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The Well of Memories: Women, Setting and Plurality in *Khamosh Paani*

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Abstract:

Selected alternative narratives are often side stepped and brushed away while creating a hegemonic discourse, in order to concretize the notion of a nation and give it an identity of its own. However, when such alternative narratives are recovered from the cobwebs of history, they tend to question the singular monolithic entity of the Nation-State. My paper would try to explore the trauma and horror of the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947 and its aftermath even after 53 years, as narrated in the film Khamosh Pani: Silent Waters (2003), directed by the Pakistani documentary filmmaker Sabiha Sumar. Further, I would draw attention to the ways in which a female body is subjected to territorisation and how religion, border, society, and patriarchy did influence women's choices during the upheavals of 1947. I would finally address the question of plurality at moments of death and analyse how the Partition has been a trauma without terminal – a trauma that cannot be sealed because the wounds are always reopened, no matter how much the Nation-State tries to erase the private narratives that are embedded into wells of memories.

Keywords: Nation-State, Trauma, Plurality, Partition, Memory, Body.

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"Two countries were born

Men abducted women, fathers killed their daughters…

Everyone said it was to save their honour;

Some young girls died, others survived.

People moved like a sea, leaving everything behind:

Broken memories, half-dreamt dreams, place of worship."

– Narrated by Ayesha in *Khamosh Paani*

Selected personal narratives on partition are often side-stepped and brushed away while creating a dominant hegemonic discourse. It is done to concretize the notion of a nation and give it an identity of its own. However, when such personal narratives are recovered from the cobwebs of history, they tend to question the singular monolithic entity of the nation-state. In fact, it is our memories that act as a repository of all such private narratives; narratives that re-narrate the public truth and underscore the shadowiness of the borderlines. My paper would try to explore the trauma and horror of the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947, and its aftermath, even after 53 years, as narrated in the film *Khamosh Pani: Silent Waters* (2003), directed by the Pakistani documentary filmmaker Sabiha Sumar. Further, I would draw attention to the plurality of identities and how religion, society and sexuality influenced women's choices during the upheavals of 1947. In every sense, the well, in *Khamosh Paani*, as well as its silent water runs as a leitmotif to the central narrative of the film and highlights the fact that there is no scope of escape from the vicious circle of memories; memories that give voice to silence.

During the Partition of India in 1947, young Veero, along with other Sikh women, was dragged by the male members of the community to jump into a well in order to "save" her honour. The event took place in the village Charkhi near Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan). With the comment "No, not me" (*Khamosh Paani*), Veero hands a locket, containing a picture of herself, to her brother Jaswant and manages to escape, though temporarily, both from her identity and the cruel grasp of death. Soon, Veero is cornered and is probably raped by a group of young Muslim men. Although there are indications of sexual violence, Veero gets married with one of the young men. Finally, she converts to Islam and assumes her life as Ayesha. Monochromatic and negative images of all such incidents, along with flashbacks of the well, continuously haunt both Ayesha and the audience. The central narrative of the film is set during the years of General Zia's military coup (1977) in Charkhi. The protagonist of the film is Ayesha, played by Kiron Kher. She is a widow in her forties and raises her young son Saleem, played by Aamir Malik. However, Saleem is soon taken over by the sheer powerful rhetoric of the radical Islamists and joins the jihadi cause. Sumar showcases how Saleem is slowly interpellated by the radical Islamic ideologies through pamphlets and occasional political lectures in Rawalpindi. The arrival of the Sikh pilgrims in the village, after an agreement between India and Pakistan, leads to the revelation of the long-buried secrets of Ayesha that raise questions regarding her identity as a devout Muslim. Ideologically influenced by the growing Islamist sentiments, Saleem soon disregards her mother when he discovers that she is not a "pure Muslim" (*Khamosh Paani*). On the other hand, though Jaswant, Ayesha's brother, pleads with her to visit her 'Hindu' family, Ayesha refuses to meet her bedridden father. Being socially ostracised, Ayesha accepts death in the form of suicide, rather than running away from it as she did 30 years ago. Ayesha finally does answer the call of the silent water, jumps into the well of memories and sacrifices her life.

Khamosh Paani's narrative does unfold an aspect of Partition that gave birth to the notion of nationalism or, as Aijaz Ahmad terms, "the nationalism of mourning" (Ahmad 119). Ahmad writes in his essay, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness", that our nationalism at the juncture of Independence was a "nationalism of mourning" (Ahmad 119), a form of valediction, for what we witnessed was the British policy of divide and rule, and our own willingness to break up our civilizational unity, to kill our neighbours or our family members, as witnessed by Ayesha, and to forgo the civic ethos and ethics, without which human community is impossible. However, nationalism itself is not a unitary thing with certain predetermined values and essence, the way certain fundamentalists think it to be. In fact, there are hundreds of "nationalisms" in Asia and Africa today, each with their own objectives. Whether nationalism will produce a progressive cultural practice depends, in Gramscian terms, upon the political character of the power bloc which takes hold of it and utilises it, as a material force, in the process of constituting its own hegemony (Ahmad 102). Flashbacks in *Khamosh Paani* further reinforce the notion of how women are reduced to mere puppets, in the midst of communal violence, without any individual choice. In fact, as Kiron Kher narrates at the beginning of the film:

> "It deals with women and how few choices they have in their lives. In fact, all their choices are related to the men in their life; whether their fathers, their brothers, their husbands and ultimately their sons...they are answerable to all of them...it is they who seem to be the keepers of their morals and their values." (*Khamosh Paani*)

Recent Partition narratives often document the gendered nature of communal violence and the ways they are executed, as Urvashi Butalia writes:

> "Thousands of women on both sides of the newly formed border...were abducted, raped, forced to convert, forced into marriage... Untold numbers of women, particularly in Sikh families, were killed ("martyred" is the term used) by their kinsmen, in order to "protect" them from being converted; perhaps an equivalent number killed themselves." (Butalia 183)

Furthermore, Cynthia Enloe has identified the participation of men and women in such violence: women's role is an icon and a signifier of purity, to be defended or as a loose, polluting woman, to be devalued and rejected (Enloe N.pg). On the contrary, the man's role as a protector of "his" woman, almost a possession, during such communal violence and military conflicts, is particularly relevant where rape is used as a weapon of war. Partition violence has often witnessed how rape has been used both as a signifier and an instrument of domination by a particular community over another. If protection is considered a fundamental component of masculinity, men who fail to give protection to the women of their community are emasculated at a symbolic and psychological level. Thus, rape becomes not only domination by men but also a domination of men. Raping and impregnating women of other communities thus became an important strategy of war during Partition, a strategy to defeat the opposing communities at a psychological level. Thus, it is probably the community's masculinity that has been safeguarded by killing the women, rather than leaving them to be raped by the men of the opposing communities. In other words, death became a more honourable solution for women vis-a-vis rape, a solution proposed and being executed by the men of the same community. There are various instances of the repetition of death when the well of silence refused to welcome any more visitors. Often it happened, as Butalia has documented, when the water could not rise any more, the women near the top were saved. At times, women tried at least four or five times to die but without any fruitful result (*The Other Side*

of Silence 203). Veero's father tried to drown her daughter into the well in order to preserve her honour. On the other hand, such practices and macabre executions arise from an intense desire to control the destiny of their women instead of getting raped by the men of opposing communities. It is a desire for an agency amid chaos, almost a nihilistic agency, which Veero refuses. On the contrary, Veero submits herself to her destiny, gets sexually exploited and accepts her new identity as Ayesha. It is interesting to note that Veero takes recourse and accepts a religion which has taken away everything from her, including her identity.

Khamosh Paani is set in 1979, during the years of General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup. These years saw the rise of Islamist fundamentalism and a growing economic disparity between the rural and urban people (Khan 131). Such a social condition provided a fertile ground for the radical Islamists to recruit the young men from the rural areas and interpellate them with the jihadi cause. Young Saleem is soon attracted by the powerful rhetoric of the jihadi recruiters, starts visiting various jihadi meetings and collects various jihadi manifestoes. He is soon driven by the urge to become an important person in a 'pure' Islamist state. Saleem's growing attachment with the jihadi cause even concerns Ayesha:

> "Ayesha: You will destroy our lives.
>
> Saleem: My life now has purpose. I have found a path.
>
> A: Your words fill me with fear.
>
> S: How can you be afraid of Islam?" (*Khamosh Paani*)

Saleem questions his mother regarding her identity, the moment his own Islamic credentials come under scrutiny. Saleem probably realizes that he has to be more Islamist than the other Islamic

fundamentalists in order to justify his credentials. One would surely notice the violence in Saleem's voice when he asks the Sikh pilgrims to pray silently, as he says:

"Do the prayer, but we should not be able to hear the sound." (*Khamosh Paani*)

Ayesha's horrified view, in contrast to Saleem delivering the jihadi cause, only suggests her helpless condition/ She laments: "If we cannot count on our children, whom can we count on then?" (*Khamosh Paani*).

There is another interesting issue with the setting of *Khamosh Paani*. In 1947, there had been a significant number of violent clashes between the Sikhs and the Muslims. However, during General Haq's regime, various Sikh pilgrimage sites were restored at government expense, and a large number of Sikh pilgrims were allowed to visit their holy places in Pakistan (Haqqani N.pg). In fact, some scholars and experts argue that the Pakistani state, led by General Haq, actively supported a Sikh insurgency for the creation of Khalistan in Indian Punjab (Chopra); while others felt that the demand for a separate nation is rooted in Sikh alienation (Rais N.pg). An important issue, regarding which *Khamosh Paani* remains curiously silent, is the role played by the United States of America in the politicization of religion in Pakistan. It was done to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan by supporting the radical Islamists (Khan 146). In the film, the recruiter from Lahore tells his audience that the Soviets are about to invade Afghanistan. The mention of the Soviet Union is the only reference that Sumar cites to hint at the international forces, fueling radical Islamists in Pakistan. If one considers the international political status-quo, since September 11, the government agendas of Washington and fragments of Islamabad no longer supported the jihadi cause as they did in 1979. Ironically, the film is set in 1979. (Khan 148). At the end of the film, which gives us a glimpse of Pakistan's socio-political condition in 2002, a

Hitlerian voice-over is heard from a radio, which addresses the President's delegation address: "Pakistan will not be a heaven for Islamic extremists" (*Khamosh Paani*). In other sense, Sumar probably critiques the state sponsored violence in the name of religion at a time when Pakistan has again witnessed a military coup, though bloodless, when Pervez Musharraf overthrows the then elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, and his government, on 12 October 1999, and himself assumes the role of Pakistan's 10th President, in 2001 (Pervez). *Khamosh Panni* ends with Zubeida's realization that the ways in which religion is used as an ideological apparatus by the State, in order to interpellate the young brains, remains unaltered throughout human history. At the ending of the film, Zubeida hears an interview of Saleem, who is shown to be serving as the General Secretary of Pakistan in 2002, as he says:

> "The ways of Islam are a part of our culture; we have followed the ways of Islam for centuries. Now legalising Islamic customs is simply a formality." (Khamosh Paani)

The entire timeline of the narrative, starting from 1947 and continuing till 2002, and the layers of post-partition politics, give a new dimension to *Khamosh Paani*. Indeed, the film coalesces narratives of Partition and its aftermath.

Mushirul Hasan voices that since Partition, "Pluralism, the bedrock of secular nationalism, could no longer contain hatred, religious intolerance and other forms of bigotry" (Hasan 105). The issues concerning the partition violence raise questions about being a Hindu, Muslim or a Sikh. Plurality of identities is often devalued in the midst of a communal violence in order to objectify a particular target group, be it a Muslim, Hindu or a Sikh community. What we often fail to realise is that "being Islamic can hardly be the only identity a Muslim has;" (Sen 67) and it applies equally for all other communities. One has to have certain choices in matters of identity – as Amartya Sen

writes, “Indeed, the denial of Plurality as well as the rejection of choice in matters of identity can produce an astonishingly narrow and misdirected view” (Sen 67). At the same time, a person can be a Hindu, a Dalit, a refugee, a father, a child, a farmer, a poet, an environmental activist, and a murderer. In *Khamosh Paani*, though Veero did embrace the identity of Ayesha, is she a Muslim or a Sikh? The moment we try to essentialize Veero/Ayesha’s identity, we would ruin the notion of plurality. Flashbacks of Veero keep coming back in Ayesha’s memory while Ayesha sends sweets for Veero’s community. Suppose being a Hindu or a Muslim is the only identity of a person then that religious identification would have to carry the huge burden of resolving various other choices that one faces on different occasions. In other words, Sumar thus amplifies the question of whether it is possible to barricade memories with trenches or to divide a soul with two names, Veero and Ayesha. There are at least three moments of death in Veero/Ayesha’s life, taking place in different temporal and social frameworks. Veero’s first encounter with death is in her childhood, while standing near the well in order to be pushed into it. Years later, Ayesha encounters death, probably for the second time, when Saleem asks uncomfortable questions regarding her religious identity, her Islamic rhetoric and belief. Saleem and Ayesha’s conversation probably reminds us of the conversation between the two strangers in Samaresh Basu’s short Bengali story “Adab”; a story that narrates how Partition has partitioned language and how we all seek refuge in the same “dustbin” (Basu 4). Ayesha soon discovers that her neighbours have also started showing their disinterest towards her, after the revelation of her past, forcing her to embrace death just the way she had once embraced Islam. Ayesha thus steps into the well to step out of this post-partition world where the flood of communal violence has only left a pile of memories, memories that give voice to silence.

The well in the village of Charkhi remains a silent observer of Partition and is a repository of untold and unheard narratives of Partition violence. The silent waters are probably signifiers of the private and unheard narratives which are constantly at loggerheads with the public truth. Such private narratives are often forgotten with the death of the individual because death gifts a 'khamoshi' (silence) to memories. Regarding Partition, Ismat Chughtai once stated: "The bonds of relationship were in tatters and in the end, many souls remained behind in Hindustan while their bodies started off for Pakistan" (Chughtai 3). Zubeida questions at the end if it is ever possible to answer who left, and who stayed back in Charkhi:

> "So this is how Veero left and Ayesha stayed behind…Do we know who left and who stayed?" (*Khamosh Paani*)

In a world of "imagined communities" (Anderson N.pg), the "struggle of Man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera). The question is, as Partha Chatterjee argues, "whose imagined community" are we talking about during such upheavals? (Chatterjee 3) Saleem places the belongings of her mother in a wooden box and floats it in a river, almost in an effort to erase or rather silence her memories. Despite Saleem's serious efforts to float away Veero/Ayesha's memories in the stream of time, it is Zubeida who manages to bring back Veero/Ayesha's memories. In fact, Zubeida is the narrator of the film *Khamosh Paani* and it is through her eyes that we get a glimpse of Rawalpindi, in 2002. *Khamosh Paani* thus reveals that the partition of India is a trauma without terminal; a trauma that cannot be sealed because the wounds are always reopened, no matter how much the nation state tries to erase the private narratives of the "silent waters"; narratives that are embedded into wells of memories.

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