Against Forgetting: *Haider*, *Hamlet* and the Politics of Remembrance

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Abstract: Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014) is a postcolonial intervention that weaponizes Shakespeare's Hamlet to stage a cinematic tribunal against state-sanctioned historical amnesia in 1990s Kashmir. This paper approaches the film not as adaptation-as-translation, but as a disruptive act of political remembering. The paper argues that the film derives its power from its deliberate refusal of catharsis, achieved through centring its critique on the figure of Roohdaar, whose function is inherently contradictory.

Drawing on Derridean concept of Hauntology and Victor Turner's concept of Liminality, Roohdaar initially emerges as an ethical spectre, a collective voice of the disappeared demanding justice; however, by introducing the psychoanalytic concept of the Phantom (Abraham and Torok), the paper reframes this spectre as the pathological carrier of an encrypted, unmourned trauma. This critical approach brings into focus the film's central dilemma: is Haider's quest for vengeance an ethical injunction for justice, or a compulsive repetition of inherited violence? Ultimately, Haider suspends the possibility of ethical resolution altogether, situating the viewer within the same hauntological impasse that ensnares its protagonist.

Keywords: Adaptation-as-Intervention, Hauntology, Liminality, Phantom, *Haider, Hamlet*

Introduction

The adaptation of Shakespearean drama in postcolonial contexts has become a significant field of scholarly inquiry, representing a site where the cultural authority of the Western canon is both engaged and contested. Such adaptations are rarely simple transpositions; they frequently function as strategic interventions, repurposing canonical narratives to interrogate local histories and

contemporary political realities. To properly analyse these works, it is necessary to move beyond the traditional paradigms of fidelity criticism. This older critical model, with its “profoundly moralistic” (Stam 54) vocabulary of failure and betrayal, is predicated on the flawed assumption that a source text possesses a singular, “transferable core” of meaning that the adaptation is obligated to reproduce (57). As adaptation theorists have argued, strict fidelity is not only a problematic critical standard but is often a practical impossibility, as a “change of medium” automatically generates difference and originality (55). A more productive theoretical model frames adaptation as a dialogical and palimpsestuous process. This approach, which understands adaptation as a form of “repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7), recognizes the adapted work as a “derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (9). It is a "creative and an interpretive act of appropriation” (8) that exists in a constant, resonant dialogue with its predecessor, possessing its own unique aura even as it is “haunted at all times by [its] adapted texts” (6). Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* (2014), a transposition of *Hamlet* to the conflict in 1990s Kashmir, serves as a powerful exemplar of this interventionist mode of adaptation.

Haider operates not as a reverential translation but as a pointed political rereading, a deliberate “transculturation or indigenization” (XVIII) that forces a “re-accentuation and refocusing of themes, characters, and plot” in a new cultural context (40). The film functions as a hypertext, one that actively “transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends” its Shakespearean hypotext to engage directly with the political trauma of the Kashmiri insurgency and the brutal state counter-insurgency of the 1990s (Gennete qtd. in Stam 66). This process of transformation is not merely a change of setting; it is a fundamental re-routing of the source text’s thematic concerns. The existential, metaphysical angst of the Danish court is deliberately grounded in the material and visceral reality of enforced disappearances, mass graves, and the psychological toll of occupation. The film seizes the narrative framework of a domestic tragedy and re-deploys it on a public, political stage, making the family’s drama a microcosm for the region’s collective suffering.

To adequately dissect this complex cinematic intervention, this paper will employ an interdisciplinary theoretical framework. It is grounded primarily in postcolonial adaptation studies, which provide the tools to analyse how Bhardwaj's film "writes back" to the Shakespearean canon, not as an act of homage but of critical re-evaluation (Ashcroft et al 1989). Within this, the analysis will draw on theories of hauntology to explore the film's spectral dimension, examining how the past, both literary and political, persists as a disruptive force in the present. This will be supplemented by a focus on liminality, which offers a vocabulary for describing the threshold states of characters, landscapes, and political realities within the film. The central thesis of this paper is that Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* weaponizes its status as an adaptation to stage a cinematic tribunal against state-sanctioned historical amnesia. It argues that the film, through its engagement with the spectral logic of hauntology and the liminal states of its characters, ultimately exposes the profound psychological and ethical contradictions embedded in a politics of revenge. The film achieves this by centring its political intervention on the ambiguous figure of Roohdaar*,* who functions simultaneously as an ethical injunction for justice and a pathological carrier of transgenerational trauma, forcing a confrontation with the unmournable nature of the Kashmir conflict. This paper will demonstrate that *Haider* is not simply a retelling but a politically charged re-visitation. For as Hutcheon reminds us, adaptations do more than retell stories; at their most potent, "they can also destabilize both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations" (174). Ultimately, this paper will contend that *Haider*'s great power lies in this very destabilization, using the ghost of Hamlet to give voice to the ghosts of Kashmir.

Adaptation as Intervention

Any rigorous analysis of Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* must begin by categorically rejecting the anachronistic and theoretically inadequate paradigms of fidelity criticism. For decades, the scholarly discourse surrounding adaptation was constrained by what Robert Stam describes as a "profoundly moralistic" vocabulary, one preoccupied with notions of "infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization and desecration," (Stam 54). This critical model, predicated on the flawed assumption

that a source text possesses a singular, "extractable 'essence'" or "transferable core" of meaning that an adaptation is obligated to reproduce, represents a critical dead end (57). As Linda Hutcheon argues, the "morally loaded discourse of fidelity is based on the implied assumption that adapters aim simply to reproduce the adapted text," a framework that completely ignores the complex political and aesthetic motives that drive creative reinterpretation (7). For a work like *Haider*, such a lens is not just inadequate; it is obstructive. The film is a prime example of a "potentially radical" (Loomba and Orkin 7) postcolonial strategy: one that involves "interrogating... Shakespearean texts not on Western terms but on those of indigenous cultures' resistance to... hegemony, using these texts as sites of 'cultural intercourse'... to 'write back' to the 'margins'" (95). The act of adapting a canonical text within this context is never a neutral act of translation; it is a strategic and often subversive political engagement. It is a process of transforming the canonical text into a "colonial battlefield," a site where inherited meanings are contested and where artists can "appropriate Shakespeare as their comrade in anti-colonial arms by offering new interpretations and adaptations of his work" (2). Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* is a definitive example of this interventionist strategy. The film's political intentionality is not a subtle undercurrent but its explicit, foundational principle. The very genesis of the project, as Bhardwaj recounts, was an affective and political awakening, a realization that the aesthetic frame of Shakespeare could contain the raw political trauma of Kashmir:

> One night, I woke up to find my wife, Rekha, crying while reading a book titled Curfewed Nights by Basharat Peer. She explained that it was a memoir of the writer's growing-up years in the nineties—the peak period of militancy in the Kashmir valley. A bulb switched on in my head. I strongly feel that Kashmir has been the biggest tragedy in modern Indian history, and no film has been made to capture the real tragedy. . .I began to read Basharat's book with Hamlet in mind. . . I held Basharat's hand and walked back in time with him to feel the pain, terror and tragedy of that time in Kashmir (Bhardwaj and Peer qtd. in Javed 2).

This mission to translate the pain, terror and tragedy of Kashmir to celluloid was a direct response to a history of cinematic misrepresentation. As Bhardwaj explains, "Our way of looking at Kashmir has

either been cosmic—only for shooting songs—or rhetoric, where we show a man in a *phiran*, holding a Kalashnikov. *Haider* is the first film where we see Kashmir from the inside" (Singh). This project of "writing back" is shared by screenwriter Basharat Peer, who, as a Kashmiri journalist, sought to dismantle decades of harmful stereotypes. His stated hope was that the film would "challenge the narrative constructed by previous mainstream cinema... 'Kashmiris have always been portrayed as crazy fanatics, or Kashmir simply seen as a picturesque tourist destination. This is a very different view.'" (Burke). For Peer, the creative process was a matter of taking "stories I had reported on and grafting them onto Shakespeare" (Chakravarti 129). This "grafting" of lived trauma onto a canonical framework is the core of the film's interventionist power. It is a complex negotiation with the colonizer's cultural capital, as Loomba and Orkin theorize: the appropriation of Shakespeare, then, does not always signal a desire to be 'nativist' or to return to some 'pure' indigenous cultural form. Rather, it is often a way of challenging the cultural authority of the coloniser in his own terms and on his own ground. The master's tools, in this view, can be used to dismantle the master's house. But such a process is never simple or unproblematic. The cultural capital of Shakespeare is such that any appropriation of his work is inevitably a double-edged sword, one that can both empower and constrain the post-colonial artist (1998).

Bhardwaj wields this double-edged sword with remarkable acuity, admitting, "I like to fire the shots from Shakespeare's shoulders [...] that gives me a lot of license" (Chakravarti 129). The choice of Hamlet was deeply structural, with Bhardwaj declaring, "Kashmir is the Hamlet of my film," signalling that the play's themes of betrayal, surveillance, and a state in moral decay provided the perfect architecture for exposing the injustices of the postcolonial state (129). The film relentlessly grounds Shakespeare's abstract anxieties in the material reality of the Kashmiri occupation. Bhardwaj observed that "in the local [Kashmiri] papers, it's all full of politics... When you go to Kashmir, the first thing you see [is that] the pain is in the air and there is a lurking kind of fear" (Young 9). This pervasive pain gives visceral weight to Hamlet's famous lament that "Denmark's a prison" (Shakespeare 2.2.242). In *Haider*, this is not a metaphor for existential angst but a blunt statement of

political fact, declared by Haider during his desperate search for his father across a landscape of military camps: “All of Kashmir is a prison” (Haider 00:37:43-00:37:47). This carceral reality is anchored in specific historical grievances. When Haider seeks to file a report for his missing father, the lawyer Parvez Lone cynically recounts a history of broken promises: “Pandit Nehru promised Kashmiris a plebiscite with the world as his witness. What happened? Let aside a plebiscite . . . Even the first condition of plebiscite: demilitarization. That did not happen” (ibid).

This fusion of Shakespearean structure with contemporary political critique is best understood through the theoretical tools of dialogism and the palimpsest. An adaptation, in Hutcheon’s terms, is an “inherently ‘palimpsestuous’ work, haunted at all times by [its] adapted texts” (6). In *Haider*, the audience sees both Kashmir and Elsinore simultaneously. The political urgencies of Kashmir interrogate and repurpose the source text, with the “to be or not to be” soliloquy serving as the most profound site of this transformation. It is no longer a private, philosophical meditation on suicide but a public, political indictment of state violence and the erasure of a people. Haider, seizing a microphone in a town square, performs his madness as a political tribunal, citing international law to frame his existential crisis:

> Hello, hello, mic testing, one, two, three, hello. . . can you hear me? Hello. . . UN council resolution number 47 of 1948, Article 2 of the Geneva Convention and Article 370 of the Indian Constitution raise one and only one question! Do we exist or do we not? If we do, then where are we? If we don’t, then where did we go? If we do, then to what purpose?... Did we ever exist or did we not? (*Haider* 01:26:37-01:27:16).

This initial salvo moves the question of ‘being’ from the metaphysical to the juridical, demanding recognition within the very legal frameworks that have been used to suppress Kashmiri identity. The speech then escalates, moving beyond a plea for existence into a radical deconstruction of the legitimacy of state power itself. He continues, mocking the very concept of jurisprudence in a lawless state: “Law and order, law and order... There’s no law, and there’s no order. The one with the power dictates the terms. It’s a ‘law and order’ built to suit them. India and Pakistan, they’ve been playing

games with us, and we're just the pawns caught on the borderline..." (*Haider* 01:28:24-01:28:57). This movement in the speech is the theoretical core of Bhardwaj's intervention. It demonstrates a profound philosophical shift: the initial question, "Do we exist?", seeks recognition from existing power structures. The subsequent deconstruction, "There's no law, and there's no order?" rejects those structures entirely. The soliloquy thus fully transfigures Hamlet's individual, existential crisis into a collective, political demand for self-determination, one that refuses the geopolitical binaries that have defined and erased the Kashmiri subject.

Ultimately, this framework of adaptation as a politically charged, hybrid, and dialogical process is essential for any meaningful analysis of *Haider*. It moves the conversation beyond simplistic questions of fidelity and allows for an appreciation of the film as a complex cultural act. It is a work that, in Hutcheon's words, is its "own palimpsestic thing," an autonomous and politically charged intervention that actively engages and rewrites its sources to speak to the present (9).

The Hauntological Condition

To comprehend the function of Roohdaar within Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* is to move beyond conventional character analysis and into the realm of the spectral. His very ontology is immediately problematized by his name, Roohdaar. Mookherjee states that: "The first syllable of his name (*Rooh*) translates roughly to spirit or soul, while the second syllable (*Daar*) translates roughly to one who owns or possesses. His name identifies him not as the 'soul of a doctor' but rather one who keeps, possesses or even protects the doctor's spirit, his essence' (5). He is not a self, but a vessel. This ambiguity is compounded by his own self-definition. When asked if he is a doctor, he denies the fixed status, offering instead a liminal identity that explicitly frames him as a conduit for a presence that is absent: "After diagnosing a man with the New Disease, Roohdaar denies being a doctor and instead identifies himself as 'the soul of a doctor'" (5). This de-ontologizing gesture aligns precisely with Derrida's philosophical project in *Specters of Marx* (1993), which seeks to displace the primacy of being with what he terms "hauntology." As Davis explains: "Hauntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is

neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (373). Roohdaar is the cinematic embodiment of this condition. As Derrida writes of the specter:

> The specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the revenant or the return of the specter (5).

Roohdaar, with his scarred face and limping gait, is a carnal form, yet his essence is purely spiritual, the lingering trace of the disappeared Hilaal Meer. His existence, which is simultaneously physical presence and incorporeal reminder, perfectly illustrates the spectre's status as a phenomenal body, one whose spiritual core manifests through the flesh only to dissolve back into absence. Derrida's hauntology is not merely a study of ghosts but a thinking of time itself, a recognition that the present is never self-sufficient. Roohdaar's very appearance confirms Hamlet's foundational cry that "The time is out of joint" (Shakespeare 1.5.188). As a revenant, he is a figure who returns from a space of absolute violence and erasure. His origin in the detention camp, a modern analogue to the grave, allows him to disrupt the corrupt present established by Khurram's usurpation. His spectral presence acts as an ethical injunction, a demand that the past isn't truly past and that a profound debt remains unsettled. Derrida posits that the specter's defining characteristic is its untimeliness, its radical disjuncture with the linear progression of history, a trait Roohdaar embodies as a living contradiction to the new regime's constructed reality.

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as a question of the ghost. What is a ghost? What is the *effectivity* or the *presence* of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is *there*, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes it also a *last time as well*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*.

This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being… It would harbor within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. (Derrida, 10)

Roohdaar*'s* arrival is this hauntological event. He is not merely a messenger; he is the message itself, the embodiment of a trauma that refuses to be buried. He is, in Derrida's terms, a "simulacrum that is virtually more actual than what is so blithely called a living presence" (13). His return is precisely the "repetition *and* first time" simultaneously, a historical recurrence that shatters the present as a singular, new event. His unstable existence, which is neither a firm reality nor a mere hallucination, certifies the ghost's power to interrupt the established political truth. His presence signifies that the political and familial order constructed by *Khurram* is built upon a phantom limb, an absence that aches with presence. In this way, Roohdaar manifests a permanent deferral of closure, a figure whose very being disrupts the historical continuity and projected endpoint of the narrative. "A specter is always a revenant," Derrida insists (11). "One cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back" (11).

The power of Roohdaar's injunction for revenge is derived from an "absolutely unmasterable disproportion" that Derrida terms the "visor effect" (7). In his initial encounter, Roohdaar approaches Haider via an intermediary, Arshia, ensuring that the necessary truth is mediated by an external, detached agent. This immediately establishes an asymmetry of knowledge; Roohdaar possesses a truth that Haider desperately seeks but cannot access on his own terms. This essential detachment and superior access to knowledge establish the spectral authority of the command.

This spectral someone other looks at us, we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part, according to an absolute anteriority (which may be on the order of generation, of more than one generation) and asymmetry, according to an absolutely unmasterable disproportion. Here, anachrony makes the law. To feel ourselves seen by a look which it will always be impossible to cross, that is the visor effect on the basis of which we inherit from the law (6-7).

Haider cannot cross the look of Roohdaar*;* he cannot verify the source of the injunction. He must accept the narrative of betrayal and the demand for vengeance on faith, a faith born of desperation and grief. This constitutes, as Derrida describes, the encounter with the ghost, an "essentially blind submission to his secret, to the secret of his origin: this is a first obedience to the injunction. It will condition all the others" (7). Haider is thus interpellated not by a subject, but by a specter, binding him to a course of action whose origins remain shrouded in the traumatic opacity of the detention camp. This spectral subjection ensures that his quest for vengeance remains entangled in the undecidable political and historical trauma of the region, preventing any clean resolution or establishment of verifiable truth.

Roohdaar's hauntological status achieves its most expansive political scope in this profound utterance, where he transcends the role of Hilaal's soul and becomes the very soul of Kashmir:

> Darya bhi main, darakht bhi main / Jhelum bhi main, chinar bhi main / dair hoon, haram bhi hoon / Shia bhi hoon, Sunni bhi hoon / main hoon pandit / Main tha, main hoon aur main hi rahoonga (I am the river, I am the tree / I am the Jhelum, I am the Chinar. . . I am the Shia, I am the Sunni / I am the Pandit / I was, I am, and I will always remain) (Haider, 01:14:13-01:14:40).

His spectral utterance marks a profound ontological mutation in which the individual subject dissolves into the eternal suffering spirit of Kashmir itself. Roohdaar is no longer just a character but the spectral essence of a region saturated with memory, violence, and political schism. He is the river that carries the bodies, the tree that witnesses the atrocities, the warring identities, and the enduring spirit that persists through it all. His temporal declaration, "I was, I am, and I will always remain," perfectly captures the untimely nature of the spectre, which collapses past, present and future into a single, haunting continuum. He is that which "is neither substance, nor essence, nor existence, is never present as such," but whose non-presence structures the entire narrative reality (Derrida xvii). He is the ethical injunction made spectre, compelling the living to reckon with an inheritance of violence and a debt to the dead.

If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of justice. Of justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer, let us understand where it is no longer present, and where it will never be, no more than the law, reducible to laws or rights. It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born (xviii).

Derrida's invocation of the specter as the necessary condition of ethics and politics situates Roohdaar's return within a horizon where justice itself is unmoored from law. Justice, for Derrida, is that which exceeds codification; it belongs neither to the past nor to the present, but to an unfulfilled and perhaps unfulfillable future. It must be spoken "in the name of those who are no longer and those who are not yet." His message demands an ethics grounded in the recognition of absence, an ethics that speaks to and with the ghost rather than about it. Roohdaar speaks in the name of this justice, a justice for the disappeared, for the silenced, for the land itself. He becomes the ultimate hauntological figure, the ghost of Kashmir. The justice he articulates cannot be legislated, because it concerns those whom the law cannot see. Roohdaar'*s* spectrality is thus not merely metaphysical but deeply political; he embodies a justice that must forever exceed institutional form. To speak through him is to speak from the wound of history, where the ethical demand to remember cannot be separated from the impossibility of restitution. Yet, the impossibility is not merely a failure; it is constitutive. Derrida's formulation reminds us that the ghost's address is necessary precisely because justice will "never be reducible to laws or rights." Roohdaar's haunting is therefore not a lament but a summons, a call to rethink the very grounds on which political being is recognized. His voice insists that responsibility is not exhausted by the present citizenry but extends to those who cannot participate in the social contract: the dead who were denied mourning and the unborn who will inherit the ruins of the denial.

The Liminal Space and the Powers of the Weak

The Kashmir of *Haider* exemplifies what Victor Turner conceptualizes as a liminal zone, a threshold space where the normative order of society collapses, and the distinction between life and death, self and other, sovereignty and subjugation becomes unstable. The film's 1995 setting situates Kashmir in a state of suspended crisis, perpetually oscillating between war and peace, visibility and disappearance. It is a territory haunted by uncertainty, where political violence and surveillance have rendered both the body and the psyche sites of profound ambiguity. Turner describes this state of liminality as one inhabited by those who exist outside conventional structures of meaning:

> The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon (95).

Within this framework, *Haider*'s Kashmir becomes the geographical and psychic manifestation of Turner's "betwixt and between," a landscape of spectral indeterminacy where the living and the disappeared cohabit. It is precisely within this threshold that Roohdaar emerges as the archetypal liminal persona: a figure of return and revelation, whose spectral existence blurs the ontological boundaries between the dead and the living, justice and vengeance, memory and erasure. Having survived the execution that claimed Hilaal, Roohdaar occupies a profoundly liminal position within *Haider's* necropolitical landscape. Neither fully dead nor completely restored to the domain of the living, he becomes what Turner calls a "threshold" person, suspended between ontological states and social recognitions. His spectral return to the world− limping, white-clad, scarred, and stripped of all worldly possessions − visually encodes this condition of radical in-betweenness. Roohdaar embodies

the erasure of status and identity that marks the liminal subject, existing outside the symbolic economy of both state and kinship. As Turner observes:

Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system—in short, nothing that may distinguish them from their fellow neophytes or initiands (95).

Roohdaar's physical and spectral austerity thus converge to signify a total evacuation of social being. His liminality is not merely symbolic but existential, a living testimony to the collapse of order and identity under conditions of political disappearance. In him, the abject body becomes a site of revelation, mediating between the worlds of the disappeared and the living, and transforming trauma into spectral presence. From this position of profound structural inferiority, Roohdaar wields what Turner, drawing on Lewis, identifies as the "powers of the weak" (99). His authority emerges not from institutional legitimacy or political capital but from his radical marginality and the moral authority conferred by suffering. In his spectral return, Roohdaar resembles the liminal figures of ritual specialists, prophets, or "holy beggars," who, though positioned outside the structures of power, derive an alternative potency from their exclusion. Their very dispossession becomes the source of a subversive form of agency, a sacred counter-discourse that unsettles hierarchies and gestures toward what Turner elsewhere describes as "communitas," the spontaneous solidarity that arises from the dissolution of social structure (96). Turner writes:

> In many societies, a terminological distinction is made between relatives on the father's and mother's side... The fact that continuous physical contact between the lineages involved is hardly possible is not ideologically important here, for the *bakologo* shrines are symbols and expressions of the Tale community... Such linkages are patently in their aggregate and transection more than merely personal or spiritual ties; they represent the ties of communitas

> countering the cleavages of structure. They are, moreover, bonds created from the 'submerged' side of kinship, the jurally weaker or inferior side (113, 118).

Turner's distinction between the structural and "submerged" sides of kinship, those bonds that arise from "jurally weaker or inferior side," provides a compelling analogue for Roohdaar's position within *Haider*. Like the *bakologo* shrines that express communitas through linkages beyond formal lineage or law, Roohdaar operates from the submerged side of social order. His moral authority emerges not from institutional sanction but from abjection itself, from the liminal space of disappearance, torture, and near-death that places him outside the visible structure of the polity. Yet it's precisely this exclusion that grants his speech its affective and ethical force. Roohdaar articulates the community's repressed truths because he no longer participates in its hierarchies; he embodies the paradoxical sanctity that arises when structural power collapses and only the solidarities of the suffering remain:

> In most societies, there are other areas of manifestation to be readily recognized by the symbols that cluster around them and the beliefs that attach to them, such as 'the powers of the weak,' or, in other words, the permanently or transiently sacred attributes of low status or position. In closed or structured societies, it is the marginal or 'inferior' person or the 'outsider' who often comes to symbolize what David Hume has called 'the sentiment for humanity,' which in its turn relates to the model we have termed 'communitas' (109, 111).

Turner's reflections on "the powers of the weak," those sacred attributes that accrue to those occupying positions of marginality or low status, clarify the paradox of Roohdaar's authority. In structured or closed societies, it is often the outsider who comes to embody what Turner, after Hume, calls "the sentiment of humanity," the affective ground of communitas that counters the divisions of structure. Roohdaar becomes precisely such an outsider-prophet: his liminal status grants him a sanctified moral voice within a landscape of silencing and fear. His diagnosis of the "New Disease" exemplifies the praxis of this sacred marginality: when he encounters the man paralyzed at his own doorstep, unable to cross the threshold of his home without being frisked, *Roohdaar's* response is not analytical, but ritualistic:

Arshia: “What’s with him?”

Old Mother: “I don’t know . . . These days, he just stands outside the door for hours. He doesn’t come in . . .”

Roohdaar: “Search him. Where are you coming from? . . . What’s in your pockets? ID?”

The boy immediately takes out his ID from his pocket. Roohdaar frisks the boy from head to toe.

Roohdaar: “Go, now.”

The boy quietly goes inside.

Roohdaar: “People have become so used to check-posts and body searches at every entrance that unless they are frisked . . . they fear crossing a door even to enter their own homes. It’s a psychological disorder called ‘New Disease’ . . .” (*Haider* 01:04:23-01:05:05).

This moment operates on multiple registers: political, ritualistic, and metaphysical. Roohdaar’s act of frisking is not merely a parody of militarized control but a profound dramatization of psychological colonization: the internalization of surveillance as ontology. By reenacting the violence of the checkpoint within the domestic sphere, he transforms domination into revelation. His action corresponds to what Turner identifies in Ndembu ritual as *ku-solola*, “to make appear, or reveal” (25). Through this embodied gesture, Roohdaar exposes the invisible pathology of a people who have absorbed occupation into the rhythms of everyday life, where fear itself governs movement and intimacy. The paralysis of the man at the threshold thus becomes a condensed image of Kashmir’s collective condition, caught between home and exile, belonging and suspicion. Roohdaar, as a liminal figure, inhabits this in-between space, transforming a scene of abjection into one of disclosure:

> What is made sensorily perceptible, in the form of a symbol (*chijikilu*), is thereby made accessible to the purposive action of society, operating through its religious specialists. It is the ‘hidden’ (*chamusweka*) that is ‘dangerous’ or ‘noxious’ (*chafwana*). Thus, to name an inauspicious condition is halfway to removing that condition; to embody the invisible action of witches or shades in a visible or tangible symbol is a big step toward remedying it (25–26).

Roohdaar's gesture thus performs a ritual of revelation: he renders visible the populace's invisible wound, transforming buried trauma into collective recognition. In doing so, he embodies the moral principle of "communitas" within a violently fractured polity. His words and actions consecrate the space of suffering as a threshold between silence and speech, law and disorder, death and return. From his position beyond legality and legitimacy, Roohdaar turns dispossession into revelation, marginality into moral resistance, and spectrality into an ethics of remembrance.

Roohdaar as Phantom

When Roohdaar is read solely through a Derridean hauntology in which the spectre functions as an ethical summons that exposes historical injustice and obliges the living to responsibility, his reappearance appears teleological: the past returns in order that the present may be accountable. Yet relocating Roohdaar within the psychoanalytic apparatus of Abraham and Torok radically displaces this teleology and reframes the spectre's political function. Roohdaar becomes not the moral ghost of justice but the pathological carrier of an encrypted trauma. His "message" is not revelation but repetition; his vengeance is not ethical duty but the symptom of a secret that refuses symbolic resolution. Derrida's formulation of inheritance makes clear that any ethical encounter with the past requires interpretive rather than blind obedience:

> An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can consist only in the injunction to reaffirm by choosing. 'One must' means one must filter, sift, criticise, and one must sort out several different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret" (18).

If inheritance demands sifting and judgment, the phantom forecloses that labor by converting the secret into a single compulsive imperative. Where Derrida demands an agonistic ethics of interpretation, the Abrahamian phantom substitutes compulsion for choice, enacting what Abraham and Torok outline as "transgenerational haunting" (3). This haunting is a "family secret, handed down to an unwitting descendant" through gaps, silences, and unspeakable words in a parent's discourse (16). They call this gap in knowledge "nescience," a not-knowing that nevertheless structures the

descendant's psyche (140). In this framework, the descendant's symptoms may "not spring from the individual's own life experiences but from someone else's psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets" (166). The phantom works through a pathological process of "incorporation," an instantaneous swallowing of the lost object or trauma that bypasses mourning's gradual work of "introjection" (125). The incorporated trauma is then entombed within a 'crypt,' a sealed-off vault within the subject's ego where the unspeakable loss is "swallowed and preserved" (126) whole, containing "words buried alive" (159-160) that continue to exert a powerful, directive influence from beyond the grave. These unassimilated fragments of "painfully lived Reality—untellable and therefore inaccessible to the gradual assimilative work of mourning," (141) generate a "ventriloquist" effect, whereby "a stranger within the subject's own mental topography" speaks in place of the self (173).

Haider's encounter with Roohdaar exemplifies such psychic inheritance. The phantom does not emerge to deliver truth but to implant a foreign trauma into the subject's interiority. The moment Roohdaar utters Hilaal Meer's 'final message," the scene ceases to signify revelation and becomes one of psychic contamination. Roohdaar's speech transmits a trauma that Haider neither lived nor chose, transforming him into a ventriloquized subject, a host for someone else's pain. The exchange between Haider and Roohdaar encapsulates this dynamic:

Haider: "You said you had a message from him... what it is?"

Roohdaar: "Revenge. Vengeance."

Haider: "Vengeance. Vengeance from whom? And why?"

Roohdaar: "To take revenge for a foul and unnatural murder... by a serpent of a murderer."

Haider: "You seem to have confused matters... my father was arrested by the army and one of these days... we will find out where they hold him."

Roohdaar: "It was Khurram who betrayed your father. The army crackdown in your village was not a matter of chance. And Ghazala had informed Khurram... Ghazala deceived your father and Khurram betrayed him. They live like a married couple is a proof of that."

Roohdaar further announces that it was Meer's last wish that Haider should take his revenge.

Hilaal: “Tell him to avenge my betrayal by my serpent of a brother. Tell him to aim his bullets at those cunning, deceiving eyes... that entrapped his mother... that made him an orphan.”

Roohdaar: “And his mother?”

Hilaal: “God will be her judge” (Bhardwaj and Peer qtd. in Javed 5).

In this register, Roohdaar’s “message” becomes the phantom’s implant: a fragment of another man’s unassimilated pain, his encrypted death wish, transmitted into Haider’s psyche as an imperative. Its affective influence is reinforced by its false legitimacy: the voice carries the authority of kin and the verdict of the dead, yet its provenance is pathological. Roohdaar becomes, in this sense, not a messenger of justice but an emissary of unmourned grief. His speech does not complete Hilaal’s death; it extends it into Haider’s life. This reading reveals a crucial contradiction between Roohdaar’s claim and Hilaal’s earlier characterization:

> A few minutes into the film, Ghazala (Gertrude) interrogates her husband, Hilaal Meer, who has just smuggled a known militant into their house for an emergency appendectomy. She asks him: *Kis taraf pe ho aap*? (Which side are you on?) His laconic response—*zindagi ki* (life’s)—sums up the approach that the film seems to adopt when faced with the uncomfortable questions of political intent and allegiance (Mookherjee 1-2).

This statement establishes Hilaal’s core ethos as a doctor and a humanist, an ethical position that transcends political binaries in favor of a universal imperative to preserve life. This ethical orientation renders implausible the later image of the father commanding his son to “aim his bullets” at his uncle’s eyes. Chakraborti identifies this dissonance as central to the film’s enigma:

However, the hypotextual enigma re-echoes here in the disparity between Roohdar's version of portraying Hilaal as a tormented figure seeking revenge for his prescribed destiny and Hilaal's portraiture in the initial scenes of being an excessively concerned doctor for whom saving a patient's life matters more than his own. Can a person, who even in the moment of crisis remembers to instruct medicinal doses to a militant-patient, think of avenging his own brother by making his son shoot at his eyes? (177).

Chakraborti's question reframes the issue: the problem is not whether Hilaal actually demanded vengeance, but how trauma can be misrecognized as fidelity. The phantom's deception lies precisely in this disguise. Where Derrida's specter calls for an interpretive sifting of the past as a demand to responsibility and deliberation, the phantom demands uncritical enactment. Haider's acceptance of the message thus marks the foreclosure of ethical deliberation: the triumph of incorporation over introjection. Haider's famous soliloquy articulates this collapse precisely:

> Shaq pe hai yaqeen toh, yaqeen pe hai shaq mujhe. . . / Roohdaar ka afsana sachcha ya jhoothi kahaani chacha ki. . . / kiska jhooth jhooth hai, kiske sach mai sach nahin. . . / Hai ki hai nahin bas yahi sawaal hai, / aur sawaal ka jawaab bhi sawaal hai. . . / Dil ki agar sunun toh hai, / dimaag ki toh hai nahin. . . / jaan loon ke jaan doon, / mai rahun ke mai nahin.
>
> (My conviction is born from my skepticism, My skepticism, from my conviction. Is Roohdaar's narrative the reality, or is my uncle's testimony the deception? Whose falsehood is truly false? Whose 'truth' is devoid of truth? Does it exist, or does it not? That is the fundamental query. And the answer to this query is itself a query. By intuition, it is. By reason, it is not. Should I take a life, or give my own? Should I be, or should I not be?) (*Haider* 01:37:44-01:38:55).

This oscillation between doubt and conviction dramatizes possession rather than moral reflection. Haider is "possessed not by his own unconscious but by someone else's" (Abraham and Torok 173). His agency is displaced into the service of an encrypted imperative, and his ethical reasoning becomes a casualty of psychological colonization. The mission of revenge, therefore, is not born of Haider's autonomous political will but is the translation of an inherited psychic fragment into behavioural demand. This is precisely the work of the "psychic 'crypt,' a kind of tomb or vault harboring the not fully confronted 'phantoms' (*fantomes*) or secrets from the analysand's earlier history" (Bellamy 21). The crypt preserves the trauma's opacity rather than transforming it. The political tragedy of *Haider* lies here: oppression reproduces itself through the unprocessed transmission of its own violence. The son becomes the medium of the father's unexorcised secret, and the colonial death-world perpetuates itself as psychic inheritance.

Roohdaar's ambiguity intensifies this pathology. His function is amplified by his inherent unreliability as a "double agent whose repeated switches in allegiance have made it impossible to discover his true identity," and whose name, as Khurram describes, is part of a "'ghost' identity, an endlessly deferred sign that hints at but never fully represents his character" (Mookherjee 5). This indeterminacy makes him the perfect carrier of the phantom's lie. His testimony cannot be verified because its origin is sealed in the crypt; its function is affective transmission rather than evidentiary clarification. The film thereby stages uncertainty not merely as epistemic limitation but as the structural form of transgenerational haunting: the secret Roohdaar imparts is not the factual content of suffering but the felt texture of humiliation: the degradation of torture that resists symbolization, ensuring that the pain remains unspoken yet active. This corresponds to what Lacan calls the *Real*: that kernel of experience that cannot be represented or domesticated by language. In this sense, Roohdaar becomes both the keeper and the symptom of the crypt: his words are the words buried alive that reopen in Haider the wound sealed in Hilaal. Haider's pursuit of vengeance is thus the repetition of the very logic of violence that destroyed his family. The crypt repeats what it cannot mourn.

Victor Turner's notion of liminality helps situate this dynamic within a social frame. Turner describes the liminal phase as a potential space of communitas: "The second [model for human interrelatedness], which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders" (96). Ideally, liminality enables shared mourning and reconstitution of social bonds. Roohdaar's injunction, however, collapses this potential by privatizing grief. The phantom transforms collective suffering into an individual mandate, turning the social wound of Kashmir's violence into Haider's personal vendetta. Instead of communitas, there is isolation; instead of collective testimony, compulsion. Turner's insight that "the passage from lower to higher status is through a limbo of

statuslessness" registers here as a tragic inversion: Haider is suspended in liminality without passage to communal reintegration (97).

The film's ethical counter-injunction to this pathology arrives in Ghazala's renunciation: "*Inteqaam se sirf inteqaam paida hota hai. Jab tak hum apne inteqaam se azaad nahin honge na, koi azaadi humey azaad nahin kar sakti*" ("Revenge only begets revenge. Until we are free from our own revenge, no other freedom can free us") (*Haider* 02:27:58-02:28:17). In her self-annihilation, she becomes a new spectral voice, offering Haider an alternative inheritance. Her words invert the phantom's logic. She refuses the translation of pain into action, insisting instead on the necessity of internal liberation. The paradox of her suicide, violence used to negate the compulsive logic of violence, underscores the impossibility of simple purification.

Critics who read Haider's refusal to kill Khurram as a narrative weakness overlook this psychoanalytic and ethical structure. As Mookherjee records, "Haider, ultimately, does not kill his maimed uncle who, in turn, pleads for the mercy of death. . . One reviewer points to this as the film's fundamental flaw, that it 'is a revenge melodrama featuring a suicidal, reckless hero who neither kills the villain nor dies in the end'" (2). This critique, however, misreads the film's deeper philosophical project. Haider's refusal to kill is not a narrative failure but an ethical act of exorcism. Haider's refusal reorients the narrative away from retributive closure toward the slow labor of mourning. It marks the shift from incorporation to introjection, from repetition to narration. The act of not killing is the first articulation of the ethical 'filtering,' the living subject reclaims agency by refusing to be ventriloquized. Davis clarifies the practical divergence between phantom and specter:

> What they call a phantom is the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego, still intent on preventing its traumatic and usually shameful secrets from coming to light. One crucial consequence of this is that the phantom does not, as it does in some versions of the ghost story, return from the dead in order to reveal something hidden or forgotten, to right a wrong or to deliver a message that might otherwise have gone unheeded. On the contrary, the

> phantom is a liar; its effects are designed to mislead the haunted subject and to ensure that its secret remains shrouded in mystery (374).

Davis cites Abraham and Torok's formulation: "*les lacunes laissées en nous par les secrets des autres*" (the gaps left in us by the secrets of others) to describe how the unconscious is perforated by the unspoken secrets of others, noting that "*Le fantôme des croyances populaires ne fait donc qu'objectiver une métaphore qui travaille dans l'inconscient: l'enterrement dans l'objet d'un fait inavouable*" (The phantom of popular beliefs therefore only objectifies a metaphor that works in the unconscious: the burial in the object of an unspeakable fact) (374). The phantom's lie, in other words, is not narrative deceit but a psychic defence designed to preserve unconfessed pain. Haider's refusal to kill, therefore, becomes a gesture of ethical filtration, an inheritance sifted rather than obeyed. As Davis later observes: "Phantoms lie about the past whilst spectres gesture towards a still unformulated future. The difference between them poses in a new form the tension between the desire to understand and the openness to what exceeds knowledge" (379). Haider's decision to walk away affirms this openness: he turns from the repetition of trauma toward the uncertain possibility of life. His final choice represents not narrative weakness but the first articulation of a post-phantom ethics, the courage to choose life.

In this view, Haider breaks the cycle. He walks away from the climactic act of vengeance, choosing the difficult path of liberation from retribution made possible by his mother's sacrifice. However, this reading is directly challenged by an opposing critical perspective that sees Haider's final choice not as an abjuration but as a refinement of cruelty. Chakravarti argues forcefully for this interpretation: "Haider's decision at the end to walk away from a grievously injured Claudius begging for release is not an abjuration of revenge but a reinforcement of it, since he wishes only to prolong his antagonist's suffering" (130-131). This darker reading suggests that the cycle of violence is not broken but merely transformed. Haider does not kill Khurram but leaves him to a fate worse than death, a prolonged agony that constitutes a more profound form of vengeance. This interpretation implies that Ghazala's sacrifice was in vain and that Roohdaar's phantom has ultimately triumphed.

As Chakravarti concludes, “The film rejects tragedy but not vengeance: Haider lives only to be able to cross the border to Pakistan to keep the cycle of revenge alive” (131). This film leaves this ambiguity unresolved. As Chakraborti observes, “the implied issue of Haider getting trapped and manipulated... echoes and re-echoes even after the film ends (177). The haunting persists.

Conclusion

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* stands as a masterful act of postcolonial intervention, transforming the existential despair of *Hamlet* into a searing indictment of the political trauma of 1990s Kashmir. In Bhardwaj’s hands, adaptation becomes an act of insurgency: a way of reterritorializing Shakespeare’s text within the geopolitics of occupation, exposing how universal humanist tropes fracture under the pressure of postcolonial violence. The film’s transformative power crystallizes in the figure of Roohdaar, whose unstable ontology makes him a site where politics, spectrality and psychoanalysis converge. Reading Roohdaar demands a confluence of critical frameworks, each illuminating, yet also disrupting, the other. Within a Derridean Hauntology, Roohdaar emerges as a paradigmatic ethical specter, the revenant whose temporal disjunction interrupts the corrupted present and demands an impossible justice for the disappeared. His liminality, in Turner’s terms, grants him “the powers of the weak,” enabling him to articulate a collective suffering of “communitas” from a position of radical marginality. Yet the psychoanalytic framework of Abraham and Torok complicates this redemptive interpretation. Seen as a “phantom,” Roohdaar ceases to be an ethical summons and becomes the return of an encrypted trauma, a ventriloquized symptom of the ungrieved dead. His message ceases to be an injunction for justice and becomes the transgenerational transmission of a psychic "crypt," a compulsive repetition of violence rather than an ethical choice.

The film’s denouement intensifies this theoretical impasse. Haider’s refusal to execute Khurram is not a closure but a provocation, an act that hovers between ethical transcendence and melancholic paralysis. Is it the exorcism of the phantom, the fulfilment of Ghazala’s plea to end the cycle of *inteqaam*, or merely another iteration of the same repetition compulsion that binds the living to the dead? The answer remains elusive. *Haider*’s enduring brilliance lies precisely in this refusal of

resolution. By suspending its audience within the same aporetic space that ensnares its protagonist, the film converts Hamlet's metaphysical dilemma into a political hauntology, an act of translation that reconfigures tragedy itself into critique.

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