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The Other Side of Silence: Discourse on Partition

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Abstract:

This paper deals with ‘memories’ of survivors of partition violence. In this context, Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* is an apt piece of work. Urvashi Butalia not only relies upon her family’s personal details but also interviews several other survivors of this massacre. She moves to different places to collect details without forcing her interviewee to mention piercing details of spine-chilling incidents which could disturb them mentally. The work is an honest delineation as the writer collects minute details to satisfy her reader. Butalia revisits history to explore post-partition scenario in both India and Pakistan. The partition of country in 1947 into a Hindu dominated India and Muslim dominated Pakistan brought in its wake one of the greatest upheavals world could ever witness. Civil unrest and religious strife were its most common repercussions. The text by Butalia is an amalgam of vocal narratives and an attestation of the fact that people had to suffer acutely owing to cataclysmic division. Butalia placed sufferings of people above political angle played upon by demagogues during the emergence of an independent India.

Keywords: Partition, Abduction, Violence, Arson, Religious Divide, Mass Displacement and Mass Extermination.

The Partition of India in the calamitous year of 1947 was a gory massacre which took a heavy toll on human population who not only lost their hearths but also kith and kins. There was a large scale displacement of refugees on both sides of the border. Riots, mass displacements and mass exterminations were not a new thing to be witnessed. Urvashi Butalia has worked upon partition narratives and prioritized human lives over political standards in her books. In *Other Side of Silence*, Butalia’s concern was the general populace—their experience of partition, spine-chilling memories of the harrowing event and a portrayal

of the trauma of silenced voices. Urvashi Butalia is a renowned writer and a social activist. She is a feminist and co-founder of Kali- India's publishing house for women.

Urvashi Butalia was conferred Padam Shri owing to her contribution to the field of literature and education. She also worked at the headquarters of Oxford University Press in Delhi along with Zed Books in London. Butalia's specific area of concern was partition narratives, gender discourse, communal discord along with religious fundamentalism and oral histories. She holds the position of reader in Delhi University, College of Vocational Study. Butalia realizes the fact that women in third world need attention. For this under-estimated section, a feminist discourse is need of the hour. In her book, *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi butalia weaves partition narrative by merging diverse interviews or voices of the survivors of partition. The book has been divided into eight chapters- Beginnings, Blood, Facts, Women, Honour, Children, Margins, Memory.

Partition of India was a politically motivated event. It caused one of the greatest disruptions in the history of the country. It was in a time duration of few months that people moved between India and Pakistan. "By far the largest proportion of these refugees- more than the million of them-crossed the western border which divided the historic state of Punjab, Muslims travelling west to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs east to India (Butalia 3). The main problem before refugees was their deliberate slaughter by people of other communities. Disease, death, squalor and dinginess prompted them to change places. It was also accompanied by sexual savagery; infectious/transmittable illness, under-nutrition/ malnourishment which became part and parcel of daily lives. The death rate varied from two lakh to two million but according to reports by British Government, only two lakh people died. "About seventy five thousand women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own... (Butalia 3)".

The villages turned to haunting sets as there were mass displacements to safer places where people could find beings of their kind. It could be defined as partition in general sense of the word. It was hard to talk about particular instances as they were too personal and turbulent to be discussed. Urvashi Butalia belonged to a family of partition refugees who moved from Lahore to India. Her mother had to help her brothers and sisters to shift their base from Lahore to India. It was an arduous task. The days seemed longer and never ending loaded with sounds of guns and fire crackers. But it did not end up there. Soon there was news of loot, murder, arson and rapes. In October 1984, then prime minister Indira Gandhi

was assassinated. For many days, Sikhs were killed brutally. People were often burnt alive. The children and older people were victims. They were numb as partition memories became alive. “Four days...Sikhs...were attacked in an orgy of violence and revenge. Many homes were destroyed. People didn’t think it could happen to them in their own country.... This was like partition again” (Butalia 4-5).

The riots claimed more than three thousand lives in Delhi. People were clueless regarding that which was happening around. There was news of people torturing the men of religious communities which was different from theirs. The writer - Urvashi Butalia worked in relief camps which provided assistance to partition refugees such as food, water, blankets and many other commodities were distributed to people in refugee camps. But it was a one sided view. The other sided view was dark and full of disgust and horror. People were beheading their own children. Women were drowning themselves in wells so as to avoid rapes and forced religious conversions. Butalia worked in refugee camps where she collected traumatic stories of partition survivors.

Partition was an everyday event. It comprised of horror, fear, death, violence and everyday’s controversies. The author was of the view- “I began to realize that partition was not ... a closed chapter of history-that its simple, brutal, political geography infused and divided us still” (Butalia 6). The writer also a researcher was of the view that there was ample material available on the bloody partition in the form of riots during massacre. There was much which deserved attention during partition riots like treachery, deception, forgery, inflicting pain upon members of other religious communities. The politics in the country did not remain untouched by what was happening around at the grass-root level. There was a kind of strife in discussions/ political rhetoric between Jinnah, Nehru, Gandhi, Patel and other towering figures of Indian politics.

What surprised Butalia was the fact that the misfortune wrought upon common folk by egoistic decisions of politicians was not given due importance. Figures of loss and number of casualties was changed. Partition was a never ending process. In 1984, Sikhs were killed in Anti-Sikh riots in Delhi. Likewise in 1989, many Muslims were tortured to death in Bhagalpur, Bihar. In 1992, Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu members of communalist wing. The reasons for frenzy were shallow as they formed 1947 riots as base for their unscrupulous intentions. These members were from responsible factions like RSS-Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, VHP- Vishwa Hindu Parishad. “In each of these instances, partition

stories and memories were used selectively by aggressors: militant Hindus were mobilized using the one sided argument that Muslims had killed Hindus at partition” (Butalia 7).

Partition was an unavoidable political and religious event. It led to separation of families- mother and daughter, brothers and sisters and many others. They had to bear the pain inflicted upon them caused by horror stories, forced and traumatic conversions in the name of religion and their haunting memories. People might meet up each other after ten, twenty or may be fifty years through newspapers and magazines on the eve of fifty years of independence in India and Pakistan. “These aspects of partition - how families were divided, how friendships endured across borders, how people coped with trauma...find little reflection in written history” (Butalia 9). Partition narratives provide an overall view of how people lost their loved ones; what led to demarcation/breaking up of families; how people with sane minds maintained amity across borders.

In the *Other Side of Silence*, author has deliberately skipped writing about gamers who were behind the blueprint of partition- whether British or Indian politicians. Her area of concern were people from lower strata of society i.e. peasants, everyday women, ordinary men, weavers, scheduled castes or tribes. “Oral history is a deeply contested area in historical discourse... such narratives often flow in each other in terms of temporal time, they blur...rigid time frames within which history situates itself ” (Butalia 13). Part IIInd of the story is titled “Blood”, with subtitle ‘Rana Mama’. The author was Rana Mama’s niece and daughter of Subhadra who is sister to Rana Mama. She has been to her uncle’s place where there was only love blossoming between family members. The author had travelled all the way from Delhi to Lahore to meet her uncle who was on a tour. Fetching a visa for Pakistan was not an easy task. In Lahore the author felt “Why should this place which I had never seen before, seem more like home than Delhi, where I had lived practically all my life?” (Butalia 32)

Rana Mama was Subhadra’s youngest brother. The family had divided during partition. It was Rana Mama’s deliberate choice to stay in Pakistan after partition. He wanted an access to his father’s property and it embittered relationship between him and Subhadra as well as other family members. Earlier there was an exchange of letters and phone calls but for a brief period of time. Once the borders were drawn clearly between India and Pakistan, any kind of communication seemed an impossible task. It was only forty years later that the author went to Lahore to meet Rana Mama who had converted to Islam by then. “There was a

deep suspicion on both the sides and any cross border movement was watched and monitored by the police and intelligence” (Butalia 34). Finally the author was called up by Rana Mama to his place. It was an emotional discussion when Rana Mama narrated the heart-wrenching tale of his life in Pakistan. His mother died in 1956.

According to Rana Mama, being uneducated it was difficult to earn a living in India. The only source of income was mother’s property. The author was anxious to know about her uncle’s conversion to Islam. But it was a sensitive matter and uncle was unwilling to comment on it. “I ...silenced those parts that needed to be kept silent... I could not bring myself to, in the name of...intellectual honesty, expose or make Rana Mama so vulnerable” (Butalia 38). However Rana Mama expressed himself for a brief fraction of seconds- One is never forgiven for being a convert. He could not have sound sleep for one day during last forty years. People who moved to India or Pakistan were confused about the idea of ‘watan’. It was a cumbersome thing/idea which settled down in their psyche and they could feel pangs or yearnings for their close relatives. Such was the case of Rana Mama. “For Rana Mama, in a curious travesty of this, while he continued to live on in the family home in Pakistan, his watan became India, a country he had visited only... once” (Butalia 39).

At a later stage, Urvashi Butalia interviewed many refugees and survivors of partition. One of them was Bir Bahadur Singh. According to Bir Bahadur Singh, in pre-partition India, there was a different scenario. Muslims used to visit their places and eat along with Sikhs but Sikhs refused to do the same. It was not a friendly gesture. May be the seeds of mutual differences led to creation of Pakistan. When the author managed to come back to India, there was a flurry of questions poured upon her. Initially there was resentment among sisters but it melted down after reading the letter sent by Rana Mama. “Ask him... ask him if he buried or cremated my mother” (Butalia 43). Rana Mama had buried their mother who was now known as Ayesha Bibi. The author’s grandmother Dayawanti was a pure Hindu woman with strong religious sentiments. When her elder son died, she was shocked to the core. The tragedy in her life intensified after her husband’s death. Her journey was more complex after conversion from Dayawanti to Ayesha Bibi. “What must it have cost her to convert overnight to a different faith, a different routine?” (Butalia 44)

Partition forced more than twelve million people for mass-displacements. Over one million could not survive the trauma. The tragedy proved most harrowing for women who were raped, forcibly captured/kidnapped and impregnated by men of villainous intent. One of

her acquaintances, Bir Bahadur Singh was a man who strongly believed in religion. It was after listening to his mother's story that the author came to know about honour killings. Basant Kaur witnessed more than ninety women jumping into a well and a similar fate awaited her. She also jumped into well but was saved as there was not enough water left in the well. Bir Bahadur Singh's father killed his daughter and the child witnessed it in a stoic manner. It was in Amritsar that the author met a man named Mangal Singh. He and his brothers had killed many members of their family because of the fear of coercive conversion.

According to Mangal Singh, "Hunger drives all sorrow and grief away" (Butalia 46). The question that the author wants to pose is that why the governments, political circles remain untouched by this gruesome phase of India-Pakistan divide. The cataclysmic division was not only about drawing boundaries or lines and bifurcating the states or cities keeping in view geographical locations. It was grave human loss which shaped the next day for two nations. "Why, for example, had straight historical accounts not been able to address this underside of history of partition...to see what role people had played in shaping India we know today?" (Butalia 46) The author wanted to strengthen her bond with Rana Mama. So she paid frequent visits to Pakistan as it was easy to seek permission for few years. Approximately hundred Indians were permitted to visit Indo-Pak border at Wagah in Punjab on the night of 14 august, 1996. They could not see any person from Pakistan as it was a complex pattern of two sides of the same object. "There is a middle ground and also grander. The Indian side has an arch lit with neon lights...So was Pakistan. The Indian side had inscribed 'Mera Bharat Mahan' on the arch. So Pakistan had the words 'Long Live Pakistan'. (Butalia 51)

The second chapter of book had a subdivision titled "Part II- Subhadra Butalia, children of the same parents, the same blood". Subhadra was Urvashi Butalia's mother and was fated to live in India after partition. Earlier the relationship between Subhadra and Rana Mama was toxic. But frequent meetings led to evocation of love and sympathy. After cheerfully deciding to live in Pakistan, Rana was in a state of shock. He never imagined that the house in which he found refuge and was the sole owner turned into a concentration camp. His children and relatives had prying eyes upon that house. The third chapter 'Facts' was about how the cunning manoeuvres, deceit and trickery from the British side led to civil war in country. Part Ist of Chapter3rd '(Facts)- Dividing Lives' pointed to ominous date- 3rd June, 1947 when Mountbatten Plan was devised to divide the nation into India and Pakistan. One of the political workers- Sankho Chaudhary was happy about the final decision. But the

general public was in a state of shock. If India is supposed to be divided into two countries, where they would go? What could be the source of their livelihood? Will they get jobs in new nation? Or will they be terminated from jobs? The then government i.e. Congress Working Committee failed to manage the chaotic state of affairs in the country. A declaration was passed which stated that those who were strong enough to survive on their own can choose India as their country. Otherwise migration was the only option left.

Panic spreaded among people, especially minorities in Sind, Punjab and Bengal. “If Congress is impotent to protect the Hindus, then dissolve Congress organization in Punjab and let Hindus have their own course”. Congress or other parties in power were only puppet governments providing lip service to countrymen. Even the government in India or Pakistan or the British empire failed to have precision in partition plan. They could hardly calculate that refugees/people would change countries like swarm of locusts. When the partition was announced, riots had already taken place in Punjab and Bengal. “The Rawalpindi riots occurred in March 1947 which left thousands dead...there had been widespread loot, arson and violence towards women (Butalia 72)”. A similar wave of bloodshed and violence could be witnessed in Bengal, Bihar, Noakhali and Garh Mukteshwar. It was on 17th august, 1947 that prime ministers of two countries decided to exchange refugees/populations on both the sides of border.

The irony was that people had to leave their luggage-vehicles, machinery etc. behind and move to a new land for a safe future. People were killing each other like demons. Harjit, a Sikh described it in his words- “One day our entire village took off to a nearby Muslim village on a killing spree...We simply went mad. It has cost me fifty years of remorse...I cannot forget faces of those we killed (Butalia 73)”. One day they were friends. The next day they were strangers. Then they became the ‘other’. This change of heart from friend to enemy was responsible for this utter destruction of human sentiments and humanity itself. A seventy year old professor in Patiala had shared his experience with Urvashi Butalia. He heard from some dark corner shrieks of a woman who was raped and brutally murdered. But he was helpless being a member of RSS, they were not permitted to ‘feel for the other’.

Cyril Radcliffe was assigned the task to decide and divide the cities by redrawing the map of India and allocate places to Pakistan. It was a matter of grave concern as there was transfer of power to both the countries but division of land was still incomplete. It was on 18th july, 1947 that Indian Independence Bill was passed and became a law. Ten expert

committees were formed like Assets Liabilities Committee, Central Revenues Committee, Domicile Committee, Armed Forces Committee etc. But the governments in both the nation states turned deaf ear to killings, genocides, mental harassment, moral depravity which shocked the world to the core. Urvashi Butalia interviewed Damyanti Sahgal in 1989. Damyanti was a strong and courageous woman of eighty years and worked in Indian state's recovery and relief operation for many years. Partition turned thousands of women over night into helpless creatures. Krishna Sobti- a critically acclaimed writer spoke on behalf of women who lost their families, their own true self due to haunting memories of loot, murder, self immolation. Those who were in safer hands were horrified by listening to accounts of survivors. They were rejected by their families or treated as 'fallen woman'. Damyanti was among many such lone survivors who chose to spend her life on her own. "That very rejection by her family, the very real fact of her aloneness, allowed Damyanti to move into public world and make something of her life" (Butalia 112).

In the part 'Hidden Histories', the author revealed how she was affected by women's history in the catastrophic year of 1947.... "The history of partition as I knew it made no mention of women. As a woman and a feminist, I would set out to find women in partition and once I did, I would attempt to make them visible" (Butalia 126). *Manushi*, a journal published in 1988 served as a testimony to the world of horrors and brutalities. It contained a reference to a book named 'Torn from the Roots' written by Kamlaben Patel. Various sadistic kinds of violence were inflicted upon women. Women became saleable commodities not only for men of other religions but also their relatives and closed ones. "Partition was like a tandav nritya... I have seen such abnormal things" (133). Butalia questions why these women chose to be silent. A similar kind of silence prevailed in families of victims. In the chapter- Honour, Urvashi ironically uses the title 'Part I- Our Women, Your Women'. The process of returning back to own land was a tiresome one in the context of woman survivors. There were trust issues and Military Evacuation organization was assigned the responsibility. Pakistan's government reacted angrily to it and wanted police to take charge of this matter. But the irony was that there were loopholes in bureaucratic circles and police department. They were themselves involved in abduction of women in several instances. According to a government official- "If there is any sore point or distressful fact to which we cannot be reconciled... it is question of abduction and non-restoration of Hindu women....We can forget all the properties, we can forget every other thing, but this cannot be forgotten... As descendants of ram, we have to bring back every Sita that is alive" (Butalia 178). The state of circumstances

in India in 1947 was full of tumult and turbulence. The reason was bloodshed and violence, state of civil war in country.

India was a weak state not only internally but also innumerable confrontations with neighbouring state Pakistan disturbed it externally. Both the countries were always on the brink of warfare. It was a difficult exercise for Urvashi Butalia to shift between personal and general while interviewing the survivors of violence who were neglected by governments and bureaucrats. “Was this just historiographical neglect or something deeper” (Butalia 347). People were only mute spectators who felt imprisoned and handcuffed in their own houses. The ghost winds returned back again and again. People were sceptical about arrival and departure of trains. There were several instances where trains in Bengal, Punjab, Bihar etc. were full of corpses. The intensity of tragedy could not allow anyone to write about it immediately. It required time and space so that a catharsis was possible. According to Krishna Sobti, “Partition was difficult to forget but dangerous to remember” (Butalia 357). The use of Partition as a terminology for gory massacre of 1947 was not sufficient. Various urdu writers used synonyms like ‘Batwara’ and ‘Takseem’. Wars form part and parcel of every nation’s existence. Different countries have built memorials or museums to celebrate the spiritual presence of lost lives. For Example, Memorial for Vietnam War or Memorial for murdered jews of Europe. There is no such institution in India. There should be significant steps taken by governments to establish such memorials so that honour could be bestowed upon millions who crossed the border.

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