



Between Misappropriation and Erasure: Revisiting *Haider*'s Cinematic Silence on Kashmiri Hindu Identity

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ABSTRACT

This essay critically examines the lack of representation of Kashmiri Hindu identity in Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014). As an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the film primarily projects the existential dilemma and conflicts over Kashmir, overshadowing the plight of the identity crisis faced by the displaced Kashmiri Hindu community. While selectively prioritizing certain narratives in the valley, the movie omits their tragedy reducing it to a backdrop for political and personal dramas, unhearing of their cries. The essay problematizes *Haider* for its selective representation as well as for reinforcing intergenerational and transgenerational trauma, challenging collective memory and perpetuating cultural erasure in the psychology of the marginalized Hindu minority. Thus, it locates the cinematic portrayal and narrative within the larger discourse of identity politics of the survivors.

KEYWORDS: Kashmir, Kashmiri Hindu, Identity, Displacement, Trauma, *Haider*

Introduction

Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, begins with a disclaimer postulating the movie's fictional nature. The disclaimer positions the film as purely fictional, bearing no resemblance to any persons or events in particular. However, the cautionary undertone of the preface that attempts to distance itself from the political realities of Kashmir, inadvertently underscores the issue of selective portrayal, which becomes almost equivalent to nonrepresentation or worse the erasure of its Kashmiri Hindu (KH) minority.

This paper critiques such selective portrayal of trauma in *Haider* and examines its implications on identity, collective memory and cultural erasure. It aims to investigate the film's narrative strategies and politics of representation, arguing that the directorial omission of crucial socio-political realities affecting the Kashmiri Hindu community carries grave implications for historical memory and identity. The movie's disclaimer locates *Haider* alongside other cinematic representations seemingly framed on creative expression, artistic imagination and interpretation alone. However, by selecting Kashmir for transposing the turmoil of Scotland, the director makes the intent of his choice unmistakably political, despite the disclaimer implying otherwise. The historical, socio-political and emotional baggage of Kashmir is employed to amplify the themes of Shakespearean tragedy. Thus, the film draws the viewer back to the original premise that neither the regional landscape as a backdrop nor the context of the narrative is incidental to the plot.



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Nonetheless, the infusion of themes of betrayal, displacement and personal loss is problematic due to the exclusion of the Kashmiri Hindus from the narrative fabric altogether. The lack of representation omits the experiences of the community, including their seventh and most recent forced exodus of the 1990s.

Kashmiri Hindus are an indigenous Hindu minority native to the valley. They have been an integral part of Kashmir's rich socio-cultural, philosophical, religious and intellectual legacy. The community has faced centuries of persecution and six recorded mass exoduses resulting in multifaceted violence, displacement and deep inter as well as trans-generational trauma.

The oppression of the Pandits or the Hindus in Kashmir is not a nascent phenomenon. In fact, a close reading of history confirms that the native Hindus have been victimised by successive Muslim/Afghan rulers in the valley leading to mass exodus in various phases over the centuries to Jammu and other parts of northern India. (Banerjee 11)

The historical backdrop becomes crucial for understanding how cinematic representations like *Haider* selectively negotiate memory, identity, and trauma within the Kashmiri landscape. Meanwhile, Bhan, in his seminal text notes that the historic waves of multiple havocs headed by invasions, resulted in religious persecution of Kashmiri Hindus. Beginning from the late fourteenth century, under the reign of the sixth Sultan of Shah Miri dynasty, Sultan Sikandar also known as Sultan Sikandar Butshikan (1389–1413), the religious intolerance against the Hindus intensified, which led to their first major exodus.

Besides destruction of temples, he also ordered prohibition of Hindu rites, rituals, festivals and various traditional customs. As a ruthless intolerant ruler he imposed jizya or taxes on the Pandits besides trying desperately to convert them to Islam. In order to avoid conversion, thousands of Pandits had to flee to the Jammu region. Bhatta Mazar or the graveyard of the Pandits (near Rainawari in Srinagar), is a living testimony even today of the ruthlessness of the tyrannical Sultan Sikandar, as those Pandits who refused to leave or resisted conversion of faith were burned alive here. (Banerjee 11)

Each successive period deepened the mass persecution and displacement of the natives. Through 1506-86, 1753-77, 1806-20, 1931, 1947-48 and 1989-ongoing, the widespread uprooting has permanently scarred the certitudes of identity and home for Kashmiri Hindus. From late 1989 onwards, the communal tension flared across the valley and continued to grow worse, culminating in their seventh recorded exodus. Rahul Pandita in *Our Moon Has Blood Clots: The Exodus of Kashmiri Pandits* recalls that something had begun to change significantly during that period. It was in the air, something you couldn't see, but could feel and smell (Pandita 2013). The threatening sloganeering, death threats, broad daylight murders and rising terrorism systematically intimidated the bereaved families, pushing them into an increasingly vulnerable state of existence.

In hindsight, the acts of terror unleashed on innocent victims in Sangrampora, Budgam in March 1997, Gool in June 1997, Wandhama near Ganderbal in January 1998 and Nadimarg, Pulwama in March 2003, made it clear that Pandits were not safe in their own land (Kaul 2015). Similarly, Colonel Tej K Tikoo historically recapitulates the trajectory of deteriorating condition of Kashmiri Hindus leading up to the 1990s terror violence. He documents the gruesome killings of Shri Tika Lal Taploo, Pandit Nila Kant Ganjoo, Sheela Koul (Tikoo), Ajay Kapoor, Prem Nath Bhatt and many more innocent victims. The spectacle of these murders was meant to set a precedent for the rest of the community. The night



of January 19, 1990, now marked as Exodus Day, became a watershed moment that irrevocably shaped the future of the minority community.

Those who had organised such a show of force in the middle of a cold winter night, had only one objective; to put the fear of death into the hearts of the already frightened Pandits...[t]his frenzied mass hysteria went on till Kashmiri Pandits' despondency turned into desperation, as the night wore itself out (Tikoo 2013). The unleashed macabre punctured the ethos of Kashmir and the community braced each loss as a personal tragedy. Even post January 1990, the routine targeted killings continued to claim the lives of Kashmiri Hindus. Tikoo refers to a survey conducted by the Centre for Minority Studies, Jammu and Kashmir State, to highlight the disparity in the figures of killings¹ in 1990. He contrasts these discrepancies with the considerably lower figures as cited by Raman Bhalla, State Government's Minister of Rehabilitation in 2010. This inconsistency is not isolated, other sources provide varying numbers² for the killings of Kashmiri Hindus, indicating the numbers may have been understated. The variation underscores the lack of an immediate response in documentation (let alone protection) by the then State government. This gap also reflects underreporting, institutional apathy³ and attempts at creating spaces for conflicting narratives to emerge. In the absence of any authoritative figures published by the state government about the total number of non-Muslims killed in Kashmir during the past two decades, voluntary/non-government organisations and private agencies have put such number at 2,500. Out of this figure, the number of Kashmiri Pandits killed stands at 1,800 (Tikoo 2013).

The shortage of comprehensive documentation as evidenced by this variation, and in many cases, the complete lack of data on acts of violence against Kashmiri Hindus, obscures the scale of the atrocities and complicates efforts to categorize the crimes as not equating to genocide but simply ethnic cleansing (National Human Rights Commission 22). Although, the proposed distortion can't diminish the gravity of the tragedy. It does hinder the formulation of a consistent legal⁴ and historical narrative. The underrepresentation and failure to take into cognisance the catastrophe of victims, coupled with victim blaming and shaming, perpetuates their marginalization, deepens their trauma, and pushes them into forced exile.

Forced Exiled: Echoes of a Shattered Home

What is exile? What does it do to the displaced – to their identity, their uprooted sense of self and their idea of home?

Exile doesn't entail mere physical dislocation from previous places of existence. Rather, it becomes an enduring state that severs individuals and/or groups from their anchors of belonging. There is a nuanced difference between exile and forced exile, though they might seem interchangeable. While exile may be voluntary or self-imposed, wherein individuals choose to depart from their homeland to escape oppression or for better opportunities, mostly economic. On the other hand, forced exile refers to situations where individuals or groups are compelled to leave their homeland due to violence, or persecution. The slight distinction lies in the primary choice of departure as opposed to the lack of agency or coercion. Forced exile is accompanied by systematic violence caused due to abrupt severance from one's roots. Thus, it carries a deeper sense of trauma and loss. Forced exile compels individuals such as in the case of Kashmiri Hindus, an entire community to navigate collectively through uncertainties of homelessness.

Significantly, the forced exile of Kashmiri Hindus is often misleadingly termed as 'migration' in official as well as colloquial records. Migration implies a voluntary movement, motivated by factors such as



economic opportunity, better living standards, or personal choice at the least. Far from it, the targeted killings, gruesome torture of Kashmiri Hindus, looting and burning of their property, kidnapping and raping of Hindu women, desecration and destruction of Hindu temples⁵ which began to take shape in the valley from 1989 onwards, paint a different picture. They were unwelcome in their native land and forced into distress sales of ancestral property and eventual exile.

Thus, terming forced exile 'migration' not only misrepresents the massacre and consequent exodus of the Kashmiri Hindu community, but also attempts to dilute the gravity of the entire sequence of events. Such nomenclature becomes a rhetorical shield that obscures violence and silences trauma. Equating forced exile with migration reduces the gruesome experiences and violent uprooting to a mere act of voluntary movement. This, in turn absolves those in authority from their responsibility and shields the perpetrators of the massacre from their share of accountability. It fosters a cycle of denial and the accumulation of trauma, adding more profound layers of suffering for the survivors.

The displacement is intrinsically connected to the perpetual search for home and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), which is triggered each time the wounds of the past are recalled. In a study conducted on adults of the displaced Kashmiri 'migrant' families (three hundred families) residing in Muthi camp at Jammu, it was observed that "[d]epression, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and generalized anxiety disorders (GAD) were statistically more prevalent among migrants than in controls" (Banal et al. 154).

Hence, when cinema as a cultural artifact virtually erases the existence of the minority community, its trauma, and subsequent displacement, it not only distorts historical memory of a collective but also perpetuates a selective narrative that further marginalizes an already silenced group. Consequently, the marginalisation and symbolic erasure, continuously add to the horrors of the ethnically cleansed community. The absence in representation denies visibility and validation. Additionally, it challenges the thin strands of identifiers which the displaced have held onto through their perpetual state of forced exile.

Haider's Cinematic Silence on Kashmiri Hindu Identity

Though set against the backdrop of turmoil ridden Kashmir, *Haider* movie is primarily framed within the context of the majoritarian population wherein the protagonist and his family become the central axis of the story. The film's narrative and character arcs revolve around them and by extension, align with majoritarian narratives of half widows, disappeared men and psychological trauma. With no screen time, the trauma of the Kashmiri Hindu community is rendered virtually invisible.

Moreover, the narrative framing positions the two communities in a representational tussle. The selective portrayal and simultaneous omission contrast with the political and historical contexts. This easy disavowal tries to absolve the script from acknowledging the traumatic experiences of the Kashmiri Hindus. However, the matrix of the valley is incomplete without the KH community.

The first shot fades on a narrow lane in 1995 Kashmir, where *pheran* clad men escort a suited man with visible urgency. Hilaal Meer, revealed to be a doctor, is taken to an undisclosed location to diagnose Commander Latif, a terrorist leader suffering from severe pain. Later, the terrorist is transferred to Dr Meer's residence, where the Meer family, aware of the grave risks involved, shelters him. The army narrows down their search and Dr Meer is apprehended for harbouring a terrorist. Amidst crossfire their home is destroyed.



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Meanwhile, the narrative shifts as Haider, the protagonist, returns from Aligarh to find the remnants of his family home. He stands within the ruins of their literally charred and metaphorically broken house. The imagery of burnt Kashmiri homes is a triggering sight for the Kashmiri Hindus living in exile across India and elsewhere. It evokes painful memories of their own forced exodus and fleeting moments in the valley.

Much later, in the aftermath of Operation Bulbul, Pervez Lone (Aamir Bashir) meets Khurram Meer (Kay Kay Menon) near an abandoned site, he mentions the army's plan of recruitment – *Ikhwan-ul-Mukhbireen*. Listening carefully, Khurram notes that the house they were heading toward belongs to a Kashmiri Hindu. Khurram asks, "Isn't that Kaul's house?" to which Pervez replies, "Yes, he's in Jammu, in a refugee camp." Khurram then comments, "I think he's moved to Bombay" (*Haider* Script). The passing exchange is delivered in a matter-of-fact tone, signalling naturalisation of the tragedy of Kashmiri Hindus as they sought safety of their lives in unfamiliar cities.

The camera focuses on Pervez and Khurram in the foreground and visually relegates the house to the background. The abandoned site functions as an extended surrogate for the missing inhabitants. Through its use of presence and absence, *Haider* reserves affect almost exclusively for the protagonist's family arc, leaving the other community's affective representation unarticulated on screen.

While the rest normalises and reduces a catastrophic human tragedy to an almost offhand remark. But for Mr. Kaul and countless others, the forceful expulsion from their ancestral homes to refugee camps and eventually to another city is not geographical relocation. It marks a profound and continuous fragmentation of identity itself.

The displacement gradually erodes their connection to their homeland, leaving them in a state of cultural and emotional limbo. Later, while addressing a press conference, Murthy responds to a journalist's question about APDP's claim that over eight thousand people are missing since arrest by saying, "What about the three hundred thousand Kashmiri Pandits who were displaced from their homes and are now living as refugees? Will you not count them among the disappeared?" With the plight of the Hindus of Kashmir remaining an undeveloped theme in the movie, Murthy's statement appears as a one-off line. Projected as the unsympathetic mouthpiece of the state, he raises the issue of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus not out of empathy, but as a rhetorical strategy to deflect attention from the journalist's question. In the exchange of whataboutery and perfectly timed counterbalance, the film reduces the Kashmiri Hindus to a minor footnote.

Significantly, the reference to Pandits (and not Hindus) is yet another attempt at selective memorialisation and victimhood. The allusion both within the film and in popular discourse is not an oversight, but part of the dominant narrative framework which flattens the complexity of the region's demographic and communal realities. By employing the Pandit terminology, the movie exclusively limits the scope of representation of plural sufferings. Other Hindu communities are thus relegated to the margins, producing a hierarchy of grief. Had the directorial intention been otherwise, the film would have shown the ghastly homes of Kashmiri Hindus, and traces of their absence – an opportunity not taken.

Architectural Erasure: The Martanda Sun Temple

In his seminal twelfth-century chronicle *Rajatarangini*, Kashmiri historian Kalhana attributes the construction and commissioning of the Martand Sun Temple to king Lalitaditya Muktapida. The eighth-century Karkota king built the marvellous temple of Martanda with massive stone walls inside encircling ramparts and a township which rejoiced in grape-vines (Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* 2021).



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Meenakshi Jain highlights several revered temples of Kashmir, including the Martanda temple, emphasizing their contribution to the region's scenic beauty and spiritual essence. The magnificence of the Hindu temple extends beyond its religious practices to include cultural preservation, spiritual education, social and economic welfare and to facilitate community gatherings as well. As stated,

In ancient times, temples were not just places of worship but also centers for education, healthcare, and cultural exchange. They served as platforms for fostering unity, providing spiritual guidance, and addressing the social needs of the community. The temple management was entrusted with the task of organizing festivals, supporting charitable initiatives, and overseeing the welfare of devotees and the less fortunate (International Temples Convention).

The iconoclast Sikandar Butshikan not only persecuted the Hindu minority but also destroyed their religious sites representing the literal erasure of architecture. Among the many temples devastated by Sikandar was the Martanda temple (Jain 2019). The invasive assaults extend beyond religious identity to encompass socio-cultural identity as well.

This historical desecration finds a troubling echo in Haider, which compromises the sacred integrity of the temple through its cinematic choices. The song "Bismil" is a performative monologue which aims to blend the protagonist's inner turmoil and betrayal. Through allegorical parallels, the lyrics symbolise Haider's realisation of his uncle's betrayal and murder of his father. Using puppetry, the song stages a pair of loving doves lured, separated and killed by the predator against the backdrop of the Martand Sun Temple.

While the choreography compellingly invites the audience into the protagonist's personal loss and anguish. It comes at the cost of alienating the Kashmiri Hindu community. The song begins with a top shot, filmed from within the temple, with the camera positioned in front of the gigantic masked figurine, showcasing the protagonist's descent down the stairs. This moving high angle shot, followed by a series of low-angle shots, metaphorically traces Haider's descent into personal and political vengeance. Structured as a dramatic, theatrical performance within the main narrative, *Bismil* blends elements of Kashmiri folk theatre (*Bhand Pather*) and modern cinematic techniques.

Bhand Pather typically incorporates archetypal characters such as the *maskhar* (jester), *magun* (leader), *sutradhar* (narrator) and *kurivol* (lasher). The *mashkar* carries out exaggerated, farcical actions while critiquing the exploitative actions of authorities in the play, while the *kuvirol* lashes the *mashkar* for his behaviour. The *sutradhar* comments on the activities taking place. These characters are mutable and may transform into different ancillary characters depending on the narrative being performed. ("Bhand Pather.")

Vishal Bhardwaj, while discussing the making of the song ("Vishal Bhardwaj – Making of Bismil" 4:00) also acknowledges drawing from the previous performative traditions, highlighting the use of elements of music, masks and costumes. Significantly, Haider's character too offers a complex amalgamation of the archetypes from *Bhand Pather*, thereby reflecting the fluidity of the form. For instance, as the *sutradhar* (narrator) he guides the audience through his father's murder; the *maskhar* (jester) pokes fun at his uncle's authority and in the guise of the *magun* (leader), he directs the performance and controls the narrative on stage. The song which marks the theatrical exposé of betrayal and injustice at multiple levels, could have easily alluded to the agony of an entire displaced community. Including them through



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the performative tradition of the *Bhand Pather* would have offered an inclusive portrayal of collective sufferings in Kashmir. On the contrary, as the masked figurine turns around (“Bismil” 4:00) it reveals a towering devil descending from the heart of the temple to partake in the performance. By staging the dance of the devil in a location deeply tied to the religious beliefs of the marginalized community, the movie furthers the systematic violence inflicted upon them.

The portrayal of the Martand Temple as “shaitan ki gufa” (Singh; TN Lifestyle Desk) questions the sacredness of the temple’s sanctity in the name of artistic freedom. Positing a historical and spiritual site as the backdrop for a symbolic descent into evil, amounts to distortion of its cultural and religious significance. The sequence in the temple is a violation of the faith and belief systems of the Kashmiri Hindus. It disturbs the sanctity of the place of worship, misappropriating a sacred space into a stage for metaphorical demonization.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined *Haider* through the lenses of representation to reveal its selective narrative construction and systematic silencing of the Kashmiri Hindu community. By situating the movie within the broader debates of identity and representational visibility, the analysis revisits how the cinema privileges one community’s trauma while rendering another invisible and marginalised. The paper underscores that affect in the film is unevenly distributed, with the cinematic silence hovering between misappropriation and erasure. For the Kashmiri Hindus, the film’s silences provoke a hauntingly existential inquiry, *hum hai ki hum nahi?* – capturing their intergenerational and transgenerational struggles for belonging and visibility within Indian cinematic discourse.



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Notes

1. Refer to Colonel Tej K Tikoo's discussion on this issue in *Kashmir: Its Aborigines and Their Exodus*.
2. See *KASHMIR DOCUMENTATION Pandits in Exile* by Panun Kashmir Movement. PKM reported that 319 Kashmiri Pandits were killed till September-October 1990.
3. In 2022, Vineet Jindal, practicing Supreme Court lawyer had written to the President seeking special probe into killings of Kashmiri Pandits. Jindal asserts that 215 FIRs had been registered and the cases were investigated by the Jammu & Kashmir Police but to no avail.
4. Order in *Roots In Kashmir vs Union of India*, Supreme Court of India, 24 July 2017, reads: "We have heard learned counsel for the petitioner at some length. We however decline to entertain this petition under Article 32 of the Constitution of India, for the simple reason that the instances referred to in the present petition pertain to the year 1989-90, and more than 27 years have passed by since then. No fruitful purpose would emerge, as evidence is unlikely to be available at this late juncture." The dismissal on grounds of procedural limitations due to lapse of time violates the communities right to justice.
5. See *KASHMIR DOCUMENTATION Pandits in Exile*. For detailed record of temples vandalised and desecrated in Kashmir from 1986-1995.

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