
On Ghazala Meer: (Re) mapping the Land-as-Woman Metaphor in Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider

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The thing I came for: the wreck itself and not the story of the
wreck the thing itself and not the myth

(Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck* 23)

The concepts of space and spatiality are amorphous and informed with complexities which render thinking, writing, theorizing and performing spaces and spatialities challenging and difficult to map. A wide range of disciplinary knowledge(s) and practices, from philosophy, natural sciences, social sciences to the arts, have increasingly engaged with the polysemic character of these concepts in an attempt to unravel their possible meanings, modalities and implications which inform such fluxional contexts as aesthetics, culture and politics, among others. Space has, indeed, emerged as an interface for diverse modes of inquiry and several concerns of literary and cultural scholarship such as nationalism, colonialism; gender and sexuality; urbanization and globalization; digital cultures; environmentalism and ecopoetics / ecocriticism / ecofeminism have, in recent times, posited a fundamentally spatial dimension. Literature has, in particular, played a crucial role in addressing issues pertinent to spatial studies and, the introduction of Ecocriticism to the study of literature in the past few decades has contributed a novel way of looking at space and understanding spatiality. Informed by ecological science, politics, ethics, women's studies, and history, among other academic fields, ecocriticism has

surfaced as a vehicle that has propelled notions of space beyond aesthetic expression and theoretical interdisciplinarity into the realm of activism. Under its aegis, our understanding of space has acquired new dimensions and consequently, agency to question, resist and remap the existing ontology, epistemology and character of issues imbued within it. One such dimension has evolved in the wake of Ecocriticism having branched out into Ecological feminism or Ecofeminism, a philosophical and political theory/movement combining ecological concerns with those of feminism and emphasizing on the fundamental connection between the domination of women and the domination of ecology as a result of patriarchal practices and discourse with respect to the two.

Since the 1970s, when the term “ecofeminism” was first conceived by Francoise d’Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le féminisme ou la mort*, the feminization of space has increasingly generated the interest of geographers, feminists and ecocritics, alike. From the early ecofeminists advocating an essentializing link between women and the natural world to the censure of the view by such ecofeminist thinkers as Annette Kolodny who regard the metaphor of land-as-woman a patriarchal construct developed by the “male metaphors” of “erotic mastery or infantile repression” (8), gendering the landscape female remains a contentious issue. In her essay “Landscape in Drag: The Paradox of Feminine Space in Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World*”, Andrea Blair points out how categorical acceptance or dismissal of the land-as-woman metaphor are both dubious practices that generate enough confusion to render the more complex examples of the feminization of landscape in literature imperceptible. She emphasises the need to explore and define a middle ground in order to widen the debate and open further possibilities toward a new understanding of the metaphor and its implications (49). While an examination of the intricate relationship of gender and landscape representation in literature that escapes the

parochial nature of the debate would require a separate essay altogether, a close scrutiny of Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider*, a film adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which appeared in the year 2014 reveals an immensely nuanced and convoluted use of the land-as-woman metaphor which not only provides the 'middle ground' perspective but also reappropriates the structuralist-poststructuralist idea of the absent referent, already reworked for feminist and ecofeminist purposes by such scholars as Margaret Homans and Carol J. Adams, to reorient it toward a fresh analysis of the ontology of domination in relation to the contexts of gender and politics, in particular. The paper will, therefore, examine *Haider's* discreet and subtle representation of one of its central women characters, Ghazala Meer, and the landscape of Kashmir as the imbricated absent referents appropriated to reconceptualise the land-as-woman metaphor as a disruptive, anomalous, paradoxical, non-dominative space which could both, serve to subvert institutionalised approaches to Kashmir and provide a new language and set of metaphors to landscape and gender representation.

Set against the controversial scrim of insurgency-hit Kashmir of the 1990s, *Haider* is not just a fine example of intersemiotic translation, but one which successfully and rather disturbingly performs a figural operation, adapting *Hamlet* with its motif of revenge, moral dilemma and the ensuing ethical struggle to the ruptured and contentious socio-political-historical context of the valley of Kashmir. A film narrative in which the knotty personality of Shakespeare's tragic hero, Hamlet metamorphoses, as it were, into the titular character, Haider, a Kashmiri and a poet studying at Aligarh who returns to the valley experiencing the height of armed insurgency and rampant civilian disappearances, on learning of his father's 'disappearance' in the aftermath of a military raid and embarks on a dangerous journey to find his father; consequently, being drawn into the political turmoil of Kashmir, is inevitably bound to evoke strong emotions and

opinions. Seamlessly adapting the basic plot, characters, important soliloquies, the ‘play within the play’ technique, metaphors and themes of *Hamlet* to the fractured political climate of Kashmir, it is the first mainstream Indian film’s screenplay, jointly written by Bhardwaj and the Kashmiri writer, Basharat Peer, to go beyond the “cosmetic” and/or “rhetoric” to portray “Kashmir from the inside” (Bhardwaj, *The Indian Express*). Taking its cue from *Hamlet*, the film’s plot unfolds a tale of individual tragedies, fraught with repeated references to militancy, AFSPA, alleged human rights abuses in the state, civilian disappearances, and manipulation and victimization of Kashmir in the wake of political games played by two rival South Asian neighbouring countries: Haider returns home to seek answers for his *Abbuji*, (father) Doctor Hilal Meer’s disappearance. An idealistic doctor, Hilal, operates upon a militant at his home despite the threat of a military raid, a prevalent counter-insurgency measure in the 90s Kashmir and against his wife, Ghazala’s wishes. The next day, during a military swoop down, he is accused of sheltering terrorists in his house and is taken away for questioning. The militant is killed in the ensuing shootout at Hilal’s house and subsequently, his house is incinerated by rocket launchers. In just a few minutes, Ghazala finds herself surrounded with the ruins of her home and the uncertainty of her husband’s return. On his arrival, Haider already disturbed about his father’s disappearance, is further depressed to behold the growing intimacy between his *Mouji* (mother) and his uncle, Khurram. He undertakes an insidious journey to search for his father with the help of his love interest, Arshia, a journalist. During his search Haider encounters an enigmatic stranger Roohdar, later revealed as possessing several ghost identities, who claims to have met Haider’s father at one of the detention centres where, according to him, they were both tortured and where his father discovered he was betrayed by none other than his brother Khurram. Roohdar also tells him that his father’s last wish

was that his son should avenge his murder by shooting Khurram in both the eyes, the eyes with which he bewitched Haider's mother. Roohdar's words indirectly implicate Ghazala as well. Her fate was to be, however, left to divine justice. The successive scenes of Haider's struggle with conflicting emotions and myriad shades of truth, his accidental shooting of Arshia's father, police inspector Parvez Lone, Arshia's subsequent suicide interspersed with his decision to cross the border at the instigation of Roohdar in order to receive arms training lead to the film's final graveyard scene which turns the apparent narrative linearity of the adaptation on its head with Ghazala Meer's startling act of self-annihilation. Those familiar with the Shakespearean original would recognize both, the parallels drawn and the deviations made.

Shifting the geographical, cultural and temporal location of Shakespeare's tragic narrative from Elsinore castle in Denmark to Anantnag in Kashmir, Bhardwaj's film reiterates the transhistoricity of the Shakespearean play, manoeuvring it to cast an unflinching and unapologetic gaze on the uncomfortable political reality of Kashmir. It, predictably, locates *Haider* in a quagmire of controversies commensurate with the disconcerting interweaving of the complicated Shakespearean tale of revenge and its associated ramifications with a subject which continues to remain a sensitive flashpoint and touches several raw nerves, whenever invoked. Despite its apparently predominant political fabric, *Haider* discreetly offers something more exquisitely potent and urgent to our understanding of Kashmir: it offers a mechanism "for listening to the vibrations that things produce in detaching themselves [from] the nothing-being to which our blindness relegates them" (Cixous). In a single masterstroke, *Haider* draws attention to the 'nothing-beingness' shrouding the political, historical, cultural spatialities of Kashmir and the Kashmiri identity and unpretentiously makes a plea to let the bleeding, suffering landscape of Kashmir, "struggling with

[years of] indifference give [itself] to be heard”(Cixous 74). This coup de maître is secured through the portrayal of the landscape of Kashmir as the absent referent, Ghazala Meer, embedded in the narrative but distorted, dominated and relegated to the background against which the dominant narrative unfolds.

Classic Structuralist theory speaks of threefold signification: the absent referent, the signified and the signifier. These three concepts are applicable to any symbolic discourse, including art forms and cultural ideologies, which may be regarded as operating like languages. Carol J. Adams, for instance, brilliantly explores the cultural discourse of carnivorousness by establishing meat-eating as a text in which meat is the signifier and animal is the absent referent. The animal is absent from the text, its being elided and dominated by the signifier meat, which deadens the animal’s aliveness, turning him or her into an it (14). The process allows the signifier to dominate and transform the referent, facilitating the enactment of an ontology of domination. The signifier as an interpretant transforms the absent referent into an object for use or exchange in a human chain of signifiers, inscribing the referent as an exchange object within a symbolic commerce. (Donovan 6-7). Similarly in *Haider*, Bhardwaj’s Gertrude- Ghazala Meer- is like Adams’ absent “animal” dominated and commodified for a symbolic personal, cultural and political exchange by a chain of signifiers. Her ‘being’ is repeatedly redefined in accordance with the requirements of each of the signifiers; her living presence is ‘deadened’. She is objectified as the object of desire, ownership and exchange value. Her individual, independent “literal” reality is twisted, obscured and subdued to the claims of the “figurative” roles imposed on her. The disappearance of her husband, Doctor Hilal Meer bestows upon her the cultural signification of “half widow” but, even before his disappearance Ghazala’s ontological status is undermined by her husband’s complete disregard for her fears. In the scene where, distressed with

Hilal's decision to perform an appendicitis operation on the leader of a pro-separatist group at their home and fearing the worst for her family's safety, she confronts and questions her husband's allegiance. His irreverent dismissal of her opinion, fears and wishes inscribes on her living presence the 'nothing- beingness', passively waiting for her apprehensions to materialise and destroy her spatiality. As the screenplay progresses, Ghazala is recast as an object of desire and ownership by Khurram and Haider. Khurram's fascination with her leads him to conspire against his brother.

The Oedipus complex angle in *Hamlet* is reinstated in the relationship between Haider and Ghazala and becomes a signifier of Haider's act of domination. His sense of possession over her arises from it and makes him appear all too eager to believe in Roohdar's version of events. There can be located in his behaviour a singular focus to implicate and punish her for attempting to restore her 'owned', silenced 'being' as a living, liberated presence, and a subject with her own reality. He refuses to accord Ghazala any existence outside the limits of his perspective, determined by the praxis of dominance hierarchy. In a brilliant scene, as they meet amidst the ruins of their destroyed house, Ghazala explains to Haider how her marriage to Hilal was a loveless one but that she never wished him ill. She tries to convey to him, all she wanted was love, a home and a life which is not spent waiting for loved ones to return. Haider labels her Janus-faced for having dared to exercise agency that challenges the ontology of domination. For, only through the denial of agency can the referent be elided from discourse(s) and dominative practices institutionalised and perpetuated. Ghazala's 'being', thus, is contingent on her signifiers. Outside the purview of their signification, as she states during one of her conversations with Haider, she will remain "the villain" always; her ontological status reduced to that of a necessary evil, a backdrop against which the signifiers can define their ontological meaning and justify their

epistemological orientation and, a metaphor to validate their act of domination through warped signification.

Ghazala's objectification is brought to a full circle with Roohdar's imposition of a symbolic exchange value on her. Towards the end of the film's narrative, Roohdar, with evident links with terrorists from across the border agrees to take Ghazala, in exchange for her life, to Haider's hideout from where he is to leave for arms training across the border. She is given a suicide vest to; perhaps, kill Khurram, who had manipulated both the militant regime and the Kashmir government to strengthen his political position and who was Roohdar's prime target for which he manipulated Haider. "Consumption is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity."(Adams 73). Ghazala's metaphoric consumption as an implement and her altered, disembodied "nothing-being" eventually serves to disclose the structure of oppressive, violent domination. Her story framed by and juxtaposing the landscape of Kashmir, becomes the embodiment of the process of 'absenting' the Kashmiri landscape from the dominant historical and political narrative build around it. "The most striking feature [of the historical-political process] is the silence to which those dispossessed of the official language are condemned. Lacking the means of legitimate expression, they do not speak but are spoken to" (Thompson 46). Akin to Ghazala the landscape of Kashmir has been denied subjecthood. It is veiled, interpreted and defined in accordance with the locationality and convenience of its signifiers. With its lush green valleys, snow-covered mountain peaks, Dal Lake, Jhelum, and fresh springs Kashmir has long been marked as what Dr. M Ashraf Bhatt calls a pornotropic land, a celebrated "beauty myth". Thus objectified as a landscape of desire, the geographic spatiality of Kashmir has been continuously subjugated, controlled, manipulated, and defined as per the dominant 'nationalistic' narrative and religious discourse. The multiple political and cultural

claims on Kashmir has wreaked havoc on its ecology which has been cast in the passive form as the signified conflict zone and/or a romanticised paradisaal landscape that must be owned in order to preserve the existing dominant discourse(s).

Representing Kashmir through the land-as-woman metaphor, *Haider* first reflects Julia Kristeva's postulation that all space is initially enveloped in the semiotic chora and the dominant signifying subject desires to re-experience it by gendering the landscape female, and then problematizes this vocabulary of landscape gendering by first claiming the identity assigned to the two overlapping absent referents by the dominant culture and then rejecting the position. Ghazala along with the landscape of Kashmir symbolises a paradoxical space which is both inside and outside the parameters of the established cultural norms. As the 'silenced' background, Ghazala and Kashmir serve to first foreground the microcosmic and macrocosmic narratives and then subvert the narratives by seizing agency. In the process of reiterating dominative discourses, Ghazala's final act of self-annihilation disrupts and undermines their hegemony by reclaiming her space, free from masculinist significations. She rejects the nothing-beingness imposed on her by the dominant signifiers. Explaining her performativity theories in terms of gender representation in her essay *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler argues how this representation is a performance, "a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo". Ruptures in the reiterative performance occur when the subject "fail(s) to repeat loyally cultural performatives" (95).

Ghazala's appropriation of agency constitutes this rupture and slippage that not only effectively subverts her role as an absent referent but also creates an alternative reiteration in portraying her as paradoxical, non-dominative, lived body spatiality. Ghazala's act of

rupture logically extends to the landscape of Kashmir. Just as we project reiterated norms onto ourselves and others, we also project them onto space, sexualizing and gendering landscape. And as we can fail to represent loyally cultural performatives, we can fail, in the repetition of landscape representation, creating representations that contest the status quo (Blair, 50). Bhardwaj's narrative challenges the status quo by representing the landscape of Kashmir as a paradoxical space like Ghazala. Bhardwaj's Kashmir is a paradisaal landscape but one constitutive of 'kruhun sheen' (black snow), open graveyards, a river Jhelum tainted with blood. It is not just a conflictual physical space within the dominant cultural praxis. It is an embodiment of individual and collective perceptions as well as the simultaneous reiteration and failure of the dominant cultural performatives that repeatedly challenge the dominant structure. His Kashmir is, thus, reconceptualised as a space which eludes a clear perception of what it is. The film's narrative thwarts every single attempt by the dominant signifiers from the government, military, militants to Khurram and Haider (besides others) to claim and define Kashmir through its concluding scenes: Ghazal's self-annihilation leads to Kashmir's snow literally catching fire and burning and the landscape of Kashmir turns into a physical and metaphorical graveyard for most of its signifiers, rejecting, disrupting and subverting the restrictive, hegemonic mapping of its landscape as a passive, malleable, monological space. Haider, first, connects the conventional dots between landscape and gender and then, reclaims it by tracing land-as-woman as an active, dialogic, subversive space where both Ghazala and Kashmir create alternative identities for themselves which escape the bind of singular, dominant paradigms and subsequently, turns the land-as-woman metaphor into an effective tool for expanding and reconceptualising the interpretive possibilities in the overlapping studies of landscape and gender. Explored through the prism of semiotics, performativity theory and

feminist geography, Ghazala Meer functions as a new philosophical discourse and linguistic index for the landscape of Kashmir and gives us a glimpse of the possibility of unmasking the masquerades of culturally constructed performatives to reveal the ‘living reality’ of its landscape, the silenced voice of Kashmiri womanhood and a new understanding of the praxis of Ecofeminism.

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