



## Portrayal of Migration, Identity Validation and Peace Education in the Films of Conflict Zones: Visualizing Migration through Cinema

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### Abstract

*Cinema and migration have been interconnected for over a century. Many early filmmakers were immigrants themselves and they offered poignant stories about migration which resonated with audiences across different cultures. The films on migration often depicted the dynamic and diverse experiences of migrants and the unique socio-political contributions that migrants make to their new communities. On the other hand, peoplehood has always been glorified both in the real and the reel and the migrants have always fought to affirm their identities within the new national framework. Moreover, forced migration and formation of new borders sometimes normalize and even justify sexual violence. The offspring of such violence struggle to validate their identities in a strange socio-political milieu that tend to be rigid and exclusive. Religion, ethnicity and language play pivotal roles in this process of self-validation. Visual media, especially films, portray gender-based violence, offering a personal viewpoint distinct from other forms of media. Khamosh Pani (2003) serves as a prime example, delving into themes of migration, border dynamics, gender issues, and identity through cinematic narratives. Furthermore, films can serve as tools for promoting peace education in regions beset by conflict, as seen in The Afghan Alphabet (2002), highlighting cinema's potential to cultivate peaceful prospects through education amidst refugee challenges.*

**Keywords:** Migration, Identity, Cinema, Violence, Peace-education.

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### Introduction

An imagined sense of the political community valorises peoplehood. Borders transform the communities to states and the people to citizens. However, formation of new political borders and forced migration sometimes creates a permissible environment for strategies of sexual violence. Children born because of these strategies often struggle to validate their identities as subjects within borders. The essentialist ideas embedded in the national/state identity endanger the process of incorporation of those children in the imagined political communities. Thus, they problematize the notion of political identity. Parts of the generations born out of sexual violence try to search for various ways to ratify their specific identities. Religion, ethnicity and language play very significant roles in this process of validation. Interestingly, gendered violence and its consequences have always been mediated by certain graphic spectacles in the media both online and through older forms like TV and Films. Visual media other than films mainly provide objective information. On the other hand, meaningful films apart from just providing objective data, may connote various facets of socio-political realities specific to a particular region. Besides, they are different from other visual media because of the 'human factor' associated with them. Because of this 'human factor', cinema can be used productively to teach various features of migration. The paper

focuses on the film- *Khamosh Pani* (2003) by Sabiha Sumar which has shown how spatial reorganization of political territory and intolerance of differences lead to gendered violence and how the progeny of sexual violence tries to legitimize their identity by replication and dogmatization. Hence, the paper investigates migration, border formation, gendered violence and identity predicaments through filmic lens and tries to explore the efficacy of teaching these aspects through the medium of cinema.

On the other hand, a film can encourage people to learn the lessons of peace in a world where people are victims of forced dislocation. As a very popular medium for connecting people, the use of films as peace-building measures can be seriously considered by governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions of conflict-ravaged countries. Today, many nations are tormented by refugee problem. *The Afghan Alphabet* (2002) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf can be an inspiration for educationists of those countries. If young minds are trained with proper education, it might lead to a peaceful future. There might be lesser chances of those minds being indoctrinated with the dictums of violence.

Consequently, the paper probes into the problematic facets of migration and refugee crises, the questions of politico-cultural identity, education of refugee children, purposive peace education and the use of cinema in the sphere of teaching migration.

### ***The Afghan Alphabet: Yes to Pencil, No to Bombs and the ‘Unveiling’***

In *Alef-bay-e Afghan* or *The Afghan Alphabet*, Makhmalbaf tracks the Afghan refugee children who do not attend school in the border villages between Iran and Afghanistan and questions why they are not being educated. When the film starts, a voiceover runs as a little boy with a pair of crutches is shown walking to a classroom. He is an Afghan refugee child. He cannot enter the room, because he does not have an identity card. The boy listens to the teacher sitting outside the classroom. Then he returns home. The background voice tells, “This is not the only Afghan child that lives without an alphabet. At least he has the chance to sit behind the doors of a class in a border village between Iran and Afghanistan and learn the alphabets, which wafts through the air. Even before the Taliban regime, 95 percent of Afghan girls and 80 percent of Afghan boys did not attend school. During the last few decades, hunger and displacement created by war have meant, Afghan children never had a chance to learn. During the rule of the Taliban, all the public schools in Afghanistan were closed. Among the three million Afghan refugees who lived in Iran for more than 20 years, a few managed to attend Iranian schools. Many of them had an ardent desire to learn.” The voiceover ends with a little girl on screen, standing outside the classroom, anxiously trying to learn what the teacher teaches inside the classroom.

The film later informs the viewers that in the year 1980, the Afghan community was estimated at 20 million; 2.5 million of them had died in war or from hunger. Seven million people became homeless. From the year 1980 to 2000, 50 percent of the Afghan community either left Afghanistan for other countries or died. The children of the seven million Afghan refugees could not attend public schools because they entered those countries without legal permission. Basically, a projection of Makhmalbaf’s ‘Afghan Children Education Movement’ or ACEM, the perceptible theme in this documentary is the rampant illiteracy among Afghan refugees in Iran, and the various bureaucratic matters that stand in the way of those who want to learn.

In the film, Makhmalbaf interacts with a local boy, he learns from him that they do not have identity cards and that is why they cannot go to Iranian schools. That is the reason they only learn religion in a local mosque. When Makhmalbaf goes to the mosque, he finds a large number of children chanting religious verses at the top of their voices. When Makhmalbaf asked some of the children what they were learning, they could not answer. Makhmalbaf shows that the children do not have the slightest idea of what they are studying. They just know that they are studying God, religion and the *Quran*. But they do not know the meaning of what they are supposed to be learning. Wherever he goes, he notices Afghan children not attending school as their families do not have identity cards. He learns from a boy that they escaped from Afghanistan because they had no food, and the Taliban and America are fighting there. Makhmalbaf asks him, “Do you like America?” The boy says, “No.” Then he asks, “Do you like the Taliban?” He answers, “No.” Then he asks, “Would

you like to go to a school?" This time his answer is, "Yes."

The director also finds girls studying in UNICEF classrooms in one region. One of the girls is not willing to come out of her *burqa* despite the fact that she has run away from Afghanistan and the shadow of the Taliban. She just cannot escape the horror of God that the Taliban have created. Makhmalbaf seizes upon one girl who refuses to uncover her face even to perform her classroom exercises. When the teacher says that she would not understand what is written on the blackboard or could not write properly, she says that a religious preacher told her not to show her face because it is a sin. She even tells that Prophet Muhammad confined his wife Ayesha in a box and would not let her go out in the streets. She has to leave the class. Then her friend persuades her to unveil. The potential unveiling of the unwilling girl becomes the crux of the film. Those sequences connote that even if the refugee children get to learn in a school, there are other psychological hurdles they have to cross.

It may be noted here that Fatima Mernissi of Morocco is one of the most respected Muslim feminists. She published her book *Beyond the Veil* in 1975 and *The Veil and the Male Elite* in 1991. Mernissi is regarded as a foremost Muslim feminist who has disengaged herself from the culture of Islam, which governs the philosophy of many Muslim feminists. But, in her later intellectual phase, she shifted a bit from her purely secular and westernized ideology. She shifted her ideas from a 'reconstruction' mode to the 'reform' mode. The reconstruction paradigm was later replaced with an agenda of reforming the existing patriarchal system. According to Mernissi, the *hijab* can be interpreted as Allah's answer to a community that has become boorish and invasive.

### **Education as 'AB' or Lifesaving Water**

In this documentary, a sequence has been used as a motif, which appears again and again throughout the movie. It shows a class full of Afghan refugee children. They enthusiastically read out "A, B- AB" repeatedly. In Pashto language, *Ab* means water. Therefore, in this sequence, the whole classroom is reverberated with the children's chant of water. Water keeps people alive. These homeless refugee children will be alive if they are provided with their basic needs. These basic needs are not constituted of food, shelter and clothes only. Education is also a basic need. Thus, Makhmalbaf metaphorically states that the children are unanimously demanding a life of dignity which can only be achieved if they get proper education.

### **Afghan Refugees in Iran and the Impact of Makhmalbaf's Movie**

After the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was shaken by civil war as various factions of the erstwhile *Mujahideen* fought for power. The most extreme in terms of religion were the Taliban. In the fall of 1994, the Taliban took power. Their intention was to create a pure Islamic government subject to their own strict interpretations of the Shariah.

This prolonged period of war and conflict since 1979, forced a huge number of Afghans to leave their country at various points of time; some returned, but a large number of them remained exiled. The refugees from Afghanistan comprise the largest refugee population in Asia and the second largest refugee population in the world. According to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), there were almost 2.5 million registered refugees from Afghanistan. According to the UNESCO website, during the 23 years of armed conflict in Afghanistan, around 6 million became refugees in neighboring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The largest number of Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan and Iran. Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan faced an uncertain political situation, according to the Human Rights Watch (HRW). Iranian officials deported thousands of undocumented Afghans without allowing them the opportunity to demonstrate a legal right to remain in Iran. They could not even lodge an asylum application.

However, about three million Afghan refugees were living in Iran in 2002. About 700,000 of them were children. They were not allowed to go to Iranian schools as they had no identity cards. They were staying in Iran illegally. After the movie, *The Afghan Alphabet* was released, and Makhmalbaf's organization, ACEM's works got noticed; the issue of the

refugee children's education gained prominence. The Iranian parliament or *Majlis* was compelled to pass a bill which allowed Afghan children to attend school. As a result, 500,000 Afghan children got to learn. In 2002, a UNESCO project collaborated with Makhmalbaf's ACEM to promote Afghan refugee children's education. The Iranian Literacy Movement Organization (LMO) ensured local support. UNO's contribution covered textbooks for trainers, stationery, and support to teachers for the duration of the programme. The project enabled 80 teachers to be trained in regard to the specificities of education during emergency and 1,600 children to receive literacy training in their national language. Nevertheless, the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 led the Afghan refugees, with the assistance of the Iranian government and the UNHCR, to return to their country. It caused the launching of a second phase of the project to provide educational assistance to the returnees.

Some 480,000 Afghan children in Iran benefitted from these inclusive education policies, of whom 130,000 were undocumented Afghans. In 2019 alone, 60,000 new Afghan students found a place in school in Iran.

However, in 2021, Taliban's takeover of Kabul again exacerbated displacement throughout Afghanistan. More than 3.2 million people in the country remain displaced and the impact of the conflict on children has been devastating. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi said, "Afghanistan's displacement crisis is one of the largest and most protracted in UNHCR's seven-decade history. We're now seeing a third generation of Afghan children born in exile."

### ***Khamosh Pani* (2003): Shimmer of Liberty in Silent Water**

*Khamosh Pani* (2003) is the story of Ayesha (actor Kiron Kher), a widow raising her teenage son Saleem (actor Amir Malik) in a Punjabi village, Charkhi, near Rawalpindi. Ayesha is a lovable, caring, friendly woman in her forties. Saleem is her son who is in love with feisty and ambitious Zubeida (actor Shilpa Shukla). The film is set in the years of political turmoil (late 1970s) just after General Zia's military coup. The serenity of Ayesha's village was polluted when radical Islamists arrived from Lahore to promote Islamization. Saleem was at first dismissive of the freshly arriving zealots. But later, he was seduced by the pompous extremist rhetoric of the Islamists. He was frustrated at the lack of employment opportunities in his village. He also felt threatened by the educational ambitions of his girlfriend. In the meantime, a group of Sikh pilgrims from India arrived in the village after an agreement between the Indian and Pakistani governments. One of the pilgrims enquired about a Sikh woman in the village Charkhi who he believed had survived the violence which broke out when India and Pakistan emerged as independent states in 1947. He came to know of a woman who never goes to the village well. Following the girls who fetch water for the woman, he learns that the woman is Ayesha. The pilgrim was actually Ayesha's brother. During the post-independence communal riots following partition, Ayesha (whose actual name was Veero) was one of the girls lined up in front of the well to jump into it rather than face 'a fate worse than death' according to the village patriarch. They were pushed to death by their family headmen to 'save' them from being raped by Muslims. However, Veero did not jump and escaped death just to be caught and raped. Later, the man who raped her became remorseful and requested her to marry him. Then Veero started a new life in Pakistan as a Muslim convert, Ayesha. Years later her brother came as a pilgrim to tell her that her dying father wanted to see her. Ayesha refused though she sent food for the pilgrims and she also taught other girls in the village that non-Muslims can also go to heaven. Saleem got furious when he learnt of her mother's past. He reports this to his friends who demand that Ayesha must make a public declaration of her Islamic faith. Ayesha felt humiliated and she refused to do it. Then the locals ostracized her. Only Zubeida continued to take care of her. However, Ayesha's loneliness grew day by day. She went for the first time to fetch water from the well. She also could not accept the truth that her own son was grasped by fundamentalism. She then took her own life by finally jumping into the well. Saleem destroyed all her belongings as her past was a threat to his booming career in religious extremism. He gave a pendant, the last reminder of his mother to Zubeida who he believed was as resilient as his mother. The film ends in 2002 with an ironic note - Saleem talking about religious sermons and democracy as a general-secretary of an Islamic organization and Zubeida looks on. As the country is gradually subsumed by extremism, Zubeida secretly passes on the legacy of Ayesha with her neck chain shining around her own neck.

In this film we see that Ayesha or Veero herself becomes a trope of resistance. Veero's volition to embrace life made her victorious. She celebrated the festival of life with vigour. She did not acquiesce to the impulse of death, to be specific to the whim of the authoritarian males of her (Sikh) clan. In the same way, in the end, she preferred to take resort in the 'silent water' or *Khamosh Pani* of the village well rather than face the double humiliation of proclaiming her faith in public, an act that was being pushed by her own son. One may opine that at the end, she had to choose what she refused long ago. Yet, she deserted life as she could not live with indignity in the newly established undemocratic regime where women and minorities were treated as sub-humans. At the same time, she did not wish to return to her father's home, because he had once tried to end her life. She also did not want her son to dictate the terms of how her life should be lived. Thus, she celebrated her wish to be absolutely independent of anyone's will by taking her own life. Sometimes death is also celebratory.

### **The Transgression and the Servility**

In *Khamosh Pani*, the intricacies of gendered communal violence have been treated with finesse. The film has shown how Veero was doubly victimized for being a woman and a convert to Islam. A woman, who is violated by a person from another community, is considered an unwanted part of the nation. The men of that particular community feel dominated by the other as they could not protect their 'property'. On the other hand, the raped girl is also unwelcome in the community whose representatives raped her. Thus, the accepted norm is to repudiate her very existence. But Veero refused to yield. So, she was a transgressor.

Saleem proved to be just the opposite of his mother. It is not clear whether he had reverence for extremist sermons. Nevertheless, he was deprived of a future in Charkhi as years of stagnation, underdevelopment and corruption sent thousands of youth like him to join groups of zealots. He could have shown resilience towards the cruelty of the circumstances. He could have saved his mother emotionally. But he did not dare to do that. Rather, he chose a prospective career in Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization drive. However, politics and religion have always been intertwined conceptually and practically in Pakistan. Theoretically, this Islamic country is a polity ruled by God, where the ruler derives power from God and not from the people.

### **The Identity Dilemma of the Children of Violence**

*Khamosh Pani* (2003) by Sabiha Sumar shows how the progeny of sexual violence tries to legitimize their identity by replication and dogmatization and further violence. We found Saleem to be gradually lured into the Islamization drive which was taking place in Pakistan at that time. He turned acrimonious towards his mother because her past as a Sikh girl had put Saleem's identity (as a product of rape during the 1947 partition) in danger. He baptised himself in militancy to correct his 'defect' of being the son of a *kafir* or non-believer (his Sikh mother, who had been raped but later married by the Muslim violator and had been converted). He legitimized his identity by taking resort to zealotry and literally pushed his mother to her death. Saleem's insecurity grew when no one spoke to him at the mosque after the performance of *namaz*. A desperate Saleem completely deserts his mother.

In the meantime, Ayesha's friends stopped communicating with her. She realized that she has been ostracized by the local community. She was also shocked to find Saleem in a rally in the village market, ferociously performing the *nara* or slogan with others: "You infidels, show yourselves! May Allah guide us..." Saleem did not hesitate to throw angry gestures at his mother. Then we find Saleem and his friends among the Sikhs who came to the village Charkhi. They threatened the pilgrims that they would not be allowed to pray in public. One of Saleem's friends also shouted that they are aware that the Sikhs have a spy among them, who has his eyes on the Muslim women of the locality. That very night Ayesha's best friend forbids Ayesha to attend her daughter's wedding. Next morning, after performing *namaz*, Ayesha jumps into the village well.

Ayesha's death, in a way, liberates Saleem from his deep-rooted insecurity. In the film, the sequences after Ayesha's

death shows Saleem in a pensive but relaxed mood. The only potential hindrance to his prospective career as an Islamist leader was gone. The film ends with the TV interview of Saleem as the Secretary General of *Tehrik-i-Difa-i-Islam*. When asked about Islam and democracy, Saleem says, "We are a Muslim nation... We have followed the ways of Islam for centuries. Now, legalising Islamic customs is simply a formality. After all, why did we create Pakistan? Pakistan was made for Islam." He continued his speech as the film ends and credits roll on.

*Khamosh Pani* shows that a film can trace how the children of rape (as political violence) take refuge to further violence to legitimise their identity in the socio-political community they live in. To validate their identities in a given society, the progenies of violence, like Saleem of *Khamosh Pani* may also buttress the dominion of violence and oppression by conscious performances of further violence.

## Conclusion

The intricacies of human lives fractured by migration can very well be communicated to the migration students through cinema. Because, meaningful cinema portrays life as it is (though, it is believed that life is stranger than cinema) and life does not always need to be interpreted through texts or theories. Moreover, these films depicting migration expose the fault lines the communities develop over time and the predicaments associated with the future of the youth and children of those communities.

Furthermore, *The Afghan Alphabet*, tried to teach the value of education to wipe off the trauma of violence from the minds of the children who left their war-torn homeland. As the film media deeply influences people's minds, it can educate generations to build a less violent, more civil and more virtuous future. Nevertheless, while teaching migration through cinema, a lesson plan can also be drawn by both the teachers and the learners for the children of the victims of migration; a study plan or an academic blueprint which will promote the culture of tolerance and peace. Yet, it is imperative to see the 'real' as it is. The reality replicated through texts, as in two dimensional images, has its own constraints compared to the audio-visual methods of representation which gives reality multiple dimensions. The audio-visual medium merges multiple realities and questions the territorialization of interpretation.

In support of the argument for merging disciplinary boundaries, Sudeep Dasgupta's essay on French philosopher Jaques Ranciere in *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers* (2009), which speaks of police order and politics, may also be mentioned. Ranciere is of the opinion that police order dictates the society if art comes out to be a consensual form of politics. This situation dismisses any chance of conflict. Nevertheless, according to Ranciere, politics in its truest form is actually transgressive. The aesthetics of politics lies in the very fact that it is transgressive and it makes the people conscious of the crisis of civilization. Thus, it leads to change in the landscape of societal order. On the other hand, the universe of art has infinite possibilities and every image-sign has enormous capability of interpreting the consensuality and transgression. Ranciere asserts that political art is unmistakably transgressive.

Interestingly, in his book *Modern Hatreds* (2001), Stuart J. Kaufman shows that intertwining ancient hatreds with present-day conflicts is an academic cliché and also wrong. It is fashionable to define violence along cultural lines. But, the reasons for hatred should not be confused with the reasons for violence. According to Kaufman, the cultural myths do more harm to civilization than enriching the oeuvre of political literature by explaining the causes of conflicts. Myths of oppression create further dividing lines among people and separatist politicians, opportunist foreign powers, arm supplying groups and unemployed youth engage in pogroms and sometimes large scale, sustained violence.

Kaufman suggests that security organizations or conflict resolution groups should concentrate more on potential conflict areas. Focusing more on pre-crisis peace building rather than post-crisis peacekeeping should be encouraged. Political historians should write less tendentiously and the politicians who aid and abet violence and enrage the masses by using ethnic stereotypes in campaigns, should be exposed and brought to justice.

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