In this essay, we will examine the questions of politics, gender, memory and religion in *Khamosh Pani* (Sabiha Sumar, 2003), an independent Pakistani film. The film uses the setting of rural West Punjab during the regime of General Zia ul Haq to explore these questions in relation to Partition and its far-reaching effects on the lives of the people in the subcontinent.

We will consider the message of the film in each of the four aspects separately, although all these issues are essentially tied together and affect each other in complex ways. For example, the reflex of religion and its practice was felt in completely different ways by men and women.

**Politics**

**Popular Perception of Government**

Most of the characters of the film are villagers, except the two “city boys” (who come to the village from Lahore to spread word of, and mobilize support for, General Zia's Islamization). Their conversations, among each other and with the outsiders, do much to reveal the perception of democracy and politicized religion prevalent among the rural communities of the subcontinent.

At a high level, the perception of politics that people preserve in the movie may be described as aloof, but not completely unaware. This includes not only questions of what politicians do from day to day, but even matters marketed as “fundamental” by leaders – for instance, the very existence of Pakistan. At 00:34:15, in response to the outsiders' request to turn up the volume of the debate on Pakistan's creation, the villagers say

*It's all politics; what's it got to do with us? Pakistan exists. Why harp on about it? Talk about the price of wheat.*

The film thus presents this situation, where urban and rural mentalities of politics and its role in daily life are contrasted. Rasheed, the man who asked for the volume to be increased, responds angrily:

*Men shed blood for this country and all you care about is food.*

What is of significance here is the phrasing in Punjabi, which has not been perfectly rendered into English – the villager says *Pakistan ban gaya* (“Pakistan came into being”), while Rasheed says *lokaan ne lahu deke Pakistan banaya hai* (“People have shed their blood to make Pakistan”). A speaker at the political rally they attend with Saleem at 00:40:54 says *hamne is mulk ko Islam ke naam pe haasil kiya* (“We have achieved/obtained this country in the name of Islam”). We see in this wording further evidence of the tendency of the common man to take matters of politics as a fact of life, changes and everything – as Mehboob, the barber, hums, *badal-badalke sab kuch badli jao* (“Changes, changes and more changes!”).

This perception of politics as something distant, over which the common man can exert no influence, lends itself to a certain lightheartedness that the supporters of General Haq find hard to share. At 00:30:55, Mehboob cracks a joke to pacify impatient customers:

*Why does Zia's barber keep asking him about elections? Because when Zia hears the word 'elections,' his hair stands on end and it's easy to trim!*

Rasheed at this point shifts his tone – rather than enumerating the virtues of General Haq and the legitimacy of his claims to power, he resorts to effectively threatening Mehboob with being charged for sedition.

The mention of elections follows close on the heels of a discussion, in the same scene, of the claim to representation of democracy. At 00:30:14, Mehboob asks Rasheed about the urban opinion towards Zia ul Haq's takeover, and Rasheed claims the general opinion is that he “represents people like you and me.” To this, Mehboob draws a distinction between himself, “a naïve villager,” and Rasheed, a “man of politics.”

This is an aspect of the same popular perception of politics that we have seen above, but one that contrasts fundamentally with the very assumption of democracy – that the people actively participate. The mindset leftover from a century of British rule and millennia of monarchy before it, however, is hard to alter.

**Politics as a Path**

The economic situation during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rule and the uneven distribution of benefits during Haq's meant that, as Shahnaz Khan1 says, youth in low-income families (either uneducated or with an education limited to madrassas) “found few employment opportunities in Pakistan,” save entering politics and joining the “fight for Islam” in some capacity – either in the proxy war in Afghanistan or as a political worker in the country.

The depiction of this in *Khamosh Pani* comes immediately after the political discussion in the barbershop. At 00:31:45, Ayesha informs Saleem that he can get a job at Bhatti's (the landlord's son-in-law's) shop, which she secured for him through a personal connection. She goes on to say that he can use the money to start farming and earning money. He, however, is unsatisfied by the prospect of a life spent “fetching and carrying.”

In his meeting with Zubeida at 00:41:40, Saleem repeats this sentiment, saying that he will go to the city to find some work *jihdi koi maqsad ho* (“which has some purpose”), to which Zubeida says that nobody would give him a job or make him a leader.

It is this last conversation, where he declares his intention to work “in service of the country,” that we see most clearly the opposite view to politics, which the “city boys” brought to Charkhi – a path in life. When Ayesha finds out his intentions and confronts him (00:53:04), he says *raah nazar aa gayi hai mainu* (“a path has shown itself to me”). Ayesha, on her part, repeats Mehboob's sentiment from earlier – she warns him to “stay away from political types.” Thus we see in the film a reflex of the economic conditions of Bhutto's and Haq's time that pushed more and more youth towards militarization or radicalization.

**Gender**

**The Gendered Nature of Partition Violence**

Ayesha's backstory in the film, revealed through flashbacks that reveal progressively more detail, is a depiction of the gendered nature of partition violence, and a chilling reminder that this was not restricted to strangers, but rather often perpetrated by their own family members. The final flashback, at 1:21:38, shows the members of Ayesha's (then called Veero) family jumping into the well, as her father stands and watches. She, however, refuses and runs away, is caught by Muslims, and (presumably) raped.

Menon and Bhasin2 point out how the bodies of women are considered territory, equal to land or any material possession, and therefore are to be protected as such. The death of a women is preferable to her being abducted by the enemy. We see this in the film, when in a discussion among the Sikh pilgrims at 1:02:25, one says:

*The women went to my uncle and said, “Shoot us.” He kept firing and firing... All 22 women. Our honour (izzat) was saved. We killed them, but the Muslims didn't lay their hands on them.*

The altercation about the price of wheat that we have already seen (00:34:30) also presents Rasheed's view: “You'll be stuffing your face while they take our women.” The role of women, therefore, as markers of the *izzat* of the community, is depicted on both sides.

**The Autonomy of Women**

We also see more general perspectives on the autonomy and independence of women that prevail in the subcontinent, unrelated to partition. For example, at 1:21:18, Shanno informs Zubeida that Allabi will not bring water for Ayesha anymore, because “[her husband] forbade it.” The closeness of the women of the village among themselves, including Ayesha, is not to be doubted – she and Shabbo, for instance, routinely discuss matters like village gossip (00:13:50), the upbringing of their children (00:42:56), and their marriage (1:06:40).

However, the word of Allabi's husband is enough to break all other claims to consideration and mutual aid that Ayesha might have. Allabi herself cannot even see Ayesha – she sends her daughter Shanno to break the news instead.

When Saleem tries to buy a watch for Zubeida at 00:44:30, his friend mocks him, asking why she would need a watch once they get married. He explains that “these love marriages are not part of our culture,” that people don't respect “women like Zubeida.” This is a major factor, in addition to his newfound political leanings, that causes the friction between him and Zubeida.

The film thus uses Zubeida's character and her interaction with Saleem to show the increased restrictions on women that Haq's regime implemented, and the accompanying conservatism that limited their roles in society. We also see, at 1:35:15, Zubeida putting on a hijab to go out, which she never bothered with as long as she was in Charkhi – a symbol of how the way women cover themselves is used as a way to impose a rule upon a community.

**Memory**

The film is, in some sense, about Ayesha's struggle with her past when it intrudes upon her present. Her flashbacks are interleaved with her present life, and the growing loneliness she suffers at the hands of the community that once welcomed her is associated with the attempt on her life made by the community that she was born into.

Her attitude towards her past is one of complete disassociation, although it is not – and can scarcely be – forgotten. It is foreshadowed by the scene in the beginning (00:09:29), where Saleem is clearing his room, and she tells him that he must “throw out what [he doesn't] need.”

He, however, is unable to share her nonchalance in the matter of discarding what he calls “a lifetime of earnings,” at the age of 20; he says he needs time to decide what to keep. This, too, is a foreshadowing of his decision at the end of the film, to decide to keep his newfound “path,” throwing away his relationship with Ayesha and Zubeida. As Khan1 says,

*Saleem's response to his mother's death suggests that a part of him has died as well ... we see him hand over the locket with his mother's picture to Zubeida because, as Sumar says, “he recognizes the spirit in Zubeida to be the same as the spirit in his mother: strong and resilient.”*

He has, with this decision (1:33:35), finally decided what to throw away and what to keep.

Ayesha's final decision to jump into the well is open to a number of interpretations. Khan1 suggests that, having been ostracized by the community that she invested her life into, she is forced to go back to Sikhism. However, to her, Sikhism carries only one message – that she does not deserve to live – and so she takes this path.

However, many points in the film go against this idea. For instance, at 1:27:52, she takes in Mina's mother after her fight with her husband, telling him that Mina will never return, and asking him to consider the realities of his expectation – that his daughter might still be a Muslim, praying in a mosque somewhere in India. We also see her, right before her suicide (2:30:30), reading namaz in the light of the early morning, making it unlikely that she should be renouncing Islam.

It is more likely that she is exhausted by the tug-of-war she has found herself in between two communities, with her rejecting one and the other rejecting her. She is simply recognizing the insupportability of her position as a convert in a land of “the pure,” and thus surrendering to the forces of communalism that have brought her past back to the present.

**Religion**

The nature of the situation being depicted means that religion can scarcely be considered separate from any of the questions we have already examined. However, it is interesting to consider the roles that religion plays in the lives of Ayesha and Saleem.

Ayesha, while subscribing to her religion (in her childhood), refuses to forsake her individuality – her life – for it. She does not see the “honour” of the community as her *raison d'être*. She has a perception of herself distinct from the role the community has given her, which is simply that of a marker of territory. We know, from works like *Khol Do* (Saadat Manto) and anecdotes of women having to leave home without a *chunni*, how partition changed the way people perceived themselves, but Ayesha's strength of character is such that she does not allow this to happen. This is the “resilient spirit” that Zubeida and Ayesha share, that Saleem too perceives.

In her new religion, she refuses to ascribe to the intolerant and divisive politics that are gripping the country, teaching the children (00:46:00) that anyone of good heart can go to heaven, according to the Qur'an. Saleem's newfound extremism refuses to countenance what he calls “blasphemy” of this kind from his own mother.

Saleem, on the other hand, may be considered to have given up his individuality for his religion, falling into the promise of purpose provided by General Zia ul Haq through the mouthpiece of Rasheed. He joins the movement of Islamization, and is shown to be (1:35:57) the secretary general of an Islamist party, talking about the compatibility of Islam and democracy in Pakistan.

In conclusion, we have seen how the film *Khamosh Pani* depicts narratives surrounding gender, religion, memory and politics in the subcontinent, specifically “the connection of politicized Islam to communism” (Khan1). We see examples of how democracy and government in general is perceived by the people; how women are affected by social processes in particular ways; and how memories may disrupt the present or make way for the future.

**References**

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2. Menon, Ritu, and Kamla Bhasin. “Borders and boundaries.” *Women in India’s Partition. Nueva Delhi: Kali for Women* (2000).