation from his absurd reality—one that he can only make sense of as a character in a play. Khurram's crimes are not separate from the questionable workings of the Indian state, and Bhardwaj does a good job tapping into the folk idiom and the song-and-dance format to critique what Haider calls the state's "*chutzpah*" (pronounced tʃəʊzpə, not ˈhʊ͡ʊtspə), the infamous Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The alteration of the first syllable is possibly to bring in an echo of a popular north Indian abuse word to take a jab at the impunity enjoyed by state officials for the crimes committed on the Kashmiri people.



https://youtu.be/p6ZxI5_A69M

Haider remains a brave directorial undertaking not only aesthetically but also politically, given that the issue of Kashmir's independence (*azadi*) is still a burning issue in India 27 years since 1995, the year in which *Haider* is set, and 8 years since the film's release. Bharadwaj's self-composed music in the film is not simply a placeholder for the dazzling verbal exchanges of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The music in *Haider* magnifies and intensifies the local mood of the scenes where they feature. This function is not only limited to the background soundtrack which, in its haunting atmospheric quality, renders a hollow despair and anguished hopelessness throughout. The songs additionally step in to carry the expression beyond the register of words and visuals to render a poetic and sonic intensity to the film, making it more memorable and impactful to a wider audience. In *Haider*, the formula of the Bollywood blockbuster film is effective not only as good entertainment, but also as a means to tie the story together in a haunting soundscape which refuses to fade long after the film ends.

Featured image: screen capture from Haider *created by* SO!

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