


## The Poetics of Affective Resistance: Bhardwaj's Refiguring of *Haider* as a Site of Protest

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 ishmal Bhardwaj's *Haider* transposes Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* into the fractured, fragile and unstable political landscape of 1990's Kashmir—a region in India that continues to scar with brutalities, of militancy, disappearances, and the dominating presence of Indian military under the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). The plot focuses on the personal struggles of a young student from Aligarh Muslim University after he returns to Srinagar to find his father missing and his mother entangled in a love affair with his uncle. The fabric of Shakespeare's narration is woven through the intricate realities drawn from Basharat Peer's *Curfewed Nights*. Together, these sketch Kashmir's figurative character and reimagine its core. Kashmir turns into a haunting metaphor for Bhardwaj, whose lineage wanders within the intersections of hushed resistance, stifled justice and faint rebellion. As Bhardwaj affirmed in an interview, Kashmir is the Hamlet of his film. Bhardwaj stays true to the emotional challenges, everyday experiences, and nuanced representation of Kashmir's social reality as experienced by locals. *Haider's* cinematic frames, directorial vision and poetic anguish are uniquely inspired by shades of suffering that do not collapse into mourning. Instead, they transcend tangled desires, connecting longings and emotions to a plane of reason, as inspired by the liminalities of Shakespeare's stage. Bhardwaj dwells within a vulnerable, numbing uneasiness

that becomes palpable through frosty silences and desaturated acoustic textures. Silence operates not as absence but as affective pressure. Extended pauses, muted interiors, and snow-laden long shots suspend dialogue, allowing ambient sounds, the crunch of footsteps, distant military hums, and unanswered telephones to assume narrative force.

Scenes of disappearance are structured around sonic withdrawal, where abrupt audio cuts mirror psychic rupture. Even the *azaan*, drifting across the valley, oscillates between diegetic realism and interior echo, converting everyday sound into existential unrest. This restrained soundscape is punctured by moments of acoustic intensity, most notably in “Bismil,” staged against the ruins of the Martand Temple, where rhythmic percussion and erratic choreography fracture the film’s prevailing stillness. Yet the sequence offers no catharsis. Instead, it exposes betrayal and moral decay, amplifying unease rather than resolving it. Through this oscillation between silence and sonic excess, Bhardwaj crafts cinematic poetics in which emotional paralysis and affective resistance coexist. Uneasiness becomes both atmosphere and method. It is symbolic of an acoustic strategy that renders Kashmir’s suspended temporality audible, compelling the viewer to inhabit grief as a lingering, unresolved vibration rather than a complete tragedy. In capturing this stillness, he edges closer to the sinking of Kashmir and seeks comfort in the cultural richness of the past, evoking emotional cadence and poetic interventions that are long lost yet deeply remembered. Sorrows and grief form the lingua franca of Kashmir’s tragic potential, prompting today’s pivotal query: “whether tragedy dies or simply mutates.”<sup>1</sup> These tragic echoes, born of social renewal and a “sense of enhanced human possibility,”<sup>2</sup> mutate anew in our present.

Adaptations, especially within global Shakespeare studies, are viewed as translations and transcultural revisions, forming a central pillar of modern critical interpretations. Critics increasingly reject fidelity as a productive framework for reading *Haider*’s relationship to *Hamlet*, arguing instead that the film operates as an autonomous political and aesthetic text shaped by the historical trauma of Kashmir. A major strand of criticism, particularly in the work of Taarini Mookherjee and Julia Hoydis, challenges fidelity-based approaches that measure the film’s “accuracy” to Shakespeare.

Hoydis conceptualizes *Haider* as a “contact zone,” where Shakespeare’s global circulation intersects with the local realities of militarized Kashmir and the testimonial memory embedded in Basharat Peer’s *Curfewed Night*. Rather than being a simple act of indigenization, the adaptation becomes a site of crossmapping, where *Haider* reveals communal conflicts and maps a “revisionist agenda that captures both hidden political realities and a haunting refiguration of Shakespeare.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Mookherjee reads the film through the lenses of absence and repetition, identifying a poetics of disappearance that resonates with enforced disappearances and the figure of the “half-widow.” Here, spectrality becomes not merely thematic but structural, shaping narrative temporality and visual framing.

A second critical pillar concerns spatial politics and haunted landscapes. Scholars describe *Haider*’s Kashmir as a terrain structured by “absent presences,” where domestic and civic architectures, homes, cinemas, and schools are converted into interrogation centers and militarized zones. This spectral cartography reframes the Shakespearean ghost motif within a politics of occupation, transforming the question of filial revenge into a meditation on sovereignty, memory, and erasure. The film’s bleak *mise-en-scène* and suspended temporality thus become central to its tragic reconfiguration. From a structural and cognitive perspective, critics such as Kowsar and Mukherjee approach the film through conceptual blending and bricolage. They argue that Bhardwaj refashions Kashmiri folk idioms, Bollywood performance conventions, and Elizabethan tragic structure into a hybrid aesthetic form. This blending produces what might be termed projective empathy; the Danish prince’s existential dilemma is re-situated within a contemporary ethical impasse shaped by militarization and insurgency. Comparative analyses, including that of Fatimah Javed, further emphasize the film’s radical departure in its ending, where revenge yields to renunciation. *Haider*’s refusal to perpetuate violence reframes tragedy within the frame of ethical withdrawal, positioning survival and non-retaliation as gestures of political resistance.

Despite this rich body of work, critical attention has largely privileged thematic, comparative, and sociopolitical readings over the film’s formal and affective strategies. While scholars

have compellingly mapped *Haider's* spectral geographies and political revisions, less sustained attention has been given to how the film's acoustic design, musical architecture, and performative traditions operate as sites of dissent. This paper addresses that gap by foregrounding sound, music, and embodied folk performance, particularly the Kashmiri tradition of Bhand Pather, as modes of affective and passive resistance. Rather than treating sequences such as "Bismil" as ornamental spectacles, this study reads them as ritualized interventions that transform cinema into a sensory site of protest. The choreography of bodies in snow-laden ruins, the interweaving of folk satire with narrative revelation, and the layering of voice, echo, and silence collectively produce an acoustic politics that exceeds dialogue-driven rhetoric. In this framework, dissent is not articulated primarily through speeches or overt ideological declarations, but through rhythm, repetition, and spatialized sound. The use of Bhand Pather, historically a satirical folk theater tradition, reclaims suppressed cultural memory and reactivates collective spectatorship within the diegesis itself. Performance becomes testimony; song becomes indictment.

By centering sound and spatial choreography, my analysis repositions *Haider* within adaptation discourse as a film that enacts resistance through affect. If earlier scholarship has demonstrated how Bhardwaj revised Shakespeare at the level of plot, character, and political allegory, this study extends that argument to cinematic form. The film's affective textures, its mournful refrains, ruptured silences, and ritualized performances, transform adaptation into an embodied practice of reclaiming silenced spaces. In doing so, *Haider* emerges not only as a transcultural Shakespearean revision, but as an acoustic and performative reimagining of dissent, where Kashmiri subjectivity is articulated through cultural performance rather than overt political rhetoric.

### **Alternating silence against ghazals and soundtracks**

Vishal Bhardwaj's reimagining of Shakespeare does not merely relocate philosophical conflict into a postcolonial landscape; it dislocates Hamlet's inward, rational hesitation and redistributes it across a collective, affective field shaped by enforced disappearances, militarization, and suspended justice. Tragedy, in this register, no

longer unfolds through soliloquy or deliberation alone but emerges through atmosphere, silence, and sensory pressure. This shift resonates with Linda Hutcheon's understanding of adaptation as an intentional act of creative reinterpretation rather than faithful reproduction. It retains a recognizable narrative framework while re-contextualizing and politically re-signifying the text within a new cultural and aesthetic horizon. Bhardwaj's narration, thus, moves beyond abstract doubt and ethical paralysis into an affective domain where sound, silence, and spatial emptiness become the primary vehicles of tragic consciousness.

This affective reorientation is materially inscribed through the film's visual and acoustic grammar. A desaturated palette, expansive snow-laden long shots, and sparsely populated frames diminish individual agency, visually subordinating personal revenge to collective history. Continuity editing is largely maintained, yet strategically ruptured at moments of performative exposure, most notably in the "Bismil" sequence, through cross-cutting between Haider's theatrical indictment and Khurram's reaction shots, recalling Shakespeare's play-within-the-play and unsettling narrative stability. Within this suspended visual field, music assumes a structuring rather than an ornamental role. Bhardwaj repeatedly blurs diegetic and non-diegetic registers. The azaan drifts through the valley as ambient sound yet reverberates as interior unrest; silences are punctured by unanswered telephones, distant gunfire, intrusive footsteps, and the gravedigger's abrasive sonic interruptions. Songs such as "Aaj ke Naam" and "Bismil," alongside the performative grammar of Bhand Pather, translate political anxiety into collective expression, converting personal grief into communal memory. Through this oscillation between muteness and acoustic intensity, Bhardwaj does not resolve tragedy but sustains it as a living condition, preparing the ground for a cinematic language in which silence and song alternate as registers of affective resistance.

These musical interventions recount the seasons of life through the cultural idioms deeply embedded yet increasingly neglected in a terror-stricken Kashmir. Khurram and Ghazala's wedding celebration unfolds to the rhythms of a Kashmiri folk song sung by ladies and accompanied by the *tumbaknari*<sup>4</sup> and *riq* drum.<sup>5</sup> The song, "रोष वाला म्याने दलिबरो, पशिन बहरा आव योर वल्लो"

(Come, my beloved. Finally, the spring has arrived.) serves as a celebration of love within the contextual settings but also revives the cultural idioms that continue to lose their melodies against the cacophony of violence. The song functions as a comic interlude in the Shakespearean sense, recalling festive pauses that heighten tragic tension rather than alleviate it. However, within this reconfigured temporality, naivety and innocence overlap with betrayal and the web of lies, as cultural celebration coexists uneasily with moral decay. The traditional ceramic *tumbaknari* reappears later when Khurram performs a musical assertion of dominance over Ghazala, appropriating folk sound into a hypermasculine register. Once collective and participatory, the music of the *tumbaknari* becomes passive, reduced to an aesthetic echo stripped of its original context. The fragile, rustic presence of these instruments symbolically revives the muted voices of the masses, restoring cultural memory even as it exposes how such traditions are rendered ornamental within structures of power.

Ghazala's voice occupies a more volatile sonic register. It is haunting, eroticized, and intimate, preserving familiar archetypes while gradually fracturing them through agency. Her songs and silences are not merely maternal or seductive; they are politically fraught. Domestic tenderness is repeatedly infiltrated by the acoustics of militarization, boots, gunshots, and official announcements bleeding into private space and destabilizing emotional refuge. Bhardwaj often frames Ghazala within thresholds, doorways, windows, and mirrors, visually splitting between mother, lover and accomplice. Her pauses, lowered gaze and eventual withdrawal function as counter-sonic gestures, resisting both the militarized state and Hamlet's inherited masculine rage. Ghazala's final act, choosing death on her own terms, is rendered through cinematic minimalism. There is no lingering song, only silence. This absence becomes louder than music, transforming the soundscape into ethical rupture. In this moment, silence ceases to be passive; it becomes tragic surplus—an awareness that agency persists precisely because it is doomed.

A similar doom is palpable in the Kashmiri song, “चैसमे लूसमि म्ये प्यारन, काटे चुख त्से पान पैरन यावुन चू केल सोरन, पोषण बहारा आव योर वालू” (I lost my sight in your longing. You still adore yourself? Beauty fades by tomorrow. Come my beloved,

spring has finally arrived). Highlighting the loss of true sight and transience of beauty, the loss of innocence evokes Shakespeare's Ophelia, and the tragic consequences she faces. The song is a lyrical ode to the "violet in the youth of primy nature, / Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting, / The perfume and suppliance of a minute; / no more" (1.3.7-10).<sup>6</sup> The affective textures, tonal modulations, and Arshiya's body language make her a significant aural presence, reverberating with modesty, humility, and innocence. Arshiya's death is a lament—the loss of innocence and naivety as a consequence of human affliction. It meets the audience as a lingering sadness intertwined with lost hope. She is not a quintessence of dust alone, but an innocence that springs violet in this sterile promontory.

Arshiya's loss sweeps the greenness of human experience and devoids *Haider* of all hope. After her death, *Haider* becomes a tragic catastrophe that surrenders to universal decay; all hopes for a comic resolution are lost. She voices grief, loss, and suffering that permeates human relationships. And yet, Arshiya refuses to act in self-preservation. Her lament is as tragic as it is beautiful; it reminds us of an innocence related with a heavy heart. The abstraction of this grief, lament, and suffering is localized through Kashmiri song: "बट्टि नाइ दूरी, चूम ज़राई बामराइयो क्या कर होउ थाम" (This separation from you, I can no longer bear it. I will wither away young. What am I to do?). When Arshiya sits on a bench amidst the white snow, she unties the red muffler she had woven for her father. The image is an intimate glimpse into her emotional turmoil. Her youth wilts away into awareness of the violence that surrounds her, reminding us of her insignificance in this complex nexus. Questioning the arrival of spring, Arshiya longs for the "new breeze of spring that grants blossom their hues," just as Kashmir longs for liberty from the vicious wheel of systemic violence.<sup>7</sup> The poetic intervention of Faiz's *ghazal* is a stark reminder of the hearts that suffer at the awareness of life. As Faiz writes, "और भी दुःख हैं ज़माने में, मोहब्बत के सवि, राहतें और भी हैं, वसूल की राहत के सवि" (There are sorrows in this world beyond the pleasures of love. There is more to happiness than the relief of reunion). Arshiya's grief, inflicted by personal relationships, transcends the limits of the personal to recount the suffering of the collective.

Arshiya's narrative arc is shaped by emotional, spatial, and visual coldness. Kashmiri song associated with her foregrounds the transience of beauty and the erosion of innocence, recalling Shakespeare's Ophelia while relocating her fragility within a militarized modernity. Arshiya's body language, tonal restraint, and diminishing vocal presence render grief as withdrawal rather than outcry. Bhardwaj increasingly isolates her within desaturated frames, alone in snow-covered landscapes or enclosed within sparse interiors, allowing stillness to register as affective inertia. Her suicide is staged not as spectacle but as disappearance, completing the gradual freezing out of her desires and voice. Unlike Ghazala, whose silences confront and destabilize power, Arshiya's silence marks the violence of being unseen. She shows how modern femininity collapses under intersecting regimes of patriarchy, surveillance, and loss. Together, these women expand the grammar of resistance in *Haider*. Sound, dance, and silence articulate a politics of becoming in which agency does not always sing or perform, but sometimes survives as refusal, withdrawal, or a devastating quiet that continues to inhabit the viewer's moral imagination long after the screen fades.

### **Layering resistance with a radical politics**

Folk traditions, grounded in oral cultures and collective responses to lived experience, articulate shared communal identities that run parallel to, and often against those archived by dominant historical discourse. Their humor, melody, satire, and allegory function as cultural weapons, foregrounding aural and spatial presence as passive yet persistent intervention into existing power dynamics. Across South Asia, traditions such as *Tamasha* in Maharashtra, *Nautanki* in Uttar Pradesh, and *Jatra* in Bengal deploy similar vocabularies of exaggeration, parody, and affect to challenge cultural and political hierarchies without relinquishing ritualistic tenderness. In a highly politicized space such as Kashmir, folk traditions embody a dual character. They are celebratory and performative, yet simultaneously critical, encoding dissent through improvisation and allegory while remaining anchored in communal memory. In *Haider*, this alternate cultural logic reshapes cinematic language itself.

Everyday rhythms, sounds, hues, and gestures are transformed into metonymic vehicles of social and political renewal, recalling suppressed memories and heterogeneous identities without threatening the musicality or emotional cadence of lived experience. They rework ordinary events rather than interrupting them; waiting and endurance become habitual. When these rhythms surface in weddings, lullabies, or street performances, they resound with communal memory without declaring protest. Their power lies in familiarity. They evoke the persistence of everyday life rather than the overt declaration of resistance. Similarly, hues and gestures operate metonymically through restraint. Muted whites and greys register emotional numbness, while sudden intrusions of color, for instance, blood, a red scarf, or bridal fabrics condense private loss into shared affect. Gestures such as silence, hesitation, or partial participation in rituals layer dissent through withdrawal rather than confrontation. Embedded within routine sensory life, these elements allow political meaning to accumulate quietly, preserving emotional cadence while displacing dominant narratives from within.

This layered resistance finds visual articulation in Bhardwaj's winter-bound *mise-en-scène*, where Kashmir's coldness is announced even before it is spoken.<sup>8</sup> Snow drifting over abandoned houses, fog swallowing entire stretches of the valley, or skeletal trees standing as witnesses construct an ecology of absence in which warmth has been drained not only from the landscape but from history itself. The persistent whiteness of the valley is punctuated by stark contrasts that function like sonic interruptions—black and grey pherans, red bloodstains, charred ruins, and the earthy browns of crumbling architecture. Phenomenologically, winter emerges as a season of suspension, where life retreats beneath surfaces and time stalls under cold gusts of air. Bhardwaj's fog-laden frames are not merely atmospheric, but dialogic, visually screaming emotional distance and psychic numbness. Moments of warmth, such as earthy clothing or domestic interiors appear hollow when set against darker ruins as *Haider* confronts betrayal and exhaustion, making devastation sensorially and ethically palpable. Often built on a “highly developed process of thinking in images”<sup>9</sup> and sounds, the essence of this alternate culture consists of “forbidden emotions, raw vernacular vocabulary, riddles, secret codes, and non-rational images.”<sup>10</sup>

Sound and poetry further intensify this radical politics by animating what might otherwise remain unspeakable. As we peruse *Haider's* Kashmiri songs, the marital celebrations and their contrast against Arshiya's lament, the raw emotions substantially add to the philosophical, grey depths of the counterculture that Bhardwaj intends to establish. The sadness lingers as the audience leaves the cinematic frames with rippling melodies of "*Aaj ke naam*," "आज का ग़म कहीं ज़िदगी के भरे गुलसितां से खफ़ा ज़रद पत्तों का बन" (There are sorrows in this world beyond the pleasures of love. There is more to happiness than the relief of reunion.). Faiz's invocation, creatively blends with the political, linguistic subversion, subtly highlighting, "राहतेँ और भी हैं वसूल की राहत के सवि अन-गनित सदयों के तारीक बहीमाना तलिसिम, रेशम ओ अतलस ओ कमखाब में बुनवाए हुए जा-ब-जा बकिते हुए कूचा-ओ-बाज़ार में जसिम, खाक में लुथड़े हुए खून में नहलाए हुए" (There is more to life than union of lovers. The blight of dark magic of years beyond counting, while draped in silk, satin, and brocade; everywhere, in alleys and marketplaces, young flesh is up for sale). Faiz's verses, speaking of suffering beyond love, of bodies traded in marketplaces, of blood-soaked histories, transform individual grief into collective awareness, recalling Shakespearean negation where suffering deepens empathy without collapsing into mourning. Like *King Lear's* vision of life's cheapness, Bhardwaj's use of "*Aaj ke Naam*" insists on an ecstatic negation that breaks and remakes social order, creating a larger self from destruction and fostering attunement with collective pain.

Faiz's poetic resurrection within Kashmir's volatile landscape lends political and ideological subjectivity to Bhardwaj's poetics. It creates an eerie resonance with personal struggles trailing off into public terrains, blurring memory with incessant longing and expressing elegiac resistance against brutalities. Faiz's *ghazal*, "*Gulon mein rang bhare*," hopes for the arrival of spring in the dusk of autumn, echoing an infectious resilience layered with affective textures and awareness of the tragic necessities of being. His invocation calls for poetic justice to withered flowers or the young buds, and longs to fill them with vivid hues. It brims with emotional urgency to stop their withering and allow the garden to flourish with its daily business. "*Gulshan ka karobar*" (daily business) finds newer depth when seen in line with Kashmir, as its

political background denies its people even the basic mundanity of lived human experience. The realization of a monotonous routine is a privilege, yet to be earned. Thus, Faiz's outcry for a revolution, cloaked under the guise of a romantic longing, highlights a political awakening in Bhardwaj's poetics. His political intervention is self-reflective and critical of promised homelands. Faiz's progressive reflection becomes a spatial underpinning that mediates tragic potential in Kashmir's landscapes. It runs in strange directions, vividly capturing the web of lies, corruption and anguish that timelessly connect human conditions in the past with the present. Faiz's vision edges to the brink of longing for a musical abstraction that breaks the cyclic mundanity of the cultural, political, and social fabric governed by law. He so longs for a political upheaval that it refuses to converge with the celebration of human existence.

### **Converging sounds with space**

These personal outcries, tears, dirges, and muted screams, coalesce into the mournful refrain of "Jhelum hua khaara," where grief renders the river saline and unresolved. Bhardwaj's cinematic restraint in capturing Jhelum is crucial. The dead bodies float directionless across the slow stream in static, contemplative frames that resist urgency or spectacle. The camera lingers, refusing to cut away, allowing the weight of absence to settle into the image. Sparse, low-register instrumentation underlines a dull heaviness, while the near-absence of dramatic orchestration opens an affective vacuum in which ambient sounds, like the hush of flowing water or the silence between notes, dominate the acoustic field. This sonic minimalism does not heighten emotion; it numbs it, mirroring how Kashmir itself drifts within frustrated cries of collective suffering, leaving its people suspended in emotional, physical, and political trauma. The imagery drains individuality from the dead, rendering them unnamed and unspoken, as the river tends to these bodies with indifference. Sadness clings to the coldness of the water; a coldness emblematic of the perpetual struggle over the warmth of human relationships, which quietly succumb to an abyss of mourning that offers no respite.

The Jhelum River thus becomes more than a backdrop. It embodies memory and burial, a living witness that listens to

distressed shrieks and holds suffering within the depths of its flow. Bhardwaj turns to the river's fluidity to impose a fragile order upon destructive chaos, evoking a longing for the prosperity and cultural intimacy that once adorned its banks. Through wide, desaturated frames and measured pacing, Jhelum emerges as a spatio-temporal metaphor, a border that separates yet blurs the spaces between the living and the dead, presence, and oblivion. The true spirit of Kashmir, once rejoicing in cultural footprints etched into the whiteness of snow, is now drenched in the sanguinity of violence, yet refuses erasure. By displacing Shakespearean archetypes into this flowing archive of grief, Bhardwaj creates a dialogue with the masses, using the river as a metaphor to preserve what stands veiled in neglect and on the verge of being lost. Jhelum offers no comfort. Instead, it leaves its people wandering within the uncomfortable silences of the dead, insisting that what is buried is far from forgotten. This convergence of sound and space extends into Bhardwaj's use of folk instruments, the *tumbaknari* and *riq* drums, whose fragile timbres voice a democratic yearning without declamation. Their rhythmic cadence captures popular affect as a dynamic tension between hopelessness and will, belief and exhaustion.

These instruments, crafted out of mud and clay, recall organic ways of living and affirm a passively resistant space grounded in cultural memory. The same grammar underwrites "Bismil," staged amid the ruins of the Martand Sun Temple. Long-shot frames mask folk performers against eroded stone pillars, as circular choreographies and diegetic percussion refunction ritualized folk performance into an aesthetic mode of accusation. The sequence refracts Shakespeare's "Mousetrap" through Kashmiri folk theatre, turning dance into testimony. The Martand Temple holds "something of the rigidity and strength of the Egyptian temple and something of the grace of Greece."<sup>11</sup> Yashee, in the article titled "Martand Temple in Kashmir: Its grandeur survives, and so do its controversies,"<sup>12</sup> argues that the temple "is known distinctively as Kashmirian and owes much to the influence of Gandhara,"<sup>13</sup> which emerged in Northern India following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, subtly gesturing toward the influence of Byzantine architectural modes. The muted, fog-laden frames are thus set against evocative cultural images, generating a sense of nostalgia for a once inclusive and heterogeneous social fabric.

“The Mousetrap” in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is portrayed in the song *Bismil* where Haider performs at the center of the stage, wearing ghungroos on his arm and an eagle-shaped mask covered with colorful threads. The use of colorful masks to challenge the authority of the king supplants Shakespeare’s clown/jester with the 500-year-old folk tradition of Bhand Pather, a popular form of folk theater. Satiric in its nature, the dramatic art form is a localized, Kashmiri variant. Other forms include *Dard Pather* in Afghan, *Gosaine Pather* that focuses primarily on religion, and *Bakarwal Pather* that exposes exploitation, among many others. By using the local Kashmiri form, the protagonist highlights the tale of personal betrayal, murder, and loss through a unique combination of dance, music and dialogue. Haider’s body becomes the site of narrative revelation as the audience places him adjacent to the cinematic framing of the song. His dance is erratic, self-lacerating, and confrontational. The choreography fractures classical masculinity. It is neither heroic nor romantic. It is, in fact, hysterical, excessive and vulnerable. Sounds and movements expose the rot of patriarchy rather than soften it. Haider’s personal struggles also offer a glimpse into the sad state of affairs in Kashmir when seen in unison with his performance at Lal Chowk Tower.

Haider’s seemingly lunatic behavior at the Ghanta Ghar (Clock Tower) acquires a sharper political inflection, extending satire into civic confrontation. His madness is not merely performative, but figurative. It is a desperate attempt to make sense of the confusion, neglect, and institutional oblivion that define Kashmiri lived reality. Personal grief exceeds private boundaries; his outcries no longer mourn individual loss alone, but dissolve into a chorus of collective anguish, collapsing the divide between the personal and the public. Grief acquires a shared grammar, aptly invoked as “*dard ka rishta*” (The empathetic bond of suffering) by Faiz, where loss is simultaneously civic confrontation against cultural anchorage. While “*Bismil*” stages Haider’s intimate turmoil, his disbelief at maternal betrayal and his uncle’s unpunished crime, the Chowk performance articulates the defiance of a citizen, blending the particular with a universal language of grief, sadness, and suffering. Bhardwaj’s use of handheld camera movement and medium-long shots to capture the restless crowd encircling Haider mirrors Haider’s psychological disorientation even as it energizes

the space as a performative arena. The repeated visual anchoring of the clock tower situates the scene firmly within Srinagar's political geography, transforming individual lament into public address and exposing the entrenched violence, trauma, and psychic fractures that continue to structure everyday life under oppression.

Contrasting these political dimensions to the performative and creative cohesion at the Martand Temple, the sequence unravels and revives Kashmiri identity, offering an alternate cultural image and a poetic anchor against mainstream oppression. A long shot of the masked performance vividly captures Noets of Kashmir, similar to the Ghatam of South India or the Matki of Rajasthan, accompanied by rubab players, indicating cultural journeys and reminiscences of the past. Rubabs, the national instruments of Afghanistan, accentuate the mulberry tree's wooden textures; "they are tuned to the notes of the *raag* ('melodic mode') being deployed and reinforce the sound of each note as it is played."<sup>14</sup> *Haider* explores the art of storytelling and dwells within the experiential realities, accompanied by these cultural reminiscences—the bits and pieces from all parts of the world. The organic nature and inclusivity of this background music thus establish affective textures and cultural depth for the narrative. As the folk artist in the documentary *Indus Blues* insisted, "In playing a *tambura*, we are immersed when playing it. . . . You can only imagine how it affects the listeners."<sup>15</sup> The *tambura*, in Hindustani classical music, is used to create the base note, *adharaswara*: "The performer (singer or musician) then builds the rest of the vocals and music using this base note as a reference."<sup>16</sup> This background music does not subdue the vocals, or the lyrics, but instead accompanies and enhances the melody. Bhardwaj's choice of instruments, the use of the *ghazals* and the invocation of the richness of hybridized Indian culture is a loud image that offers an anchor to the thoughts of the contemporary tragic heroes in *Haider*. It positions them within a transcendental imagination that highlights lack and abundance, being and becoming. The materialization of grief, betrayal, anguish, and helplessness conspicuously contributes to an acoustic crescendo that aims to evoke a communal harmony where an audience actively and viscerally participates. Through music, the film asserts a subjectivity that lures its listeners into existential leaps.

The soundtracks establish “an alternative society governed by love, not law...actively construct[ing] a counterculture, a community of visionaries who will live by the questions” they pose.<sup>17</sup> This counterculture requires an intellectual, linguistic, emotional, political, and social reversal and a “great deal of honest probing to get close to.”<sup>18</sup> As is often acknowledged through studies, the ideas of this counterculture have largely been derived from the excluded orders of India’s political or social upheavals, causing subversive beliefs in societies. They are driven by a hunger “for human freedom, a sense of the world’s inexplicable mystery and the conviction that each of us forms some personal relationship to that mystery.”<sup>19</sup> The movement’s passionate intensity was designed to break all beliefs limiting the spontaneity of human experience. Faiz’s *ghazal*, “*Hum dekhenge*,” then becomes a lyrical manifestation of a political upheaval that linguistically subverts the conventional confines of the law and seeks to augment the counterculture when he says: “all God’s creatures will rule, those like me and those like you.”<sup>20</sup> His political vision declares the political supremacy of the masses, “Every crown will be flung. Each throne brought down.”<sup>21</sup> Bhardwaj’s intervention thus highlights prolonged demands for social and economic equality. The *ghazal* is an equal collaborator in the quest “to find the dimensions of the human heart and mind, and to readjust the world we live in—to wrench or crack it open—so we might drop old prejudice.”<sup>22</sup> Sound here does not decorate space but revives it. Rivers remember; ruins speak; squares listen. By binding acoustic restraint to charged locations, Bhardwaj forges a cinema where resistance emerges through the alignment of sound with space until silence itself becomes an address.

### Conclusion

Vishal Bhardwaj does not simply transpose Hamlet into a contemporary political crisis. In fact, he reworks the very ontology of tragedy to speak from a world where justice is deferred, and memory stands under siege. Kashmir, conceived as the emotional and ethical analogue of Shakespeare’s Denmark, becomes a space where time does not progress linearly, but circulates through repetition, haunting, and suspended anticipation. In this fractured temporality, cinema ceases to function as a medium of resolution

and emerges as a durational experience that compels the viewer to remain with grief, uncertainty, and moral unease. Bhardwaj's most radical intervention lies in his commitment to affective form. Sound, silence, and folk performance are not subordinate to narrative meaning. In fact, they constitute the ethical core of narration. Extended silences, ambient withdrawals, and restrained musical textures render absence palpable, allowing the violence of disappearance, betrayal and erasure to register without spectacle. Tragedy thus migrates from soliloquy to atmosphere, from individual cognition to a shared sensory field where emotion circulates collectively. The oscillation between sonic excess and acoustic restraint, between lament and muteness, sustains tragedy as a lived condition rather than a completed arc. Within this framework, folk traditions and poetic invocations assume critical force.

The integration of Bhand Pather, Kashmiri songs, and ghazals animates a countercultural grammar grounded in repetition, ritual, and communal memory. These forms do not declare resistance overtly. Instead, they practice it through familiarity, endurance, and affective continuity. The recurring presence of Faiz Ahmed Faiz intensifies this politics of quiet insistence. His verses, woven into the film's sonic and emotional fabric, translate private sorrow into collective awareness, foregrounding suffering that exceeds romantic loss and gestures toward historical and structural violence. Faiz's poetics does not promise redemption, but hold open a space for ethical reckoning, where pain becomes the ground for solidarity rather than closure. *Haider*, as a cinematic adaptation, conceptually extends agency by articulating resistance, whether through action, speech, or revolution, which survives as refusal, withdrawal, or a silence that refuses assimilation. Figures such as Ghazala and Arshiya expand the grammar of dissent by embodying forms of agency that are fragile, constrained, and tragic, yet no less politically resonant. Their silences confront power differently—one through ethical negation, the other through devastating erasure. Together, they reveal how modern tragedy fractures along gendered lines, exposing the uneven costs of survival within militarized and patriarchal structures.

In reclaiming cinema as a sensory and performative archive, Bhardwaj aligns film with embodied memory rather than

institutional history. Rivers remember what official records erase; ruins speak where language fails; music and silence transmit what cannot be safely articulated. *Haider*, thus, becomes a cinematic site of passive resistance, where cultural idioms long relegated to the margins are figuratively refined and revived as vehicles of political and ethical thought. Tragedy neither resolves nor redeems; it lingers, mutates, and insists. *Haider* compels us to reconsider the fate of tragedy in the contemporary world. It suggests that tragedy does not die under modern conditions of surveillance, violence, and bureaucratic law; rather, it adapts, dispersing itself across soundscapes, bodies, and spaces. By foregrounding affect over catharsis and endurance over resolution, Bhardwaj reclaims tragedy as a mode of listening—a sustained attentiveness to suffering that resists erasure. It transforms Kashmir’s silenced grief into an enduring ethical vibration, one that continues to resonate long after the screen fades to black.

### Notes

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