

Gendered Dynamics of Violence during Partition: A Study of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*

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ABSTRACT

Characterised by widespread violence, mass migration, displacement and trauma, the Partition of India in 1947 remains to be one of the most tumultuous events in history. Through an analysis of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, this paper aims to unravel the unending echoes of trauma and violence that reverberate through the narratives of women who witnessed and survived through the catastrophic events of Partition. It throws light on the role patriarchal structures and ideologies play in perpetuating violence. By centring the experiences of women within a historical context, this study aims to investigate how gendered violence, in the name of religious and national pride, took place during the Partition of India for the creation of Pakistan.

KEYWORDS

Partition of India; Trauma; Violence; Gendered Violence.

Introduction

In August 1947, the British colonial rule, which had lasted for 200 years, came to an end. The transfer of power led to the Partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. Forming the basis for this division, the Two-Nation theory claimed that Hindus and Muslims could not co-exist due to their distinct social, cultural and religious identities, and thus needed to live as two separate nations. The haphazard formation of the two nation-states, as a result of the demarcation of boundaries based on religious identities, led to extreme violence, marked by massacres, arson, forced conversions, abductions and brutal sexual assaults. Gangs of killers would burn entire villages, slaughtering men and leaving children orphaned while abducting young women. Partition resulted in the deaths and tragic displacement of millions, leaving an entire generation

homeless and leaving indelible scars on its collective psyche.

Kuldeep Nayar mentions in his work *Scoop*, "The change of the date of British departure, from 6 June 1948 to 15 August 1947, heightened the tension on both sides and led to the forced transfer of populations and the massacre" (29). The human suffering it unleashed has been enormous and continuous. In every yard, there was a body, some butchered whereas some were dead of hunger or disease. The inhumanity of man against fellow man, a neighbour against a neighbour sharing a common wall was horrendous. The country being littered with the dead was the tragic harvest of Partition. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* defined Partition as "the unfortunate outcome of sectarian and separatist politics and as a tragic accompaniment to the exhalation and

promise of freedom fought for with courage and valour" (3).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the enduring impacts of the Partition of India, characterised by widespread violence, mass migration, displacement and trauma. The primary source of analysis is Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*. The study focuses on unravelling the silences of women who witnessed and survived the horrors of Partition, aiming to elucidate the persistent echoes of trauma and violence within their narratives.

Various literary works on Partition like Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar*, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries*, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, Anis Kidwai's *In Freedom's Shade*, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*, and many more create a space for women in the dominant patriarchal structure to shed light on the gendered violence that occurred during the Partition. They delve into the themes of identity and belonging to offer insights into women's experiences during Partition, be it rape, kidnapping, murders, disfigured, paraded naked in public, molestation or abduction. A close reading of different literary works on Partition is an insight into the manifestations of trauma and violence, exploring the personal experiences of women during this upheaval.

Another prominent author with a significant contribution in this field is Urvashi Butalia. In her seminal work *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia interweaves historical accounts and survivors' testimonies within a theoretical framework to elucidate on the gendered violence that took place during the Partition, how it affected thousands of women and its broader societal implications. Women were stripped of their autonomy and individuality. Throughout Partition narratives, there are

repeated descriptions of rape, abduction, mutilation, arson, loot, death, and decay. The graphic details of the horrors of Partition arouse feelings of fear, disgust, shock, and agony in the readers.

Analysis

Butalia, in her work, mentions the story of Kulwant Singh who had witnessed his father being brutally murdered in front of his eyes. Kulwant told in an interview, "my father being killed, they cut him up into a hundred pieces, the first blow they struck on his neck, and then they cut him into a hundred pieces" (254). Kulwant after spending a year in the hospital, found it extremely difficult staying with his relatives and was hence shifted to an ashram. The history of Partition is also a history of major violence as well as widespread sexual bestiality. It signifies a disruption in the lives of those who suffered and the future generations to come.

Violence is a step taken to achieve certain ends that are conceived to redeem a collective goal or target. Violence during the Partition aimed at establishing the superiority of a community over its immediate Other. More than seventy-five thousand women were abducted or raped while around fifty thousand children were abandoned during Partition. Violence was inflicted on women basically under two categories. The first kind of violence entailed men from one religious group perpetrating violence against women belonging to other religious communities. Women were mutilated, their genitalia branded with religious symbols, men ripped out the wombs of women belonging to the Other community, they were paraded naked on the streets or in places of religious worship, and raped to inflict a sense of deep shame. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* emphasises that man:

defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...For him

she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (de Beauvoir, 15 – 16)

Acts of rape and abduction were committed to contaminate the guarded self-image of the male members of the victim's community. A woman's body stood as a site to prove one's religious supremacy over the other. Women's sexuality and bodies became a fetish to demonize the men of the 'Other' religion. Moreover, it must be asserted that every violent act served as a metaphor that was "an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupied in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities" (Menon and Bhasin 41). While some women were forcefully returned to their families, some were sold into prostitution. There were, however, rare cases of women getting married and settling well with their abductors.

The second form of violence was committed by women's own families. Many women were killed by their family members or forced to commit suicide in the name of 'protecting religious and familial honour'. Committing suicide over conversion or abduction was considered to be an 'honourable death', a heroic act of religious pride. It was deemed fit to let a woman commit suicide or kill her to save her honour, and hence by extension, the community's. Butalia, in *The Other Side of Silence*, mentions the story of Bir Bahadur Singh in a chapter titled 'Honor' where he says that sons would kill mothers, brothers would murder sisters, and uncles would end the lives of their nieces, all in the name of their 'honour being protected'. Recalling the time, he revealed that around hundred girls sacrificed their lives and "Even today

when I remember it...I cry, it helps to lighten my heart. A father who kills his daughter, how much of a victim, how helpless he must be..." (Butalia 212).

Mangal Singh along with his brothers 'martyred' seventeen women of their family before leaving their home during Partition. Women and children were weak and had to be killed was taken for granted. He reveals that people had to travel on foot for days and travelling would impose difficulties. The patriarchal narratives suppress the voices of women, labelling their mass killings as 'volunteered sacrifices'. Glorified by the patriarchal society, these 'sacrifices' have been compared to the sacrifice and valour of the many Rajput women who undertook mass immolation when their husbands faced defeat in wars. Patriarchy constructed a framework wherein a woman's dignity and respect hinged on maintaining sexual purity. Society made sure that women saw their sexuality as a threat to them and that they had no ownership over their own bodies. She was the repository of her community's honour.

Butalia also emphasises on how the abducted Muslim women were more easily accepted back into their original families than Hindus who prioritised 'sexual purity of the woman' over having their women back. She mentions that the reasons behind a woman's decision to stay with her abductor may as well stem from a woman's awareness of her now altered social status that marks her as unacceptable, hence ostracizing her from the community to which she would return. A woman opting to remain with her abductor highlights the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms on controlling a woman's sexuality and the drastic measures the State implements to regulate it. This ideology ingrains in women the belief that they need men to 'protect' them, enabling abductors to replace husbands or father figures in their lives. Hence, during the communal unrest, women began to perceive their abductors

as protectors when they were abducted and forcibly separated from their families.

While discussing the story of survivors, Butalia essentially categorizes them into victims and violators, and in both cases the boundary between life, death, and choice has been blurred to an extent that it emerges into 'memory', hence incorporating a silence of distance from events across the border of time and space. The chapter titled 'Women' is the story of Zainab who was abducted while her family was on the move to Pakistan. It demonstrates the gendered as well as religioned complexities of Partition, where Zainab was trapped by various institutions like religion, family and patriarchy. She was doubly marginalized; first posited as a Muslim woman and then was appropriated by the patriarchal norms. Further, she is posited in familial and political-economic terms: appropriating her and marrying her to a cousin to retain her property. After being abducted, she was then sold to Buta Singh in Amritsar who married her and eventually, they fell in love.

Several years later, the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act of 1949 was passed by the governments which annulled marriages that took place during Partition and further stated that the women be restored to their fathers as if they were an object to be traded. When a lookout for abducted women was done, Zainab too was sent to Pakistan and like many other women she had no say in the matter. With a heavy heart, he lets her go but assures her that he will come to take her back. The enmity between the two countries made it difficult for Buta to get a visa to go to Pakistan. When he finally did, he forgot to report his arrival and was summoned to the court. Closely guarded by her relatives, Zainab too is produced before the court and rejects Buta by saying, "I am a married woman. Now I have nothing to do with this man." (Butalia 130). The next day, Buta commits suicide by putting himself under a train and Zainab continues

to 'live' in silence unable to mourn for her lover.

Lastly, the book also sheds light on the idea of the nation as a nurturer and explores how the scars inflicted on the nation symbolise the violation of a woman's body through recurring themes such as rape, abduction and honour killing during the catastrophic events of Partition. Each woman stood as a representation of potential mothers in the eyes of the communities to which they belonged. It was forbidden for an abducted mother to wish to stay with her abductor. These women were often made to return and get 'purified', which meant abandoning their children from the 'impure' union. This underscores how women, despite being ideological symbols of national and religious pride, had their reproductive roles severely restricted and controlled by patriarchal norms. From a gendered lens, if a nation is anthropomorphized as a mother, it inherently becomes feminine within the traditional male/female dichotomy. This reinforces that the nation, embodied as a feminine entity, must be safeguarded from external threats by its (male) citizens. The notion of a woman's role primarily as a mother intertwines the concept of motherhood with the idea of nation. India is commonly referred to as *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). It is imaged in feminine terms as a mother and the demarcation of boundaries was seen by many as a violation of its body.

Butalia also portrays the lives of certain educated middle-class women, who began to view marriage in connection with abduction. Butalia cites, "one might almost say that for the majority of Indian women, marriage is like an abduction anyway, a violation, an assault, usually by an unknown man" (147-48). Women who were forced to convert to other religions could be converted back but a child born out of wedlock or an impure union for that matter belonged nowhere. The struggle of guardianship of the child persisted,

mirroring the view that like a wife, a child too 'belonged' to the man, even if the father was likely the abductor and rapist of the mother. Abortion was seen as the only way out of this defilement by the Other to purify the woman.

Not a lot is talked about children in the narratives of Partition. According to the official records, if about one lakh women were abducted, half of them were impregnated. Millions of children were orphaned or left behind, many were killed in their mothers' wombs, and those born out of an "impure" union with the 'Other' were rendered homeless because no one was ready to give them shelter. These hybrid children were seen as contaminated and hence a stain on the communities' honour. Anis Kidwai in her seminal work *In Freedom's Shade* talks about how many of the abandoned children at a tender age used to ask "What are you? Hindu or Muslim?". She puts forth an important question "Blood-filled psyches, stony hearts, children untouched by love – what would become of them" (79). Many expecting mothers were forced to go through abortion (illegal) to 'purify' themselves whereas many women had no option but to abandon their children to be accepted by their original families. Hindus are more particular about the religious purity of their women as is also indicated in the story of Sita who has to prove her purity through *agni pariksha* to avoid social stigma. A Hindu woman converted to Islam could be converted back to a Hindu, but a child who was half-Hindu and half-Muslim had no place in the society. Butalia calls them "A child of history, without a history" (163).

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Conclusion

Partition was a cataclysmic event; a storm that uprooted millions of people and yet what gave people some relief was that everyone was in the same boat: lost homes, and their ancestral roots. The abrupt and haphazard division of the subcontinent of India to create Pakistan led to chaos, mass migrations, communal riots, and the death of millions of people. This imposed division turned out to be very painful for the people. Violence on women's bodies was used as a tool for mass killing and justified as martyrdom. The Partition led to women becoming victims of the communal discords. Women felt dislocated and lost their dignity because of sexual abuse and abduction. They were objectified, physically and psychologically abused, and traded amongst men for pleasure.

The lingering effects of the spiral of silence surrounding the events of the Partition of India continue to affect people even today. By centring on the experiences of women, emphasis has been laid on highlighting the ways in which patriarchal norms influence perceptions of the role, agency and victimisation of women within the historical and social context of Partition. The narratives of women discussed in Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* are essential in understanding Partition; they give voice to the pain and trauma of women as a collective group during Partition. These narratives expose the deep fissures in the 'imagined unity' of the nation. It demonstrates how the normative narratives of the nation are continually problematised by the presence of the Other narratives, in further context to the home.

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