



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Critiquing Violence And Silence In *Khamosh Pani* From A Spatial Stance

Dr. Chetna Karnani

Assistant Professor

Centre for Language Learning

The NorthCap University, Gurugram

**Abstract:** This paper examines Sabiha Sumar's film *Khamosh Pani*, probing the intertwining of time, space, and narrative. It delves into the domestic and public spheres as symbolic arenas for exploring trauma and societal tensions post-Partition. Ayesha's personal space reflects internal turmoil, while public spaces like the barber's shop depict ideological clashes. Through characters like Mehboob, resistance against rising fundamentalism is portrayed. The film serves as a poignant exploration of silenced voices and warns against the dangers of extremism.

**Index Terms – Time, Space, Partition, Radicalism, *Khamosh Pani***

Time and space are two elements of human cognition that serve as important strands of a narrative. They are so closely intertwined in life that they cannot be separated from each other. Sometimes, Time is understood from the axis of Space and often, Space is understood from a temporal axis. Space in narratives is not merely the place where action takes place, but when seen from the aspect of time, its sociological, historical and ideological dimensions can also be explored. This intertwining of time and space provides as a basis for understanding the narrative of a film. This paper is an attempt to study *Khamosh Pani*'s silences witnessed from domestic to public spaces and to explore voices that can be heard in the subtext of the film. The hypothesis is in the time present and the time past in the film and thus, are not less important to understand the larger discourse of the film.

*Khamosh Pani* by Sabiha Sumar introduces us to the emotional and psychological dislocation felt by displaced people during the Partition. This film's primary focus is on Ayesha's inner space and domestic space- her- memory and her home. It is from this position that the film explores trauma faced by her during the communal violence of Partition and how she silently lives with her haunting traumatic memories. Ayesha's home and the well are two central metaphors of the film. Through Ayesha, a victim of communal and sexual violence of partition, the film questions the very idea of home and family, women and honour, patriarchy and politics. In the film, juxtaposed with the domestic and personal space of Ayesha is the public space-- the market, the barber's shop, and the tea stall or even the *dhaba*. This paper presents an understanding of the dynamics of such public spaces in the film and the endeavour is to study how different voices that run in the sub-text of the narrative surface at these spaces.

Ayesha as a young girl felt immediate threats from the males of her family, and later by her own son who saw in her a Sikh woman and no more a mother. She was first scarred by the tearing apart of her family, only to lose her sense of belongingness again as her son Saleem gets swayed towards religious extremism. When fear becomes pervasive, we stop questioning. And thus with decades of recurring trauma, she gives up and jumps in the same well she had once escaped from. With the domestic setting as the centre of the action, the public spaces are marginal yet essential to understand the political crisis at national level. These marginal spaces play an important role in surfacing different forces which run in the sub-text, and the barber's shop captures the political stir of Pakistan of 1979 – in a year where the echoes of 1947 could still be heard.

During partition, people were being slaughtered on both sides of the border and Ayesha was one such victim caught up in the conflict of religion and identity. She has a tragic past and an even more tragic present, where her existence has been brought down from Veero to Ayesha to merely *kaafir di bhen* (a traitor's sister). Women's bodies were the bearers of culture and honour in both the nations and Ayesha was one of the many young girls who suffered not only abductions, rapes and forced religious conversions but were also forced by their families to commit suicide to save the honour of the community, renamed as a sacrifice for their chastity. Through the character of Ayesha, Sumar has tried to portray the condition of women who suffered double subjugation both as the "other" gender and as dislocated people. Ayesha escapes jumping into the village well and falls at the clutches of men from the Muslim community. Offered by one of the abductors to marry him, Ayesha converts from a Sikh to a Muslim and embraces Islam as her own.

The film is a meditation upon the silences that lie on multiple layers of the society. Where on one hand the surface of the domestic setting of Ayesha's home is as silent as still water, her inner self was like water rippled with stones. Her past haunts her, thus striking a contrast of how she is silent about her past to people, but retells herself the story of her grief every day. Her outer space is silent while her inner space is still crying over the loss. On the other hand, the public spaces in the film primarily involving the barber's shop and *dhaba* are an inverted image of the household. These are the spaces where shopkeepers and other people would talk about everything from politics to the price of wheat, but would keep silent about the sensitive issue of Partition and cases of women like Ayesha or Veero. This underlying silence of the barber and others is self-imposed and while the public scenario was preoccupied with daily ventures, the inner space was silent about 1947 and its aftermath.

Veero, the meaning of which is brave, lived bravely as Ayesha all her life but her past kept coming back to her, and the film draws a parallel between her past and her present through monochromatic shots. Not even for once does she forget what happened to her; the nightmare that began in 1947, never seemed to end.

The film provides us with an insight into cultural politics in a fragmented society where being a woman was a difficult task, and the domestic sphere of Ayesha's house is the centre of conflict in the family. The story also notes a radical change in the character of Saleem—from being an aimless doted youth to being drawn towards extreme Islamic fundamentalism, his journey of transition is merely loss of innocence. It is gullible unemployed youth like Saleem and Zubair who fall prey to the false hopes and consciousness of nationalism, provided by Islamic radicalists like Mazhar and Rasheed. They are taught to pray and oppress women, but they are not given means to economic independence.

The narrative is built up of different forces, starting with ordinary people and their ordinary lives. The film opens with Ayesha busy with household chores and Saleem lives as a milk-fed prince, the village people were content with their lives despite the scarred emotions buried inside. Harmony prevails until two fundamentalists from Lahore spread the air of extreme fundamental ideologies.

However, the village is represented as a microcosm of Pakistan—where people were being drawn towards Islamization, some accepting it as great service to the nation and Allah, and some were forced into it. The entire village gathers at the mosque invited by the *chaudhary* of the village. They are introduced to Mazhar and Rasheed and these religiously neutral people are exposed to radicalism. If not all, these radicalists persuade Zubair and Saleem who lead the movement of General Zia-ul-Haq in Charkhi village in the name of true Islam. From raising walls of schools to forcing people to close their shops to offer Namaz, all is done as "*Allah da hukum.*"

The marketplace and the barber's shop are essential spaces in the narrative. Situated in the new side of the village, the barber's shop was the converging point of different ideologies and opinions, politics, pilgrims and silences. When Mehboob the barber is introduced to the viewers, it is just another pleasant day for him and his friends Hadi and Mubarak. Occupied with giving Hadi a head massage, the barber seems unaffected by the radio news that the House shall soon implement Islamic Laws under the rule of General Zia. Mockingly, Mehboob asks the city men whether their General Zia was the voice of simple villagers like him or politically centric men of the cities like them. This embarks the beginning of a conflict between these religious and socio-political extremists and moderate villagers like Mehboob. Mehboob is a character that tries to retain his individuality against such oppressive political and religious systems.

Public spaces like the mosque, the barber's shop, the *dhaba* and the tea stall were meeting points for people. The barber's shop had no divisions or boundaries which enabled people to talk inside-out of the shop. While this is suggestive of people like Mehboob detesting the very concept of boundaries between India and Pakistan that divided people, this also shows the barber's acceptance to all that comes to him—he argues with Mazhar from the same shop where he greets his pilgrims from.

The barber's shop is representative of the larger picture of political unrest in the nation, the common man on the other side of the line, finding it difficult to cope with the new ways of the hot blooded extremists, thus overpowering their easy lives.

In one such scene at the *dhaba*, Mazhar and Mubarak show stark disagreement over a TV interview of Islamic fundamentalists where Mubarak ridicules their 'revolutionary' journey and asks the price of wheat instead of listening to the great help that their troops are giving to the nation. "*Pakistan ban geya, hun vi pitti jaande ne. Koi kanak da bhaa dasso ehnu.*" This indicates that such fundamental needs are more important than the hopes of General Zia, thus surrounding the concerns of the society. "*Eho jehe bandeyan naal sing nai fasaayida*", says Mehboob as he pacifies Mubarak and corners himself from the mayhem that politics is. Media, as it is highly said, is the voice of people in a nation, but various instances like the radio news at the barber's shop and TV interviews in Rawalpindi and the *dhaba* portray how media avoids talking about basic needs of man and the society.

This clash of ideologies symbolizes the overpowering dawn of the Islamic fundamentalism, the Sharia Law, and the dusk of liberal thinking in post Zia-Ul Haq Pakistan. This is again evident in the scene where the hardened Saleem and his companions start in the market to force people to close their shops to offer Namaz. Religious extremism starts to spread in the village where the thin line of domestic and public spheres is blurred. While everyone succumbed to the announcement out of no choice, Mehboob stands out when Mazhar tells everyone, "*Ae Allah da hukam hai.*"

"*Tu kal da bachcha mainu dassenga ki Allah ne ki keha aur ki nai keha?*" says Mehboob as he pours down water right in front of the radical group and apologizes, asking them to leave and let him decide what religion means to him. Not only does the character of Mehboob stand against these oppressive forces, but he also ridicules Gen. Zia's military rule and suspension of elections, and asks his friend that why does Zia saahb's barber always talk about elections? Because then his hair would strand out and they could then be easily trimmed. In this spectrum of humour and satire, Sumar has created the character to point out the repressive implementation of the Sharia Law.

This religious extremism movement has destroyed teenagers like Saleem enough that the same Saleem who held Zubeida's hand as she walked her journey of going to Rawalpindi had now become a person swept by the questions on women's rights and the belief that love marriages are social taboos, that women like Zubeida do not hold moral character. One's sexual identity and desires are also affected by religious influences.

The conflicting nature becomes more evident as the story proceeds with the arrival of Sikh pilgrims from India, which also brought in sour memories from the grave. The barber and his friends welcome them with open arms realizing that they were one amongst them—because the land that belonged to those who settled there after Partition also belonged to those who lived there till Partition.

As the young boy comes for his first shave and gets bruised while laughing, Mehboob warns him that to laugh is not permitted. "*Hassna khedna manaa ae, hassogey tan lahu uggega*", which is an indirect comment on the Pakistani scenario where making merry would mean being called a traitor and having your blood shed at the mercy of the radicalists.

As the story further continues, one of the Sikh pilgrims meets these villagers at the tea stall to enquire if any of their women had been left behind or kept coming back over these years. Apprehensive, people insist that none of the Sikh mothers and sisters had been left behind. He is asked to be careful while talking about it, since it could land him in trouble. The play of silences on such sensitive issues in the film also took on the Sikh pilgrim's voice. Public spaces are thus reduced as quiet as domestic households, where one does not have a say in anything. Even though the man breaks this silence and finds his sister, he is unable to find Veero in Ayesha.

*Khamosh Pani* tells the story of partition using the grief of a woman. It looks at the chapter of partition from women's point of view to highlight the agony and difficulties faced by them. The barber's character, though marginal in the narrative, adds humanity and provides an alternative perspective to the narrative. It also cautions against rising fundamentalism. In his own humble and limited manner, he shows resistance to the rising forces of fundamentalism in the village. Heated arguments at his shop between the two poles of the Pakistani society determine the clash of ideologies prevailing across borders.

REFERENCES

- [1] Sumar, Sabiha, director. *Khamosh Pani*. Netflix, 2003, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUX9kFhwS7Q>. Accessed 2022.
- [2] Hurley, Marian, Deborah Mellamphy and Jill Moriarty. “Space and Time in Film: Issue Editors' Note”. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 2 (Winter 2011). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

