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**The Poisoned Well¹:
Memory and Forgetting in Sabiha Sumar's *Silent Waters*²**

*For Professor M.K. Byrski
Gurū dakṣiṇa*

Abstract

The paper revisits the events of 1947, which gave birth to two independent nations, India and Pakistan. The nation-building enterprise unleashed terrible violence and brought unspeakable suffering to millions of people who unwittingly found themselves on the wrong side of the border and sporting wrong identities. Of these the most vulnerable were the women. The stories of their plight rarely made it to the official narratives of the times. Pakistani film *Silent Waters* is one such narrative. It took more than half a century for it to find a voice. The chief protagonist of the film is a woman, whose life bears the imprint of the Partition and who becomes a victim of the continued, present-day violence against women. The film takes up such fundamental concepts as identity, belonging and home and shows how women are called on to define them again and again. This paper scrutinises these quests.

Invocation

*Ajj akhā Vāris Śāh nū, kittō kabrā vicō bol!
Te ajj kitāb e īśq dā koī aglā varkā phol!
Ikk roī sī dhī Pājāb dī, tū likh likh māre vaiṇ,*

¹ A lived experience of many cultures involuntarily stocks the memory with the most varied and unexpected images. Here the title was suggested by a series of six paintings by Jacek Malczewski (1854-1929) collectively titled *The Poisoned Well*, which is housed in the National Museum in Poznań, the town where I grew up. Of these the one that fascinated me most depicts a young girl sitting next to a well (*Zatruta studnia I*, 1906).

² *Khamosh Pani*, Pakistan 2003. Dir. Sabiha Sumar, language: Punjabi with intrusions of Urdu.

*Ajj lakkhā dhīā rōdīā tainī Vāris Śāh nū kahīn:
 Uṭh, dardmādā de dardiā! Uṭh, takk āpnā Pājab
 Ajj bele lāsā vichīā te lahū dī bharī Canāb!*³

*Today I say to Waris Shah,⁴ speak up from the grave
 and open yet another page in the book of love!
 When one daughter of Punjab wept you wrote countless lines;
 thousands of daughters weep today, calling you, Waris Shah,
 Rise, Comforter of the Sorrowing! Rise! Look at your Punjab
 Today the fields are strewn with bodies and blood runs in the Chenab!*⁵

Years have past since I heard these verses for the first time. It was Amrita Pritam herself who recited them and it is her voice that resounds in my mind whenever the topic of the Partition⁶ comes up. Though a Sikh, a native of Lahore and a citizen of India, when she spoke, as in this poem, of what transpired in 1947, she consciously chose, from many identities⁷ available to her, the identity of a Punjabi woman. Speaking as a Punjabi and as a woman, she dramatically called out to Waris Shah, a medieval poet of one, undivided Punjab, to lend her his ear. This she did to bid him to wake up to the horror of the day and rise from the dead to record once again the grief of Punjabi women. By resorting to that device she forged a direct, emphatic link with the past claiming it as her inalienable legacy and birthright. Her plea thus strengthened she could now speak not only for herself but also for others. Her eloquent avowal of regional identity, her appropriation of the shared past and her assertion of her womanhood allowed her to place herself firmly in the ranks of the weeping daughters of the soil, both past and present. No longer merely a poetic narrator, she simply turned into one of them. When they cried it was she who cried, when she spoke it was they who spoke. Their voices so merged, they summoned Waris Shah, who had already immortalised female grief once before, to take a look at his Punjab, their home, their pride, their beloved land, now one vast killing field, its rivers filled with blood. Can you, comforter of the sorrowing, they called to him in anguish, once you behold the ravaged land and its grieving daughters, not bear witness

³ A part of the poem *Ode to Waris Shah* by Amrita Pritam (1919-2006), a famous Punjabi writer. The translation that follows below, though based on the translation by Darshan Singh Maini, *Studies in Punjabi Poetry*, Delhi 1979, is essentially my own, while the system of transcription of Punjabi is based on Joshi and Gill (1994).

⁴ Waris Shah (1722-1798), a renowned Punjabi poet who was a Muslim, as the name indicates. His most famous work, *Hir*, narrates the tragic love of Hir and Rājha.

⁵ Chenab is the name of a river in Punjab. The proper name "Punjab" actually means '(The Land of) Five Rivers' thus the idea of land nourishing rivers and water, as the source of life and prosperity, is very strong in the Punjabi imagination.

⁶ The partition of British India into India and Pakistan and the subsequent proclamation of independence on 15.8.1947 were accompanied by mass migration and communal violence.

⁷ For a discussion on multiple identities and social context, see Sen 2006, especially Chapter 2, *Making Sense of Identity*, p. 18-39.

to their grief, you whom the grief of a single one in times of old touched so much that you could not stop yourself from filling page after page with heartfelt verse?

Even this short fragment of Amrita Pritam's poem when recited in Punjabi comes across as a powerful piece of writing heavy with allusions. To demonstrate how these allusions work, let us briefly consider one, the allusion to Waris Shah, and examine the reasons for which he might be invoked here. Like many semi-legendary persons, Waris Shah too possesses many identities but the one which endears him most to Punjabi women and which is strongly evoked by Amrita Pritam is his proven ability to act as a true witness to women's sorrow and a compassionate recorder of their fate. This gives him a special place in a world where women's stories go unrecorded and history is an account of male deeds retold from male perspectives and in male voices. His credibility and his motives are beyond doubt, while the fact of him being a male makes him an ideal conduit for disseminating a story coming from a source which in itself has no voice to speak of, is often mute, marginalised, relegated to the fringes, unimportant, and yet, so burdened and overwhelmed by grief that almost incapable of reclaiming the self and taking up a yearned for, socially meaningful, traditional, ordinary role – of mother, daughter, wife. How else can this grief be lightened but through the unburdening of telling? How is the telling to be done? Who can be entrusted with the story? Once heard, how is such a narrative to be viewed? How is it to be used? Or even a more basic question: Can pain ever be felt as something other than pain? Can death be experienced as other than death? Must some accounts be denied and others privileged? May not a woman be seen first of all as a woman rather than a site of contest?

The tale introduced

Silent Waters is one such poignant Punjabi story, a woman's story told by another.⁸ It is the story of Ayesha who was once called Viro.⁹ When the surge of violence provoked by the Partition¹⁰ sweeps over the village, its Sikhs prepare to leave but only after committing their women to death. Viro stands on the parapet of the well but does not jump in like the others. Instead, she runs away. She runs away from the well, from the community in which she was born, from the family that brought her up, from the menfolk who betrayed her trust to ask for her death. She refuses to die for one simple reason:

⁸ The story and direction by Sabiha Sumar, screen play by Paromita Vohra, Punjabi version of the dialogues by Shoaib Hashmi.

⁹ A spectator of Pakistani/Indian origin does not need here any further explanation – if somebody called Ayesha (a typical Muslim name) was once called Viro (a typical Punjabi Sikh/Hindu name), the most probable way the change of name could have come about is through abduction, rape and forced conversion, which however did not preclude a subsequent happy married life.

¹⁰ For women and the Partition, see Das 1995; Bhutalia 1998; Menon and Bhasin 1998; Settari and Gupta 2002; Ivekovic and Mostov 2004; Talbot and Darshan Singh Tatla 2006; Didur 2006.

she wants to live.¹¹ Her desire to live is so strong and her innocence so complete that she does not pause to think what might be asked of her in exchange for life, given the prevailing circumstances. She ultimately does live on though henceforth marked with a poisonous knowledge.¹²

Since the film was made in 2003¹³ and the story is grounded in 1979, a few decades after the fateful events of 1947, its ramifications naturally extend far beyond the immediate task of narrating the communal violence attending the Partition. Rather, it provides an opening to bring up all the issues that were to grow around the whole transaction of violence in the years to come. The film might on one level speak of what is taking place in 1979, on the other it might even provide enough in sporadic flashbacks to reveal what transpired in 1947. Everything is however filtered through a 2002 consciousness, which serves as the vantage point for viewing the past. Let us be very clear: most of the questions raised by the film and in the film, be it as part of the actual dialogue or through various non-verbal means, even if an integral part of well attested private transactions between individuals, could never have aspired to become part of public discourse, could not have been asked previously on the screen, would not have been asked, were not asked.

What are these issues blanketed in silence? Foremost among them is the truth that much of the violence inflicted on women during the Partition was inflicted on them by their own kinsfolk – women were forced to jump into wells to the accompaniment of religious chants (like Viro, her sister Jitto, their mother – Biji), women were killed with swords,¹⁴ women were shot with guns held by their own fathers, brothers, sons to prevent them from falling into enemy hands.¹⁵ It required half a century of silence for the Sikhs, and most probably Hindus and Muslims too, to privately admit that in that terrible time they did kill their womenfolk with their own hands, that they did take pride in it, they did think it to be the only honourable thing to do. Blotting out the experience both at the individual as well as the communal level might have been the only way of distancing oneself from the act and preserving a semblance of sanity. Definitely it took more than half a century to timidly venture back into the past and re-examine the accumulated debris though a lurking feeling remains that it may never be possible to discuss the subject in an open forum.

¹¹ Compare with the words used by one of the survivors of the Partition when describing her state of mind: "I loved life, was in love with it. And I saw death staring me in the face." Menon and Bhasin 1998: 47.

¹² I use the term "poisonous knowledge" the way it is used by Veena Das in her essay (Das 2000). Poisonous knowledge refers to that kind of knowledge, which robs a woman of trust and innocence by making her aware of the possibility of betrayal coded in her everyday relations. This knowledge plays a very important part in the subsequent formation of the self.

¹³ There were three attempts at filming the story, in 1999 (the filming ran into financial difficulties), in 2001 (the filming was interrupted by the events of 9/11), and finally, in 2002; see www.firstrunfeatures.com.

¹⁴ See the description of the death of Kusum, the dutiful daughter of a Sikh family residing, ironically, in a village called Pari Darwaza – The Doorway of the Fairies – in Baldwin (1999). This is one of the very first, maybe even the very first, fictional portrayal of the killing of women to safeguard the honour of the community.

¹⁵ See the scene where a Sikh in the *gurudwara* narrates how he himself has shot many Sikh women.

Another much skirted issue was the fate of women who made their homes – often as an aftermath of rape and forced marriage – with their abductors. Their male relatives hated the very idea of their women cohabiting with the enemy and tried to reverse this status quo. Here the state, which had by then reconstructed itself and vested itself with the power of the guardianship of the abducted women, stepped in to play a paramount though often ignominious role. A conscious state policy on abducted women and on children born of sexual and reproductive violence was initiated both by India and Pakistan. As a result of agreements between the two states, appropriate ordinances were issued in India on 31 January 1948 and in Pakistan in May 1948. Later on the Indian parliament passed the Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 1949,¹⁶ which remained in force till 31 October 1951 and which was clearly informed by patriarchal, communal and nationalistic discourses that shaped the identity of the gendered Indian citizen in the new nation-state. The Bill sanctioned the authority of the state to detain persons suspected of having been abducted, to determine their nationality through a specially established tribunal and to use police power to enforce its decision. The adult women were disqualified from designating their national identity themselves, and the state placed a special burden on women who identified themselves as Muslim to legitimise¹⁷ their right to citizenship in India. Adult men, on the other hand, were under no special obligation to do the same because the powers of the tribunal applied only to males under the age of 16. “The recovered women themselves, although promised a ‘free’ environment and ‘liberty’ were, by the very terms of the Bill, divested of every single right to legal recourse. The writ of habeas corpus was denied; their marriages were considered illegal and their children illegitimate; they could be pulled out of their homes on the strength of a policeman’s opinion that they were abducted; they could be transported out of the country without their consent; confined in camps against their wishes; have virtually no possibility of any kind of appeal; and, as adult women and citizens, be once again exchanged, this time between countries and by officials.”¹⁸ The treatment meted out to abducted women in Pakistan was no different.

Yet another issue excised from the collective memory was the fate of the abducted women who escaped the dragnet of the state and hung on to their families and homes.¹⁹

¹⁶ For the full text, see Appendix I, Menon and Bhasin 1998: p. 261–263.

¹⁷ In effect a single Muslim woman whose family resided in Pakistan was not allowed to stay on in India. When found out, she was deported to Pakistan, even if married (obviously to a non-Muslim), pregnant or mother of small children. Those would be sent with her across the border while the elder ones would remain with the father. There are many stories of such siblings meeting for the first time half a century after enforced deportation.

¹⁸ Menon and Bhasin: 1998: 105–106.

¹⁹ Such stories make it in to the media now, but when the weekly *India Today* published its article *Bridging a Great Divide* on 18.8.1997, in the issue commemorating half a century of Indian independence, it was like breaking a seal on some taboo. It carried the story of Niranjana Singh who, just like Jaswant, is looking for his elder sister, Jitto, who got left behind during the Partition. He was 12 then and she 16. Also, to read of the two sisters, of whom one jumped into the well and the other lived on, and on whose account the film is based, see Sabiha Sumar’s interview with Sairah Irshad Khan, Newsline (www.newsline.com.pk), September 2005.

This could have been accomplished only by the silent conspiracy²⁰ of the whole concerned local community and this was also the story of Ayesha.

The tale retold

When pieced together Ayesha's story is really very simple. She is a Sikh girl living in Charkhi, a village that is just diagonally opposite the hamlet of Hasan Abdal where Panja Sahib²¹, a *gurudwara* marked by a stone bearing the imprint of Guru Nanak's protective hand, is located. When the violence of the Partition engulfs Charkhi, the Sikhs get ready to leave. Before doing so, they ensure that their women jump into the well to safeguard their honour and make their men's trek across the border easier. Viro however runs away even as her young brother Jaswant tries to catch up with her and stop her. (Stop her to what end? To take her back to the well? Escort her to India?) All that he manages to grasp is her locket. (This locket appears later on to act as witness to her non-Muslim origin.) She herself falls into the hands of some men, obviously Muslims, obviously harbouring evil intentions. She is raped. An offer of marriage is made, she converts, is married. She lives on.

When we encounter her in the film she is already middle aged, she is a widow and has an eighteen-year-old son Salim. She lives an ordinary life in the very same village, prays at the tomb of the local saint, offers her *namaz*, teaches little girls to recite the Qur'an, and does not go to the well to fetch water herself. She has a close friend Shabbo (Shabnam), whose husband Amin Bhai seems to know Ayesha from the old times. He himself lost a wife (killed?) and a daughter (abducted?) in the Partition violence but does not possess Ayesha's equanimity and becomes unsettled with every annual arrival of the *yatris*.²² Ayesha's only other visible transactions are with the vegetable vendor, the neighbourhood children, her son's friends and Allah Bi who brings her water from the well. In that her relations with the village do not differ from the relations of other women bound by the village customs. To all appearance she is happy and at home there. She attends the wedding of the *chaudhury*'s daughter and is well received, for *chaudhury sahib*'s patronage and protection extends to the whole village, herself included. When the Sikh pilgrims come to Panja Sahib, she prepares pickles and sweets, and sends them over. Her behaviour towards her erstwhile coreligionists does not seem to be unusual in any way. The other inhabitants of the village also treat the pilgrims courteously and with open hospitality. They call them their guests (*mehmān*). This attitude however is

²⁰ For an excellent account of how such a conspiracy of silence works, see Nadeem Aslam's novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, 2004. It also deals with the ghosts of the Partition and ambiguous identities.

²¹ Gurudwara Panja Sahib, one of the most sacred sites of Sikhism, is located in Hasan Abdal, 45 kms from Rawalpindi. Guru Nanak is said to have visited it in 1521. The town takes its name from a Sufi saint, Hasan Abdal, known also as Baba Wali Qandhari, who stayed there in the early 15th century.

²² Sikh pilgrims – the *yatris* – visit Panja Sahib every April, on the eve of the Baisakhi festival, which commemorates the making of Khalsa. Note how the Urdu/Punjabi speaking Muslims use this context-specific term to refer to the pilgrims and their pilgrimage, immediately situating them outside their own religious boundary.

not shared by the fundamentalists, the *jehadis*, one of whom, in a conversation with the barber, derogatorily refers to a visiting Sikh as “your *yār*” subverting the relationship of hospitality with a gross innuendo.

Yet Ayesha’s story ends in her death. What makes her take her own life *now*, so many years after the Partition? To answer *that* question one has to take a close look at 1979 Pakistan. To many like Sabiha Sumar it is a period that obviously defined the shape of things to come and gave rise to yet another set of issues that could not have been easily addressed earlier. The film in spite of a strong Sikh element is after all a film about Pakistani society, shot in Pakistan and by a Pakistani director.²³ There is a strong critique of Pakistani politics and Pakistani life.²⁴ What was so subversive about asking questions in the Pakistan of 1979 and later, about the year 1979?

Let us turn again to the film. We already know the location. We are in a village called Charkhi. Most of its inhabitants left at the time of the Partition (“I came here in 1947,” says the barber; “I lived here till 1947,” says Jaswant). A few stayed on: Ayesha, Amin Bhai, a few others. So did the mosque, the *gurudwara*²⁵ and the *mazhar*²⁶: *Rabb de ghar* (‘The Houses of God’) in Ayesha’s words. Much of what had been there before is still there; however, the entire context has changed. Of course, so much being gone contributes also to the changed context. What is absent becomes no less significant than what remains. What is not spoken lingers in the air like Shabbo’s unfinished question: *Tainū kadī yād āī hai? Salīm de abbā...?*²⁷ (“Do you ever recall? Salim’s father...?”) to which Ayesha replies: *Vaqt lāgh jādā hai. Jo labbh giā uh bhālā, jo nā labbh giā, uh sir sadkā*. (“Time passes. What one found must be thought to be the best; what one lost, well, that is gone for ever.”)

The times are changing again. It is April 1979. We are left in no doubt about that. On the 4th of the month Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, is hanged. The news reaches the village. Ayesha has just collected her pension from the post office and is walking out when she spots Amin Bhai. *Amin bhāī, kī ho rihā hai?* (“How does it go, Amin Bhai?”) – she greets him. And then, seeing his face, again,

²³ That Sabiha Sumar considers herself foremost a Pakistani speaking for Pakistan and for Pakistanis can be gleaned from her interview (23.2.2006, www.chowk.org) where she says, in reference to the award the film won at Locarno: “The fact is, when I was in Locarno and I won the Leopard, I wanted to first be interviewed by the Pakistani press. I called up people I knew in the media to say, ‘Listen I won this award’. But they hadn’t a clue what I was talking about. For three days I didn’t give an interview to the Indian press, but how long could I hold out for?”

²⁴ See for example what Sabiha Sumar says in one of the interviews: “[...] Charkhi becomes then a symbol for a place... [...] when you really scratch the surface you find out that everything is very disturbed in fact, everything is very changed, everything is very different, that we are a completely different people today because of the processes that started in 1979.” 23.2.2006, www.chowk.org.

²⁵ *Gurudwara*, ‘the doorway of the Guru’, is the name given to a Sikh temple.

²⁶ *Mazhar* designates a tomb of a saint, usually a pious Sufi.

²⁷ As all the conversations have been transcribed from the spoken dialogues, there might be departures from the standard, dictionary rendering of certain words to reflect the dialectic nuances as well as personal manner of the speakers. I would like to thank my friend, Anna Sieklucka, for going over the dialogues and correcting the transcription.

in a different tone: *Kī gall hai?* ("What is the matter?") *Tū nahī sunīā?* ("Haven't you heard?") *Kī nahī sunīā?* ("Heard what?") Bhutto has been hanged. Fearfully, she asks: *Te hun kī hovegā?* ("What is going to happen now?") *Jo vī hovegā, kudrat kite nā kite te badlā legī, na. Tainū-mainū te patā hai.* ("Whatever happens, nature is going to even things out by striking somewhere else. You and I both know it.") Their knowledge-acquired-through-suffering fills them with a poisonous foreboding: the forces over which they have no control are about to be unleashed again to threaten their world. More and more signs point to that. There is a growing surge of militant fundamentalism supported by Islamic rhetoric; there is already a covert Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan, which will increase when the Russians invade Afghanistan in December. Meanwhile, civil rights are trampled on, something the hanging of the former, legally elected Prime Minister vividly demonstrates. The Hudood Ordinances are already in force and women's rights are severely restricted.²⁸ Aren't the walls around the village school raised? Aren't the *jehadis* having the run of the village? General Zia ul Haq is firmly in charge and military dictatorship is about to become a reality. The message is loud and clear: Pakistan is no longer a place to sport multiple or blurred identities. At first reluctantly and much against its will, then faster and faster, the village too is being swept by the new ideology, which demands a clear cut declaration of adherence to the official position and a parting with the old, traditional ways.

How does it affect the women? What does it do to Ayesha? How does her personal predicament forward the narrative? In an interview, Sabiha Sumar, who – till this venture came along – was primarily a documentary film-maker, confessed that originally she set out to make a documentary film. "I then decided that I didn't want to do this as a documentary at all because it would mean scratching people's wounds. These women had been through the most awful violence one can imagine [...]. I also thought it was very important that I somehow connect this violence with present-day violence, so that it's not as if it becomes a historical film that suggests that violence occurred and then it *ended*, but rather that it is a continuous process. I wanted to show the continuation of violence against Ayesha."²⁹ So she asks questions and looks for plausible answers: "How does a woman reconcile herself to a life, not of her choice, not of her making, a life that began in violence. She simply had no say in her future. [...] I could feel the violation of a woman abducted, who had to live in a country not of her choice, compelled to convert to the religion of her abductor and bear his children. [...] Despite her best efforts to build a life for herself, her vulnerability is undiminished. Her isolation grows and deepens through the changing political climate of the country. [...] In sculpting Ayesha, I looked at her life through her Achilles' heel – her only son, Salim, who is her sole link to the country she lives in."³⁰

²⁸ The Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, 1979, Ordinance No. VII of 1979, February 1979. Its provisions remained in force virtually till today and are beginning to be amended at the time of writing this article (November 2006).

²⁹ From an interview with Sabiha Sumar, 12.4.2005, www.asiasource.org.

³⁰ Director's note; see www.firstrunfeatures.com.

Thus conceived, the story called for a strong protagonist who to all appearances felt comfortable with the social role imposed on her by circumstances, but at the same time remained extremely vulnerable. So she is a widow, her son is her only child born after many prayers addressed to a compassionate saint (*Pīr Sāī*³¹ *dī duā* – says Ayesha to *chaudhury sahab*), she has no other family. Further, she needs to be equipped with such diverse traits of character as strength of mind, integrity of purpose, a generous nature and a self-effacing personality. Ayesha fits the bill well: she knows her mind, she has a great capacity to cope with pain, and she is powerfully quiet and self-contained. She is true, steadfast, and courageous in whatever she does. She finds happiness in everyday chores and an uneventful life. She sees the ordinariness of life as an antidote to the strife and violence of the abnormal and the unexpected. She considers the bonds that tie her to the village to be a measure of her ordinary stability. This ordinary stability gives her a sense of being and identity and informs her own subjectivity. We already know that she knows all there is to know about betrayal and sacrifice for she had drunk from the poisoned well. That is why she anticipates the question that Salim is yet to ask, for she really has been waiting for it all her life: *Huṇ tū dass, māī kī karā? Ammā, māī huṇ kī karā?* (“Now you tell me mother, what am I to do? What am I to do now?”) She also knows her own answer to the long-awaited question. She knew it even before she saw Jaswant entering her lane, stopping at her door, calling her name. Nonetheless the intensity of pain brought on by the surge of old memories and the demands of the relentless present catches her by surprise. She can feel her own self splitting again into two: the part of her that can be destroyed over and over again separating itself from the part of her that must endure. The first had been victimised many times before. It sits on her like a garment that might be easily discarded. It is in any case not her true self and so it does not matter if more pain is inflicted on it. But the second, the one which all the while she kept only to herself and which informed her very sense of being and gave her a private identity, she needs to annihilate now herself so that the world, which is about to collapse around her might stop whirling madly and stabilise itself. Once more there is no hesitation in her answer: *Tainī kujh karan dī loṛ nahī.* (“You don’t need to do anything.”)³² What is to be done must be done and can be done by her alone.

³¹ Both Pir and Sain are honorific titles used for local saints. Here Ayesha might be referring to the village’s patron saint at whose tomb we see her praying along with Zubeida. However, she might also be alluding to some other saint who specially answers the prayers of childless women. Or there might also be an allusion to a Muslim saint Sain Mian Mir, whom Guru Arjun Singh apparently invited to lay the foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib, the Golden Temple, in Amritsar.

³² This expression has a very high emotional charge in Punjabi and is used as a stock phrase when the person uttering it takes everything (sacrifice, pain, responsibility, etc.) on himself.

Complaint and answer³³

In an interview with Anil Saari Arora, when asked how it is that her female protagonists, be it Ayesha or Zubeida, emerge as muted, Sabiha Sumar replied: "The issue is that in Pakistan it's as if women's voice has been taken over, taken away by men and a patriarchal system which is extremely oppressive and powerful. I wanted to make my women strong, because they are strong, but I didn't want to make them very vocal because they are not very vocal. *I think they are waiting for a time when they can be vocal* (emphasis mine MSP). I think Zubeida will be the woman who will speak when the time comes. She will be the first to speak and she will be the first to make amazing changes in society. It's women like her who will do that, *but for the moment these women choose to stay quiet.*"³⁴

The mute and the voiceless may choose to stay silent but not necessarily, not always. Social codes provide them with certain ways in which they may subvert the general rules and lay claim to their own voice through recourse to plaint.³⁵ As Veena Das observes, this form of accusation is appropriate only among those who are closely related.³⁶ The context is thus privileged by a well defined situation and its access restricted to persons remaining in some form of close relationship with each other like husband and wife, siblings, close friends or relatives, lovers. It might however include, somewhat by default, a certain form of prayer³⁷ or mourning rituals. The very structure of an exchange born in such a context – the assumed closeness, the vocabulary used, the body language employed – allows it to become a vehicle for all that cannot be voiced openly and under normal circumstances, all that is suppressed and outwardly disowned. However, as such an exchange is necessarily heavily charged with emotions and depletes the secret resources of the self, it may not be engaged in on a day-to-day basis. It is the last recourse of the aggrieved and is used sparingly and only in an extreme situation, where all other resources fail. It resolves and eases a condition that may not be resolved otherwise.

Here I would like to examine only one such context where reproach is voiced: the encounter of Ayesha with her brother – first at the doorway of her house and then at the well. During the first meeting Ayesha chooses to keep silent though there is already an inkling of a complaint in the phrase: "Now please leave" with its use of a formal form of address (third person) to distance herself from the person in front of her. It is not really meant as a denial of the relationship but rather a refusal to engage in a discourse just then and thus allow it to make a claim on her. In a way this first meeting prepares the

³³ The title of this section has been borrowed from Muhammad Iqbal, see *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa*, translated by Kushwant Singh as *Complaint and Answer: Iqbal's Dialogue with Allah*, 6th impression, OUP, Delhi 1999. I consider the title to be most appropriate to the context of an emotionally potent situation when the only socially permitted exchange is that of a formalised accusation and an almost as formally organised response.

³⁴ Interview with Sabiha Sumar by Anil Saari Arora, 23.2.2005, in www.chowk.com.

³⁵ This is expressed in Hindi/Urdu/Punjabi by the following words: *gilā*, *śikvā*, *gilā-śikvā*.

³⁶ See Das 2000: 223, note 4..

³⁷ The relationship with God or His representatives, the saints, etc., is an intimate and close one; the pronoun used is *tū* – second person singular.

ground for the exchange at the second. By then Ayesha, caught at her most vulnerable (she is again at the well which she avoided for all those years), suddenly finds her voice. The claim made on her through evoking her sisterhood and daughterhood provides her with a framework whereby using the very same ties she can make her plaint.

Let us examine the first scene. Jaswant enters the lane leading to Ayesha's house and immediately life is suspended. It is almost as if time itself has acquired a different quality: the vendor stops his cry in mid sentence, Ayesha's carefree expression with which she met Allah Bi a moment ago becomes clouded. Allah Bi has not yet reached the corner when we see Salim approaching. Noticing a stranger at his doorway, he quickens his step. By then Jaswant has already greeted Ayesha (*Sat srī akāl*). Faced with the staring vendor off screen, she has already asked: "Whom do you want to meet?" (*Kihnū milnā hai?*), already heard his reply: "I was looking for my sister. She got left here in forty-seven."³⁸ (*Maī āpnī bhain nū labbh rihā hā. Uh sāṭālī jithō rahi gaī sī.*)

Ayesha: "You must be mistaken. There is nobody like that here. She must have died with the others." (*Tuhānū galtī laggī hai. Itthe uho jihī koī aurat nahī. Uh vī baqī sārī de nāl mar gaī hoī hai.*)

Jaswant: "She did not die. We lived right here." (*Nahī, uh nahī marī. Asī itthe rahīde sā.*)

Salim arrives at the door and she merely says: "I don't know anything." (*Mainū te kujh patā nahī, jī.*)

Now the conversation is between the three of them:

"What is it?" (*Kī gall hai?*)³⁹ – asks Salim, facing Jaswant.

"Now please leave" (*Huñ tusī jāo*) – says Ayesha to Jaswant.

"You go in, mother!" (*Tū ādar jā, ammā!*) – says Salim to Ayesha. Ayesha goes in and leans against the closed half of the door on the inside. The still open half is about to close on Jaswant.

Jaswant: "Viro! We used to call her Viro!" (*Vīro! Asī Vīro bulāde sā uhnū.*)

Salim: "What do you want?" (*Tusī kī cāhūde ho?*)⁴⁰

Jaswant: "I am looking for my sister." (*Maī āpnī bhain nū labbh rihā hā.*)

Salim: "This is a Muslim house." (*Ih musulmānā dā ghar hai.*)

Jaswant: "This is my sister!" (*Ih merī bhain hai!*)

Salim turning to Ayesha: "Is he telling the truth, mother? Do you want to meet this yatri? I did not hear you!" (*Ih sac kahi rihā hai, ammā? Tū is yātrī nū milnā hai? Maī sunīā nahī!*)

³⁸ *Sāṭālī* ('47) and *caurāsī* ('84) – there is a great emotional charge attached in Punjabi to these dates, which are used as time markers that do not require any explanation. '47 refers to the year when British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan, while '84 refers to the communal riots that followed the assassination of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards.

³⁹ The intonation here is menacing. Compare with the same phrase used by Ayesha to address Amin Bhai – it was full of concern.

⁴⁰ When combined with a certain intonation this is a very offensive statement in Punjabi. However, it is always an emotionally charged statement. See how Ayesha uses it in her conversation with Jaswant at the well. There the stress is again on *kī* – 'what' – implying: "What else do you want from me now, after so many years? Is there anything else you can ask for and I can give?"

Ayesha: "No!" (*Nahī!*)

Jaswant: "Viro! Take this, have a look!" (*Vīro! Tū ih le, ih vekh!*) Stretches out his hand with the locket. Salim snatches it.

"Viro! Father is dying. He wants to see you one last time." (*Vīro, bāpūjī mar rahe han. Tainū ikk vār vekhṇā cāhūde ne, Vīro!*)

The doors close. Salim opens the locket.

In this scene we see how the boundaries of identity and belonging are redrawn for Ayesha: Jaswant might not have made her openly admit that she is Viro, but both of them already know that she is his sister, that he is staking a claim over her in the name of their common blood ties. The way they are bound to each other transcends time and space. They cannot ever deny their ties. They might only let them be. Salim's claim is equally powerful. The choices here are very limited for Ayesha and she makes her choice without any hesitation. She says to Salim: "You don't need to do anything." (*Tainū kujh karan dī lor nahī.*)

When Jaswant meets Ayesha at the well, she is suspended in some liminal time-space between the past and the present. One flows from the other as if they were not separated by a thirty-year chasm. The impression is maintained by a voiceover. "Viro!" cries Jaswant and she hears the voice of her little brother calling "Viro!"; can see her mother and sister jumping into the well; can hear the urging: "Hurry up!" (*Chetī karo!*), can see herself running away. She has crossed the threshold. He is again her younger brother and she is his sister. Now she can talk. She is free to make the complaint, which she had to put on hold for more than thirty years for the simple reason that there was nobody she could make it to. Their exchange is not marked by any distance of time only by pain. It is almost as if they were carrying on an interrupted conversation. Let us listen to the lines:

Jaswant: "Viro!" (*Vīro!*)

Ayesha: "What do you want, Jaswant? After so many years, what do you want?" (*Kī cāhūdā hai, Jasvāt? Inniā sālā bād kī cāhūdā hai?*)

Jaswant: "Viro, father is dying. He wants to see you once." (*Vīro, bāpūjī marde ne, uh tainū ikk vār vekhṇā cāhūde ne.*)

Ayesha: "For what? To finish now that which was not finished then? He is still not happy, after killing mother and Jitto?" (*Kade laī? Jo udō nahī hoiā, uhnū huṇ mukāuṇā cāhūde ne? Bījī te Jitto nū māran thāḍ nahī pāt hālē?*)⁴¹

Jaswant: "The old man wants to die in peace." (*Buddhā cain nāl marnā cāhūdā hai.*)

Ayesha: "He wanted to kill me for his own peace. Now what will happen if he sees me alive? Alive and a Muslim? How will he go to the Sikh heaven? What heaven is left for me? Sikh? Muslim? You tell me, brother! For so many years you were happy to have me dead. But I was alive still! I made my life myself, without you. Now this is my life, and this is my home. Now go! Leave me the way I am!" (*Uh te āpṇe cain laī mainū marnā cāhūdā sī. Te huṇ mainū jūḍī vekhiā te kī hovegā? Jūḍī te musulmān. Te huṇ*

⁴¹ The expression used here – *thāḍ pāuṇā* – is not only idiomatic but also very graphic and not very polite. It could be translated as "to heave a sigh of relief, be satisfied, happy".

sikkh jannat vic kījḥ jāvegā? Te mere laī kihṛī jannat bāqī hai? Sikkhā dī jā musulmānā dī? Mainū te dass dio, vīrā. Inne sāl tusī mainū mār ke hūs so. Par māī jūḍī sā! Māī āpṇī zīdagī āp baṇāī, tuhāḍe bagair. Huṇ iho rahī merī zīdagī, huṇ iho rihā merā ghar. Te huṇ jāo! Te mainū mere hāl te chaḍḍo!)

Jaswant: “Viro!”

Ayesha: “Now go, go back!” (*Huṇ jāo, vāpas jāo!*)

Though film imitates life closer than any other art form by creating an illusion of virtual reality and engages with the spectator on many simultaneous planes, let us, since we have consigned the narrative to the domain of a verbal discourse by quoting *verbatim* two sections of the screen dialogue, briefly consider how the words get to play their roles. Since the encounters of Ayesha and Jaswant are saturated with emotions and can be viewed as portrayals in nearness (and distancing), there is a constant demand to reflect this also on a verbal level. True to the format of complaint and answer this oscillates between appeals to shared ties and repudiation of these ties, and is done for example by using, as a matter of choice, pronouns like *tū* and *tusī*; by addressing the person by her/his given name (Viro, Jaswant); by references to other members of the family (Jitto, Biji, father) and placing them in the context; by recalling the act of killing and its motives; by implicating the father (he did it for his peace of mind) and invoking his old age (he is dying); and finally, by defining the concept of home. It should be duly noted that Ayesha is the more expressive of the two, uses an emotionally charged language (the way she says “now” and “my state” – *huṇ*, *hāl* – reflects *her* state of mind), and is clearly about to make the final leap (both metaphorically and literally). Cutting across all discourse on identity and belonging, home and homelessness,⁴² on which she had enough time to deliberate in the last thirty⁴³ years, she delivers the final verdict: “Now *this* is my life, and *this* is my home.”

The epilogue

For more than thirty years Ayesha and Amin Bhai measured their time by the annual visit of the *yatris*. That both of them waited there is no doubt. There is a brief shot of Ayesha, at night, standing in her own house, waiting. It is preceded by a conversation between Amin Bhai and Shabbo, where Shabbo implores her husband to let Ayesha know that her brother is here, looking for her. To lend strength to her plea, she says: “Whatever you do, do it for Meena’s sake!”⁴⁴ (*Jo vī karnā hai, Mīnā de vāste kar jā!*) This exchange is followed by the already mentioned image of the waiting Ayesha, which

⁴² For this particular aspect of the discourse of the Partition, see Menon 2004; Devali Mookerjee Lonard 2005.

⁴³ To understand better how these “thirty years” prey on her, see the scene where Shabbo takes shelter in Ayesha’s house and the exchange she has with Amin Bhai where she uses this phrase.

⁴⁴ Meena is most probably Amin Bhai’s daughter who was abducted during the Partition.

in turn is succeeded by the scene at the gurudwara where Amin Bhai calls out to Ayesha's brother to tell him where his sister is. And now we turn to Amin Bhai.

Apparently his life too was one long wait but the spectators' occupation with Ayesha allowed it to be missed. He too hopes for some news every time the *yatris* come. However, there is no news, there is no Meena. He cannot contain his pain: "The *yatris* come and go and nobody has seen my Meena!" (*Yātrāñ āde ne te cale jāde ne, par merī Mīnā nū kise ne nahī vekhiā!*) Ayesha answers: "Do you think your Meena has been sitting on her prayer mat for the last thirty years and praying for her father to come and take her back with him! She has done her share of patient waiting. She is not coming back." (*Terā kī hīāl hai? Terī Mīnā tihā salā tō musalle⁴⁵ te baiṭhī namāz parh ke duāvā māg rahī hai kī uhdā pio āvegā te uhnū lai jāvegā! Uhne sabar kar liā. Uh vāpas nahī ādī.*) Her words provoke him and he bursts out: "O, you! She is not like you!" (*Uh tere jihī nahī hovegī!*) What he implies, is: she is not like you, had her brother come to take her like yours did, she would have gone with him!

Ultimately it transpires that the whole life of the village revolves around the annual pilgrimage, some wait for someone to come and claim them, others wait for someone to come back, yet others keep watch to see what happens. All are in a way tied to the past. But for the young generation who neither know of their elders' past nor their preoccupation with it, things are already different. Salim consigns his mother's trunk with all its accumulated reminders of the past: a prayer book, a watch, reading glasses, a fan (Sikh past) and his own photograph, a copy of the Qur'an (Muslim past) to the waves of the silent, faithful river.⁴⁶ Her body has already been consigned to the well (and the earth). The locket with his mother's photo he gives to Zubeida, "This... is for you." (*Ih... tere lāī hai.*) What is Salim and Zubeida's relation to the past? Nothing more than something best got over with to attend to the present. Salim follows his newly found religion. Zubeida follows her woman's voice and is already on the way to change things in the future, for as she explains: "What is the point of remembering the past? It is not going to change the tone of the bells." (*Fāidā kī hai uhnū yād karnā? Ghāṭīā dā pad nahī badlegā, na.*) Or in other words, thinking about the past is not going to change anything. Time must go on. Having said this we now take leave of the film and the Punjabi narratives.

⁴⁵ The word *musalla* actually means 'a place where *salat/salah* or a prayer is performed' and thus can be also used interchangeably with the term *masjid* ('mosque'), which is 'a place of *sajda* (prostration)'. This is also how it is translated in English subtitles. However, here *musalla* is used in a context where the person concerned is a woman, and a woman utters the word. This should make us take note of the fact that in common speech *musalla* refers also to a 'prayer mat', which is also obviously the very designated place for a prayer to be performed. However, it is very important to remember here that most women pray at home and in most localities there is no custom of women praying in a mosque. Thus in this context it has to be a prayer mat. This brings us to the issue how the language itself reflects usage and custom and how nuanced the readings of a narrative (film) can be.

⁴⁶ How does it recall the image of a Polish novel *The Faithful River* (*Wierna rzeka*) by Stefan Żeromski!

Post scriptum

A narrative functions both to reflect and to create cultural values. It can never be devoid of a social context on the pain of being unintelligible. Providing such a context introduces into the story a strong cultural component, which is a high sounding term for “subjective bias.” This does not mean at all that the story gets tilted one particular way only and remains so. Nor does it call for one and only one correct reading. It merely serves to make the story more plausible. A committed narrative, well grounded in local details, structured around easily identifiable events and possessed of a coherent presentation can always hope to transcend the boundaries of time and place. The specific and the personal appeal to the universal. The pain can be read as pain, violence recognised as violence, death as death. So too with laughter, happiness, hope. A meaningful story may be born anywhere. The world over memories overflow with images that cry out to be buried away and discourses raise ghosts that refuse to go. It is for literature, film, and theatre to reinterpret them and ease them into the collective social consciousness. It is left for them to raise the questions and provide the answers.

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