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THE TRAUMA OF PARTITION AND IDENTITY CRISIS: A CRITIQUE ON SABIHA SUMAR'S KHAMOSH PANI

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ABSTRACT

Set against the background of General Zia's regime and coupled with the frequent flashbacks to the Pak-India Partition of 1947, *Khamosh Pani* (2003) by Sabiha Sumar, retells the story of a middle-aged widow in the village of *Charkhi*, Rawalpindi, Pakistan. Initially born Sikh, Veero converts to Islam after the atrocities of the partition, and is named as Ayesha. Torn between the memories of and from her past and the present life on one hand, and her loyalty, faith and identity questioned at every step of her new life on the other hand places her in the state and space of 'inbetweenness' that typically fits into Bhabha's (1994) hybridity and Spivak's (2010) subaltern who cannot speak. Studies have been conducted on the subaltern and hybrid identities; however, limited or no significant research has been carried out on the subject at hand in reference to *Khamosh Pani* (2003). Therefore, essentially qualitative in nature, this paper uses the parameters of Textual Analysis set by Catherine Belsey (2013) and further uses the lenses of Bhabha's Hybridity (1994) and Spivak's Subaltern (2010) to probe into the duality of the character of Veero/Ayesha and determine her true identity.

INTRODUCTION

Originally titled as *Khamosh Pani* in Urdu, *Silent Waters* is a Pakistani film that was released in 2003. Directed by a well known Pakistani director Sabiha Sumar, *Silent Waters* is a co-production of Pakistan, France and Germany. Filmed in the Pakistani village *Charkhi*, Hasanabdal, Rawalpindi, and set in General Zia's regime of 1979, *Silent Waters* retells the story of the sufferings of women during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Taking its cue and inspiration from real life stories, Sumar (2005) claims that *Silent Waters* is 'like life itself' (p.5). Sumar (2005) further claims that *Silent Waters* is the way "to give a piece of life to the audience, exactly as I see it, exactly as I live it, and let the audience make up their own minds" (p.4). It is so because the film reveals the tragic stories of those women from minorities, who were left behind in Pakistan after the partition. The film investigates and traces the identity of and for these women. For example, the main character in this film is Ayesha, who is shown as a Muslim when the film starts, but as the story progresses we realize that her real name was Veero and that she belonged to a well off Sikh family.

During the partition of 1947, in the film, when her family decided to migrate to India, their village was attacked by the Muslims. This attack was in reaction to the all the Muslim-Hindu-conflict related riots and attacks that were taking place across the subcontinent. It was feared by the Sikh families of *Charkhi* village that their women might be taken by Muslim men; therefore, they decided to mass murder them by throwing them in a well that was situated on the outskirts of the village. Most of the young girls were thrown in the well while Veero ran off to save her life. Veero was later rescued by a Muslim named Salman who later married her after converting her to Islam. Veero converted and changed her name to Ayesha. They had a son named Saleem.

The film revolves around the theme of love and loss, while the story of General Zia and his Islamization and enforcement of Islamic law resonates in the background. In the efforts for the enforcement of Shariah law in the country, and Saleem's deep love for religion, Ayesha struggles to take sides. Her deep love for her son and her love for a free independent country where women are free, tests her loyalties. She is put back into a quagmire where she questions her own identity. Whether she is a true Muslim or a Sikh at heart is the question that shatters her supposed identity after her marriage. She is put to a test of identity and loyalty. Even her own son, Saleem, questions her religious beliefs and her identity. Shattered between ethnic and religious identities, Ayesha fights Veero (internal conflict) and as a result creates a hybrid identity - identity which is not fixed but a byproduct of Pakistani and Indian/Muslim and Sikh cultures and beliefs respectively.

Research has been carried out at great length on colonization/decolonization and identity conflicts/Hybrid Identity/Hybridity; however, limited or no significant research has been carried out on the *Silent Waters* (2003) and the questions it raises and tries to answer regarding the subject at hand. Therefore, this paper investigates the true identity of Ayesha/Veero and presents a critique on her hybrid identity. Whether it is possible for Ayesha to have two identities and beliefs at the same time, what are impacts of these conflicting

identities and beliefs on Ayesha, and where does Ayesha's individuality reside and where does this individuality lead to? are the questions that this paper probes into. Essentially qualitative in nature, this paper uses the parameters of Catherine Belsey's (2013) Textual Analysis to bring forth the argument. This paper also makes use of Homi.K.Bhabha's Theory of Hybridity (1994) in order to probe into the set research questions. For this reason, his book *The Location of Book* (1994) and the parameters described in it are taken into consideration for the theoretical framework of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term hybridity is mostly related to Bhabha (1994) in post colonialism. Hybridity, Ambivalence and Mimicry are often the terms associated with him. Bhabha (1994) refers to the term hybridity as 'inbetweenness' (p.2). According to Mizutani (2008), the term hybridity coined by Bhabha is mostly in the cases of cultural criticism. The term hybridity resonates whenever there is a criticism on conflicts between culture. Prabhu (2007) argues that hybridity leads to 'binary thinking' (p. 4). This binary thinking is evident from the main character Ayesha, who is Veero at the same time. She lives as Ayesha in *Charkhi* village but has a Sikh past embedded in her thoughts that keeps on disturbing her from time to time.

Hybridity or hybrid character like Ayesha/Veero is an "offspring of a tame sow and wild boar" (Winkle, 1996, p. 240). When the story unfolds, we realize that Ayesha, who is apparently seem a devoted Muslim and a mother to a lover later turned religious fanatic Saleem, belonged to a Sikh family and was named Veero. As the story progress, we see that Veero has never turned completely to Ayesha nor is she the same Veero - she is in the state of 'inbetweenness'.

Amrulloh (2014) claims that Hybridity is inevitable for people living in two different cultures. Both cultures influence the individual living in it. In this case Ayesha is predominantly influenced by Muslim/Pakistani culture and adapts to it; however, deep down she has inherent Sikh influence which she cannot get rid of. She tries to live as an individual not affected by the differences in cultures but she cannot. It is not possible to stay neutral and not get influenced by both the cultures in which an individual live. Amrullah (2014) has presented a detailed criticism on the subject hand in reference to the Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* (2000). Similarly, Turasan (2013) has presented a detailed study of Conrad's *Almayer's Folly* (1895) from the perspectives of 'Othering' and 'Hybridity'. In the similar line of argument, Khatar (2016) has probed the concept of hybridity in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) by Chinua Achebe. The study is conducted from the perspectives of culture and identity.

Olsson (2010) has also presented a detailed criticism about the subject at hand in reference to the novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe and *Tracks* (1998) by Louise Erdrich. Olsson argues that it is impossible for a person not to be influenced by one's own culture and/or the other culture in which he/she is living. The main characters in the novel mentioned above react to the changes in the cultures. Although the two novels are different from

each other, the responses of the characters are the same and it is mainly due to the similar impact and influence of cultures on a person.

In similar line of argument, in addition to the experience of the two cultures, the migration during the 1947 played a pivotal role in triggering violence, which ultimately resulted in mass conversions of religions due to fear. According to Kraidy (2002), Hybridity is a global condition that is initiated and triggered by force or normal migration. He argues that hybrid identity is inevitable in such conditions and migrations; especially in forced migration which is mostly accompanied with trauma. The sufferings of the 1947 partition and the mass migration added to the misery especially of women. According to Butalia (1998),

A million people traversed the border on foot, as at times they could not get access to any form of public transport. Thousands of women were kidnapped, raped, marched naked in streets, and at times their bodies were tattooed with symbols of the 'other' religion. (p. 132)

In order to avoid this brutal fate, male heads of the family even killed their own women. (Butalia, 1998, p156). Ayesha and her family members had to face the same fate ; however, she escaped but ended up in another quagmire of identity crisis where she is tested for her Muslim and Sikh faith (Bi-religious affinity). She is tested by her Muslim as well as Sikh family members, that is, by her son and her brother respectively. Her son is a staunch Muslim where as her brother is a staunch Sikh. She is torn between the two and add further injury to her trauma. Saeed (2012), rightly calls *Silent Waters* as a story of trauma. While referring to the trauma, Saeed quotes Hirsch who categorized this trauma as a 'social phenomenon' (2012, p. 134). Saeed further adds that this is a national trauma rather than an individual one. Ayesha is merely a representative of hundreds and thousands of women who suffered similar fate during the 1947 partition.

To consider an example of this trauma from *Silent Waters*, there is one water-well in the village which feeds its residents. During the turmoil of the partition, Ayesha and her family members are forced by their male family members to jump into the well in order to save their honour. Ayesha ran off while others jumped into the waters and died. As the time passes, Ayesha never visits the well because of the fear and tragic feelings/emotions attached to it. Other women from the village bring her water from the well. She drinks it because it is the only water available. This further adds injury to her trauma. Furthermore, towards the end of the film, devastated by her love for son and brother, and the subsequent rejection of the society, and her hybrid identity, she jumps into the same well and commits suicide. The well that she escaped from in the past becomes her grave. It was the same trauma that she never really could escape. She escaped death as Veero and embraced it in the end as Ayesha. It is the trauma in the state of this 'inbetweenness' that lead her to and accept her death that she previously refused and escaped from.

Having said that, research has been carried out on the feminism and nationalism aspects of *Silent Waters*. Khan (2009) has discussed the novel at

great length from the perspective of feminism and nationalism. She has probed the film from the perspective of 1979 religious issues. Rehman (2011) has also investigated the Eco-cosmopolitan Feminist Praxis in *Silent Waters* where religious nationalism and global capitalism have been taken into account. However, limited or no significant research has been carried out on *Silent Waters* from the perspective of identity and hybridity. A comparative study of Ayesha and Veero has not been probed enough from this perspective in order to shed light on the subject at hand. In order to do, Textual analysis has been carried out in this project. Belsey (2013) argues that the text is open to interpretation and the readers and audience can draw their own meaning of it.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Silent Waters presents the harsh realities of life faced by the people during the partition of 1947. The catastrophic migration during the 1947 partition of Pakistan and India led to hundreds and thousands of deaths/murders. Numerous catastrophes befell on the people of subcontinent; however, it is pertinent to mention here that, the focus here is not on the migration during the partition and the subsequent violent incidents that occurred but on the sufferings of women especially in relation to identity and identity crisis alluding *Silent Waters*. For this purpose, let us consider two instances from the film that demonstrates the suffering of women:

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 the sea, leaving everything behind. Broken memories, half-dreamt dreams, places of worship (Sumar, 2003, 14:31). and

Rubbish! Not one woman survived. The women went to my uncle and said 'shoot us'. He kept firing and firing. All 22 women. Our honor was saved. We killed them. The Muslims didn't touch[ed] them (01:02:23).

Both the instances from the film demonstrate the ways in which women were treated during the migration. In order to save the honour of the family, men killed their women. However, Ayesha/Veero escaped and survived.

The definition of hybridity best fits the character of Ayesha. It is pertinent to mention here that Ayesha and Veero are the same names for one character. Veero is a Sikh girl and lives happily with her family in the village of *Charkhi* in Pakistan. During the partition, when the families are migrating to their respective countries, Veero's family migrates to India. Before migration a catastrophe befalls them. They fear that they will not be able to migrate safely and that their women might be taken from them; therefore, they forced them to jump in the village's well. All die except Veero who runs off. In order to survive, she later marries a Muslim man and becomes a Muslim too. Although she becomes a Muslim and teaches Quran to the little children of her village, she keeps a wooden box with herself which carries her Sikh faith sacred things including the religious book. This speaks and questions the very conversion of her to Islam. Thus, it typically reflects her inbetweenness and hybrid character.

Is she really a Muslim or Sikh is the question that this research probes into. The researchers argue that, though she has converted to Islam and has assumed a new identity; however, she cannot forget her past nor can exclude it from her memories. After marriage and the birth of her son, she is apparently happy and tries to live a normal life. She teaches Quran to the children of the village and follows the teachings of Islam. For this, she is loved by the village people. On the other hand, she has kept a wooden box hidden and locked in her room which contains things related to her old religion. It also contains the holy book of the Sikh faith. Now the question is that has she kept the things in the box because of her love for her faith or has she kept them as a memory of her past. The researchers argue and come to the conclusion that she has kept things in the wooden box as part of her memories that are associated with it and not because of her love for her previous faith. At times, the memories of her past haunts her too as is evident from the frequent flashbacks in the film (in her thoughts). She cannot get rid of the trauma that she has suffered in her childhood. Not only was she forced to jump into the well like her other family members but also for all these years her family never tired to find her or rescue her because of which she ever restless and as a result suffer from post traumatic stress disorder.

During her life after marriage and conversion to Islam, she is never seen making an attempt to pray in accordance to her previous faith. The arrival of her brother and the locket he presents to her decades later does trigger her past memories and that is where we see her opening the box. It is obvious that she has kept (as well as opened) the box as a remembrance and memory; not as in faith. However, it can also be further argued that she has kept the box as a tool of and for her identity. Identity that she has lost long ago. Thus, this lost of identity is again associated with her memories and the trauma that she has suffered. She is more a victim of trauma and tragic memories rather than faith. Though apparently, the rejection of her by the village people towards the end may seem as a reason for her suicide; however, it is argued that it is the trauma and tragic memories that led to her identity crisis and her subsequent suicide.

Having said that, it is her tragic memories and the related trauma that leads to her identity crisis/loss; not just mere exposure to a different culture and/or because of the mere difference in two cultures as put forward by Bhabha (1994). The researchers argue that the memory plays a vital role in the shaping of an identity of an individual regardless of any exposure to two different cultures. Furthermore, it is this memory that does not allow the individual to stay in hybrid shell forever or permanently. Therefore, hybrid identity is a byproduct and not a static stable permanent identity. It may shift whenever the memory related traumas are triggered and/or when the emotional memory is disturbed.

Take another example into consideration, in one of the scenes in the beginning of the film, Saleem, Ayesha's son, has piled up to stocks in his room; one that he wants to let go and throw away, and the other to keep. He is reluctant and confused what to keep and what to let go. When his mother asks him to decide quickly, he answers; "It's a lifetime earning" (09:55). Same is the case with Ayesha, she is confused throughout her life what to keep and what to let go.

This is precisely why she keeps going back to that box where she has kept her past things. Apparently, she seems to be torn between the two faiths but deep down it is the trauma and her tragic memories that has shattered her personality, and has affected her identity as a Muslim and/or Sikh.

She chooses Islam because she is left behind from her family and has to survive. However, she keeps her Sikh belongings in a wooden box that she finds hard to let go. Ayesha procrastinates throughout the story. Retained in emotional memory and triggered by identity crisis, it is this procrastination that leads to her destruction. The wooden box that she keeps locked all the time contains the religious Sikh book, picture of her husband and few other things. The box is a symbol of her memories that she has locked. Metaphorically the box is a reflection of her inward mind and/or her one faculty of mind that she wants to shun but cannot. After her suicide, Saleem opens the box and places a Quran in it too, which represents the two faiths Ayesha had experienced. This typically represents her as well as Saleem hybrid characters. In addition, it is argued that Saleem (as well as others) see her as a victim of crisis because of her two faiths; whereas, in truth, it is her association to her memories and trauma that leads to her destruction. She could not cope with the trauma, tragic memories, and misunderstanding of people about her; that is why she committed suicide.

In addition to the wooden box, when Ayesha was running away to escape her death in the first place, her brother Jaswant snatches a locket from her neck. Later in the film when the two unite, Jaswant gives back the locket to her as an evidence as well as a reminder. Ayesha wears the locket in her neck till her death. Thus, the researchers argue that this act also demonstrates that Ayesha cannot shun her memories no matter how hard she tries to adjust to her comparatively new situation/circumstances. During this time she teaches Quran to the Muslim children, which apparently reflects upon her conversion to Islam; but her disapproval of her son's involvement in General Zia's campaign of Islamization also reflects upon her contrary thoughts. Having said that, it can be argued that it is not her love or hate for the religion in itself but her disapproval of violence that it may cause. She was against the violence and aggression that was demanded of the youth in General Zia's regime, mainly because it took her back to her past where they were initially targeted in the name of religion. One may say that it is her traumatic past and tragic memories associated with it that played a pivotal role in her identity crisis. She is torn between the present and past. The present which is hard for her to accept because of the reasons mentioned above and the past, with similar reasons, that she cannot forget or shun. This is a typical example of 'inbetweenness'. Her 'inbetweenness' is also evident from her act where she puts that same locket on her prayer rug before her suicide.

In the similar line of argument, this 'inbetweenness' is caused by her victimization coming from her father and brother on one hand and her son on the other hand. She is doubly victimized in the light of Spivak's (2010) Subalterns. On one hand she is forced by her father and brother to jump in to the well and end her life and on the other hand she is abducted by the Muslims after the partition, and her son, later on, shuns her because he believes that she

is associated to her Sikh faith. However, in truth, as argued above, she is a victim of identity crisis due to her traumatic past and the subsequent tragic memories. The people around her are oblivious of this fact and that is why they treat her badly, that pushes her deep into the quagmire of torturing memories.

Failing to recognize the mental state of Ayesha by her neighbours and even her son, she jumps into the same well that she ran away from as a child. This further strengthens the argument that she is so tied up to her past memories that she commits suicide by jumping into the same well. It seems as if her memories are tied to the well as her fate. She is torn between the sufferings of the memories of the past as well as the present. The old and new memories both are taking her to the well. The old and new memories, and the conflict between the two is leading her to identity crisis which in turn is not allowing her to settle for one faith (identity). From the various dialogues in the film, it is inferred that most of the time she trying to survive and just live a life as a human; and not tilting towards any side. For instance, while she was teaching Quran to the young girls at her home, one of the girls asks whether nonbelievers would go to heaven. To which another girl replies immediately that no, only Muslims will go to heaven. Upon hearing this, Ayesha immediately interferes and tries to give an example that Allah is very merciful and that anybody who does good will be able to go to heaven. Her son and his friends hear this interpretation outside the door to which they object and start questioning her faith. Ayesha's answer suggest that she has developed her own understanding and interpretation of Islam, and more importantly, she is not tilting on any side but believes in general good. Therefore, it is argued that her tendency and thought process is relation to religion but associated with her memories from which she wants to derive any sense. It further suggests that she in the state of 'inbetweenness' as she has sympathies for everyone belonging to any faith. One can safely say here that she has developed bi-religious beliefs; thus hybrid beliefs. It is therefore argued that it is this 'inbetweenness' that led to her identity crisis which ultimately resulted in her death/suicide. It is pertinent to mention her that this 'inbetweenness' is caused by her memory and emotional memory. Even after her death, the neighbours including her son are confused about her true identity. They question whether she was a true devoted Muslim or a Sikh at heart. Therefore, it is argued as well as concluded that she is Bhabha's (1994) typical hybrid character and a classical example of Spivak's (2010) subaltern who has no voice and cannot speak.

CONCLUSION

Silent Waters contains various characters that fits into the concept of hybridity and subaltern as put forth by Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (2010). The main character, which this study has critically evaluated, Ayesha, is torn between the memories of and from her past and the new ones that are created along the life. Being misunderstood throughout her life, she is continuously tested and questioned by people around her about her faith and loyalty. Not siding with any in particular, she is haunted by her memories that ultimately lead her to identity crises. She is torn between the past, that she cannot let go, and the present that questions her faith and loyalty. Unable to negotiate and establish

her true self/identity, she lingers on in the state of 'inbetweenness' and in a way creates a hybrid identity. The hybrid identity coincides with her new faith, which requires strict adherence to the basics; especially in General Zia's regime, where Sharia law was enforced. The trauma and the subsequent tragic memories of her life further worsens her state of 'inbetweenness' that ultimately leads to her suicide/death. She tries to maintain her individuality as a person but fails to do so and loses her life in the end. Thus, it is concluded that she fails to ascertain her true identity because of her traumatic past and the subsequent tragic memories of the past as well as the future. The very act of her suicide coincides with the teaching of Islam where suicide is forbidden. Her tragic end leaves her identity inexplicable; however, we can safely conclude that she was the victim circumstances caused by her emotional memory that resulted in traumatic stress disorder that ultimately became the reason of her tragic end.

Having said that, this paper recommends the critical evaluation of another character, Saleem, whose identity shifts from that of a lover to a staunch fanatical fundamentalist, and of Zubeida, whose identity shifts from a lover to a moderate empowered woman. *Silent Waters* contains multifaceted themes such as fundamentalism, nationalism, feminism, and women empowerment, which this paper recommends to be researched and probed.

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