

# TRAUMA IN FEMALE VOICE BY URVASHI BUTALIA

Mrs. Sonal Malik<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. (Mrs.) Manisha Diwedi<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Linguistics (English), Dr. C.V.Raman University, Bilaspur, (Chhattisgarh)

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Department of Linguistics (English), Dr. C.V.Raman University, Bilaspur (Chhattisgarh)

\*Email: sonal.pisces777@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Urvashi Butalia in "The Other Side of Silence" shows us why we cannot afford to forget the suffering, the grief, the pain, and the bewilderment that resulted from the division of the subcontinent.*

*To close the gap, Butalia has spent the last ten years collecting oral histories from women, members of lower castes, and orphaned children, whose voices were frequently muffled by politics. She focuses especially on the "disarray" that women went through because their fates were frequently decided by the men in their religious societies. For instance, many women were "rescued" from interfaith unions and made to go back to their families; many of them were forced to leave their children behind or get abortions. Others killed themselves in order to avoid being forced into prostitution or being raped; one woman recalls trying to join 90 other women in a mass suicide by drowning herself in a well.*

*Butalia demonstrates, via the use of official documents and personal anecdotes, that in political circles, the Partition was made legitimate by "purity." The novel by Butalia is a wonderful remembrance of the partition, which still has an impact on India today. This book on India's division was inspired by the awful violence that engulfed Delhi in both 1947 and 1984. Following the death of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard, Delhi residents launched a vicious campaign of violence against the Sikh community as a whole. The passivity of the local government in ensuring citizens' safety and security, as well as the media's failure to disclose the horrors occurring, outraged Delhi's residents.*

*This essay focuses on the problem of violence towards women during the riots that followed India's 1947 Partition. The gender-specific interpretation of the partition genocide makes it easier to talk about the numerous types of violence directed at women and the symbolic significance of these acts.*

**Index Terms:** - Orphaned, "Rescued", Assassination, Campaign, Grief, Bewilderment, Subcontinent, Interfaith.

The partition of India into two countries, India and Pakistan, caused one of the most massive human convulsions in history. Yet, more than half a century later little is known of the human dimensions of this event. Butalia pointed out that the Partition is, like the Holocaust, still very much a "living history," in the sense that many survivors are still around and can be interviewed.

This void is filled by Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence*, which centres this catastrophic tragedy around people, their unique experiences, and their inner suffering. Butalia explores the impact of this upheaval on marginalised groups like as children, women, members of lower castes, and untouchables through 10 years of interviews and analysis of diaries, letters, memoirs, and parliamentary records.

To understand how and why certain events become shrouded in silence, she traces facets of her own affecting and partition-scarred family history before investigating the stories of other people and their experiences of the effects of this violent disruption. Those whom she interviews reveal that, at least in private, the voices of partition have not been stilled and the bitterness remains.

Throughout, Butalia muses on challenging issues like what role did caste, community, and gender play in the bloodshed that precipitated partition. What were the goals of partition, and what did they actually accomplish? How did the survivors manage to survive such horrible horrors?

She does an admirable job of recognizing her own voice in what is written. She has collected memories, with all of the pros and cons of those, told by people who survived this human catastrophe, along with enough didactic history to allow those with inadequate knowledge of the standard history to understand.

She beautifully transcends the reader into hostilities of inequality that continue to prevail. When we needed them, they were always there to assist. They called our moms and sisters didi and referred to us as brothers, sisters, and fathers. However, we were so cruel to them when they visited our homes. This is very awful. And for this reason, Pakistan was created." [1]

She shares an account of Dalit (Harijan) woman, someone from a very marginal oppressed group, who spoke of how everyone used to live together in community, with intermarriage between Hindu and Muslim, friendships and celebrations all shared. She pointed out that this all changed because of the English. She was the only one who spoke of the divide and conquer tactic used to convince all that the (newly described) “other” was at fault for all problems, leading to enmity and hostility severe enough to require the English to govern. This point was not even hit upon by others as particularly important.

Hundreds of thousands of women were abducted, raped, killed, and sold. The inadequate effort afterwards, to find and return them to their families was sometimes resisted by the women themselves - who, by then, had married and had children with their abductors.

“They refused to go back. 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. Why then should this assault be any different? Simply because the man belonged to a different religion?” [2]

After Partition, the question of “How could men allow this condition of affairs to continue?” was frequently raised in relation to these stolen, raped, or abducted women who wished to remain with their perp. Ms. Butalia sought the stories of marginal groups such as Dalits. There was a bizarre kind of immunity that their work bestowed on them due to services offered by them. Soon, both countries were trying to force them to stay!

The stories of partition can get repetitive but once we look minutely at our collective histories, we will find that our histories tend to repeat themselves in one way or another.

The Other Side of Silence presents a sensitive exploration of hidden nuances and voices from the margins, especially with respect of the fate of women, whose bodies came to signify the ‘honour’ and ‘purity’ of religious communities in these violent times. Butalia thus talks to, and about, women who were ‘martyred’ by their own families; women who jumped into wells to save their honour; women who were forcibly separated from their families and children and whose identities were displaced time and again in the name of ‘restoration’; and equally too the women who entered the public sphere through teaching and social work as a result of the partition. [3]

The book also tackles the ‘others’ rendered invisible by the predominantly religious understanding of the conflict. Butalia also referenced the violence against Sikhs in Delhi in 1984, in the wake of Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguard. This non-fictional work of Butalia however contains the personal interviews of about seventy people who had to witness the traumatic Partition era. But Butalia here deals with the partition in the Punjab province and she has not included the partition in the East Pakistan. The author deals with the personal lives of people who were perturbed by Partition which resulted in their segregation. Often Partition works deals with collective memory where people recall the incidents during that time as they had firsthand experience of it. Butalia however gives preference to private memory of the people where the actual survivors of Partition recount their traumatic and painful experiences. Even though the focus of Butalia is small she includes the unheard voices from that period which was excluded from the mainstream history.

Butalia's work gives these feelings and issues more weight by tying in genuine, lived experiences of people and contextualising them with official records, even if many of these experiences and issues had already been discussed or given room in fiction from and about this time period. Given all of this, The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India is a seminal work in the field of partition studies and an essential read for anybody living in a region where the silences of this time are still present.

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