

Shanti as a site of trauma and oppression in Manmohan Desai's *Chhalia*

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ABSTRACT

Partition of India is a watershed moment in the history of the Indian subcontinent which resulted in great human tragedy where millions of people displaced from their homes a innumerable brutal killings, along with abduction and rapes of women and their subsequent ostracization. Anupheaval of this magnitude led to its explorations in the field of cinema with focus on themes of displacement, separation of lovers and nostalgia for the lost home. The film Chhalia(1960) also falls into the category of a partition cinema and explores the trauma and oppression of women. This narrative brings to the fore the trauma that Partition inflicted on women and how Shanti becomes its symbol of ostracization when disowned by her own people.

INTRODUCTION

Chhalia (1960) is a commercial Bollywood film directed by Manmohan Desai with Raj Kapoor, Nutan, Rehman and Pran as the main leads. It is a film based on the theme of Partition of India with its focus on women and children affected by the division. The film depicts the trauma and oppression of women through its protagonist Shanti played by Nutan.

The Partition of India is an important moment in the history of Indian subcontinent culminating with the end of the British Raj and creation of Independent nations of India and Pakistan. With this division, millions of people left their homes, families were divided along with mass killings, rapes and abductions of women. Innumerable casualties happened due to violence between different religious groups. According to one estimate between 200,000 and three million people lost their lives and around nine million Hindus and Sikhs and six million Muslims crossed the borders between India and Pakistan. (Singh, *The Partition of India* 1)

Partition history is replete with violence and trauma that women were subjected to. They were abducted, raped and mutilated. Women were subjected to honour killings by their own kinsmen to save the community of disgrace if raped or abducted by the members of enemy community. The accounts also mention how women were left ostracized by the community for the sake of this community and family honour which added to the bulk of their trauma. It is within this framework that trauma and oppression of women due to Partition is analysed in *Chhalia*.

ANALYSIS

It is the first night of marriage between Kewal and Shanti itself which portends a doom for the newlywed couple as there is a fire engulfing the nearby area. The fire symbolises the impending darkness and destruction that partition unfurled. Kewal's words sums up the devastation and violence when he says,

The lights will never come back.
The lights outside are lights of darkness
Entire Lahore is burning today. Men have become
beasts (*Chhalia*)

It is an observation about the burning fire of partition that engulfed the nation with its baggage of violence, rape, abduction, poverty and displacement.

In a sudden shift in the scene, Kewal left Shanti in Lahore with a promise of coming back, but he never came with a forlorn Shanti waiting for him since five years. This is what happened with many women at the time of the Partition. They were left behind by their families or else got abducted or killed. Shanti is also one representation of those women. The narrative right from the start focuses on Shanti's vulnerable condition due to being left alone in Lahore to fend for her selves.

Shanti's trauma lies in the fact that families rejected their girls and women and did not accept them back when they were recovered by the State to be reinstated into their families. This perception of rejection and dissociation from one's own family members is shared by both her parental family and in-laws with the exception of her husband Kewal. The film highlights the prevalence of distancing from women who were left behind in the Partition upheaval. Here also the father with a stern posture refuses to accept Shanti and instead questions her daughters' memory of recognition that he is her father.

You are mistaken my daughter. I am not your father.

It seems you have got a great shock. In my whole life I haven't saw you, then how can you call me father.
(*Chhalia*)

Here, pretence of a father to doubt his own daughter's memory is in reality his own denial of acceptance of a daughter left behind for no fault of hers. This ostracization was a reality which many women faced at that time. It was believed that if women were brought back into the household, they contaminated their whole family and clan. They were considered impure as the patriarchal fantasies made them believe that their daughters might have been touched by other men and therefore unacceptable to bring back into their own family fold. Thus within this context the family undergoes a wilful amnesia regarding Shanti. Her brother also becomes complicit and blames her for defaming their family name by coming back. Her trauma arises from this rejection, denial and disowning by her own family members. Shanti suffers a

psychological trauma at the hands of her family. Any event which makes a person feel “utterly helpless in the face of a force” impacting the physical as well as emotional quotient of a person is considered as traumatic. (Brison, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* 40). It registers in the deep recesses of a person’s psyche. In these terms, Shanti suffers from the trauma of rejection by her own family. Unable to take this shock, she is shattered and broken. She further gets exposed to another trauma from her husband Kewal. Kewal appears to be concerned with Shanti’s sad plight and accepts her with willingness as an atonement for his inability to bring her back in the past. But this happiness is short-lived as he feels betrayed when he gets to know the name of their child as Anwer. The bearing of a Muslim name- Anwer- shatters his trusts on Shanti and immediately alters his feelings for her as well as the child. He sees Shanti as a transgressor, trying to betray his trust by making him accept her and the illegitimate child by another man who is a Muslim. The film relies on the trope of Otherness. The Muslim itself is unacceptable given the times of partition. Though Kewal moves beyond the prejudices of the society by accepting Shanti but he also steps back when confronted with the mistaken paternity of a child. Thus the Muslim ‘Other’ name and doubtful paternity, make him reject Shanti as his lawful wife and ostracize her like her parents. The prejudices are deep as he does not give her a chance to explain her position, how she lived these five years and why her son is named as Anwer. Without letting her speak and explain her stand, she is shunned and silenced by her husband. The platform of voice is denied to her. Further the text does not maintain that Anwer is an illegitimate child. Instead, it is made sure that Shanti is pure and has not transgressed and the child belongs to her and Kewal. But to focus on the issues of the society with respect to prejudices regarding women and children, the narrative shows Kewal denying the lineage of his own child. It is because Anwer as a name stamps his lineage as a Muslim. The narrative therefore highlights the bigotry of the society where a husband does not even give a chance to his wife to explain herself and abandons the child as illegitimate irrespective of proof. It was the condition of innumerable women, who were not heard or listened of their trauma and violence that they suffered. The narrative explores this prejudice of the society related to children which was a reality at the time of partition. The children posed a problem for the State recovery program. The families willing to accept the women back into the families rejected the children borne by them. Since the premise of all the bloodshed was maintenance and sanctity of religion, therefore the children born out of this union were unacceptable to the families. The babies born in both the countries had to be left behind by their mothers. The recovery program more than re-joining the women with their families denied women their rights towards their own children. Shanti was saved by Khan five years back in Lahore and offered a shelter to her and the child. Therefore she tries to make sense to Kewal that before doubting her, he should have asked her who Khan is. She tries to make him understand that he is like a Lakshman to her and it is due to him that she is alive and safe.

With rejection from both her parents and husband, Shanti goes through an identity dilemma and contemplates to end her life by suicide. The traumatic stance that Shanti goes through culminates with her decision to end her life. She contemplates suicide which itself shows her trauma at the hands of own loved ones. As Trauma Theorists put it that a person going through a traumatic event suffers from depression, lack of

interest in the meaningful activities of life, and thus question their subjectivity with respect to the world. Shanti also goes through the same. With her disownment from her own people, she feels a loss of completeness and wholeness. The plight and trauma of Shanti can be understood as a “split”(Alphen, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* 29)between the selves, shattering the fundamental belief in humanity thereby severing the connection between the human being and its own self. (Brison, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* 40).Thus lacking any outlet forthe dilemma Shanti is subjected to, she considers ending her life by suicide. It reflects the mental state she is left in. With no recourse to a meaningful life after a struggle of five years along with a yearning for her family, she chooses an easy option of ending her life.

The trauma victims have no recourse to their feelings of trauma hood. They are left alone in this enactment which is tragically solitary as there is an absence of a hearer who can offer a solace to this kind of Victim. Shanti also falls into this “solitary re-enactment” of her feelings as her traumatic memory has no addressee to alleviate her pain of rejection and disownment. (Brison, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* 47).It is due to this solitude that it becomes difficult for her to overcome this trauma and considers putting an end to her life.

Shanti’s trials start from the moment she is left behind by husband and is alone on the road with her susceptibility to an approaching angry mob. It is actor Pran as Khan Abdul Raheem-an Afghan, who saves her from the clutches of the blood-thirsty people. Khan faced with a tragedy of losing his own sister own leaves no stone unturned by helping other women. His act of rescuing girls from the mad clutches of people is an atonement of his failure to save his own. It shows the humane side that people had in them. Further, when she is living with Khan along with her child who is named Anwer, her sense of identity erodes because for the sake of safety of her son and herself, she adopts Khan’s shelter and protection. A name must be given to the child else he/she is illegitimate in the eyes of the society and to that end Shanti names his child as Anwer. Subsequently when she returns, she is rejected by the same husband when he hears the name of the child as Anwer. It reveals the hypocrisy inherent in the communities with regard to women. With Khan, the paternity, name and legitimacy is important otherwise she would not be accepted by the society. Therefore, Shanti choses a Muslim name and paternity for him. At the same time, this name and lineage proves disastrous and traumatic for her as Kewal rejects both Shanti and Anwer on the basis of a Muslim identity and considers Anwer as a child of illegitimate union. This highlights the double ended sword under which Shanti lives revealing the patriarchal and claustrophobic stance of societies with respect to its women. And the partition of the subcontinent magnified this hypocrisy to the extent that women like Shanti were then left to fend for themselves. Without letting her put her side of the story, he proceeded with his rejection. Her husband’s rejection coupled with her family’s disownment add to Shanti’s trauma and oppression in the narrative. It adds to instances of violation of her identity and sense of self. She becomes the complete other as her being Shanti, born and raised by her parents, completely erodes after their actions.

CONCLUSION

Challia presents itself as a narrative within the confines of Bollywood cinema portraying the traumatic stance of women at the time of Partition. This cinematic narrative portrays how women were subjected to oppression by their own families and the society. Shanti becomes a victim right from the start when the frenzy of partition engulfs the continent. Left to fend for her selves amidst the partition upheaval, life for her becomes an ordeal of trauma and oppression. With no fault of their own, women like Shanti, were rejected by their own families.

They were disowned and ostracized and therefore subjected to inhuman behaviour and oppression which led to their traumatic conditions. Here in the case of Shanti, her rejection and ostracization by her family and her husband and subsequent rejection of her child as illegitimate leads to her contemplation of suicide. The way Shanti is portrayed in *Chhalia*, establishes her as a symbol of trauma and oppression for no fault of her own in the frenzy that Partition unfurled on many women like her.

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