



# Redefining History: The Impact of *The Other Side of Silence* on Partition Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Partition Studies has long relied on political documents, elite memoirs, and official narratives to understand the violent division of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998) radically redefined this field by foregrounding oral testimonies, personal narratives, and marginalised voices—particularly those of women, Dalits, and children. By documenting silenced stories of abduction, rape, forced conversions, and familial violence, Butalia complicates traditional histories that often focus narrowly on statecraft and diplomacy. This article explores how *The Other Side of Silence* reshaped Partition historiography, challenging dominant paradigms by situating trauma, memory, and gendered violence at its core. The book's methodology of oral history allows for a democratization of historical knowledge, offering space for subaltern voices that had been excluded. In doing so, it exposes the intersection of gender, community, and power during the Partition and demonstrates how silence itself becomes a historical text. This research examines the transformative impact of Butalia's work on Partition Studies, tracing its role in shaping feminist historiography, trauma studies, and memory discourse in South Asia. It argues that Butalia's intervention shifts Partition Studies from a state-centered narrative to a people-centered narrative, redefining both the sources and the ethics of history.

**Keywords:** Partition, Oral history, Gender, Memory, Silence, Subaltern

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most traumatic events of the twentieth century, leading to the displacement of nearly 15 million people and the deaths of an estimated one million. Traditional historiography often narrated Partition through the lens of political negotiations between elites such as Nehru, Jinnah, and Mountbatten. In this framing, the masses appeared only as abstract figures—migrants, refugees, or victims—without their individual voices.

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* represents a crucial turning point in this historiographical tradition. Published in 1998, the book foregrounds the "ordinary" people of Partition by collecting oral testimonies and personal accounts. Butalia deliberately listens to women, Dalits, and children—groups doubly marginalized in historical writing. Through their memories, she uncovers difficult truths about gendered violence, abduction, and even violence within families, where women were sometimes killed by their own kin in the name of "honor."

As Butalia notes, "Partition is not one story, but many stories, often contradictory, but equally valid" (Butalia 89). This methodological shift—away from a single, linear narrative toward multiple fractured voices—redefines how historians conceptualize the past. This paper argues that *The Other Side of Silence* not only enriches our understanding of Partition but also transforms the very practice of history writing by integrating memory, trauma, and silence as legitimate sources of knowledge.

## 2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The rationale for this study emerges from the recognition that traditional Partition historiography has been largely dominated by political and nationalistic narratives. Such accounts marginalize lived experiences, particularly of women and subaltern groups, whose voices are systematically silenced in archival sources. Butalia's intervention challenges the monopoly of official archives by demonstrating that oral histories, despite their subjectivity, reveal dimensions of trauma and memory otherwise absent from state-centered accounts.

The objective of this research article is threefold:

1. To analyze how *The Other Side of Silence* redefines Partition Studies by privileging marginalized voices.
2. To examine the methodological and ethical implications of using oral history as a primary source.
3. To assess the long-term impact of Butalia's work on feminist historiography, memory studies, and South Asian history.

Through this focus, the article contributes to ongoing debates about what counts as "legitimate history" and how historians can responsibly engage with traumatic pasts.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Partition Studies began in the 1950s with works such as Chaudhry Mohammad Ali's *The Emergence of Pakistan* and later studies by historians like H.V. Hodson. These early works emphasized political negotiations, territorial boundaries, and the role of elites. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars like Bipan Chandra and Ayesha Jalal broadened the scope but still largely framed Partition as a question of nationalism, ideology, and state formation.

The feminist turn in Partition Studies came through the pioneering works of Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (*Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*, 1998) and Urvashi Butalia (*The Other Side of Silence*, 1998). These texts foregrounded women's experiences of abduction, rape, and silence, arguing that Partition violence cannot be understood without gender analysis.

Since then, a new wave of Partition scholarship—Gyanendra Pandey (*Remembering Partition*, 2001), Vazira Zamindar (*The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia*, 2007), and Yasmin Khan (*The Great Partition*, 2007)—has built on Butalia's framework. These works emphasize memory, displacement, and the everyday violence of Partition, demonstrating how Butalia's oral history approach has permanently altered the field.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY / RESEARCH DESIGN

This article employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on textual analysis of *The Other Side of Silence* within the framework of historiography, memory studies, and feminist theory. Primary attention is given to Butalia's use of oral histories, her narrative strategies, and her treatment of silence as a form of testimony. Secondary sources, including scholarly reviews and subsequent Partition studies, are used to contextualize her contribution. Rather than attempting a comprehensive history of Partition, this study adopts a **critical-interpretive approach**—analyzing how Butalia redefines what counts as historical evidence and how her methodology shapes the ethical responsibilities of historians.

#### 5. DISCUSSION

##### 5.1 Shifting the Focus from Elites to Subalterns

One of the central achievements of Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* is how it upends the traditional elite-centric narrative of Partition, giving space to subaltern voices—women, Dalits, children, people from rural areas whose stories rarely appear in official archives. Butalia states that through interviews she came to see how “so many stories as yet unheard — of women, children, untouchables — were necessary to locate the human cost of Partition.” (Butalia, p. 34).

In *Beginnings and Margins*, Butalia describes how she collected testimonies over a decade to “place people — their individual experiences, their private pain — at the center of this epochal event.” The book summary notes that she does this through “interviews conducted over a ten-year period ... diaries, letters, memoirs, and parliamentary documents.” This is not simply additive (adding “ordinary” people to a history that has already been written), but transformative: it changes what counts as valid evidence and who counts as a historian and witness. For example, in the chapter “Women, Butalia relates the story of Zainab and Buta Singh. She writes:

As it was told, this was the story of a hero and a ‘victim’. We learnt something about the hero: his impulsive nature, his honesty ... But nothing about the victim. Try as I might, I could not recover her voice. What had Zainab felt? ... I realized I had to go back ... that I would impose my own silences on this search. ( 56, )

This shows that even when stories are told, often only the public, heroic, or male parts endure; women's feelings, suffering, inner life are suppressed. Butalia makes clear that retrieving those is a difficult, partial task—and that silence is sometimes imposed, both by survivors and by historians.

## 5.2 The Gendered Experience of Partition

Gendered violence is one of the most disturbing, yet under-examined, dimensions of Partition. Butalia does not shy away from it. She documents abductions, forced conversions, rape, sexual abuse, and the violence visited on women's bodies in the name of honour. These are not peripheral; they are central to how Partition affected many individuals and communities.

A particularly powerful section is the description of how the governments of India and Pakistan responded to large numbers of abducted women. In *Part II – History Is a Woman's Body*, Butalia recounts the setting up of the Inter-Dominion Treaty of 6 December 1947, and later the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Ordinance (and then 1949 Act), to find and “recover as many abducted women as could be found” (p. 123).

She writes:

Many women protested. They refused to go back. Impossible as it may seem, there were women who ... had formed relationships with their abductors ... Another said: ‘Why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?’ ( 63)

This raises difficult ethical and personal questions: does “recovery” always mean “return”? What about women who, in the trauma, in the context of abduction, had begun to rebuild lives, had children, had formed attachments? The state's notion of “honour” demands purity, but the lived complexity defies such simplistic categories.

Butalia also introduces the concept of “double dislocation”: women who after abduction bore children, then were expected to sever those bonds and return to origins, while often being rejected because they were seen as “impure.” As a commentator summarizes: “Impurity could be faked ... bearing of a child implied sexual intercourse ... Their ‘choice’ was rather terrible ... leaving their child and joining the family, or staying with the child ... no possible return to their past.”

This not only documents the trauma but highlights how gendered power operates in public, legal, and private spheres: in the laws about “abducted persons,” in family demands, in social shame, in religious definitions, etc.

## 5.3 The Politics of Silence and Memory

Another central theme in Butalia's work is how memory and silence interrelate. Silence is not simply absence of speech—it is itself evidence, an effect of trauma, shame, social norms, or political suppression. Butalia reflects on how people sometimes refused to speak, or only spoke partially; how “half-said things” or “ambiguous phrases” mattered as much as clear testimony.



For instance, in “Margins” and “Memory”, she writes, “Working with memory is never simple or unproblematic ... So much depends on who remembers, when, with whom, indeed to whom, and how.” (72)

“In many people then, 1947 and 1984 flowed into each other ... time past and time present, the incompleteness, often even contradictoriness, in the stories as part of the process of remembering ... words would suddenly fail speech as memory encountered something too painful ... ‘How can I describe this ... there are no words to do so.’” (81)

Thus memory is both generative and fragmentary. Butalia’s method treats contradiction, forgetting, and silence not as flaws to be eliminated, but as features to be understood.

She also acknowledges the ethical problem: is it right to force people to remember? When is silence more respectful or necessary? She writes:

“Is it better to be silent or to speak? Or, for the researcher, is it better to ‘allow’ silence or to ‘force’ speech?” (88)

#### 5.4 Oral History as Methodology

Butalia’s methodological self-reflection is one of her most important contributions. She is not uncritical of oral history; she sees limitations, responsibilities, power imbalances, and the risks of re-traumatization or exploitation.

She describes how interviews often took place in family settings, multiple generations present, sometimes others stepping in or taking over parts of narrative, stories beginning and stopping, mixing of past and present.

The quote:

I began to understand how much, and how easily, the past flowed into the present ... For so many people then, 1947 and 1984 flowed into each other ... storytelling started would be left incomplete ... stories begun would be left incomplete ... I recognised too the imbalance of power that oral historians ... often spoken about as being inherent in such situations ... (43)

She also admits that she imposed her own silences: she decided not to press certain interviewees, not to delve where people did not want to go. In the story of Zainab, for example, she describes how she had to “impose my own silences on this search” (67) because she did not wish to force testimonies.

Butalia also treats oral testimonies with respect to their subjectivity: she doesn’t present them as “objective truth” but as personal, shaped by memory, by social norms, by present concerns. She writes, “The way people choose to remember an event ... is at least as important as what one might call the ‘facts’ of that history ... these latter are not self-evident givens; instead, they too are interpretations ...” (86)

This is crucial, because it shows her historiography is not about simply filling gaps, but about expanding what history can be — what counts as evidence, and how stories are told.

## 5.5 Ethical Dimensions of Testimony

Connected to methodology is the ethical dimension: Because Partition stories often invoke extreme violence, betrayal, sexual assault, loss — telling them risks re-opening old wounds; perhaps even harming interviewees. Butalia is conscious of not re-traumatizing, of not converting people into “informants” stripped of feeling. In her interviews she would ask only those who wanted to speak about their suffering; sometimes only partial stories; sometimes she withheld asking certain details.

She also shows how state recovery operations, though officially humanitarian, could be coercive. Under the Abducted Persons Act, women who were living with men of another religion were to be “brought back ... whether necessary by force, to their ‘own’ homes” regardless of their wishes. She raises the question: does “restoration” always mean restoration to safety or restoration to shame? Or restoration defined by male, religious, familial notions?

## 5.6 The Impact on Partition Studies

Because of all the above—Butalia’s centering of subaltern voices, her attention to gender, to memory and silence, her ethical oral methodology—Partition Studies changed in several distinct ways:

- ✓ After *The Other Side of Silence*, many works of Partition scholarship increasingly include oral testimony as primary source (Pandey, Zamindar, Khan).
- ✓ Feminist historiography of Partition becomes more mainstream and acknowledged.
- ✓ Memory studies blossoms: the way communities remember, the role of diaspora, generational memory, collective forgetting have come into the foreground.
- ✓ Ethics: scholars are more aware now of the ethics of interviewing survivors, of bearing witness, not exploiting, being sensitive to silence.

Butalia's work has also influenced how textbooks, memorials, and public commemorations treat (or avoid) the stories of violence, especially gendered violence. She challenges the “public amnesia” about what exactly happened, the reluctance of states to memorialize abducted women or to mark sites of suffering. As the book summary says, “In public memory, ... the violent, disturbing realities that accompanied Partition have remained blanketed in silence.”

## 6. FINDINGS

This research finds that Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* fundamentally redefined Partition Studies by:

1. **Decentering political elites** and foregrounding ordinary voices.
2. **Integrating gender** as a central category of analysis.
3. **Reconceptualizing silence and memory** as legitimate historical sources.
4. **Challenging the archive**, showing that oral testimonies can expand and critique official records.

5. **Influencing subsequent scholarship**, shaping feminist historiography, memory studies, and postcolonial history.

The book's impact lies not only in its content but also in its **methodology** and **ethics**, which encourage historians to approach traumatic pasts with sensitivity and openness to multiplicity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

*The Other Side of Silence* represents a watershed moment in Partition historiography. By privileging marginalized voices, Butalia destabilizes state-centered narratives and foregrounds the lived realities of Partition survivors. Her use of oral history challenges the boundaries of historical evidence, insisting that memory, trauma, and silence themselves constitute archives of the past.

This redefinition has lasting consequences. Partition Studies is no longer confined to political analysis but now embraces interdisciplinary perspectives from feminist theory, anthropology, and memory studies. Butalia's ethical approach to testimony has also reshaped how scholars engage with survivors of violence, emphasizing respect, responsibility, and the acknowledgment of subjectivity.

Moreover, Butalia's work highlights the entanglement of gender, community, and violence, showing that women's bodies often became the battlegrounds of Partition. By recording stories of abduction, rape, and honor killings, she ensures that these silenced narratives cannot be erased from history.

Ultimately, *The Other Side of Silence* redefines history itself. It moves us from a singular narrative of Partition to a polyphonic tapestry of memories, each fragment shedding light on the incompleteness of "official" histories. It urges historians and readers alike to accept contradictions, silences, and fractures as integral to understanding the past. In doing so, Butalia not only transforms Partition Studies but also offers a model for writing history in contexts of trauma worldwide.

## 8. REFERENCES / WORKS CITED

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