

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Naming the Voices: Reflection on Amrita Pritam's "*Pinjar*" and Urvashi Butalia's "*The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India*"

---

Suparna Roy, M.A, currently pursuing B.ED, Independent Researcher

---

**Abstract**

Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari said in their article "Listening for Echoes: Partition in Three Contexts", "The History works to produce the truth of traumatic genocidal violence of Partition and to elide it at the same time." Literature has always depicted the social complexities and the symbolic order of the political subjects in every area of history. To speak of which, 'History validates the identity, the existence of any such identities' in a society. Partition in India has subjected numerous identities under the scrutiny of law and order. Violence, skewering notion of nationality, injustice of migration not just from the geographic location but from the 'self' which existed under so many old constructions has veiled many printed pages of mainstream history. Geo-political marginalization upon any gender adds up to the branches of oppression. In this regard, conceptualizing 'partition and women' under the spectrum of Gender theory will also try to allude the uniqueness or peculiarity associated with India by drilling the 'voices of silences' of multi-centered perspectives. Literary depiction of the marginalized lives has gain immense significance at present. My paper, will focus with quick and cursory theorization of the concept of Gender on the 'body' of a 'woman' to bring forth the psychological probation of the 'silent voices' and their suffering which somewhere went unnoticed under the political 'power-play' of the leaders!

**Keywords-:**power, women, partition, gender, identity

## INTRODUCTION

A Reading of *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India* (2017) by Urvashi Butalia, portrays that human dimension which overlooked the political strategies framed to grasp

the power, where massive human convulsion of the bodies on the margins of history gets some representation through Butalia's pen. Here, Butalia tries to reduce the gap between the mainstream historical representations of Partition with the personal pain, living experiences of the unheard people. A mnemonic technique has been applied by Butalia to reflect how the upheaval impacted the people located in the margins of the history. Butalia has interrogated throughout the novel what the issue of 'caste', 'gender', 'religion' had to do with Partition. Before immersing into the memory lane of people through various forms of memoirs interviews, etcetera, she traced the facets of her own experiences in the effect of this violent disruption and has tried to reveal how the 'voices on the other side' have been stilled with bitterness; and the painful silence still dwells in the 'memory lane'.

Gender is a cultural complexity that has been created as one of the most important operating device to control and dominate the bodies to maintain a power hierarchy. A cultural product that has been turned into destiny and all decisions are based on this created identity. Gender is socially constructed as presented by Simone de Beauvoir, but who does this construction? Few heads and series of discourses that are genuinely and carefully designed is utilized to sustain and create Gender. Power Dynamics can be the cultural interplay and operation of certain practices in various premises and arena of lives. "Power produces" as Michel Foucault regarded in *History of Sexuality* (1976). Power is

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

that centre of operation which operates and controls human bodies as per convenience and to maintain a legitimacy of every right, and standards of economic production. Power dynamics varies under multifarious cultural complexities and commute its face value in terms of Gender, Caste, and Identity. Focusing on Gender Power Dynamics indicates the socio-cultural norms and regulations imposed by power on gender. Power manifests its norms to regulate the Gender, so that each 'binary and boxes' of identities are unquestionably maintained. Problem arises when larger socio-cultural and socio-political world involves in reflecting power play and upheavals like Partition when this carefully constructed order is demanded to be destroyed by the power itself who created it because then the power to maintain its authority needs to be equal-like the 'Quit India Movement', where women and children, people beyond class and caste, people of 'peripheral identities, simply to put- the entire mass participated.

**THEORETICAL INTERPRETATIONS**

In the article *Contemporary Feminist Theory* Stevie Jackson and Jackie Jones regarded "The concepts of gender and sexuality as a highly ambiguous term, as a point of reference" (Jackson, 131). Sex/Gender/Sexuality is a complex teleology that is not only socially constructed but complexly designed with intricate network of discursive power. Furthermore, cultural representation of the same is dangerously layered as 'culture is an excuse' to maintain certain power. Culture is a complex operative device consisting of numerous social institutions to continue its lineage, out of which religion is a crucial arena to focus on; the manner religion conditions gender/sex/sexuality and is policed by civil law and medical consultation; the bodies are forcibly presented as the culture wants them to be. Partition is just not limited to the premise of History, when history is released from the strict shackles of academic discipline, and left to perceive from a multidisciplinary approach; History starts living again, awakening those 'hidden' wounds covered by partial and translated

'mainstream' version of History. Regulation of Sexuality depends on various cultural connotations, and construction of gender as something fixed also lies on the way that cultural power wants the bodies to perform for their convenience. In Indian culture, a woman's body is that domain of control and rule, further complicated with the 'idea' of shame, where Partition's impression has drawn a geography of 'silence', which only reflects 'abduction', 'rapes', prostitution, and 'forced marriages'. The Partition systemized the identity of a woman as either "your woman or our woman". Religion, chastity, became the organizing modules for recreating the identity of a 'woman'. Butalia said, "Referring to the mass rape and abduction of nearly a hundred thousand of women at the time of partition" (Butalia, xiv), Amrita Pritam wrote a poem referring to Waris Shah that "When one Heer died in Punjab/You penned an epic lament/Now that hundreds of Heers are being violated/Why are you silent Waris shah?" (Pritam, as cited in Butalia, xiv). The reason of women being abducted and raped or forced to marry during partition was because of the underlying political power-play of religion-gender-sexuality-women.

As we know, that in a patriarchal society 'women' is nothing more than a transforming identity- before marriage the legacy of father's identity is endured by this 'body'; after marriage the husband's identity is her final shift marker. So if I draw in the understanding of Judith Butler's theory from *Gender Trouble* (1990) where she said, "Butler defines- "Women are the sex which is not "one". Within...a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*...women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" (Butler, 13), then we can visualize that how 'women' as a subject is victim of political representation without being represented! Religious politics is sustained by re-making the storyline of history within the present horizon deemed to be the future's History. Therefore, religion being constructed it is easier to implement the same on an anatomy, which is a transferrable object, an identity whose representation is veiled by the center markers.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

This is what happened with Women during partitions; their bodies were used to gain supremacy and control. The touch of a Muslim man defiled the chastity and religious purity of a Hindu-woman and the touch of a Hindu man did the same to a Muslim woman. *Why?* Because both these elements, in relation to the body of a woman is a frail circumstance!

Butalia also emphasizes on the ‘absences’ of women from their own mnemonic recap of their own ‘history’. The term ‘History’ is hued political word whose complex decorum can be decoded once the term is deconstructed as ‘His’-‘Story’. ‘His’ is a pronoun used in place of a male/boy noun. Now on association of a .created piece’ along with the male pronoun ‘His’, it calculatively results in creation of a fable of the His, the He, the Male. Then what about the ‘She’, the ‘female’, the ‘Her’? Therefore finding the Herstory or Her-Story within the History/ His-story needs the help of certain hermeneutical devices like Feminism and Gender and Queer theory that eventually helps in projecting the unknown, unacknowledged ‘Herstory’! As Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949), depicted that women are identified as a woman (ticking all the features) because they are marked, while men are universal and left unmarked; hence, restrictions must be on women because they are ‘all body’ and they must endure their plight! Why this ‘absences’ or the ‘absent history’ more specifically the ‘silent history’ of a woman’s identity forgotten? “Because they were now in relationships with men of other religion, they became ‘absences’ in their families, absences that also led, in many ways, to an absence of memory” (Butalia, xxvi). Another important aspect of Butalia’s work is a clear portrayal of the very popular idea- ‘women as property’. Butalia specifically says that,

The idea of Women as property-of families, communities, men-underlay the ways in which women’s rights were so routinely violated during Partition, under the guise of protection, honour, purity (Butalia, xxvii).

This concept is indeed very important to analyze the violence committed on women during geographical cracks! The ‘propertization’ of a particular form of body and identity is to showcase revenge, owing power and authority. Along with land women were also a representation of the Man’s power. The statuses of a Hindu man abducting/raping/force marrying a Muslim Woman show the ‘power of phallus’ and its rule! Butalia also linked the ‘sexual violence’ on women was a result of this above stated idea. The history of ‘sexual violence’ on these bodies were not just a ‘lust motivated’ action but also a creative process of making these ‘bodies’ a ground on which these partitioned countries fought their wars. It must never be omitted that the historical lines of academics has only uplifted the sacrifices of people who struggled to kept the borders aligned together but not of the crying which turned to silences and were marginalized within walls of rule. Here, it is important to realize that our minds never realized the need of bringing the sufferings of such identities into forefront because our consciousness lacks that frame which can uphold these scratches of pain when it is related to that ‘unrepresentable and poorly in scripted gender identity’. When history of women in terms of partition is put under the lens of analysis sexual attacks is the dominating story. Therefore, these ‘sexually violenced histories of women’ were hidden with silences and awkward pauses- “...that awkward silence, that hesitant phrase was perhaps where the disappearance of two sisters lay hidden...” (Butalia, 134).

Furthermore, we see that although the Indian’s wanted to prevent partition recalling that it was a secular country and a space for all religion to be equally sheltered; however, when the abducted women, after being impregnated and or with children and a Muslim husband was found to be of Indian origin, the families did not accepted them, why? They lost their purity both in terms of ‘body and religion’. Even if, their bodily chastity was ‘untouched’, still acceptance was not initiated for the

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

abducted women and thus they were forced to be with their abductors. Why? Because women were identified based on religion too and during Partition it was one of the important criteria to resurge the histories of women in printed forms. Similar reflection is found in Amrita Pritam's work- *Pinjar: The Skeleton and The Man* (2009), where though Pooro was abducted by Rashida, she somehow managed to escape and reach her parents, but her parents asked her to go back because she can no longer be accepted, for a man from another religion has abducted her and that too kept for a night; although her 'bodily chastity' was "pure"; and Pooro heard her father saying- "Daughter, this fate was ordained for you, we are helpless" (Pritam, 22). This incident of being abducted by a 'man' whom Pooro did not even know and has to survive with him for the rest of her life, when even her parents refused to help marks the plight and scuffle of women who are identified only and just as a 'body'. In that dark mist of the night this incident got hidden and veiled by 'silence' and Pooro went back to the path she ran to reach to her parents. Her journey as Hamida began and similarly the unwanted journey of so many thousands of women began during partition, recalling which was not appreciated by the mnemonic scuffles, as Butalia said,

Even if the women wanted to remember, what would they remember? With whom would they remember? In order to be meaningful memories had to be shared but if you are alone, if that memory is shameful, if there is no one to allow it as legitimate, how do you remember?

Memory, a conscious production created through the present existence in relation to its surroundings which inculcates both living and non-living beings. Although, it is a conscious product of circumstances, its entity and identity exist completely in the subconscious state which further entangles the thought procedure of our unconscious realm, in a form of intricately complicated network design! Psychological interpretations of mnemonic

orientation is quite distinguished from the literary perspective, until an interdisciplinary approach merges both the domains together, which rather becomes a crucial lens to interpret the journeys of 'bodies' during the partition and 'histories of partition' in terms of few 'silent identities- women, casted people, prostitutes'. Memory has often tried to omit or put stored reflections associated with 'violence, blood quenching' struggles under the shade of 'oblivion', and now if the question arises 'why', the answer to which can be a reason to find security, solace, happiness, fixity, and above everything an *identity of representation in parity with respect*. To trace the impact of violence it is important to consider and refer to *A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal* by Suranjana Choudhury, where few lines articulated by simple lives has the power to present the plethora of psychic destruction that partition resulted to- "For breaking a bottle of oil/ you snub the little girl/ All you old boys/ you have partitioned Bharat/ What about that?" (Choudhury, 1). Partition was like a broken bottle of oil, it impacted lives with sharp and uneven shaped objects of power, particularly lives of those whose voices were subdued into 'silence'. To this understanding, the character of Pooro from *Pinjar* would be a suitable description, because after she was been abducted by Rashida, she tried to escape to her parents but which Rashida said, she is already defiled, no Hindu is ever going to take back as she has already become "impure", to which Pooro said- "I have only eaten your food and drunk your water, I...Pooro could not put the rest into words" and to which Rashid said, "Who will believe it?" (Pritam, 19). This instance of Pooro's inability to give words to her expression, feelings show how the issue of 'others' believing the same motivated the sound of any 'voice'; moreover, association of the identity- 'woman' to 'lack of voice' was a fact cherished and maintained during the days of 'histories/partition' and till date. Further 'silence' dominated Pooro, when her parents rejected to accept her for the fear of society (others) and therefore for her "Even death has slammed the door in her face" (Pritam, 23), so she did whatever



**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Rashida wanted, as ‘silence of being a woman and abducted Hindu’ overpowered and destroyed her. So, she was transformed to Hamida (the new name given to her by her husband Rashida to change her identity from Hindu-Muslim) and when Rashida grabbed her by the arms “she followed him without a word” (Pritam, 23). Pooro, just like ‘oil’ was molded and re-shaped in accordance to religion/identity/language/gender, which had no support from her ‘inner voice’!

The concept of naming or taxonomy and language during the partition played an important role that showcased how majority of events were influenced either by desire to rule and own or revenge to justify some years old issue. The concept of naming is essentially important and crucially interlinked with the theoretical understanding of politics in Language framework; therefore, delving into the history of English Language in India is important to hold the thread of naming a ‘body’ to show ‘control’. This is important to discuss because ‘partition’ in India was all about ‘possessing’ land/woman/children; this trilogy influenced every single ‘phallus’ to grab the ‘power of production’! Language in identifying ‘silent identities’ during ‘partition histories’ has centered the ‘main’ and subjugated the ‘rest/others’ whose stories became skeletons of words but never were printed to be visible to the eyes of the ‘readers’, because then ‘History’ would have been different! Arriving to the concept of ‘naming’ or ‘taxonomy’, numerous lives were renamed to suit the religious parameters, particularly women. Here, we also need to talk a bit on marriage ‘culture’ in India; marriage here is a ‘life-changing’ event, but only for bodies with ‘vaginas’ not bodies with ‘penis’. In *Laugh of Medusa*, Helene Cixous presented that the entrance of woman and man as political subjects is constructed and structured differently, where the their subject position within the phallogocentric symbolic order is highly distinctive. This difference molds the ‘political’ position and representation of the identity ‘women’ for which within the cramped social institution of marriage, women are nothing

but properties who are practically ‘sold off’ under social and legal procedures and along with that their names, surnames, identification also commutes forever under the ‘protection/shelter’ of the ‘husband’! Not only circumstances and life for women changes during marriage, but it is considered the marking end of a happy life; yet, this is that particular event for which the women are taught to prepare, and in regards to this Nivedita Menon in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* wrote:

Women have to learn to remake themselves completely, but even more significant is the fact that the entire period of their lives before this singular event of marriage, is spent in anticipating and preparing for this specific future...”Now I am married, I can’t do that,” If marriage is the end of life, how can it also be the goal of life?” (Menon, 43).

This exact cultural setup ran through every home during the partition period too, a way to establish and validate a culture, and referring this the character of Pooro can be drawn from *Pinjar*, where after she was abducted at the age of fourteen or fifteen she was thing the ‘preparation of her marriage’- “Pooro thought of what her wedding was to be like. She would have bathed in oil and massaged with a stick of turmeric; her arms would have been loaded with read ivory...she would have ridden to Ram Chand’s home...beautiful bride... (Pritam, 19). A carefree age of memory was driven with hopes of marriage and soon after that with desolation of abduction. In relation to her abduction the process of marriage changed and Rashida married her to take the family revenge of what was done to his aunt, and this revenge was capturing and owning the body of a woman, because that shows which religion has the more authority. Rashida changed her name after marriage to Hamida and tattooed the same, “One day he brought a stranger with him and asked his wife to stretch out her arm. The man tattooed on it the new name she had been given when she was married to Rashida...call her by that name” (Pritam, 25). This inscribing of a name

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

on the body transfers the authorship of identification and ownership to the person who provided the name, that means from her father now the authorship goes to her husband, who abducted her initially to take the revenge. Majority of the partition stories of the 'silent voices' were stirred in memories associated with violence, abduction, forced marriage, and rapes!

Family as an institution maintains the hierarchical order and is the source that produces legit and illicit identities. Mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, brothers, sisters, daughters and sons, etc, churns from this source only and this family is the one that refused to accept women/daughters/wives if they were abducted by men of other religion during partition. So family no longer is the safe space but in the memory of the survivors it is the space that *produced and marked that abducted women must not be accepted!* This 'space' created some silent memories which are to be forgotten and some representable memories that will either conduct and recreate the history or showcase the great victories marginalizing those voices whose lives were compelled in fathoms of veils- "Kamlaben's silence was one thing. But what about many families I had spoken to? Why had they made no mention of the rape and abduction of women? Were these deliberate erasures..." (Butalia, 133). Sanchali Sarkar in her article "The Study of the Bengal Partition Through the Mnemonic Narrative of Women in Qurratulain Hyder's 'Fireflies in the Mist'" wrote, "Literature on Partition demands a psychological probing" (Sarkar, 2) and here, the need to travel psychologically into the history of Partition is because there are many 'histories' and not one; there are many stories that are veiled by mainstream 'history', and there are many 'her-stories' of Partition that goes un-named, lost in memory of oblivion, further curtained by "familial love" to maintain standard of themselves!

**CONCLUSION**

Thus, after perceiving the historical lanes of partition, what gets prominently showcased is that a

triadic power dynamics of 'silence, gender, and memory' ruled and operated the bodies during the time when geographical barriers were constructed amidst the ownership of bodies based only on religion, but it was really juxtaposing with the ideals Indian presented during the partition time as the solution to rescue the abducted women- "It was a curious paradox...India's reluctance to accept Partition was based on its self perception as a secular, rational nation, not one whose identity was defined by religion...Yet women...could only be identified in terms of their religious identity" (Butalia, 139). It is very important, therefore, to understand the social position of women also impacted the social position of men as R.W. Connell said in his article, "Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities" that, "gender is a living system of social interactions, not a stack of watertight boxes" . Many men were labeled as abductors only because of religious revenge. Thus, History of Partition is complexly stratified theorem, where the subject identity 'woman' stands in 'silence' in opposition to the subject man, who created and recreated, produced and reproduced 'histories' with their voices.

**REFERENCES**

- [1] Beauvoir, De Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage, 2011.
- [2] Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India*. Penguin, 2017.
- [3] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1990.
- [4] Choudhury, Suranjana. *A Reading of Violence in Partition Stories from Bengal*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020.
- [5] Connell, R.W. "Understanding Men: Gender Sociology and the New International Research on Masculinities." *Social Thought & Research*, 2002, Vol.24, 1&2.  
[file:///H:/Understanding%20Men\\_Connell.pdf](file:///H:/Understanding%20Men_Connell.pdf).
- [6] Foucault, Michel. *History of Sexuality*. Penguin, 1976.

**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

[7]Jackson, Stevi and Jackie Jones. "Contemporary Feminist Theories." *Edinburgh University*

*Press*, 1998, pp. 280. *JSTOR*,

[www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366).

[8]Jassal, Smita Tewari and Eyal Ben-Ari. "Listening for Echoes: Partition in Three Contexts."

*Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 41, No. 22, 2006, pp. 2213-2220. *JSTOR*,

[www.jstor.org/stable/4418294](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418294).

[9]Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like A Feminist*. Zubaan, 2012.

[10]Pritam, Amrita. *Pinjar*. Tara India Research Place, 2009.

[11]Sarkar, Sanchali. "The Study of the Bengal Partition Through the Mnemonic Narrative of Women in Qurratulain Hyder's 'Fireflies in the Mist'." *Academia*,

<https://www.academia.edu/25128564/> .