

CINEMA

Their War: Getting away from patriarchy and nationalism?

As a historical document and current cultural text -- in terms of breaking silences, filling in gaps and provoking discussion, 'Their War' is an invaluable and excellent addition to the archive on 1971, as well as on women's history, writes Dina M. Siddiqi

ALL histories are partial histories. I use the word partial here in two senses, incomplete as well as partisan. Master narratives of history tend to mirror the perspectives and interests of the powerful and dominant, often discounting, suppressing or erasing elements that don't fit into the dominant discourse. Histories of the nation are particularly susceptible to both kinds of partiality. National narratives also invariably invoke the bourgeois male individual as subject and hero. None of this will come as a surprise to most Bangladeshis, who continue to witness endless, bitter struggles over the nation's history. It is presumably in this context that the documentary 'Their War' was conceived. Produced and directed by journalist and social critic at large, Afsan Chowdhury, the film makes a concerted effort to move away from the nationalist and patriarchal paradigms that underpin most histories of the Liberation War. As the title indicates, it does so quite consciously, making a clear distinction between "our" (middle class, male-centred) histories and "their" (mostly poor, female) histories/struggles. The film's main subjects are subaltern women, who participated in a variety of ways in the Liberation War but whose stories have remained untold.

'Their War' uncovers many rich, fascinating and often heartrending stories. We hear from women who, at tremendous risk to themselves and to their families, surreptitiously delivered food to muktiyodhas, or smuggled arms from one place to another. One is reminded of the Algerian Revolution when women, especially in borkhas, smuggled bombs and messages through French army lines. Paradoxically, dominant images of women as limited to the domestic sphere and innocent of politics allow women to transgress boundaries closed to men. Such images confer protection even as they increase women's vulnerability. We hear from the women of the "widows village," where after a Pak army massacre only women and young children survived. These women, without immediate male protection, subse-

quently lost much of their property to distant relatives. Indigent rural women with few means for supporting themselves recount with pain and pride their sons leaving to join the muktiyuddho. An interesting dichotomy emerges between patriotism and family obligations, as the sons seem to have all begged forgiveness for abandoning their duties to their families in order to fight for their country. We are also reminded of wartime rapes and the subsequent fate of 'war babies' and their mothers.

The lives of these forgotten women are implicitly contrasted with those of male free-

dom fighters, who have been recognized by the state and by their own communities as real heroes, as Bir Bikram, Bir Protik, etc. We cannot help but concur with the filmmakers that these women are as much muktiyodhas as the men who fought the Pakistani army. By documenting these women's remembrances, 'Their War' offers us a multiple narrative of '71, one in which class was a major fracturing line. The film does not allow for a simplistic class analysis either it's striking how often the women interviewed invoked Mujib and never questioned the need to free the country from Pakistani domination. It raises difficult and

important issues about whose war it was, and what "Liberation" meant and continues to mean beyond bourgeois nationalist aspirations. These questions are woven together through the common experiences of women who lost their husbands, fathers, sons or brothers, or their "chastity."

Unlike many other recent documentaries on 1971, 'Their War' does not contain a formal narrative. Presumably this decision was taken to sidestep the nationalist/patriarchal framework and to allow the women to speak for themselves. In a novel move, the interviews with women are punctuated by discussions among the group of young filmmakers who assisted Afsan Chowdhury in the making of the documentary. This 'postmodern' approach to film making has several advantages. We see and hear the people involved in the conception of the film. We follow them as they traipse across the rural countryside, with their equipment and their entourage, in search of their subjects. We end up with a good sense of the filmmaking process.

After every set of interviews, we hear from this group of dedicated and talented young men and women, reflecting on their responses and their knowledge of the war, in discussion with the filmmaker. The drawback is that these dialogues can end up performing the same function as a formalized narrative, encouraging the viewer to think one way as opposed to another. This need not be negative but it does challenge the conceit of 'neutrality' inherent in the structure of the documentary.

As a feminist rendering of history, however, 'Their War' has certain limits. The women's recounting of their suffering is obviously real and present, but ultimately the emphasis on suffering as opposed to struggle and agency renders the women into somewhat passive victims. Making a more explicit connection with contemporary structures of patriarchal domination might have provided a more specific example of how a woman's war experiences and postwar struggles differ from that of men. For instance, it would have been



Bewa: At the 'widowed village' Shohagpur

interesting to hear more about the appropriation of land in the widows village or to hear more about the rejection of the "birangona" by their own communities. The film also subtly and not so subtly identifies womanhood with loss and pain, with keeping alive and holding on to pain. The effect is to romanticize women's emotions and their roles as nurturers, at the expense of their actions and struggles as gendered and classed humans in the political field. However, by raising these questions on patriarchy and nationalism, and opening them for discussion, 'Their War'

makes an invaluable contribution to the existing literature.

As a historical document and current cultural text -- in terms of breaking silences, filling in gaps and provoking discussion, 'Their War' is an invaluable and excellent addition to the archive on 1971, as well as on women's history.

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BOOK EXTRACT

Mapping a Karachi winter

It is 1987. Raheen, the narrator, and Karim, her closest friend, are in Rahim Yar Khan, a town in the Punjab, for the winter holidays, staying on lands belonging to their parents' friends, Laila and Asif. Raheen and Karim are thirteen, and in this section they start, for the first time, to wonder about their parents' history together - Karim's mother had originally been engaged to Raheen's father and Karim's father had been engaged to Raheen's mother. In the chapter preceding this one, Karim has just announced, much to Raheen's surprise, that when he grows up he wants to be a map-maker. This an extract from Kamila Shamsie's Kartography, forthcoming from Bloomsbury in June 2002

WE were without obsessions at the time, a rare occurrence in our lives. A few months earlier it had been birds. We became buyers of bird books, spouters of bird-facts ('the hummingbird eats 50 or 60 meals a day', 'the Gila woodpecker lives in the desert and never sees wood, only cactus'), imitators of bird-walks (moving through the world on our toes, heels in the air), though the fascination with feathered creatures was necessarily short-lived since all we could see in our gardens were crows and sparrows, and what's the point of being bird-obsessed if you can't bird watch. Prior to that, we'd filled our lives with disguises. We'd wander around with cotton balls lodged in our cheeks, sling towels across our shoulders under loose shirts, stick black paper over our teeth, and even collected hair clippings from Auntie Runty's beauty parlour and attempted to glue straight, long tresses to the ends of our own hair.

How each of our obsessions started, and how they ended, and who instigated their beginnings and ends we never remembered or cared about. But I cared deeply when Karim started pulling atlases out of Uncle Asif's bookshelf, the day after we arrived in Rahim Yar Khan, and traced distances and routes with his index finger, without any regard or concern for my total uninterest in the relationship of one place to another.

'You can't be a mapmaker anyway,' I said to him one morning when I found him in Uncle Asif's desk poring over a large map of Pakistan with creases where it had been folded

and re-folded into a neat rectangle. 'Because all the maps have been made already, right? What are you going to do? Discover a new continent and map it?' I hoisted myself onto the desk and sat down in the 'disputed territory' of Jammu and Kashmir. 'Better way to occupy yourself is to come outside and lose a game of badminton to me. Or we could walk to the dunes. Or leap around the cotton mountain.'

He took the glass of orange juice I held out to him, and gulped it down. Bits of pulp clung to the inside of the glass and to his upper lip. 'If you had to give someone directions to Zia's beach hut, what would you say?'

I looked out of the window. It was a beautiful day, winter sun beckoning us outside. 'I don't know. I'd say, go towards the beach, and when you come to the turtle sign take a right and...'

'No, idiot.' He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. 'How would you give directions to someone who didn't know the way to the beach. Maybe someone who'd left Karachi, years ago, and couldn't remember the way there any more.'

'Oh.' I considered this. 'Well, I'd just say, 'don't worry, we'll meet somewhere and go to the beach together.'

Karim glared at me. 'That's not helpful.' I glared back at him. 'There's something you need to know.'

'What?'

I lifted him up by the collar and slammed him against the chair back.

'You hate geography!'

'Yeah, so? Every map maker has his

quirks.'

I couldn't help laughing. 'Fine. By the way, map makers are called cartographers.'

'Cartographers.' He wrote down the word, forming a circle with the letters, and we both bent our heads over the paper.

'Go rap her carts,' I suggested, re-arranging letters in my head. 'Strap her cargo? Crop rag heart?'

Karim grinned. 'Chop Ra's garter Listen,' I said. 'We're adolescents. We're supposed to be rebellious for the sake of it. So if you just want something that has nothing to do with making linen, that's really fine and in keeping with this stage of life and all that. But there are more interesting options than latitudes and longitudes. How about flea-trainer? Or bear wrestler?'

'Bare wrestler? Please. Let's promise never to imagine each other naked. Oh sorry, no. Too late for that.'

'What?'

'I've seen your baby pictures.'

I crossed my arms and gave him one of my that-is-so-pre-teen looks, attempting an air of superiority, but he wagged his ears at me in return and I couldn't help laughing.

'Okay, but truthfully, Karim, what's so interesting about this stuff?' I picked up the atlas and placed it on his head; you'd never know how flat the top of his head was until you tried balancing something on it. 'I don't understand the fascination.'

He tilted his head forward and let the book fall onto the desk. 'It's like a giant jigsaw, the world. All these places connecting.' He opened to one of the first pages, where all the

continents were spread out. 'See - Pakistan connects to Iran which connects to Turkey which connects to Bulgaria which connects to Yugoslavia which connects to Austria which connects to France. But then there's the sea. And after that, England. It doesn't quite connect, England.' He stared gloomily at the page.

'But we like seas,' I reminded him, before either of us could start thinking about the increasing frequency of his father's threats to move the family to London. I traced a sea route with my finger from the coast of Karachi to Plymouth. 'If it were possible to walk on the seabed, we could step into the water at Baleji Beach and just start walking. And everyone would see us go, and we've wave back at them and we'd carry on waving at them and walking, even when we couldn't see them anymore and just knew they were there, and we'd walk and walk and walk, and never know when we crossed out of Karachi's water and were surrounded by some other country's seaweed. And then, look, all of a sudden, there's England. And maybe the sea's colder now, but it's still the sea, you know.'

But he wouldn't be drawn in to that vision of things. 'Even seas have boundaries,' he said. 'You'd be arrested by the coast guard.'

You?

'Can't turn everything into a game,' he muttered.

I swung my legs off the table, and shrugged. I wasn't going to let him see how much that stung. 'You started with the jigsaw puzzle.'

He pushed back his chair and stood up. 'True. Guilty. But may I say something in my

defence.'

'Nope. You are dismissed as incontinent, irreverent and immaterialistic.' I kicked his shin. 'Come on. Let's go and find a non-existent ghost.'

He saluted me, and all was forgiven. I never knew how to stay angry at Karim. We climbed out of the windows and wandered into the back lawn, past the slightly sagging badminton net and towards the ancient tree which dominated the garden, thin, ropey strands falling like veils from its outstretched limbs. A ghost lived in this tree. Ghosts appeared to live in almost all the old trees near and around the farm, but they smelled citydwellers' disbelief emanating from both of us, and hid in protest. The least amount of courtesy you should extend to someone is acknowledge that they exist, and Karim and I were horribly discourteous towards ghosts. The one in this tree was a nomad, but she'd stayed put in the tree all her afterlife. She had belonged to one of the nomadic tribes that passed through the sand dunes that bordered the farm - strange to look around Uncle Asif's land and consider that such a verdant place was reclaimed desert. The people of the town didn't mix with the nomads and whenever two peoples don't mix with each other it means Romeo and Juliet is about to happen. And so it was with the nomad girl and a boy from the village; they were in love, they swore they would die before they allowed themselves to be put asunder, and before the drama could develop further she died of pneumonia, which wasn't terribly romantic, and he married someone else,

which was worse, and she had been sulking in the tree in the back yard ever since. Or at least that was Uncle Asif's version of things.

'How long do they remain nomads?' Karim climbed from one branch to another until he was high enough to see the silver-grey dunes, less than a ten minute walk from where we were, on which the 'settled nomads' had built mud huts. 'They've been in one place for over twenty years now, Uncle Asif said. When do they stop getting called nomads?'

I put my arms around the tree trunk, and Karim clambered onto the branch growing out of the other side of the trunk and did the same. Treehuggers before we'd ever heard the term. The trunk so wide (or we so small?) that even the tips of our fingers didn't reach each other. The sun's rays were piercing through narrow gaps between the leaves, and it almost seemed possible to grasp a shaft of sunlight and wield it like a lightsabre. 'Luke, I am your father,' I rasped in my best Darth Vader impersonation. Karim jumped up from a branch, his feet leaving solidity, and hooked his arm over the branch above. I looked down. We weren't very high up, but high enough that you wouldn't want to slip. I looked down again. The branch I was standing on seemed narrower than I had thought. Narrower, and flimsier.

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BOOK REVIEW

From lyrics to poetry: The making of Javed Akhtar

Scion of a poetic family, Javed Akhtar hasn't quite inherited the gift. But still Quiver (HarperCollins) does signal Urdu poetry's first Post-modern voice, writes Zafar Agha

URDU-SPEAKING snobs had never rated Javed Akhtar as much of a poet. Nor did I, although I do not rate as a snob of serious consequence. Not only was he not a frontliner on his ownsome, he was also not a peer of great Urdu poets such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Ali Sardar Jafri or his own father, Jan Nisar Akhtar. Javed's lyrics written for Hindi films may have been hugely popular, but none of them had the class of Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, or even Gulzar. 'Ek, do, teen, char...' from the blockbuster movie Tezaab was hummed across the land and Javed even received a coveted Filmfare Award for it. But no connoisseur of poetry would elevate it to the stature of verse even worth remembering. That's quite an indictment, given that Urdu poetry is hard put not to become the stuff of total recall.

That, in essence, was Javed's first problem: people thought that his thudding lyrics would define the nature and quality of his poetry. As a poet, Javed was, therefore, dead before he had taken his first breath.

That is why, when his first collection of poems, Tarkash (Quiver), hit the stands in 1995, it was first critically ignored and then, when it became difficult to bypass such a beloved of the hoi polloi, critically panned. What saved his bacon was the uncanny ability of Urdu shairi to be rescued by its aural seductiveness, quality be damned. The collection was sold out in no time, and, in fact, ran into two more editions.

Often, the image overtakes the reality. After reading Quiver, the English translation of Tarkash by David Matthews, I realised that I was being unfair to Javed's poetic sensibilities. His greatness lies in another direction - a certain loveableness, so to say, a quality that suffuses his poetry. Today, his growing maturation is visible: his poetry shows sparks of gathering content and momentum into a great voice of the modern times. The second problem confronting Javed is that he is benchmarked

against poets difficult to equal, let alone beat: every Urdu critic worth his salt compares him with his father, Jan Nisar Akhtar, his father-in-law, Kaifi Azmi, and his maternal uncle and one of the greatest of modern Urdu poets, Majaz. Javed was never their pupil, in the true sense of the word, and he can never be their master.

Nevertheless, Tarkash has earned Javed a place as a Post-Modern literary figure - a first in Urdu poetry. He stands virtually alone at the crossroads, tuned to the exigencies of transition from the security of a feudal existence to the angst and summary uprooting that has come in the wake of industrialism and metropolitanism. Javed has experienced this transition firsthand - he left a protected childhood in the feudal miasma of Lucknow, struggled through a relatively radical period in Aligarh and Bhopal, and finally landed up in Bombay (Mumbai), where he encountered a world that he immediately saw as teetering on the edge of subhuman, a world that he went on to conquer and then become an indivisible part of. It is this difficult journey between two polar opposite value systems that Javed has internalised and expresses through his poems. These are the two worlds that he so vividly talks about in his poem *I Remember That Room*:
*Whenever
I was scorched by the burning sun of life,
Whenever
I grew tired of my own lies and the lies of others,
Fighting with everyone, losing against myself, I used to go into that room.
That one room with its light and dark brown colours,
That room, kind beyond all bounds, which used to tuck me up in its soft sleep
As a mother*

*Might hide a child in the folds of her dress,
Scolding with love:
'Now what a way to go on!
Wandering about in the midday sun!
I remember that room, that heavy, solid wooden door,*

*Hard to pull open
As if a stern father
In his rugged breast
Had hidden an ocean of tenderness...
This is the world of swathed comfort from where Javed started - secure and solid within the four walls of a home that teemed with protective parental imageries. The poem ends with:
The house where I live now
Is very, very fine
But often I sit here in silence and remember
How that room would talk to me.*

Yes, it is a fine modern house - but it is lonely. It offers none of the security and tranquillity of the old feudal world; it is a room that is silent and cold - not tranquil but glacial.

*Millions of faces
And following them
Millions of faces.
Are these streets of hornets' nests?*

*The earth is covered with bodies.
No place to walk, no room to squeeze by.*

*I look at this and think
That I might as well remain
Rooted where I am.*

*But what can I do?
Because I know
That if I stop,
The crowd behind me
Will trample me under its feet and crush me.*

*So now I walk,
Under my own feet is
Someone's chest,
Someone's arm,
Someone's face.*

*If I walk on,
I shall oppress others.
If I stop,
I shall suffer oppression.*

*My conscience!
You are so proud of your sense of justice
So tell me:
What decision have you reached today?*

This is the voice of a politically aware litterateur, haunted by the fact that it is just altitude that divides the oppressor from the oppressed, an interface so thin that only conscience can bridge it.