



## Stoicism: Portrayal of Women in *Khamosh Pani*, *Pinjar* and *Eho Hamara Jeevna*

Randeep Kaur<sup>1</sup>, Mahesh Arora<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (English), Department of M&H, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering & Technology, (Deemed University under MHRD, Govt. of India), Longowal, Distt. Sangrur, Punjab, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of M&H, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering & Technology, (Deemed University under MHRD, Govt. of India), Longowal, Distt. Sangrur, Punjab, India

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**Abstract**— Women bodies are the victim of sheer oppression and violence due to their vulnerable status since time immemorial. Instances of rape, murder, abduction, honour killing, and domestic violence are quite common in the case of women even in the contemporary world. They were the principal victims of the communal violence at the time of partition as well. They were murdered and humiliated before their loved ones; abducted and forcefully married after conversion or even sold out like inanimate entities. To avert the worst, copious of them committed suicide or others were killed by their family members for the sake of honour. The plight of these misfortunate women has been depicted by many writers very often through their works and even by cinema industries. The present paper tries to explore the fate of these wretched women which have been depicted on the silver screen in *Khamosh Pani* (Silent Waters), *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) and *Eho Hamara Jeevna* (Such is Her Fate). Women characters in these movies are trapped in a quagmire of hideous social evils, inflicted upon them by society, which has left them with nothing but trauma, violence, suffering, identity crises, atrocities and so on. All these women are Sikh women, who are swirling in the gyre of 'in-betweenness' due to their past traumas and the kind of life they are living right now. Keeping aside their emotions, these women do not lose their self-control and always try to strike a balance to live a harmonious life even after such atrocities. Their stoic personalities have encouraged them to undergo the sufferings inflicted upon them but their soul is completely torn due to these inhuman atrocities.



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Identity, in simple terms, may be identified as the distinguishing character or personality of an individual including the relation established by psychological identification, the condition of being the same with something described or asserted and the sameness of essential or generic character in different instances. Such an uncomplicated description really suits the portrayal of women in *Khamosh Pani* (Silent Waters), *Pinjar* (The Skeleton) and *Eho Hamara Jeevna* (Such is Her Fate) which present women from Punjab in different yet identical radiance. Perrier says precisely in the opening lines of his editorial work, *From Fiction to Film*, "The study of literature casts light on the meanings in the film and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the

literature." Films being reflection of the society. Ali in the Preface of her book *Literary Adaptations from Page to Screen (A Study in Films)* states, "Literature and films are art forms designed to empower each other owing to their own attributes...Film is, therefore, a more direct sensory experience than reading-besides verbal language, there is also colour, movement, sound and visual images that stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words can do this indirectly". Malik highlights this aspect of female narratives in her book *Partition and Indian English Novelists* when she states, "Though women were very much a part of millions who witnessed Partition, they seldom figure as the 'subject'. A study of the works/movies

is presented in this paper which shows women in trouble in a stoic light.

First of the lot *Khamosh Pani*, the movie by Sabiha Sumer is an eye-opening story of a mother who had been hiding her identity since partition, but due to certain circumstances, her religious identity is exposed that results in her suicide finally. Partition of the Indian nation in 1947, one of the most tragic events in the history of South Asia, was followed by massive migrations and bloody ethnic cleansing that the world had ever witnessed. While the two countries were celebrating their newly-acquired independence, it was a cause for anguish, regrets and remorse for a large number of people across the two borders. Literature mapped the emotions and sufferings of people and it was considered the only means of exposing societal nuisances owing to circumstances of fear, brutal politics and which, now gradually is being replaced by all other mediums like the stage and silver screen. It is a fact that demonstrating the identity and stoicism of women in turbulent times has been a great challenge to both writers and directors for the reasons naturally associated with some vicious and indescribable events. Murdering of women in the name of honour even by their own families and forced suicides to protect their 'sanctity' and 'purity' or face exploitation as a choice became the norm. Suffering and religio-gender-centric violence that the women had to undergo in the aftermath of partition, has been vividly depicted through theatrical adaptations.

*Khamosh Pani* (2003) presents the traumatic life of Ayesha (Kirron Kher), a Sikh girl abducted during partition and married to a Muslim, confronting her Sikh and Muslim identity. The movie is set in 1979 Pakistan when the country sees a visible transition to Islamic fundamentalism under General Zia-ul-Huq. Ayesha, a widow, lives in Charki village with her son Saleem (Aameer Mallik). The story is about the trauma inflicted from the early part of her life which still haunts her. The inclination of her son Saleem to Islamic fundamentalism hurts her but she refrains from interfering in his political ideology. Her Sikh brother comes to the village as a pilgrim and finds her. He wants her to meet their dying father. This reveals her religious identity before her son. Her son disowns her and finally, she commits suicide by jumping into the well. It is of note that the image haunting all her life is the image of a well. She does not go to the well to fetch water. Her voice narrates the story of partition, the abduction of women and the father killing his daughters for the simple reason that the act would save them from the perpetual trauma of their tumultuous life. Later on, we realize through another flashback scene that her father has forced the ladies of her family to commit suicide but she ran away from the place. Her suicide which

she earlier evaded in a sarcastic manner, expresses existential limits that there is no escape from fate.

*Khamosh Pani* is an example of women facing violence by their own families and communities during the partition. Much in line with the women of Mewar who committed the ghastly act of "Jauhar" to end their lives, a countless number of Sikh women preferred to kill themselves in order to safeguard their modesty from the Muslims while their relatives were forced to convert themselves. In the bordering village of Thoa Khalsa, around 90 women committed suicide by jumping into a well to preserve the 'sanctity' and 'purity' of their religion, as also to escape conversion. It stands as the best example of violence inflicted upon women by their very own community. Veero aka Ayesha runs away from one such martyrdom, from the hands of a patriarchal community. But the memory of that incident haunts all over her life.

Butalia (1994) remarks that forcible conversion was seen as the biggest danger as it would allow the sexual union with the male of the 'other' community- a religion-sanctioned welcome act that would allow them to increase their tribe. The families were adamant on preserving their community and racial honor albeit at the altar of the girl's life. Butalia calls this 'patriarchal consent' where the decision taken by the men, women were 'compelled to take'. In *Khamosh Pani*, the religious identity of a mother becomes more important for a son, undermining maternal and human bonding. When Salim discovers his mother is a Sikh, all his emotional ties are snapped by this one fact. He doesn't want to be associated with his mother once her past Sikh identity surfaces. *Khamosh Pani* was filmed in early 2001 so its exploration of the spread of fundamentalist Islam in Pakistan couldn't have been more topical. It succinctly argues that however well-intentioned it might be, religion is often used as an excuse for nationalistic conflict, and also for men to oppress women in the name of God. It also questions why fundamentalism might be so appealing to young people despite its obvious drawbacks. The central theme though is how social pressure can lead people to do the most appalling things to preserve their so-called 'honour'. Due to this 'honour', the identity of women never found their deserving place in society. At the time of partition, the women were raped, bought, sold, and sometimes, murdered; some ended up marrying their abductors. Says a critic, "From the women's point of view, they faced danger from two sides. The immediate threat came from males within their families. Their fathers, brothers or husbands forced them to commit suicide to preserve chastity and protect family and community honour...The official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslims in India and 33,000

Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. But it is feared that the actual number was much higher.”

With an eloquent and fairly straightforward screenplay, *Khamosh Pani* is one of the precious handful of films that dares to address the two most contentious yet (cinematically) unexplored issues significant to the sub-continent: Partition and religious extremism. And it is admirable how the film manages to interweave these two seemingly distantly related issues into one cohesive narrative. It is as much Saleem’s story as it is Ayesha’s - a woman first scarred by the violent tearing apart of her family and home (land), only to be devastated years later when her son is taken from her by the new claimants of the same destructive forces.

*Pinjar* (The Skeleton) a novel by Amrita Pritam and developed into a movie by Chandraprakash Dwivedi also portrays a woman caged in her identities which are as confusing and segregated as anything could be. Though the movie presents a sharp contrast to *Khamosh Pani*, the inherent undercurrent remains on similar lines. Puro is a young woman of Hindu background, who lives a happy, comfortable life with her family. She is engaged to a kind young man, Ramchand, who is from an upstanding family. While on an outing with her younger sister Rajjo, Puro is suddenly kidnapped by a mysterious man, Rashid. Rashid’s family has an ancestral dispute with Puro’s family. In the past, Puro’s family had made Rashid’s family homeless by taking over their property. Puro’s uncle had even kidnapped Rashid’s aunt and then released her after raping her. The task of exacting revenge is given to Rashid, and his family tells him to kidnap Puro, to settle the score.

Rashid goes through with the kidnapping but cannot bring himself to be cruel to Puro, since he is drawn to her. One night, Puro manages to escape and return to her parents. Her parents woefully turn away their daughter, explaining that if Puro were to stay, Rashid’s extended clan would slaughter everyone in their family. Left with no support, Puro returns to Rashid who is well aware of Puro’s escape; he knew she wouldn’t be let in by her parents and had been waiting for her nearby. Rashid marries Puro, and they settle into an uneasy routine of husband and wife, during which time Puro becomes pregnant but miscarries. Partition happens and riots break out. As Puro’s family leaves for India, Trilok has a tearful reunion with Puro and explains to her that if she so chooses, she can start a new life, as Ramchand is ready to accept her even now. Puro surprises Trilok by refusing and saying that after everything that has happened has happened, she is where she belongs. Ramchand responds with tremendous empathy to Puro, as he sees that she has accepted Rashid. Meanwhile, Rashid

slowly tries to merge into the crowd, making it easier for Puro to leave with her family if she so desires. He is heartbroken, as he is deeply in love with her, but wants her to be happy. However, Puro seeks Rashid and unites with her.

Though the movie has some sort of happy ending as compared to *Khamosh Pani*, where Puro reunites with Rashid after the realization of her love towards him but it also showcases the instances of violence toward the female gender where Rashid abducts Puro to take revenge of his family. This kind of violence was and is still prevalent in society as Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin depict in their book:

“The most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by “dishonouring” their women.”

*Eho Hamara Jeevna* by Dalip Kaur Tiwana and adapted by Om Puri on screen presents a post-partition picture of women in Punjabi Society. Bhano, a poor woman belonging to a poor farmer family in a rural area of Punjab, is the female protagonist of the novel. In her village women are often treated as commodities and sold for a little money. Bhano’s father was ready to sell her daughter and arranged her marriage with Sarban, a resident of Moranwalli village. After her marriage, she faces harassment and torture. Sarban’s four unmarried brothers try to abuse her sexually. Friends of Sarban also harass her. After the death of Sarban, Bhano’s life becomes more miserable and her father tries to sell her once again to the brothers of Sarban. Bhano tries to escape by committing suicide. A man named Narain saves her and accepts her as his wife without denying her any social recognition. Because of circumstances and the patriarchal setup in her society, Bhano fails to fulfil even her simplest goals in life. Tiwana attempted to portray an ordinary downtrodden Indian (Punjabi) woman’s tragic life in this novel. Reviewer Harjeet Singh Gill analysed Bhano’s character as “She has no kith or kin. Once the bargain is struck, her relationship with her parents also gets detached. She lives on an island of social outcasts even in a small village. She belongs to none. But socially and individually, she does not ‘exist’, she only ‘floats’. The tragic story of Bhano reflects the double marginalization of women in third-world countries. They get marginalized due to their low status by the people of elite groups and on the basis of their gender in a patriarchal society. They do not have equal socio-cultural rights as men have and as a result, turn out to be subordinate and oppressed. As Sarah Grimke states about the cruelty of men against females, “Man has subjugated woman to his will,

used her as a means to promote his selfish gratification, to minister to his sensual pleasure, to be instrumental in promoting his comfort; but never he has desired to elevate her to that rank she was created to fill". Bhano not only suffers violence under a misunderstanding when she is charged with seduction by another illustrating woman as a possession or commodity. Her repeated selling to males only augments this social belief. She is so bound that even suicide is not available to her as a choice. After the marriage of Narian's niece, Bhano comes to know that her husband is going to marry again to have a son which shocks her and she tries to hurt herself physically. When she comes back from the hospital she finds that her husband has already married to another woman. After the birth of his son from another woman, Bhagwanti, he sells her to another man under the influence of his second wife forgetting all the sacrifices of Bhano which she made for him. Gerda Lerner states in her work *The Creation of Patriarchy* that "The system of patriarchy can function only with the cooperation of women. This cooperation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; and the dividing of women, one from the other, by defining "respectability" and "deviance" according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women." For nearly four thousand years women have shaped their lives and acted under the umbrella of patriarchy, specifically a form of patriarchy best described as paternalistic dominance. Whether there are events like partition or normal life women express stoicism which is as false as the belief that they are inferior to men.

### CONCLUSION

All three works analyzed portray women as stoic characters who withstand pulls and pressures in their own ways. Contrasting are the circumstances they live in are treated differently by the men who control their lives. *Khamosh Pani* perfectly focuses on the loss of humanity, the desensitization and dehumanization of the victims and the strategies they evolve to remain alive. This film unearths the horrors and after-effects of partition with its subtext of the reality of honour killings due to identity in a patriarchal, nationalist setup, in which the death of a woman exposed to sex crimes is not only desirable but even necessary to the total defeat of new forged identities in close social structures. It is not just the social structures that destroy her, but also the inherited sense of guilt that follows her as a woman who has bypassed the norms of tradition and

honour, and the very fact of her being alive is a crime and the source of her guilt. As an after-effect of partition, her identity is tormented by society creating the hegemonic well of the silent waters, into which she has to drown herself.

All three works showcase the plight of women during periods of social upheaval and the heightened levels of violence and trauma faced by them, both physically and psychologically within the home and outside it. The execution of the stories is seamless. Each and every character capture attention and provokes introspection.

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