



THE ORAL NARRATIVES AS HISTORY IN URVASHI BUTALIA'S 'THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE: VOICES FROM THE PARTITION OF INDIA'

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Abstract – Urvashi Butalia is a renowned historian writing from feminist perspective.

Current feminist theory, in validating women's own stories of their experience, has encouraged scholars of women's history to view the use of women's oral narratives as the methodology, next to the use of women's written autobiography, that brings historians closest to the "reality" of women's lives. Such narratives, unlike most standard histories, represent experience from the perspective of women, affirm the importance of women's contributions, and furnish present-day women with historical continuity that is essential to their identity, individually and collectively. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is an attempt to validate oral narratives as history. Women suffered a lot during the partition of India, but they are almost invisible in historical narratives. Urvashi Butalia had set for herself the task of making women visible in history by delineating the brutal side of partition through women's lens.

Keywords –mainstream history, feminism, personal narratives, Partition of India, violence against women

THE ORAL NARRATIVES AS HISTORY IN FEMINIST RESEARCH:

The Partition of India in its magnanimity of migration, violence, murder, loot, rape and abduction can only be compared with Holocaust. Holocaust is known to us as much as through research books as through literary narratives, movies, documentaries, diaries, memoirs and testimonials. It is not only the facts of any event that are important, but equally, how people remember those facts, and how they represent them.

Perhaps more than any other event in modern Indian history Partition lives on in family histories where tales of the horror and brutality, the friendship and sharing, are told and retold between communities, families and individuals. This collection of memories, individual and collective,

familial and historical, are what make up the reality of Partition. They illuminate what one might call the ‘underside’ of its history.(1)

Current feminist theory, in validating women’s own stories of their experience, has encouraged scholars of women’s history to view the use of women’s oral narratives as the methodology, next to the use of women’s written autobiography, that brings historians closest to the “reality” of women’s lives. Such narratives, unlike most standard histories, represent experience from the perspective of women, affirm the importance of women’s contributions, and furnish present-day women with historical continuity that is essential to their identity, individually and collectively.(2)

One such attempt to validate oral narratives as history is made by Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence*.

"Oral history is a methodological tool that many feminist historians have found enormously empowering. Looking at women’s narratives and testimonies, and placing them alongside, or indeed against, the official discourses of history, has offered feminist historians a new and different way of looking at history. How does ‘history’ look when seen through the eyes of women? How does it evolve, in narratives and testimonies, when women talk to women? But while oral history has been empowering, it has also brought its own problems."(3)

Urvashi Butalia is quite aware of the limitation of to what length these personal narratives can be considered as histories -

"I do not want to argue here that oral narratives can replace what we see as history, only that they can offer a different and extremely important perspective on history, a perspective which, I believe, enriches history." (4)

Urvashi Butalia rightly observed that "the men seldom spoke about women. Women almost never spoke about themselves. They denied they had anything ‘worthwhile’ to say, a stance that was often corroborated by their men." (5) The stories of women who were victims of partition were the stories of deep violation — physical and mental — for women, and so very difficult to articulate. Even to the social workers like Kamlaben Patel who worked for rehabilitation of women it took years to write about it, one can fairly imagine how difficult it might have been to women survivors to open their heart fully. It was a herculean task to make them speak, and more difficult task was to listen to them: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances.

Urvashi Butalia had set for herself the task of making women visible in history:

"...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." (6)

From the narratives of women who survived Partition, there are some findings that are discernible through the stories. The second part of the research paper attempts to discuss about these findings.

WOMAN AS PROPERTY

Woman As Property To The 'Other' Men –

So many older women had been abducted — women in their fifties and sixties. "According to social workers, this wasn't uncommon: because abductors often knew the circumstances of the women they were picking up, they would take away older women, widows, or those whose husbands had been killed, for their property. They would then ask to become their 'sons' — a short-cut to quick acquisition of property." (7)

Damayanti Sehgal in her interview with Urvashi Butalia threw light on how men got hold of properties by keeping the old women in their custody -

"...they would keep these old women, kill off their sons and make themselves their sons, they'd say amma take me as your son, and then they'd get their property. If they'd let these old women get away they or their families would get compensation in India and their property here would have to be confiscated, so they would keep them back. *So it was a well thought out and well worked out thing.*"(8) (Italics mine)

Women were used and exchanged as goods. They were reduced to use and throw objects. Anis Kidwai in *Azadi ki Chhaon Mein* explains this in detail -

"In all of this sometimes a girl would be killed or she would be wounded. The 'good stuff' would be shared among the police and army, the 'second rate stuff' would go to everyone else. And then these girls would go from one hand to another and then another and after several would turn up in hotels to grace their decor, or they would be handed over to police officers, in some places to please them. And every single one of these girls, because she had been the victim of a trick, she would begin to look upon her 'rescuer' perforce as an angel of mercy who had, in this time of loot and killing, rescued her, fought for her, and brought her away. And when this man would cover her naked body — whose clothes had become the loot of another thief — with his own loincloth or banyan, when he would put these on her, at that moment she would forget her mother's slit throat, her father's bloody body, her husband's trembling corpse. She would forget all this and

instead, thank the man who had saved her. And why should she not do this? Rescuing her from the horror, this good man has brought her to his home. He is giving her respect, he offers to marry her. How can she not become his slave for life?" (9)

Woman As Property To The 'Own' Men -

Not only the outsiders kept women for their property, their own men, their sons as well betrayed their old mothers for their personal gain. Urvashi Butalia's maternal uncle kept his mother with him in order to get the property, while he didn't care for his sisters and let them go to India. He converted into a Muslim in order to live a peaceful and respectable life in Pakistan and converted his mother also.

Many men killed the womenfolk of their family or encouraged women to commit suicide. The stories of women jumping in well to save the honour of their family and religion are well-known. They preferred to die than to get soiled.

Once an abducted woman returned, she was not welcomed in her own family. This betrayal and loneliness must be too much to handle. That's the reason many Hindu and Sikh women refused to go back to their families and wished to stay with their abductor husbands who saved them from mass rapes and gave them homes. They convincingly know how their religion insisted on the purity and chastity of a woman. They knew they'd be refused to be taken back.

Urvashi Butalia notes -

"Such was the reluctance of families to take these women back, that Gandhi and Nehru had to issue repeated appeals to people assuring them that abducted women still remained 'pure'."(10)

Things used to get more complicated if an abducted woman came back with a child. Their children were a constant reminder of the shameful act of abduction. There was probability that children would not be treated well and were denied of their basic rights.

"So women were given a choice: keep your children with you, and stay — in all probability — in an ashram all your life, or give them up (such children were then kept in orphanages) and go back to your old family. There was also another problem: many women were pregnant. What was to be done with them?

.....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."(11)

Woman As Property To State:

In September 1947 the Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan met at Lahore and took a decision on the question of the recovery of abducted women. So, Inter-Dominion Treaty of December 6, 1947 was made to recover as many abducted women as could be found. The operation came to be known as the Central Recovery Operation.

It was agreed that

".....forced conversions and marriages will not be recognised. Further, that women and girls who have been abducted must be restored to their families, and every effort must be made by the Governments and their officers concerned to trace and recover such women and girls." (12)

The state machinery operated in its peculiar way. A date was fixed, March 1 1947 when the riots in Punjab broke out. After this date all conversions and inter-religious marriages were declared as forced marriages through abductions.

Urvashi Butalia makes an insightful statement regarding this process of 'forced' recovery -

"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?"(13)

Truly so, because abducted women who were recovered without much of their choice asked questions -

" Why should I return? Why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?" (14)

And another said: "I have lost my husband and have now gone in 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." (15)

It's a strange paradox that at Partition every citizen had an option to live in the nation of his choice but abducted women were denied of that choice. For the state these unfortunate women had to be 'restored' to their previous place, just like stolen, lost cattles are given back to their owners.

LONELINESS -

From the very first narrative to the last the loneliness that pervades a woman's life is quite conspicuous. A woman is told since her childhood that she's a 'paraya dhan' and doesn't belong to her paternal home, in the home where she's married off, she's made to realise that she's the 'other' person, the outsider. The women who witnessed and suffered through Partition feel more alienated because their own kith and kin didn't treat them fairly and couldn't offer them security, rejected

them when they came back home and asked to sacrifice their lives to preserve their 'honour'. Partition rendered many thousands of women alone and ruptured their lives. Women faced violence alone, lived alone whether in rehabilitation camps or in household of their abductors and survived alone with the pangs of sorrow given by their own family or the new family they called their own.

A woman feels differently, reacts differently, responds differently. Her perspective many a times is significantly different from a man. This is very well articulated in the narrative of Subhadra (The author's mother) when she saw the trees in the courtyard of her ancestral home were cut down by her brother. For her brother Rana, those trees were just liability when there was scarcity of water, but for Subhadra it was loss of home -

"But I felt a real sense of loss, an almost physical hurt. My father had loved his trees more than anything else. It seemed like a betrayal. I thought, we had lost so much in Partition — what did a few trees matter, yet to me at the time they seemed like a symbol of everything we had lost ..." (16)

'The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India' is a quest to find out the, gendered telling of Partition. Urvashi Butalia shares that her experience of talking with men is significantly different than talking with women. "While for the most part men spoke of the relations between communities, the broad political realities. Seldom was there an occasion when a man being interviewed would speak of a child lost or killed, while for a woman there was no way in which she could omit such a reference." (17)

It is said that those who forget history are condemned to repeat them. These oral narratives scattered with insights tell us that Partitioning two lives is difficult enough, Partitioning millions is madness.

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