

Contours of Silence / Utterance : Navigating Female Lives in Select Visual Narratives of Partition

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Abstract

The early narratives of Partition were primarily celebratory in tone but heedless to the trauma and silences of the many women who went through the nightmare. The archives were unevenly apathetic to the fragmented histories of women and hence three- fourths of the female experiences related to the appalling event are still unknown to the world. The paper attempts a qualitative analysis to read and reconceptualise female silences and utterances in the context of Partition by looking into two visual narratives produced on Partition, one from India and the other from Pakistan viz, *Garam Hawa* and *Dastan*. The objective of the paper is to explore the underlying epistemic injustices experienced by women from a feminist epistemological perspective . It problematises female silences and utterances in both visual narratives as new sites of opposition and resilience that irrupt the phallogentric grand narratives of masculinity, thus engendering new spaces for counter discourses .

Keywords: Counter discourse; Epistemic injustice; Hermeneutic injustice; Silence; Testimonial injustice.

Introduction

History offers knowledge of the past, however, society and culture are the elements that provide gravity and significance to incidents in human terms. The existential consequences of events in the past come to us through literary writings and visual narratives, although historical narratives do not provide its readers with the enormity of mental trauma any historical moment has left behind in the minds of the people. In contrast to this, Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of*

History reminds us “ that history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own for, one’s trauma is tied up with the trauma of another” (188). The carnage and migration consequent to the historical trauma of partition that has left an indelible mark in the minds of the people of South Asia, is an example that elucidates the aforementioned statement of Caruth. Partition initiated unprecedented genocidal violence and broke the high ideals of the syncretic Indo-Islamic cultural lexicon. It is essential to investigate how visual narratives, unlike literature and truth commission testimonials, re-membered the dis-membered silences and utterances of women. The paper is a qualitative exploration of both acts of enunciation namely silence and utterance of women who went through the harrowing experience of Partition. It delves into the nuanced layers of the thematic subtexts underlying the diegesis of M.S. Sathyu’s film *Garam Hawa* and Pakistani tele-drama *Dastan*. Though the representational semiotics of film and tele-drama are different the objective of choosing both for the study stems from the singularity in their thematic concern of Partition. Though from diverse geographies the two visual texts selected for the study share the same historical information and same frame of reference namely Partition. The objective of the paper is to explore the underlying epistemic injustice both testimonial and hermeneutic, experienced by women in both visual narratives from a feminist epistemological perspective, resulting in reiterating docile female stereotypes as it is evidenced in the initial parts of both visual texts. The paper further examines how the site of silence and utterance in both narratives emerges as a productive as well as oppositional space.

The end of British rule that led to the truncation of India, with the intention of Hindus and Muslims to have their separate national home and national state, ripped the cultural fabric of pluralism that the nation had judiciously interwoven over centuries. Religion became a key determinant of political identity and the subsequent violence unleashed during the Partition of British India brought in a seismic zone of uncertainties in the lives of people in the sub-continent. Many women went missing, many were subjected to brutal physical violence, rape, abduction and approximately 500,000 people were killed.

As Erich Fromm elucidates in his *Psychoanalyze and Soziologie* an individual is “ understood as a socialized *a priori*” whose “ psyche is understood as being developed through the relationship of the individual to the society” and that “Human beings do not have one individual psyche which functions when a person performs as an individual and so becomes the object of psychoanalysis, contrasted to a completely separate mass psyche with all sorts of mass instincts as well as vague feelings of community and

solidarity which spring into action whenever a person performs as part of a mass" (Funk 217). By the time the plan to partition British India was announced the English had already been successful in moulding the psychic structure and social character of its people. The truncation of British India restructured the contours of the geopolitical landscape of South Asia. Shashi Tharoor corroborates in *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond* on the imperial policy of divide and rule:

What the British euphemistically dubbed "communal feeling" was actively stoked; it became a tenet of colonial policy to encourage particularist consciousness among Indians, both religious (so that they would be Muslims or Sikhs first and Indians second if at all) and regional (so that they would be Bengalis or Dogras rather than Indians. If the structures of British rule tended toward the creation of a united India for the convenience of the rulers, its animating spirit was aimed at fostering division to achieve the same ends. This seeming paradox of imperial policy culminated in the tragic partition of India upon independence-so that August 15, 1947, was a birth that was also an abortion. (15)

The British policy of 'divide et impera' or divide and rule was a colonial construct to facilitate the imperial rule. But the perceptible denotation of nationalism that by and large emerged during the years of freedom struggle was an amalgamation of miscellaneous groups of people to form a new community of citizens - rooted in pluralism, made inevitably by the nation's geography and reaffirmed by its history- to fight against the British Raj.

Silence and/as Trauma

The cartography of partition trauma and its filmic representations takes one back to the first few films like *Lahore, Nastik, Dharmaputra, Chhalia, Apna Desh*, etc churned out in thirty years after independence. Those films acquiescently looked at the mayhem of Partition and mediated questions of community and violence in transient but stylized scenes. Such stylization was an alteration from a realist to a presentational mode, neglecting ethical complications related to screen representations of refugee crisis, riots and mass migration and more importantly violence. In adapting corporeal and psychic violence into the visual medium, the directors of *Garam Hawa* and *Dastan* must have faced a dilemma in selecting the appropriate mood and tone. Both are major narratives that not only bring back the memory of trauma out in the public sphere, it also engages

questions of religious identities and survival of communities. Through intense delineation of loss and dislocation, both visual texts revive the experience of Partition trauma. The vocabulary of both visual texts inscribes and re-inscribes the preponderant ideologies of hegemonic patriarchal discourses by imposing silence on women. Silence “ is a phenomenon which is at least equiprimordial with utterance”(Dauenhauer 5). There has been attempts to genetically encode silence into female body as a result of identity prejudices based on gender, so much so that utterance is unremarkably metonymised with male and silence with female. Women are subjected to what the British philosopher Miranda Fricker calls epistemic injustice deeply entrenched in the political, social and cultural fabric of society. Fricker who coined the term epistemic injustice in 1999, identifies two types of epistemic injustice namely testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.

The term testimonial injustice is apparent in the undervaluation and exclusion of women in meaningful production and transaction of knowledge. It is evident that unlike male-centric narratives of Partition, the excruciating female experiences of rape and abduction, even in the form of private memories have hardly found its place in the masculinist signifying public domain so far. The female bodies are subjected to testimonial epistemic injustice, their experiences neither uttered for want of a proper female language nor the gravity of the experiences understood. On top of that, the prevalent binary rhetoric that women are highly emotional, and men sufficiently rational, devalues the articulation of even the most harrowing of female narrative as female intuition thereby undermining the credibility of female narratives of Partition. Akin to testimonial epistemic injustice José Medina describes hermeneutical injustice in the article “Varieties of hermeneutical injustice.” as that epistemic injustice which “puts individuals, typically in virtue of their membership of an oppressed social group, in a position of hermeneutical and communicative struggle: social arrangements and their consequences unjustly complicate victims’ ‘meaning-making and meaning-sharing’ (41-52). Women, being victims of hermeneutical marginalisation, do not have access to spaces where she can protest against physical and psychic violence, where she can employ language to articulate and share her experiences with other women who have gone through similar circumstances and call for support. It is imperative for women to speak within the hermeneutical framework to bring in positive transformation in their lives or else taboo on articulating such topics like rape and abduction would cause greater cognitive harm to them. Both female protagonists, Bano and Amina in *Dastan* and *Garam Hawa* are subjected to testimonial and hermeneutical injustices though

the former finds a way out of it and the later succumbs to it.

Garam Hawa

The 1970s anti-state mobilization, national emergency and the emergence of Bangladesh through the division of Pakistan form the context of *Garam Hawa*, which evokes and restores the traumatic memories of Partition. The film encountered initial opposition from the Censor Board as it was controversial from its inception. It was banned for instigating communal dissension, though the film won the President's gold medal later for the best film of the year. Released in 1973, the film is based on an unpublished novel written by Ismat Chughtai. *Garam Hawa* embodies the predicament of the families of two brothers in the decadent city of Agra. Amina's father Salim Mirza, is an optimistic shoe factory owner whose elder brother Halim Mirza, a local political leader amidst the mass exodus, addresses the people and proclaims in public his allegiance to India. But he easily succumbs to political machinations and shortly after the divide, furtively flees to Pakistan, leaving the ancestral haveli an evacuee property from where Salim's family is forced out. Salim's struggle in getting a rented house and the Hindu money lender's refusal to lend money to him, for fear of not getting back as it is evident from their conversation, ruptures Salim Mirza from within.

The new distrust that rips through communities which had been living in harmony for decades amputates him. Mirza carries his 'watan' Hindustan in his heart and thinks that the demise of Gandhi "will galvanize people into overcoming their differences and building the secular community of Gandhi's dreams" (Sarkar 191). But the venomous remarks of the rickshaw puller and the moneylender's outrageous spew dwindles Mirza's hopes. Amina, his daughter too, goes through a traumatic situation when Halim tries to improve his position in the new country by marrying off his son Kasim - who is in love with Amina- to a girl from an affluent family in Pakistan. The betrayal of Kasim sunders Amina's heart and silences her, though she gives in to the romantic overture of her other cousin Shamshad in no time. Their love episode advances in the background of a rapturous song sung by qawali singers and consummates on a boat near the Taj Mahal, a monument symbolic of undying love. Amina's loss of virginity resonates with the loss of social innocence. Soon, Shamshad accompanies his parents to Pakistan for good, with vain promises of return. The otherwise cheerful Amina gradually lapses into a shell of deafening silence, renouncing words even to her doting father when she learns of Shamshad's betrayal; in other words, she succumbs to a tactical enactment

of silence, surrendering, entirely without even putting up a fight. Thus, unable to bear the betrayal of her two prospective spouses and the subsequent emotional breakdown, Amina slashes her wrist and commits suicide. Her psychic disintegration and agony are intensely captured in a soaring qawali and the flash back shots of surging memories.

The film unveils Amina's shift from articulation to silence though any attempt on her part to interrogate the patriarchal structure would offend her family/religion/culture, thus reiterating the theory of good conduct- the prescriptive model for women's speech in a masculinist set up (Spender xi). The gradual retreat of Amina into silence speaks volumes about the histories of victims of such epistemic hermeneutical injustice. Amina is wronged in her capacity as a knower, as someone who has agential power. Her voice and suffering lack a 'hearer' too in Fricker's terms. Amina goes through a conflict between what she perceives of herself as abnormal in her present situation and what should have happened in a normal state. She is subjected to testimonial injustice as she fails to find a language of her own to make sense of her experience of betrayal within the framework of societal norm. This does a greater cognitive harm, ultimately leading her to take the extreme step of silencing herself. Contrary to the arguments regarding the sanctity of life and Kantian notions about suicide as "annihilating the subject of morality in one's person is to root out the existence of morality itself (Cholbi)," there are existentialists like Sartre "struck by the possibility of suicide as an assertion of authentic human will in the face of absurdity" (Cholbi).

The 'rational suicide' (Cholbi) is a debatable topic that raises normative questions regarding the appropriateness of the act as a remedy to the malaise of meaninglessness of life. Amina's suicide is her rage towards the epistemic injustice done to her, which also echoes her autonomy of choice in the Sartrean existential sense. The suicide could be seen as a statement of refusal to play out the compartmentalized roles social norm has pre-ordained for the rest of her life. The slashing of her wrist metonymically stands for the truncated nation. The nationalist codes are primarily articulated and dominated by masculinist discursive practices that assume female body not only as a biological and cultural reproducer of a nation but also as an embodiment of the ideals of purity and domesticity which are to be protected and monitored with a militant fervour. The entire suicide scene replicates the eeriness of violence of Partition, being enacted on the body of Amina, thereby casting a distressing shadow on the public consciousness, a reminder of the collective trauma of Partition.

Dastan

In India the idea of humanization of the physical territory as Bharatmata bolted with a painting of Abanindranath Tagore in 1905 during Swadeshi movement in Bengal. Such iconographic delineations acted as catalyst and gained approval in the course of time. It left an indelible mark in the Indian subliminal understanding of the nation as a woman clad in a sari –the Deshmatha or the Motherland- with a crown on her forehead, along with nationalist heroes standing by her as saviours to protect her from violation. Tanika Sarkar in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* writes:

As is usual with other nationalist discourses, the country is not just a piece of land with people living on it. It is abstracted from the people and personified as the Mother Goddess, the most recent and the most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon....This process of deification is essentially a process of self-estrangement, of fetishisation. The country was sacralised and feminised. (25)

The violation of the land and borders has always been perceived as the violation of the female body. Though the brutality of Partition was much condemned and every village had innumerable tales of silenced/erased women, no family, historian or state discussed it in public. "Partition represents an actual violation of the female body. If the severing of the body of the country recalled the violation of the body of the nation- as- mother, the abduction and rape of its women, their forcible removal from the fold of their families, communities and country represented a violation of their bodies as real mothers- not metaphorical" (Butalia 189).

Bano in *Dastan* is a victim of epistemic injustice like Amina in *Garam Hawa* as the trauma of violence and displacement of Partition unleashes havoc in the close-knit family of Bano too. The perception of silences- its space, form and practice as enacted in *Dastan* helps us to understand the categories of silences, namely malign, neutral and benign forms. If Amina is a silenced subaltern, a victim of epistemic injustice who rises above the polemics of the sacred/profane discourses of the body through her death, Bano in *Dastan* symbolically stands for 'purity'- as it is suggested in the Persian meaning of the name of her country Pakistan. An adaptation of Razia Bhutt's Urdu novel *Bano, Dastan* is not only an articulation of the other side of silence but it is also a riveting saga of splendour and simplicity of pre-partition life in India, when life was easier without dislocations, rupture, mistrust and geographical boundaries. This is superbly outlined in the idyllic setting of the story- in the bond shared by Kamini Chachi

and Bano's family, the optimism of Salim the pro-congress brother of Bano who remarks about Hindus as his own brothers and sisters, the belief in two-nation theory of Bano's love interest and pro-Muslim league ideologue Hassan,- where everybody is leading a contented life until history plays out in their lives especially on the bodies of their women whereby the inner and outer, psychological and geo-political landscapes change forever. Torn initially between her 'Congressi' brother and 'Leagui' lover, Bano decides to join Muslim League. She witnesses the massacre of her family on a fateful night; her helpless neighbour Kamini Chachi adopts the practical tool of neutral silence at a critical juncture; the gang rape of Bano and her rescue by a Sikh; her life with Basanta the Sikh who forcefully marries her and make attempts to convert her and from whose clutches she escapes to Pakistan later- Bano sees it all. The violence portrayed in *Dastan* is not only located 'outside and in the exteriority' of the communities, but could be seen as located within the boundaries of same communities and families as well. Bano's brother Faheem's yelling at his mother to give poison to Bano before the enemy defiles her body and later her mother's attempt to strangulate her with the consent of Bano are instances of cultural violence where a 'defiled' female body is perceived as a potential threat to family honour and hence to be liquidated.

Such acts legitimises not only the sacred/profane discourse of the purity/impurity binary of female body but also validates structural violence as well. Silence and utterance run hand in hand in many such situations in the plot. The honour killings and the 'sacrifice' of women by jumping into wells with/without coercion and the later repatriation are instances of cultural violence that recapitulates the notion that the honour of the community lay in protecting its women. Such protection in the discourses of Partition are often valorised as sacrifice, but it raises grave polemical questions of agential acts like could those women articulate themselves in the aforementioned situations or whether they sacrificed their lives on their own will and so on. The responses of women are not documented in the official archives. It is hard to say whether the contours of silence of the victims of honour killings can be taken as passive receptivity. Initially, Bano like Amina, remains silent as she too is carved within the framework of the prescriptive model of good conduct. Like many other women, Bano also goes through the trauma of forced conversion and marriage. She renounces her world and words while living with Basanta, the man she hated the most. She assimilates silence as if it is embedded in her body. By then, she became a mother to a son whom she hated even more than Basanta. With Basanta's accidental death Bano escapes to Pakistan with her son after five long years of silence and incessant subjection to physical,

mental and sexual violence. She might have ended her wretched life had Hassan and the hope of reaching Pakistan someday been not there in her thoughts.

Amidst the division of the land, communal uprisings, rape, abduction, bloodshed and sacrifices that are enacted on the bodies of Bano and her mother, as it had enacted on the bodies of innumerable women on both sides of the borders, *Dastan* must also be viewed as a heart wrenching visual narrative of the turbulent love of Bano and Hassan. It is her overwhelming hope to see Hassan someday that keeps her alive. As evidenced in the drama, Bano hates her child born to Basanta and looks at him as 'impure,' as the seed of sin who constantly reminds her of her 'polluted' body and crushed aspirations. Surprisingly, in the passivity of her nightmarish life with Basanta, Bano vents her anger and frustration by cursing her child, which continues even after Basanta's death and Bano's escape to Pakistan. For her, the child is the living reminder of her shame and the effect of her violated body. Bano's son is not a 'bachacha' for her but a 'gali' an acrimony used to refer to the silence/abuse that she had been subjected to. Though the recovery process is traumatic for Bano as it happened with many women who had lived their devastated lives in the only hope of returning to their respective lands and loved ones, many families were not willing to take them back. Those amenable to compromise wanted their women back into the fold of religion and family 're-purified' but were not ready to accept the children they brought along with them. These children like dalits and transgenders are muted constituents whose histories are unrecorded in the historiography of Partition.

Bano's perception of Pakistan, as a hope and trope of unadulterated and untainted love and brotherhood shatters the moment she gets off the train in Lahore. The idea of 'abode of peace' crumbles when she experiences the trauma of rejection and alienation even within the domestic space which she thought would be her place of belonging. She experiences the same at her workplace too, where she is viciously harassed by her employer. Utterly disconsolate, Bano apprehends that all her sacrifice and scourges she endured for the sake of her nation proved futile. Frenzied, she stabs her employer who tries to rape her. With her blood-stained hands, she screams hysterically to Hassan, who is waiting for Bano in his bridegroom's attire on his wedding day. "Hassan I have killed Basanta. This land is untainted now, no woman will be harassed here again, nobody will snatch others' rights here. I have killed the devil (*Dastan* Episode 21)." She speaks for all women who have gone through the trauma of rape thus attains hermeneutic justice for them too. Here one can trace the transition

of Bano from a coy, placid, docile girl to a woman who articulates her pent up emotions for years. She expresses her ruminations loudly in a formless and fragmented form, that too in an elusive and enigmatic way -all characteristic of a hysterical narrative. An epitome of resilience, Bano's body is not only a situation and instrument of subjection but emerges as a site of resistance too. She finds her own language, though inchoate and disrupted, to articulate her protest and hence achieves a certain level of hermeneutic justice.

The conclusion of *Dastan* echoes the hysterical articulation of Bano who is admitted in a mental asylum, completely lost in reminiscences, talks to herself constantly, which makes it impossible for her to lead an 'intelligible' life as she does not speak the phallogocentric language of codified knowledge. But as Elaine Showalter writes, "The true feminist reading is a hysterical reading, one which acknowledges both the presence of the uncanny and which associates it with the hysterical and feminine. Reading hysteria is a way of reading woman and reading hysterically is a form of women's reading" (30). Bano's hallucinations are induced partly due to "the male denial of women as subjects of enunciation" (Showalter 30). There are occasions when Hassan turns a deaf ear to the account of Bano's ordeals when she tries to articulate her fragmented and irrational thoughts. She is subjected to both variants of epistemic injustice namely testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, the former occurs when Bano's articulations are unheard on account of assigning "a lower credibility" to her testimonies, and the latter occurs as Hassan "lacks an interpretive framework to understand" (Carel and Gyorffy 1256) her traumatic experiences.

Conclusion

The textual translation of trauma, as Cathy Caruth explicates, demands a mode of representation through silences, gaps, repeated breakdown of language and its incomprehensibility (Schonfelder 31). But "literary verbalization still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (Schonfelder 31), though silence engenders an alternative mode of communication altogether. The verbalization of trauma, or even the admission of memory, needs a vent, a language, and a vocabulary that can adequately capture the dreadful magnitude of pain and violation. Unlike Amina, who silences herself forever, which could be perceived as an act of resistance in Sartrean terms as mentioned earlier, Bano's flawed articulation of trauma is a mode of redemption for her. Her babbling in the asylum and the indeterminacies in her language challenge the famil-

iar vocabulary and phallogocentric modes of articulation. It destabilizes the rationality of the very act of 'intelligible speaking.' The attempt to read silences and utterances of women like Amina and Bano through a feminist epistemology uncovers the epistemic injustices they are subjected to namely testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. This understanding is essential to comprehend the morphology of silences/utterances embedded in individual female memories and oral narratives which mostly are sites of contested, parallel and fragmented 'her-stories' that challenge the absolutist phallogocentric narratives.

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