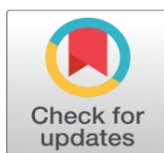
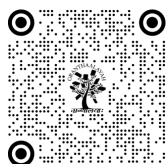


RESILIENCE AND RESISTANCE: A STUDY OF PARTITION TRAUMA IN SABIHA SUMAR'S KHAMOSH PANI

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the film *Khamosh Pani* by Sabiha Sumar, focusing on the character of Veero/Ayesha and her experiences before and after the Partition of India in 1947. The paper delves into how Veero/Ayesha navigates trauma, assimilation, and identity crisis in the aftermath of Partition, particularly in the context of changing political landscapes in Pakistan, such as during the Zia-ul-Haq regime. The paper also explores themes of resilience, patriarchy, and the enduring impact of historical events on individual lives, especially women's experiences. Through a close reading of the film and its characters, the paper seeks to shed light on the complexities of post-Partition society and the challenges faced by marginalised individuals, particularly women, in finding agency and dignity in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Partition, Trauma, Resilience, Marginalisation, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was a deeply traumatic event that had a profound impact on individuals, particularly women. The Partition was marked by widespread gendered violence against women, including rape, abduction, forced conversion, and even murder in the name of "honour." Women's bodies became sites of violence and communication between opposing communities. This inflicted immense psychological trauma on women, leaving lasting scars on their identity and sense of self (Sobti and Kumar 2022, p.731).

Khamosh Pani, directed by Pakistani filmmaker Sabiha Sumar, is a significant film that delves into the impact of Partition. Described by Savi Munjal as an

"ideologue of a small family in a small village and illumines the ill-documented underside of the political events" (Munajil, 2008, p.86). The film centers around Veero/Ayesha, illustrating how her life is upended by the aftermath of Partition in the subcontinent. Serving as a fictional documentary, the narrative highlights the struggles faced by individuals, particularly women, amidst major political upheavals. The film unfolds Veero/Ayesha's story from the beginning with a marriage ceremony, culminating in her tragic death by suicide. A key element of the film is the portrayal of Veero/Ayesha's traumatic past through recurring flashbacks, notably featuring monochromatic images of these (partition) events, dominated by images of water in a well (Khan, 2009, p.23).

Taking place in the small village of Charkhi, Pakistan, in 1979, *Khamosh Pani* unfolds thirty-two years after the partition of 1947, against the backdrop of Zia-ul-Haq's regime known for its restrictions on people's rights, particularly minorities. What sets this narrative apart is Sabiha Sumar's presentation of a micro-history and micro-narrative within the broader context of the Partition's Grand Narrative. By focusing on this individual instance of oppression and trauma, the film illuminates Ayesha's struggle as a microcosm reflecting the enduring trauma experienced by countless women affected by the partition, showcasing how the legacy of division continues to impact her life long after the event itself.

The central theme in *Khamosh Pani* revolves around the enduring trauma experienced by Ayesha. Portrayed as a resilient single woman leading a quiet life among her neighbors in the village, Ayesha's past as a member of the Sikh community in Charkhi, her current residence, is gradually unveiled through poignant flashbacks. Before the partition, her community was an integral part of the village. Interestingly, Ayesha stands out as the sole woman in the village who refrains from fetching water from the communal well. Instead, she enlists the help of her neighbor, Allah bi, and his young daughter Shanno for this task. In a poignant moment, Shanno innocently questions Ayesha if she ever goes to the well.

The moment the young girl poses this question, it sets the tone for the film, highlighting the deep-seated trauma Ayesha endured during the tumult of 1947, thirty-two years earlier. As the narrative unfolds with the initial flashback, a poignant scene emerges: small village girls joyfully playing around a well, juxtaposed with a haunting image of a young and frightened Veero fleeing, symbolizing the profound impact of past events on her present existence. Subsequently, it is revealed that the scene of Veero running away depicts her refusal to sacrifice herself for the sake of community honour, a prevalent expectation during that era to uphold family prestige. The societal norm dictated that ending her life by leaping into the village well was crucial to preserve honour. Veero's act of fleeing signifies her rejection of such a futile demise. In a later encounter with her brother at the same well, a flashback reinforces her defiance against succumbing to uphold community honour. The poignant scene portrays young girls taking the plunge into the well one by one, yet when Veero's turn arrives, she refuses and flees as far as possible, emphasizing her steadfast refusal to comply with the community's expectations. So, the well in the film acts as a powerful symbol representing Veero/Ayesha's traumatic history, specifically the tragic events associated with it during the Partition. It serves as a constant reminder of Veero/Ayesha's past anguish. Despite being a source of trauma, the well also symbolizes Veero/Ayesha's resilience and strength in confronting her past and striving to overcome the challenges posed by her traumatic history.

The film effectively brings to light the theme of honour killing through recurring flashbacks. The portrayal of women's role within the family, community, and nation

is depicted as complex and uncertain. During that era, community honour held immense significance, leading to the practice of honour killings where women were sacrificed to preserve this honour. Any tarnishing of a woman's reputation through acts like rape, abduction, or conversion by the perceived enemy (in this case, Muslims) was seen as a disgrace to the entire community. This uncomfortable aspect of Partition is sensitively depicted through Veero/Ayesha's story. Despite her father's urging for her to end her life by jumping into the well to safeguard the family and community honour, Veero chooses to defy this tradition and prioritize her own survival. This pivotal moment underscores her decision to reject the norm of suicide imposed by her community and embrace life, marking a significant turning point in her narrative. Rather than succumbing to death she "instead submits to violence by men from other communities as well as dislocation" (Khan, p.138). Veero's actions are viewed as transgressive by her family and community. Her father's imposition of the cruel act of coercive suicide places Veero in a harrowing dilemma where she is compelled to choose death, becoming the foundation of trauma in her life. This situation forces Veero to sacrifice her own identity for the sake of the community's survival. The societal emphasis on women's bodies as the locus of honour creates a scenario where any perceived threat of rape or abduction must be eradicated to maintain the community's reputation. Veero's father exerts control over her agency, coercing her towards self-destruction to uphold this distorted sense of honour. In that critical moment, Veero is reduced to a mere symbol of honour that must be preserved through either death or suicide. Paradoxically, Veero finds herself in a position where her annihilation is deemed necessary for her salvation. The deprivation of her agency and the imposition on her will plunge her into a state of trauma. The denial of her autonomy renders her a victim, highlighting the significance of agency in shaping one's subjectivity and the detrimental effects of its suppression. According to Alphen when an individual "does not make any conscious choices, one is in fact not one hundred percent a subject" (Alphen, 1999, p.30). This scenario effectively negates the individual's agency, as exemplified in Veero's experience. Bearing witness to a tragic event orchestrated by her own family plunges her into a traumatic state where, as described by Brison, she feels completely powerless and in imminent danger. These memories persist vividly in her psyche and body, haunting Veero with relentless flashbacks. The recurring flashbacks in the film serve as symbolic representations of Veero/Ayesha's traumatic past, particularly her experiences during the Partition. It depicts the haunting memories and emotional scars that continue to impact Veero/Ayesha, highlighting the enduring nature of trauma and its influence on her present life. Flashbacks disrupt the protagonist's sense of self and temporality, as the past intrudes into the present. Through these flashbacks, the film also portrays the deep psychological impact of historical events on individuals like Veero/Ayesha, emphasizing the long-lasting effects of trauma on personal identity and well-being.

Ayesha/Veero demonstrates remarkable strength and resilience. Her firm stance reflects her rejection of the oppressive forces attempting to dictate her fate and agency. Choosing life over death allows her to "keep the option of individual choice open when the rule of the day is that of community ideology" (Doraiswamy, 2009, p.1). Simultaneously, Veero's predicament is rendered traumatic by the fact that her own family compelled her towards death, leading to haunting flashbacks of that harrowing period. Intense emotions surface when confronted by Shanno's inquiries or upon reuniting with her brother after an extended separation, evoking memories of the unfathomable horrors she endured. These flashbacks serve as a form of indirect and paradoxical witnessing, with Veero herself becoming a silent observer of her own trauma. By projecting these traumatic

memories back in time, the flashbacks aid Veero in preserving them through her process of mourning.

Her determination and autonomy shed light on another aspect of the partition, revealing the fallacy of so-called 'honourable' deaths in the name of religion and community. This underscores the likelihood that many women were coerced into accepting death as they had no alternative, manipulated by patriarchal figures. Works like *Khamosh Pani*, a historiological narrative, draw attention to the various ways women are exploited in the guise of honour by society. Despite Ayesha's bold actions, her past "draws attention to the doubly victimized stature of women during partition victimized by the enemy as well as by their own community." (Munjal, 2008, p.89). Veero/Ayesha's perspective challenges the harsh reality of the Partition, highlighting the double victimization experienced by women - initially by external communities and subsequently by their own. Deprived of agency by their own community in the name of safety and communal honour, her narrative underscores how "real and perceived threats to the community helped mobilize its defense" (Khan, p.137).

While attempting to evade the prospect of suicide, she is abducted by a group of men. The narrative remains ambiguous regarding the potential occurrence of rape, a prevalent threat during that tumultuous period. In another flashback, she is depicted lying in a corner of a small hut, surrounded by two men - one displaying aggression by physically assaulting her, while the other exhibits compassion, urging her to eat and even proposing marriage. The compassionate man makes persistent efforts to persuade Veero, implying a willingness to marry her. Faced with limited options, Veero consents to become his wife. By choosing to escape the perceived honourable death by suicide, she prioritizes life and, instead of succumbing to death, "submits to violence by men from another community as well as dislocation from her own." (Khan, p.138). She accepted the constrained choices available to her and consequently agreed to marry the unfamiliar man. Amidst the crisis and constraints, she opted for what seemed like an escape from her past sufferings, choosing assimilation at that critical juncture. Eventually, Veero transitioned into Ayesha and embraced the Muslim community in the newly established nation. She not only learned to recite the Quran but also imparted this knowledge to the young girls in the village. This aspect of Veero/Ayesha underscores her journey of integration and assimilation within the community, enabling her to reclaim her sense of self and live with dignity and respect.

Following the Partition, during the Zia regime, Ayesha is depicted as a widow who has raised her sole son, Salim, and actively engages in community affairs. She partakes in various village events, including marriage ceremonies and everyday communal activities. Individuals who have endured traumatic experiences often seek avenues to rebuild their lives and adapt to new circumstances, striving to continue forward with redefined paths (Brison, 1999, p.39). Veero similarly endeavors to adapt and navigate her circumstances to the best of her ability. Despite assimilating into the post-Partition Islamic society, Ayesha retains her traumatic past. The film underscores this by recurrently depicting flashbacks of the well, which continue to haunt her psyche amidst the semblance of normalcy in her life. For Veero/Ayesha, the well plays a significant role, serving as a poignant reminder of her trauma-laden history. It becomes a pivotal element in her life, acting as a constant trigger and repository of her past anguish. According to Mike Bal Traumatic memories persistently linger in an individual's psyche as traumatic events, resurfacing particularly when triggered by certain gestures or ordinary perceptions (Bal, 1999). In some cases, these memories are deeply ingrained with an emotional intensity that makes them challenging to forget. The recollection of

traumatic experiences is often more agonizing as they are associated with events that had a negative impact initially. For Ayesha, the well symbolizes a living testament to her tragic past, serving as a constant reminder of her trauma. This haunting memory of the well acts as an unwanted relic from the past, hindering Ayesha's journey toward complete healing. To avoid confronting her traumatic past, she consciously avoids visiting the well and instead delegates the task of fetching water to Allah Bi and her daughter. By steering clear of the community well, Veero temporarily shields herself from the distressing memories it evokes, allowing her to evade the emotional turmoil associated with her past experiences

Ayesha's incomplete healing is closely intertwined with the relics of her ancestral religion. Despite her conversion to Islam, she has retained elements of her forefathers' faith, as evidenced by a chest containing religious artifacts such as texts, photographs, and a gold locket with a picture of a young Veero. These cherished items create a bridge between Veero/Ayesha's past and present, showcasing her enduring connection to the joyful memories of her childhood home. The presence of these religious mementos signifies Veero/Ayesha's reluctance to fully assimilate into her current Islamic identity, highlighting a sense of attachment to her roots. Through these tangible remnants of her past, she finds solace in revisiting a time before the trauma, portraying it as a gentle and familiar era that counteracts feelings of "cultural uprootedness" and "alienation" (Spitzer, 1999). She has carefully concealed these artifacts in her old trunk out of fear of exposure. Ayesha has effectively integrated into her new life, necessitating her to bury her past in the depths of secrecy to avoid scrutiny in the present. The weight of her tumultuous history compels her to safeguard it for the sake of her current stability. Despite her successful transition into a Muslim identity, she grapples with the enduring influence of her Sikh heritage, unable to fully relinquish her religious roots ingrained in her upbringing. This internal conflict prompts her to keep her Sikh lineage hidden as a personal keepsake, symbolizing her struggle to reconcile her past with her present identity. The act of concealing these relics in her "chest" serves as both a literal and metaphorical gesture of preserving her history while navigating her evolving sense of self.

The trauma depicted through the well and the keepsakes stored in Veero's trunk exemplify what trauma theorists refer to as the "experiencing" of trauma. This notion delves into how effectively a victim processes and comprehends past traumatic events. The ability to engage in this experience is crucial for reconstructing a positive self-image, as a failure to do so categorizes the victim's trauma as a "failed experience". Veero's discomfort triggered by flashbacks of the well signifies her unresolved trauma. Despite her efforts to integrate into her new life with her husband, son, and community, the haunting reminders from her past, such as avoiding the well and clinging to mementos, indicate that she remains tethered to her traumatic history, unable to fully confront and process it for complete healing. This delayed processing of trauma, described by Kilby as a "haunting presence," manifests through the well and the memorabilia, suggesting that while Veero appears well-adjusted externally, internally she has not fully grappled with her trauma in the present. Furthermore, the inadequacy of narrating her lived experiences and the absence of a supportive Second Personhood contribute to Veero's struggle in fully experiencing and overcoming her trauma. The lack of a receptive listener to acknowledge her past, including her Sikh lineage and her journey toward assimilation, hinders her ability to achieve closure and healing. This deficiency in addressing her trauma effectively leads to repeated victimization, emphasizing the importance of supportive individuals in validating and integrating the narratives of those impacted by trauma.

Ayesha's peaceful existence is disrupted once more during Zia-ul-Haq's era of Islamization in Pakistan. Men from Lahore bring Zia's doctrine of religious fundamentalism to the tranquil village of Charkhi, reigniting debates about the role of women in society. Under his regime, laws and regulations diminish the rights and status of citizenship, particularly affecting minorities and women. (Khan, p.134). The implementation of social, political, economic, and moral regulations profoundly impacted all aspects of people's lives, leading to the relegation of women to second-class citizens through legal and institutional restrictions on their rights. With the advent of this new regime, Ayesha finds herself vulnerable once again, this time at the hands of her son Salim. Portrayed as a young man lacking direction but aspiring for significant achievements beyond what the small village can offer, Salim's aspirations take a radical turn under the influence of religious extremists. Salim becomes ensnared in the web of fundamentalist ideology, coercing the community of Charkhi to adhere to rituals of religious extremism such as closing shops during prayer times, erecting high walls around the girls' school, and segregating people at marriages and community gatherings. Succumbing to the demands of zealous fundamentalism, Salim is pressured to prove his pure Islamic lineage, leading to conflict upon discovering his mother's Sikh heritage. Unable to reconcile her mixed genealogy with his expectations of pure Islamic descent, Salim views her with suspicion, exacerbating their strained relationship. This discord intensifies as Salim distances himself from his mother, growing increasingly rebellious and hostile. His aggression peaks when he witnesses an altercation between Ayesha and her brother Jaswant, prompting him to denounce his mother as the relative of an unbeliever. As the narrative unfolds, Salim demands that Ayesha publicly affirm her Muslim identity, further fracturing their already fragile bond. He even asserts that she must stand in a public square and declare herself a Muslim and accept Islam while rejecting false beliefs.

This situation proves to be profoundly tragic and traumatic for Ayesha, as she finds herself once again at a crossroads where communal pressures threaten to tear her world asunder. Facing a resurgence of turmoil reminiscent of the Partition era, Ayesha grapples with the disintegration of her life, having painstakingly reconstructed it following a tumultuous and sorrowful past. Investing years in nurturing her new family and fostering relationships within her community, Ayesha experiences the complete collapse of her existence as even her closest friends turn their backs on her. (Khan, p.135). In a poignant scene, her friend Shabbo indirectly discourages Ayesha from attending her daughter's wedding, symbolizing the rejection and isolation Ayesha faces during these turbulent times. As societal acceptance of minorities wanes and associating with them becomes perilous, Ayesha finds herself unwanted and marginalized, highlighting the profound challenges she must confront amidst a society fraught with prejudice and division.

The transformation in her son's demeanor, coupled with the altered attitudes of her longtime friends like Shabbo and Allah bi, proved to be an unbearable burden for Ayesha. Confronted with this breakdown of her family and social connections, Ayesha found herself engulfed in a profound anguish akin to a living death. Estranged from her son and ostracized by her community, Veero/Ayesha ultimately succumbed to the despair that had been building within her, choosing to end her life in the same well she had once evaded. Unable to withstand the rejection inflicted by her son and society for the second time, Ayesha, who had invested herself in carving out a semblance of life, reached her breaking point. Cast as a pariah in the eyes of her son, former family, and acquaintances, she found herself unable to reconcile with her new reality, leading to her tragic decision to end her life. This second instance of victimization, orchestrated by her own son and exacerbated by the

political upheavals unfolding around her, pushed Veero to a state of despair mirroring her past struggles. While she had managed to navigate and integrate herself to some extent after the initial trauma, the subsequent wave of victimization proved insurmountable, leaving her isolated and desolate as she was abandoned by those she once relied on for solace. Her ultimate act of self-destruction, as noted by Shahnaz Khan, symbolizes her “defeat at the hands of communalism and the process of history” (Khan p.141). The loss of her family and social support network for the second time left Veero bereft of hope, resigned to the belief that rebuilding her shattered life was an insurmountable task.(Doraiswamy 2009, p.5-6)

The pinnacle of the story unfolds as Salim discards her chest into the water, a repository of items intimately connected to Ayesha/Veero such as the Guru Granth Sahib, a picture of Guru Nanak, and her bridal attire. In a poignant portrayal, Ayesha tenderly caresses the chest, a tangible link to her origins and a poignant reminder of her tumultuous and sorrowful history. Consequently, this chest symbolizes the final tangible connection to his departed mother and her past, yet he casts it away as if to sever all ties with her permanently.

The film starkly illustrates the limited options available to women within a patriarchal framework. Veero/Ayesha is compelled to end her life in the very well she had once fled from at the outset. Her sense of identity was in turmoil during the partition era and resurfaced years later, yet this time she finds herself unable to confront it. Feeling suffocated by the factional dynamics that cost her the companionship of her only son, she remains devoid of solace even after the passage of numerous years. Stripped of her ability to uphold her dignity and marginalized in decision-making processes, she struggles to assert herself in her environment. Left with no agency, her sole recourse becomes death - a choice she makes for herself. In a cruel twist of fate, she succumbs to the same fate of drowning in the well that she had bravely evaded during the Partition, underscoring the enduring subjugation of women within patriarchal structures. Despite the passage of time and changing regimes, women continue to be relegated to the status of second-class citizens, deprived of the right to lead meaningful and peaceful lives. Veero/Ayesha's plight epitomizes the resilience of women “who bear the brunt of patriarchy, familial and community pressures, who have survived and passed through traumatic events, find interstices in which they make it possible for themselves to exist” (Doraiswamy, 2009, p.1). Despite facing adversity, they emerge resilient and successful “these spaces are fragile and can give away at the onset of another round of political and social pressures, even if it is decades later” (Doraiswamy, 2009, p.5)

Zubeida, another significant character in the novel, is portrayed as Salim's love interest. She is not merely his beloved but a spirited young woman with independent thoughts. In essence, she embodies a modern-day Ayesha, leading the charge for female empowerment in a society influenced by religious fundamentalism. Despite facing slim odds, her character radiates a glimmer of hope amid the prevailing darkness. Her resistance to Salim, asserting her knowledge of her religion, challenges the limited choices typically imposed on women by fundamentalist ideologies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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