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CAN THE MARGINALIZED SPEAK?
HEARING WOMEN VOICES IN URVASHI BUTALIA'S "THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE"

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ABSTRACT

Marginality is generally used to describe and analyze socio-cultural, political and economic spheres, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources, and full participation in social life. Marginality in the 20th century does not only involve the condition of the underprivileged class or race but also the real condition and position of women in the society. The eternal struggle of women attempting to occupy the central position of the patriarchal societal structure has been and still is a major subject for marginality related discussion. My paper would discuss how the oppressed voices, the identity of the 'subaltern' or 'other' women are silenced and ignored, through a re-reading of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* where she talks about the victims who survived the traumatic event of Partition in 1947. Through interviews conducted over a ten-year period and examination of diaries, letters, memoirs etc Butalia enquires how people on the margins of history have been affected by this epochal event. To understand how and why certain events become shrouded in silence, she traces facets of her own poignant and partition-scarred family history before investigating the stories of other people and their experiences of the effects of this violent disruption.

Key words: marginality, subaltern, other, silence, voices, identity, trauma

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Marginality in the wider sense indicates a socio-cultural, political and economic situation, where disadvantaged people struggle to gain access to resources which are normally denied to them, and their attempt of full participation in social life where they will not only counted merely as a part of the population but where their decisions, convenience and inconveniences would be heeded. Marginality in the 20th century does not only involve the condition of the underprivileged class or race but also the real condition and position of women in the society. The eternal struggle of women attempting to occupy the central position of the patriarchal societal structure has been and still is a major subject for marginality related discussion.

Human history is a history of power struggle. Right from the very beginning humans have been trying to establish their own significant position in the society. At first their struggle was against Nature but gradually as they learned to master Nature their field of struggle shifted to a point where they began to fight with each other for power. All the histories of human invasions are rooted in the basic desire of gaining power and of mastering the other. That scenario of power struggle also changed with due course of time when the conflict or began basing on gender. The men or the comparatively 'powerful' section of the mass began to exercise their superiority over the comparatively 'weak' section of the mass: the women. Thus began the history of women oppression. While talking of women subjugation and how they become less significant and marginalized in the Indian context during the twentieth century, the reference of the Partition of India becomes all the more important and indispensable. As Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov observe:

"Gender and nation are social and historic constructions, which intimately participate in the formation of one another: nations are gendered; and the topography of the nation is mapped in gendered terms (feminized soil, landscapes, and boundaries and masculine movement over these spaces)."

(Ivekovic and Mostov 9)

The political Partition of India is considered to be one of the most atrocious events in recent human history. The series of events that followed the epochal event: violence, mass migration, rehabilitation are equally or even more terrific than the actual event. But the 'history' of Partition seemed to be associated mainly with political developments which were the real causes behind it but very little research or thought have been devoted to other issues related to it – what had happened to the millions of people who had to live through this time, what happened to the huge number of women who were abducted, raped and tortured in the name of this political alias communal frenzy? These are the things which are extremely difficult to capture factually. Could it be then said that they had no place in the history of Partition? Why did they live on so vividly in individual and collective memory?

The Partition experience, as the survivors say, cannot be easily put away – its deep, personal meanings, its profound sense of rupture, the differences it endangered or strengthened still lived on in so many people's lives. Partition besides being just a political divide or a division of property, liabilities and land was essentially a division of the heart. It separated families across an arbitrarily drawn physical border and it became impossible for most families to get reunited after this mass movement of men and property. As Mostov points out:

"Border fantasies develop with the gendering of boundaries and spaces (land-scapes, farmlands, and battlefields) and with the collectivizing of 'our women' and 'their women'. Masculine actors invade (or fill) feminine spaces. The nation is adored, and adorned, made strong and bountiful or loathed, raped and defiled, its limbs torn apart, its womb invaded. The vulnerability and seduction of women/borders (space/ nation) require the vigilance of body guards."

(Mostov 10)

The Partition was not a struggle between a set of good and bad-s, the most unfortunate thing is that families from both the sides had a history of being both the victims and the victimized in the general story of violence. The 'facts' which we believe to be facts may be one side of the story, if we look into them critically we can find the 'other' side of the story as well. History of Partition is always or at least in most cases shrouded by political affiliations which often prevent us to know the actual facts. This deliberate silencing apart from having political connotations also are heavily laden with sociological factors whose most apt evidence is the silencing of the women stories, their sufferings, their experiences, their trauma, their memories. Is there any way in which history can make space for the small, the individual voice?

Urvashi Butalia in *The Other Side of Silence* talks about those women who are made to recollect the horrific days of Partition in order to know about their first hand experiences without being influenced by the men folk of their families who try to dominate their voices, their stories making them lapse into a state of silence. Is there really a thing called a 'gendered telling' of the Partition? Butalia through interviews conducted over a ten-year period and examination of diaries, letters, memoirs tries to formulate and reconstruct the lost

voices of Partition which include the voices of the people telling stories, the voices through which they speak in memoirs, diaries, autobiographies, those that emerge from the official narratives, those that are evident in communal discourses.

The women narratives and testimonies have offered a different way of viewing history. One may question that how exactly history would appear when viewed through the women's lens? How does it evolve in narratives and testimonies when women talk about the missed out histories of women? The fact is, the 'telling' was or rather is always phallogocentric. The position of women in the society-be it at the time of Partition or otherwise is that of the oppressed. The eternal struggle of women attempting to occupy the central position of the patriarchal societal structure has been and still is a major subject for marginality related discussion. Many of the women were forced to religious conversions apart from being abducted and raped and brutally killed. The women body became the major site where the 'other' male folk could exercise their power, their hegemony, moreover their 'masculinity'. Women were thus reduced to mere platforms or agents where the communal frenzy could find its cruelest manifestation because 'polluting' women of a particular community would mean a much desired and satisfactory means of 'revenge' over the other community. Women jumping into wells to drown themselves so as to avoid rape and torture and fathers and husbands beheading their own daughters and wives to 'save' them from the dishonorable fate. While this was the overall scenario during Partition days, situations after that were even worse. Women who were abducted, kidnapped and lost when recovered by their respective families were not accepted and welcomed in their families.

Butalia deals with some women who went through the horrendous experiences of Partition and whose first hand experiences of the event tell us much of the hitherto unheard, unheeded stories of women in general. She realizes the fact it would be much more difficult for the women to speak up about their traumatic stories, to relive the horrible past. She also realizes that in order to be able to 'hear' the lost women voices it was necessary to pose different questions altogether and the most important thing was that they should be allowed to 'speak', to voice their repressed anguish, their untold stories, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. The men in most cases tried to avoid the stories of the women and the women themselves often repressed their real stories under societal pressure or whatever. They almost never spoke about themselves; even they denied that they had anything worthwhile to say at all. Butalia talks about the story of Zainab and Buta Singh where the latter had bought the girl and married her. They were believed to be in love with each other and had two children and were living their lives happily. Buta Singh's brothers in fear of division of their property called Zainab's family to take her back. Zainab was forced to leave with one of her children. Buta Singh deeply in love with her decided to convert to Islam and go to Pakistan to get his wife back. He managed to go to Pakistan only to find that Zainab was forced to marry her cousin brother in the new country and finally Buta Singh committed suicide. This story became a legend in terms of eternal love immortalizing Buta Singh but the other side of the story was never disclosed. No one enquired upon the condition of limitations of Zainab who was treated as a commodity on whom different men claimed their ownerships at different points of time. The enormous amount of pain for her dead lover and the killing 'silence' into which she wrapped the rest of her life was something which was never explored.

The loss of abducted women to men of the 'other' religion was also a loss to their 'original' families. These and not the new families which the women may now be in were the legitimate families and it was to these that the women needed to be restored. If this meant disrupting the relationships that they may now be in, that they had accepted for whatever reason, this had to be done. The assumption was that even if asked for their opinion women would not be able to voice an independent one because they were in situations of oppression. Even in their 'own' families women are seldom in situations where they can freely voice their opinions or make a choice. Nonetheless these were the families which were held 'legitimate'; women therefore had to be removed from those 'other' non-acceptable families and relocated into the 'real' ones. This for the State was considered to be an honorable deed. The issue of Partition not only provided the men folk the rationale constructing and reconstructing the identity of women it also served the men the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation's honor.

The violence that women faced in the aftermath of Partition is shrouded in many layers of silence. If we hear little about the rape and abduction of women in historical accounts, what we do know about violence in general relates only to 'men' of the 'other' community. The abduction and rape of women, the physical mutilation of their bodies, the tattooing of their sexual organs with symbols of the other religion – these acts had been universally condemned. But no mention was made of this kind of violence by anyone – neither the families nor the State or indeed by historians. And yet its scale was not small. While the abducted women entered the realm of silence, women who were killed by their own families entered the realm of 'martyrdom'.

The narrative aims at looking at 'voices' both in people's narratives and testimonies as well as in letters and documents. The recovery of 'voice' however is not unproblematic. When the history of these voices is written, it is almost always written by 'others' – how people define their self identities, and how these identities get represented are two different things. If recovering 'voices' is not unproblematic, this is further complicated by the fact that the voices themselves are differentiated. The most frequent question that is faced is that if people have lived with their experiences, in some ways they have made their peace with them, what is to be gained by pushing them to remember, to dredge up the many unpleasant memories? There is a dilemma between the roles and responsibilities of the researchers as well. The question therefore arises is – is it better to be silent or to speak? Is it better to allow silence or to force speech?

The Indian nationalist ideology is at its very core or one can say from its very inception is gendered. The issue of 'Woman Question' therefore becomes less significant in relation to the nationalist discourse by the end of the nineteenth century. It is sort of wrapped up with an unusual kind of silence which can be referred to as a deliberate national denial to make the issue of women a subject of negotiation with the colonial state. According to Partha Chatterjee, the 'home' then becomes the discursive site of nationalist victory whereas the 'world' has been ceded to the colonial state. The male nationalist turns inward, reifying the home, and women's place within it, as a spiritualized 'inner space' that contests colonial hegemony. Therefore it is possible to see a kind of logic at work; if the family or home is the site of nationalist silence and women's subjectivities are located in the home, women's agency is itself subject to a kind of silencing.

Women's subjectivities or their stories are often refracted or deviated or one can say twice removed from 'reality' because their discourse is always represented through third person accounts. Even where a woman's words might be reported as direct speech, they appear as fragments. Thus middle-class women are often rendered 'speechless' by the records. Colonial records emphasize more on 'how' women spoke rather than 'what' they spoke. In fact the records often attempt to deny the impact of women's speech by implying that even within the elite nationalist circle they were made to speak rather than speak spontaneously.

"For the 'figure' of woman, the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves...if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow..."

(Spivak)

Jyotirmoyee Devi does not raise the question: why are women's bodies subjected to a gendered form of communal hostility? Instead, she analyzes how women's bodies are made the preferred sites for the operation of power diffused throughout everyday domestic life. She critiques the over-emphasis on chastity and tabooed social contacts among Hindus that led to their abandoning the women abducted and/or raped during the communal riots. In doing so, her work breaks the silence surrounding the sexually-victimized women that has operated as an effective denial of their citizenship.

The women were important only as objects, in the sense that their bodies were to be recovered and returned to their 'owners' or to whom they 'belonged'. Though the entire concept of 'belonging' becomes extremely insignificant and even futile in a situation when countries get divided along imaginary lines, the sense of 'belonging' for women is even more intangible as it is directly associated with sexuality, honor, chastity and even family, community and country. Nationalist anxiety about colonialism manifested itself in, and intensified, gender discriminations and the discursive conceptions around chastity in the colonial and nationalist era clearly had concrete consequences for women, because their bodies were not simply sites for discourse but were also sites of patriarchal constraint and violence. The negation of abducted wives,

daughters, mothers, and sisters was a dramatic demonstration of the fact that nationalist discursive constructions of femininity held adequate scope for violence in itself.

The objectification of female body reaches its zenith when the raped body is even dissociated with the conventional concept of the purity. The inevitability of rape leaves women with the choice of committing suicide so that she can make a place within the narratives of the nation as a significant and 'pure' citizen. Those who survive rape are refused entry into the domestic space of the new nation. The purity of the family therefore mirrors the purity of the nation.

Literature itself is marked by silence about violence and this silence serves as a pedagogical purpose in reframing an attitude toward partition history. Charting the histories of women's oppression acquires the semantics of a political concern. Questions of historical visibility or the denial thereof, the constitution of the political subject through history, and the deliberate evasions/ perversion of history become very important as the state manipulates the process of the dissemination of histories.

It is a matter great concern as to why the history of Partition hitherto had been deficient in recounting how Partition had an impact on the lives of ordinary people, or what it had actually meant to them? Is there any logical explanation behind the reluctance of the historians in not even trying to explore the 'true' side of this ambiguous history of Partition? Have adequate measures been taken in unfolding the feelings, the emotions, the pain, the anguish, the trauma, the senses of loss, the silences in which the lives of the survivors lay shrouded? Was this just a chosen negligence on the historic front or something graver than this? Can we therefore say that there is a hint of refusal on the part of historians to encounter this perception of trauma?

Women are unfortunately left out of the process of nation building which is essentially seen as a part of 'male' activities like waging war, conquest, destroying the 'other', capturing territories, making governments, setting up the Nation state, etc and women therefore are obviously out of these activities. For the men who were involved in the process of nation building, the loss of their women to the men of the 'other' religion represented a failure on their part to hold on to their own.

What do these narratives rather the male narratives of the nation tell us? Would they have been different when narrated by women? In men's narratives of the nation, women are often seen as or rather reduced to symbols of national and family honor. But in women's narratives the concerns are often different. The need to keep the family together, to contain grief, to put closures on unexplained deaths, to try and somehow contain the violence that such a situation inevitably unleashes. It is time to tune our modes of concern into learning to listen to the unheard and unsaid things, so that we begin to hear women's narratives of the nation. If that is done, one is likely to come up with different and uncharted inferences about the grave process of nation building. It is obvious that when adequate effort, opportunity and importance are provided to the so called 'marginalized' women they can pretty well speak or voice their perceptions and narratives; the only challenge is to get the appropriate listeners.

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