



Memory and Amnesia in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*

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Abstract

Memory and amnesia are closely connected to each other. Amnesia occurs when certain events of life are forgotten voluntarily or involuntarily depending on the intensity or effect of the events. But amnesia is more of a medical term than the simplified meaning of forgetting. Amnesia occurs when one undergoes certain medical injuries and also traumatic events. Memory and amnesia may occur both in individual and collective levels. The feelings and emotions of people belonging to a particular community are more or less the same so far as a historical or social event is concerned. The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was an unforeseen event dawning upon the people of the subcontinent can be marked as the darkest period of Indian History. This event forced millions of people to cross the border, thousands were left dead, thousands of women were raped, killed and abducted. Urvashi Butalia's memoir *The Other Side of Silence* is a sincere document on the Partition experience of the survivors both Hindu and Muslim. This paper is an attempt to analyze the concepts of memory and amnesia related to Partition and its survivors in *The Other Side of Silence*. The theoretical framework of memory and amnesia shall be taken into consideration while elaborating the ideas in the text.

Keywords: Partition, Memory, Amnesia, Engineered Forgetting

Introduction

The common way of understanding memory is to conform to the object of a search which is to recall or to recollect. A major influence on the claim of memory is to be faithful to the past. The twentieth century has seen massive migration of people due to varied reasons which has led to a good

number of works related to memory and nostalgia. The concept of memory is closely connected with historical events of the world. According to Anne Whitehead, memory has a wider connotation which not only just signifies a thing that the mind stores but connotes multiple layers of meaning. Memory and amnesia are closely related to one another. Amnesia occurs when certain events of life are forgotten voluntarily or involuntarily depending on the intensity or effect of the events. Memory and amnesia may occur both in individual and collective levels. The feelings and emotions of people belonging to a particular community are more or less the same so far as a particular historical or social event is concerned. The collective memories are buried by a particular community for slow healing of psychological wounds which may usher in a ray of survival. The memories of such events are so gruesome that without amnesia there will be no chance of living a sane life. The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 is such type of an unforeseen event dawning upon the people of the subcontinent can be marked as the darkest period of Indian history. This event forced millions of people to cross the border, thousands were left dead and thousands of women were raped and abducted. Displacement, uprootedness, murder, arson and loot engulfed the sky of the continent even before Partition. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) is a sincere document on the Partition experience of survivors both Hindu and Muslim. This article is an attempt to analyse the concepts of memory and amnesia with reference to Partition and its survivors, particularly as recorded in *The Other Side of Silence*. The methodology to be adopted for the purposes of this paper is analytical and based on secondary sources. The theoretical framework of

memory and amnesia shall be taken into consideration while elaborating the ideas in the text.

The Other Side of Silence by Urvashi Butalia was first published in 1998. In the second edition published in 2017, the author has added an introduction entitled 'Return' in which she talks about how things and circumstances have changed gradually in the society and the country since the time of the book's first publication. She is not very positive about the changes taken place within the country. She finds the divisive powers to be stronger today effecting the unity and integrity of the country.

If people of my generation grew up in what could broadly be defined as a secular India, today the divisive power of religious majoritarianism is all around us and pressing inwards, hemming us into identities we have never wished to own (Butalia xi).

The memories of Partition have been manipulated by the state, media and myth to such an extent that the enmity between the people of the two countries is never going to cease easily. By raising issues of religious persecution, militancy and politics concerning Jammu and Kashmir; distance between the two countries is strategically created. The propaganda influenced way of understanding the memories of Partition has led people to descend into collective amnesia and engineered forgetting. The traces of a long history of solidarity between the Hindus and the Muslims, the illustrations of a composite culture in the undivided India are sweet memories but are unfortunately pushed under the carpet due to propaganda at the present time. So the literary works that have been produced on the Partition and the aftermath have determined the event as a rupture, as the Indian Holocaust.

The project of engineered forgetting— whether conducted by the individual, the society, or the state; whether through censorship or simple denial— comes under scrutiny in the powerful literary works of these authors, and reveals the awesome and multifarious colors of Partition (Stewart & Kumar xvi).

Partition and Memory

The Partition of India included the division of Bengal province of British India into East Pakistan and West Bengal (India) and the similar Partition of the Punjab province into west Punjab (now Punjab, Pakistan) and East Punjab (now Punjab, India). The Partition was promulgated in the Indian Independence act 1947 and resulted in the end of the British Raj in India. The border between the two nations— India and Pakistan— was determined by the Radcliffe line, named after the London Lawyer, Sir Cyril Radcliffe. Riots between the religious communities started even before Partition and massive migration of people took place between both sides of the border resulting in violence and bloodshed. Because the Partition continues to be discussed and debated even today, continually altering and reconstructing our memory of the event, it may be termed “*opus de profectus*”— a work in progress. Thus the past is never silenced but lingers at the present time and will continue in future.

The Other Side of Silence by Urvashi Butalia is considered to be the first book to divulge into the memories of Partition which reveals individual’s experience of the catastrophic event. The written history of India does not reflect the trauma, violence, experience of dislocation during Partition. So people like Urvashi Butalia have tried to bring out the reality of Partition through oral

narratives. Therefore Butalia states, “I focus on the stories of the smaller, often invisible, players: ordinary people, women, children, scheduled castes. I do this principally through interviews and oral narratives” (Butalia 11). Urvashi Butalia’s family was dislocated during Partition. Being Sikhs, the family had to uproot themselves from Lahore, their land of birth for fear of life and move to India. So, it can be said that there can be no other person better equipped than Urvashi to depict the memories of Partition in such a tenacious way. History is repetitive. Some events of history are so heartbreaking and horrific that in the words of Butalia, it “does not give you leave to forget so easily” (Butalia 31). Urvashi belongs to the second generation of Partition. Her parents had to migrate from Lahore to India during Partition but her uncle (Ranamama) insisted on staying back. As a strategy of survival he converted himself into Islam and had a Muslim wife. Urvashi Butalia went to Lahore long after Partition and met Ranamama and during the few days of her stay at Pakistan she could discover the sad memories which silenced Ranamama these long years. To stay in Pakistan was his own choice but he felt himself an outsider even after his conversion. “Even today, when I walk out to the market I often hear people whispering, ‘Hindu, Hindu’. No. you don’t know what it is like. They never forgive you for being a convert” (Butalia 38). Again, he honestly confesses, “One thing I’ll tell you, I have not slept one night in these forty years without regretting my decision, not one night. Your past follows you, it hounds you” (Butalia 38). This is the fate of Ranamama. Though he did not leave his own country, was not physically dislocated and displaced, psychologically and metaphorically he was certainly alienated and exiled. He felt himself to be a second grade citizen facing the wrath and the sarcastic

remarks of the people of Pakistan. He was not considered to be a loyal citizen of Pakistan as he was a converted one. Ranamama felt overwhelmed at the visit of his niece. Instead of his own immediate family he felt Urvashi to be closer to his heart. The Partition had such varied affects upon individuals. Persons like Ranamama did not leave his birthplace but suffered dislocation from what is called home. His home is now not home but an unbearable place to live in. The people who really were dislocated and were forced to cross the border, they could at least live peacefully in an alien land (later became their motherland) although after long struggle without fear. The alien land embraced the refugees with open arms and it became their *watan*. But those who decided to stay back became aliens and betrayers in their own country as in the case with Ranamama. The stories of Partition with subjective and collective memories like that of Ranamama have been kept under cover so far until people like Urvashi Butalia have unveiled them. Therefore in the editor's note of the book *Crossing Over* edited by Frank Stewart and Sukrita Paul Kumar, it has been stated that the oral-history narratives in Urvashi Butalia's collection *The Other Side of Silence* reflect what she calls "the layers of silence" and their anguish as a result of keeping their stories secret for decades." (Stewart and Kumar xviii)

The memories of Partition are transferred to Urvashi Butalia by her own relatives, acquaintances and other survivors. Urvashi's mother had to leave her own mother when she crossed the border, from Pakistan to Hindustan. Her brother Rana stayed back with his mother. The separation of mother and child is probably one of the saddest and even traumatic experiences, the scar of which can never be erased. This is not only the case with Butalia's mother but "*there is no way of knowing how*

many parents lost their children in the sweep of this history, no way of knowing how many of them were lost by accident and how many by design” (Butalia 54).

A definite record of separation between parents and children is not possible to find. While much of India basked in glorification when freedom was attained, very few people could comprehend that many people had encountered shock and brutality due to unwarranted violence and displacement. Memory carries on with itself certain states of mind which are seemingly mysterious. Partition was such a massive event that millions of victims, apart from being physically abused, were affected psychologically which made them hysteric or insane under the impulse of traumatic memory. *The Other Side of Silence* records Butalia’s painstaking efforts to meet women victims of Partition whom she cajoled into opening up their buried memories of the event. The traumatic memories are usually kept dormant within the victims to afford them a certain amount of mental peace. But these memories cannot be suppressed always and in times of congeniality these are evoked. When Butalia meets Damayanti Sahgal, she finds out that Damayanti’s biggest trauma is her sense of homelessness. A sudden change from a protective environment to a situation of homelessness and desperation can be felt only by those who have the first-hand experience of such an abrupt and life changing event. Damayanti reveals that she did not find a home of her own in the new country and to keep herself busy she involved herself in public life. She started recovering many abducted women and visited Pakistan in spite of its hostile environment to identify women victims of Partition. Another interviewee, Kamla Ben, reveals that the memories of Partition were things that had to be kept in abeyance and so she became a social worker trying to help

women in distress. But she has not written her experiences, which makes Butalia question the reason behind her reticence. The reply she receives is, "*I have seen such abnormal things, I kept asking myself, what is there to write, why should I write in...*" (Butalia 133) Paul Ricoeur talks about 'ordinary memory' and 'ordinary forgetting'. Ordinary forgetting follows the fate of happy memory: it is silent about its neural base. "Ordinary forgetting in this respect on the same silent side as ordinary memory" (Ricoeur 427). Partition did not leave any happy memory so there will never be any ordinary forgetting. Though memory and forgetting are interrelated, but the types may be different. Paul Ricoeur again opined about the 'obsession of past' which "is related to that of repetition of the memories of the past" (Ricoeur 449). Ricoeur explains that:

Under the title obsession—characterizing a period—a phenomenon such as the rebirth of a Jewish memory provides a concrete content to the idea that, when we fix a gaze upon an aspect of the past—the Occupation—we blind ourselves to another—the extermination of the Jews. (Ricoeur 452)

Just like the Jewish Holocaust, the Partition is the Indian Holocaust which leads to 'obsession of past.' The past of such events is evoked at times as it leaves its imprint on the sand of time. The characters whom Butalia interviewed are victims of Partition. They under no circumstances can do away with this 'obsession.' But they engage themselves in some alternative works to forget the gruesome past. "Seeing one thing is not seeing another. Recounting one drama is forgetting another" (Ricoeur 452). When Butalia interviews several families about Partition, they remain silent. They do not want to speak about the event, leading Butalia to wonder: "Why had they

made no mention of the rape and abduction of women? Were these deliberate erasures or could it be that I had asked the wrong questions?" (Butalia 133). Butalia is baffled by the silence on the part of the people. The Partition divided the Indian subcontinent but the most hurting matter was that it created enmity and ferocity permanently between India and Pakistan. The result is the different wars fought between the two countries at different times, terrorist activities etc. "Mass scale migration, death destruction, loss—no matter how inevitable Partition seemed, no one could have fore seen the scale and ferocity of bloodshed and enmity it unleashed" (Butalia 188). The post-Partition generations in both the countries have seldom experienced the intensity of religious fanaticism that resulted in the trauma of Partition. Consequently, memories of the traumatic event, especially for those who did not experience the horrors first hand, have been shaped for the most part by fictionalised narratives produced by such writers as Saadat Hasan Manto and Bapsi Sidhwa in Pakistan and Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni and Chaman Nahal, among others, in India. *The Other Side of Silence* marks a singular intervention in this memory making process by recovering and rediscovering authentic accounts of those who were variously victims, survivors, and even perpetrators of untold horrors.

Simultaneously, however, there has existed in both countries, political propaganda for vested interests which has sought to refashion the memories motives along religious grounds creating confusion among simple, peace loving peoples. Ananya Jahanara Kabir rightly comments,

The memory politics of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh reveal imaginative alternatives to modes of self-fashioning that devolve around the

persecution of minorities, religious fundamentalism, and ongoing conflicts in peripheral frontier zones.

(Kabir 29)

But the present generation, the young minds encourage positive ideas, they realize the repercussions that propaganda can create; so they believe in shared responsibilities of establishing peace and tranquillity in both the countries.

Amnesia of Partition

Butalia not only speaks about the women victims of Partition, but also she talks about men and children who had undergone both physical and psychological effects of the event. She interviews Bir Bahadur Singh who confesses about his father having killed twenty five girls in front of his own eyes with his *kirpan* in order to keep their honour (to retain their purity). Along with his daughters he had to kill other girls of his neighbourhood during the communal riots. “A father who kills his daughter, how much of a victim, how helpless he must be” (Butalia 243). He has to reconcile with the past by forcing himself to amnesia so that the past memory does not disturb him. Butalia meets Trilok Singh who was nine years old during Partition. The decision of his father and his two uncles of killing the children and women before they proceeded to India could not be accepted by Trilok. “They took a decision to do what had by now become common in Hindu and Sikh families: kill those who were seen to be vulnerable—women, children, the old and infirm” (Butalia 252). This was essentially a monstrous strategy of self-preservation rooted in the discourse of patriarchy. In order to save themselves the men folk were even prepared to sacrifice their wives and children in a form of honour

killing. In this instance Trilok Singh saved himself by pleading his father not to kill him. But Butalia records that a guilty consciousness permeated relations between Trilok and his uncles afterwards, "...both (Trilok and Mangal, Trilok's uncle) were tied to each other in a sort of 'conspiracy' of silence: the deaths hung around them like constant presence. But they were never referred to" (Butalia 253). Mutual understanding and compassion were not only lost amongst the religious communities but also died in the families. Therefore Satish Gujral, one of the victims of the tragedy, remarks, "After all these years, when I sit and wonder about the biggest loss incurred during the Partition? Money, property, home life? No. It was the loss of compassion. I looked around and there was no compassion in anyone's face" (Ahluwalia 161-162). What is fascinating here is the peculiar persistence of memory that continues to haunt and affect the present even after the passage of decades.

The memories of Partition are filled with hatred not only against the other religious communities but also against the political leaders. Just before and after the announcement of Partition, the people were in utter bewilderment. People wrote number of letters to the political leaders seeking explanation to the possible dislocation and dismemberment of people owing to Partition. One of such letters shows the amount of hatred and bitterness building up for the Congress: "We don't want to be Butchers for your magnanimity or elevation. If the Congress is impotent to protect us then dissolve Congress organisation in the Punjab and let the Hindus have their own course" (Butalia 71).

The political parties of the time were perceived to be only too willing to make scapegoats of the common people for their own selfish benefit. This perception was made

stronger by certain prohibitions imposed on the migrants. For instance, people were forbidden to take excess goods while migrating to the other country. The remorse, the feeling of betrayal transformed the otherwise peace loving people into near savages. *The Other Side of Silence* mentions the phases of life of such people who out of sheer anger and frenzy killed others and suffered a cursed life later on. A retired professor and a member of the RSS from Patiala remembers how he ignored the cries of a Muslim woman being gang raped while he was passing nearby. Years later, he confesses feeling the pangs of conscience for his inhuman behaviour, “Fifty years later, he wept, tears of mourning for the woman, and for his own indifference” (Butalia 74).

Thus the facts of Partition that have been retrieved and archived by writers like Butalia function as memorials to the event, thus underscoring the continuing significance of the event even in the present. This memorialisation serves in effect serves to prepare the ground both for reconstructing the past and rethinking the ways in which narratives about the Partition have been constructed in the past. It initiates, in other words, a new way of knowing.

As Butalia demonstrates, amnesia is an indispensable part of the psychological inheritance for those who encountered traumatic situations during Partition. In fact, amnesia appears to become almost a survival strategy for such people. However, various narratives of Partition— in the form of literary, cinematic, journalistic or documentary texts, among others— have always been available at different periods of time in the post independence era and these have interfered with the process of willed and putatively therapeutic amnesia among those who lived through the trauma of Partition. What has been equally evident in both India and Pakistan in the post-

independence era is a desire among those who did not undergo the trauma— present day political leaders in both countries— to take advantage of the amnesia and manipulate the memory of Partition for narrow political and ideological ends. The existence of such memory politics in India and Pakistan has been both the cause and the consequence of religious fundamentalism, intolerance, persecution and social fragmentation.

Urvashi Butalia has, on the other hand, has done a wonderfully constructive work by exploring and excavating the amnesia of those who encountered the event. Therefore Kabir has opined that activists and ambassadors like Butalia, “...strive to create spaces of dialogue across conflicted identities by imaginatively evoking shared cultural and natural resources so as to overcome the burden of divisive memories and amnesias” (Kabir 28).

The survivors of Partition cannot forget the event even when they seek to suppress their memory. Partition is just a political event in the history of the country for many Indian citizens who did not face the direct effect of Partition. But the ones who felt the direct impact, who crossed the border, whose parents, relatives, friends were killed, who saw massacre at close proximity and lived to tell the tale, for them much of their lived experience of the Partition remained indescribable. Because they sought to forget the event but could not, they decided to commemorate the event instead. They observe Martyrs’ Day to pay tribute to those who laid their lives. “Each year, survivors of March 1947— the number declines with each passing year—get together to recount tales of the heroism of those who died in the killings” (Butalia 363-364). Memories are revived, stories are recounted and passed on to the next generation. The women who killed themselves

by jumping into the wells, the men who killed their women in fear of being made impure are not remembered but what is remembered is the courage of such people who could lay down their lives in the name of honour. What this implies is that there are two simultaneous processes at work here, remembering selectively and also forgetting selectively. According to Butalia, "It helps keep the memory alive, and at the same time, it helps them to forget. They remember selectively in order to forget" (Butalia 365). The term 'engineered forgetting' becomes relevant at this point insofar as it refers to those memories which are sought to be erased on the grounds that they may have a negative impact on the people or the state. In this connection, the state, the media urge the victims to forget those memories for the benefit of the nation state and the people. On personal grounds also an individual may seek this. Accordingly, engineered forgetting is conducted and the brutal realities of Partition are silenced. Amnesia and forgetting are complementary to each other. But amnesia is more of a medical term than the simplified meaning of forgetting. Amnesia occurs when one undergoes a traumatic event that results in certain physiological or psychological injuries. This condition is not life threatening but has a long standing effect on the individual. The lines between amnesia and willed forgetting become blurred when one considers that both are consequent upon trauma and both are, in a way, therapeutic. Anne Whitehead in her book *Memory* makes a very pertinent remark on forgetting:

It seems to me that forgetting, considered in all its complexity, deserves to be taken seriously, both because it is an inseparable and not always sufficiently recognized aspect of memory itself, and

because some measure of forgetting is necessary requirement for personal and civic health.

(Whitehead 157)

The concept of forgetting has a shadowy side of memory. But this concept on the other hand shapes and defines the things that are preserved. The Partition survivors have suppressed the memories for long. For them the sense of memory becomes a burden which they seek to divest themselves of, but which nevertheless remains intact, clogging up their selves. Therefore, what is evident from the shared among these survivors they have taken recourse to collective amnesia:

For many years, people from all professions and facets of society seem to have made a deliberate effort to bury the stark truth of those experiences in their subconscious—to engage in a collective amnesia.... Collective amnesia has always served as a survival strategy for individuals, communities, and nations. (Stewart et. al xv)

What is important to realize here is that the willed erasure of what truly happened during the Partition, especially among those who may be regarded as its most reliable witnesses, leads to gaps in our understanding of the history of modern India as well as of Pakistan. It also creates a space for the construction of alternative and fictitious—often fissiparous— narratives by vested interests. In other words, it creates a dangerous space for the reconstruction of memory itself.

Conclusion

The event of Partition ushered in a period of incomprehensibly violent acts which led many people to descend into amnesia. It is difficult for writers, politicians, historians, artists to deliver the true calibration of this

Indian Holocaust as millions of people became the victims of the event and most of the survivors are disappearing fast. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is a restorative memoir which gives an authentic account of the lives of women, men, children who experienced Partition, focussing particularly on the marginalized and forgotten histories. "The oral-history narratives in Urvashi Butalia's collection *The Other Side of Silence* reflect what she calls "the layers of silence" of survivors and their anguish as a result of keeping their stories secret for decades" (Stewart and Kumar xviii). The issues of dislocation and exile, memory and nostalgia, remembering and forgetting, have been brought forth by many authors, but Butalia has completed altogether a different and a difficult task of meeting as many as Partition survivors or if not the 'generation after' to excavate the untold stories of Partition which "restore our sight and enrich our understanding" (Stewart and Kumar xix). Her work, paradoxically, reveals fissures in the accepted narratives of the Partition while at the same time sealing and healing dangerous gaps in our collective consciousness about an event that continues to psychically divide two neighbouring nations and also bind them together in a common history of horrific blunders.

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