



***Raazi*: “that kind of voyage, rank as honeysuckle...”**

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Abstract

Raazi (2018), a Bollywood film directed by Meghna Gulzar, represents a curious interweaving of a young woman's love for her native land and for her father. The protagonist is a daddy's girl, an Athena, who strategizes with her father and other father figures to extract vital information from the enemy camp and in the process ends up slaying her own husband and his entire family. This is a film that brings together nation, nationalism and the father-daughter relation in an impossible bind; where to love the “fatherland” is to disown oneself and one's deepest instinct for conjugal and filial belonging. That the father-daughter duo is Kashmiri thickens the plot even more. My interest is in exploring how the body of the woman becomes the site through which the film generates its meaning: family-country, father-daughter, female body-the body of the nation, patriarchy-patriotism, Muslim-Indian, love-hate. All these binaries woven so tightly together, rising like a double helix structure, form the DNA of Bollywood's relationship with Kashmir.

Keywords: Female body, Nation, Patriarchy, Patriotism, Kashmir

Introduction

The title of my paper bears a curious line, “that kind of voyage, rank as honeysuckle”. This line from Anne Sexton's poem “Briar Rose” came to me like an apparition, or perhaps like an epiphany, just as I finished seeing the film, *Raazi* (2018) by Meghna Gulzar. I could not shake the line off; it kept going in my head like a struck record. I went to the poem. It read:

Consider

A girl who keeps slipping off

Arms limp as old carrots

Into the hypnotist's trance

Into a spirit world

Speaking with the gift of tongues¹.

This was Schmet, the protagonist of the film. A twenty-year-old undergraduate student of Delhi University, daughter of

a Kashmiri Muslim and a Sikh mother sent on a spy mission to Pakistan by her father. A girl, with a talent for memorizing numbers; a girl so tender and soft that she cannot look at her own bleeding foot, a girl who throws herself in front of a speeding scooter to rescue a squirrel from getting crushed. A girl described in the book, *Calling Sehmat* (2018) by Harinder Sikka (the film is based on this book) as Meera; a saint poet who loved a god so deeply that she became a wandering minstrel in search of him. In the book, in her ecstasy as Meera, the poet dancer, she steps on a piece of broken glass on the stage of the college auditorium, and does not notice that her foot has besmeared the entire stage with her blood. Needless to say, she goes on to win the first prize for her performance. A role, she almost lost for being a Muslim girl.

We have here the portrayal of a character, whose beauty, tenderness, passion are the stuff of legends. Ingredients that make for a heroine, whose choices, whose journey, whose call to adventure, will be watched carefully. Here are also the ingredients of a plot, of the transformation of a shy girl into a spy so dreadful that she singlehandedly destroyed the family of a high-ranking Army General in the Pakistani army, and whose cachet of information led to the saving of INS Vikrant and the destruction of PNS Ghazi, a prized submarine of Pakistani Navy. Some credit the victory of Indian forces over Pakistan in the 1971 war also to the efforts of many such “unsung” heroes. My interest is primarily in exploring the web of relations in which the protagonist of the film and the book, Sehmat finds herself in, and the trance-like state induced by a love of the father and the land of the father for which she unflinchingly kills the members of the family into which she is married.

My interest is also in exploring how the body of the woman becomes the site through which the film generates its meaning: family-country, father–daughter, female body-the body of the nation, patriarchy-patriotism, Muslim-Indian, love-hate. All these binaries woven so tightly together, rising like a double helix structure, form the DNA of Bollywood’s relationship with Kashmir. The structure of DNA however is not immune to

mutation. Hindi cinema's relationship with Kashmir has mutated over a period of time. Especially, since it transformed from Hindi cinema to Bollywood in the 1990s. What has however remained unchanged is the libidinal charge with which Kashmir is portrayed in Indian cinema. The beauty of the Kashmiri girl, the girl of dreams, the land of Kashmir, of red apples, of almonds and walnuts, of silk carpets and wood carvings, of lakes, and fir trees, of a beauty that parallels *jannat*/paradise. The land is coveted as much as its women. Perhaps it is difficult to separate the desire for its women with its land. In all of this what Kashmiri women want has never mattered. In that sense, it is a relationship whose terms have been settled by patriarchy and patriotism, where the girl must willingly or unwillingly walk the path laid down by the patriarch.

The Love of the Father and the Love of the 'Fatherland'

In *Razzi*, we have a woman protagonist, who is a perfect daddy's daughter. An Athena, a Durga, who strategizes with other father figures to fight for the land of the father. The mother figure is absently present in her life. The mother has no counsel for her. She has no scenes with the mother in the film, except one toward the end. Even as she is leaving on the fateful voyage to the enemy state after her marriage, she turns to her father again and again and does not so much as embrace her mother. She keeps her father's counsel, a stern, authoritarian and a benevolent man. A man whose word no one goes against; a man who refuses treatment for cancer; a man, whose duty is first and foremost to the nation. His wife is a passive figure with no voice. She has not a single scene by herself. She is never framed alone, except in the passing with other characters. She has no action, no meaningful words to utter. She accepts the fate her husband decrees for their only child without a fight. Her only task in the film is to nourish the bodies. In the first scene with her daughter, she refuses the fruit the child asks of her. "Loqat", she tells her is not available in this season. Instead, she has made for her a drink of almonds

The father has already decided Sehmat's fate when he promises her hand in a marriage to the son of an army brigadier

in Pakistan without so much as asking for her opinion. He owns her and he knows she will not go against his wish. This is further made evident in the supreme confidence he displays when meeting the RAW officer, Khalid Mir. Khalid is horrified that Hidayat, (Sehmat's father) has pledged his daughter across the border and that he wants her to take over from him as the informer of the Indian defense forces. And indeed, as anticipated by Hidayat, Sehmat accepts her fate and proves to be an exceptional student of subterfuge.

When asked by Javed Mir, her trainer as to why she put herself up of for this irrevocable task. She answers like a true patriot, "my father, his father they were freedom fighters. I am doing the same for my "Mulk". She aligns herself with the hierarchy of patriots: grandfather, father, daughter. She draws her lineage from the father's side. That her chronology may be a bit archaic does not matter. Did the Kashmiris participate in the Indian struggle for freedom? What of the struggle of Kashmiris themselves for freedom, and even before the arrival of the Dogra kings? That the film is made in 2018, in the backdrop of violence, militancy and encounters with the Indian army does not so much as come as a minor reference. The Kashmir that is presented in the film is a serene place, ahistorical except as a deeply integrated part of India.

Indeed, no one uses the word "fatherland" anymore. And, in the Indian context it was Savarkar, who first used the word "fatherland" and one might add without irony. It seems in the film too the idea of the country as the land of the father is without irony. The girl who stands in for her father maybe the heroine of the film, but she is really only a puppet, a perfect ventriloquist, who speaks in the tongue of the father. Always in the film the word used for the nation is *mulk/ watan/ vatan*, a Turkic word-meaning homeland, the gender of which is masculine. It is the memory of grandfather and the father who have been taking risks for the nation that convinces her to undertake the task. She reminds her father that he himself had taught her that nation comes first, even before the self. The self must subject itself to the duty asked of it for the nation and that

if sending the sons into army for the security of the nation is right then so is the task cut out for her by her father.

The Body of the Nation – Shadow of the Moon in the Waters of the Sea

The film opens with the expanse of the Arabian Sea, on a warship, where troops have assembled to listen to the wise words of a Lt. General. Behind the general are parked fighter aircrafts. Sehmat's son is in the audience, an army officer himself. The sons of the nation gathered to pay homage to others like them. The speech of the general is commemorating India's victory over Pakistan in the 1971 war, and becomes the point of entry into the story of the incredible actions of its intelligence bureau. Immediately the scene shifts to West Pakistan, with a black frame. In a dark room are gathered senior army officers of the Pakistan Army for a conference. Brigadier Sayeed is briefing his seniors about the Mukti Vahini in East Pakistan, even as a car enters the Army headquarters at Rawalpindi. A meeting takes place between the two friends, Brigadier Sayeed and Hidayat Khan. From West Pakistan the scene shifts to Kashmir. The film's foray into enemy territory is brief and limited to buildings. The return to India is through the lush landscape of Kashmir, with the Himalayas and rivers and winding roads. From the gleaming waters of the Arabian Sea to the sensuous beauty of the Himalayas, the nation is a mermaid, her lower body dangling in the sea, while her head high above the Himalayas with the trees and rivers for her tresses. Whereas, the enemy is cloistered in a tiny building, a few old men, laughing at dreams of freedom of another nation. Inside the room too, the discussion is on the prowess of an Indian intelligence officer. India is framed in light and Pakistan in darkness. Later after Sehmat's wedding, the party leaves Kashmir's bountiful nature to enter dark forests of Pakistan and its dark streets.

Both in India, Pakistan and yet to be formed Bangladesh the "nation" are its men, its armed forces, its rebels fighting against one another for supremacy. It is not until after 7 minutes and 45 seconds that we first see a woman, any woman in the film. A maid in the household of Hidayat Khan followed by Teji, his

wife, who is framed behind the husband in her first shot in the film. From Kashmir we reach the fields of Delhi University, teeming with young students and squirrels. It is here; for the first time that we meet the protagonist of the film, Sehmat Khan. We first see her bare feet pacing the lawns with squirrels in the foreground, then her eyes, then her hands as they rescue a squirrel from getting crushed under a scooter and then her full face with the squirrel sitting cozily in the palms of her hands. A beautiful woman, a beautiful Kashmiri woman, for whom Shammi Kapoor once sang, “*ye chand sa roshan chera, julfon ka rang sunehra, ye jheel si neeli ankhen, koi raaz hai inme gehra. Tareef karun kya uski, jisne tumhen banaya*”. And Jawaharlal Nehru much before him gushing like a besotted lover, in comparing the beauty of Kashmir to that of a supremely beautiful woman:

Like some supremely beautiful woman, whose beauty is almost impersonal and above human desire, such was Kashmir in all its feminine beauty of river and valley and lake and graceful trees ... sometimes the sheer loveliness of it was overpowering and I felt almost faint².

Sehmat, unlike Sharmila in *Kashmir ki Kali* is a fragmented woman, as the different shots connecting her tell us. She is a woman of delicate sensibilities, with kohl rimmed soft eyes. She has to be made whole. Turned into an Athena, a Durga, born of the minds of male gods. In her hands a gun must replace the squirrel, books become sites for bugging, the kohl must disappear from her eyes. Under the tutelage of men, she must become the goddess of subterfuge and stratagem. All her loveliness weaponized for a task she has been assigned. Her eyes will now brim with kohl only as a newly wed to lure and to lead astray, Pakistani men. Sehmat is the only woman in the film who straddles the outside and the inside worlds. All the other women of the nation are framed within the interiors of buildings, whether it is her mother or other women, either at the telephone exchange or college professors. Sehmat, the goddess of war and of the outdoors, she alone has breached boundaries carefully laid down: men in the open spaces, women in the interiors, in house,

in offices. Later, when Sehmat has achieved what she had set out to for the nation she too will be relegated to the insides of a barren house with minimal belongings, far away from the lush surroundings of Kashmir, to Malerkotla, a small town in Punjab historically known for its tolerance and protection of its Muslim population. The only place said to be left untouched by communal violence during the partition.

The interior of Iqbal's house, where Sehmat is now rightfully settled as his wife, is a space that barely contains her. She is forever escaping into the outdoors. As the field agent of the nation her role as a wife is just that, a role. A role made so sacrosanct by the holy vows of matrimony that her husband's family never ever sees her as someone who could betray them. The first task she does upon entering the Sayeed household is to wire it up and connect it to the headquarters in far-off New Delhi. Thus, making the house of Sayeed's an extension of India. Just as marriage is turned into a perfect alibi for espionage, so are the religious places and symbols of Muslim faith turned into sites of subterfuge and refuge. The dargahs and the mosques are used as spaces for physical transformation, from wife to a burqa-clad spy, coolly passing over information to the other side and planning killings to save her own life and the integrity of her mission. Pakistan as opposed to India is just the garrison and the religious spaces. To that extent, India too is presented as a massive fort, ranging from the Arabian sea to the house of India's foremost informer in Kashmir. But, in India at least there are some forays into the civilian life. None are offered to us in Pakistan. Pakistan is only its army, their wives, children and scheming generals. The narrative of the film contains the story of Sehmat, as recounted by Nikhil Bakshi, a Lt. General in the Indian Army commemorating the 46th anniversary of Indian victory over Pakistan in 1971. The narrative that began at the Arabian Sea ends at the Arabian Sea with the general paying homage to its brave hearts, Sehmat being one of them. The story is told from his perspective.

Life after Death – the Self and Its Enemies

She's on a voyage.

She is swimming further and further back,
up like a salmon,
struggling into her mother's pocketbook.
Little doll child³

Did she love Iqbal? We will never know. For she never does say what she felt for him, when he asks her if there was ever anything true between them. She has him on point blank range, toward the end of the film. When her mask finally slips and she stands without the cover of the loving wife and has in her hands a pistol and not the usual serving bowls that we see her with, or handing over to him his purse etc. Her voice is trembling and her eyes are teary. Did she ever imagine what it would be like to face him as the spy of India and not as his loving wife? A performance she had perfected. How did she keep the two selves separate? Did she ever have any doubts about her motives? Did she ever think of abandoning her mission in the face of its human cost?

The film makes us believe, she did not. She is firm on her resolve until the last. Her hypnotist's trance is broken only with the explosion in which her husband, Iqbal is killed. She breaks down, and sees Khalid Mir for what he is – a hardened spy bereft of any emotion. As far as he knew she was already dead. He is surprised to see her alive. In the film it is the wife of the grocer, who dies in the explosion, in the book however it is Munira her sister-in-law, who dies in the explosion. Later on, reaching the safe hideout of Mir and others she breaks down and lashes out at Khalid, and asks him to take her away, she wants to return home, she is shocked at what she has done, at the death of Iqbal. She tells him she does not want to become more like him than she already has. The irony however is that she has crossed over frontiers that Mir himself never has. And that place she called home has changed irrevocably. Nothing will ever be the same. She had unwittingly staked her own future. There is now only the present, the real that will haunt all her future days.

She realizes this when she accuses Mir and his way of life of recognizing neither the sanctity of relationships nor of life. Is she not indicting her own father in all of this? She had after all willingly embraced his ideal of life, “watan ke aage kuch nahin” (Nothing comes before the nation). Her belief in the romantic notion of a life led for the nation has yielded a bitter harvest. All the masks have slipped. Access to the self is now available but only after a brutal awakening. The trance is broken. She is condemned to a life of wakefulness. She is fractured beyond repair. If at the beginning of the film she was fragmented. Now she is whole but missing her soul. Her Faustian pact with the nation is complete.

The film has no answers or even questions for the fractured self. At the end of the film, the protagonist, having woken up from her trance with the explosive kiss of her prince, sees for the first time the ugly face of nationalism that cannot stop killing. There are no relations, no ties, no humanity, no love, only a deafening silence. Sehmat has turned silent, at the end of the film. As penance, or perhaps out of love for Iqbal, she decides not to abort her child. Samar Sayeed, who later becomes an officer in the Indian army. The film begins with him but does not end with him. It ends with Sehmat looking out of a window, in a desolate land, with no close relations, except her old mother. Shunning all adornment, all luxury, she lives like a recluse with her memories, perhaps contemplating the choices she had made. But the film cannot bear the burden of a nationalist heroine in love with a Pakistani man. Sehmat has turned silent towards the end. The film however cannot bear the burden of that silence and it ends with the dedication, “to the brave hearts who are anonymous in the history of our nation. Like Sehmat, they remain unnamed and unknown...” The circle is complete. Sehmat has lost but the nation has won.

The One True Love

Until the end Iqbal is deceived. The woman standing in front of him in the last scene, who he thinks is Sehmat is someone else. He remains in love with her despite everything and never can bring himself to overpower her by force. He remains in a state of

shock and redeems her by describing her as one who loved her nation more than anyone else, even as he himself is wont to do. Of course, where she enters the annals of her nation's history as a true daughter of the soil. His and his family's name is written in ignominy in the history of his own nation. Nothing remains of his family, his father the only surviving member too commits suicide as Sikka's book tells us. He is the only character in the film, who retains his humanity till the end. He abandons his pistol when he sees the woman, he thinks is Sehmat, falling to the ground and is killed instantly in the explosion that follows. He alone in the film is shown as being more than a hardened nationalist. He loves Jazz and admits to it affecting him in strange ways. For Sehmat, even music is only Indian classical music. Unlike Sehmat he is not pretending a love, he is not performing a love. He is a dreamer, a lover and is apologetic of his father's insensitive anti-India utterances at dining table, thinking it might hurt Sehmat's sensibilities. He feels for her, he wants to know her and wants to win her over and not subject her to a husbandly conquest. Until the end he defends her to his father, saying, "she was only doing, what we are doing for our own nation". Is it really true, however? Whether the love of the nation so easily trumps that of the family? This is a question that the film refuses to ask.

What would it take for a Kashmiri Muslim to be accepted as a "patriotic" Indian? To go against the "self"? To kill? To conspire against the very idea of humanity and filial relations? To that extent the film is unable to reconcile its contradictions, in that the characters from Pakistan in the film are far portrayed with dignity and humanity. They offer to Sehmat their unconditional love and trust and do everything they can to make her comfortable and feel a part of their family. The Indian side on the other hand is consumed with aggression and hatred toward their Pakistani counterparts. They are reduced to animal caricatures in the nicknames bestowed upon them by the Indian intelligence bureau: Cat to Sehmat's brother-in-law, mouse to her sister-in-law, eagle to her father-in-law. There is

no hesitation in exploiting conjugal relations for the sake of vital information for the nation.

Conclusion

The film poses nationalism as the answer to filial and conjugal relations. The question of ethics and humanity in the face of an unquestioning acceptance of the logic of nation, nationalism and war is left dangling. And finds a delayed expression in Sehmat's anguish at the death of Iqbal. But her lament is not enough. It comes too late and at a terrible price. Her act of bravery/heroism in the service of the nation is but a small consolation and definitely not one, which redeems humanity. She has sinned against love, family and humanity and has killed for an "imagined community" and spurned the chance of a real one. It is only suitable that this paper should end with yet another quote from Sexton's poem, "Briar Rose":

Briar Rose
was an insomniac...
She could not nap
or lie in sleep ...
Further, I must not dream
for when I do I see the table set
and a faltering crone at my place,
her eyes burnt by cigarettes
as she eats betrayal like a slice of meat⁴...

End Notes:

1. Anne Sexton, "Briar Rose"
<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/briar-rose-sleeping-beauty/>
2. Perry Anderson. *The Ideology of India*. Verso, 2012. P.69-70.
3. Anne sexton, "Briar Rose"
4. Ibid.

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