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Narrating the Unsaid-A Study of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*

Abstract

Urvashi Butalia, in her work *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* has made a novel attempt to break free of the hegemony of the historical records by the early historians. She has gone beyond the abstract ideas of nationalism and the patriarchal depictions of sufferings to bring forth through her expression the pain, emotions and unheard voices of the victims of the Partition. Her work focuses on how these voices, which are all oral narratives, offer a different and extremely important perspective on history-a perspective which, she contends, enriches history.

According to Butalia, these oral narratives play an important part in doing away with the politics of history and the fixed discourses which govern our minds. Her work focuses on how the influences of culture, tradition and general organization of the society constrain and limit women's freedom. Honor, tradition, religion are pointed out as the main stumbling blocks on the road to the freedom of women. The author has dealt extensively with women's conditions, strongly criticizing the earlier versions of history for the lack of presence of women. The article explores how Butalia's work highlights the issues mentioned above, and attempts to complete the incomplete picture of Partition.

Keywords: Political freedom, Freedom of oral narrative.

Introduction

We all became acquainted with history as a subject, since we were in school. There we used to read history textbooks which gave us information about various incidents of the past actions. But the question arises how many of us as students found history as a subject interesting or remember all the facts of history or could feel or connect ourselves with the past incidents which changed our lives and the condition of our country so much? And if we are not able to connect ourselves with our past then what is the reason behind it? What I have felt is that by simply mandating history in schools and colleges, students' interest in the subject cannot be achieved because history textbooks tend to treat history as a science, requiring an analytical and objective response by students. Students simply go on acquiring the knowledge about past as a selection of incidents arranged synchronically against time, without any feeling for the past actions. This is the main reason that one fails to remember every detail about past incidents or fails to arouse interest in the students.

All of us might have seen in our practical life also that we generally remember those things easily which are concrete, which we can touch, taste, smell or feel because those are the things which we experience or feel on our own. Similarly, we will find that if we have to remember an abstract thing then what we generally do is to associate that abstract thing with something concrete, which helps us to remember those things for a longer span of time. In the same way, history textbooks which give us records of incidents are just abstract things for the person reading these books for the first time and thus fail to attract his interest.

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So, recently we find that many foreign universities emphasize on historical fiction or oral narratives to be included in the syllabus which can help the students not only to overcome their problems in reading history but also enables them to connect oneself with the past and thus slowly realize how studying the past can help them to understand the present. Students are also able to recall historical information more easily as it has now been associated within the context of the plot, character, setting and the theme of the narrative. As a result, they begin to absorb the historical details in the narratives or novel without even realizing that they are being instructed. In this way historical fiction or oral narrative can form lasting impression and foster more authentic learning than a textbook.

Urvashi Butalia's work *The Other Side of Silence* is also an oral narrative, as she in her book has beautifully brought out the real effect and after-effect of Partition through the interviews she conducted of people who experienced the Partition and thus tried her best to unearth the horrific tales of mass rape, honor killing, sense of rupture and pain of separation. We have read so many history books of the world and of our country in schools and colleges, have learnt and memorized so many incidents which led to the Partition of our country and formation of India and Pakistan. But we might have noticed the fact that those history books simply dealt with those incidents on the surface and its pages failed to record the pain, the trauma that the common people, women and children had to undergo in their real life. Therefore, we find that it becomes difficult for the students to co-relate themselves with those incidents in the pages of the history books as it fails to stir their emotions. It shows how the absence of "I" in the history establishes distance. These textbooks have often narrated so many wars and struggles of freedom but there are very few books in history which have brought out the after-effect of these incidents on the life of the people who in some way or the other are still suffering from trauma, pain and violence to communities who had once lived together in some kind of social contact.

In this article, I would like to focus on the politics in the creation of history in textbooks, emphasizing mainly on the topic of Partition in order to bring out the difference in history textbooks and oral narratives. At the same time, I would also like to ponder on the reason, for incorporating oral narratives as reference books for history students, if not as history textbooks, in school curriculum. History textbooks we find have been mostly written from the elitist point of view, which fails to take into account feminist historiography, history of peasants and other subaltern groups who played an important role in the freedom struggle. On analyzing these history

books, we can find a deep ingrained politics behind the writing of history textbooks as the matter in a history textbook depends solely on the author who is writing the book. What matters the most is from which view point he is writing the book. Butalia has also in this work of hers quoted James Young where he poses this question "How can we know the holocaust except through the many ways in which it is handed down to us?"¹ We come to know about history through its literary, fictional, historical, political representation because it is not facts which is important, but how people remember those facts and represent them. So the way of representation in the books and who and how they are presenting to us also matters a lot. Oral narratives generally offer the students stories of individuals who have no place in textbooks, i.e., the ordinary men and women who faced the Partition and lived to tell the tale, people who had lost their whole families and what remains with them are only memories of places, which can never be revisited. These stories of history when read by students arouse in them a sense of critical thinking.

Butalia's this work on oral narrative has played a great role in the Partition history as it has worked to render many others invisible in the history books, including women, old men, children and even untouchables, with little more emphasis on feminist historiography because of the fact that in the history of Partition, women's condition remained invisible. Butalia justifies it through her saying in the text "...me too as a feminist, and someone interested in history, particularly the history of those who have been marginalized in the broader world of history writing... how do human beings relate to their history? It seemed to me that, at least where Partition history was concerned, there was a contradiction in the history that we knew, that we had learnt, and the history that people remembered."¹ Butalia at the same time has tried to clear out the fact that although the book is not only about women, the stories were collected and the text itself written from an explicitly feminist framework, but at the same time it results in an increased attention to other historically marginalized voices. She says in the book "I have found the tools of feminist historiography to be enormously enabling because it allows you to listen to that most unheard of things, silence to understand it, to work with it.... If something is shrouded in silence, then speech must be good, it must be liberating...the stories of women, children, untouchables and many others, have been silenced both at the level of the state and at the level of history writing.... In my work, the more I looked at women's voices and found them inserting themselves into the text, the more I realized that the silences did

not exist only around women, but also around others, those whose silence has been less important to society. The search for a history of women was what then led me to a search for a history of others. The voices of women, children, of untouchables, to me provide not only a different perspective on the history of Partition, but they also establish the history as a process, a continuing history which lives in our lives today in a variety of ways."¹

Thus, we find how oral narrative can help students to understand better what has happened in the past, what people did at the time of the event, specific actions taken, why the event took place and the consequences of the event. It also helps students to understand things in broader contexts, such as social forces created and shaped by people or the ways certain economic conditions affected people's lives. Historical fiction or oral narrative through its multiple characters and perspectives can provide better voice to those who might have been silenced or adversely affected by a particular event, thus inviting students to question why some groups had less power, influence or privilege than others. In the same light we find Butalia's this work is of immense help for the history studies as her work has given voice to the unspoken, providing students opportunity to study history's forgotten victims whose stories would otherwise have been left untold or unrecorded.

Therefore, the major question which arises before us is that when we know that through oral narratives, a new and different perspective can arise which will only enrich history, then why is oral narratives books like that of Butalia's *Other Side of Silence* or historical fiction books like Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* have not been included in history syllabus of students? At this point, the hidden truth behind the politics of formulation of history textbooks comes to the forefront. These history books which since a long time have been written following the hegemony of writing history from above, ignoring the labor history, women history, social history who had been ignored so there was a felt need of writing history from below, which was only possible through the oral narrative. Still we find that many historians criticize these oral narratives on the ground that whether its records are true or not. Butalia in her book has quoted James Young to explain this statement, where he says "Whatever 'fictions' emerge from the survivor's accounts are not deviation from the 'truth' but are part of the truth in any particular version. The fictiveness in testimony does not involve disputes about facts, but the inevitable variance in perceiving and representing the facts, witness by witness, language by language, culture by culture."¹

For those who still cannot have trust on these oral narratives can simply go for testing the memories for reliability and validity by comparing and analyzing oral testimonies with other historical sources.

On a broader area, if we see, we will find that oral narratives have many advantages over normal history books. Firstly, oral history had been a very important means of investigating the majority of lives which had remained ignored in the pages of history textbooks. Secondly, unlike history books, oral narratives were not just about describing a dead past. It was about using the past to shape the present. In oral narratives we find that they not only recognize relationship with the subjects of their studies, but they also had made their best effort to empower people who had been doubly marginalized in history and then in historiography and thirdly, the most important benefit of oral narratives is that their attempt to write "history from below," which means encouraging wider participation in the production of history. These oral narratives encourage students to approach the history books through the deconstructive methods and thus help to break down the boundaries between the educational institution and the world, between the historical language and the language of ordinary people.

In this light, I have found Butalia's book very helpful from the historical purpose and also from the point of view of knowing the hidden truths behind Partition. The author rightly said in her book that Partition was not something confined to history books only, there was division in everyday life as well-loss, sharing, friendship, enmity, grief and joy, with a painful regret and nostalgia for loss of home, country and friends with strong dimension to create them afresh. Though the Partition was over, still it was everywhere-communal tension, religious fundamentalism, division on the basis of religion (7). These facts that Butalia has brought out in her book are very important to know and understand what Partition actually was and how it changed not only the history of our country but also the life history of many people whose voices none of the history books writer attempted to record. Her book at the same time has brought forth many other hidden stories and truths related to Partition, like for example, the politics behind creation of religious differences among the countrymen by the Britishers which led many people to kill their neighbors just because they belonged to a different religious community, the politics that existed in the name of caste and gender where the honor of the house was only related to the women of their community and their home. That time and even today we find that the purity of women was of much more importance within India, to Hindus and Sikhs-perhaps because the Hindu

religion places a greater emphasis on purity and pollution. Thus, the real fear related to women was of dishonor. Her work, therefore, shows that it is only when one is able to look behind and beyond the 'facts' of Partition that these different, multi-layered histories begin to unfold.

The change which I myself felt after reading Butalia's book was that, till I read her book I had accepted and had known only the incidents of Partition written in history textbooks and had also considered them as truth and had taken them for granted, but it was only after reading Butalia's book that I could visualize Partition and could see in a broader perspective the effects and the after-effects of Partition. It not only aroused in me a critical viewpoint of the different facts but also served for me as an eye-opener to many different vistas. Reading this book really made me think how the history book writers failed to introduce it in the history of Partition the major incidents related to women, children, untouchables, old people, etc., who suffered a lot and still whose accounts remained unheard and unnoticed. None of the history books gives the account of the thousands of women who had to jump into the wells to drown themselves in order to avoid rape or forced religious conversion, or the incident of a father beheading their own children so that they can avoid the same dishonorable fate. In the book, we find the example of many people like Bir Bahadur Singh, who had watched his father kill his sisters. Hundreds of women had been 'martyred' simply to 'save' the purity of the religion (205). In this book, she also talks about a women's journal, *Manushi*, which published a review of a Gujarati book about a women's journal *Mool Suta Ukhde* (Torn from the Roots). The book was a sort of memoir and documentary account by a woman called Kamlaben Patel, her work with abducted and raped women at Partition. She had written and analyzed that about 75,000 women, had been raped and abducted on both sides of the border at Partition. Apart from that other violence had also been visited on women-many were paraded naked in the streets, several had their breasts cut off, their bodies were tattooed with marks of other religion, women were forced to have sex with men of other religion, many were impregnated (132). Thus we find on reading the oral narratives in this book that the history of Partition was a history of deep violation-both physical and mental-for women (131). Women had to face violence both from their own families and also from their own communities.

Similar was the case also with the children and old people, who were abandoned or who simply got left behind, of whom we have no record. Some of their families left them behind, others had been abducted,

some were in hospital and in camps and some were there who lost all relatives. Among the children who were abandoned most of them were girls. Butalia in the chapter "Children," has brought out through an interview with a social worker the grave conditions of the children of Partition. The social worker said that most of the children abandoned at camps were girl children and among them many young girls then ended up as domestic workers or as prostitutes, swelling the members of the 'whole generation' of young girls that the writer Krishna Sobti said had been 'sacrificed' to Partition (282). It is really sad to know that so many small children, who had no fault and who could not even speak on their own, had to suffer so much ignorance and became victims of the country's politics and remained unnoticed and unattended by many historians. Not only children and women, even many old people, untouchables, prisoners were also there who had to suffer so much and had remained silent unless the oral narratives and historical fictions rendered the invisible to become visible and had helped them to come from the margins to the outer.

Butalia, thus, rightly said toward the end of the book how important it was for the historians revisiting history to speak to the survivors to gather their testimonies, in order to simply interpret and to train a different eye on the past (349-350). To her, she said, these stories of these marginalized people were moving reminders of many hidden ways in which Partition touched upon the lives of the people. Thus, I found, on reading these types of books which provide incidents and many harsh events in the form of story. All these interviews and stories provide the thread that weaves the chapters together in such a way that the reader automatically finds it interesting and also helpful to keep them in mind while reading. So, we can thus conclude that these oral narratives had been really helpful for students reading history books. So these types of books if not also included in the current curriculum, as it cannot encompass all the past incidents, can at least be used as a supplementary curriculum for students which will enable them to connect with their history and thus help them to remember things better.

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