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Reviewed Work(s): Khamosh Pani by Sabiha Sumr; Pinjar by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi

Review by: Priya Verma

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REVIEW

“Silent Waters” and “Skeleton”

**Directed by Sabiha Sumr
Pakistan, 2004**

**Directed by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi
India, 2003**

Reviewed by Priya Verma

Women's bodies have always been the battlegrounds for political/religious/communal conflicts around the world. Two recent films—“Khamosh Pani” (Silent Waters) and “Pinjar” (Skeleton)—are remarkable depictions of violence against women during the India-Pakistan partition of 1947.

“Silent Waters,” directed by Pakistan-born filmmaker Sabiha Sumar, looks at the story of one such woman, Ayesha, played by Indian actress Kirron Kher. The context of “Silent Waters” is the partition of the Indian sub-continent following India's independence from British rule. The partition triggered the largest mass migration of people in human history—in the border states of Punjab in the north and Bengal in the east, millions of Hindus and Muslims crossed over to their respective sides. Partition also triggered one of the largest bloodbaths humanity has known. In pre-partition Punjab, an uneasy peace had prevailed between the Muslims and the Sikhs. During partition, however, men from both sides mercilessly slaughtered each other. Each looted the other's property, which included their women: little distinction was made between robbing cattle and abducting women. Women were raped, bought and sold, and often murdered. They faced danger from two sides—their own families, where fathers, brothers and husbands forced them to commit suicide to preserve their chastity and the family honor, and the marauders from the other side. If they escaped death at the hands of the family patriarchs, men from the other religion targeted them, apparently with the thought that nothing would dishonor the enemy more than dishonoring his womenfolk. Ironically, though, the women stood a better chance of survival against the strangers, who were more interested in “dishonoring the enemy” than killing them—some ended up marrying their abductors.

In Pakistan, with the onslaught of Islamic fundamentalism from 1979 under General Zia-Ul-Haq's military regime, these once-Hindu women once again came under threat because of their non-Muslim past. For them this was partition all over again. Religious intolerance threatened to undo everything they had built for themselves since 1947.

“Silent Waters” is set in a village known as Charkhi in Pakistan. Ayesha (Kirron Kher) is a widow whose life revolves around raising her son Saleem and giving Qur'an lessons to the neighborhood children. Ayesha is depicted as

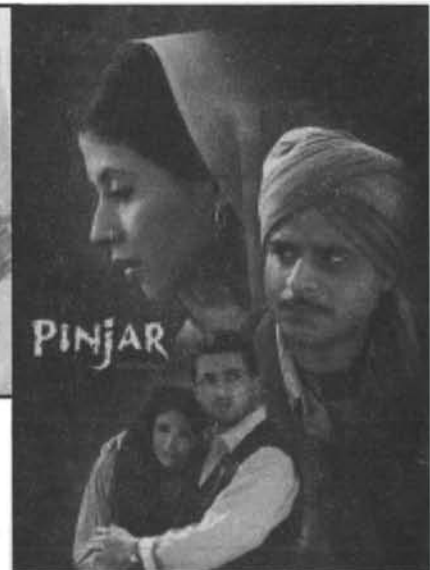
a tolerant person who teaches her students that it is not so important to be Muslim to get to heaven, but that all good human beings go to heaven. Throughout the film, Ayesha is shown to have some kind of fear associated with the village well; she never fetches water from the well herself, instead engaging a neighbor to do this task. It is only near the conclusion of the film that her fear is revealed to us.

Ayesha's son Saleem (Aamir Malik), has neither any vision nor any ambition in life. The highlight of his day is to be in the proximity of the girl next door, Zubeida (Shilpa Shukla). Unlike Saleem, Zubeida wants to move to a bigger city, go to college and be independent. At this crucial juncture in Saleem's youth, Charkhi's naïveté is shattered by the arrival of Islamic fundamentalists.

There seems to be a pattern in the history of Pakistan whereby military leaders come to power by conducting coups and then stay in power with the support of the religious right. General Pervez Musharraf came to power in a bloodless coup in 1999 by overthrowing Prime Minister Nawaj Sharief and immediately banned political activity and started encouraging the mullahs. In 1979, General Zia-Ul-Haq did the same after he had had Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto hanged. These military rulers have a symbiotic relationship with the mullahs—the rulers provide the mullahs with a secure environment to operate in, and the mullahs provide the rulers with an endless supply of men like Saleem to continue their propaganda. Saleem becomes one of them—a misguided boy holding on to a fanatical version of Islam.

In the film, a large number of Sikhs visit Charkhi for a pilgrimage. One such pilgrim alludes to some female relatives being left behind during Partition, but is silenced by those





around him, who are proud to have killed their women—daughters, mothers and wives—sacrificing them brutally to avoid “dishonor” at the hands of the enemy. It is then that Ayesha’s identity is revealed. She is Veero, a Sikh girl who refused to jump in a well and kill herself in order to save her “family honor” (hence her fear of the village well). She had been abducted by Muslim men, one of whom married her later. The revelation of Ayesha’s past creates uproar in her Muslim community. Now an outcast, Ayesha has no one to turn to, not even her own son, who has now been transformed into a staunch fundamentalist.

The film “Skeleton,” based on a novel by author Amrita Pritam, is set in a similar context. The film, directed by Chandra Prakash Dwivedi, is set in 1947 and focuses on the plight of women during the Partition. Puro (Urmila Matondkar), daughter of a wealthy Hindu merchant, leads a happy life in the city of Amritsar in northern India. Her marriage is arranged with Ramchand (Sanjay Suri), but her dreams of a happy future are shattered when one evening a Muslim man, Rashid (Manoj Bajpai), abducts her. Rashid is looking to settle a family score that goes back two generations.

Puro’s parents give up on her rather easily; they assume that her honor has already been tainted, and now no one will marry her even if she came back home. Puro’s brother Trilok (Priyanshu Chatterjee) is outraged by this attitude. He cares more about his sister than he does about any honor code, and is determined to find her.

Rashid confines Puro to his house in the same village. He tells her that she will be converted to Islam and will then be married to him. A desperate Puro manages to escape, but for her, there is no refuge. Her parents—afraid for their own lives and those of their other children—refuse to take her back. When a heartbroken Puro heads back to kill herself, she finds Rashid waiting to take her home. They get married, but for Puro—who is now named Hamida—this marriage is equivalent to death. She wastes away, becoming a *pinjar* (skeleton) who exists but has ceased to live.

Puro, who is now living the life of a Muslim woman on the Pakistani side of the border, learns that Muslims have

abducted her brother’s wife during the Partition riots. She is determined to save her sister-in-law from the same plight. Puro manages to find the kidnapped woman and is helped in this endeavor by Rashid, who seeks to redeem himself in Puro’s eyes. The woman is reunited with her family, thus giving Puro the solace of saving a sister, though she could not save herself.

In the end, Puro has to make a choice between Rashid and Ramchand. Here you see the dilemma faced by the protagonists of both movies—Puro of “Skeleton” and Ayesha of “Silent Waters.” Both women have survived the Partition and the abductions, have set up homes; have had children and appear to have adjusted to their new lives. Would it then be fair to uproot these women once again? In the case of Ayesha, when her Sikh brother offers to take her back, she refuses; since the father was ready to kill her in the name of honor, she says, shouldn’t she now be considered dead by her Sikh family? In Puro’s case, her brother and would-be husband offer to take her back, and just like Ayesha, she refuses. Ayesha and Puro have become two of those countless, nameless and forgotten women; the tragedy is that they prefer their nameless existence to the families who had forsaken them in their hour of need. The homes of their abductors are all they have left.

While both the films tackle similar themes of honor and societal hypocrisy, in “Skeleton” the religious conflicts are depicted in greater detail. The depiction is not always “sensitive,” as humanism was absent in those horrific months when Hindus and Muslims were slaughtering each other. Reportedly 55,000 women were abducted on the Indian side and 33,000 on the Pakistan side during the partition. These figures are, of course, gross underestimates of the number of women raped, murdered and abducted in the name of honor.

For many of us, although the Partition is a part of our history, the plight of women during Partition is lost among political rhetoric and the tales of bloodshed and mayhem. These films provide a different perspective on the calamitous events of 1947 and bring back to life the untold stories of those unfortunate women. ○