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The Invisible Wall Between: Women and Shared Experience in *The Other Side of Silence*

Sethuparvathy. S
MA Student,
Department of English,
Pondicherry University.

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Abstract:

The Other Side of Silence written by Urvashi Butalia, details the stories of the women who were stuck on both sides of the invisible wall that was built by the boundary between India and Pakistan after partition and whose stories have been forgotten by history. The study aims at understanding how and why women's voices were often silenced or marginalized in history, especially in the case of the Indian partition. It then focuses on the rise of the need for different story-collecting strategies. The paper will also discuss how the state interferes in the agency of women, sometimes rendering them powerless.

Keywords: History, Women, Partition, Violence, Voice.

Introduction

The Indian partition and its horrors stand separate from the legacy of the non-violent struggles for the freedom of the nation. The biggest convulsions in history concerning the number of people who lost their homes, countries, and identities, have never been higher in any other case, than in the partition of India. The mass murder that took place also left thousands of women subjected to atrocities on both sides of the boundary of the newly formed country.

Post-colonial studies until now, mainly focus on the Indian side of the boundary and what happened to the country. Indian researchers and critiques have also to date, focused on the community and what the males in these communities had to go through. Often, what the society had to face has been described from the male point of view in public forums and that is the story that is popularly told. The partition has reemerged as an important topic in the discourse of South Asian Studies and war narratives; in anthropological and historical disciplines. The importance is

often given to individual stories and memories of people who suffered on both sides of the boundary of the newly formed countries. It is in this context that *The Other Side of Silence* written by Urvashi Butalia emerges as a feminist narrative that wishes to give voice to the sect of the community that has been silenced in history, which in this case, is the group of women. It approaches history from an angle of a personal narrative of the women that had to face various atrocities during the partition of the country. The oral accounts that the book presents act like testimonies that help in historicizing and challenging the political identities that have been marked in contemporary nationalist discourse and have been ethnicized and gendered. It details the stories of the sisters who were stuck on both sides of the invisible wall that was built and how they have fared in the post-colonial times and the chronicles and stories of partition which were never spoken of. The book brings to light the stories of those who were forgotten by historians, especially that of women.

Partition and the Recovery Mission

The extent of the abduction and rapes of women that happened during the partition and the rescue operations carried out by the Indian government are the major areas of concern in the text. Butalia attempts to find out the reason why some of these women chose not to participate in the rescue mission, by staying with their newly formed families. She also tries to shed some light on what happened to the children of these abducted women. But the women mentioned here are not the patriarchal continuity of national territoriality and the communal mode of power that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak often mentions (Daiya 231). Instead, these women figures disturb the continuity and mobilization of the nation and the patriarchal community. Their discontinuation is marked through their insistent, intentional otherness in civil society.

The men on both sides of the boundary during the time of partition believed that their honour was vested in the purity of their women and the protection of the 'motherland'. In critical conditions, the responsibility of this honour made any unreasonable crime they committed justifiable, like men slitting the throats of their daughters to protect them from getting raped and families rejecting rescued 'tainted' women.

Meanwhile, in a letter written to the then governor of Punjab Evan Jenkins, the first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru stated that more attention should be given to the rescue

operations of the women who were forcibly abducted or converted. The letter portrays women as 'victims' and 'objects' of religious communities as well as the colonial state and it does not give any voice or agency to the needs and desires of these 'abducted' women who represented the 'ones to be rescued'. This act of the government and its leaders points to the question of the agency of women to make decisions for themselves. It presupposes that the decision of the state is the best for women. This becomes one of the important messages in *The Other Side of Silence* when talking about why in the history of partition women do not have a voice and why they cease to exist, just because they were considered as 'property' and not 'human'.

Nehru's position can be read along with the argument put forward by Mitchell, that women are considered as objects of transactions (qtd. In Nayar 103) that belongs to a particular nation or community. This idea then makes the need for these 'objects' to be returned rightfully to their owners, concrete. When the husbands or the families of the rescued women didn't welcome them back, the government took to other means of rehabilitating them. During the rescue mission, it was found that most of the women were either pregnant or had had children. But since these children were born of a mixed union and were a constant reminder of violation and the fact that she had had sex with a man from a different religion, women had no choice but to choose between their children and their old families (Butalia 161). To those who couldn't choose either, there were ashrams built to live with their children. Gandhi Vanita Ashram in Jalandhar was one such ashram that was built on a graveyard that belonged to Muslims. The latter part of the lives of these women who were predominantly Hindus and Sikhs were built on the bodies of the dead of the 'supposed' enemies (Butalia 163). Some of these residential homes that survive, like the Gandhi Vanita Ashram, still house some of the 'rescued' women. It is a personal tragedy, but - the authors insist - out of it some new resolve has arisen. 'Every single one of the widows we spoke to in the [Ashrams] had ensured that her daughters were educated and earning. This itself constituted a definite break with the past and was one of Partition's many ironies' (Whitehead 311). Partition, in a different sense, opened new doors for women, because so many had no option but to work outside the home to sustain themselves and their families, and the others broke the bounds of the convention to serve as social workers and help beleaguered women.

Feminism's theoretical stance is that the inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not preordained but created by men so that they retain power (Nayar 83). In this case, too, men have taken up the responsibility of making the decision for women, for if the abducted woman decides to stay with her abductor and create a family of her own, then it is the man's honour and pride that gets destroyed. Hence here, gender roles are pre-determined and the woman is trained to fit into those roles. This is the cause of the extent of the lack of agency women experience.

Honour and 'Double Colonization'

The men on both sides of the boundary feared that their powerlessness would be exposed once it was proved that they could not protect their women. Critics have often talked about considering women as the 'other' of men and how much a woman depends on a man. But the fact that the power and powerlessness of a man depend upon a woman is never acknowledged. To overcome the powerlessness that they felt, men resorted to various ways, including initiating a mass murder to avenge their lost pride.

In the chapter "Honour" of the book, survivors from Sikh villages, both women and men, proudly recount the 'martyrdom' of their women. Their memories of mass suicide and the killing of daughters, wives, mothers, and sisters reveal the fate of many women across India and Pakistan and how their deaths have been trivialized as a mere consequence of the men's fight for the protection of their honour.

It is here the notion of 'double colonization' comes into play. This concept refers to the suppression by two authorities at the same time. Here, the women were under the suppression of patriarchy as well as the nation-state. Interestingly, when women who were rescued from abductors faced rejection after their chastity was questioned, they broke out of this doubly colonized identity having found new opportunities to build their own lives. But, the question of whether they had the resources to make use of this opportunity in its right way remained.

Memory and Body

The nature of the memory presented in *The Other Side of Silence* is collective, as it spans over and works upon the reminiscences collected from various women who lived through the

riots. In *The Other Side of Silence*, Butalia opines that there is a contradiction in the way people relate to their history, at least that of the partition- “In the history we knew, we had learned, and the history that people remembered” (Butalia 350). In the entire narrative, this is what Butalia does, she juxtaposes emotional memory with that of factual memory of the partition.

Radical feminism states that women acquire their true identity when they have control over their minds and bodies. Women lack subjectivity because they are always considered as the ‘other’ of the man. When they broke out from the shackles of the ‘double colonization’ that they were under, they gained control over their bodies and minds which lead to the development of their true subjectivities. Radical feminism also sees all women as linked by patriarchal oppression and hence treats them as a ‘collective subjective’. It created ‘sisterhood’ as the code for the shared oppression women faced. The woman’s body was central within this discourse because it was the body that suffered. The questioning of their purity and the rejection from their families arose with the woman’s body as the central subject. With these ideologies in view, she was considered impure once she was abducted. Therefore, though women did not have their subjectivity they were always objectified and never were given a voice. Their desires and interests were given no importance and were always ignored. Even after the abduction, though she was out of her patriarchal construct she still lacked a voice for herself.

Feminist perspectives show how anti-colonial nationalist discourse in India has always been gendered. While Indian nationalists supported the need for rights and suffrage of women, patriarchal nationalist discourse, during the pre- and post-independence era continuously constructed women as the embodiment of our nation, Mother India. The country is itself imagined as an Aryan woman’s body that demands protection from men. Women’s body, therefore, is only an object of study, control, discipline, and gaze.

Some of the questions that need to be asked include whether the sexual violence committed against women is always about dishonouring a community (especially when ‘honour’ is associated with ‘masculinity’). If not, another question arises whether it is possible that other motivations and desires that range anything from class, caste, or gender conflict to sexual desire, manifest in the form of communal identity in these atrocious crimes committed against women. That brings up the confusion as to where we include the intra-communal violence that women

had to suffer from and to which historical archives they are to be shelved. The level at which memories and gendered bodies have been intertwined and the production of identity (national, ethnic, or class) through violence where the burden of sexuality plays a part, is important enough to be looked into more critically. In this context of partition, the violence committed against the female body is considered to be the violence against masculinity and male honour, and in turn the violence against the community and the nation that they take care of. Questions also arise then arise about the concept of what a family really is, and what it constitutes.

About the communal violence that existed and the confusion within communities, it is important to note that the discourse gives a test of a 'proper Muslim'. The women who were abducted and forcibly converted were never given the identity of a proper religious subject. It reiterates the fact that women's bodies are never marked in religious ways because they are never placed in a proper ethical sense of identity unless connected through men. For the women, who were forcefully abducted and converted, their ethical and religious grounding was based on their relationship with their abductors and their ethnicity or religion becomes very superficial on a sartorial level (their appearance through clothing and jewelry), whereas, for men, it is embedded within their being. During Partition, the women that were taken to the other side of the boundary by men who did not belong to their religion were branded with symbols pertaining to the 'other' religion on their body. This could have been an 'Om' sign on the body of a Muslim woman or the crescent on the body of a Hindu woman. But these brandings did not make them one among the host community. Instead, it acted as a sign that separated them as being the 'other' who was brought into their territory. They were considered as the brandings of shame and violation. Ironically, these signs on her body re-established her previous identity concerning ethnicity and the fact that she had undergone dislocation.

The Notion of the 'Other'

The history of the Indian partition has very little or no mention of women. There is no account of what happened to the women who were abducted or the women who gave birth to the children of their abductors. But, the number of men who were killed during the partition and the anti-Sikh-riots has been given more prominence. For these families who lost their men, it was the

women who stood as their pillars. The families depended so much upon these women that the woman's desires and interests were often pushed to the background.

One of the merits of a feminist approach is bringing out the voice of the unspoken, in this case, 'the other side'. Oral history reaches its prime in the work by Butalia. The story that the reader reads becomes personal to them. It is the story about someone they know, told to them first-hand. This causes the readers to react to the stories even more strongly, questioning the authority of the nation-state to make decisions for its subjects as well as validate themselves by rewriting the history of the mass murders they have caused, giving them the aura of a glorious event.

Conclusion

Partition is difficult to forget but dangerous to remember, according to Krishna Sobti (Butalia 497). This argument is important concerning the unfavorable conditions that women had to go through. It, in a way, reminds us of the Puranas and epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* that were written down hundreds of years ago. The story of Amba, who was abducted by Bhishma on the day of her swayamvar to be made someone else's wife and who was let go after found out to be in love with another man, is very similar to the plight that the Indian and Pakistani women were in during partition. Amba loses her identity, not being welcomed back by her lover since she was abducted by another man. Neither was she accepted in her kingdom. The same thing happens to Sita in *Ramayana* too. She is abducted by an 'asura' king, (parallel to the Muslim man in the Indian context of Partition) is brought back by her husband, then accused of impurity and thus banished from the kingdom by her family. Coincidentally, she too takes refuge in an ashram. It is also important to note that Shibban Lal Saxena, RSS leader at the time who took great initiative in rescuing Hindu women and bringing them back constituted the issue within the Puranas saying "As descendants of Ram, we have to bring our Sitas back" (Butalia 178).

Grassroots history, a popular concept of Eric Hobsbawm has become a canon that has flourished over the years and brought to light the unsung stories of heroes and heroines. Butalia relies to a significant extent on this canon. Memory, she tells us, is not ever 'pure' or 'unmediated'

and that recovering 'voice' is not unproblematic. This is where it gets evident that breaking silence does not always lead the path to the liberation of voice.

Questions have always arisen within feminists about the 'cultural nationalist narratives' where deployment and the control of women as political and social symbols and objects are used in its construction. The conventional textbook histories have to be contested to make the contradictions in the nationalist history visible and give voice to those who have been silent about it. It is through this contestation that we can rewrite nationalist histories which Pandey calls the histories of confused struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss, the tentative forging of new identities and loyalties (Daiya 224). *The Other Side of Silence* seeks to put on center-stage the ordinary people upon whose bodies and lives history has been played out. The book is very personal, quite contrary to the approach that would have been taken by a historian and this method has helped Butalia to achieve greater credibility when it comes to narrating inclusive experiences. Thus the book shatters the taboo and starts conversations about those who were sidelined after the partition by creating an alternative pro-feminist history.

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