

The Other Side of Silence by Urvashi Butalia - A Representation of Women's Voices during Partition

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Abstract

In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia unfolds the different layers of the history of partition as narrated to her especially by women. Memories of the past are brought back through close conversations. Butalia painstakingly captures the saga of displacement, victimisation, and the gruesome shattering of the body and soul of women. History and politics always shape human existence but the history of partition almost made women non-existent. They were brutalised to the extent that they became dumb-struck. They were silenced and treated as scraps. Their sense of belonging and citizenship was permanently contested. The partition history, therefore, remains difficult to forget. Women tried to live a half-life obliterating the past. Butalia begins her work by mentioning the perception of two Indian poets on partition history being difficult to forget but dangerous to remember. The history of partition is also the history of violence against women. Women became subject to sexual violence 'particularly rape, abduction, forced marriage, selling into prostitution'. Sexual violence happened on a mass scale without any scruples and morality. Women's rights were frequently violated in the pretext of protection, honour, or purity. The political rift turned out to be a plot for rendering women silent and invade them with utmost brutality. The power struggles throughout the ages make women pawn and the partition of India was no exception. It made enormous scars in the minds of women with none to heal it. The wound deepened with fear for further deprivation and torture in the hands of family or state. This paper aims to bring into our collective consciousness the saga of violence against women during partition as captured by Butalia and to locate the aftermath of the violence on women's body, mind, and soul.

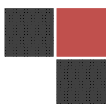
This paper investigates the following research questions.

- What different forms of violence were faced by women during the partition?
- How does the legacy of the partition (displacement of millions) continue even today?
- Why is there the need for resistance against any type of violence against women?

Revisiting partition stories is a kind of inward journey for every woman. The history of exploitation of women stresses the need for great strength and courage to resist violence during any kind of insurgency that women are subjected to.

Keywords: partition, displacement, resistance, violence.

Violence against Women continues since time immemorial. The age-old taboo to consider women as subservient and the subject of violence persists. In the patriarchal society, women are secondary. Their opinion, beliefs, abilities, desire, and wishes hardly matter. As a result, even after Independence women have achieved little progress. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out 'The narrative of women's 'progress' is read as three steps forward and two steps backward, a slow and imperceptible advance (Rajan 141). Independence of India came at the expense of bifurcation of the territory. *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal brings forth the horrors of partition and the holocaust created by the riots. In 1947 Partition of India became one of the major histories of human carnage. Horror and trauma filled the minds of people on either side of the border. Interestingly as Rituparna Roy points out in *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh*, that 'the experiences of women at the time of partition' remained left out both in the elite historiography and subaltern history. It is in the 1990s feminist perspective gained momentum and women authors 'saw Partition as a male narrative, in which women were sacrificed or abducted or recovered in a conflict which gave primacy to community and hierarchy at the expense of individual rights' (Roy 19). In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia unfolds the different layers of the history of partition as narrated to her especially by women. She attempts to find women in the partition. Memories of the past are brought back through close conversations with the partition witnesses (Especially women). Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* documents the experiences of partition victims. Like Butalia they also rely on oral testimonials to explore the complexities of women experiences during partition. Butalia painstakingly captures the saga of displacement, victimisation, and the gruesome shattering of the body and soul of women. History and politics always shape human existence but the history of the partition almost made women non-existent. They were brutalised to the extent that they became dumb-struck. They were silenced and treated as scraps. Their sense of belonging and citizenship was permanently contested. The partition history, therefore, remains difficult to forget. Women tried to live a half-life obliterating the past. It was obvious that partition would result in large-scale migration, loss, death, and destruction but people did not foresee the hatred, enmity, and bloodshed. The nation was conceived as Mother and severing her body recounted the 'violation of the body of the nation-mother'. (Butalia 189) So, the partition concretised the feeling of nationhood and people were traumatised to see the nation divided. 'National honour: the honour that was staked on the body of Mother India, and therefore, by extension, on the bodies of all Hindu and Sikh women, mothers, and would-be mothers' (Butalia 191) India had already the heritage of Sita's abduction and also her strength to keep her purity intact. 'For the sake of one woman who was taken away by Ravana the whole nation took up arms and went to war.' (Butalia 177) But during the partition, millions were brutalised and the attempt of the men and nation could hardly counter the brutality. Lopamudra Basu in *The Repetition of Silence: Partition, Rape, and Female Labor in Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India* talks about unearthing history from the silence of women – women who were tortured, brutalised and raped. During partition on both sides of the border, people made brutality towards women and children weapon for vengeance. This reminds us of Khushwant Singh's '*Train to Pakistan*' where Singh also mentions of a similar situation, "The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped." (Singh 01)



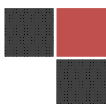
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- Why is there the need for resistance against any type of violence against women?

A close examination of the events during the partition makes it clear that two narratives were formed at that time: the narrative that voiced the honour of Motherland and the narrative of silence that the women carried within. The second narrative found an inward way and was kept within secretly. They were not revealed, expressed, or told to anybody in fear of dislocation, humiliation, and further deprivation in the hands of the prosaic brutality of the insensitive men folk. The women buried layers of history inside and led a *different* life. They emerged in new garb and even close circle did not know their suppressed life. As days passed their past went deeper. After partition, a woman was not the same. She evolved a different self, trying to come to terms with the new situation maybe with the memory of death, with the acceptance of forced conversion, or the horrors of rape and physical assault. How these women tolerated the loss of their parents, children and husband remains to be known. Butalia's own family had a similar history which prompts her to look for histories of women.

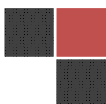
History has witnessed the self-immolation of Hindu women in fear of being raped by Muslim invaders. The history of partition is no exception. Partition traumatised women beyond imagination but their voices were hardly heard. Women were brutalised during the partition but partition histories do not represent these stories sufficiently. Butalia presents the alternative history of women during the partition. She tries to fill the blank spots in women's history. The rudimentary needs of life were denied to women; they had no voice, no shelter, and above all no safety. Their existence was always threatened with physical and mental assaults.

Butalia begins her work by mentioning the perception of two Indian poets on partition history being difficult to forget but dangerous to remember. The history of partition is also the history of violence against women. Women became subject to sexual violence 'particularly rape, abduction, forced marriage, selling into prostitution'. (Butalia xxvi) Sexual violence happened on a mass scale without any scruples and morality. Women's rights were frequently violated in the pretext of protection, honour, or purity. The political rift turned out to be a plot for rendering women silent and invade them with utmost brutality. The power struggles throughout the ages make women pawn and the partition of India was no exception. It made enormous scars in the minds of women with none to heal it. The wound deepened with fear for further deprivation and torture in the hands of family or state. Land played a symbolic role as people did not want to migrate leaving behind the land. People were unwilling to move as they cannot take the land and the house with them. Carrying machinery was not allowed; hence many opted to perish there instead of changing nationhood. And there are cases like Butalia's maternal uncle Rana Mama who stayed back with his mother in the ancestral home, got converted to Islam, and married a Muslim woman. He got his mother also converted to escape any controversy or doubt. This choice opted for survival and existence.



Forms of Violence against Women during Partition

Butalia through her research reveals: 'It is now widely known that sexual violence happened on a mass scale during Partition, and nearly a hundred thousand women were believed to have been abducted, raped, sometimes sold into prostitution, sometimes forcibly married.' (Butalia xvii) Like *The Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* is representation of partition as an insight into the complex positionality of rape during partition. Women during partition had to accept forced marriage. Many were abducted. Often women were forced to marry the abductors and even the rapists. They were forced to convert into religion and were bound to marry out of their religion. 'In this homily there was a lesson too for those abducted women who had so easily fallen prey to or chosen to accept the religion of the 'other'. (Butalia 187) The same is seen in Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, written in the backdrop of partition where she documents the pangs of rejection after Puro is abducted and raped. During partition, pregnant women posed a big problem for society. The solution to this problem came in the form of forced abortion'. Social workers confirmed that pregnant women would either be sent away to appointed places to have their children (who were then often offered up for adoption) or they would be sent for being 'cleansed', in other words, to have mass abortions performed 'safaya', it was called. The State then financed mass abortions, out of a special budget set aside for the purpose, at a time when abortion was actually illegal.' (Butalia 161) Being 'weak' women were made victims of rape. The violence even came from family and own community in the disguise of martyrdom and honour killings. 'Nearly 75,000 women, she recounted, had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at Partition' (Butalia 132). Raped women sometimes were not taken back in the family. They were either forced into prostitution or stayed with the assaulter even changing the religion. Women were raped, sexually assaulted, and then killed by the enemy camp. The fact is that women were also killed by their kin in fear of losing honour in the hands of other religions. The incident took place in a small village. Thoa Khalsa in Pakistan acquired an iconic status in history and literature. Some eighty or ninety women from Sikh community jumped into the village well in fear of possible attack by the Muslims. The incident is later narrated by a survivor who did not die as it became filled up. There was a kind of regret in her voice having escaped an honourable death. Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* also narrates a similar incident. *Tamas* is primarily the vivid picturisation of communal violence but alongside it depicts the plight of Sikh women who jumped to death in the well to escape molestation. Women suffered forced separation from child and family. Women's movement from one place to another was not easy hence they suffered. Women had to leave behind children, family, and friends. There were death and destruction everywhere. The inherent fear of being raped was a constantly harrowing factor. Butalia brings forward the story of Shehnaj who was earlier Harbhajan Kaur. She was picked by Afzal Khan and married to him and had five children. Later when she came to India to meet her parents, they did not let her go. They were ready to accept the children but not the husband. The husband finally returns to Pakistan with five children goes for second marriage and raises the children. Harbhajan on the other hand is married off to a Sikh who had a son from the first marriage. Harbhajan raises this son. Half a century later this stepson settled in America finds the silenced story of his mother and through media finally takes his mother to Pakistan. Shehnaj is united with the children and wishes to stay back in Pakistan. This is a story that covers all kinds of violence: abduction, rape (marital), change of religion, separation from the children, and finally the dramatic union (which was not the fate of everyone).

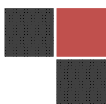


Legacy of the History of Partition (Displacement of Millions)

Mass migration that happened during partition continued and continues even today. The influx of migration in large numbers took place after 1971. This migration involved both Hindus and Muslims. Moreover, the internal migration within the country also carries the same story of deprivation. Many stories remain unheard and unknown to many. The people thus dislocated carry within the stories of anguish, anxiety, and amnesia. During the partition, people were haunted by remorse though on a spree they went on killing people. It was hard for them to understand why they had no control over themselves and what madness or hatred did overpower them. In this book, Butalia not only scratches the surface to unearth the cross-border displacement, deprivation, and destruction but she also hints at the internal movement of people within a country and how any kind of dislocation takes a toll on the mind of the people moving. It shapes the person who is never the same man again.

There is need for resistance against any type of violence against Women. Before partition Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs shared a common culture, language, and history despite their religious differences. But the madness that sparked the riot and killing made the women vulnerable. The resistance that women formed was an outcome of their experience of violence and also it was a possible way to protect themselves from violence: 'I have lost my husband and have now gone for another. You want me to go to India where I have got nobody and of course, you do not expect me to change husbands every day.' (Butalia 148)

Revisiting partition stories is a kind of inward journey for every woman. The history of exploitation of women stresses the need for great strength and courage to resist violence during any kind of insurgency that women are subjected to. Women should be aware of the possible dangers that they must be subjected to during any kind of insurgency. The violence becomes a tool to exhibit the power of the enemy. Women have violence inflicted on them whenever there is a crisis in the family/ society/state. Religion, Body, and Gender played a key role in the destruction of human identity during partition. While people thought intensely about religion and made much furore about it, they swallowed the grudge of their women's humiliation. While religion got the attention of the state seriously it neglected callously the scar of a woman's mind, body, and soul after being abducted, raped, tortured, and humiliated. So, partition remains the story of layers of silence. The history untold, half-told remains incomplete. For the victims of partition, the stories are difficult to forget. Butalia has unearthed the simple stories of simple men in a time of complex socio-political upheaval. The tremor was such that it disjointed a country, bruised the soul also not the body alone, and made it historic. The birth of two countries from a single identity was at the cost of the carnage of millions. The partition of the Nation resulting in two geographical entities became an archetype of our general consciousness, but what went deep inside is the trauma and sexual assaults faced by women during the partition. The stories recounted by many a woman tells the horrific experience that changed their lives forever. A Nation that is equated with Mother is a silent observer of the panorama of violence against women. Even today it is viewed that women become the victims because of their sex and gender and often they are silenced by the tyranny and domination of the predator. The suffering of women has a long legacy of oppression through generations, which the intervention like Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* questions and gives rise to the myriad questions in the mind of the readers.



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