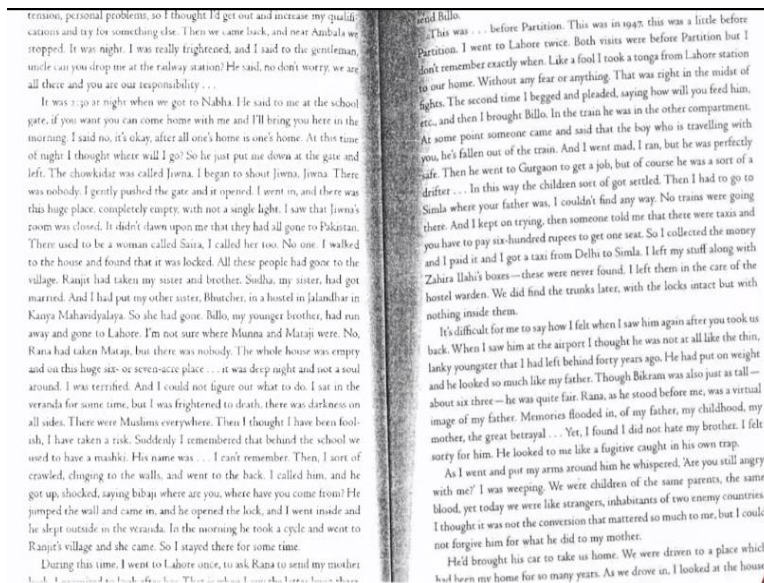


Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 43
Butalia's The Other Side of Silence – Part 7

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This is an NPTEL course entitled “Trauma and Literature” on Urvashi Butalia’s “The Other Side of Silence”. We were talking about the difficulties of the form of the interview.

Especially when it comes to a traumatic experience or an experience of let us say narrate something which happened many years ago and the position of the interlocutor or the position or the location of the interviewer becomes very important because on one hand there needs to be some kind of an emotional connect. On the other hand, if it is too emotional, if it is too close for comfort, then it becomes difficult to narrate to the events.

It has to be a very fine balance between impersonality and empathetic connect. And that fine balance is something that Butalia as a writer struggles with because this case in point here is interview that she has of her on own mother, Subhadra Butalia. We see how the reluctance to remember, the reluctance to narrate the memory of partition is part of the emotional complexity.

Emotional and cognitive complexity which then becomes a narrative complexity. Because she will be talking to her own daughter and that is too emotional, that is too close for comfort. There has to be a very thin line between proximity and distance and that is something which Butalia struggles with too. Among the many things which makes this work really unique in quality is very honest confession of the struggle of the interviewer.

“The struggle to collect knowledge, the struggle to collate and calibrate knowledge especially when it comes through a traumatic event like partitions. How do you put that in writing? And more importantly, how do you interview such experiences? How do you collect such experiences through the formal method of the interview? The formality of the interview seems to be insufficient, seems to be not big enough.

And not complex enough to accommodate this very traumatic experience of partition which is some type of a combination of geographical physical partition, but also emotional and existential partition because you are separated from people that you grew up with, separated by people that you are tied to, connected to in the forms of kinship which are blood relationships.”

For example they talk about the trauma of leaving behind one's parents because to sort of let go of one's parents to come away from one's parents physically, emotionally, that seemed to be going to be unbearable in this particular situation. Subhadra Butalia's experience of leaving behind her mother with the knowledge that she may be unsafe, with the knowledge that she may be converted into something else.

Some other religion that becomes almost a permanent marker of trauma in our mind, which is something which we get to see. Now, in this concluding session over here she talks about the whole idea of just before partition, the last time she visited Lahore, and after partition she went to Lahore twice and also as we can see trailed the entire work over here; we see how the familial, sometimes petty narratives about real estate tensions, about property tensions.

It is mapped on to the bigger narrative of partition which is a more national, more historical, more political in character. The political quality and personal quality of

partition seem to be quite connected because we are talking about real human beings, real human subjects, real families, real emotional ties, real property ties; all these become very important.

“This was before partition. This was in 1947, this was a little before partition. I went to Lahore twice. Both visits were before the partition, but I do not remember exactly when.” We can see that the before partition thing is mentioned twice and that is important for us to understand because there is a big temporal paradigmatic existential shift before partition and after partition.

She does not quite remember exactly when, what month that was, which month of the year, which part of the year it was, but she remembers just before partition and that is something that stays in her mind. So, before partition, after partition becomes the temporal existential divide, which is highlighted in a reputation away, it comes back twice. “Like a fool I took a tonga from Lahore station to our home without any fear or anything.

That was right in the midst of fights. The second time I begged and pleaded, saying how you would feed them, etc. And then I brought Billo. In the train he was in the other compartment. At some point someone came and said that the boy who was traveling with you, he is fallen out of the train. I went mad, I ran, but he was perfectly safe. Then he went to Gurgaon to get a job, but of course he was a sort of a drifter.

In this way the children sort of got settled. Then I had to go to Simla lab where your father was, I could not find any way. No trains were going there. And I kept on trying, then someone told me that there were taxis and you have to pay 600 rupees to get one seat. I collected the money and I paid it and I got a taxi from Delhi to Simla. I left my stuff along with Zahira Ilahi’s boxes, these were never found.

I left them in the care of the hospital warden. We did find the trunks later, with the locks intact but with nothing inside them.” She talks about different kinds of travel and this journey to Simla becomes the very symbolic journey. She wants to connect; she wants to go to where her husband was and the amount of money is important 600 rupees to get one seat in taxi.

That must have been astronomical amount at that point of time, 600 rupees was stratospheric amount, is a huge amount of money and she had collected to get one seat in a taxi which will take her to Simla. The symbolism of the bag; the boxes are interesting over here because she left behind some boxes to the hostel warden and the trunks were found later, the locks were intact but nothing was inside them.

The clinicality of disappearance is symbolized by the boxes, the locks seemed to be intact, the boxes were fine, the trunks were fine, but the content inside the boxes were gone. That is a very symbolic departure, a very symbolic absence, a very symbolic disappearance which is to suggest a permanence and the clinicality of this form of disappearance which is material is signified over here with these boxes.

“It is difficult for me to say how I felt when I saw him again after you took us back. When I saw him at the airport, I thought he was not at all like the thin, lanky youngster that are left behind 40 years ago. He put on weight and he looked so much like my father. Though Bikram was also just as tall, about 6ft 3; he was quite fair. Rana as he stood before me was a virtual image of my father.”

We can see how the dead father comes back almost like a reincarnated, reimported to Rana which seemed to suggest very interesting interplay of materiality and spectrality that runs through all this work and in terms happy to remember partition, the spectral presences, the recall, the resurface, the dead father comes back and Rana looks exactly like the father. He does not look like Rana alone to Subhadra Butalia when she sees him at the airport after many years, 40 years of the partition.

“Rana appears to her like a reincarnated symbol or embodiment of fatherhood long since being dead. Memories flooded in, of my father, my childhood, my mother, the great betrayal. Yet, I found I did not hate my brother. I felt sorry for him. He looked to me like a fugitive caught in his own trap. And that seems to suggest the very tragic and sorry condition of the people who stayed behind in Lahore.”

People like Rana for example, people like Rana’s mother, they had to convert to Islam in order to feel safe, but then they never got accepted because the conversion was an ad

hoc, convenient conversion and everyone knew around them. They were safe, but they were not accepted; so they lived an alienated life throughout and existence in Pakistan.

When she sees her brother for whom she felt a lot of resentment for a long time for having stayed behind, for having taken the mother, for having taken over the property. But when she sees in Lahore, she feels sorry for him because it was quite clear to her as well evident to her that he has led a miserable life, he has led an alienated lonely life in Pakistan. He is a fugitive caught in his own trap.

“As I went and put my arms around him, he whispered, are you still angry with me? I was weeping. We were children of the same parents, the same blood, yet today we were like strangers, inhabitants of two enemy countries. I thought it was not the conversion that mattered so much to me, but I could not forgive him for what he did to my mother.” The first sentence he says to her when they meet is asking her if she is still too angry with him.

“And you find that this becomes a very emotional experience for her as well. But then she realizes they are connected in a level of blood, they are connected in the same parents, they connected from genetically in the same structure. And yet, they are now strangers politically speaking, speaking that the level of citizenship, they inhabit two enemy countries who are at war with each other all the time, India and Pakistan.”

It seems to her that what matters more at the level of not forgiving him is the fact that the mother got converted and that is to her seems like a bigger betrayal than his conversion because that conversion of the mother into something else symbolically suggests an entire change in the lineage to a certain extent because his conversion to her seems to be an emotional individual conversion.

But the conversion of the mother into a different religion seems to be an attack on the entire lineage which is more difficult for her to forgive him. He brought his car to take us home. We were driven to a place which had been my home for so many years. As we drove in, I looked at the house.

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the same majestic look, but, as I peered through the dark to see, I found two things missing. My father's name no longer decorated the gate, and the big religious symbol 'Om' which had been drawn on the water tank above the house did not seem to be visible. We met Rana's family: his wife and three sons—the fourth was away. We made ourselves comfortable: it was the month of December, but the rooms were warm, with room heaters in each of them. Pakistan has a cheap supply of piped gas. It was only in the morning that I noticed that all the fruit trees were gone. Rana said he had had to get rid of them because of water shortages. But I felt a real sense of loss, an almost physical hurt. My father had loved his trees more than anything else. It seemed like a betrayal. I thought, we had lost so much in Partition—what did a few trees matter, yet to me at the time they seemed like a symbol of everything we had lost . . .

That day your friend Lala came and took me sightseeing in Lahore. So much had changed. I wanted to go to Hall Road to see my old college, but when we reached there, the college was not to be seen. It had been shifted. I visited many places I had known well, but nothing was the same: this wonderful cosmopolitan city had now become a Muslim one. Loudspeakers called the faithful to prayer . . . shops, streets, everything was different . . .

I had been in Pakistan and our house for a full day but I had not gone into the other rooms. I wanted very much to go into what had been my room but I did not have the courage. Just one look beyond the drawing room made me draw back. The rooms on the other side were full of dowry articles for the impending wedding. And no one seemed to be living in them. Perhaps they all lived on the first floor. At dinner, however, the whole family assembled and we had a delicious and pleasant meal.

A few days later, Rana came into our room. And he began to talk. He shut the door behind him. He said, 'if this house had not been there, I think we all would have been together. I would not have converted and lost every mo-

That was my last night in Pakistan. I remember when I sat down to eat the next morning, before we left, Rana pulled out a bowl of white butter from the refrigerator. 'I have not forgotten how you loved white butter. I bought it yesterday. He put the bowl in front of me, and my eyes filled with tears. That was the last time Rana and I spoke.

I have not been able to decide whether Rana was telling the truth or not. Was his problem really one of conversion? But there are many people who have converted and stayed on—is religion so important after all? Or was he simply lying, choosing a method of survival he had resorted to many times earlier? I don't really know.

The house appears as a physical architecture, but also as an emotional symbolic space. Some kind of a chronotope, a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin, a chronotope; so chrono as in time chronological, tope as in topological or topography is the space and time put together. House becomes over here a symbolic chronotope which has been unchanged in the mind for so many years.

But now she is revisiting the same physical place and what does that do to her at an emotional existential level. "It had the same majestic look, but as I peered through the dark to see, I found two things missing. My father's name no longer decorated the gate and the big religious symbol Om which had been drawn on the water tank above the house did not seem to be visible."

We find that how the conversion to Islam is more than just a semiotic change, is more than just a convenient transformation. It is sort of affects the entire architecture in a way, which is quite symbolic and existential in quality. The 'Om' is missing; the letter 'Om' which is symbolic of the Hindu sign of the house that has gone missing and the father's name is missing as well.

The disappearance of signs become interesting and symbolic in existential way, so the extent into the existential realm, from the semiotic realm to the existential realm and that shift becomes interesting, that transition becomes interesting. We met Rana's family, his wife and 3 sons, the fourth was away. We made ourselves comfortable. It was the month of December, but the rooms were warm, with room heaters in each of them.

“Pakistan has a cheap supply of piped gas. It was only in the morning that I noticed that all the fruit trees were gone. And the word Pakistan always seems interesting because it seems strange to her that she will have to call it a different name. It used to be just one place, one neighborhood, one village, one little town, one street, but now it has got a different name and it just appears to be very formal and contrived coming from someone like her.

Pakistan has a cheap supply of piped gas we are told and then she again notices the disappearance.” We see over here the disappearance of trees, disappearance of the name of the father, disappearance of the sign ‘Om’. All these disappearances become markers of this identity formation, a new identity formation is sort of informed by absence, paradoxically produced by absence.

The absence over here becomes very conspicuous presence, it can speak with symbolic sign, so disappearance of the letter ‘Om’, the disappearance of the father's name, the disappearance of trees. All these absences inform the shift in identity over here. The entire identity, the new identity is formed out of Pakistan has been formed through a series of loss and absences and that becomes the important instrument over here to understand the entire psychological situatedness of this particular subject.

“Rana said he had to get rid of them because of water shortages. But I felt a real sense of loss, and almost physical hurt.” We see how the disappearance of the familial markers, the familiar as well as familial markers that extend onto some kind of physical pain as almost like she is having a bodily pain being completely distanced or disconnected from things that she had grown up with.

The loss of familiarity affects her at a physical corporeal level. “My father had loved his trees more than anything else, it seemed like a betrayal. I thought, we had lost so much in partition, what did a few trees matter, yet to me at the estimate at the same time they seemed like a symbol of everything we had lost.” The micro markers of loss, the loss of the letter ‘Om’, the loss of the name of the father at the front door, the loss of the trees.

All these different micro markers are lost, they all coalesce together and appear in her mind as a massive symbol of loss and everything just disappeared. These become the symbols of what she had lost. The absences which appear over her post partition. We are quite literally looking at an appearance of absence through these markets, these shifting markers. “That day your friend Lala came and took me sightseeing in Lahore. So much had changed.”

There is an irony in that she has to go sightseeing in Lahore. The word ‘sightseeing’ has a touristic connotation; so she is very much a tourist. She is very much a temporary visitor. The place that she has grown up in, she comes back as a tourist, a different kind of gaze involved over here, different kind of experience, different kind of an engagement over here.

“She goes on sightseeing in Lahore. So much had changed. I wanted to go to Hall Road to see my own college, but when we reached there, the college was not to be seen. It had been shifted. I visited many places I had known well, but nothing was the same; this wonderful cosmopolitan city had now become a Muslim one. Loudspeakers called a faithful to prayer, shops, streets, everything was different.”

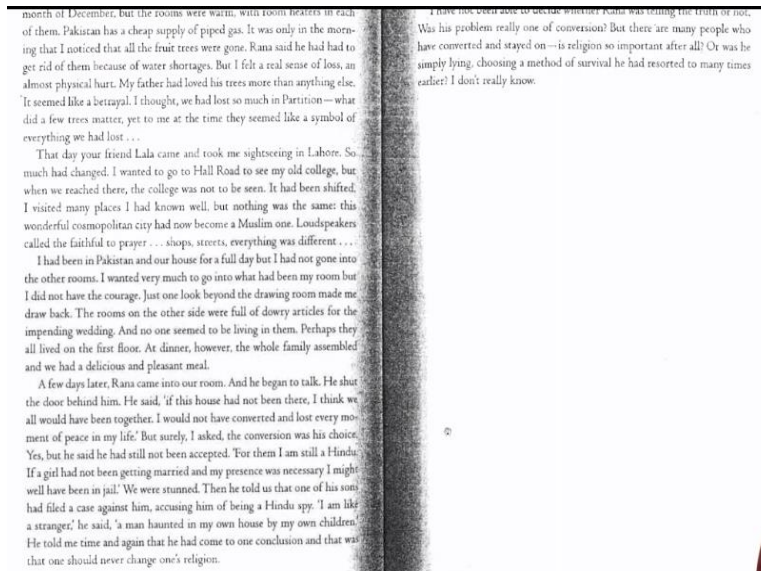
The very multicultural and cosmopolitan Lahore she had grown up in it has now become a very much an Islamic city. It just seems to be completely marked by that particular Islamic symbolism, Islamic symbols, so loud speakers are calling people for prayer, shops are different, and the streets are different. The Lahore that she knew which appeared to her as cosmopolitan at that point of time seems to be different at this point of time post partition. It is like a changed city.

It has metamorphosed into a different kind of metropolis, where she does not quite recognize anymore in which she is very much tourist rather than a native. All location is also reoriented. “I had been in Pakistan and our house for a full day, but I had not gone into the other rooms. I wanted very much to go into what had been my room, but I did not have the courage. In her mind, she wanted to retain the space imaginatively.”

She did not go to what used to be her room because she was afraid what might have changed and that may have shattered her imagination, her memory of that room. Just one

look beyond the drawing room made me draw back. The rooms on the other side were full of dowry articles for the impending wedding. And no one seemed to be living in them. Perhaps they all live on the first floor. At dinner, however, the whole family assembled and we had a delicious and pleasant meal.

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“A few days later, Rana came into our room and began to talk. He shut the door behind him. He said if this house had not been there, I think we would all have gone together I would not have converted and lost every moment of peace in my life.” Suddenly this house becomes some kind of ominous present, he said that only because of this house he stayed back and converted.

“If this house was not there, I would have shifted to India as well I would not have to convert into Islam. It is all because of this particular physical building that so many psychological existential changes have happened, I mean forced to happen. But surely, I asked, the conversion was his choice. Yes, but he said he has still not been accepted. For them, I am still a Hindu.

If a girl had not been getting married and my presence was necessary I might well have been in jail. We were stunned. Then he told us that one of his sons had filed a case against him, accusing him of being a Hindu spy. I am like a stranger, he said, a man haunted in my own house by my own children. He told me time and again that he had come to one conclusion and that was that one should never change one's religion.”

This state of being a permanent outsider to your own house seems to be something that haunts him and he sees how his own children filed a case against them; his son filed a case against him accusing him of being a Hindu spy. The conversion to Islam rather than protecting him; maybe does at a legal level, but at an existential cultural level he is seen with a lot of suspicion as someone who stayed back.

Perhaps is working for the Indian government clandestinely in a very covert way. And just make it safe for him he is converted into Islam. That mistrust and suspicion all them, not just some of his neighbors, not just some of his relatives, not just some of the people around him, but from his own blood, his own son who is presumably who was born Muslim, he looks at him with suspicion and mistrust.

He thinks of him as a Hindu spy working for the government of India, that alienation affects him on a daily level and he comes to conclusion that one should never change one's religion. And that conclusion of course is a political conclusion, existential conclusion and emotional conclusion and all come together; all these different conclusions come together and it makes him regret.

The entire discourse, entire trajectory, the entire flow of his life. But of course, he cannot go back, he cannot go back in time and change them. He ends up blaming the house, he ends up blaming this physical monument which presumably had forced or compelled him to stay back and convert, and in the process alienated himself, not just from his family but also from his immediate surroundings at a permanent level.

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“That was my last night in Pakistan. I remember when I sat down to eat the next morning, before we left, Rana pulled out a bowl of white butter from the refrigerator. I have not forgotten how you loved white butter. I bought it yesterday. This food becomes a marker of memory over here. It becomes a marker of emotional connect, it becomes a marker of time travel.”

As if consuming that food is like going back in time. The fact that he remembered her fondness for the white butter that connects them and also enables them to go back in time and connect to her as just purely as a brother and sister, not as a converted person, not as a post Pakistan person, but as someone who grew up together in the same house. So, the butter becomes a metaphorical connector, it becomes a marker.

The gastronomic market, the food market through which memories are reestablished, kinship is reestablish going back in time. “There is this element of time travel that happens with the arrival of the butter. He put the bowl in front of me and my eyes filled with tears. That was the last time Rana and I spoke. We can see how the butter becomes a trigger for memory.”

It almost becomes a pulse in trigger. It just appears and the entire sensory perception around the butter, the fact that she loved the butter, the fondness and the fact that he remembered her fondness of the butter becomes a very interesting marker of a very strong kinship, a very strong family system, a very strong emotional blood connect

which seems to transcend all the political cartographic changes that happened subsequently, so becomes a very important symbol for us to understand and study.

“I have not been able to decide whether Rana was telling the truth or not. Was this problem really one of conversion? But there are many people who have converted and stayed on. Is religion so important after all? Or was he simply lying, choosing a method of survival he had resorted to many times earlier? I do not really know. And that is a concluding section of this interview, I do not really know.

This admission of ignorance, the admission of non-knowledge that becomes most honest admission over here. And I do not know; the fact that I do not have any certainty about his memory, any certainty about Rana’s confession and that suspension of certainty becomes interesting over here because that becomes a very symbolic suspension, which characterizes the partition and many ways.

You do not quite know who is telling the truth and who is lying, who has been manipulative and who has been sincere. And that admission of ambivalence, that admission of lack of knowledge becomes connected, becomes very symbolic admission of the larger absurdity of partition, the larger unknowability of partition. The fact that we do not quite know why the partition happened? Who were the victims? And who were the perpetrators of partition or who felt more loss? Who got to more damage?”

All these questions remain unanswered and would perhaps always remain unanswered or suspended in space and time. It concludes this section and that concludes our reading of Urvashi Butalia’s “The Other Side of Silence”, which ends on a moment of silence: “I do not really know, there is no answer to that.”

The lack of an answer is also a production of silence to a certain extent, a production of absence to a certain extent, and we see how absences and silences become almost representative narrative categories in this work, which is about a very deep wound, very deep psychological traumatic wound from which these people will never perhaps recover.

Not just these people, but also the post memory generation like Butalia or say Urvashi Butalia herself, who makes it a project to go back in time, reconnects to her family, the family she never grown up with, the family she had heard stories about and that makes nostalgia, stories make nostalgia. The entire book becomes the project of nostalgia, project of post memory or a post memory project to some extent because she belongs to that generation who had never seen partition.

But who would consume stories of partition, who now would to go back in time and rediscover and reconnect to her ties, reconnect to her kins and that system. The entire book is about this particular project and then it becomes more ethnographic in quality. It is a very important piece of work about the partition and it talks about how fictionality and nonfiction.

Fictionality and truth become almost interchangeable categories, how there is an element of narrative truth which can sometimes be higher than a factual empirical truth or emotional truth can sometimes be higher than factual truth. The way people feel about partition and may actually be more important than what really took place at an empirical quantitative level.

It becomes secondary, but the emotional engagement becomes more primary and the whole book is about the emotional depth these people suffered to, the extent to which they suffered emotionally in the event of partition took place. This is a very important work and it is a very important for us, especially in a course like “Trauma and Literature” because it talks about the fictionality of traumatic reputation.

The fictionality which underscores any narrational trauma which tries to move away from the real event, but which tries to so camouflage itself to different kinds of emotional disguises, different kinds of emotional interactions. Emotions become a very important category of a traumatic recollection and that is something which this whole book foregrounds and highlights in very complex ways.