



Khamosh Pani: Studying the Shades of Silence

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Abstract

The ‘generality’ of the emergence of India as an independent and secular nation state in 1947 has been that it was characterised by mass migration and large-scale ethnic violence. However, the reality lies beyond and is engrained much deeper both socio-culturally and psychologically. The paper investigates the issue of violence against women during the communal carnage that the Partition of 1947 was. The gender specific analysis of the 2003 film *Khamosh Pani* (or *Silent Waters*) by Sabiha Sumar facilitates a discourse on the multi-layered violence that targeted women. The paper focuses on the forms of violence that gets inscribed on the ‘body’ as well as the subjectivity of the women characters, thereby rupturing their ‘personal’ being. The paper examines the trauma or rather a collective trauma endured/embodyed by women in the course of nation making and the subsequent gendered territorialisation.

Keywords: Partition, Communal Violence, Sexuality, Patriarchy, Trauma, Resistance, Agency, Embodiment, Nation

Introduction

The year 1947 marked the emergence of India as an independent and secular state. Not only did the year record British India’s independence but, also its violent division into two separate nation-states – India and Pakistan. The months preceding and following August 1947 made the Partition/Independence a singular event in the subcontinent as the period was characterized by massive mass migration, and large-scale ethnic violence primarily amongst the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The official data states that around 10 million people migrated across the

new borders and about 500,000-1,000,000 perished in the carnage that followed (Menon and Bhasin, *Borders* 35). However, the unofficial count declares the number to be much higher. This has been the ‘generality’ of Partition as known to the common public.

Gyanendra Pandey argues that the Partition historiography has mainly been in the nature of “justifying or eliding, what is seen in the main as being an illegitimate outbreak of violence” (3). The historical omissionism pertaining to the cultural, psychological, and social ramifications of the Partition has received its due attention only recently. The official Partition historiography lacks what Urvashi Butalia calls a “human dimension”—that is the personal/collective experiences of Partition (Butalia, *The Other* 7). In a similar tone, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin contend, “[t]he story of 1947, while one of the attainment of independence, is also a gendered narrative of displacement and dispossession, of large-scale and widespread communal violence, and of the realignment of family, community and national identities (Menon and Bhasin, “Recovery” 210).

The history cannot capture the complexity of an experience like Partition believes Mushirul Hasan, which is why one has to look for creative writing and in this sense, “literature has emerged as an alternate archive of the times. In the study of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in particular, literature has articulated the ‘little’ narratives against the grand; the unofficial histories against the official” (xiii). Shumona Dasgupta too admits to the compensatory role of fiction in the absence of an archive to record the experiences of the survivors, including survivors of sexual violence, “[the] Partition fiction also plays a part in the production, consumption and circulation of historical memory” (39). Considered as a

branch of literature, cinema acts as an alternative and a catalyst to the extensive cultural discourse about the events it depicts, thereby, passing into our imaginary cultural spaces. This is how, in the absence of actual and tangible breaking apart of the country in the 1947, cinema constructs a 'vision of the past' expressing the trauma of the rupture through visual imagery, signifiers and dialogues.

In the light of these observations by scholars like Gyanendra Pandey, Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, Mushirul Hasan, and Shumona Dasgupta, the present paper attempts to examine Sabiha Sumar's 2003 film *Khamosh Pani* (or *Silent Waters*). The depiction of abducted women and the ensuing trauma has been one of the often written/filmed narratives. Apart from Sabiha Sumar's film *Khamosh Pani* (2003) or Chandraprakash Dwivedi's *Pinjar* (2003), the short stories like Saadat Hasan Manto's *The Return* (1948) and Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Lajwanti* (1951), are some of the most remarkable accounts of gendered violence that narrates the ways in which Partition radically altered the lives of thousands of women.

The paper investigates the continued silence on multi-layered violence enacted on the protagonist Ayesha/Veero in particular and thousand other abducted women like her, in general; starting from the communal carnage of Partition in 1947 to 1979 covering about four decades in the life and times of Pakistan. Also, the paper examines the ways in which this violence gets inscribed not only on the protagonist's body but also on her psyche and subjectivity.

Set in a small village called Charkhi in Pakistan's Punjab in 1979, the film is a story of Ayesha (played by

Kirron Kher) and her son Salim (played by Aamir Malik), who progressively gets involved in the vortex of extremist religious politics of the time. Even though the main plot is set in the year 1979; however, right from the onset the narrative is interjected by visuals of Ayesha's memory of Partition in 1947. These brief recurring sepia visuals of memory of Partition allows for an understanding of Partition as not only an event of the past but, one that has ongoing effects even now.

A woman's personal constitutes not just of her, rather it is a cumulative of family, community, and homeland and hence an uprooting from the 'personal' means a rupture of the very basis of life. Displacement becomes the loss of home, fragmentation of the family and suspension of communal ties, thus, robbing women off the very anchoring in their life. The sepia flashbacks narrate the dissolution of Ayesha's immediate, a disruption of her personal/familial/communal/national. The flashbacks form a parallel story of Ayesha's past, a past that mingles with the present, a past that is always knocking at the door much like the door scene where Ayesha's brother (the past) knocks at her door (the present) eager to meet her.

The flashbacks tell the story of Ayesha's past during the Partition, when her father insisted on her and other women of the family to jump in the local village well, apparently to save their 'honour' and avoid their misappropriation at the hands of the 'Other' as, "[t]he easiest way to assail a community, therefore, is to defile the sexual purity of its women" (Bagchi and Dasgupta 4). Since women are believed to be the repositories of 'honour' of any family/community/nation; which is why an assault, and for that matter a sexual assault on them, then becomes "an overt assertion of . . . [the assailant's] identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other . . . [due to a]

‘dishonouring’ their women” (Menon and Bhasin, *Borders* 41). To deter such a humiliation at the hands of the Other at a time when women’s bodies became the most potent and symbolic targets, suicides “were seen as heroic acts of religious pride, requiring courage and valour. The women were considered *martyrs* who had sacrificed themselves to safeguard their families’ (and community’s) honour” (Dey 115).

In a situation of riot/war, the core of violence often is the deconstruction of ‘body’ which forms a model of violent ‘socio-symbolic’ discourse. The ‘body’ in that sense becomes indispensable, as a prime object of suffering as well as a locus of violent narratives. Butalia argues that:

Thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed border...were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage...torn apart from their families... Untold numbers of women particularly in Sikh families, were killed (‘martyred’ is the term that is used) by their kinsmen in order to ‘protect’ them from being converted, perhaps equal numbers of them killed themselves (Butalia, “Community” 14).

It is the ‘body’ of female members of the family that Ayesha’s father felt needed protection, even at the cost of their deaths. And it is Ayesha’s ‘body’, that is violated once instead of jumping in the well at the behest of her father, she runs away to save herself from the forced death. Ayesha’s abduction by the Muslim attackers and her ‘supposed’ sexual misappropriation (since in the flashbacks we see her being dragged into a dark room by a group of men who slap her and call her an infidel woman) reinstates the argument that, a ‘body’, in particular a woman’s body, becomes the easiest victim of violence and thus, the locus of any violent discourse. The violence

forced upon women either by their kinsmen or the perpetrators or by the women themselves forms a part, where there is “death [or refusal/exclusion] at the hands of one’s own kinsmen at one end, and rape and brutalisation by men of the other community at the other” (Menon and Bhasin, *Borders* 57). The scenes in the flashbacks, where Ayesha’s mother and sisters jump into the well when insisted upon by her father to protect their honour, and other, Ayesha’s eventual misappropriation after the escape from the well, both form a part of the “*continuum of violence*” one by the own kinsman and other by the enemy (Menon and Bhasin, *Borders* 57).

The flashback of women jumping in the wells to save their ‘izzat’ or ‘laaj’ (honour), not only form a reflection of the trauma endured by Ayesha (an eyewitness as well as a victim) in particular, but forms a reflection of the collective trauma to those who succumbed to the horrors as well as those who sustained it. The flashbacks form silent memories/fears of Ayesha which repeatedly interrupt her everyday much like the silence around Partition history, which even though remains silent/latent but is omnipresent (like Khalistan movement, 1984 Anti-Sikh pogrom, Kashmir militancy, 1991-92 Babri Masjid and Bombay riots, 2002 Gujarat riots, etc in the Indian context). The flashbacks form testimonies/eyewitnesses to the trauma borne at/in a nation’s becoming and are narratives of how “women were ruthlessly used as silent, dehumanised tools amidst the patriarchal power play between two religious groups” (Dey 116).

Endowed with memory and meaning a woman’s body forms an embodiment of history that has long been latent or silent. Ayesha being one such embodiment is an apotheosis of violence – physical, psychological, and socio-religio-political. Her abduction during the violent

Partition, her marriage to Afsaan, one of her captors, her conversion to Islam, and the subsequent settlement in her own village Charkhi, but with a different ethnicity, all culminate into an embodiment of history with which Ayesha leads her life in the present of the film, i.e., the year 1979. The well of the village forms an integral part of this embodiment, as even after almost thirty-two years of escaping the jump into it, Ayesha still fears going anywhere around it. The fear forms a part of the embodiment of the past that Ayesha inherits from the Partition. The reluctance to go near the well can be seen as Ayesha's reluctance to revisit her past. The past does not leave the present and so does the well. When not in present (as Ayesha avoids going near the well), the well haunts her in memories. The sepia images of the well keep interrupting Ayesha's present. In a way the past always keeps lingering in Ayesha's present and by disrupting her present Muslim identity with that of her past Sikh identity.

Even though there is an unwillingness to go near the well/past (the site where she narrowly escaped death), Ayesha still connects with her past by keeping certain objects of her former Sikh identity in a box. The box becomes a part of her memory which she cherishes. The items of the box connect Ayesha to a happy past, unlike the well which remains a constant reminder of all the ill that happened to her. The well forms the disruption and is thus avoided at all costs; whereas, the box forms a treasury of the cordial and warm pre-Partition past. However, it is Ayesha who selects and decides as to what memories of past are allowed in her present. The box, thus, forms a part of her past which can be visited every now and then, but which can also be adequately contained with a lock with 'lock' being symbolic of Ayesha's agency.

Ayesha's present, which is the present time-frame of the film, i.e., the year 1979, forms the precarious year of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's political execution by the then Chief Martial Law Administrator, General Zia-ul-Haq along with the official Islamisation of Pakistan. En route the Islamisation of Pakistan under General Zia's rule, the repression as well as marginalization of minorities and women's enfranchisement followed. The repression in the name of religion becomes a reminder of Partition where abducted women like Ayesha became victims of it once again. After three decades of Partition, Ayesha again falls victim to the heightened nationalism, when her only son Salim gets lured into Zia's fundamentalist politics by Rashid (one of Zia's many fundamentalist youth representative). Salim's growing deflection towards fundamentalism erodes the relationship he shares with his mother and girlfriend Zubeida.

The shift of Salim from being a liberal to a fundamentalist corresponds to past as well as to present politics of the nation, i.e., becoming of Pakistan on religious grounds in 1947 and General Zia's military coup in the present i.e. 1979. In both the scenarios, Ayesha in particular and women in general, become the victims of the nationalist patriarchal politics; once in the name of honour by her father's and then in the name of religion by her own son, Salim. Earlier it was her Sikh identity which was attacked and converted into a Muslim; now in 1979, her Muslim identity comes under scrutiny and is challenged.

Ayesha's history of being a Sikh woman gets exposed when her brother Jaswant comes to Charkhi on a Sikh pilgrimage. With the hope of finding Ayesha, who to him is known as Veero (as Ayesha is her Muslim convert name), he enquires if any woman were left behind at Partition in the village. After getting information about her

whereabouts from Amin (Ayesha's friend Shabbo's husband), Jaswant tries to meet Ayesha. In the brief meeting that follows in presence of Ayesha's son Salim, Jaswant calls her his sister Veero and hands her the locket which she had given to young Jaswant while escaping jumping into the well during Partition. This scene where both Jaswant and Ayesha stand on the opposite side of the door with Salim in-between on the border forms a binary of past/present. A past which has been kept under wraps has now come out knocking the door of Ayesha's present but is somehow contained by the border (Salim) before further intrusion.

Jaswant meets Ayesha again near the well where he asks her to come to India for their father's sake who is on his death-bed and who wishes to see her one last time so that he could die in peace. The conversation that follows, presents us with Ayesha's resistance to the patriarchy that once forced suicide on her in 1947. The scene is one of the most heart rending scenes where a daughter/sister insists on her agency, or rather, prefers her agency refuting personal relational emotional grips. Both the brother and the sister stand on the opposite sides of the well making the well symbolic of the border (India and Pakistan) that lies between them along with past that it symbolises:

AYESHA. What do you want after all these years? What do you want?

JASWANT. Father is dying. He wants to see you one more time.

AYESHA. So he can finish the job? Wasn't killing mother and Jeeto enough?

JASWANT. He just wants to die in peace.

AYESHA. He wanted to kill me for his peace. What will he do if he sees me alive and a Muslim? How will he go to his Sikh heaven? And what heaven is there for me? A Sikh heaven or a Muslim heaven? You were happy to think I was dead. But I'm alive. I made my own life without you. Now this is my life and my home. Go away. Leave me as I am.

JASWANT. Veero.

AYESHA. Go. Go back.

The refusal to reconciliation crops from the outright assertion of her agency by Ayesha. She unequivocally resists the "articulation of nationality and belonging" and makes "the non-normative choice to refuse the offer of inclusion or interpellation into family, community, and nation that was once denied to her" (Daiya 177).

However, with the growing fundamentalism in the village, Ayesha journeys back to from where she had started. The discovery of Ayesha's Sikh past suddenly renders her out of place in an increasingly intolerant and religiously fanatic society. She becomes incompatible with the concept of new Islamised Pakistan promoted by her son Salim, who asks her to publically declare her Islamic faith and her allegiance to Pakistan. Ayesha's history, when exposed, creates a situation where patriarchy (Rashid, Zubair, Salim and others) feel the urgency to control and contain it. Their language of honour is reminiscent of the Partition. Ayesha's sufi teachings, her help to the Sikh pilgrims in the village Gurudwara and her former Sikh identity suddenly makes her anomalous oddity in the state's Islamisation even after thirty two years post-Partition, thus making her a cultural unfit and anti-state. The village community starts ostracizing Ayesha to an extent that Allabi and Shanno no longer fetch water for

her. Even close friends like Shabbo and Amin, who have known about Ayesha's Sikh identity, ask her not to attend their daughter's marriage. According to Shahnaz Khan,

A woman and a convert to Islam, she [Ayesha] is doubly suspect. She is the undesirable pollutant to be ostracized and cast out from the pure land. Moreover, she is unable to transmit pure genealogical credentials to her son, which... threatens his future in Zia's Islamic Republic (135).

A repetitive need to control and contain women since they are considered to be the repositories of national/community/family honour can be seen both in the past during the Partition as well in the present during the Islamisation of Pakistan in 1979, both in the reel as well as in real. The repetitious determination to supposedly protect their women, Salim along with Rashid, Zubair and others arrive at the girls' school where Zubeida studies, with bricks and mortar to raise the wall. The wall becomes symbolic of the border that was once laid between the two nations; and now between the Muslim masculinities and women and other minorities, giving priority and power to the former and marginalization of the latter. The act also symbolises the contestation of space between the genders as well as containment of the 'supposedly' weaker by the stronger.

It is this insistent communal nationalist politics that forces Ayesha to return to the well from which she has been escaping ever since the Partition. Life comes full circle when she faces a similar situation that she had once faced in the past. The past and the present converge and the sepia images of well turn real before Ayesha takes a plunge into it. Scholars like Khan, have read the 'suicide' as a breakdown against the fate or as Ayesha's "acceptance

of defeat at the hands of communalism and processes of history” (141). However, we read Ayesha’s suicide as an act resistance against the dominant discourse. Ayesha represents resistance and agency against patriarchy. Earlier she maintained her agency by escaping death during the Partition and now she has maintained her agency by choosing death, by not speaking in the dominant language that her son/community/nation expects her to speak in. Ayesha becomes an embodiment of resistance against the patriarchal nationalist discourse and this legacy is carried forward in the form of her locket which Zubeida embraces after her death. Like Ayesha, Zubeida too is seen living on her own terms in the future towards the end of the film. In a way she carries on Ayesha’s legacy of maintaining her agency inspite of a wall that was created by Salim earlier in the film to contain her aspirations and ambitions. In the end, we see Zubeida out in the open as an independent working woman embracing Ayesha’s agency in the form of a locket, making Ayesha’s spirit eternal.

Foregrounding the hypocrisy of patriarchally controlled communal politics, the narrative of *Khamosh Pani* excludes, marginalises, subordinates, and destroys the voice/self of woman. The cinematic articulations of these silenced gendered quotidian experiences in the film mark significant puncturing of the existing national narratives. As if echoing Ritu Menon, who has argued that it is not important to analyse “why the politics of Partition played itself out in the way it did, but to how its legacy has been dealt with” (Menon, “Cartographies” 159), the film too seems to significantly intervene in this debate around partition and its aftermath.

Khamosh Pani offers myriad gendered perspectives on the lived realities of the Partition and post-Partition nationalist discourse and provides cogent insights into the

cross-community un/gendered associations while at the same time nuances the conventional discourses of violence, division, rupture and resistance. The film pertinently justifies Menon and Bhasin's argument:

Women's sexuality as it had been violated by abduction, transgressed by enforced conversion and marriage, and exploited by impermissible cohabitation and reproduction was [and is] at the centre of debates around national duty, honour, identity and citizenship in a secular and democratic India... The extent and nature of violence that women were subjected to when communities conflagrated, highlights not only their particular vulnerability at such times, but an overarching patriarchal consensus that emerges on how to dispose of the troublesome question of women's sexuality. Together, the clusters lay bare the multiple patriarchies of community, family, and state as experienced by the women in their transition to freedom, and explore the deep complicities between them (Menon and Bhasin, *Borders* 20).

Ayesha's story is not only an individual story of Partition trauma but a gendered narrative of repetitive systemic nationalist violence. It is a contestation of a masculine nation over feminine subjects and the silence that surround this contestation. The film is a fragmented representation of a fragmented life of Ayesha that moves back and forth in the past and the present with past framing repercussions for the present. She becomes an apotheosis of violence induced upon her—physical, psychological, and socio-religio-political. The ruptures in her life form an analysis of the legacies that has accompanied independence. Ayesha becomes symbolic of an entire generation of women's narratives encountering trauma and

exuding resistance against the patriarchal codes in ways they know best. The film forms a counter gendered narrative as opposed to the existing nationalist one, thereby bringing to the surface the realities of an inherently communal and violent society that crossed and still crosses all borders during a communal fracture like Partition.

Khamosh Pani as a cultural text brings forth the nuanced, complex and multi -- faceted nature of the existence of woman in the post-colonial fundamentalist national narratives with the protagonist Ayesha presenting a microcosmic picture of ruptures and resistances vis-à-vis body-psyche, gender, religion, community, and nation. She is portrayed as neither a “heroine” who rises above the patriarchal conservative-nationalist struggles that engulfs her community, nor is she a complete “victim” of its physical and discursive violence. Instead, she is figured as someone negotiating her subjectivity within the interstices of experience and interpretation and shaping the outcome of material events as they do so (Didur 50).

Khamosh Pani is a decentralised representation of the marginalised and not a historical telling of the popular. The systematic violence enacted by social hegemonic order on women’s identities and sexualities forms an extensive impact in the construction of self and identity of women. Dey quotes from Itty Abraham’s work *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics*, as to how in the aftermath of Partition, gender was territorialised much like the Indian Subcontinent, “[w]omen’s bodies represented both the inner core of patriarchy — couched in the language of honor and prestige — as well as marking boundaries of social and national reproduction” (Dey 116). The dynamism that the amalgamation of patriarchy, religion, social and cultural norms forms, works towards perpetuating a systematic violence towards women as

presented in the film through Ayesha. The depiction of her ruptures and resistances in the film challenges the hegemonic victimization and objectification. Thus, such representations have and would continue to give voices to the silences surrounding the subaltern's quotidian experiences of oppression and resistance.

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