

***Burning Paradise: A Comparative Study of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry and Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider***

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**Abstract:**

*Kashmir has become the perpetual battleground over the issue of possession between India and Pakistan. In the tug o war, both the sides have claimed the legal ownership on the land. People of Kashmir have become the citizens of 'no man's land'. Unrelenting violence, proxy war, terrorism, PoK, questions of Kashmiri Pundits, Kashmiri Muslims, and harsh realities of life in the heaven can be compared to Pandora's Box where people are just searching for their selves, their identity, peace in the valley; those who have migrated or were forcefully evacuated are in exile – physical and mental. Kashmir as a commodity is matter of debate. But those living human beings, the youth, the mothers, the fathers, sisters, brothers, children are dwelling in the country without 'post office', without any address, without any communication and any hopes of redemption.*

*Agha Shahid Ali in his poetry and Vishal Bhardwaj in his feature film Haider have at length expressed their concerns for Kashmir from different perspectives. This paper is an attempt to compare these two different genres of artistic expression in respect of treatment given to Kashmir into their creative genius.*

**Key Words:** *Kashmir, Kashmiriyat, Identity Crisis, AFSPA, Violence, Nostalgia, Fragmentation.*

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Mogul Emperor Shahjahan once said during his sojourn in Kashmir that, "If there is heaven on the earth, / It is this, /It is this, /It is this." These beautiful lines underscore the beauty and bounty of Kashmir in yester generations. But in course of continent's history, Kashmir has undergone many changes, political and religious phases.

Kashmir was paradise on the earth in respect of its geographical picturesque landscape and communal harmony where Kashmiri Pandits and Muslims co-existed in strong bonds of brotherhood. The idyllic beauty and lyrical scenery of Kashmir has inspired poets, artists to sing praises for it in their creative works. *Kashmiriyat* is often a synonym used for the composite culture that was prevalent in Kashmir. *Kashmiriyat* has infused the admixture of Hindu and Islamic religious, cultural and musical traditions. It weaved the strong fabric of Hindu-Muslim bonding, communal harmony and socio-religious co-existence in Kashmir.

But in course of time political greed and lust for power has paved discord in religious harmony. It disturbed the socio-cultural texture of Kashmir. Now, Kashmir has become the perpetual battleground over the issue of possession between India and Pakistan. In the tug o war, both the sides have claimed the legal ownership on the land. People of Kashmir have become the citizens of 'no man's land'. Unrelenting violence, proxy war, terrorism, PoK, questions of Kashmiri Pandits, Kashmiri Muslims, and harsh realities of life in the heaven can be compared to *Pandora's Box* where people are just searching for their selves, their identity, peace in the valley; those who have migrated or were forcefully evacuated are in exile – physical and mental.

Kashmir as a commodity is matter of debate. But those living human beings, the youth, the mothers, the fathers, sisters, brothers, children are dwelling in the country without 'post office', without any address, without any communication and without any hopes of redemption.

So today Kashmir is a burning paradise carrying the relics of broken relations where people forlorn in their motherland and just preserving the fragmented memories of their lost relations and loved ones.

This paper attempts to compare a film, *Haider*, by Vishal Bhardwaj which focused on Kashmir in its backdrop and poetical world of Agha Shahid Ali who overtly and covertly writes about Kashmir as an indivisible part of his Diasporic imagination. The paper focuses on Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, diasporic themes in his poetry and Kashmir as a central locus in his poetic world. It deals with Vishal Bhardwaj's critically acclaimed masterpiece and a part of his Shakespearean trilogy Haider (*Macbeth-Maqbool*, *Othello – Omkara*, *Hamlet – Haider*). It synthesizes the Kashmir in Ali's poetry and Kashmir in Bhardwaj's Haider. It compares on the basis of issues, questions of diaspora, geographical alienation of Agha Shahid Ali and mental alienation of Haider, the problems of mother land i.e. of Kashmir as a recurrent theme in Shahid Ali's poetry and Ghazala, the mother, who symbolizes Kashmir for whom all wars are waged.

#### [I]

**Agha Shahid Ali** was born on 4 February 1949, Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir. He was migrated to America and devoted his life for poetry writing. He was teacher of creative writing. He died of cancer on 8 December 2001 at Amherst, Massachusetts. His creative works claim him the tag as a Kashmiri poet. Agha Shahid Ali has written these poems to his friends and mentioned it at end of every poem. It shows his deep concern for Kashmir and his friend from Kashmir.

His poetry collections include *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country Without a Post Office* and *Rooms Are Never Finished*, the latter a finalist for the National Book Award in 2001.

He introduced and popularized the genre of *Ghazal* in English. Ghazal became powerful medium to convey his deep down hurts for his Kashmir. For him only ghazals would be able to articulate his longing and sorrow his heart suffers from exile in foreign land. He talked about introduction of this new genre to English literature in his introduction to *Ghazal*, **Call Me Ishmael Tonight (2003)**:

Ghazal can be traced back to 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. In its canonical Persian (Farsi) form, arrived at in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it is composed of autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain, and line length. The opening couplet set up the scheme by having it in both lines, and then the scheme occurs only in the second line of every succeeding couplet --- i.e. the first line (same length) of every succeeding couplets sets up a suspense, and the second line (same length but with the

rhyme and refrain – the rhyme immediately preceding the refrain) delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding.

[19:2003]

His love for Kashmir can be seen from the poems and ghazals he has written in English. His Diasporic imagination longs for his mother land India and his paradise Kashmir. His nostalgia for Kashmir its *imambaras* (mourning houses), the sense of community, *pashmina* shawls, *shikaras* (boat houses), lakes, cliffs and serenity and purity of his land and many other issues are aptly reflected in his poetic world.

The story of Ishmael in the Holy Koran left an unforgettable impression on Agha Shahid Ali. The sacrifice of Abraham and Ishmael are landmarks in the history of civilization as quoted in the Koran:

**...do as thou art bidden;  
Thou shalt find me, God willing,  
One of the steadfast  
[The Koran, Surah 37:102]**

Ali talks about this story in his *Foreword to Call me Ishmael Tonight* as:

Directed by God, Abraham says to his son, Ishmael, “I see in a vision that I offer thee in sacrifice.” Differing from the Old Testament story Abraham and Isaac, the sacrifice is demanded not only of Abraham, but also of Ishmael. Ishmael’s willingness to be sacrificed (as in above epigraph) heightens the beauty of God’s redemption where He says, “This is indeed a manifest trial.” [From *Foreword, 17-18:2003*]

This book of Ghazals reveals readers his inner world longing for Kashmir, sacrifices of Kashmiri people, re-membrance of Karbala, as in title Ghazal (Call me Ishmael Tonight), exile, migration, uprooted feelings, home sickness, love for language, reading in between the lines of cultural, linguistics nuisance etc.. Agha Shahid Ali depicts his love for his home i.e. Kashmir in a Ghazal *I have Loved*

I must go back briefly to a place I have loved  
To tell you those you will efface I have loved

[23:2003]

His longing and memories for Kashmir and its language are expressed in the poem *Arabic* as:

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland-  
Says Shammās: Territorialize each confusion  
in a graceful Arabic.  
They ask me to tell them what Shahid means –  
Listen: it means “The beloved” in Persian,  
“witness” in Arabic.

[25:2003]

*Rooms are Never Finished (2002)* is collection of poems and ghazals. It deals with his experience at Amherst. It is all about the story at Karbala, marasiya, elegies of Muslim poets who express their grief on the death of Prophet's grandsons Hasan and Husein in the battlefield of Karbala. It talks of *imambara* – the house of sorrow. It clubs the legends of Kabala with Jesus and reflects the importance of Karbala sacrifice for both the religions. The title poem talks of 'Many of my favorite things are broken' [55:2002]. These lines are used as an epigraph written by Mario Butta. It hints at the agony of poet on the loss of Kashmir his beloved home land in a poem *By the waters of the Sind*:

...the moon must rise now from behind  
That one pine-topped mountain to find  
Us without you. I stare at one guest,  
Who is asking Father to fill them  
In on –what else? – the future,  
Burnishing that dark gem  
Of Kashmir with a history of saints, with  
Prophecy, with kings, and with myth,  
And I want them to change the subject  
to these waters that must already  
be silver there where the moon  
sees the Indus empty [52:2002]

*The Half-Inch Himalayas (1987)* is early collection of Ali. It highlights the diasporic experience of poet in America. He remembers his home in Kashmir. 'Postcard from Kashmir' talks of the exile, memory, nostalgia, loss of memory, fragmented self. It is an experience of remembering the place/homeland through pictures, persons, their memories, activities and artifacts. It is an effort to connect the roots of origin. It creates imaginary homeland miniature cosmos of Kashmir. It is like reliving the landscape through mindscape *via* postcard, people and poetry, Sufi saints etc...

#### **Postcard from Kashmir**

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,  
My home a neat four by six inches.  
I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.  
This is home. And this the closet  
I'll ever be to home. When I return,  
The colors won't be so brilliant,  
The Jhelum's waters so clean,  
So ultramarine. My love-  
So overexposed.  
And my memory will be a little,

Out of focus, in it

A giant negative, black and white, still undeveloped. [1:1987]

*Country Without Post Office (2013)* is collection of poems that highlights the predicament of Kashmir at present, its destruction due to militancy, aggravated political issues, AFSPA, loss of generations, lost of human bonds, broken communication and loss of address which symbolizes that people do not exist, they can't be communicated, all links of communication are wiped out. Title poem '*The Country Without Post Office*' questions the existence of *Kashmiri* people. Title poem has an epigraph by G.M. Hopkins, "...letters sent/To dearest him that lives alas' away" [37]. It meticulously expresses the loss of identity of Ali and his Kashmir. The poems in the collection recurrently focus on this identity fragmentation and loss of self. Ali remembers every nuisance of day to day life in Kashmir and disturbed patterns of peaceful co-existence. It genuinely brings out the horrors of excessive military interference and terrorist activities in Kashmir. He expresses it aptly in this poem:

Again I have written to this country  
 Where a minaret has been entombed.  
 Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps.  
 In mustard oil, each night climbs its steps  
 To read messages scratched on planets.  
 His fingerprints cancel blank stamps.  
 In that archive for letters with doomed  
 Addresses, each house buried or empty.  
 Empty? Because so many fled, ran away,  
 And become refugees there, in the plains,  
 where they must now will a final dewfall  
 to turn the mountains to glass. They'll see  
 us through them—see us frantically bury  
 houses to save them from fire that, like a wall,  
 caves in. the soldiers light it, hone the flames,  
 burn our world to sudden papier-mâché.  
 Inlaid with gold, then ash. When the muezzin  
 Died, the city was robbed of every Call.  
 The houses were swept about like leaves  
 For burning. Now every night we bury  
 Our houses-and theirs, the ones left empty.  
 We are faithful. On their doors we hang wreaths.  
 More faithful each night fire again is a wall  
 And we look for the dark as it caves in.[37:2013]

Thus Kashmir becomes the indivisible part of Ali's memory. It becomes store house of Diasporic imagination for him. It celebrates the sorrow and remembering of loss of his motherland, the painful conditions of the people victims of terrorism in Kashmir.

### [II]

*Vishal Bhardwaj* is a well-known musician and a creative director. He differs from his contemporaries in terms of his cinematic vision and artistic concerns in his works. He is director who explores the dark corners of human psyche. His works such as *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider* are cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*. These adaptations are area of research in Comparative Studies and Film Studies.

His adaptations are not mere literary or cinematic transformations but in some respect they surpass the original by juxtaposing them in Indian context more effectively. In case of *Haider*, Hamlet talks about the dilemma of a son who is haunted by his father's ghost to avenge his wicked brother. It also underlines the Oedipus complex if analyzed from psychoanalytical perspective. *Vishal Bhardwaj* very dexterously brings these thematic concerns and critical aspects in his *Haider*. It not only speaks about all the problems of *Haiders* (Hamlet's dilemmas) but interweaves brilliantly in its narrative the horrors of Kashmir in backdrop. At certain point of time, *Haider* is an individual work deeply rooted into the spirit of Kashmir and openly debates the past and present horrors of Kashmir. Thus *Haider* has surpassed *Hamlet* by making it universal as well as deeply located into its local ethos and pathos.

*Haider* gives *in-camera* view of Kashmir. The landscape, schools, homes, broken homes, ruins of home, curfew, alienation of Kashmiri youth from entire Indian milieu, problems of parents to give their children better education in democratic conditions, disappearance of people, raids and parades of Kashmiri people, havoc of militancy and excessive use of AFSPA relates the story of Kashmiri people prominently. Here one can compare the images and memories spread across the poems and ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali.

The story of the film revolves around three major characters *Haider*, *Ghazala*, his mother and *Khurram* his uncle and step father. It is story of love, betrayal and lust that has torn the familial bonds of a Kashmiri family. Dr. Hilal, *Khurram*'s brother, is betrayed *Khurram* for the purpose of marrying his wife *Ghazala*. *Haider* son of Dr. Hilal and *Ghazala* is sent to Aligarh Muslim University for education to save him from militancy and terrorism. Dr. Hilal is harassed and enlisted as 'disappeared'. On the pretext of his involvement in nurturing a militant, he is considered as a separatist. He is shifted from camps to camps. *Haider* comes home from Aligarh University to search his father.

He is working on his doctoral thesis on rebellion poets. He himself is a poet. His rebellious poems are considered as a sign of anti-integration and threat to security. He refers Anantnag as Islamabad. He is interrogated by Military officer. Arshiya, a journalist helps him out from this situation. *Haider* witnesses intimacy between his mother *Ghazala* and his uncle *Khurram*, who is an advocate by profession. He is searching for his father who was captured by Army on the



accusation of treating a militant in his house. He is also searching the culprit who informed this news military. His search for his lost father '*Hum Hai Ki Hum Nahi*' raised the question of existence and belonging, question of identity, condition of mental alienation and suffering of innumerable Kashmiri people who were evacuated from their homes and living in refugee camps like Kashmir pundits.

Ghazala lives the life of half-married and half widow. She is waiting to be full married or full widow. She is unable to undergo the tortures of being half-widow or half-married. It hints at the predicament of women in Kashmir under the havoc of militancy and special powers to military.

He comes to know about the truth from 'Ruhdar' who calls himself as soul of Dr. Hilal. He narrates the whole story of betrayal of Khurram and conspiracy to remove his brother from Ghazala's life. He narrates the tortures of military that have hounded on Dr. Hilal and other captives. It also narrates the tactics used by military and deployment of people like Khurram for killing the militants and suspected militants by militants. By doing so, it is shown as their internal conflict. Once realizing the truth, he speaks the inner conflicts of common Kashmiri people who are in the situation of 'to be or not to be' '*Hum Hai ki Hum Nahi*' in the square scene. Haider talks of Chutspa, ironical twist and parody of AFSPA. It hints at the predicament of Kashmiri people after independence. Neither Pakistan nor India considers them as a full citizen of any of these countries. It highlights the enigma of national identity. It connotes the political games that politicians have played for last seven decades. Thus Kashmir has become the complex and perpetual cite of political controversies. Needless to say, common people are easily neglected in the power politics.

Film deals with multiple layers of human life personal and national history. It focuses on psychology of love and longing, lust and betrayal, on one hand where as psyche of revenge, separatist tendencies and forgiveness on the other.

Haider is trapped between promise given to his father to kill his brother, to complete his revenge where as hopes of new era by forgiving as Ghazala says, '*Jab tak hum intkam se azad nahi hote, hame koi azadi nahi milegi*'. It is path his grandfather has talked about to the separatist and extremists that revenge would generate revenge; violence will bounce back with violence. Only non-violence would prevail. Finally, Haider chose the path suggested by his mother by not killing his uncle who is already reduced to wretched status and panting for the death.

Film is rich in its imagery and symbolism specially the stark whiteness of the snow, the darkness of the night, graves and bloodshed on the white snow. It hints at the burning paradise, broken relations, Ghazala stands for Kashmir. Haider her legitimate son and Khurram who has snatched her from his brother are in conflict to claim her. She is no man's land.

### [III]

Kashmir portrayed in Agha Shahid Ali's poetic world can be witnessed differently in Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic world Haider. Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir is mindscape of beautiful home

with composite culture and memories of childhood enriched with different languages and literatures. His ghazals are garnished with inter-texts from other poets. His Ghazals and Bhardwaj's Ghazala represents Kashmir, forlorn mother (land). Both are torn between beauty of past, love and longing of home; bleeding present and bleak future amid the emergence of terrorism, evacuation of Kashmiri Pandits, villages without post offices etc... Ghazala alludes to Kashmir where Khurram and Haider are fighting to own her. But in the process, Ghazala faces death as Kashmir is bleeding. Ghazala wants to save her son from hatred and bloodshed so Kashmir wants to see her children happily dwelling in its valleys.

*Armed Forces Special Power Act* is debatable and protested in Kashmir and North East states of India. *Irom Sharmila Chanu* has been fasting for over two decades for revoking this act and expelling army from the states to bring normalcy for common people. It would help them to lead a normal civil life where excessive indulgence and powers of Army have resulted into chaos, disorder and nightmares in the lives of citizens of the states. As this act confers special powers to Army that it can arrest, evacuate, interrogate any person in the these states as well as it can destroy the homes of common people in the suspicion of links to militant organization who are threat to national integrity and security. Kashmiri people have to carry their Identity cards all the time. Bhardwaj has brilliantly portrayed this problem of loss of identity or need to be continuously prove their identity in a scene where a Kashmiri youth stops at the door of his own home, but does not enter into the house. Ruhdar asks him about the identity card, he interrogates him like army and then allows him to go inside. Then he enters into his home. This subtle comment of the AFSPA denotes the psychological conditioning of Kashmiri people both in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry and Bhardwaj's Haider.

Agha Shahid Ali writes about curfew, villages without post offices, and destroyed homes in his poems such as *Rooms are Never Finished* or *Country Without Post-office*. It can be visualized in Haider. Agha's grief expression for Karbala war can be witnessed in *marasiya* and processions in Haider where Haider and orphan children, widows, mothers and sisters are searching for their fathers, brothers and sons. Their search ends in grave yard as Haider finds his father in a grave named after a number. This loss of identity is ever haunting theme in Agha Shahid Ali's poetic imagination.

Death and elegy, expressing grief and *marasiya* or Matam over his martyrdom of innocents like Dr Hilal, Arshiya and finally Ghazala who dies for the sins of others as Kashmir is paying the price of Pakistan's betrayal. Coincidentally, the grief is expressed by the persons who are in real life named as *Shahid* which means *beloved in Persian and witness in Arabic*. The use of Faiz in backdrop by both Agha and Bhardwaj hints at the Kashmiri backdrop and hopes of new valley regarding bright future, '*Gulo mein Rang Bhare, Bade naubahar Chale, Chale bhi aao ki gulshan ka karobar chale*'. It underscores the composite culture and Kashmiriyat that would save the paradise for further complete burning. This feeling of togetherness and harmony can lead Kashmir once again towards to the peaceful heaven.



Thus, Both Agha Shahid Ali's poems and Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider bring out the deep concerns of Kashmir and its people who are waiting for their complete identity as an individual of society and as a citizen of a country.

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