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Review of Broken Memory, Shining Dust: Loss and Hope in the Land of Disappeared by Nilosree Biswas

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Film Reviews



Broken Memory, Shining Dust: Loss and Hope in the Land of Disappeared.

Nilosree Biswas. India. April 2012.
34 minutes. English & Urdu.

Reviewed by Inshah Malik.

An unlettered woman named Parveena Ahangar from a lower-middle class background in downtown Srinagar has undertaken a relentless struggle against the state practice of enforced disappearance of young Kashmiri men. Motivated by the sudden disappearance of her own young son, Javed, in the wake of a militant uprising in Kashmir against Indians in the early 1990s, she has gradually become a global icon for her daring documentation of human rights violations. In 2003 Ahangar was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and she was awarded the Rafto Prize in 2017 for her remarkable human rights work.

Nilosree Biswas, an Indian documentary filmmaker and a writer based in Mumbai, presents a fascinating portrait of Ahangar, her comrades, and their work in the

documentary *Broken Memory, Shining Dust*. In 2012, the film was selected to be screened at Court Mètrage, Short Film Corner, which is a part of Festival De Cannes that provides a meeting place for professional film makers from all over the world to present and discuss their short films. In the same year, it was also shortlisted for the Rome Independent Film Festival Awards. Additionally, the film is archived at the Academy of Motion Pictures at the Oscar Library.

Broken Memory, Shining Dust progresses like a song that leaves its lyrics on your mind long after it has faded away from the public memory. The film attempts to frame the complex intertwining of power and tragedy by documenting the tragic and powerful lives of Kashmiri women. To convey this dynamic to a Western audience, the film uses verse to weave together visual and narrative material to cater to their affective sense. The use of poetry in this way does two things at the same time: it both embraces and evades the political. We see Kashmir and we identify with it through its human fragility and tragedy without hearing a word about how Kashmir arrived at its current moment or its political context. It seems like an important strategy to evade the curbs and limitations of a dangerous political space. The voice of Heeba Shah recites the verses of a Chilean poet Pablo Neruda: “Things are broken at home, like they were pushed by an invisible, deliberate smasher...”. Shah’s voice is aloof, untouched, and distant from the

images on the screen, as if this is a deliberate reluctance to touch the madness that led to the tragedy in the first place or is an attempt to make invisible that which needs to be seen. Through use of poetry, the film tries to hold our affective attention.

In the opening scene, the film weaves images of Kashmiri life through a sequence of visuals juxtaposed with sound, contrasted between idealism and realism, the ordinariness of danger and the dangerousness of an ordinary life under those circumstances. A conversation ensues between lakes and mountains, abandoned carts and deserted streets, and a child’s eye meets the camera’s lens as if pointing to only that one looming threat. The threat is somehow embodied in the visuals of army bunkers and lull of deserted houses. The film procures Neruda’s verses again to inform us: “Life goes on...,” even under such debilitating circumstances of everyday violence where missing one’s death is only a matter of chance. It forms an introduction to the rest of film, showing how tragedy-struck people find meaning and purpose to continue living. We are shown the complexity of living under a military occupation in recognizable ways without the film presenting us with a rational or political understanding of what that military occupation entails. This helps the viewer to *feel* how it is to live under such circumstances.

Kashmiri women wait for their disappeared kin, grappling with social patriarchy and fighting a

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Inshah Malik on *Broken Memory, Shining Dust*

political fight necessitated by their circumstances. The film conveys the passion of Kashmiri women when a heaving pain is caused by separation from their loved ones who are subjected to enforced disappearance. Using Hafez Shirazi's verse "...Because of separation, in my eye there is a thorn... Beyond what is enough for you there is another task," the film asks what keeps the body from breaking under circumstances of lethal agony. That's when pain turns to faith to find solace and then becomes a habitual insistence, as expressed in Rilke's verse, "...And if you set this brain of mine afire, then on my blood-stream I yet will carry you." It is here the director shows us how Kashmiri women fight a relentless battle, patiently hoping, as we are told through invoking Rilke again: "It is hope and a half, too much and too less at once." Suddenly, there is familiarity with this pain as it forms into cyclical surges of insistence, the missing lover or son, the pain of not knowing, the urge to want to know and the devastating death of hope. It consolidates so beautifully in Lale Ded's poem as it appears against the backdrop of the Dal Lake: "...Seven times I saw the lake vanishing in the void, I remember having seen in former lives, through eons of time, these dissolutions of worlds and their rebirth."

It is not anger that makes Ahangar and her band of women fight a relentless twenty-years-old battle. The familiarity of the cycle of pain translates into assuring words of

by Ahangar as she sits poised at her office "How can I ever let go? I can never let go!" It's the only thing that has permanence in these lives that are devastated otherwise by an uncertain existence.

Broken Memory, Shining Dust is a must watch documentary film for those interested in understanding Kashmiri subjectivity and bearing witness to this powerful struggle of Kashmiri women against a brutal political occupation.

Inshah Malik is a Kashmiri scholar, writer, and a poet based out of Tehran. Her first monograph entitled Muslim Women, Agency, and Resistance Politics in Kashmir (under contract with Palgrave Macmillan) is due out in 2018.