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The Truth of Testimony: A Reading of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to study the notion of testimony, particularly found in Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* as one of the leading voices in the field of Partition testimonies of survivors. Testimony is generally regarded as the narration of the genuine experience of the people who have undergone a certain event at a point of time in their life. But it should be taken into account that the testimony of a person is a mediated form of narration of the events and thus the 'truth' of testimony needs to be examined. Thus, in this paper the notion of testimony found in Butalia's book in the context of Partition has been analyzed using certain theoretical framework from the field of Holocaust testimonies.

Keywords: Partition, testimony, trauma, witness

The word 'testimony' normally brings to our mind the legal institution and with it the structural set up of a courtroom where a witness has to stand in a witness box to give testimony under the oath of telling the truth and nothing but the truth. In the courtroom scenario, many factors can alter or have an effect on the testimony that the witness will provide and thus the figure of the witness is a very important one in the whole process. In the legal scenario, the whole essence of the procedure is to know the truth from the witness which would then help the judgment of the case which is on trial in the courtroom. This brings to mind the following comment of Shoshana Felman:

To bear witness is to take responsibility for truth: to speak, implicitly, from within the legal pledge and the juridical imperative of the witness's oath. To testify--- before a court of Law or before the court of history and of the future; to testify, likewise, before an audience of readers or spectators---, is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. Memory is conjured here essentially in order to address another, to impress upon a listener, to appeal to a community. To testify is always, metaphorically, to take the witness's stand. (2)

But standing in the first half of the twenty-first century we can look back towards the many disasters that have taken place in the last century--- like the Holocaust, the Partition of India, the

Bosnian war, the conflict between Palestine and Israel and then the utterance of the word 'testimony' brings to mind the phenomenon of bearing witness to the trauma that the people had faced during these disastrous events. Though these disasters might have had different reasons and agendas behind them, one thing that they had in common was that they created havoc in the lives of people and left death, disaster, fear and trauma to come to terms with. The fear and trauma have been such that they have created a deep-seated impact on the mind of the people and have scarred the memory of those who have survived the atrocities of these events. The survivor's carry within them a painful amount of memory of what they had to face, what their near and dear ones had to face and the guilt of a survivor never seems to leave them. Thus in this scenario, when they talk about their experiences to a person who is willing to hear and to record their testimonies, there is an opportunity to let go of these traumatic memories and lighten their burden of the traumatic memories. "[T]estimony [. . .] bring[s] one into an immediate and compelling contact with those who have been degraded, suffocated, victimized. The text is the voice of one who would witness for the sake of another who remains voiceless even as he or she is witnessed".(qtd. in Cubilie and Good 2) But this is a commonsensical understanding of what testimony is and how it helps the victims and survivors of disasters to decrease the burden from their minds.

This commonsensical understanding of testimony needs to be questioned. Further some issues about the role of the person who is being witness to the testimony or in other words the role of the interviewer, the atmosphere in which the testimony is being taken and other factors which might have an impact on the person who is giving the testimony need to be examined. Just as in the legal scenario, certain factors can alter the testimony given by the witness as has been mentioned above; in the process of recording the testimony these factors can also create an impact on the person concerned. Moreover, the relationship between the testifier and the readers or the audience of the testimony needs to be taken into account when the testimony is recorded in written, audio or video form. The role of the interviewer thus becomes very important because he or she will be the one who will record the testimonies and then present it to the readers or audience. What needs to be carefully considered is the way in which the testimonies are presented to the readers or audience especially, how far the testimonies have (not) been edited. Thus the politics of the interviewer in the process has to be taken into account as most of the people who give testimony have already been through a lot in their life; it is the responsibility of the interviewer to present their testimony in an ethical manner. Whether or not they can share their burden by testifying is altogether a different issue as there would be many events that might not be easy to share with anyone and even the testifiers might mold their memories into something which would be less hurtful for him or her to remember. The role of the interviewer again becomes very important as he or she needs to read into certain moments of silences as the kind of testimony that we are talking about deal with traumatic incidents and such incidents have an altogether different effect on one's memory. Since memory is an integral part of the process of testimony and it can play many tricks, testimony which will be provided after experiencing trauma needs to be recorded carefully, the questions which would be put to the testifier should be

carefully framed and even the readers who are twice removed from the testifier need to be responsible readers and if required sieve through the editorial layer and reach the essence of the testimony.

In this regard, the focus of the present paper is on *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* written by Urvashi Butalia. The book brings together testimonies of the people who have suffered during the mindless riots that tore the country at the time of the independence of India. Like the Holocaust, it was not an openly state-sponsored event but the general opinion is that the British people took the ultimate revenge by dividing the nation into two parts and creating the ultimate rift by taking refuge to the most sensitive issue in the minds of people, that is, “religion”. But the saddest part in the history of India is that there is a conscious attempt on the part of the official narrative of the country to erase the memory of Partition from the collective memory. Unlike the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, nowhere in India is found a site which bears witness to the thousands of life that was lost during the partition of the country. Rather the history of the country portrays its moment of independence as one full of fanfare and happiness and as a new beginning and in such a portrayal what is buried beneath the facade of a new beginning is the helpless cries of the people who died or lost their friends and families and bore the brunt of the mindless havoc that created a huge disturbance in their lives. Thus such books as Butalia’s have brought forward those voices from behind the shroud of silence. Though the book deals with the voices of women, children, the people from the margin, it specially focuses on giving voice to the women of the country because they were the ones who were the worst sufferers during the Partition riots and were raped, abducted, killed, branded with nationalist slogans and so on. And what is worse is that they were not all the time killed by people from the other religion but they were also killed by the members of their own family at times. The family members go on to valourize the death of the women of their family and justify their ‘murder’ by saying that they did so in order to save the honour of the women as well as the honour of the family. Since the honour of the family rested on the shoulders or rather the ‘body’ of the women, they had to remain pure and that could be done if it could be ensured that they were dead before they were abducted or raped. The women who chose to kill themselves were even hailed as martyrs and their gained a certain status in society in terms of courage and honour and the families from which women were abducted or lost were somewhat poor in terms of the currency of honour. Thus the testimony of the women who survived the atrocities of the Partition riots is worth looking into and what is of interest is that not much work have been done on the nature of these testimonies¹. In most works on the Partition of India, these books are looked upon as gendered readings of Partition and said to have brought forward true stories of the women but there has been no attempt to look into the role that the writers of the book and in these cases also the interviewers or collectors of interviews have played. So by taking recourse to certain

¹ Another work of similar nature as of Butalia is *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin which was also published in 1998 by Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

theoretical formulations on the testimonies of Holocaust, Israel-Palestine conflict and other traumatic event victims, the issues raised above will be discussed keeping in mind Butalia's work on the victims of the Partition of India. These formulations might help in starting to look into the nature of the testimonies of the victims of India's partition.

Since trauma is most intricately bound to the nature of events that we are talking about, it is but inevitable that the psychologists and psychiatrists would have a role to play. There is even a clinical process of therapy known as the 'testimony method' that is used in the clinical therapy of trauma victims who have suffered political violence. The 'trauma story' of the victims is drawn out of them through conducting many sessions and these are transcribed or recorded in form of audio tapes which the victims can keep if they wish to and are then "disseminated into the wider social and political arena" with a "degree of coordination toward producing a specific narrative form and a written document". (McKinney 1-2) And thus "trauma appears less as a clinical category than as a political argument" and "the witness has become a key figure of our time, whether as the survivor testifying to what he has lived through or as the third party telling what he has seen or heard". (Fassin 25) Thus if the atmosphere of clinical psychotherapy can also be brought into the domain of creation of a kind of discourse with the testimonies that they record from the victims, then it is legitimate to question the kind of discourse that is formed when scholars or academicians conduct and collect interviews from the victims and witnesses of trauma.

Didier Fassin has included Emile Benveniste's formulation on the two Latin words for 'witness' which are '*testis*' and '*superstes*'. '*Testis*' means the person who has been a witness to the events that have happened around him or her but has not experienced any atrocity and '*superstes*' is the one who has lived through the atrocities of the violent times. (Fassin 5) This formulation is useful while talking about the testimonies that are present in the book by Butalia. The testimony of one woman which Butalia has included in all its details in her book is that of Damayanti Sahgal and Butalia has also mentioned the work of Anis Kidwai which is in the form of a memoir and which records the atrocities done to women during the havoc of partition and also during the recovery operation in which Kidwai was actively involved. As Butalia herself mentions that she was unable to talk to women who had been victims of rape or abduction (354), it was through the testimony of Damyanti Sahgal that she had to record the plight of the women. Anis Kidwai was one who lost her husband in the Partition riots (148) and she can be taken to be the '*testis*' whose life had been affected by atrocities that had happened around her.

But the testimony of Damyanti Sahgal is one which needs closer scrutiny because in her, we can see the figure of the '*superstes*' when she talks about the difficulties she herself faced during the riots and also the figure of the '*testis*' when she talks about the experiences of others around her. Thus a survivor of a traumatic event is witness to the atrocities around and also to the atrocities that fell upon him or her. When Butalia first met Sahgal in 1989, she was eighty years old (109) and thus almost four decades had passed since the Partition of India and the testimony she gave was of a memory which was that old. Thus there is a considerable gap of time between the time

of witnessing and the time of testifying and in this gap of time, many memories might have been altered or 'saved' in her mind in a different way. It is interesting to note that in the testimony of Sahgal, we get to know about the difficulties she herself had felt during the maddening times of Partition and later she moves on to account for the lives and stories of other women whom she worked with as a recovering agent. But at certain point in the testimony, some questions can arise in the mind of the readers--- if, for example, Sahgal was giving vent to everything that had happened to her or whether there were certain things that she was hiding. An important aspect that needs to be noticed is the setting in which the process of interviewing was taking place--- Sahgal's sister Kamla Buldoon Dhingra and niece Lina Dhingra were present and the interview was taking place in Butalia's house. Though the interview went on for many months in which Butalia and her co-interviewer Sudesh Vaid formed a certain 'friendship' with Sahgal (111), the point that the presence of family members could have affected certain part of the remembrance ritual cannot be ignored. Sahgal talks about several days when she had travelled alone without any money and food and sustained herself by the help of kind strangers on the way. She talks about the imminent cases of violence which she had witnessed around her but does not speak about any incident that happened to her except for the hardships that she faced on the road due to lack of money. But an interesting bit of broken conversation that takes place between Sahgal and her sister Kamla bears witness to the fact that Sahgal strictly wanted to drive home the point that nothing 'wrong' had happened to her. Sahgal insists that she had come away alone. When Kamla, her sister, wants to say something like "No, I mean we thought..." Sahgal stops her in the middle of the sentence and says: "Never, never..." (120). Further Sahgal had never shared the details of her experiences during the Partition with her sister. This denial can be superficially seen as Sahgal trying to reiterate that she came alone but then it can also be seen as Sahgal's subconscious effort to demolish any kind of doubt about how she came away or whom she came away with.

Moreover the 'friendship' formed between the recorder of the testimony and the testifier then brings the question of objectivity into the scenario but Butalia has herself mentioned that this was a project that she was too personally involved in and there was no way in which she could call it objective. In this regard, Butalia says, "One of the things that troubled me enormously when I began was precisely the lack of what is known as objectivity in my work. There was no way I could deny a personal involvement; no way I could pretend that there wasn't an emotional entanglement; no way I could wipe out my politics (20)" and thus "[t]his is a personal history that does not pretend to be objective" (21). But the question that arises is that if the interviewer is so emotionally entangled in the recording of testimonies, then would that not affect the way in which she will 'listen' and 'record' them?

Thus the structure of the testimonies in this book should be taken into consideration. Butalia writes that:

In presenting the interviews to the reader, I have taken the liberty of narrativizing them--- that is, I have removed the questions posed by the interviewers, and have let the text run as one continuous narrative. Although no chronological alterations have been made... This shaping of the interviews to turn them into more 'readable' texts has been done quite consciously. I do not believe that the transcript of any interview can ever be an unmediated text. In transferring words to text, so much is lost: the particular inflection, the hesitation over certain thoughts and phrases, even certain feelings, the body language, which often tells a different story from the words, and indeed the conscious shaping of the interview by the interviewer who is usually in a situation of power vis-à-vis the person being interviewed. (15)

Butalia insists on making the interviews more 'readable' and since she does not follow any "particular pattern in the interviews" and there is "no fixed questionnaire" (23), she does not see any reason to make the questions available to the readers. So Butalia wants the interviews to flow in whichever direction they want to flow. But it is not entirely true that Butalia did not somehow control the 'flow' of these 'narratives' by asking questions. While talking about the silence about the rape and abduction of women, Butalia writes, "Were these deliberate erasures or could it be that I had asked the wrong questions? (133)" The questions that were asked by Butalia differed on the basis of the nature of respondents and the kind of response she was willing to elicit.

Butalia knew that the "history of Partition was a history of deep violation--- physical and mental-- for women" (131) and that she had to listen to "their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances" (126). These silences are thus an integral part of the testimonies of women that Butalia collected. Michael Nutkiewicz talks about the presence of a public and a private space in oral testimony in regard to the testimonies of Holocaust. Generally rape, torture or any kind of sexual assault "occur in secret and in the very space (the family, the bed-room) that is usually considered secure and nurturing. The common 'stick up' happens in the back alley away from as many eyes as possible. Even torture inflicted by repressive governments usually takes place in prisons or special chambers that are inaccessible to all but the tormentors". But in case of the Holocaust, the Jewish people were assaulted in the public space and thus it was the assault to the Jewish community as a whole. (Nutmiewicz 4-5) The rape and sexual assault of the women during Partition also took place in the public space and thus the boundaries of what should be public and private gets blurred in such cases. This does not mean that the sexual violence that takes place behind closed doors is easy for the women to talk about, it is equally difficult but what complicates the matter in case of the victims of sexual violence during Partition is that the boundaries between public and a private space gets muddled up which leads to long-bearing silences which Butalia has encountered.

What is interesting to note as it has been mentioned before is that by insisting on the 'readability' of the interviews, Butalia brings in a narrative style into her book. Thus the comment made about Holocaust survivor testimony by Michael Nutkiewicz that "some people will treat the story as

literature and utilize the tools of literary analysis to examine the narrative; others will listen to the story for its message; still others will use the story--- or part of it--- to make a point” (Natkiewicz 18) can help in understanding the reason of Butalia’s way of narrating the testimonies in her book. Butalia is aware of the problems that she would face because what she was working with was memory and memory could never be ‘pure’ and ‘unmediated’ and “so much depends on who remembers, when, with whom, indeed to whom, and how” (10). And she thinks that even though these remembrances cannot be taken to be ‘facts of history’, they can be taken to be interpretations of the same event by a certain individual (10). Thus when an element of interpretation is inserted in the process of testifying, the question of the nature of the narrative of testimony as ‘literature’ seeps in. In such a context, it is important to take into account Jacques Derrida’s comment,

... there is no testimony that structurally does not imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury--- that is to say, the possibility of literature... If this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted”. (Blanchot and Derrida 29-30)

Thus, in testimony, there is always this uncertainty of not being the whole truth and containing many silences shrouded within it and it can open up possibilities to read the testimonies as literature. Butalia by narrativizing the testimonies has opened up a way of doing so.

Butalia is aware of this aspect of the oral testimonies where there is no way of knowing whether what people say is the truth or not. The questions that she herself raises are: “How can we know that, four to five decades after the event, the stories are not simply rehearsed performances; or that they are told differently for different people, perhaps tailored to suit what the person thinks the interviewer wishes to hear? How do we reach beyond the stories into the silences they hide; how can we assume that speech, the breaking of silence, is in itself a good thing? (12)” A succinct answer to all these questions can be what Giorgio Agamben says about testimonies: “testimony is of value essentially by virtue of what is missing from it”. (qtd. in Fassin 6) Thus Butalia’s awareness of the silence that shrouds testimony can be said to be the essence of testimony itself. Butalia’s narrative method of explaining the testimonies at certain points and inserting certain factual data from official records, diaries and even incorporating other oral narratives can be said to somewhat analyze what is “unavailable to the witness and certainly invisible to representation”. (Bernard-Donals 3) Butalia says in the beginning of the book that : “I do not wish here to carry out a literal exercise of first seeing how people remember the history of Partition, and then attempting to penetrate their narrative for its underlying facts to arrive at an approximation of some kind of ‘truth’. Instead, I wish to look at the memories for themselves--- even if they are shifting, changing and unreliable. (13)” But this argument is not quite convincing when she talks about the silence about the rape and abduction of women and going

back to her interviews and analyzing them to see if she had missed anything in them. So Butalia tries to find these 'cracks' in the narratives and wants to look beyond the silence of the testimonies and so her role does not remain limited to being the collector of testimonies, she also becomes the analyzer of these testimonies. The question that can come to mind here is whether or not Butalia herself is engaging with the text of the testimonies as 'literature' and interpreting them in ways which seem fit to her and which seem justifiable to her due to her personal reasons. This may seem to be taking away agency from the readers of the testimonies to read them in their preferred way but as Butalia has mentioned that her book is not an objective one but a 'personal' one, it saves her from this criticism. Butalia's book then has to be read keeping one thought at the back of one's mind that this book will contain the personal thoughts and feelings of the author and the collector of the testimonies and the readers have to deal with the thoughts and feelings of the interviewer and also those of the testifiers.

Even though the role that Butalia plays conform to that of an oral historian who "does not merely transcribe speech but uncovers and engages the various dialogues within the testimony" (Nutmiewicz 4), this is not an unproblematic position to take. The question that may arise at this point is that to what extent should the silences of the women or the person who is being interviewed be respected so as not to seem exploitative or violent to their privacy of memory and where should the limiting line be drawn so as not to make "the human subject you are researching become simply a provider of information, the 'informant', devoid of feelings of her own, but important for your work" (131). So the decision that Butalia reaches of talking to "only those women who wanted to talk about it" (131). Such an ethical decision gives her work the humanistic edge which is required in such projects.

Testimony is thus such a medium which has many conflicts within itself--- there is the "struggle to forget and remain silent, and the need to tell and to memorialize". (Nutmiewicz 4) This is evident by the questions that the people asked Butalia when she went to them to talk about their memories of Partition: "[W]hat do you think this will achieve, who do you think will listen to your tapes, will this really make a difference to anything, to our lives, the lives of others" (24) but when they decided to talk, "they would do so cathartically, making you, as listener, the bearer of their burden" (25). Not only the interviewer but also the readers in some way become bearers of that burden and it is this therapeutic function of testimony which says that the sharing of the traumatic memories would help the victims or survivors to forget or at least lessen the burden of those memories.

The testimony of those who were the perpetrators of the heinous crimes against women that took place or the male members of the family who themselves killed the women as they were the bearers of the honour of the family should also be taken into account. Though Butalia's book does not contain the testimony of such men, it contains the testimony of Bir Bahadur Singh who is the witness of killing of his sisters by his own father. (219). In the video which is available on

YouTube² Bir Bahadur talks about that particular incident, he breaks down into tears before narrating this particular incident. But then he goes on to emphasize the courage and valour of the women as they accept death over being ‘violated’ by the men of the other religion. In all this, Bir Bahadur sees his father as a victim and not the perpetrator of the crime of murder. Even in the legal scenario, the perpetrators of the crime are given a chance to testify and narrate their version of the incident but the innumerable murders that had taken place during the Partition did not see the light of any trial and it is people like Bir Bahadur Singh whose testimony can be taken as the closest of being the testimony of the perpetrator of the crime. So, the person who had witnessed the crime which took place against women also gets the chance of testify and lessen his burden. Thus Butalia’s book includes the testimony of the victims and also the bystanders of Partition violence. The men may also have been the victim of violence but their attempt to kill the women of their family with their own hands makes them the perpetrator of the crime of murder.

Thus testimony can be seen to be one method of bearing witness to traumatic incidents which is full of complexities. As the Holocaust was a state-sponsored crime, the power dynamics between the perpetrator of the crime and the victims was somewhat defined. But in case of the Partition of India where people do not know whom to blame in the chaotic incidents that took place, it is difficult to chart out the scenario where the victim and the victimizer can be clearly identified. In one situation while one was a victimizer, in another scenario that same person could have been the victim. While the men killed the women of their families, they themselves might have been killed in the next moment. So the testimonies of the Partition of India are so ambivalent that it is difficult to place them distinctively within the realm of testimony of the victim-survivor or the testimony of the perpetrator-survivor. Thus testimonies cannot always be taken as the complete ‘truth’ about the event only because it is based on the memory of the first-hand experiences of the survivors of the event. But the achievement of Butalia’s work lies in the fact that it helps in filling the gaps in the official narrative of Partition by voicing the plight of the common people, especially the women.

² Sunnybondsingn84. “How Sikhs saved their women from Muslim Mobs during Partition of 1947”. *Youtube*, 26 Dec. 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WQtUYv1_-s.

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