Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 40
Butalia's The Other Side of Silence – Part 4

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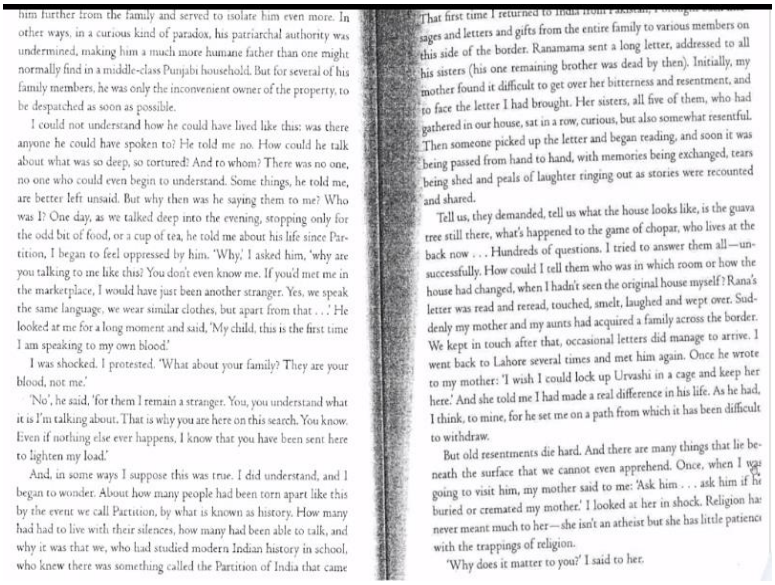
him further from the family and served to isolate him even more. In other ways, in a curious kind of paradox, his patriarchal authority was undermined, making him a much more humane father than one might normally find in a middle-class Punjabi household. But for several of his family members, he was only the inconvenient owner of the property, to be despatched as soon as possible.

I could not understand how he could have lived like this: was there anyone he could have spoken to? He told me no. How could he talk about what was so deep, so tortured? And to whom? There was no one, no one who could even begin to understand. Some things, he told me, are better left unsaid. But why then was he saying them to me? Who was I? One day, as we talked deep into the evening, stopping only for the odd bit of food, or a cup of tea, he told me about his life since Partition, I began to feel oppressed by him. 'Why,' I asked him, 'why are you talking to me like this? You don't even know me. If you'd met me in the marketplace, I would have just been another stranger. Yes, we speak the same language, we wear similar clothes, but apart from that . . .' He looked at me for a long moment and said, 'My child, this is the first time I am speaking to my own blood.'

I was shocked. I protested. 'What about your family? They are your blood, not me.'

'No', he said, 'for them I remain a stranger. You, you understand what it is I'm talking about. That is why you are here on this search. You know. Even if nothing else ever happens, I know that you have been sent here to lighten my load.'

And, in some ways I suppose this was true. I did understand, and I began to wonder. About how many people had been torn apart like this by the event we call Partition, by what is known as history. How many had had to live with their silences, how many had been able to talk, and why it was that we, who had studied modern Indian history in school, who knew there was something called the Partition of India that came

That first time I returned to India from Pakistan, I
sages and letters and gifts from the entire family to various members on this side of the border. Ranamama sent a long letter, addressed to all his sisters (his one remaining brother was dead by then). Initially, my mother found it difficult to get over her bitterness and resentment, and to face the letter I had brought. Her sisters, all five of them, who had gathered in our house, sat in a row, curious, but also somewhat resentful. Then someone picked up the letter and began reading, and soon it was being passed from hand to hand, with memories being exchanged, tears being shed and peals of laughter ringing out as stories were recounted and shared.

Tell us, they demanded, tell us what the house looks like, is the guava tree still there, what's happened to the game of chopar, who lives at the back now . . . Hundreds of questions. I tried to answer them all—unsuccessfully. How could I tell them who was in which room or how the house had changed, when I hadn't seen the original house myself? Rana's letter was read and reread, touched, smelt, laughed and wept over. Suddenly my mother and my aunts had acquired a family across the border. We kept in touch after that, occasional letters did manage to arrive. I went back to Lahore several times and met him again. Once he wrote to my mother: 'I wish I could lock up Urvashi in a cage and keep her here.' And she told me I had made a real difference in his life. As he had, I think, to mine, for he set me on a path from which it has been difficult to withdraw.

But old resentments die hard. And there are many things that lie beneath the surface that we cannot even apprehend. Once, when I was going to visit him, my mother said to me: 'Ask him . . . ask him if he buried or cremated my mother.' I looked at her in shock. Religion has never meant much to her—she isn't an atheist but she has little patience with the trappings of religion.

'Why does it matter to you?' I said to her.

This is an NPTEL course entitled "Trauma and Literature" on Urvashi Butalia's text "The Other Side of Silence". We move on to the next section, the section where the narrator, storyteller Butalia returns to India out of Pakistan and we get to know, we have got to know before how she had experienced a very different kind of emotional connect, which in a way deconstructs and transcends any cartographic division.

She connected back to her uncle, Ranamama a and then we also mentioned how the traveling to a different space, which is Pakistan was also a little bit of time traveling, she went back in time to reconnect in a pre-partition kinship system. It generates very complex emotional and memory models, so we were looking at how memory becomes an act of storytelling.

We can weave memory through an act of storytelling and that is something which we see quite recursively in this particular text. Memory as an act of storytelling; memory as a storytelling activity and memory as very emotional activity, so this emotionality of

memory, the narrative quality of memory are things which we need to highlight. So, this section talks about what happens when she comes back to India.

The kind of questions that she is asked after having experienced relatives in Pakistan. “That first time I returned to India from Pakistan, I brought back messages and letters and gifts from the entire family to various members on this side of the border.” We have very; we keep talking about how the domestic and family narratives are sort of interestingly mapped onto the bigger macro political narratives.

Sometimes, the petty family stories, the little family stories and stories of difference and quarrels and fighting and litigations and in terms of who will own the house these things become suddenly very symbolic in the context of partition. These two narratives converge at very complex points. This intersectionality between the familial micro stories and the political macro stories is something which we will see happening throughout.

“She comes back from Pakistan with love letters and gifts and small things which were sent from the other side of the border, which is quite literally becomes a messenger across the border per se. Ranamama had sent a long letter addressed to all his sisters, his only remaining brother was dead by then. Initially, my mother found it difficult to get over her bitterness and resentment and to face a letter I had brought.

Her sisters, all five of them, who had gathered in our house, sat in a row, curious, but also somewhat resentful. This is how we see the ontology and experience of silence becomes so important, so emotional and so political, they had not spoken for so many years. There is that resentment and there is that initial ambivalence about opening the letter whether I should read the letter at all because you have not spoken to each other for decades now.”

The silence becomes some kind of an identity category, the silence becomes some kind of emotional and experiential category. It is much more than just wordlessness, is much more than just emotionlessness, and is much more than information lessness. It becomes some kind of an experiential category, which disconnects even as it connects.

That silence becomes interesting over here and this initial ambivalence or perhaps refusal or resentment about opening the letter is also an extension of that silence. “Her sisters, all five of them, who had gathered in her house, sat in a row, curious, but also somewhat resentful. Then someone picked up the letter and began reading and soon it was being passed from hand to hand, with memories being exchanged, tears being shed, and peals of laughter ringing out as stories were recounted and shared.”

We look at how storytelling becomes a memory activity, storytelling which incorporates imagination as well as information. This interesting integration of information and imagination which constitutes storytelling that becomes very interesting instrument for memory, a very interesting signifier of memories, symbolically speaking. We see that not just symbolically but also experientially how storytelling becomes the best form of remembering.

“The finest form of remembering as of this remembrance is very intimate, is happening inside the family house, but it is also a shared collective quality. There are people sitting together; sharing the stories, sharing the memories, sharing the letter.” The letter becomes very symbolic memory capsule, it becomes very symbolic memory instrument. And it contains information as well as emotion.

It is interesting combinations, weaving of information and imagination makes this act of remembering very cognitive in quality as well as very experiential in quality. Everything is very political. We are looking at the context of partition aware which was a profoundly political event. That very complex combination of politics, emotion effect, symbols, sign, kinship, all come together and so recounts this wonderful narrative about memory and remembering through silences.

Silence also becomes almost a communicative category over here. Silence is not just absence, silence is also some kind of productive presence. So not saying something also says a lot and that becomes the communicative category at a certain level. “Tell us, they demanded, tell us what the house looks like, is the guava tree is still there.” The two signifiers here look very domestic, intimate personal signifiers of identity.

“So tell us how the house is, is the guava trees is still there and all the stories, all these questions being asked by the different locations around the house. What has happened to the game of chopar, who lives at the back now, hundreds of questions? I tried to answer them all unsuccessfully? How could I tell them who was in which room or how the house had changed when I had not seen the original house myself?”

We have a very interesting combination of a post memory, embodiment of post-memory which is Urvashi Butalia, who is Urvashi Butalia and people who actually lived there. Butalia is recreating the entire house from a revisit there and also from the stories she had heard, but she never lived there, she was born much subsequent to that. She was born in India after partition.

These people, aunts, people who lived and grew up in that house, so, it is a very interesting dialogue between the memory generation and the post-memory generation happening here. “Rana’s letter was read and reread, touched, smelled, laughed and wept over. Suddenly my mother and my aunts had acquired a family across the border. So, this letter becomes almost semiotic connect, is just a small sign, the letter.”

It is also a communicative capsule. It communicates information and emotion through certain signs and symbols, which is a letter. The letter that communicate a symbol becomes a connection across the borders over here, where suddenly the kinship is reestablished, suddenly the kinship is regenerated through the signs through the symbolic structure.

“We kept in touch after that, occasional letters did manage to arrive. I went back to Lahore several times and met him again. Once he wrote to my mother, I wish I could lock up Urvashi in a cage and keep her here. And she told me I had made a real difference in his life. Ad he had I think, to mine, for he has set me on a path from which it has been difficult to withdraw.” This becomes an experiential journey for Urvashi Butalia. This becomes a research journey for her.

This becomes an ethnographic story. This becomes a personal story. This is where her research and emotional involvement with the partition begins to start, the inception point so to speak. But all resentments die hard. There are many things that lie beneath the

surface which we cannot even apprehend. Once when I was going to visit him, my mother said to me ask him if he buried or cremated my mother. I looked at her in shock. Religion has never meant much to her.

She is not atheist but she has a little patience with the trappings of religion. We can see how a religion becomes a marker of identity, a marker of existential identity, a marker of familial identity. "Depending on whether mother got buried or cremated she will get to know whether her mother's original identity was preserved or was subverted by the conversion of Rana which was as you know a convenient conversion, after partition he became Muslim. Why does it matter to you? I said to her."

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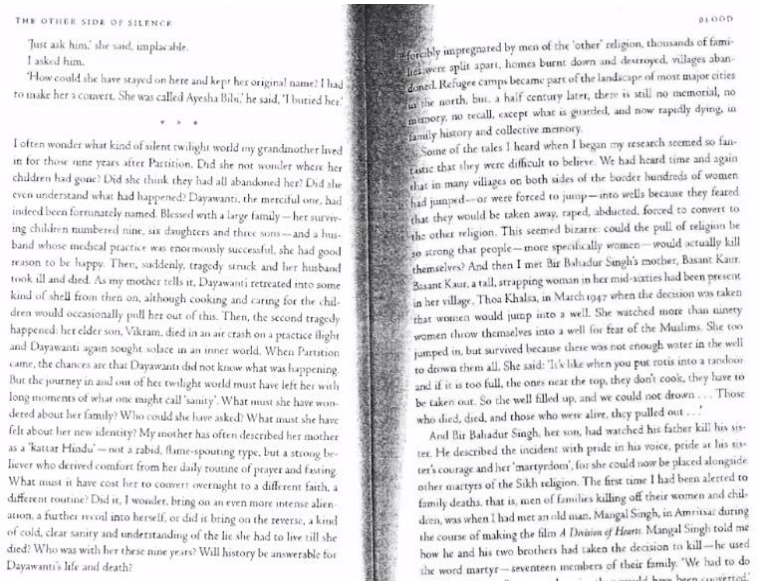

THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

'Just ask him,' she said, implacable.

I asked him.

'How could she have stayed on here and kept her original name? I had to make her a convert. She was called Ayesha Bibi,' he said, 'I buried her.'

* * *

I often wonder what kind of silent twilight world my grandmother lived in for those nine years after Partition. Did she not wonder where her children had gone? Did she think they had all abandoned her? Did she even understand what had happened? Dayawanti, the merciful one, had indeed been fortunately named. Blessed with a large family—her surviving children numbered nine, six daughters and three sons—and a husband whose medical practice was enormously successful, she had good reason to be happy. Then, suddenly, tragedy struck and her husband took ill and died. As my mother tells it, Dayawanti retreated into some kind of shell from then on, although cooking and caring for the children would occasionally pull her out of this. Then, the second tragedy happened: her elder son, Vikram, died in an air crash on a practice flight and Dayawanti again sought solace in an inner world. When Partition came, the chances are that Dayawanti did not know what was happening. But the journey in and out of her twilight world must have left her with long moments of what one might call 'sanity'. What must she have wondered about her family? Who could she have asked? What must she have felt about her new identity? My mother has often described her mother as a 'Kattar Hindu'—not a rabid, flame-spouting type, but a strong believer who derived comfort from her daily routine of prayer and fasting. What must it have cost her to convert overnight to a different faith, a different routine? Did it, I wonder, bring on an even more intense alienation, a further recoil into herself, or did it bring on the reverse, a kind of cold, clear sanity and understanding of the lie she had to live till she died? Who was with her these nine years? Will history be answerable for Dayawanti's life and death?

BLOOD

forcibly impregnated by men of the 'other' religion, thousands of families were split apart, homes burnt down and destroyed, villages abandoned. Refugee camps became part of the landscape of most major cities in the north, but, a half century later, there is still no memorial, no memory, no recall, except what is guarded, and now rapidly dying, in family history and collective memory.

Some of the tales I heard when I began my research seemed so fantastic that they were difficult to believe. We had heard time and again that in many villages on both sides of the border hundreds of women had jumped—or were forced to jump—into wells because they feared that they would be taken away, raped, abducted, forced to convert to the other religion. This seemed bizarre: could the pull of religion be so strong that people—more specifically women—would actually kill themselves? And then I met Bir Bahadur Singh's mother, Basant Kaur. Basant Kaur, a tall, strapping woman in her mid-sixties had been present in her village, Thoa Khalsa, in March 1947 when the decision was taken that women would jump into a well. She watched more than ninety women throw themselves into a well for fear of the Muslims. She too jumped in, but survived because there was not enough water in the well to drown them all. She said: 'It's like when you put rotis into a tandoor and if it is too full, the ones near the top, they don't cook, they have to be taken out. So the well filled up, and we could not drown . . . Those who died, died, and those who were alive, they pulled out . . .'

And Bir Bahadur Singh, her son, had watched his father kill his sister. He described the incident with pride in his voice, pride at his sister's courage and her 'martyrdom', for she could now be placed alongside other martyrs of the Sikh religion. The first time I had been alerted to family deaths, that is, men of families killing off their women and children, was when I had met an old man, Mangal Singh, in Amritsar during the course of making the film *A Division of Hearts*. Mangal Singh told me how he and his two brothers had taken the decision to kill—he used the word martyr—seventeen members of their family. 'We had to do

"Just ask him, she said implacable. I asked him, how could she have stayed on here and kept the original name? I had to make her a convert. She was called Ayesha Bibi, he said, I buried her. And, we can see how this renaming also becomes in a certain sense the regeneration of identity, which is an ad hoc production after partition. So after partition, these identities have to produce certainly for the matter of convenience, for the matter of security and safety."

We are told that the grandmother was renamed Ayesha Bibi and she had to be buried under Muslim ritual. She was not cremated according to the Hindu ritual, she was buried. And again, this ritual becomes a marker of identity, a marker of post partition identity, and that is something which bothers, that is something which makes a difference, not just at a religious level, but also at a very personal existential level.

It is almost as if a large part of identity was reformed or taken away or deformed and she became someone else with the arrival of a new name that continued posthumously with her burial. “I often wonder what kind of silent twilight my grandmother lived in for those 9 years after partition.” The choice of the time twilight is interesting in a way because twilight is the liminal time between sunset and evening that shading period where things begin to become dark.

Where one particular order of time ends and the other others brought to begin that transition period. It is quite appropriate as a metaphor to talk about partition and this is a twilight period in which her grandmother lived and she often wondered how she lived around that time. “Did she not wonder where children had gone? Did she think they have abandoned her? Did she even understand what had happened?

Dayawanti, the merciful one, had indeed been fortunately named. Blessed with a large family, her surviving children number 9; 6 daughters and 3 sons and a husband whose medical practice was enormously successful. She had good reason to be happy. Then suddenly, tragedy struck and her husband took ill and died. As my mother tells it, Dayawanti retreated into some kind of shell from then on, although cooking and caring for the children will occasionally pull her out of this.

Then the second tragedy happened; the eldest son Vikram died in an air crash on a practice flight and Dayawanti again sought solace in an inner world. When partition came, the chances are that Dayawanti did not know what was happening. But that journey in and out of the twilight world must have left her with long moments for one might call sanity. What must she have wondered about her family?

Who could she have asked? What might she have felt about her new identity? Well, my mother has often described her mother as a kattar Hindu, not a rabid, flame spouting type, but a strong believer who derived comfort from our daily routine of prayer and fasting. What must it have cost her to convert overnight into different faith, a different routine?

Did it, I wonder, bring on even more intense alienation, a further recoil into herself or did it bring on the reverse, a kind of cold, clear sanity and understanding of the lie that she had lived till she died. Who was with her on those 9 years? Will history be answerable for Dayawanti's life and death?" The whole section is read because this particular figure is a spectral presence in this context.

She died 9 years after partition. She never inhabits, in the text except as a character, we do not get to hear her speak, we do not see her self-story, and we just told things about her. We can see how the very personal emotional sense of loss, emotion experiences of loss she suffered at different degrees, the death of her husband, death of first son, and of course the partition.

So, that sequentially makes her a different kind of person and of course with partition, it does not make a difference to her because chances are that she does not know what was happening. We also do that certainly after the partition, she had to be converted into Islam and she became someone else. And one can only speculate what that must have cost to her mentally.

The question is whether it made her even more recoil or withdrawn or just made more just bring out the sanity understanding that she was living a lie, that everything that she lived for were just rituals and constructs and anything that is a construct can be deconstructed and reconstructed. The partition in a certain sense it brought into the surface the constructed quality about identities.

Constructed qualities about our emotional affiliations, and this emotional landscape and the political landscape to became completely incompatible with each other and she stayed back. But one can only speculate what she must have felt like, was she alienated or did she get a clearer understanding of life and existential level that should become more sane, that should become more clear, that should become more direct.

In terms of the finding that all the life has been a lie, that all her little rituals have been just meaningless. And the religious thing comes to the end as well where we get to know from Butalia's mother that this grandmother character was a very spiritual Hindu. She

was someone who very strong believer and someone who derived her sustenance from prayers and offerings and for that person to change the different religion overnight.

What that must have done to existentially is a question that we can only speculate. But there are two possibilities Butalia is offering. One, it could have made her more retreated, it could have made her more withdrawn. The secondly it could have given her a clear understanding of the meaninglessness of rituals, the meaninglessness of the constructed identities that she had, inhabited and suffered throughout her life.

The final sentence becomes interesting will history be answerable for Dayawanti's what is life and death? History is a discursive quality, a discursive narrative over here over here something which is discursively determined, politically informed, illogically informed; there are different kinds of factors involving history.

That artificiality of history, the artificiality of the movement of history can that be held accountable for the tragedy and sufferings and alienations that Dayawanti suffered was at an emotional level. We have again a bit of a disjuncture between history as a metanarrative, as a material narrative, as an artificial narrative, as a grand narrative and the human memory is something which happens inside it in a negotiation with history.

But then sometimes it can be out of sync with history as well. It is sometimes compatible, sometimes incompatible and that is a purely random moment, a purely random situation whether they are compatible or incompatible. That quality when history and memory is something that becomes very interesting and it is very burning question. But this section about the twilight category of the character becomes interesting.

First of all, she is a spectral presence, she is the hauntological presence, so haunted ontology, someone is just there, but then she is also some kind of a metaphor of partition, she also becomes a symbol of sorts of partition. This movement between matter, metaphor and memory becomes very interesting in terms of understanding what partition must have been to all these people.

People who have sort of lived through it, people who have suffered emotionally and existentially before the partition did a lot to them or was just another blow that they had

to negotiate with. And again, this whole ad hoc conversion to some kind of other identity also becomes interesting. And that also reveals the constructed quality of identity in the first place.

While also perhaps giving another very big tragic blow to her sense of sustenance, to her sense of existential core, to her sense of essential rootedness that may have been completely uprooted. We do not quite know, but these are the possibilities that Butalia is speculating over here.