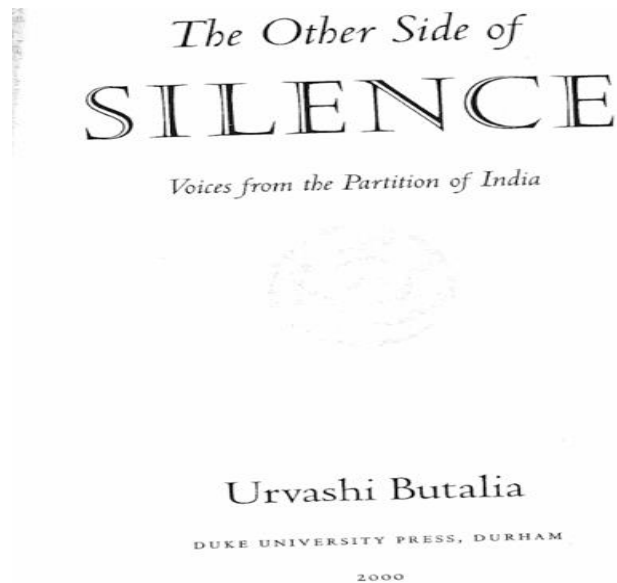


Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 37
Butalia's The Other Side of Silence – Part 1

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This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Urvashi Butalia’s “The Other Side of Silence”. This text, is a monumental text on trauma, memory and partition and it is actually about the voices from the partition of India.

It is essentially a book of memorials as well as philosophy as well as a very ethnographic account of the horror of partition, experience of partition. It is important for us is to understand how the experientiality of partition and the entire politics of partition sort of merged together in this account because we are talking about human loss, we are talking about human horrors, we are talking about human memory, etc.

This whole account of partition is very personal perspective and the subjective personal perspective is constantly foregrounded in this work. It never appears to be an objective account or a hardcore ethnographic account of partition, it is very much invested emotionally in this project. In fact, the opening of this book which we will read in some details today very much flags up the personal subjective investment, the emotional investment in this project.

This is the book about the memory of silence, memory of partition, true silence. Among the many things which we will keep in mind while reading this book is the category of silence, what it means to be silent. As we can see in the very title itself, silence seems to be the keyword, the operative word which is slightly paradoxical because when we talk about memory, we expect articulation of memory.

We expect representation of memory and iteration or reiteration of memory; repeating, reiterating, so these things become these things become important categories apropos of memory. But what Butalia is doing over here interestingly is she is talking about the refusal to represent, the refusal to reiterate. That refusal, that rejection or reiteration, the rejection of memory or remembering true representation is something which becomes a very unique voice.

Almost like a pure reservoir of the horror of memory, the horror of that kind of partition which is not just a physical partition or a cartographic partition, but also a deeply emotional partition. The emotional quality and the cartographic quality of partition, these two qualities constantly merge with each other and this account is very moving.

We can see it talks about the voices from the partition of India, which is to say that it is very much interested and invested in the human stories and stories become more important than history. The entire historical framework in his book is informed by stories, personal stories, emotional stories, experiential accounts of this historical act, this historical event.

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Part I RANAMAMA

This story begins, as all stories inevitably do, with myself. For many years while this story has lived with me, I have thought and debated about how to tell it, indeed whether to tell it at all. At first it was painful and, I thought, too private to be told. Even though my uncle had said, time and again, that he did not mind my telling it, even though my mother knew I wanted to tell it, I still couldn't get rid of a sense of betrayal. I was convinced they didn't realize the implications of what they were saying. Perhaps then the simple thing to do would have been to show the story to them before I let it go. But when I thought of doing this I realized I did not want to. Because if I am to be honest, I had already decided the story had to be told. In many ways, as I began to see it, the telling unfolded not only my story, not only that of my family, but also, through their lives, many other stories, all of which were somewhere woven into a narrative of this strange thing we call a nation. This may sound very grandiose, and in the telling of this story—and all the others that follow—I don't mean to theorize about grand things. But I do want to ask questions: difficult, disturbing questions that have dogged me ever since I embarked on this journey.

For long, too, I have debated about how I would begin this story once the telling was upon me. There are so many beginnings, it was

We are looking at the event of partition, we are looking at the trauma of partition, we are looking at the politics of partition through storytelling. This is where it becomes interesting for us, especially for a course like this which is about memories, storytelling, horror, trauma, literature, etc. When literature is seen as a mode of storytelling, we say narrativization.

Narrativization when coupled with historical memory, when coupled with historical materiality can become a very unique form of representation which is to say that it could represent presence as well as absence. It can represent articulation as well as silence. The silence of the category is important over here. It almost becomes a representational category. It becomes an experiential category. It becomes an ontological category.

It is a very loaded term. It is the operative word in the title and “The Other Side Of Silence” seems to give some kind of spatial quality to silence. It sounds like a map or landscape of silence, a landscape of absence or a landscape of the refusal to remember, to reiterate, etc. What happens if we sort of explore or engage with that sight of silence, that typography of silence, so it has a very deep-seated spatial quality which needs to be represented and reiterated that is the whole project of this book.

This is a very personal book. It has a lot of personal account, a lot of personal investment, a lot of emotional subjective underpinning and that is something which the very title, the very opening of part-I. It is called the “Ranamama” and it talks about how

the partition of India it comes as a trigger to Urvashi Butalia chiefly because of what happened in 1984 riots.

We are aware of the 1984 riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the very violent series of events which took place and how that incident of violence; that example, that experience of violence it triggered in Urvashi Butalia's mind and this whole horror of partition which she did not experience firsthand. But that, this is like a post-memory thing.

We hear about it, we hear about partition, we grew up hearing about partition, about what happened to your family, to ancestors, to people who experienced that. We see something similar, replicated. It merges the experience of that event with the textuality of what we heard in terms of the text we have read, the stories we have read, etc.

The post-memory quality in terms of hearing, something in terms of listening and absorbing and internalizing something which might happen to you that post-memory quality merges with the real memory quality. This is what she says that she experienced it, went through the horrors, experienced very firsthand and very close quarters.

What it means to have some kind of huge spectacle of violence based on identarian politics based on identities, based on your location, be religious location, ethnic location, etc. That serves as a trigger in her mind and that connects to the stories she had heard or she had consumed while growing up about partition. That seems to be the trigger point for this project and the very fact that she wants to go back to this project or partition and write about it and research on it.

It comes because of what happens in 1984. These two events need to be interestingly and carefully situated, 1947 partition and 1984 anti-Sikh riots. These two are complex events and they sort of become dialoguing in a certain sense in our imagination. This story begins as all stories inevitably do, with myself. We can see she situates her subjectivity at the very forefront; at the very inception of this account is about myself.

“It is my perspectives, my experiences, my emotional investment. For many years while the story has lived with me, I have thought and debated about how to tell it, indeed

whether to tell it at all. At first it was painful, and I thought too private to be told. Even though my uncle had said time and again, he did not mind my telling it even though my mother knew I wanted to tell it. Still, I could not get rid of a sense of betrayal.

I was convinced that it did not realize the implications of what they were saying. Perhaps then the simple thing to do would have been to show the story to them before I let it go. When I thought of doing this, I realized I did not want to because if I am to be honest, I had already decided that the story had to be told. In many ways, as I began to see it; the telling unfolded not only my story, not only that of my family, but also to their lives.

Many other stories, all of which were somewhere woven into a narrative of the strange thing we call a nation. This may sound very grandiose and in telling of the story and all the others that follow, I do not mean to theorize about grand things. But I do want to ask questions; difficult, disturbing questions that have dogged me ever since I embarked on this journey.”

We can see, there is a lot of ambivalence at the very beginning of this narrative in terms of whether the story needs to be told, whether the story should be told. The important thing over here is the constant reference to stories is something which is foregrounded and the interconnectedness of stories as a web of stories, as a sea of stories. It is different voices as a very polyphonic account of an event.

Polyphonic means many voices or the heteroglossia and polyphonic account from different perspectives about the same experience of the partition, about the same event of partition. We can also see is there seems to be a rejection about often grand things, about grand narrative. These are more micro-memories, these are more micro-stories.

This is about the firsthand experience, the little stories about ordinary people. There is no grand scheme out there which needs to go ahead and conformed to do, there is no grand narrative out there. In a certain sense, this also becomes a way of rewriting history because if we look at history as a move with the capital age of the grand narrative, which represents certain event that becomes some kind of institutional framework through which that even is revisited.

It often takes away the small stories or smaller human stories about suffering, about the trail, about pain, about loss, about absence and those get subsumed and what we get at the end of it is just one massive story, which is the dominant discourse around that event. Now, there seems to be a very clear effort on Butalia's part in this book to reject that grandness of history.

To reject that supposed objectivity of history, to reject that claim of objectivity, the claim of something grand, something metanarrative in quality that is to be rejected at all costs, and instead what is to be brought up again and what is to be almost celebrated are the human voices of suffering, human voices of the micro-memory, and as we can see the interconnectedness not only my story, not only that of my family, but also through their lives.

Many other stories, all of which were somewhere woven into a narrative of this strange thing we call a nation. The strange thing we call a nation is the aftermath of partition, the nation that appeared at the end of partition. Two nation states as we know Pakistan and India, the emergence of the two nations which felt strange at that time because the partition or the divide that has emerged as some kind of strange entity following the partition, the aftermath of partition.

We look at partition here not just as an incident but as something which creates ripples across generations, which creates a strange sense of connectedness as well as disconnectedness, which is intergenerational in quality. There seems to be an interconnectedness of story. There are so many different stories of a partition.

This seems to be like a connectedness across all the stories, becomes a sea of stories and ecosystem and economy of voices, all of which are important, all of which are relevant, all of which are valid voices. The validity of voices is important over here. There is no voice which is invalid. There is no voice which is to be rejected, even especially perhaps the voices which are silent.

The whole project of this book to tap into the ontology of silence when it comes to partition to visit the site of silence, the other side of silences, so cross that silence to seeing if we can get and voices out of that. It becomes the research project so to speak,

which is deeply human in quality, deeply emotional in quality. We can see, it is very emotionally invested in quality as well.

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For long, too, I have debated about how I would begin this story once the task of telling was upon me. There are so many beginnings, it was difficult to choose. Was it, for example, the stories of the trauma and pain of Partition, the violence that it brought, that I had heard all my life, that started me on this search? Was it the film I worked on for some friends which brought me in touch with Partition survivors and began this trajectory for me? Or was it 1984, the year that brought the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination: the killing and maiming of thousands of Sikhs in Delhi, the violent upheaval and dislocation of their lives which recalled Partition with such clarity? Or was it all of these? I don't really know. Here, at any rate, is one beginning. Others, too, will surface somewhere in this narrative.

“For long too, I have debated about how I begin the story once the task of telling was upon me. There are so many beginnings, it was difficult to choose. Was it for example, the stories of trauma and pain of partition, the violence that it had brought, that I heard all my life that started me on this search?” So again, this violence of partition, something that she had grown up consuming, she had heard it.

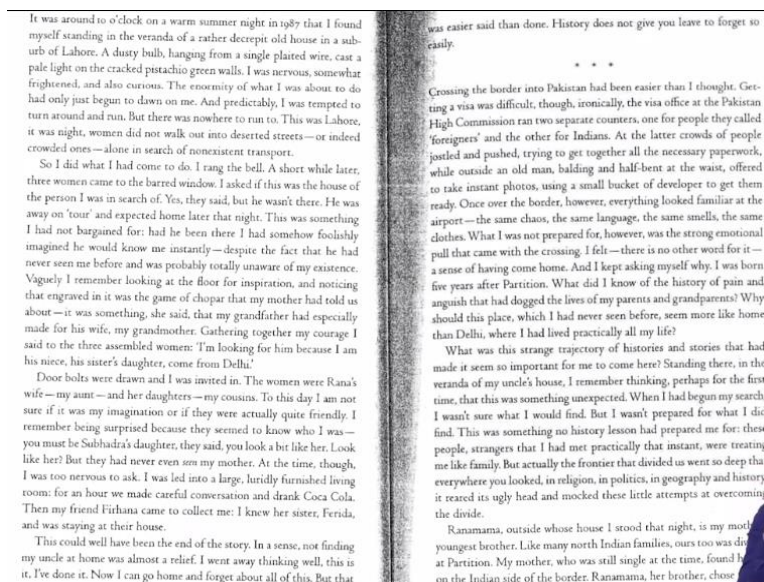
She had listened to the stories of some of ancestors, maybe that was the original point as well. Was it a film that I worked on for some friends which brought me in touch with partition survivors and began this trajectory for me? “Or was it 1984, the year which brought the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination; the killing and maiming of thousands of Sikhs in Delhi, the violent upheaval and dislocation of their lives was recalled partition with such clarity or was it all of these? I do not really know. Here at any rate is one beginning. Others, too will surface somewhere in this narrative.”

We can see over here is it seems to be a very deliberately communicated confusion and uncertainty, shall we say uncertainty about the origin point. This uncertainty of origin in a way it deconstructs the myth of origin, every story should have a beginning. Now what Butalia is clearly telling us the way we do not quite know how the story begins, we do not quite know when the story begins, what is the beginning point, the genesis point in the story. She talks about different possibilities.

It could be the stories that she heard while growing up about the partition, it could be a film that she had worked on for a period of time about the survivors of partition or it could be the event that informed the incident that informed, which was to say the violent aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi or it could be a combination of all three. It seems to be a very acknowledgement of uncertainty, acknowledgement of not knowing exactly what the original point was.

That sentiment of uncertainty, that emotion of uncertainty and the acknowledgement of uncertainty; all this informs this narrative of recreating or rehydrating stories about partition.

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She talks about a very personal experience about a personal sight, visiting a place in Lahore in 1987 and how the visit to the place have triggered memories in her mind based on the stories that she had heard. These are memories which did not really belong to her physically or corporeally. She did not grow up with consuming this or experiencing those incidents.

But these are the memories that she had consumed through stories which were told to her and she is connecting again the experience of an event, where the consumption of that memory around that event. Something that she had heard as an intergenerational narrative and that is in the sight merging together, the post-memory and the real

experience of the sight in a way of making a complex modality of memory, which is what happens over here.

“It was around 10 o'clock on a warm summer night in 1987 that I found myself standing in the veranda of rather decrepit old house in a suburb of Lahore. A dusty bulb hanging from a single plaited wire cast a pale light on a cracked pistachio green walls. I was nervous, somewhat frightened and also curious. The enormity of what I was about to do had only just began to dawn on me.

And predictably I was tempted to turn around and run. But there was nowhere to run to. This was Lahore, it was night, and woman did not walk out in the deserted streets or indeed crowded ones alone in search of nonexistent transport. The description over here is rich in details and quite emotional as well. There seems to be a sense of alienation that is quite clearly there.”

She is standing in front of a decrepit house in Lahore and trying to navigate the kind of crosses was in front of her and then also part of her was very afraid, a part of her wants to run away, but then the practicalities of that an impossibility of that it was there. She cannot go out in the streets in Lahore because no woman does that and we cannot have a nonexistent transport because it does not, it is not there.

It is Lahore, which is not very cosmopolitan, not very friendly, a woman friendly and she seems to be trapped there in something in the narrative of whole design, so she had gone that presumably out of her own volition. But a part of her frightened and wants to turn back, but then she also realized this is a bit of a cul-de-sac, does know where to turn to, it is a blind alley and she has to navigate away around it.

“So I did what I had come to do. I rang the bell. A short while later, three women came to the barred window. I asked if this was the house of the person I was in search of. Yes, they said, but he was not there. He was away on tour unexpected home later that night. This was something I had not bargained for; had he been there I had somehow foolishly imagined he would know me instantly, despite the fact that he had never seen me before and was probably totally unaware of my existence.

Vaguely remember looking at the floor for inspiration, and noticing that engraved in it was a game of chopar that my mother had told us about. It was something, she said that my grandfather had specially made for his wife, my grandmother. Gathering together my courage I said to the tree assembled women, I am looking for him because I am his niece, his sister's daughter, come from Delhi.”

The relationship is established, the kinship is established and what we can see here is a very disturbing drama of connect and disconnect. These are families which have been presumably partitioned by the act of partition, by the violence or partition. This is an effort from her part to reconnect to her relationships, to our relations or relatives in the home. We can see, the way to connect away become something which is almost, quote unquote trivial in quality.

She looks at the engraving on the floor and that is something which reminds of a game that her mother told her about her grandfather having done engraving for his wife, her grandmother. We can see again, so the memory of something which is quite big and personal and emotional and existential is triggered by something which is supposedly banal, supposedly small, supposedly micron in quality, some engraving on the floor.

And that triggers courage, inspires her to talk about why she is there in the first place. She tells, she summons enough courage and tells the woman that she is from Delhi and she happens to be the niece of this person and she has come to see him. Door bolts were drawn and I was invited in. The woman was; Rana’s wife, my aunt, and her daughters, my cousins. To this day I am not sure if it was my imagination or if they were actually quite friendly.”

This is the beginning of this interesting entanglement of imagination and information. She does not quite know and again she acknowledges the uncertainty. She acknowledges some lack of surety about it. She is sure whether it was imagination, whether this actually took place. Imagination plays a very important part in the storytelling method because this is a story about what happened, is a story about how she experienced this whole revisiting the past. Imagination becomes a very important factor over here because it somehow recreates entire event in her mind, but then she is not sure whether what she

is delivering, whether she is communicating actually took place or whether it was just a figment of her imagination.

She is unsure of this uncertainty between imagination and information, which is also an entanglement of information and imagination. It informs this kind of storytelling, this this modality of storytelling which is also about memory. We are looking at a very complex cognitive relationship with the memory, storytelling and imagination as we can see.” I remember being surprised because they seemed to know who I was.”

It is a very selective memory. She remembers being surprised because they seemed to know her, but she also does not quite remember whether it was her imagination or whether actually was case that they were happy to see her. And also what we can see is what she remembers are emotions rather than facts rather than details.

She is talking about the emotions of happiness, emotions or surprise, emotions, ambivalence, etc. Emotional memory becomes more important than let us say semantic memory more facts and figures. “I remember being surprised because they seemed to know who I was. You must be Subhadra’s daughter, they said, you look a bit like her. Look like her? But they had never seen my mother.

The whole idea of not having seen someone physically but being able to recreate the face imaginatively becomes important over here. At the time, though I was too nervous to ask. I was led to a large luridly furnished living room; for an hour we made careful conversation and drank Coca Cola. Then my friend Firhana came to collect me. I newer Sister Ferida and was staying at their house.”

It is interesting how Coca Cola appears over here as some kind of symbol of globalized connect. Everyone is drinking Coca Cola, it is a typical American product is also globalized in quality. But what is important for us here to understand how that little metonymic commodity seems to connect this otherwise disconnected people. Sipping Coca Cola becomes the interesting symbol of connect.

It is also a symbol of commodification, global commodification, which is emerging out of American capitalism, but that seems connecting drink over here. Everyone sipping

that and discussing history what happened to them many years ago, all relatives whom they never met, but they can recreate their imagination. And then we are told how friend Firhana came to go collect her and Ferida was the sister in whose house that she was living in.

Firhana happens to be a friend, Firhana's sister Ferida is as a person in whose house, in whose home the narrator incidentally Urvashi Butalia is dwelling in. This could well have been the end of the story. In a sense, not finding my uncle at home was almost a relief. So again, not finding something wanted to find almost becomes relieved. We have, I mean just before this we looked at "Catch-22", we saw there how the production of paradoxes is a very complex cognitive condition.

It is not just only about laughter, it is also about failure of expectation, is also about how we respond to fail expectations, sometimes with a different kind of response rate, sometimes one assessed to be a bad thing, sometimes it will be a good thing, failure could also be a good thing and what paradox does in a very interesting way is that it blurs the borderlines between ontological opposites.

"Where it is not finding someone will normally be a source of happiness, what over here is almost relief not finding the person which means that is a closure and she did not go back. I went away thinking well, this is it. I have done it. Now I can go home and forget about all of this. But that was easier said than done. History does not give you leave to forget so easily."

We are now moving on to the complexities of history and forgetting. There is almost seems to be the desire to forget because forgetting will give a closure to the narrative of separation, remount, etc. But the part of her wants to forget, a part of her wants to close it and move on. But then it does not happen that way and we are told it is easier said than done.

The part of the nagging brain would want to constantly remember the details, reconstruct the details, so there is a desire to go back and reconnect the process, recreate the incidentality, recreate the eventuality, and recreate the event of belonging together before the partition happened. But what we can see immediately at the very physical as

well as psychological level is experience of alienation and she is alienated in a strained city of Lahore where she does not know anyone.

But then she knows surely or theoretically has relatives whose house she is visiting in the hope of finding her uncle. And when she does not find the uncle, a part of her is relieved that he is around and a part of her wants to close the search and then go back and get on with a normal life. But that does not happen and we are told that history does not leave you to forget or give you leave, give you permission to forget so easily.

Forgetting becomes almost an act of agency, almost an act of political act, it does not allow you to forget so easily. Forgetting is a complex cognitive activity which is also quite collective and more often than political in quality. We are looking at the politics of remembering and forgetting, and the emotions of memory and forgetting. How these two orders are connected to each other and very asymmetric and complex ways.

This is the beginning of this very moving book “The Other Side of Silence”. We will just move on to the other sections in the subsequent session.