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From Silence to Subjectivity: A Pluralistic Trauma Reading of “Blood” in Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence*

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Abstract: This chapter examines the Partition of India through Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence*, employing Michelle Balaev’s pluralistic trauma model to explore how silence emerges as a socio-historical and cultural mode of negotiating traumatic experiences. This paper departs from the conventional trauma framework that primarily associates trauma with not only inexpressibility and belated recollection but also repetitive memory. This research paper adopts Michelle Balaev’s pluralistic trauma model and it argues that traumatic experiences are shaped through the dynamic interplay of individual subjectivity and socio-cultural realities. Butalia’s oral history challenges the limitations of official historiography by recovering the personal narratives of individuals across genders and generations whose voices have long remained absent from dominant historical accounts. Particular attention is given to the testimony of Ranamama from the chapter “Blood”. Rana’s experience of religious conversion and displacement, together with fractured belonging, demonstrates the fluid and relational nature of identity. His narrative illustrates that trauma cannot be viewed as a universal psychological phenomenon detached from its historical context, but must instead be interpreted in relation to changing political circumstances and cultural expectations. This research paper argues that Rana’s subjectivity is continuously reconfigured through alienation and longing for acceptance. This ongoing process exemplifies the pluralistic conception of trauma as a dynamic and context-dependent phenomenon rather than a fixed pathological condition. The study demonstrates that Butalia’s work transforms oral narration into an ethical act of witnessing by foregrounding the intersections among silence and memory. It reconstructs forgotten histories while restoring agency to marginalised voices. This research paper contends that *The Other Side of Silence* broadens the discourse of Partition literature by presenting traumatic experience not only as a historically situated process but also as culturally mediated and socially negotiated.

Keywords: Partition of India, Pluralistic Trauma, Silence, Subjectivity, Oral Testimony.

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INTRODUCTION

Trauma studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field during the 1990s through the scholarship of Cathy Caruth. Drawing upon Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, Caruth and other scholars examined the relationship between traumatic experience and literary representation. Their work gave shape to what later became known as the traditional trauma model. This framework understands trauma as an overwhelming experience that exceeds comprehension, while resisting linguistic expression. Trauma can be defined as “an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether” (Balaev “Trauma Studies” 360).

The foundations of this model stem from Freud’s *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). In these works Freud explains that unresolved traumatic experiences return through the “compulsion to repeat” (19). Such repetition reflects the psyche’s inability to assimilate the original event completely.

Cathy Caruth extends Freud’s argument by presenting trauma as an experience that remains inaccessible when it first occurs before returning later in fragmented and involuntary forms. As Caruth observes in *Unclaimed Experience* that “the experience of a trauma repeats itself exactly and unremittingly through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (2). Traumatic knowledge therefore remains outside conscious awareness. Survivors repeatedly relive the event rather than recall it as an ordinary memory. Judith Herman offers a different emphasis by locating the possibility of recovery within narration. According to Herman, healing begins by developing “an organized, detailed, verbal account oriented in time and historical context” (177). These perspectives collectively establish trauma as a phenomenon that influences psychological experience while shaping memory and narrative representation.

Despite its influence, the traditional trauma paradigm has attracted considerable criticism because of its universalising assumptions. The pluralistic model emerged in response to these limitations. Rather than

relying upon a single psychoanalytic explanation it recognises multiple forms of traumatic experience. The traditional framework identifies not only repression and dissociation but also fragmented memory as defining characteristics of trauma. Michelle Balaev points out that this model assumes the “concept of trauma [as] timeless, repetitious, infectious” (“Trends in Literary Trauma” 152). Such an approach presents trauma as a universal psychological condition, while paying limited attention to the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which it is experienced.

The pluralistic model challenges this universal framework by treating trauma as a context-dependent experience. Memory assumes different forms because individuals interpret traumatic events through their own identities and social environments. Remembering therefore becomes a dynamic process of reconstruction rather than functioning solely as a symptom of psychological disturbance. Balaev argues that “a pluralistic model describes the multifaceted functions and effects of a traumatic experience in terms that extend past essentialist notions of identity, experience, and remembering found within the traditional model because it conceptualises memory differently” (*The Nature* xiv). This perspective views memory as developing through personal interpretation. It is further shaped by cultural practices and historical circumstances rather than remaining fixed or permanently fragmented. The pluralistic approach moves beyond rigid oppositions such as speech versus silence or memory versus forgetting. Both silence and narration become meaningful responses because each reflects a particular social or historical situation. Greater emphasis is placed on the subjective dimensions of lived trauma. Individual experiences are understood in relation to the external conditions that shape both the understanding of trauma and its representation. Balaev explains that “This approach often relies more heavily on external stressor to show that trauma occurs in specific bodies, time periods, cultures . . . each informing the meaning and representation of traumatic experience” (“Trauma Studies” 366). This framework reconceptualises trauma as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than limiting it to psychological pathology. This perspective provides a more comprehensive framework for examining literary representations of trauma.

Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* represents a pioneering contribution to Partition Studies because it relocates historical inquiry from official political narratives to the embodied experiences of ordinary people. The text privileges oral testimony over state-centred documentation and reconstructs the psychological and social consequences of the 1947 Partition that conventional historiography has frequently ignored. Butalia presents Partition not merely as a political division of territory, but as a continuing human catastrophe whose repercussions persist through silence and fractured identities. The work therefore broadens the

understanding of trauma by demonstrating that history is equally preserved in personal recollections and long-suppressed memories.

The methodological strength of the book lies in its innovative use of oral history. Butalia assembles a multidimensional narrative that captures diverse experiences across religious and socio-cultural communities. Her own reflections are carefully interwoven with the testimonies of survivors and perpetrators. This creates a dialogic narrative that privileges subjective experience without abandoning historical authenticity. The text transforms oral testimony into an ethical practice of witnessing. It challenges institutional silence and restores visibility to lives erased from dominant historical discourse. The significance of this intervention extends beyond historical recovery. Butalia encourages survivors to articulate memories that remained suppressed for decades. Their testimonies reveal the enduring effects of violence upon individual and collective consciousness. Silence emerges not merely as an absence of speech. It represents grief, fear, social exclusion, and unresolved psychological suffering. Consequently, the work contests the deliberate and unconscious erasures that frequently characterise traumatic histories. Sukrita Paul Kumar and Frank Stewart acknowledge the significance of writers such as Butalia who “have rendered events with stark realism . . . have explored the psychic responses that give rise to nostalgia, the wish to recall and value a lost connectedness that transcends communal strife” (viii). Their observation underscores the ability of Butalia’s work to transcend communal binaries and foreground the shared emotional legacy of Partition across India and Pakistan.

The narrative of Butalia’s maternal uncle, Ranamama, constitutes one of the most significant testimonies in the book. His testimony offers a distinctive perspective on the neglected experiences of male survivors. It demonstrates how men’s suffering often remained unacknowledged within dominant narratives of the Partition. His narrative demonstrates that men also endured profound emotional and psychological trauma despite the dominant tendency to associate Partition suffering primarily with women. Butalia through his experiences exposes the limitations of patriarchal assumptions that often obscure male vulnerability and discourage the public acknowledgement of emotional pain. Rana continues to live in Lahore after Partition despite his family’s relocation to India. His decision is neither politically motivated nor ideologically driven, but instead stems from his deep attachment to his ancestral home and to the life he has established there. His obligation towards the family property, together with his unwillingness to abandon a developing romantic relationship, further reinforces his determination to refrain from leaving his homeland. His narrative encapsulates the struggles of male victims who pursue a life of stability while sustaining emotional anguish in

response to altering religious and socio-political norms. What initially appears to be a rational decision for preserving stability gradually develops into the source of lifelong alienation and psychological conflict. Rana's testimony demonstrates that place plays a vital role in shaping identity and preserving memory. Lahore embodies more than a geographical space. It is a profound repository of cultural belonging and personal history. His attachment to the place illustrates that memories acquire meaning through their association with specific social and spatial environments. The political transformation of territory disrupts emotional continuity and destabilises personal identity. His experiences consequently reveal the intricate relationship between not only place and memory but also subjectivity within the broader framework of Partition trauma.

The violent restructuring of political boundaries compels Rana to embrace Islam and adopt the name Abdulla as a means of survival. The circumstances of Partition also force Dayawanti (Rana's mother) to convert to Islam and assume the identity of Ayesha Bibi. The conversion is neither voluntary nor spiritually motivated. Instead, it represents a pragmatic response to an increasingly hostile socio-political environment. Rana's conversations with Butalia reflect that the life he leads after conversion becomes considerably more painful than he had anticipated. Religion that previously occupied only a marginal place in his life suddenly becomes the defining criterion of belonging and survival. His testimony therefore exposes the devastating psychological consequences of coercive identity transformation. The emotional burden of his decision intensifies as every member of his family and almost all his Hindu acquaintances migrate to India. The separation from his loved ones gradually intensifies Rana's profound isolation despite his continued residence in his homeland. His promise to reunite his mother with his siblings after the violence remains unfulfilled because strict border regulations and increasing hostility between the newly formed nations prevent free movement across national boundaries. Government surveillance further restricts communication as letters undergo official scrutiny before reaching their destinations. These political conditions steadily erode his relationship with his family and transform physical separation into emotional estrangement. The death of their father and the dispossession of their native home gradually alter the perception of several family members who view Rana as an opportunist instead of acknowledging the historical circumstances.

Rana's prolonged silence finally ends when Butalia visits him in Lahore several decades after Partition. Butalia's encounter with Ranamama in Lahore after four decades of Partition reveals the painful repercussions of his choice to stay in Lahore. Her empathetic engagement creates a rare opportunity to articulate experiences that had remained suppressed throughout most of his life. The conversation enables

him to revisit memories that had never previously been acknowledged by either his family or society. As Balaev observes, "The recursive and repressed nature of trauma does not remove its expressive potential but rather these elements allow trauma to be articulated" (*Contemporary Approaches* 9). Rana's testimony exemplifies this observation by demonstrating that narration cannot erase traumatic suffering but enables fragmented memories to assume coherent narrative form.

Suppressed emotions acquire recognition through verbal testimony after remaining concealed for decades. This process enables Rana to experience psychological relief and facilitates his gradual movement from silent victimhood towards survivorship. The account further demonstrates that religious conversion during Partition extends far beyond the formal adoption of a different faith. It profoundly alters social relationships and thereby disrupts cultural continuity while fracturing personal identity. Rana's lifelong struggle illustrates that forced conversion destabilises every dimension of existence by compelling individuals to negotiate conflicting cultural and emotional affiliations. His persistent anguish reveals the enduring consequences of historical violence upon subjectivity and belonging. "Conversion reveals the instability of a *priori* conceptions of a unified subjectivity and produces a complex new identity; one that is resisted, negotiated and eventually assumed" (Menon 34). Rana's experiences therefore illuminate trauma's pluralistic dimensions by revealing how memory, place, identity, masculinity, and religion continually intersect to reshape individual consciousness long after the immediate event has passed. Rana's testimony challenges reductive understandings of Partition by foregrounding the overlooked experiences of male survivors. His narrative demonstrates that trauma cannot be confined to an individual psychological condition detached from historical realities. Trauma emerges through the dynamic interaction of not only personal memory and socio-political structures but also cultural expectations and geographical belonging.

The book recovers neglected histories to broaden the scope of Partition historiography. It not only establishes oral testimony as an indispensable medium for reconstructing forgotten lives but also restores dignity to those whose suffering has remained unacknowledged. Rana's narrative demonstrates that the consequences of Partition extend far beyond physical displacement and continue to reshape an individual's sense of self throughout life. The resolve to stay in Lahore and embrace a new religious identity fails to provide either security or belonging to Ranamama. The emotional burden of his choice intensifies over time and culminates in a profound sense of remorse. His confession reveals the permanence of this psychological suffering: "My life cannot get any worse . . . I have not slept one night in these forty years without regretting my decision. Not one night" (Butalia 37–38). Trauma rather than functioning

as a completed event remains an active force that continually shapes his perception and his relationship with the world. Rana's experience reflects Michelle Balaev's proposition "The protagonist's subjectivity is thus a fluid process located in relation to new realities or new knowledge" (*The Nature* 40). Subjectivity is neither fixed nor stable but is continually reconstructed through lived experiences and changing historical realities. His identity undergoes constant negotiation as traumatic memories alter his understanding of belonging and citizenship. His lived experiences lead to a gradual transformation of his emotional allegiance despite his conscious choice to remain in Pakistan. He increasingly identifies India with emotional security and personal belonging owing to his inability to find acceptance in the country where he continues to reside. Trauma does not merely fracture identity but continuously reorganises selfhood by compelling individuals to reassess their relationship with their surroundings.

The social consequences of Rana's religious conversion further deepen his psychological isolation. He becomes an object of suspicion and distrust instead of being recognised as a committed Pakistani citizen. His altered religious identity fails to erase social prejudices and leaves him vulnerable to humiliation and exclusion. He remains emotionally estranged within the very place he sought to preserve despite never abandoning his ancestral home. The house that once symbolised continuity gradually becomes a reminder of rejection and failed expectations. His family members' unawareness of his internal suffering illustrates how emotional distress often remains concealed beneath outward conformity. Susan J. Brison explains the profound relational consequences of such experiences:

When the trauma is of human origin and is intentionally inflicted . . . it not only shatters one's fundamental assumptions about the world and one's safety in it, but also severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity . . . one can no longer be oneself even to oneself, since the self exists fundamentally in relation to others. (40–41)

Brison's formulation illuminates Rana's condition by demonstrating that trauma disrupts not only personal identity but also the social relationships through which identity is constituted. His inability to establish meaningful recognition within his community intensifies his emotional alienation and reinforces his fractured sense of self.

The pressures of patriarchal masculinity further complicate his situation. Conventional expectations of manhood discourage emotional expression and regard vulnerability as a sign of weakness. Rana suppresses his grief and continues to endure psychological suffering in silence. His experience exposes the limitations of dominant masculine ideals, which deny men the

opportunity to articulate pain and seek emotional support. The silence surrounding his trauma is therefore not merely personal but also socially produced through gendered expectations.

Within this context, the significance of home undergoes a profound transformation. Although Rana continues to inhabit his ancestral residence in Lahore, emotional belonging gradually shifts elsewhere. Reflecting this paradox, Butalia observes that "although . . . home in Lahore was the only home he had ever known, it was to India that he turned for a sense of home . . . in a curious travesty of this while he continued to live in on in the family home in Pakistan, his watan became India" (39). The lines illustrate the distinction between physical residence and emotional attachment. Home emerges not simply as a geographical location but as an affective space shaped by acceptance, security, as well as recognition. Butalia further elaborates the complexity of this idea through the Punjabi word *watan*, describing it as "a difficult word to translate: it can mean home, country, or land—all and any of them . . . something inexpressible, some longing for a sense of place, of belonging, of rootedness" (39). This understanding broadens the idea of home beyond territorial boundaries and foregrounds its emotional and cultural dimensions. *Watan* for Rana ultimately signifies the place where he imagines acceptance rather than the nation in which he physically resides.

Partition literature repeatedly demonstrates that displacement transforms homeland into an enduring site of memory and longing. Rana's narrative exemplifies this condition by revealing that geographical continuity does not necessarily guarantee emotional rootedness. He occupies the position of an outsider within his own community. His neighbours and even his family regard him with suspicion. This leaves him deprived of the intimacy and reassurance that ordinarily accompany familial relationships. The estrangement he faces illustrates how trauma may persist even without physical migration when social belonging is denied. Laurie Vickroy argues that traumatic experience is inseparable from its social environment because communities can either facilitate recovery or reinforce suffering (132). Rana's circumstances support this argument. Instead of receiving emotional affirmation, he encounters distrust, misunderstanding, and exclusion. These collective responses obstruct the possibility of healing and perpetuate his insecurity. His experience therefore demonstrates that recovery depends not only upon individual resilience but also upon the willingness of society to recognise and validate traumatic experiences. Rana's struggle also illustrates Balaev's view that traumatic experiences continually reshape personal identity. As Balaev observes, "Traumatic experience disrupts the self"; yet in Rana's case "it reorders identity and the relationship between the self and external world by causing to explore previous formulations of subjectivity" (*The Nature* 73). His trauma extends

beyond fragmenting his identity and initiates an ongoing process of self-reinterpretation through which ideas of nation, belonging, faith, and home are continuously renegotiated.

The symbolic significance of home reaches its culmination in Rana's own acknowledgement of irreversible loss: "ever since I have converted I have not had a single night's peaceful sleep. Every brick in this house seems to curse me. I rejected what was mine and have not been accepted by the faith I adopted" (Butalia 59). His confession encapsulates the enduring psychological consequences of the rupture. His ancestral house that should have represented continuity and stability instead becomes a constant reminder of regret and exclusion. Rana's narrative thus transcends individual experience and becomes representative of numerous men whose lives were permanently transformed by Partition. His testimony demonstrates that the psychological burden of displacement is rooted in both historical violence and the enduring lack of social acceptance and emotional belonging.

Rana's testimony illustrates that traumatic experience does not remain confined to a single historical event but continues to evolve through, not only displacement and religious conversion, but also social exclusion. These experiences reformulate his subjectivity by transforming his understanding of identity and belonging. Trauma therefore becomes a process that generates new knowledge of both the self and the surrounding world. Rather than producing a fixed or fragmented identity, it initiates an ongoing reconstruction of selfhood in response to changing historical circumstances and social relationships. Butalia's oral narrative further demonstrates that traumatic experience acquires meaning through cultural contexts and interpersonal recognition. It reinforces that Partition trauma must be understood as a historically situated, socially negotiated, and culturally mediated experience that continually reshapes identity and one's relationship with the world.

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