

State violence and its impact on gender and identity in Indian Cinema: A Critical Analysis of *Haider*

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Abstract

The 2014 film *Haider*, directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, adapts William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to offer a deep exploration of state-sanctioned violence, gender relations, and personal identity within the Kashmir conflict. Set in the turbulent Kashmir of the 1990s, the movie critically assesses the influence of governmental authority, the erosion of individual identity, and the challenges faced by gendered existences in a politically volatile environment. This study scrutinizes the film's portrayal of institutional oppression and its effects on individuals, with a particular focus on women in a male-dominated society. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that merges film analysis with political theory, this paper examines the movie's depiction of these issues. Through a detailed investigation of storytelling techniques, cinematography, and character evolution, the research delves into the film's nuanced representation of trauma, resilience, and identity formation in a militarized context. Additionally, the paper explores how *Haider* contests prevailing nationalist narratives while highlighting the human toll of political strife. The study utilizes a multidisciplinary framework, combining insights from film studies and political theory, to analyze the film's treatment of these themes. The study's methodology involves a close reading of key scenes, character interactions, and visual symbolism to unpack the film's complex themes. By examining the film's adaptation of Shakespearean elements within the Kashmiri context, the research aims to illuminate the intersections between literary heritage and contemporary socio-political realities.

Keywords: State violence, Identity, Gender, Indian Cinema, *Haider*

Introduction

Indian films have frequently served as a medium for examining societal and political realities. Among the numerous issues addressed, the themes of state-sanctioned violence and its effects on marginalized groups emerge as particularly pressing and multifaceted. State violence, characterized as the employment of force or coercion by governmental institutions against their citizens, has been a recurrent motif in Indian cinema, especially in movies dealing with political strife. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* explores these themes

through the prism of the Kashmir conflict, one of the most disputed political issues in post-colonial South Asia.

Set during the 1990s, at the height of insurgency and military intervention in Kashmir, *Haider* contrasts personal tragedy with broader political realities. The film criticizes the systematic oppression carried out under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) and investigates how state violence reshapes identities and intensifies gender-based vulnerabilities. As Pramod K. Nayar notes, "Cinema often works as a counter-narrative to dominant state discourses,

offering a space for alternative perspectives” (128). Through this perspective, Haider becomes a crucial text for comprehending the intersection of state power, gender, and identity in conflict-zones.

This study examines how Haider critiques state violence and underscores its impact on gender and identity, referencing cinematic techniques, character development, and scholarly criticism. It also explores how Bhardwaj illuminates the personal and societal ramifications of living under constant state surveillance and violence.

State Violence in Haider

Bhardwaj depicts state violence in Haider as a pervasive force that impacts every aspect of life in Kashmir. The film portrays a Kashmir under siege, where state-sponsored militarization and authoritarian policies wreak havoc on civilian lives. The Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which grants immunity to military personnel, emerges as a symbol of institutionalized oppression.

In the film, Haider's father, Dr. Hilal Meer, is arrested and killed for allegedly harbouring a militant. This event sets the stage for the film's exploration of state violence. Haider's search for his father mirrors the plight of countless Kashmiris searching for disappeared family

members. One of the most striking elements is the depiction of torture camps, where Haider learns of his father's suffering and eventual death. This scene serves as a microcosm of the larger political realities of Kashmir, where countless families are left searching for their disappeared loved ones and human rights violations in Kashmir. The film depicts enforced disappearances,

extrajudicial killings, and psychological toll of militarization.

The film also critiques the state's narrative of nationalism, which justifies violence in the name of security. In one pivotal scene, Haider confronts Indian soldiers at a checkpoint, highlighting the dehumanization faced by civilians in a militarized zone. This scene resonates with Walter Benjamin's assertion that “state violence often cloaks itself in the language of law and order, rendering its victims voiceless” (Benjamin 300). Bhardwaj's portrayal of the silenced Kashmiri population underscores the devastating consequences of this systemic violence.

Gender and Conflict: The Role of Women in Haider

In Haider, the gendered effects of state-sponsored violence are prominently displayed. Female characters in the film serve as both victims and survivors within a conflict-driven, patriarchal society. The movie's primary female protagonists, Ghazala and Arshia, exemplify the multifaceted roles women assume in areas of conflict.

Ghazala: Navigating Survival and Victimhood

Haider's mother, Ghazala, is a multidimensional character who straddles the line between personal preservation and societal norms. Her involvement with Haider's uncle, Khurram, represents both a survival strategy and a societal expectation, illustrating the concessions women often make in male-dominated societies to ensure their safety. Ghazala's ultimate demise, brought about by her remorse and the surrounding political forces, symbolizes Kashmir itself - ensnared, exploited, and finally annihilated by competing powers.

As feminist academic Judith Butler contends, “Gendered bodies in conflict zones become sites of political contestation, marked by both violence and resistance” (Butler 45). Ghazala’s narrative demonstrates how women in conflict-ridden areas manoeuvre through patriarchal and militarized structures while grappling with their own agency and victimization.

Arshia: The Price of Allegiance

Arshia, Haider’s romantic interest, embodies the unintended casualties of conflict. Caught between her loyalty to her father, a state-aligned police officer, and her affection for Haider, Arshia emerges as a tragic figure ensnared in the crossfire of political and personal allegiances.

Her suicide underlines the emotional and psychological burden of existing in a militarized society.

The gendered impact of state violence extends beyond physical harm, manifesting as psychological trauma as well. The stories of both Ghazala and Arshia illustrate how state violence disproportionately affects women, depriving them of autonomy while forcing them into roles dictated by patriarchal and political structures. Bhardwaj’s depiction of Arshia and Ghazala emphasizes the dual marginalization of women who are oppressed by both state violence and patriarchal norms.

Identity and Alienation in Conflict Zones

The film Haider fundamentally explores the concept of identity - encompassing personal, political, and cultural aspects - and how it is shattered by violence, closely linked to the Kashmiri experience of alienation and obliteration. The protagonist’s transformation from a

mourning son to a vengeful rebel mirrors the broader identity crisis faced by young Kashmiris, who often find themselves torn between conflicting narratives of nationalism and separatism. The recurring inquiry, “Hum hai ki hum nahi?” (Do I exist, or do I not?), epitomizes the existential dilemma arising from life in a conflict zone where one’s humanity is perpetually challenged.

Bhardwaj employs potent visual and narrative techniques to portray this identity crisis. For example, the cemetery scenes represent not only physical death but also the figurative demise of identity and culture. Walter Benjamin’s notion of “state violence” is particularly pertinent here, as the film critiques how the government justifies its actions by constructing a narrative of security and nationalism (Benjamin 300). The movie also criticizes the suppression of Kashmiri voices in the larger political discourse, with Haider’s quest for his father serving as a metaphor for Kashmir’s pursuit of justice and acknowledgment.

The protagonist’s ultimate rejection of revenge at the film’s conclusion is particularly significant. It signifies a departure from the cycle of violence that characterizes conflict zones, offering a ray of hope for reclaiming identity without perpetuating further bloodshed. As Ashis Nandy observes, “The refusal to partake in violence is itself a powerful act of resistance” (Nandy 98).

Cinematic Strategies and Political Commentary

Bhardwaj utilizes various filmmaking techniques such as editing techniques, sound design, mise-en-scene to emphasize the movie’s criticism of government-sanctioned violence and its effects on gender and personal identity. Chion (1994)

emphasizes that “sound does not merely accompany images but actively transforms their meaning, adding layers of interpretation” (p.34). The incorporation of Kashmiri songs and verse anchors the story in the area’s cultural heritage, while vivid depictions of tombstones and destruction highlight the severe consequences of militarization.

The movie’s reinterpretation of Shakespearean tragedy gives its themes a universal appeal. By recasting Hamlet’s individual quest for vengeance as a political metaphor, Bhardwaj transforms the narrative into a critique of institutional oppression. The film concludes ambiguously, with Haider turning away from violence, prompting viewers to consider the pointlessness of retribution in the face of systemic injustice. This ending also implies that breaking free from the cycle of violence is the sole means of reclaiming one’s agency and identity in a conflict- torn society.

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Conclusion

Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* is a landmark film that critiques state violence while highlighting its gendered and identity-based impacts. Through its nuanced portrayal of Kashmir’s political realities, the film exposes the human cost of militarization and challenges dominant narratives around nationalism. By intertwining personal tragedy with political commentary, Bhardwaj creates a work that is both deeply moving and politically resonant.

In the context of Indian cinema’s exploration of power dynamics and oppression, Haider stands out as a powerful example of how art can serve as a counter-narrative to state-sponsored violence. The film compels audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about the intersection of state power, gender, and identity while offering a vision of resistance and hope.