

Silent Waters

A Film by
Sabiha Sumar

35mm, Color, 2003, 95 min, 1:1,85, Dolby Stereo SRD
in Punjabi with English subtitles



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Silent Waters

[Khamosh Pani]

{Golden Leopard (Best Film) - Locarno International Film Festival}

{Best Actress - Kirron Kher – Locarno International Film Festival}

Synopsis

Silent Waters is set in 1979 in Pakistan, when General Zia-ul-Haq took control of the country and stoked the fires of Islamic nationalism. Ayesha, a Muslim woman who gets by on her late husband's pension and by teaching young girls the Koran, invests her hopes in her beloved son Saleem. But when Saleem takes up with a group of Islamic fundamentalists just as a group of Sikh pilgrims come to town, Ayesha's haunted past turns her present life upside down.

Cast and Crew

Kirron Kher.....Ayesha
Aamir Malik.....Saleem
Arshad Mahmud.....Mahboob
Salman Shahid.....Amin
Shilpa Shukla.....Zubeida
Sarfraz Ansari.....Rashid
Shazim Ashraf.....Zubair
Navtej Johar.....Jaswant
Fariha Jabeen.....Shabnam
Adnan Shah.....Mazhar
Rehan Sheikh.....Afsaan (Special Guest Appearance)

Story and Film.....Sabiha Sumar
Screenplay.....Paromita Vohra
Director of Photography.....Ralph Netzer
Editing.....Bettina Böhler
Producers.....Sachithanandam Sathananthan,
Philippe Avril,
Helge Albers
Claudia Tronnier

Historical Background

The film is based on actual events that took place when the Indian sub-continent was partitioned in 1947 into two new states- India and Pakistan. In pre-Partition Punjab, Muslims and Sikhs had lived side-by-side, but during the Partition men from both sides of the religious divide slaughtered each other. Each looted the other's property, which included their respective women: little distinction was made between robbing cattle and abducting women. Muslim men abducted Sikh women while Sikh men abducted Muslim women. The women were raped, bought, sold and, sometimes, murdered; some ended up marrying their abductors.

From the women's point of view, they faced danger from two sides. The immediate threat came from males within their families. Their fathers, brothers or husbands forced them to commit suicide to preserve chastity and protect family and community honor. If they escaped death at the hands of the family patriarchs, they were targeted by men from across the religious divide as 'nothing dishonors the enemy more than dishonoring the womenfolk'. Ironically, though, the women stood a better chance of survival against strangers who were less interested to kill them and more keen to dishonor the "enemy" community.

The official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslims in India and 33,000 Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan. But it is feared that the actual number was much higher.

Director's Note

In 1996, I started researching the idea of violence against women during the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and found a reference to abducted women along the borders of Punjab and Bengal. I tried to locate women in the walled city of Lahore who may have suffered violence during Partition. But the issue of abducted women met with stony silence.

How does a woman reconcile herself to a life, not of her choice, not of her making, a life that began in violence. She simply had no say in her future. We don't always have choices; we sometimes do compromise, often we can't live life according to a well worked out plan. But in my guts, I could feel the violation of a woman abducted, who has to live in a country not of her choice; compelled to convert to the religion of her abductor and bear his children and life goes on undisturbed by the little disturbances of abducted woman.

I think what drew me to these stories was that I could completely empathize with the intense vulnerability of women. I thought of abducted or captive women in Bosnia and Kosovo and earlier of tragedies of Jewish women in war-torn Europe. I instinctively felt for this fear.

When writing this story, I wanted to connect Ayesha's past with the present. Despite her best efforts to build a life for herself, her vulnerability is undiminished. Her isolation grows and deepens through the changing political climate of the country.

Ayesha represents a woman caught in a conflict and as such she represents a universal dilemma. She is the woman in Bosnia, in Sri Lanka, in Afghanistan, in Iraq.... Ayesha is portrayed with Sufi characteristics- an open and giving personality- whose philosophy of life is *"There is no God but the sum of all Gods"*. This perspective comes perhaps of my own Sufi upbringing and I needed to cast a female actor who could express the essence of the Sufi world-view. Unconsciously perhaps my mother was the role model for the character of Ayesha.

In sculpting Ayesha, I looked at her life through her Achilles heel - her only son, Saleem - who is her sole link to the country she lives in.

In all my adult years I have worked with disadvantaged women - whether it was women in prison or women fighting for custody of their children or women fighting for basic freedom such as the right to marry whom they choose. But from all these women, Ayesha stands out as being the most violated, the most vulnerable. And it is really through her that I found a voice to express my deepest fears about religious/political intolerance, not only in Pakistan but also around the world - think of Reagan's "Evil Empire" or Bush's "Clash of Civilizations". In Pakistan matters are made infinitely worse by the amoral backing provided by the so-called democratic and free governments around the world.

Every work of mine is first for my own people- the people of Pakistan. Because it is about us- my films are about what we Pakistani's must think about, change or reflect upon. As film culture grows I am sure my work will be seen by a wider audience. Today however it is restricted to private viewing or small screenings organized by women's organizations or cultural institutes. This decline was caused by General Zia's martial law which killed the culture of cinema and his hard censorship policies destroyed the small commercial film industry.

Things seem to be changing for the better on the commercial film scene but it will still take a long time for any alternative cinema to take the roots in the country.

Director Bio

Born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1961, Sabiha Sumer studied Film-making and Political Science at Sarah Lawrence College in New York from 1980 to 1983. She has produced and directed numerous documentaries for Channel Four Television, ZDF/Das kleine Fernsehspiel, ZDF/3Sat or ZDF/Arte in Germany.