

Silences and Shadows: Women in Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator*

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We were the people who were not in the papers;

We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print.

Margret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale*

Nationalisms 'have typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope', remarks Cynthia Enloe in *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. So is Mirza Waheed's debut novel *The Collaborator*, typically a 'masculinized' narrative in which women are pushed to 'the edges of print'. The women in the narrative come across as 'ghosts' and 'shadows' rather than real suffering human beings. Their voices are hardly heard in the narrative yet their tongues are cut out. While the story tells us how the narrator is made to collaborate with the oppressor, we see patriarchy and colonizer as collaborators in perpetuating violence against women.

Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborator* tells a harrowing tale of a village, Nowgam, near the "silly line of Control" that is caught into the turmoil when armed struggle breaks out in Kashmir during 1990s. The nameless narrator, a 19-year old boy, struggles to keep sane in the testing times that can drive anyone mad. Nowgam, we are told, had come into existence only five decades ago when Gujjars (nomadic people) settled there following the land reforms by Sheikh Abdullah in 1950s. When the armed struggle breaks out in Kashmir against Indian occupation, the people of this village are set onto the roads again. They leave the village to escape the wrath of military. The only family that stays behind is that of the narrator whose father is the Headman, *sarpanch*, of the village.

The narrator recounts how his four friends, Hussain, Gul, Mohammed and Ashfaq, left for Pakistan to receive training in arms without ever informing him. He feels abandoned and betrayed. Yet he misses them desperately. He wants to follow his friends to Pakistan but his plan is thwarted by Khadim Hussain, his friend's father. Meanwhile, an army camp is established in the area. The narrator is forcibly employed by the army captain, Kadian, to pick up things like ID cards, weapons, etc from the dead bodies lying littered in hundreds down the valley near the village. The dead bodies are those of the boys killed in encounters while crossing back from Pakistan. Many include those who are arrested, tortured and then killed. Every time he goes down to pick things, he is horrified at the thought of coming across the dead bodies of his friends, at the same time he is filled with nostalgia for the times when they used to play in this valley listening to Husain's Rafi songs, playing cricket and swimming in the stream. The job unsettles him and he harbors a desire to kill the 'swearing' captain but the moment he goes to do so, the captain plays a song on his transistor which fills the narrator with a longing for his friend and he feels pity for the captain. What he finally ends up doing is a mass cremation of the bodies to get rid of his nightmares.

The fact that all the dead bodies have been those of men seems to imply that no women were involved in the struggle. Though the armed struggle excludes the women, it is only in the

sense that they do not take arms against colonial occupation. But the torture and suffering that are inflicted upon the people to crush the struggle does not exclude them. Their oppression is enveloped in the silence that they wear like a necessary piece of garment. One is left wondering how they lived, how they endured, how they confronted the turbulent times of death and destruction. Their minds are made to seem impervious and impenetrable, and yet Patriarchy and Colonization are as visible as the huge and immense mountains that surround Nowgam.

Patriarchy and colonization subtly collaborate in the narrative to enforce what Peterson and Rutherford has called “double colonization”. They have used the term to “refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and Patriarchy” (McLeod 2010). In *The collaborator*, women have been silenced and victimized by both patriarchy and colonialism. While the narrator’s mental anguish plays heavy on the narrative along side the rotting and decaying bodies of the young boys down the valley, the silence of the women, particularly that of the narrator’s mother, hangs on like a dark cloud on the patriarchal patterns of the narrative. The women’s voices are never heard in the narrative. They are a moving apparition. Women are reduced to a puzzle that is beyond the patriarchal patterns of understanding. The narrator’s mother is the only woman left behind in the abandoned village. The oppressive loneliness is imposed on her by both colonizer that forced people to leave the village, and her domineering husband who refuses to leave with the fellow villagers. Though her silence is partly a result of this loneliness, her son perceives it as some kind of ‘peace’. The narrator tells us:

“Ma hasn’t gone out in the last couple of years, apart from collecting firewood.... I can’t believe it—all these months and she’s perfectly at peace with this life.”

Waheed 2011: 43

In the colonial regime, the body of the woman becomes a ‘site for political intimidation’. The “Fractured Fetus Case” in the novel is an example of such intimidation. Dasrath Singh, whom the narrator takes as a peon in captain Kadian’s office, turns out to be the *Interrogator extraordinaire*. Kadian tells the narrator that he had been a Subedar in the army. During a search operation, he had kicked a pregnant woman repeatedly in her belly. As a result, the baby was born with fractured limbs. The case was investigated by some NGO who managed to take it to Lok Sabha of the Parliament and Dasrath Singh was transferred to Kadian’s camp. The ‘swearing’ Captain praises the peon as a professional and dismisses this kind of oppression as a ‘procedural error’. He tells the narrator:

“...from time to time we have these inquiries and cases against our men for violations of fucking human rights, et cetera. Bloody fucking civilians—really, they just don’t get it sometimes. You know, a lot of times it’s jus some procedural error, some silly, logistical, technical mistake, some simple human fucking error, in short. These things happen during operations, we have to meet our objectives and we go about it purely as a business.”

Waheed 2011: 265

Ironically, all this torture is inflicted in the name of *Bharat Mata (Mother India)*, the country seen in the image of a woman, a mother. The governor in his speech on the Republic Day of India bellows:

“Dosto, these forces have just one objective...to break Kashmir from India.... They want to sever the crown on Bharat Mata’s head!”

Waheed 2011:231

He concludes his speech with ‘*Namaste Saradevi, Kashmira Mandala Vasin (I salute the Goddess of Sarada who resides in Kashmir)*’ while the women under crackdown for three days now sit there listless and suffering. In fact, the narrator relates how a woman cried during the crackdown during her menstruation.

Examining the military ideology underlying the torture of women, Bunster- Burotto in “Surviving beyond Fear: Women and Torture in Latin America” writes that ‘one of the essential ideas behind the sexual slavery of a woman in torture is to teach her that she must retreat into the house and fulfill the traditional role of wife and mother’ (Alexander and Mohanty 1997:157). In this context, Kavita Punjabi observes, “such torture takes various forms: violating the ‘chastity’ of a woman through rape; abusing a woman’s nurturing role by raping her or torturing her in front of her children, causing irreparable damage to both; forcing pregnant women into sexual slavery by taking control of their offspring, torturing them into aborting, or appropriating their new born children. These techniques not only shatter a woman’s self-respect, dignity and physical integrity, they also effect what Bunster-Burrotto terms a “cruel double disorientation”: first forcing upon her a stereotype of “ideal womanhood” ‘then making it impossible for her to achieve it.’”(Alexander and Mohanty 1997:157)

The argument can be effectively applied to women in *The Collaborator*. The women of the village, Poshpur, are collectively raped in a night-long search operation by the military while their men are kept in captivity in a field. These women appear as Milk Beggars in the novel. They are “withered-looking” with their faces ‘unusually frail, almost anemic’. Having been under curfew for more than three months, they come to Nowgam in search of milk for their hungry children. Desperation and helplessness have driven them to the edge where a mother is ready to sell a daughter to feed her other child:

“My baby will die, my baby will die’. The woman at the back shrieked and broke down. ‘If you give me milk, I will give you one of my girls.’”

Waheed 2011: 181

However, the government out rightly denies that any such injury was inflicted on them. The narrator tells us:

“A brand new Minister for Kashmir Affairs from Delhi was also quoted as saying that no place by the name of Poshpur ever existed on the map.”

Waheed 2011: 26

Moreover, the violence to women is not talked about in the novel in its own right but is rather evaluated and understood in relation to men. Noor Khan, the village grocer, tells us about the Poshpur tragedy in relation to its men folk:

“All boys from Poshpur are gone, no one left in the village, it’s empty now, all empty.”

Waheed 2011: 25

While the narrator had thought the Poshpur tragedy an exaggeration by Noor Khan, he comes to believe it when he sees the men of Poshpur during a crackdown. He is enraged at the thought of the shame the rape of women has brought to their men. He narrates:

“I had taken it with a pinch of salt, thought of it as yet another Noor Khan’s exaggeration, but now, looking at these men- there is not a single boy here-I believe everything at once, know it was true then, know it is true now, and in so doing feel guilty again and am filled with a rage both past and current! You have no idea what people look like when their women-all their women-have been raped. I realize I can’t see a single raised eyebrow now.”

Waheed 2011: 274

It is strange that he doesn’t realize it when he sees the women who have been molested, and who are driven to Nowgam begging for milk. He notices that they are ‘unusually frail ...drained of all color as if someone had squeezed out all the blood from them’ with ‘scared lifeless eyes’, ‘frayed hair’, ‘ruined red cheeks’ but he doesn’t become even suspicious of their being physically tortured, yet a mere look at men’s faces makes everything clear to him.

The ‘fast coloring’ Molvi (sermonizer) exhorts men in the name of violence to women:

“My dear brothers, these are testing times, troubled times indeed. Everywhere you see, there is death and destruction. Minor girls, your daughters and sisters, are raped every day by filthy Indian soldiers just imagine! Just imagine!”

Waheed 2011: 32

What we notice is that the ‘cruel double disorientation’ is here effected by the complimentary roles of patriarchy and colonial oppressor together. The patriarchal society has enforced ‘the ideal womanhood’ on women and its accomplishment is made impossible by the colonizer through the physical violation of women. The concept of “Ideal Womanhood”, therefore, becomes yet another form of injury that has been inflicted on the psyche of women. Fear and anxiety are further instilled by military in women by taking away their sons or by killing them. Farooq is arrested and tortured because his brother has crossed over to Pakistan. Later his head is thrown into the courtyard of his house while his headless body is found in a stream. This is one of the reasons for silencing/traumatizing the people. The narrator relates:

“After Farooq’s death, she (Ma) had assumed a sad, quietly disapproving stance. And after the crackdown, she had become even quieter. It hurt me deeply to think of the humiliation she must have suffered.”

Waheed 2011: 240

“Ma had by now absorbed, or appeared to have done so, the shock and the distress all mothers in Nowgam must have felt after Hussain and the others disappeared.”

Waheed 2011:143

Furthermore, Women do not suffer at the hands of the colonizer only. The very people who are out to get them freedom from oppression brutalize them. When the army confiscates the arms and weapons from the forest, the militants suspect Rehman, Shaban's son of being the informer. Therefore they punished him for his supposed act of treason. His whole family is mutilated, including his mother whose tongue is cut.

John McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* defines 'Patriarchy' as a term that "refers to those systems—Political, material and imaginative—which invest power in men and marginalize women. Like colonialism, patriarchy manifests itself in both concrete ways (such as disqualifying women a vote) and at the level of imagination." In the novel, power is vested in the army and the men folk. When all the village people decided to leave, the headman would not allow his family to leave. The wealth and the power that he has accumulated do not allow him to leave. The narrator's mother has no voice even though she is very anxious about the safety of her son, about his education. She cannot question her husband's decision. Yet, ironically, she is referred to as 'Chief Matriarch'. The misperception becomes clear when the narrator's mother reprimands him for his insistence on leaving the village:

"Your father doesn't want us to go, so we won't go. That is how it is; we must stay."

Waheed 2011:112

"When everyone left, Baba had made his decision known ever so firmly, and neither Ma nor I could question it. But now may be it's time to quit, may be that's what Ma also wants, to leave, to runaway, to escape her prison of loneliness. She hasn't seen another woman for more than a year now. Ma's stories dried up sometime ago."

Waheed 2011: 113

Since she has no authority, whatsoever, in making important decisions regarding her family, therefore, she is equally helpless to resist her son's employment by Army Captain Kadian where in her son is forced to confront mutilated and rotting dead bodies. When Kadian comes to meet his father, the narrator tells us about his anxious mother:

"She hovered around in the corridor, perhaps to stay in tune with what was happening in her house, perhaps to stay close to the action in the faint hope that she might be in a position to intervene"

Waheed 2011: 254

And we see that she stayed close but never intervened.

Patriarchy, according to McLeod, "asserts certain representational systems which create an order of the world presented to individuals as 'normal' and 'true'". One such representational system is the concept of womanhood that emphasizes 'chastity' of the women, and 'subservience' to men of their households. For instance, women who wander around without their men accompanying them are not considered respectable. Accordingly, violence against such women perhaps would not become a concern for men. Therefore we see that when the

‘withered-looking’ raped women from Poshpur come to Nowgam begging for milk for their children, our narrator makes sure to tell us that they were respectable women:

“I looked at the women; they didn’t seem the kind to be wandering about like this without any male company.”

Waheed 2011:178

Nowgam is a Patriarchy. It sees women as a homogenous entity. Even if they have different names, that does not suggest different personalities. Men are men. They have roles to play like fighting against oppression and attaining freedom from the oppressor. They are not described as fathers and brothers and so on. But women are only mothers, daughters, wives or sisters because their existence is seen in relation to men. In the novel, women are described in terms that hardly differentiate one from the other as if they are all a homogenous mass having no individuality. They are almost invariably described as ‘fragile’ and ‘demure’. Hussain’s mother is described as “*demurely built, feeble, faint-faced*”. Shaban’s wife is “*demure as ever*”. A kidnapped woman named Rubbaya Syed whose picture the narrator sees in the newspaper also looks “*demure*” and “*still*”. Thus the male consciousness perceives women invariably something less than living. They appear the same whether seen as real women or in newspaper photographs. They come across as lifeless portraits rather than any living beings.

Moreover, they are the object of male gaze. The village compounder’s daughter is described as “dimwit” and is projected simply as an erotic object of male gaze:

“Gul had taken a liking to Nuzhat, compounder Chechii’s dimwit daughter, or more accurately, her swelling chest and was trying hard to make his anecdote funny to give us impression that he wasn’t too serious about the girl.”

Waheed 2011: 24

She provides material for their gossip. The narrator while remembering his last meeting with his friend, Gul, before he left for Pakistan speaks thus:

“One evening we were chatting away in the street- Gul khan doling out fresh gossip about Compounder Chechii’s daughter and how she still didn’t wear anything under her loose pheran, revealing her pear-shaped breasts,(Gul’s phrase)one bigger than the other (Gul’s view)...”

Waheed 2011: 41

The torture that is inflicted upon women by both the oppressive patriarchy and the colonial regime is shrouded into silence. Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* while exploring Lacan’s texts from a feminist perspective writes “women are doomed to inhabit the tongue less zone of the Imaginary. We are forbidden citizenship in the Symbolic, exiled from the archives and encyclopedias, the sacred texts and algebras, the alphas and omegas of history. ... In this way, Lacan’s vision bears an uneasy affinity to the nineteenth- century discourse on degeneration, which figured women as bereft of language, exiled from reason and properly inhabiting the prehistory of the race. ...we inhabit an earlier space in the linear, temporal history of the (male) symbolic self. Pre-oedipal space (the

space of domesticity) is naturalized by figuring it as anachronistic space: out of time and prior to symbolic history. Women's *historically* gendered relation to power is represented as a *formally* different relation to time: the imperial gesture itself". Similarly in Waheed's narrative women 'bereft of language' and trapped in 'the space of domesticity' are shrouded in a mystery that the male consciousness fails to understand. The mysterious elements in Nature and in women are talked about in the same breath. Describing his mother's garden the narrator tells us:

"She spends most of the day in her kitchen garden at the back of the house. There is a majestic view of the mountains from there--a soaring, suddenly rising sheet of rich dark green throbbing with **mysterious** life beneath the foliage. **Someone always whistles in the dark.** It's a neat little patch she's cultivated here, my mother, all by herself... Ma reaches and bends, plucks and mends--the various inhabitants of her **magic** grove bowing to her every wish."

Waheed 2011: 50

Phrases like 'Something always whistles in the dark', 'magic grove', 'mysterious life', are used whenever the narrator comes close to describe the women's world. The same mysteriousness is felt about Nature and trees. He feels that the trees are judging him in some 'mysterious way'. Woman is reduced to an unanswerable question in the novel. Asma, the girl with whom he is in love, is described with a "tender hesitancy to her lip' and "fragile". Once looking at her, the narrator tells us that she '*opened her mouth a hesitant fraction...I looked at her and know*' (Mirza 2011: 109). What he knows he can't say because he doesn't understand her silence. Rather he talks about 'sharp chirping' of sparrows. What becomes significantly disturbing in the narrative is that women do not express their thoughts and feelings. They speak only when they are angry. The subtle oppression of the patriarchal dominating marriages has snatched away their freedom of spirit along with their voices. Anger is the only emotion that drives them to language. The narrator says:

"Ma was worried...when he disappeared. In her flushed face and tightly pursed lips she betrayed her anger."

Waheed 2011: 39

If a conversation takes place between the mother and her son, it's only when she is angry:

"You must be readying yourself too, then, haan? You think we don't know anything, hero. She said with renewed **anger**"

Waheed 2011: 39

Somewhere else also the narrator tells us:

"Ma doesn't talk much now, except for the rare occasion when she is **angry**"

Waheed 2011: 49

To the male consciousness, therefore, women remain unknowable. The world of women is made to appear impenetrable. Even though there is no verbal communication between the

father and son, yet he knows that they share the same knowledge but when it comes to Ma, he is 'unsure':

"The last few days have been quite exhausting and it's been tough keeping pace with Baba and then Ma. Baba knows everything but both of us seem unsure as to whether Ma knows or not, whether she should know or not. Ma who has fallen silent, and won't speak her mind until something really provokes her".

Waheed 2011:69

Women inhabit the world of dead, therefore incomprehensible. Their suffering is not acknowledged in full light of day but it is eliding, catching only the corner of eye. The moment you look at it directly it vanishes. It exists only as a permanent blur. The narrator thinks about his mother:

"Do I see a glint of sadness in her eye when she watches me watching her?...I want to ask her how she feels, how she copes, what she thinks, what she sees, how she lives- but there is no point. She won't say a word beyond few syllables. She seems so beyond worry now."

Waheed 2011: 50

To know women like his own mother remains only a desire for the narrator. Without asking his mother about her feelings, he decides that 'there is no point'. If someone, who lives a miserable life, dies, people would say that he's been freed from the worries of this world. In the same way, this woman, his mother is placed with the dead. Therefore, to him, she is 'beyond worry now' as if dead.

Shaban's wife is described as part of the darkness-filled hut in which she lives. The narrator visits this place twice and describes Shaban's wife as if she were dumb and stupefied. While offering them (narrator and his friend) food, he describes her as '*smiling ...to show us a set of orderly white teeth behind the leather face* (Waheed 2011:64)' and looking at them without 'blinking'. Moreover, just because he didn't hear her name during his only two visits to Shaban's hut, neither cared to ask her, he decides that she is nameless and philosophically broods on it:

"I can't recall how long I sat there. Shaban's wife, no one called her by any name, no one told me her name—it's strange, some people can get on just fine without names..."

Waheed 2011:124

Thus he effectively imprisons her into anonymity.

Another aspect of their lives, marriage, adds to their misery. While it should have helped them to attain wholeness, they suffer schisms. Marriage has robbed these women of their joy and happiness. It has silenced their songs which are symbolic of independence and freedom of spirit. Colonial oppression and patriarchal domination has reduced them to living death. We come to know that Ma had once been full of stories and tales:

"Ma ...was once full of tales and qissas, long stories about her childhood and youth and her own Baba's endless adventures. She is silent now."

Waheed 2011: 69

Hussain's mother is '*forever crushed under the weight of a needy home, had stopped singing... soon after her marriage to the piously minded Khadim Hussain*' (Waheed: 23)

While women are silenced into the limited 'space of domesticity', they cultivate it with their creativity that is seen by men just as a doing-away with time. The kitchen garden of the narrator's mother is the creative expression of the mind untrained in letters. Growing vegetables gives her joy and pleasure that is denied to her in the patriarchal prison of loneliness. It's the plants in the kitchen garden that are her companions. His mother while picking chilies from the garden hums a tune. Gardening is a source of joy for her. It gives her satisfaction.

"The first thing Ma does in morning is check her vegetable garden. She examines every plant and the big bed of greens and walks back into the house satisfied."

Waheed 2011:131

She finds solace in her garden:

"Ma withdrew aged and then fell silent. One day she just kept looking at me, wiped away a few tears, and then went into her garden."

Waheed 2011:253

But the garden is not seen in the novel as a supreme expression of Ma's creativity or an evidence of her resilience in an oppressive atmosphere but as an activity the function of which the narrator does not understand. It's merely another of the domestic chores that women engage in. The frustration that the narrator feels at the job of dealing with mutilated dead bodies comes to him with full force when he sees his mother's garden. He cannot harm his tormentor, Captain Kadian, but he is capable to take out his frustration on his mother's accomplishment, therefore, he feels:

"Sometimes I want to crush them (tomato plants) and mangle them with my feet and hands; break the tiny, hairy stems into garbled trash; smash the unripe ones into raw pulp, I don't know why. It's fleeting feeling, though and I haven't reached a point of no return yet"

Waheed 2011:51

Again, the fact that her husband works hard to fence the garden symbolizes the boundaries that men didn't want women to cross.

"The borders of the garden are fenced... Baba worked hard on them"

Waheed 2011: 50

John McLeod in his introduction to *Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* writes "...by challenging and changing the ways in which we make the world meaningful we might find new conceptual modes (however modest) of *resisting*, *challenging* and even *transforming* prejudicial

forms of knowledge—the past and the present” (p 5). Education can be seen as one such weapon of resistance and transformation. It could become the route to liberty and freedom. Women in the novel are continually worried about their children’s education. Hussain, the narrator’s friend, tells us:

“Mouj (mother) says this place needs a school of its own; I think I will open a big school here when I am older, where I will teach everything. There will also be music and singing. Do you know how many songs Mouj knows? I’ll teach all the students so that they can sing her songs after the Morning Prayer.”

Waheed 2011: 38

They keep them from the patriarchal suppression that they themselves suffer. It’s Hussain’s mother who encourages him to sing. Hussain tells the narrator:

“Mouji has a great heart, you know,... she doesn’t let Abba scold me, takes it all on her, all the time, keeps talking to him, listening to him, because she thinks she is protecting me. She can’t sing herself, you know...”

Waheed 2011: 23

The narrator’s mother also is very anxious about the education of her son:

“Ma looked on and cooked and, almost every day, without fail, talked about my college.”

Waheed 2011:174

However, the oppressor has blocked even this route to freedom. Schools and colleges are most of the times closed.

Freedom is seen in masculinized perspective. It seems to have no relation to women. The freedom at the altar of which men are laying their lives is the freedom that men need. What is this freedom for women we are not told? What they think of this freedom if attained, we do not know. Women are silent. During the crackdown when the Governor is mumbling into the microphone, the narrator prays that the Governor and his gathering be attacked and killed by his militant friends so that he could walk free to his home. In this vision of freedom he sees only himself and his father but not his mother:

“I imagined the scene and derived pleasure from it—all these men with their grins and smiles, their condescending words and lofty speeches, dead,dead,dead!

...We’d walk free then. Baba and I, hand in hand perhaps, we’d walk free and go home.”

Waheed 2011:235

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