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A Sense of a Community

A Journey of Shared Mourning during Moharram

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'The shared expression among women majlis during Moharram of an iconic grief that is both personal and communal seems to create a community of women who mourn, who share a sense of the lives of women in the past, and of their lives now.'

Does the sharing of grief, does reciting/singing together, create a sense of a community?

This was a question that came to my mind over and over again as, every year, through the Islamic month of Moharram, I joined groups of Shia Muslim women in the majlis as they mourned the martyrs of the long ago battle of Karbala.

The experience of participating in the majlis allowed me to look deeply at the genres recited—*soz*, *marsiya*, *salaam*, and *nauha*—and to try and understand these forms from a gendered perspective, as a gendered discourse.

I found myself thinking deeply about the notion of community. I asked myself—does the shared experience of grief and its articulation through ritualised sound (*sozkhwani),* does reciting/singing together, create a sense of a community? And, if it does, then what kind of community is it? Does a community need to be stable over long periods of time? Or can it exist for brief periods? Do different communities overlap, feed each other, jostle for space with each other?

> One of the most interesting facts was that despite the denying of music practice or singing during this time, I found the chanted repertoire to be, musically, a highly complex one…

I had earlier encountered the forms of *soz*, *nauha* etc as a student of music. Studying, rehearsing , practicing, and performing invariably required regular interaction with other musicians, in many cases, male Muslim musicians who acted as accompanists (tabla, sarangi and harmonium artists). During Moharram, these musicians would cease to perform or even practice. They were however very welcoming, inviting me to come and view the alams (the insignia of Imam Husain and his family) that were ceremoniously displayed in their homes, and to listen to the reciting (by the male musicians) of *sozkhwani*, in their homes and also in the homes of their patrons. Moreover, my guru Naina Devi also organised majalis at her home during Moharram.

I had found this ritualised chanting fascinating. One of the most interesting facts was that despite the denying of music practice or singing during this time, I found the chanted repertoire to be, musically, a highly complex one, where almost each word was rendered in a different way. Clearly, the *gayaki* (singing style) ensured that the voices of these musicians stayed supple and 'in practice' during this period when the regular kind of *riaz* (intense music practice) and performance was not permitted.

However what I heard and saw then was only the style of *sozkhwani* as 'performed' by male *gharanedar* musicians. It was only many years later that I found myself participating in and witnessing the women's majalis. The style of reciting/singing at the women's majalis was different—simpler, and even the texts recited tended to be specific to the women's majalis.

But it was only when I began participating and reciting *sozkhwani* myself in the women's majalis that I found myself confronted with a whole host of issues and questions about music, poetry, narrative themes. Among these was the question of what singing is at all. For the majlis never refer to what they are doing as 'singing'/*gaana*, despite the often great complexity of the piece. It is always referred to as *parhna*, or reciting. And here, I remember and understand again the complex circumventions Indian Muslim musicians have to make during Moharram to align the practice of their profession with the Islamic injunction against music. You read, you recite. You do not 'sing', however complex the music might be!

That first majlis I participated in was in 2002, or 2003. I am unsure of the exact year. All I know is the massacres in Gujarat (early 2002) had happened, and my deep sorrow and shock found a place, the majlis, where it could be held, where I could mourn with women I knew and didn't know, a tragedy that happened a few months ago, over a thousand years ago, tragedies that are still happening because we humans will never learn.

But back to the majlis.

The women at the majlis—myself apart-- are indeed already part of a community—they are all Shia women. But Shia identity is not singular, not monolithic. Shia identity itself is also complicated by identities of class, language, region, even life choices. Yet, in the majlis, class differences, other differences too, collapse, perhaps briefly, as the women weep together, hold each other as they feel faint with emotion. The shared expression of an iconic grief that is both personal and communal, both of the present and of history, both *aap beeti* (autobiographical) and *jag beeti* (a shared history of what happened in the world), seems to create a community of women who mourn, who share a sense of the lives of women in the past, and of their lives now—a space and a time to share their experiences of the many worlds that they inhabit. This community, so strong in the majlis is yet transient, even unstable.

One of the *soz* (the laments) that I am often asked to recite is in a variant of Hindi, a dialect of eastern Uttar Pradesh called Avadhi. (This dialect is also the staple of the classical *thumri* songs which I sing professionally.) Set loosely in a *dhun* (tune) that approximates to the raga called Bhairavi, it is in the voice of Bano (Shahr Bano—the wife of Husain and mother of Sughra, Abid and Sakina), and expresses her desperation, hopelessness, helplessness and deep sorrow at finding herself widowed. The poetry uses very typical phrases and images that are shared by and appropriate to (especially Hindu) widowhood, but also to the romantic repertoire and to the poetry of the medieval mystical bhakti poets:

Bano says, ‘Where now can I rest my head? My beloved has forgotten me! Abandoned the boat of my life midstream, He’s taken his own boat to the other shore...’

‘Taking one’s boat to the other shore’, means passing on to the other world—but in many songs/poems it also simply means to move on to other things, maybe even other loves. This particular *soz* therefore brings together a range of meanings/suggests many ways of understanding this text, which themselves suggest different performance contexts. The words ‘*Mora sainya to mai ka bisaar gayo*’ (My beloved has forgotten me) is a typical phrase of women’s folk songs like *bidesiya* and *birha,* which speak of the absent beloved/husband. These folk songs certainly refer to actual events—the long absences of men from their villages in search of work in the towns, a situation necessitated by the total collapse of the agrarian systems that once gave them a livelihood. But the beloved’s forgetfulness/absence is also a reference to death. This is also a typical phrasing used in songs of the bhakti repertoire (the songs of the medieval mystics) that speak of death as the beloved’s (the soul’s) abandoning or forgetting the hapless woman/wife (the body).

At a Moharram procession in Hyderabad | Saurabh Chatterjee (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In the soz I mentioned, death becomes almost an injustice that Husain perpetrates on his wife, an abandonment. For me, understanding the bandish in this way allows me to see Bano’s lament and this soz as part of a vast universe of musical, poetic and even philosophical traditions.

Bano describes her widowhood:

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Once I was fortunate, a suhagin (a married woman; a woman whose husband is alive) Once I bathed in milk, was the fortunate mother of sons Once I adorned myself (as a fortunate married woman) with a thousand adornments My beloved now wrecks my beauty (by leaving me a widow).
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Mora sainya singaar bigaad dayo-- My beloved now wrecks my beauty/adornments. These are the words Bano uses to let us know that she, once so fortunate, is now widowed.

Bano speaks of the wrecking of her beauty, the spoiling of the adornment, the wiping away of the marks that signify a fortunate married woman, one whose husband is alive (right now I am not commenting on the phrase 'the fortunate mother of sons'). But these phrases that she uses are actually typical of Hindu widowhood, and that, in the imagination of the song become the markers of widowhood per se. Widowhood, tragic for any woman (and surely in any society) does not carry the same social stigma among Muslims that it has done for Hindu women. Muslim widows can remarry (whether they do or not is another matter), Muslim widows are not required to immolate themselves on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Muslim widows are not treated as pariahs, are not forced to eat scraps and leftovers. When Bano describes her widowhood she chooses to use the metaphors of Hindu widowhood. Is this because for South Asians, the horror of the memory of the Hindu widow's plight is somehow the encapsulation of what it means to be a widow? That Bano's tragedy cannot be described except by reference to what for a South Asian woman might be the worst imaginable kind of widowhood?

> Is Bano's song, like Farid Ayaz's, telling us that both love and pain can only be fully experienced, described, shared when the boundaries between religions, between self and other dissolve?

In other contexts, no doubt, the Sufis frequently use language registers, metaphors, images, poetic conceits and even names that delightfully mix the Islamic with the Hindu. The wonderful Pakistani qawwal, Farid Ayaz often sings a bandish that says:

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Kanhaiya! Do you remember anything at all (of your promise)? Your forgetfulness—for that alone I would give my life! I fall at your feet, I beseech you Kanha I even tried some magic spells, to no avail Kanhaiya! Do you remember anything at all?
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What is Kanhaiya doing in this Sufi song which we would expect to be addressed to one of the Sufi saints?

But, singing, improvising, Farid Ayaz, in the voice of this love-sick woman, calls out to this absent beloved, this boundary-crossing Kanhaiya in a hundred ways—sometimes the familiar (and specific to western India) address 'Kanudo', sometimes locating his song and his beloved clearly within the Sufi dargah by calling out to Nijam piya (Beloved Nizamuddin).

Is Bano's song, like Farid Ayaz's, telling us that both love and pain can only be fully experienced, described, shared when the boundaries between religions, between self and other dissolve? That the community of love and pain is perhaps the only one worth having?

As any singer in India will tell you, to be a singer is to acquire another family. When you are accepted by a guru, his/her family/gharana become yours, your guru is more to you than a parent can ever be. Because, as one of my own teachers would often say, 'Your blood parents give you birth; the guru gives you your true self.' But you also become the upholder of the gharana's, the musical lineage's, honour—your work as a singer must ensure that you always stay true to this.

Would this be true of the women's majlis too?

I believe the very act of singing, certainly singing together, creates a sense of community, however fluid and fleeting it might be. So too, I believe the sharing of deep grief creates a sense of community. My experiences as a singer and, then, my experience of the Moharram majlis would suggest that this is so. In the women's majlis, women share their griefs, both historical and personal, and also share a moment of reciting/singing together to create a community of mourners.

When I first began participating in the majlis, I was something of a curiosity—saree-clad (albeit a black saree), forehead carrying a bindi—clearly marking me out as non-Muslim, non-Shia. Over the years this has ceased to be something to be remarked about, and I see how I seem to now be part of this community of mourning women. It is almost taken for granted that I will be there with them

every year to recite sozkhwani.

> Does the women's recitation carry along with the shared knowledge of Karbala, and memories of their own personal sorrows, their fears and insecurities in an increasingly majoritarian society?

But it is not a Shia-ness that is the community that is created at the majlis. It is another kind of community—one that is less easily defined, unstable, and yet very strong for all that. Mushirul Hasan speaks of Moharram as the defining mark of Shia-ness. Might the majlis also be creating another kind of community? I believe it does do this.

Through the Moharram chants, women share what it means to be a woman (a poor woman?) in India today. As they chant of the pain of losing loved ones, of thirst and deprivation, of the gruelling walk across the desert sands to Yazid's prisons, they are also speaking of their own difficult lives, and they speak too as sisters who support each other through life's bitter journey.

For me it is impossible to separate the grief of the women of Karbala from the contemporary griefs of women. Karbala happens every day in Kashmir, in Gujarat, in the North-East, in the tribal lands of Bastar and Chhatisgarh. When we mourn those long ago martyrs, do we also mourn the tragic, unnecessary and cruel deaths that happen every day? When we recall their thirst, are we also speaking of and mourning the deprivation suffered by so many? Of grinding poverty? Of the denial of justice? When we think of Bano's widowhood, of Zainab's bare-headed shame, of Sakina's uncomprehending grief and terror, are we also remembering the plight of women in India today? Of farmer's wives mourning their husband's suicides? Of tribal women raped? Of children kidnapped and sold into bondage and prostitution? Does this realisation also create another kind of community— this time across space and time with people I do not know, whose hands I may never hold, but whose griefs I can and do share through the majlis?

Embedded within those historical griefs recited in the majlis, are the women also expressing what it means to be a woman, a Muslim woman in India today? Does the women's recitation carry along with the shared knowledge of Karbala, and memories of their own personal sorrows, their fears and insecurities in an increasingly majoritarian society? Are we also mourning the threat from fundamentalisms of all kinds to the *dhoop-chhaon*—the mixed and intertwined threads—that make up the fabric of Indian traditions?