

## A Comparative Analysis of Gravediggers' Scene in Shakespeare's

### *Hamlet* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*

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#### Abstract

The Gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* performs a dramatic function with the melding of seriousness and comic element. The scene which takes place in the most gripping moment of the play is probably one of the most famous in Shakespeare plays. Apart from serving as a comic relief in the rise of the action, the Gravediggers' scene also delves in to some of the major themes of the play. This scene also provides a wide scope for direction and performance in theatre and film. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* is a modern day adaptation of the play *Hamlet* which is set amidst the turmoil of Kashmir. The movie was released in 2014 and its main cast includes Shahid Kapoor (*Haider*), Tabu (*Ghazala*), Sredha Kapoor (*Arshia*) and Kay Kay Menon (*Khurram*). The Gravediggers' scene in *Hamlet* is one of the most famous and well acclaimed iconic scenes in Shakespeare plays. This paper will attempt a comparative analysis of Gravediggers' Scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*.

In *Hamlet*, the Gravediggers makes their only appearance in Act V, Scene i of the play. Like most Shakespearean clowns/fools the Gravediggers represents the commoners or peasants who use their wits to outstand the people of higher rank in the society. The “groundlings” those couldn’t afford the rates and occupied the ground positions in the Shakespearean Globe theatre enjoyed these recurring character types. Often in Shakespeare plays the clowning scenes happens immediately after a horror or terrific scene. In *Hamlet*, it occurs after Ophelia’s suicide and hence provides a pause, a comic relief in the turbulence of action. The Gravediggers in *Hamlet* is highly appealing to the audience with their wits and political commentary on organized religion. When the scene begins, they are digging a grave for the deceased Ophelia, discussing whether she deserves a “Christian burial” after having committed suicide. According to the Christian tradition no one who commits suicide is allowed to have a proper Christian burial. Hamlet, unable to accept his mother’s incestuous marriage speaks of death and suicide and raises this same point in his first soliloquy. Hamlet says, “His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter” (Act 1, Scene ii 133) is what removes him from committing suicide and this shows the religious rules against suicide. However the second Gravedigger, points out that Ophelia is a “gentlewoman”, a woman of high social status otherwise she would not have been buried in the sacred ground. This scene shows the cleverness of the illiterate commoner. The scene progresses as Hamlet and Horatio enter the scene which is continued with Hamlet confrontation with Yorick’s skull and his philosophical commentaries on death.

Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* is set in 1995. During this time Kashmir witnessed a period of intense conflict immediately following the Armed Forces Special Power Act of the 1990s. In their movie review, The New York Times has titled *Haider* as “Shakespearean Revenge in a Violent Kashmir” (Saltz). Death becomes ordinary as people get too familiarized with the

curfews, mass/open shootings, rapes, abductions and terrorist attacks. Bhardwaj has incorporated all these themes of conflict between the army, civilians and militants to show how the public life barge into the private life of people.

In the play, the Gravediggers scene comes immediately after the death of Ophelia and in the movie it happens before Arshia's (Ophelia) death. She has already started to lose her state of mind after her father got killed by Haider. In Bhardwaj's *Haider*, the Gravediggers' scene happens in a snowy public graveyard in Kashmir. In *Hamlet*, the scene opens in a chilling church graveyard with two gravediggers discussing Ophelia's death. It is to be noted that in *Hamlet* there is only one grave which is dug for deceased Ophelia. However, in *Haider* there are three Gravediggers and three graves. The scene opens in a very surrealistic manner with the Gravediggers singing and digging of the graves with their shovels. The scene also persuades the audience to ask the same question raised by Hamlet. He asks Horatio "Has this fellow no feeling of his business a sings in grave-making?" (Act V, Scene i 65). Horatio replies that the Gravedigger has so accustomed to digging graves and he no longer feels any feelings of grief for the dead person. In *Haider*, this question is not asked by the protagonist. As already mentioned in the beginning, the movie is set in Kashmir where death has become an everyday usual happening. In Kashmir graves are often dug since anyone can die at any moment. There is only one death (Arshia's) but the Gravediggers digging three graves reflect this theme. Bhardwaj in *Haider* incorporates the cleverness and jesting of Shakespearean fools and it is evident in the song *Aao Na* which is sung by the Gravediggers. In the song *Aao Na*, the Gravediggers comment on the ultimate truth-death. They sing,

Arey aao na, ki jaan gayi (Come on now, the life has ended)

Jahaan gaya, so jaao (the world ended, so go to sleep)

Arey aao na (Come on now)

Ki thak gayi hai zindagi, so jaao (I am tired with my life, so go to sleep)

Naa shaam na savera (It is neither dusk nor dawn)

Andhera hi andhera (just darkness and darkness)

Hai roohon ka basera, so jaao! (Only Spirits reside here...So go to sleep)

(*Haider* 02:14:55-02:15:45)

The song could be called as an ode to death. In *Hamlet*, the Gravediggers speak about death in a light-hearted manner so as to calm down the tragic feel of the situation. This “comic relief” is missing in *Haider*’s Gravediggers’ song. The scene heightens our tension instead of providing an occasional suspension of seriousness. Both the Gravediggers remind us about the universality of death. In *Hamlet*, the first Gravedigger sings about the youthful love and transfers the attention to intangible things such as love, honor and revenge. However, in *Haider* one could not identify these themes since its major question is human survival. Therefore the focus of death shifts from “To be or not to be...” (Act III, Scene i 56) to something real, that is waiting for every one of us. In *Haider* as the Gravediggers sing a boy enters to the grave. The song then says,

Chhota Na Bada, Koi Lamba Hai Na Bauna Hai (It does not matter whether you are younger or older; tall or dwarf)

Kabaron Ke Tadabon Mein, Lambi Neend Sona... (In the nests of a grave, only the deep sleep exits)

Na Bistar Hai Na Bori, Na Maa Na De lori (no beds, no breakfast, no bags, no baggage)

Farishton Ki Lori, So Jao (only an angels lullaby, so sleep)

Arre Aao Na...(Why don't you come)

(*Haider* 02:15: 25-02:16:27)

The boy has a bag on his shoulder, probably returning from the school and he gives a piece of bread to the three Gravediggers. In the next scene the four of them lie in the graves and sing. The three graves create a haunting image for the audience. It represents the graves for Arshia (Ophelia), Parvez (Polonius) and Liyaqat (Laertes). When Haider enters the graveyard the Gravediggers tells him that they have been waiting for Haider, Come, dig a grave and rest. Unlike the play, in the movie *Haider* digs a grave for himself and this adds the suspense of the scene so that the viewers might think that Haider will eventually die in the end. Bhardwaj has also altered the scene with Yorick's skull. In *Haider*, there is only one skull which Haider discovers from the grave which he dug. The skull is not named as anyone and thus the director brings in the theme of universality of death. In *Hamlet*, there are more than two skulls and Hamlet says it might be the skulls of a great buyer of a land and a lawyer's. When he discovers the skull of his childhood friend Yorick the King's jester, Hamlet says "Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him Horatio" (Act V, Scene i 78). He takes the skull in his hand and contemplates over human death and mortality. Haider also does the same thing. He explains to the boy about how the body turns into soil and the same soil turns into pots and toys. He says "Sikkhandar ho ya Akbar, Hitler ho ya Gandhi (You may be Alexander or Akbar, Hitler or Gandhi), sab mitti mein mil jatha hei (all that remains is dust)" (*Haider* 02:17:22-27). Hamlet and Haider both dwells on the subject of death and the fact that all men are worms' food and all men will die one day, and

before death everyone is equal. Throughout the play and movie, Hamlet and Haider show their obsession with the physical decomposition of body. In Hamlet's first soliloquy he says "O that is too solid flesh would melt Thaw and resolve itself into a dew" (Act V, Scene ii 130).

The reflections of Hamlet and Haider on these skulls further stress their speculative and philosophical nature. The Gravediggers' scene thus presents a serious element through light-hearted dialogues. The musings of Hamlet and Haider about the stark reality of death helps to meditate the ironic fact that the greedy and ambitious politicians, the greatest men of the world and the commoners all those who are born in this earth are nothing but just the embodiment of dust.

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