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Kashmir, a theatre that stages hell: A study of Basharat Peer's Curfewed Night (2008) and Vishal Bhardwaj's film Haider (2014)

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Abstract
Kashmir, a region that lost its existence as a separate state since Akbar's invasion and controls over it in 1586, had witnessed tyranny, felt pain, and experienced the darkness of conflict and insurgency, and it is still boiling in the same hell this way or that. She had been and is a theatre where half-mothers, half-widows, pellet-hit children and young men, psychos and disappeared souls perform their roles. Basharat Peer, the author of the novel Curfewed Night has described and shown it remarkably in his book. He has drifted from the tradition – 'if there is a paradise on earth/ it's here, it's here, it's here' (Jahangir); or 'here, every countenance is a moon/ every speck a star/ this is the valley of Kashmir/ the emblem of paradise.' (Aabroo, 1968) – and recounted the tragedy he had been encountering around him as a citizen, rather a background character. Similarly, Vishal Bhardwaj's movie Haider, partly based on William Shakespeare's Hamlet and Peer's memoir, presents a moving picture of Kashmir, not as heaven but inferno, where souls had been suffering or still enduring the scimitars of Partition (1947), insurgencies and civilian disappearances that took speed after the infamous Pandit exodus, pangs inflicted by hungry and insane renegades, destruction of lives and property, identity crisis; and where the people during early mornings are characterised by crackdowns, men being taken away from their homes, questioning of young men, and mothers being condemned to spend the rest of their lives looking for their sons who have disappeared. In this paper, I will focus on Kashmir, where the general populace is denied access to basic human rights, endure the pains of conflict and their insensitive neighbours for whom she (Kashmir) is an apple of discord, and the constant attempt of Kashmiris to free themselves from the tiger grip of their hungry neighbours and their utter failure in this venture which has turned Kashmiris as mere psychos – through the lens of Peer's memoir and Bhardwaj's Haider.

Keywords: Kashmir, democracy, freedom, degradation, fear, constitution, insurgency

Introduction
Kashmir has always been viewed and described as a heaven on earth, that attracted and inspired kings, poets, and artists, because of her idyllic pulchritude and scenic landscape. Chada Behera mentions in her book *Demystifying Kashmir* states, "Jammu and Kashmir is a former princely state partitioned since 1949, yet still regarded as a homogeneous entity [1]." Akbar, the great king, like various past kings, invaded and took control of Kashmir in 1586 for her beauty and his own petty ends. Jahangir, the Mughal prince, approached Kashmir 'If there is paradise on Earth/ it's here, it's here, it's here'; Habba Khatoon, the legendary poetess, writing in the Kashmiri language, sang melodious songs in memory of Kashmir; Bollywood, in the late 70s and 80s, found Kashmir a perfect background for movies – and in songs described her as an emblem of paradise and its citizen, a symbol of peace and love: 'here, every countenance is a moon/ every speck a star/ this is the valley of Kashmir/ the emblem of paradise.' (Aabroo, 1968); however, in the last decade of the 20th century – though it had already become cancer for her neighbouring countries, India and Pakistan after Independence – Kashmir literally had a fall: it lost its charm, beauty, peace, and fraternity as a place where Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and others lived peacefully, upholding the flag of Kashmiriyat; she turned out to be a battlefield for neighbouring countries and her souls became goats at their political altar: Insurgency broke out like a plague, devouring innocent souls of Kashmir even now, the exodus of Pandits happened and people and property of both

communities who where living a sweet life, were killed and destroyed inhumanly. Agha Shahid Ali describes the post-insurgency and Pandit exodus well in his verses:

"The city from where no news can come
Is now so visible in its curfewed night
That the worst is precise: From Zero Bridge
A shadow chased by searchlights is running
Away to find its body. On the edge
Of the Cantonment, where Gupkar Road ends
It shrinks almost into nothing, is
Nothing by interrogation gates
So, it can slip, unseen, into the cells:
Drippings from a suspended burning tire
Are falling on the back of a prisoner
The naked boy screamed, "I know nothing."
(*The Veiled Suite*, 178)
"Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,
and became refugees there, in the plains,
where they must now will a final dewfall
to turn the mountains to glass."
The Country Without Post Office, Agha Shahid Ali

In addition, Vishal Bhardwaj, an Indian film director, screenwriter, producer, soundtrack composer, and playback singer, created Haider, a cinematic rendition of William Shakespeare's classic play *Hamlet* that switches the play's location from Denmark to the troubled Kashmir of 1995.

The first half of the movie establishes the scene against this political backdrop, while the second half mostly develops the Shakespearean plot. The director explains why he chose to set Haider in Kashmir in 1995 in the preface to the original screenplay. Bhardwaj made the decision to read Basharat Peer's autobiography *Curfewed Night* after discovering his wife Rekha sobbing in the middle of the night while doing so. After finishing the book, he was so moved that he decided against turning Hamlet into an espionage thriller about the "Research and Analysis Wing" and instead chose to focus on a story set in the troubled region of Kashmir, firmly believing that "Kashmir has been the biggest tragedy of modern times." and that no film has attempted to adequately depict it. Haider goes from being a "simple" spy thriller and instead bases a tragedy of the entire town, focusing mainly on the concept of loss of identity. This is because the partnership with Peer came about spontaneously. In the movie, Kashmir is portrayed as more than just an "inert and useful backdrop." The playwright's work is not used "as a makeshift vehicle for [the region's] politics," which is crucial (Sarkar 34). Instead, the filmmaker wanted to make a statement about a situation that was anti-human and could no longer be kept secret.

Kashmir, a battlefield

Kashmir literally lost her freedom when Akbar, took control of her. However, it became a battlefield for neighbouring countries, India, and Pakistan, after they were let free from the shackles of the British Raj in 1947. Although Kashmir had the option of joining one of the two countries or remaining independent, the territory was assaulted later that year by tribesmen posing as Pakistani soldiers. In order to maintain good relations with both of his neighbours, Maharaja Hari Singh desired the independence of Kashmir eventually – when the situation was out of his control – agreed to accede his state to the Dominion of India by executing an Instrument of Accession under the provisions of the India Independence Act 1947; and later under the special provisions of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, the region was made to access India.

Abdul. G states, "Article 370 of the constitution of India relating to the state of Kasmir is sixty years old. The constitution came into force on 26th January 1950 and within it, this unique provision. Up to 1989, Kashmir was in a way peaceful. (1)

However, as soon as 1989, when insurgency broke out like an incurable disease infecting almost every soul of the valley, Kashmir lost her peace: Hindu Kashmiris were expelled, and some were killed; "Kashmir lost her promising youth, she lost her identity and became a battleground. Consequently, The Indian government established the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), which was initially created to combat terrorism but ended up giving the Indian army "the power to shoot anyone suspected of being a threat" and giving officers "immunity from prosecution in a court of law." As a result, the presence of the Indian armed forces increased in the Valley" (Peer 182). They are free to question and detain anyone they suspect of having ties to any militant organisation under the exceptional powers granted to Indian soldiers by AFSPA. Any person suspected of having ties to a militant organisation can be questioned, demolished, and arrested at will. In one heart-breaking moment, an informant named Haider, a man with his face hidden by a balaclava act as a judge from a jeep while citizens are paraded in front of him. With simply a turn of his head, he determines whether to release or arrest the individuals (0:09:37-0:10:28).

Enjoying powers under AFSPA and other laws, the life of a common Kashmir has become a living hell. Every now and then, a Mohallah, a village, a town or a city is cordoned off. People have been put in extremely difficult situations – they are asked to show their identity even in their own land; asked to vacate from their house on cold winter mornings; asked to stay in a school ground or playfield or on a road; a few men are chosen, questioned, and then taken along to frisk the empty houses. (There is a camp for every few towns and a bunker every few hundred metres. Regular murders, rapes, molestation, beatings, and persistent threats against one's life, honour, family, and property all contribute to a constant state of terror and shame. The nature and memory of the relationship that the people of Kashmir share with the security forces are such that in a common area, the former is reduced to a lower class, further upsetting the locals who see such degradation in their own land as one of the worst possible disgraces. Even when the security forces are not abusing their privileges.

Life in Chaos (The movie Haider contains some excellent instances that demonstrate the problem of losing one's sense of self. In a scene where the same has been effectively demonstrated, a Kashmiri man (played by Basharat Peer himself) stands on the threshold of his own home, unwilling to walk inside. Roodaar, one of the film's major characters, comes and asks the man to show him his identity card and frisks him as Indian investigators typically do, before letting him cross the doorsill. This individual has a medical ailment known as "New illness," which amply illustrates the extent of judicial interference in people's lives (1:04:14-1:05:08)

A reference to this psychological state can also be found in Peer's memoir:

A guy waits for a long time, as though in a line, before entering his own home. and then makes off in a different direction. He is taken to the doctor by his relatives. A new ailment has emerged ever since frisking was implemented, the doctor claims. When they encounter a gate, some people need to be frisked, while others frisk themselves. Every time he arrives at a gate, he orders a "body search." The man's condition improves as a result of the family following the advice. (165-166)

There is a sequence in the movie Haider that is undoubtedly among its most moving and electrifying moments. When Haider is shown looking for his father in the song "Jhelum," something happens. In the scene, a young boy covered in blood jumps out of a truck filled with foul, dismembered bodies, and dances joyfully, thankful to be alive. In his memoir, Peer recounts an incident that is strikingly similar:

"A police truck came. Farooq was also loaded into the vehicle along with the dead by the cops. The truck was taken to the police control room; in the days to come, Kashmiris will travel there to pick up the bodies of their relatives. Two miles from Gawkadal, where the vehicle had stopped, a teenager jumped out from among the victims while his clothes and face were covered in blood. The youngster exclaimed, "I got no bullets," as he ran his hands over his body. Nobody shot at me. I have life. He remained motionless for a moment before bolting from the structure housing the police control room (125).

Another scene in the film features the protagonist's mad act of protesting the political opposition and criticism of both India and Pakistan at the Lal Chowk clock tower. Such a scene marks a turning point for the story as well as Haider's goals, as he decides to confront the bigger corrupt system imposed by the Indian government and local politicians who frequently collaborate with Indian authorities, as evidenced by his uncle Khurram. Kashmiris are demanding freedom, which has already been depicted in earlier sections of the movie as the slogan of the street protesters.

Yet another scene in the movie where the insane protagonist performs his protest at the clock tower of Lal Chowk against the political resistance and condemns both India and Pakistan. Such an episode represents a turning point in both film and the character's mission, as Haider adds to personal revenge also the aim to oppose the larger corrupt system dictated by the Indian government and by those local politicians that are often in connivance with the Indian forces – as testified to by his uncle Khurram. Freedom, which has already been presented in preceding scenes in the film as the street protesters' rallying cry, is what Kashmiris are asking for.

HAIDER: Hello... Hello... mic testing one, two, three hello... Can you hear me? Hello, hello, hello, hello... UN Council Resolution number 47 of 1948. Article 2 of the Geneva Convention and Article 370 of the Indian constitution... raises but one question!

… Do we exist or do we not? If we do... then who we are? If not... then where are we? Do we exist at all? Or not?

…HAIDER: There is no law, there is no order. Made on order... Law and order... India! Pakistan! A game on the border. India clings to us. Pakistan leeches on... What of us? What do we want?

CROWD: Freedom!

…HAIDER: We will be free!

ALL TOGETHER: Freedom! (1:26:40 – 1:28:57)

The protagonist's seemingly insane utterances represent the tragic reality of a fallen and psychotic people, who know well that nothing is going to happen, yet – because they are suffering from an incurable disease that has entered their marrow – they come out in the streets to cry out their pain: they want to get rid of this pain and this is why they are shouting slogans. In the movie, incidents are seen. [This conversation is a flashback. Go India Go Back was scrawled on a street wall as the camera lingered there.]

God alone knows when it will cease pouring blood on our land, according to HAIDER'S GRANDFATHER. ZAHOOR: Everything depends on India. Birthright, as they say in India. And all we are doing is asserting our right—Freedom. GRANDFATHER: Even in India, freedom was gained by the lathi-holder, not the gun-holder. Only revenge is known to the gun. Commander, we will never achieve full freedom if we cannot liberate ourselves from this spirit of vengeance. Keep in mind that revenge only breeds revenge. (0:52:38 – 0:53:40)

Den of injustice and torture

Kashmir**,** in other words, can surely be called a den where injustice has gone to eternal slumber and the souls of terror reign in the dark space of the den. This can be better understood through scenes described by Peer and Bhardwaj:

Mothers and spouses are seen sitting in silence in front of the army barracks with photos of their cherished kids and husbands while they wait patiently for word on the fate of their soldiers (Haider). Between 4,000 and 8,000 men have vanished after being detained by the military, paramilitary, and police, according to a peer. The missing males are frequently referred to in newspapers as "disappeared individuals," while their waiting wives are referred to as "half-widows." The government claims that the Kashmiri citizens who have vanished have crossed into Pakistan for armed training and have joined militant organisations, refusing to establish a commission of inquiry into the disappearances. Many Kashmiris think the men who went missing were killed while being held captive and cremated in mass graves. Several of these men's wives have given up and sought to move on. Others are fervently battling for justice in the hopes of seeing their loved ones again. The husbands and parents of the missing men were there in the park. Mothers often appear in city squares after dirty conflicts. (135)

Kashmiris live a life of extreme torture. Probably, no soul is left without frisking, no individual without interrogation and no man without thrashing. The following paragraph bear's witness:

'They assaulted us with weapons, staffs, and hands. Yet it was insignificant. "They brought you out to the building's yard. You were asked to take off everything, including your pants. They placed the ladder next to a ditch containing kerosene oil and red chilli powder while tying you to it. Your head was shoved into the ditch as they lifted the ladder in a seesaw motion. Depending on how they are feeling, it might continue for a half-hour. "It was the start." Sometimes they would tie you to the ladder instead of taking your clothes off. Before they fastened your trousers towards the ankles and put mice inside, you nearly felt relieved. Maybe they used kerosene welding stoves and cigarette butts to burn your arms and legs. Unless you speak, they sear your body. They bound your arms in copper wire and shocked you with high voltage. Your entire body hair stood up. The

worst part, though, was when they stuck the copper wire into my penis and shocked me. With most lads, they did it. It claimed numerous lives. Several were unable to marry after it (147-148).

With Roohdaar's narration to Haider, Bhardwaj metaphorically represents the torture sequences in the film's released version. MAMA-2, a holding facility that is like the notorious PAPA-2 interrogation centre on the banks of the Dal Lake in Srinagar, is one of the locations where abducted Kashmiris are tortured. In the flashback, Roohdaar describes how MAMA-2 was another name for hell. They left and came back as nothing more than mere shadows. At the end of the film, a frightened adolescent says, "Sir, I promise I am a student," while police officers are seen questioning prisoners who are either tied up or hanging. Sir, I assure you that I am not a militant. I'm not a fighter. Screams can be heard, as torture is portrayed in the flashback.] (1:13:20) As evidenced by Haider's father Doctor Meer's early reluctance to pick a specific camp, it can be claimed that Haider generally does not connect himself with one side or the other (Mookherjee 3). The father only changes from a politically impartial professional to an obstinate, rebellious, and resentful prisoner after his imprisonment.

Conclusion

In both, the movie and memoir, Bhardwaj and Peer have succinctly described the pain that Kashmiris are suffering. They have shown how traumatic, tragic, and hard a life people live there. Through the characters of Haider and the man, standing on the threshold of his house and not willing to walk inside, Bhardwaj has represented all those people, young and old, who have turned psychos because of the disease after not being able to withstand bloody scenes that happened in their life or the torture unleashed on them either by state or gunmen who crossed over to Kashmir. And Peer, through the characters and scenes he has superbly described in his memoir, has equally and beautifully portrayed the tragedy that moved readers, critics and even the Bollywood world; and this is why, there are a good number of novels and movies that have presented the realistic account of the valley and thereby, have been faithful to the narrative.

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