

## Shifting Approaches to Partition History in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Kavita Puri's *Partition Voices*

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### Abstract

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent has never been a dead past and even after seven decades of the event, it is being approached through various perspectives. Apart from the historical documentation of the horrors of the Partition, there has been a corpus of Partition Literature that has become the legacy of the event. Personal narratives have established themselves as alternative histories in recent times, with Urvashi Butalia setting new trends in the approach to Partition truths. The present paper analyses Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* and Kavita Puri's *Partition Voices: Untold British Stories taking into perspective* a shift in approach to the personal realities of Partition. The paper explores the psychological implications of the narratives which are written in a tradition in which the Partition victims obtain a subject position in their personal narratives. The paper will also take for analysis the approaches followed in literary narratives.

**Keywords:** Alternative history; Experience; Partition; Personal narratives; Violence.

The complexities of human behaviour, especially, in the time of crisis, have always captivated the litterateurs. However, recently there has been an attempt to record the first-hand experiences of the survivors of great calamities and tragic historical events like the Holocaust and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) is a seminal work in this direction. Considering the immensity of horrors inflicted during the Partition, the anguish of those who had been the eye-witnesses to the horrendous scenes of violence, arson and indiscriminate killings can be better imagined than described. Manohar Malgonkar gives

the record of the victims of the Partition in his *Bend in the Ganges* (1964), "... 12 million people had to flee, leaving their homes; nearly half a million were killed; over a hundred thousand women, young and old, were abducted, raped, mutilated" (Malgonkar 1). Opinions vary on the exact number of the victims as there was hardly any authentic record of cruelties inflicted upon the minorities in both the countries. Quoting from *The partition of India* (Talbot and Singh 2014), Kavita Puri writes:

...the numbers killed in partition violence will never be known. Monsoon flood, mass disposal of bodies and administrative collapse meant corpses could not be fully recovered or enumerated. "Figures range from the low estimate of 200,000 by the British civil servant Penderel Moon, to up to 2 million by some South Asian scholars. Many historians have settled for a figure between half a million and a million. Tens of thousands of women and girls are believed to have been raped and abducted, mostly by men from the other religion. (*Partition Voices* 83)

In order to have an overview of the magnitude of adversities suffered by the Partition victims, it becomes pertinent to take into consideration the representative works on the theme of Partition violence. Literature, an artistic rendering of human experience, is all replete with the narratives of crimes of humanity. Partition literature, specifically, targets communal hatred accompanied by indiscriminate killing, rapes, abductions and migration. Various fictional writers deal with the theme of Partition in various ways. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) ends on a romantic note of 'love conquers all'. Manto is highly sarcastic in his tone while Chaman Nahal is far more realistic in his approach than his contemporaries. Arun, the protagonist of *Azadi* (1975), confronts the harsh realities of life across the border. Dealing with the problem of the Partition survivors, Nahal gives a realistic depiction of scenes of bloodshed and insane acts of inhumanity. At the same time, Nahal takes up the issues of Partition refugees, too. Arun does not find himself welcome in the country he has reached after great tribulations. Disillusioned by the reception he is given on reaching the promised land, India, he finds life after the Partition to be a journey without destination, a fight without cause:

Lying on his bed late in the night, he thought of it. What of the material losses? What of Madhu? *That* could never be made good, never atoned for. And he saw years of bleakness before him, *years* of desolation. Queues and long waits and filing of petitions and more petitions and further bleakness. He felt himself

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standing before a tunnel, where he could not see the other end. How long was the tunnel? And it all looked so unnecessary, so superfluous, to him – what they were going through. (369)

All literary narratives end on a note of futility of the Partition. *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh, laments the drawing up of more and more political borders which, unfortunately, fail to divide the human experience. In *Two* (2017), another touching novel on the theme of Partition, Gulzar suggests that the Partition was not the final verdict deciding the fate of millions of lives on the subcontinent. Ever since, the split, the division has become an eternal phenomenon.

Hence, the approach of literary narratives has been more rhetorical and tone more emotional and cynical – those of Manto being most acerbic of all – than realistic and sustaining.

Partition violence had multifarious repercussions on the subcontinent. Apart from a large population that was directly consumed by it, there survived a multitudinous number of people bearing the brand of violence and shame on their hearts for the rest of their lives. Seven decades of the Partition of India have engaged themselves in recording and representing the trauma of the Partition through literary writings in multiple genres. Though in certain narratives, fictional or historical, collective or individual, repetition becomes inevitable if viewed through the statistical lens, yet, every individual's experience as a victim of or witness to the Partition has been unique and even today some of the unexplored nuances of Partition anxiety and trauma are being voiced by various organizations and sensitive writers. In *Violent Belongings: Partition, Gender, and National Culture in Postcolonial India*, Kavita Daiya argues that "partition has shaped the discourse of citizenship and belonging in South Asia and its diaspora since 1947" (Qtd. in *Revisiting India's Partition*, xxxiv).

However, these narratives are the fictional retellings of real-life experiences of Partition victims and the writers are bound more by the laws of aesthetics of literature than the depiction of experienced realities. On the other hand, Partition narratives emanating directly from those who have had the first-hand experience, who have been dislocated, marginalized and pushed to the periphery have different versions to offer, different truths to tell. These Partition stories have been retold by writers like Urvashi Butalia, Guneeta Singh Bhalla and Kavita Puri in recent times. Towards the fiftieth anniversary of the Independence of India and simultaneously, that of the Partition also, there had been an attempt to reassess

and re-examine the Partition history which “has left behind a legacy of bitterness and enmity that ensures blind hatred, terrible prejudice and deep ignorance that we are still dealing with today” (Butalia, “Looking Back on Partition” 263). A clear shift was perceptible as the focus was more on unofficial personal accounts of individual and collective loss experienced by the victims, and memory played a great role as oral history became more appealing than factual history. Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) is an influential work recording the lived experiences of the survivors of the Partition. Navtej Purewal observes:

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the partition came to signify much more than merely a historical period or event. It has become a focal point of critical reflection of both the past and present. The publication of *The Other Side of Silence* and the impact it subsequently had upon wider studies of contemporary South Asian societies represents this shift. (148-9)

Through the untiring efforts of these writers, the focus of lens has been readjusted, those who were relegated to the margins have moved to the centres. As in the case of most of the recent studies about marginalisation the voice metaphor has been used to give articulation to the unsavoury experiences which most victims would choose not to recall, leave apart their retelling. In their approach to history through personalized memory, these narratives are often questioned regarding their validity as historical documents and that makes them incline towards the category of literary narratives. In fact, the subtitle of Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* is *Voices from the Partition of India*. In the introduction of the book titled “Beginnings”, Butalia discusses the methodological problems she came across while dealing with oral histories:

As I got more and more involved in the work, I found there was a great deal I wanted to say, in addition to what the people I spoke to had said. There were their stories, as they told them, and there was what I learnt and understood from those stories. I then began to think of a way of meshing the two together. (18)

Thus, Butalia intervenes as the narrator as well as the author of the book in her dealing with ‘stories’ – a literary genre. Kavita Puri, using the same structural framework, has entitled her book *Partition Voices*. But the subtitle, *Untold British Stories*, itself betrays a fictional inclination and a merger of generic boundaries. They are, again, stories. Hence they are bound to be distinctive from facts. The author claims to record the narratives on the

basis of interviews conducted for a BBC radio programme. The point of view, however, does not remain the same in narrative form. There are only a few direct statements quoted by the narrator. Most of the times, they are third-person narratives and this shift in itself brings about a change in perspective. In both the books, the survivors of the Partition speak through the authors' language; selection of language is theirs, and the meaning is ascribed to the narratives according to their own interpretations. Here, the meaning loses its essential signification and assumes a dubious character, as it is by nature never constant, fixed or static, but always in a state of flux. The play upon the meaning—the concept given by Derrida, creates a web of connections and differences which never allows a final interpretation of a text. Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" starts with Montaigne's quotation, "We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things." The two authors have attempted to interpret the silence of the Partition victims through their own (authors') language, which "bears within itself the necessity of its own critique" ("Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" *Modern Criticism and Theory* 108).

However, the Partition of Indian subcontinent is a historical phenomenon that has had a long-lasting impact on the culture and literature of the countries involved in the process. what Mikhail Bakhtin says about the growth of the genre of novel appears relevant to the shifting approach to the Partition narratives, too, "After all, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, literature and non-literature and so forth are not laid up in heaven....The shift of boundaries between various strata (including literature) in a culture is an extremely slow and complex process" (Bakhtin 53). Hence, despite the critics' categorization of the works as non-fictional pieces of writing, it may not be unjustified to treat them as literary texts, though belonging to a different genre. Bakhtin has emphasised the relationship of novel with the other extraliterary genres like rhetoric. I. A. Richards, has explained two uses of language: emotive: "used for the sake of attitudes and emotions" and scientific: "used for the sake of reference" ("The Two Uses of Language"). The purpose of the writers here is not scientific, yet, the use of rhetoric has been kept minimum. The strategy works and lends more authenticity to the narratives which have a great emotional appeal.

Apart from the apparent structural similarity between the two works, there are many points of distinction. While the objective of Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is "to bring to the fore the unspoken, the subaltern, indeed, the "other side"," Puri's work approaches the Partition from the

perspective of those who are now literally on the other side of the continent—England (Perron 390). *Partition Voices* does not give voice to the subaltern, rather it looks back at the horrors of the Partition from a 'vantage point'. While Butalia's work is considered "an example of an outstanding feminist study" Puri's work has a multifarious approach (Perron 390). Puri's subjects range from British officers working for the empire to the migrants from the subcontinent coming from different socio-cultural, religious and class and gender identities, her own father being one of them. Not all of them were deprived of their social and material comforts. Some of them were mere witnesses. There were others who claimed not to have inflicted any violence but they were somehow instrumental in some act of violence. Their guilt was heavier than the suffering of the victims and this guilt could have a far more devastating impact on their emotional and psychological health than direct suffering. Then, there is the feminist perspective also. A large number of young women were sacrificed by their own kinsmen in the name of honour. Those, who had a narrow escape, knew the worth of life and respected the historical decision of Partition, which is an irrevocable fact of their lives.

Such people show the quality of resilience more than others. Whatever the level of suffering, they all have come out victorious, reached the heights of their professional and personal lives; it is another matter that they do not remain the same. They have known life very intimately and that makes them break their silence. Puri, throughout her work, has suggested that they survived and moved on because they had a sustaining will, determination and inner strength that did not let them break down. Psychologists term this strength as resilience. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress, such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stresses. It means, bouncing back, from a difficult experience" ("The Road to Resilience"). Most psychologists agree on the definition of resilience "as positive adaptation despite adversity" (Luther, 2006). Adversity and adaptation, thus, become the two essential factors in developing resilience.

Those who survived actually faced the hardest challenges of life and they have learnt the lessons the way no other institution can teach them. Adaptation to the new circumstances, despite a dearth of resources, an emotional vacuum created by the loss of faith in humanity and severed bonds and ties with home, required a superhuman effort and was just hoping against hope. But many of them strived to rise up even in the face of ad-

versity. Hence, their fortitude and their determination, will to move on and take life in their stride, especially when rendered in the form of multifocal narratives, become historical documents in human tolerance and resilience itself. As defined by Gill Windle, “Resilience is the process of effectively negotiating, adapting to or managing significant sources of stress and trauma. Assets and resources within the individual, their life and environment facilitate their capacity for adaptation and ‘bouncing back’ in the face of adversity. Across the life course the experience of resilience will vary” (163). Many often than not, such people are seen to bounce back to life after bearing crushing calamities.

In one of the narratives in *Partition Voices*, Harchet Singh who was only 12 years old when he left his place of birth to move to Garhshankar, their ‘desh’ in India, narrates his account of the Partition:

The food they carried had run out. It is the persistent hunger that is the abiding memory for Harchet of their journey and his crying to be fed. Harchet’s parents would pick tender leaves to eat from plants or trees wherever it was safe to get them.... One day the elders went to find water, and found corpses in the well. After that, the children were told to drink from the puddles, even if they were muddy. Muddy water was preferable to water which had lain with decomposing bodies. (103)

Mutilated bodies were a common scenario. Harchet remembers seeing somebody with his throat cut. The narrator comments, “they felt sorry for these discarded people, but soon they begin to see them so frequently that they barely noticed them” (104). Harchet Singh went to Britain in 1964 and established himself there as an electronic engineer. He is active in interfaith work also.

In another narrative, the writer recounts the horrible experience of Karam Singh who survived after he was wounded by a poisonous spear during Partition violence. As Karan Singh remembers, “They left me as dead... I don’t know how long I was unconscious. When I came around, there was a lot of weight on me and I was lying underneath it, under the dead bodies” (113). Karan Singh recollects that his father was the first to be killed by the mob. His own neighbour set fire to their house with the intention of burning Karam Singh’s mother alive, who had fractured her hip bone and could not move because of the injury. She, however, survived by jumping out of the window of the first floor of the house. Karam Singh still wonders how she found that strength despite her pain. She is, again, one of the

exemplary cases of resilience.

Recounting the details of the day while narrating his story to the narrator, Karan Singh makes strange coughing sounds, as the interviewer first comprehends, but later on realizes that it was a deep, convulsive sob. The writer was so moved that she started questioning her own method of enquiry into the whole affair. She writes, "after speaking to Karam Singh I did wonder if it was the right thing to be asking people to remember such traumatic events. I kept in touch with his daughter to check up on him. But Karam Singh wanted his story heard and preserved. Yet it was revealed with such profound sorrow" (115). Karam Singh migrated to England in 1970 and worked in hospital maintenance.

A large number of Partition survivors have lived their lives with silence as a deliberately chosen state. Speaking about Partition experience is just like scratching the wounds which have not yet healed. Yet, there are many, who through their resilience, were able to discard the rotten past by amputating the gangrened part. Despite their hardships, they have lived a wholesome life. Haroon Ahmed, who was born in 1936 in Delhi and enjoyed an affluent childhood in his grandfather's home, Windsor place, Delhi, went to Karachi in 1947 and then to Britain in 1954, from where he obtained his Ph.D. degree in 1963 from Cambridge University. After retiring from the position of the Head of the Microelectronics Research Centre of the university, he has published a number of acclaimed books on the local history of Cambridge. For Haroon, the memories of the past had "awakened many buried and very devastating moments in my life and even more so the lives of my parents" (154). Despite the trauma, he acknowledges the role of Partition in constructing the self, as "it was the making of him. If he had stayed in Delhi, he says, with all his grandfather's wealth, he may have been 'like the idle rich'" (155). He reflects, "I would have been a feudal landlord running round the estates" (155). Nonetheless, he realizes that the same was not the fate of many others, "the same thing did not happen to everybody. Of course, to my parents' and grandparents' generation, the consequences of partition were lifelong disasters" (155).

For Maneck Dalal, Partition was not a direct source of violence. Being a Parsee, he was not directly involved, but he received threats for life on account of helping the Muslims move out safely. However, he maintained his balance with great resilience and keeping his secular stance, employed a Sikh for the security of his property and gave shelter to a Hindu refugee family. The journey of his life evinces the signs of a mature vision with



a better understanding of human relationships and a successful love-life with his English wife.

Their younger generations have known and learnt from their experiences which culminates in the elevation of their own selves. Resilience has become their trait, too. However, Rutter, who is considered the father of child psychology, affirmed that resilience was a process, not a trait. He argued that it is not enough to identify protective factors, because they do not create a resilient personality in all cases. Resilience is created when these factors initiate certain processes in the individual. Rutter identified three such processes: building a positive self-image, reducing the effect of the risk factors and breaking a negative cycle to open up more opportunities for the individual (“Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms”). In another story, Iftkahr’s son Nick realizes that he might have been able to cope with the racist hatred and his own identity crisis during the post 9/11 phase when he had to discard his Muslim surname if he knew his father’s story earlier. The narrator explains, “he wishes he had known of the adversities his father had been through; it would have given him the strength to deal with the bullies” (173).

Iftkahr’s story “India was Mine as Well” may be considered the most moving of all. A young man of seventeen is uprooted from his land and has to witness the most extreme acts of inhumanity. When he is moving with his group towards a secure place, he witnesses dead bodies scattered on the road “like leaves from trees” (167). The young women of the group are abducted. He couldn’t protest, couldn’t even raise his eyes or head, “as eye contact would have meant certain death” (168). When he takes shelter in an empty house, he gets up to find the house on fire. He has to go without any food for many days. He travels to Pakistan, changes his train on the way only to find that the train he left became a ghost train of corpses. When he wakes up after falling asleep at Lahore station he finds he has been lying under the dead bodies – “Children, women all cut up their faces, the women cut up, all the details...” (169). Iftkhar went to England in 1951 when he found an opportunity. He worked in the hospitality and catering industry for many decades and married an English woman. He underwent immense suffering, but he is not broken. He reflects on his life:

Seventy years ago that journey started. So here I am... one way or another I got the chance to go to England and that was the end of my journey. and here I am. I am so happy. I survived to come here. I have grown up, got married with English girl, I have two beautiful boys... It’s a beautiful journey where I end. (175).

Nick, his son feels very proud of his father, when he says, "His story is one of struggle, survival and a journey to keep striving for success" (173).

Thus, every individual has had a unique experience, yet all these narratives have one thing in common. They prove that hardships could not shatter them. They, once again, gathered the pieces of life which was so precious to them. They had striven so hard to save it and now they could not let it go at any cost. These narrative are a testimony to the fact that no amount of adversities can dissuade one from his determination to live. Their lives themselves are the narratives in will-to-live. As Bishvanath Ghosh says in his review of the book, "there are books that serve as refrigerators preserving those memories – manuals one can turn to during dark phases – and it is heartening to find such books still coming out. Kavita Puri's book is one such" (*The Hindu Review*).

Summing up, it may well be concluded that Kavita Puri very closely models her work on Urvashi Butalia's narrative of the same pattern whom she acknowledges in her work. Both Butalia and Puri are involved with the Partition on a personal level. Butalia starts the sequence of narratives by recording the lived experiences of her mother's family; Puri brings her work to a close with her father's story. Both depict the horrors of Partition as "structures of feeling", as Raymond Williams calls them. Describing Williams' approach to history, Stephan Greenblatt comments, "'Experience,' in other words, seems to be defined by its unavailability of language. Hence, it cannot be 'found' in documentary evidence" (*Practicing New Historicism* 63). Butalia's approach is more to access history by voicing the subaltern, while Puri's sense of outrage is somewhat subdued. However, Partition narratives emerge as a genre of literature, "as the history of what hadn't quite been said" (*Practicing New Historicism* 62). But this experience is not limited to a particular community, caste or class. Every new account of the concrete experience of the Partition survivors adds to the understanding of the "lived" reality of the political event. In fact, Partition has not yet become history as "in each communal killing in the present-day subcontinent the echo of Partition reverberates" (Perron 390). Butalia herself says:

The exploration of memory and history is not something that is or can ever be finite. One cannot begin to open up memory and reach a point where one can say it is done and dusted. Every historical movement that offers up the possibility of looking at it through the prism of memory demonstrates that the more you search, the more there is that opens up. (268)

Hence, Puri seems to carry forward the project taken up by Butalia. Despite apparent similarities, her contribution to the understanding of human nature in times of trauma and distress is worthwhile. The book is deftly crafted and divided into three sections: End of Empire, Partition and Legacy, and each section is preceded by an analysis of the event. To her credit, it may be said that Kavita Puri refrains from direct commentary or philosophizing over the narrated experiences which also save the work from entering the troubled waters of political or ideological controversies. Puri's work also excludes the narratives of rape victims—a subject much discussed in Bangladeshi literature, especially through the fictional works like *Talaash* (2004) by Shaheen Akhtar translated into English by Ella Dutta as *The Search* (2011). Another important work in Bangladeshi literature is Nilima Ibrahim's *Ami Birangona Bolchi* based on her interviews of rape victims during the Liberation War of Bangladesh published quite late in 1994 and translated into English as *A War Heroine, I Speak* by Fayeza Hasanat in 2017. But again, Puri's focus is on survival strategies that ultimately led to a wholesome life which may not have been possible with such narratives. Moreover, in Puri's narratives, the reader is given, a non-chalant, dispassionate description and there is no attempt on the part of the narrator to evoke the readers' excessive sympathies or passions with the use of rhetorical language. She recounts the suffering and anguish of the partition survivors to underline their present individual success and evolution into a better species of human beings. In a true sense, if Urvashi Butalia's work initiates a new perspective to Partition narratives, Puri's work is an embodiment of sustaining hope and will to live.

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