

Pathetic Condition of Women: A Study of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*

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ABSTRACT

*The partition of India in August 1947 caused one of the most painful human disruptions in history: over twelve million people were displaced, murdered, raped and abducted. Thousands of people were slaughtered and families were divided, their own home and country became unknown and alien land for them. For decades these violent realities remained buried in silence. But the scars of brutality never faded away. Partition of Indian sub-continent was one of the most horrible events in the history of the sub-continent. Thousands of people displaced from their homes and country so quickly. During few months there was migration of thousands of people; about 12 million people crossed the western border, Muslims travelling west to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs east to India. It was a period full of trauma. There was bloodshed, abduction, rape, and all types of sufferings. People had lost everything, their family members, properties and their dearest belongings during that hard-hitting time. Many writers wrote about the Indian partition history and about the sufferings of the people but they did not precisely focus on women trauma that was because of partition. It was a very crucial period especially for women. They faced abduction, rape, discrimination and all types of miseries. It is Urvashi Butalia, who is interested in partition oral histories from a feminist point of view and expressly writes about the women sorrows due to partition. In her very famous work *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* she tried to reveal the pathetic plight of the women due to partition. She gave a feminist voice to the history of India/ Pakistan partition. In this book she discloses the barbaric deeds of the people during partition. In this book based on true stories Butalia reveals the sufferings of women, which they had to face throughout partition. The primary objectives of this research study are to explore the sufferings of women due to partition in the light of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. For the present study theory of Feminism will be applied afterwards.*

1. Introduction

India received freedom at midnight on 14 of August 1947, and the British rule came to an end. On the same day, an Islamic state Pakistan came into existence. The partition of India into two parts, in spite of the unwillingness of Mahatma Gandhi, is known as the partition of India. As the result of the partition of India, two self-governing countries legally came into existence at the midnight on 14-15 August 1947. The celebration of freedom was held on 14th August in Karachi, the capital of Pakistan. On the other hand, the celebration of freedom in India was held on 15th August 1947. The reason for an early ceremony in Karachi was to allow the last British viceroy, Louis Mountbatten, to attend both the ceremony in Karachi as well as the ceremony in Delhi. Pakistan celebration independence day on 14th August, while India celebration on 15th August.

The partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. So many people displaced from their homes and countries so quickly. During few months there was migration of people. After few months, about 12 million people crossed the western border, Muslims traveling west to Pakistan, Hindus and Sikhs east to India. There was fear everywhere due to partition. There was bloodshed all four sides.

Those whose bodies were whole had hearts that were splintered. Families were torn apart . . . The bonds of human relationship were in tatters, and in the end many souls remained behind in Hindustan while their bodies started off for Pakistan. (Bhalla 189)

Thousands of families were divided, homes were destroyed, and Villages were abandoned. People travelled in cars, in buses, by train, but mostly on foot in great columns called Kafilas. They were compelled to go on foot to cross the border from one side to another. It separated families across and arbitrarily drawn border, sometimes overnight, and it was impossible for people to know if their parents, sisters, brother, or children were alive or dead. More than 10 million people were dislocated. They had to face dislocation. More than 2 million people were killed. There were slaughters everywhere. The people were thirsty of the blood of each other. They abducted women of the other religion and raped them. There were dead bodies all around and it was such a horrible scene.

As always there was widespread sexual savagery about 75000 women were abducted and raped by men of different religions and sometime by men of their own religion. Thousands of families were divided. They destroyed their family members, properties and other things in this partition. Their condition was horrible; they have lost everything in this

tough time. They had no vehicles to cross the border and even most of them had no food to eat. The people, as women, children and old age people were in bad condition because of hunger. They had no food to eat and they had to face severe circumstances. It brought untold suffering, tragedy, trauma, pain and violence to communities. The Mother and daughter separated in the violence of partition, found each other after fifty years later through the agency of a newspaper. A brother and a sister were brought together after fifty years at the border by the same news magazine. There was a father whose 13 year old daughter was abducted from Pakistan by Hindu man, he made several trips to come back her, he tried but he was arrested on charge of being a spy and jailed, his daughter was never returned to him.

2. Discussion

The Other Side of Silence is the intersection of more than seventy interviews that Urvashi Butalia conducted with partition survivors and through these interviews she tried to depict the miserable condition of the partition survivors and tried to portray their intolerable sufferings due to partition and the pathetic condition of the partition on women. In many ways Urvashi's career since the 1980s provides a capsule for the feminist movement in India. She gave a feminist voice to the history of India /Pakistan partition. *The Other Side of Silence* is the oral history tradition. She represents the real picture of the partition time, and reveals the barbaric deeds of people during partition. In this work she specially focuses on the women sufferings and their trauma due to partition.

For decades these violent realities remained buried in silence. But the scars of brutality never faded away. So much has been said about it but there is still no writer, storyteller or poet in a real sense that has been able to explain the madness of partition, and its effects on people, specifically on women. Using the oral narratives of people—Urvashi Butalia, tried to recover their voices through spoken histories in her work *The Other Side of Silence: voices from the Partition of India*. In it she exposes the personal trauma of the partition survivors. It situates the individual experiences and private pain. Furthermore, she shows how people on the margins of history—children, women, the lower class, ordinary people, and the untouchables were affected by this convulsion. As she writes,

It was not a division of properties, of assets and liabilities. It was also (...) a division of hearts (...). And these aspects of the partition – how people coped with the trauma, how they rebuilt their lives, what resonances, both physical and mental, they drew upon, how their experience of dislocation and trauma shaped their lives and indeed the cities and towns and villages they settled in find little reflection in written history. (Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence* 18)

Butalia contributed to the partition history. The main stream history of partition is only concerned with politics and few socio-economic events between the newly created Indo-Pak government and British. There was no description about the sufferings of ordinary people, women, and Dalit. The history of common people, Dalit and women remained silent until Butalia started working particularly for the cause of

women. It gave new narratives to the partition towards the loss, honour, suffering, displacement and pain. She has taken the interviews of the partition survivors and wrote about the troubles of women during partition. There was no description about women in the writings of other writers. They never focused on them. They were unsaid and unheard, for instance, two brothers in Delhi, survivor from the Rawalpindi riots, whom she had spoken to, had said about their family:

At home we were my grandmother, grandfather, father, mother, three brothers, three sisters, (one of the sisters lived in east Punjab). Our aunt lived in Delhi, she was with us with her daughter, and they were killed there. She had come to see us. In fact, all our family were killed we two brothers were only two who survived. Some were killed in the Gurdwara and some elsewhere. Our grandfather and grandmother were killed in the house, they were killed by Pathans. The others... My mother and younger brother were killed in the Gurudwara. Our father manages to escape but was killed somewhere along the way. . . . We were only a few left, and only some survived. (Butalia 16)

These lines depict that the two brothers who were survivors from the Rawalpindi riots have told the whole story about their family members, but they did not give any direct description about their sisters, two of them, who had 'disappeared' at the time. The brothers did not talk about their sisters, because it was a topic of shame for them. In the same way there were many hidden and untold stories. There were unsaid voices and silence on the other side. Butalia tried to raise these unheard voices through oral history.

The violence of partition happened on both sides of the border. The victims were not of only one class while they belonged to all the communities. Act of violence, killing, abduction, rape, and migration were seen on both the sides of the border. There was violence everywhere, if the Hindus and the Sikhs were equally targeted on one side, the Muslim were equally targeted on the other side. Violence spread to all the communities and all the places, (especially Punjab and Bengal) in the east, the north and the west. Everywhere there was violence. All were equally guilty.

Although the women did not participate in the partition violence, yet they were the victims of it. Men were more responsible for the violence, but its greatest impact was felt by women. In that violence, it is women who were raped, who were widowed, and women who had lost their husbands and children in this violence. They lost their father, husbands and their children. Countless women were killed by their own men at the name of family honour.

This is a story of Zainab and Buta Singh. Zainab is also a partition survivor. She was a young Muslim girl, who was abducted while her family was migrating to Pakistan in a Kafilah. No one knows who her abductors were, and how many hands she passed through, but at the end she was sold to a Jat from Amritsar district named Buta Singh, who was not married at the time. He performed the 'Cheddar' ceremony and married to

her. Soon both came to love with each other. They had a family, two young girls. A search party on the lookout for abducted women traced her from Amritsar, where she was living with him. It was suspected that his brother or his nephews had informed the search party about her, because they wanted to snatch the property of him. They thought that his children would deprive them from the family property, and their share would be reduced. Like many other women, who were rescued, she had no choice in the matter to live with her husband and to go back. She was forced to leave. Newspaper reports describe the scene as a touching one: the entire village was gathered to see her, when she was going. She came slowly out of her house, carrying her child, and holding a small bundle of clothes. Her belongings were stowed in the jeep and she boarded at it. Following lines reveals pathetic condition of women:

Apart from the rapes other specific kinds of violence had been visited on women. Many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of the 'other' religion; in a bid to defile the so-called 'purity' of the race, women were forced to have sex with men of other religion, many were impregnated. They bore children, often only to have them taken away forcibly. (132)

There is another character named Subhadra Butalia, mother of Urvashi Butalia, whose life also was affected because of partition. There were untold sufferings in her life. She and her family had to face all types of struggle during partition. She was the only responsible person in her family. Although she was married but she had all responsibilities on her shoulders. Her life was entirely affected by partition.

The violence that women handled as the result of partition is hidden in many layers of silence. It was in 1986 that Urvashi first came across stories of family and community violence. At the time, she had no idea of its scale. Mangal Singh was one of the first people, who spoke first story about partition to her. He lived in Amritsar and there he was considered as a legend. He was the last surviving brother of three, when he come Amritsar; he had nothing to him except three cloths. Here, he set up his home and started the painful process of scratching together a living and starting life again. Here, he started a shop and lived with painful memories because of partition. He spoke;

After leaving home we had to cross the surrounding boundary of water. And we were many family members, several women and children who would not have been able to cross the water, to survive the flight. So we killed-they became martyrs seventeen of our family members, seventeen lives...our hearts were heavy with grief for them, grief and sorrow, their grief, our grief. So we travelled, laden with sorrow not a paisa to call our own, not a bite of food to eat...but we had to leave. (195)

Now comes many questions, why they killed the women and children. Did they not deserve a chance to live? Were they culprits? When Mangal Singh told the whole story about his

family, he described, that he had many family members. He belonged to a poor family. There were a lot of children and many women in his family. It was a wonderful and happy family. But unfortunately, because of the terrible result of partition the whole family separated, actually killed by their own male members, to save the family honour, the religion honour, they killed their own children and women. Although they had equal right to live but they became victims of their kinsman. Mangal Singh did not accept that seventeen women and children were killed; instead he told about it, it was martyrdom.

Except these stories there is an alternative story of 90 women of the little village of Thao Khalsa, Rawalpindi district. During the riots of partition 90 women were jumped themselves into the well and drowned. At the time of partition, when they found that their menfolk were no longer able to protect them, they jumped into a well, to save their honour. They followed Mr Gandhi's advice to Indian women that in certain circumstances, even suicide was morally preferable to submission. The people were unable to fight with them. When the women of the village found that their menfolk were unable to protect them, they held a hurried meeting and decided they had lost everything except their honour. Now they did not want to lose it, so they decided to jump into the well and they jumped into the small well. Out of them, only three women were protected; there was not enough water in the well to drown them all. The first person from whom Butalia heard the story of Thao Khalsa was Basant Kaur. She was a tall, upright woman in her seventies. She was one of the women who had jumped into the well; because it was too full, she did not drown.

In India the purity of women is more important, to Hindus and Sikhs. The women, who were abducted and later recovered by the search teams, could not be accepted back by their families. If they were alone, they were accepted, if they were with a child, they were treated like an unknown in their own family. Apparently, abducted Muslim women were more easily accepted back into their families, and in Pakistan. All Pakistan women's association and other organizations worked hard to arrange marriages for many women who were recovered and returned. There was given a choice of the recovered women, if they want to go back in their families, they have to give up their children in orphanages, and if they want to keep them with them, they could not enter in their family. There was very miserable condition of the abducted and recovered women. Now they were alone, and no family members were with them. They were in trouble. There were many questions, where should they go and who is responsible for their miserable condition? And who will give the answers of all the questions? Were they responsible for their gloomy life? There was also another problem; many women were pregnant at the time, when they were recovered back. Social workers and social organizations confirmed that pregnant women would be sent away to appointed places to have their children or they would be sent to have mass abortions performed. The state then financed mass abortions. All budgets were given by the State government for the purpose, at a time when abortion was actually illegal. And actually, a number of hospitals performed their duty, and gave the new life of the thousands of women.

The Gandhi Vanita Ashram at Jalandhar is today a home for needy women and widows. One of the social workers told her, (Damyanti Sahgal) that it was actually a graveyard of Muslims. The social worker told that they need an appropriate space to the needy women to build an Ashram, so they chose it. There was dislocation due to partition, they found that place suitable and built an Ashram there for the needy women.

The recovery operation for abducted women continued for nine years after partition, though recoveries began to drop off after the initial few years. In all 30,000 women were recovered, about 22,000 Muslim women from India, and about 8,000 Hindu and Sikh women from Pakistan. (*The Other Side of Silence* 163)

3. Conclusion

To conclude, there were unbearable sufferings all four sides specifically for women. On the contrary, along with the sufferings of women, there were the sufferings of the innocent children. Nearly 75,000-100,000 women are said to have been abducted at the time of partition. There can be an imagination that half the number of abducted women who had children; it gives a figure of nearly 50,000. There were the numbers of children who were abandoned, or had been left behind. There is no record about them. There is much that still remains unknown. Many of the children left behind, abandoned or killed were girls. Many young girls then ended up as domestic workers or as prostitutes. Many young girls had been sacrificed

due to partition. Homes and educational institutions were set up for both girls and boys: but when the time came to admit them into these institutions, there were boys in a major numbers who had been given a good chance to educate them, on the other side girls were deprived to take education. Young men were able to do that easily than the girls or young women. The partition had changed the life of the people, specifically the life of the women. Thus, it was a very hard and horrific time for the people in the history. It would be wrong to say that only women were affected by this disturbance, although men, children and even animals and other things were also affected by this trouble, yet, to some extent it would not be wrong to say that in comparison to men, women were more affected during this tragedy. They were abducted, raped and faced all types of humiliation. They became the victim at the name of religion. India had achieved freedom but the women were not free to go back in their homes. Even, many of them were not accepted by their own families, because they had with them children of their abductors. They were totally dislocated from their homelands, families and society. Now they were compelled to spend the life full of sufferings. They were bound to live with the awful memories. They remained silent during their whole life, and did not speak a word and spent their life like a culprit. They had to face dislocation due to partition. Although it is impossible to explain and to feel the unbearable pain of the partition survivors in words specifically the pain of women, but through this research paper to some extent it is tried to reveal the pathetic condition of women during partition and after it.

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