

*Partition and other Themes in Urvashi Butalia's The Other Side of the Silence*

Butalia's *Other Side of Silence* mostly recounts the history of the Indian Partition. The book focuses more on the subaltern people who have been silenced than on the higher classes. She says, "My book belongs to the common people, women, children, and scheduled castes or harijans or margins" (11). In addition to Indian Partition, it looks at other things like people's cultures, rituals or customs, castes, and so on. Cultural variety comes from many different places, including ethnic backgrounds, religions, and languages. India is an amazing place because of how many different plants and animals live there and how many different cultures live there. Her natural resources have drawn many people from many different places at different periods, which has led to a great mix of genes and civilizations. So, most of the people in India are regarded to be of mixed race to different degrees. In India, the dominant human civilizations have tended to support diversity, unlike in many other places where they have tended to absorb or get rid of other cultures. The variety of ecological regimes in the country has made this possible. You may say that India is an ethnological museum. Most of the people in India are descendants of immigrants who came from places beyond the Himalayas. B.S. Guha categorizes the Indian people into six principal ethnic groups: Negrito, Proto-Australoids, Mongoloids, Mediterranean or Dravidian, Western Brachycephals, and Nordic Aryans (Rao 3). Individuals from these distinct racial groups share few commonalities in terms of physical characteristics or dietary practices. The racial variety is quite hard to understand. Jawaharlal Nehru says: "The North-West Frontier Province already has the breath of Central Asia, and many of its customs, like those in Kashmir, remind me of the countries on the other side of the Himalayas." Pathan folk dances are very similar to Cossack dances. Even with all these contrasts, it's clear that India has had an effect on the Pathans, as shown by the Tamil. (qtd. in Rao 3-4) Since its beginning, Indian people have had a strong religious foundation. Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are the three most important religions in India. There are also those who follow Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and

Zoroastrianism. India is not a religiously homogeneous state, despite over eighty percent of the people adhering to Hinduism (Rao 3). There is also a small group of people known as the Dalits or "untouchables" who are always left out of social events that other people take part in. Butalia says that "they are the performers of menial, albeit essential, tasks: collecting refuse, cleaning toilets, tasks that must remain unseen, and more, untouched" (301). Butalia talks about the wonderful lives of Indian people and how they fought back against the British colonial administration in the first chapter of the book, which is called "Beginning." They are battling against British rule to protect their culture and keep their heritage alive. Even though they have different religions, they say they speak a unique language that is an important part of their daily life. Butalia says that "16 million Muslims, 15 million Hindus, and 5 million Sikhs, who despite their religious differences, shared a common culture, language, and history" (83). But with the announcement of Partition, things have altered and led to a mass execution and mass migration across the subcontinent that no one can understand. In the second chapter of the book, "Blood," Butalia tells the story of several people who were forced to leave their home country because of the Partition. People from both countries go to faraway areas during migration, and they can't go back to their old homes after that. Butalia says that "people traveled in buses, cars, and trains, but mostly on foot in great columns called kafilas that could stretch for dozens of miles" (3). In this chapter, she tells the story of her uncle Ranamama: Ranamama, my mother's youngest brother. Our family, like many others in northern India, was split up at Partition. My mother was still single when she crossed the border into India. Her brother and mother decided to stay behind. My mother and her other siblings say that he made his choice for a reason. He wanted to get into the property that my grandfather, who had passed away, owned. (32-33) The fourth chapter of the book, called "Women," is mostly about the issues and suffering of women during the Partition. There were a lot of reports of women being murdered and kidnapped during those times. Butalia says that "about seventy-five thousand women are thought to have been abducted and

raped by people of different religions or the same religion" (3). The ladies who survived Partition never talk about their horrible experiences with the public or the people in charge. Butalia remembers that the interview had to be done in the little bits of time that ladies had between chores around the house. Also, if their husbands or sons were around, they usually took over the interview, either on purpose or by accident, which made the women go quiet. The elite Indian men strive to kill these innocent ladies who were raped or kidnapped from their homes to protect their family's honor. Some individuals think that the ladies who were assaulted are a sign of ill luck. The Hindu people never accept women who have been raped, and they question their "virginity." They think they are now dirty. Butalia says, "Women have some objection that the Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure" (160). Later, in early 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru makes a public appeal: I have been told that their families don't want to take those girls and ladies back into their homes. This is a very bad and inappropriate way to think, and any societal norm that favors this way of thinking should be criticized. These girls and women need our love and care, and their families should be proud to take them back and aid them in every way they can. (Butalia 160) In this fourth chapter, Butalia talks about the lifestyles of certain educated middle-class women who are entirely against India's traditional conventions and rituals. She says that these people were inspired by the Western feminist movement and wanted to question the rituals that are still going on in India. They started to think of marriage as a form of kidnapping. Butalia says that "one might almost say that for the majority of Indian women, marriage is like an abduction anyway, a violation, an assault, usually by an unknown man" (147-48). The sixth chapter of the book, "Children," is largely about the problems that abandoned and kidnapped kids face. The conventional narrative of Partition hesitates to scrutinize the issues faced by children at that period. Butalia says, "No history of partition that I have seen so far has had anything to say about children" (249). During Partition, more than seventy-five thousand women were kidnapped or raped, and almost fifty

thousand children were left behind. The community looked down on these kids since they were born to parents of different races. Butalia asserts, "To 'repurify' a child, whose blood was equally mixed from two religions, was not easily reintegrated" (249). After the Partition, a lot of kids have mental health issues and can't live with their families. Butalia says that many kids grew up in orphanages or institutions for the poor. Others lived on the streets, and some were lucky enough to be adopted into homes. Many youngsters, survivors of Partition, experienced major psychological difficulties and discovered they could not remain in families after going through trauma and grief. (254) Butalia tells the story of a boy named Kulwant Singh who is almost sixteen years old. He sees his father get killed and rushes away. He can't go back to his home later. He tells the story of how his father was killed: "They cut him into a hundred pieces, the first blow they struck on his neck, and then they cut him into a hundred pieces" (254). He returned to his family in Delhi in 1948. But they weren't ready to let him stay with them, so they treated him like a refugee. Singh tells the story of his time there: I then went to live with some of my relatives for two or three years, although things weren't great. My chacha's kid Tarlok Singh applied for me to stay at a hostel since I was sad and full of pain. I lived in the hostel for over sixteen years and did my metric. Then I got my claim, which was about Rs. 5,000. After that, I obtained a quarter, a place to live, and then, due to Maharaja, I got a job at JP Hospital. (255) Religion and its rituals have an effect on a person's life from the time they are a youngster. Butalia tells a story that is linked to this point. During the Partition, the Gujar community started slaughtering Muslims in several parts of North India. There was a muscular and good-looking young man from the Pathan community who was in their care. They said that they might let him go if he was willing to change his religion. But the little kid never gave in to their threat. He said, "I will not become a Hindu; they can cut my throat, but I will not become a Hindu" (117). The seventh chapter of the book, "Margins," is mostly on the Dalits, who are people who are oppressed. It tells the stories of how Dalit people get along with Hindus and Muslims. The Dalit intellectuals contend that the predominant historians of

Partition neglect their community, focusing excessively on Hindus and Muslims. Butalia says that the seventh chapter is for the reserved castes. "I have spoken in this chapter mainly about the experiences of scheduled castes in relation to Hindus, and to the Indian and Pakistani States" (331). During the Partition, the scheduled castes, or Dalits, were housed in refugee camps, where they were unable to attain equal status. The authority stopped them from doing their normal activities and was very harsh to them. The mood is not serene. Butalia says that "the Scheduled caste refugees are not getting any relief" (303). The camp officers wouldn't give them their food, and they weren't allowed to go into the camp. The government has done awful things to the Dalits, just like the Indian people did to them. *Other Side of Silence* examines the objectives of Partition and its impact on the daily lives of regular individuals, as well as the changes it has engendered. The book talks about how the Partition hurt and traumatized Indian people and how these events affected their cultural legacy. The Partition of India is not a separation of Indian land; rather, it represents a tumultuous division of the Indian psyche. These mental illnesses are still bothering people in India. The book asks some questions about Indian ethnicity. Living on either side of a border does not change one's ethnicity. Ethnicity transcends geographical boundaries.