

SUBALTERN VOICES OF WOMEN IN THE
NARRATION OF PARTITION OF INDIA: A STUDY
OF AMRITA PRITAM'S "AJJ AAKHAN WARIS SHAH
NU" AND URVASHI BUTALIA'S *THE OTHER SIDE
OF SILENCE*

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Abstract

This paper examines subaltern voices in the context of the Partition of India through a study of Amrita Pritam's Punjabi poem "Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" and Urvashi Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Both works focus on the marginalized experiences of individuals affected by the Partition, particularly women, and provide a platform for voices often neglected in mainstream historical accounts. Pritam's poem, written as a poignant call to the Punjabi poet Waris Shah, highlights the deep emotional and cultural wounds inflicted by the violence of Partition of India and creation of Pakistan. It centres on the silence and suffering of women, whose voices were often suppressed or erased during the period. Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* complements this by compiling the oral histories of survivors, shedding light on the lived experiences of refugees, women, and other marginalized communities during and after the Partition. The paper uses comparative study as a methodology to explore how both Pritam and Butalia challenge dominant historical narratives, giving voice to the subaltern and focusing on the intersections of gender, trauma, and displacement. Through this analysis, the study emphasizes the role of literature in reclaiming silenced histories, offering new insights into the

enduring impact of Partition on identity, memory, and social dynamics in the Indian subcontinent. Pritam's poem was originally written in Punjabi, so spelling differs in English translation in different works.

Keywords: Subaltern voices, marginalized experiences, Partition, oral histories, trauma

Introduction

Amrita Pritam is the first eminent female Punjabi writer, novelist, and poet of the twentieth century. She was equally loved in both the nations, India, and Pakistan. She lost her faith in God after her mother's demise and moved to Lahore to find solace in writing. She was a strong and independent woman. *Amrit Lehran (Immortal Waves)* (1936) is her maiden anthology of poetry. She joined the 'Progressive Writers' Movement', post-partition, to inspire people in writing. The members of this movement were left-oriented and anti-imperialistic. She wrote *Lok Peed (People's Anguish)* in 1944 to present a criticism of the British rule for the Bengal Famine of 1943 and the war-torn economy. She was an active member of many NGOs. Pritam later joined 'Lahore Radio Station' to be in direct contact with people.

After the event of Partition, Amrita moved from Lahore to New Delhi. She penned down her famous poem in Punjabi "Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu" ("Today, I Say unto Waris Shah" or "Today, I Invoke Waris Shah"). Until 1961, she worked at All India Radio in Delhi. The works written after 1960 were feminist in nature. Some of her works deal with the unhappy marriage with Pritam Singh. Her works were translated into many languages. She has written her most famous autobiography *Raseedi Ticket*. Some of her novels have been adopted as films. *Dharti Sagar te Sippiyan* was adopted as *Kadambari* in 1965; *Unah Di Kahani* was adopted into *Daaku* in 1976, and *Pinjar* was also adopted as a film. Her later writings deal with dreams and spiritual themes, as

she was influenced by Osho. It includes *Kaal Chetna* and *Agyat Ka Nimantran*. She wrote another autobiography titled *Shadows of Words*. In 1944, she met Sahir Ludhianvi and wrote about this episode of her life in her autobiography *Raseedi Ticket* while her love story with Imroz had been recorded in *Amrita Imroz-A Love Story. Pinjar (The Skeleton)* (1950) is her most famous novel.

Amrita Pritam was awarded with many awards during her lifetime. She was the first recipient of the 'Punjab Rattan Award'. In 1956, she was the first woman to win the 'Sahitya Akademi Award' for her work *Sunehade*. In 1982, she won the 'Bhartiya Jnanpith Award' for her work *Kaagaj te Canvas*. In 2004, she was awarded with 'Sahitya Akademi Fellowship'. She was also awarded with the 'Padma Shree' in 1969 and the 'Padma Vibhushan' in 2004 by the Government of India. She was awarded with the 'International Vaptsarov Award' in 1979 by the Republic of Bulgaria, the 'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres' in 1987 by the French Government, and the 'Punjabi Academy' by Pakistan. She was awarded with the DLitt degree by Jabalpur University, Delhi University and Visva-Bharati University.

Urvashi Butalia is the first feminist publisher and writer. She is also the director of *Zubaan Books*. She later worked with Oxford University Press at Oxford Headquarters. She was also the editor of Zed Books in 1982. She returned to India with Ritu Menon and established a feminist publishing house *Kali for Women* in 1984. They both were awarded 'Padma Shree' in 2011 by the Government of India.

Her mother, who emigrated from Lahore, told her stories of the anguish and violence of the split. She was told by her mother about the perilous trips she had taken twice to bring her siblings to India. However, until 1984, Butalia only knew the event of the Partition of India as the tales of rape, murder, looting, and burning. "Butalia was among those who worked for food, relief, and shelter for these victims.

Every day, she noticed dead, missing, and people with extreme sufferings.” (Sundus, <https://feminisminindia.com>)

After the assassination of Indira Gandhi, Butalia realized that the agony of partition and its stories no longer looked so distant: people in the same town or village might still be split apart by religious politics and once split apart, could do horrible things to one another. She was compelled by this horrific event to gather the accounts of the Partition survivors. “[W]hat women did to save themselves from rapes and other brutalities” (Sundus) piqued her interest. Some of the accounts were hard to believe and horrifying. All of this paved the way for her to start researching the oral history of women and the partition.

Only politics and a few socioeconomic events between the newly established Indo-Pak government and the British are covered in the mainstream history of Partition. Before Butalia began fighting specifically for the cause of women, the history of the Dalits, women, and the common masses was quiet. It provided fresh perspectives on the Partition’s effects on honour, anguish, loss, and displacement. She wrote about the suffering of women during the Partition after conducting roughly 70 interviews. Her work, which she accomplished by reviving oral history, is a significant addition to the subaltern voices of women in the narration of Partition.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the subaltern version of the event of the Partition, especially highlighting the plight of women at the hands of this misfortune event by referring to the works of Amrita Pritam and Urvashi Butalia.

Theoretical Framework

The Two-Nation Theory

An important theoretical framework for comprehending India’s Partition and its political, social, and cultural repercussions is the Two-Nation Theory. The thesis, which was first put forth by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and then intensified by Muhammad Ali Jinnah

through his Presidential speech in the annual meeting of the Muslim League in March 1940, holds that: “Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs and literary traditions. They neither intermarry nor eat together, and indeed they belong to two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions.” (Qtd. in Guha; Kermani; and Pillalamarri) This ideological difference played a key role in the establishment of Pakistan in 1947, which was founded on the idea that Muslims needed their own country to protect their religious and cultural identity. “It has remained a topic of controversy and heated debate.” (Khan et al. 24)

The violence of the Partition, the ensuing relocation, and the ongoing communal tensions between India and Pakistan were caused by the Two-Nation Theory. The politicization of religious identity, which framed Muslims and Hindus as incompatible groups, supported the necessity of division. The idea influenced discussions of nationalism, identity, and sovereignty in South Asia hence essential for analysing the establishment of Pakistan as a Muslim-majority nation-state.

The Two-Nation Theory can be used to critique the oversimplified categorisation of populations into ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ and to examine how Partition literature depicts the trauma of displacement and the formation of two distinct identities. The theory offers a prism through which one can examine how cultural narratives—such as those found in the writings of Amrita Pritam and Urvashi Butalia—address the inconsistencies and difficulties brought about by this polarizing ideology.

Feminist Approach

Feminist theory, the foundation of the feminist approach as a theoretical framework, aims to comprehend and question how gender—specifically the oppression of women—is portrayed in literature, culture, and society. By examining how patriarchal ideas influence language,

narratives, and power dynamics, feminist criticism challenges the historical and social systems that support gender inequality. This paradigm promotes women's empowerment and freedom via equal representation and societal transformation, with a primary focus on exposing the objectification, stereotyping, and marginalisation of women.

Feminist critique examines the roles, identities, and behaviours that are ascribed to female characters in the books. It looks at how these depictions support or contradict conventional gender norms and expectations. This entails questioning the notion of male domination and investigating how patriarchal ideals impact how gender and power relations are constructed. It examines female subjectivity and agency and places a strong emphasis on women's experiences, opinions, and viewpoints, emphasizing how they exercise their agency, overcome social norms and obstacles. "It has two basic premises: one, 'woman' presented in literature by male writers from their own viewpoint and two, 'woman' presented in the writings of female writers from their point of view." (Malik 58) Gynocriticism "worked to increase the number of female authors, new and old, available to the readers." (Ghodke 11) "Feminist literary criticism has given us an opportunity to look at 'women' in literature from women's point of view." (Malik 61) The "feminist theories of writing are not limited by the theoretical interest or the textual level of working with the language...but express in the language the painful experience of female repression in culture." (Dhivya 11)

In this study, textual analysis has been used to interpret and comprehend the texts. A text can provide a wide range of information, including its literal meaning as well as its subtext, symbols, assumptions, and beliefs. As the field and the goal of the study determine the techniques employed for textual analysis, the subject under study tries to connect with a larger social, political, cultural, and artistic context.

Literature Review

Prannv Dhawan examines the profound impact of the 1947 Partition on gender dynamics, emphasizing the often-overlooked experiences of women. He critiques traditional historical narratives that focus predominantly on political events and male perspectives, advocating for a feminist historiographical approach that highlights women's roles and experiences during this tumultuous period. Dhawan underscores the necessity of incorporating gender perspectives into Partition studies to comprehend the societal upheavals of the time fully. He references scholars like Urvashi Butalia, who have utilized oral histories to illuminate women's experiences, thereby challenging the silences in mainstream accounts. The article also explores how discourses of nationhood, gender, and ethnicity influenced women's identities during the Partition, affecting their roles as victims, survivors, and martyrs. "Women, like during the horrific times of Partition, were relegated to the status of an object." (Dhawan)

Nalini Bhattar examines the multifaceted roles of women during the colonial and Partition periods in India, emphasizing their everyday acts of resistance. She challenges traditional narratives that often overlook women's contributions, highlighting how they actively resisted colonial oppression and the societal upheavals of Partition.

Gendered perspectives of partition are important because they help us to understand the unheard voices and unacknowledged experiences of women. It also makes us recognize how nation, state, family, and community construct their identities through their possession of the female identity and body. How their honour and their revenge, both, are linked with the female body. (Bhattar)

She underscores that resistance was not limited to overt political movements but was also manifested in daily life through acts of

resilience, subversion, and the preservation of cultural identities. The article explores various forms of resistance, including women's participation in protests, their roles in sustaining communities, and their efforts to maintain cultural practices amidst colonial suppression. By focusing on these everyday acts of resistance, Bhattar contributes to a more nuanced understanding of women's roles during the critical period in Indian history, emphasizing their agency and resilience in the face of systemic oppression.

Arifa Banu critically examines the Indian state's categorization of women refugees as 'attached' or 'unattached' during the post-Partition period. She highlights how this binary framework overlooked the diverse realities of women who did not conform to traditional family structures. Banu discusses the state's efforts to 'recover' abducted women, often disregarding their autonomy and consent, and the challenges faced by women who bore children during the Partition, known as 'war babies.' She emphasises the need to move beyond stereotypical narratives of violence and loss to understand the complex experiences of these women. Banu's analysis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Partition's impact on women, urging a shift from one-dimensional perspectives to recognize women's agency and diverse experiences during this critical period in Indian history. The "discourse on refugee women in post-partition India is overshadowed by stereotypical narrations of violence and bloodshed. Partition is approached with a teleological lens This prevents any engagement with several other potential sites of exploration which can be brought forth by looking at the testimonies of the oppressed." (Banu)

Kusum Lata examines the profound impact of the 1947 Partition on women in the Indian subcontinent. She highlights that women were disproportionately affected, with estimates suggesting that between 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted, raped, murdered, sold into prostitution, or forced into marriage during this period. "In any bouleversement when any sectarian passions aroused or violence

reigns whether it is communal violence or caste or inter-state, women often become the worst victims of rival groups.” (Lata 1434) Lata emphasizes that women became targets of violence, including kidnapping and rape, and were often separated from their families and religious communities. She notes that a significant portion of the task of rebuilding and reconstruction fell on the shoulders of women, who faced the dual challenges of personal trauma and societal upheaval. The paper underscores the vulnerability of women during the mass migrations and communal violence of the Partition, highlighting their resilience and the critical role they played in the post-Partition reconstruction of society. Lata’s work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the Partition’s impact, shedding light on the gendered dimensions of this historical event and the enduring legacy of women’s experiences during this tumultuous period.

Upasana Dandona critically analyzes the gendered aspects of violence that occurred during India’s Partition and the Inter-Dominion Treaty that followed. She draws attention to the two forms of marginalization that women endured at that time. Women experienced forced conversions, kidnappings, and sexual assault. Women frequently experienced rejection from their communities and families, which resulted in even greater marginalization. Dandona criticizes current literature for ignoring the wider range of women’s experiences during the Partition by concentrating mostly on regions and groups of women. “Historical records suggest that the abduction and sexual violence and faced by the non-Muslim and Muslim women were almost equal in number during the communal attacks. This implies that while those attacking the women could be from different communities, the sufferings of the victims remained very much the same.” (Dandona)

Sara Kazmi examines the feminist poetics of postcolonial Punjabi poetry, focusing on Amrita Pritam and Nasreen Anjum Bhatti. Through a close reading of their poems, “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu” (“Today I Call on Waris Shah”) and “Nil Karaiyan Nilkan” (“Blue

Cloth Dyed Blue”), Kazmi argues that these poets employ the genre of Hir to critique patriarchal structures within nation, region, and community. Their reimagining of Hir’s voice seeks to challenge male-dominated literary traditions, positioning the regional vernacular as a powerful medium for engaging with tradition in the context of modernity. Amrita Pritam “reconstitutes Waris Shah to implicate regional and nationalist patriarchies in the gendered violence of the Partition of Punjab in 1947.” (Kazmi 2) Collectively, their works offer a historiographical and literary reconstruction of cultural identity, positioning women as active subjects and narrators of history. Kazmi’s analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how postcolonial Punjabi poetry reinterprets traditional narratives to empower women and challenge patriarchal norms.

In her review, “Description of Mental and Physical Trauma in Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence: Feminist Analysis*”, Pooja looks at Urvashi Butalia’s work, which documents the significant effects of the 1947 Partition on women. A landmark work of Partition literature, Butalia’s book explores the individual stories of women who experienced sexual assault, kidnappings, and the social rejection that followed during and after the Partition.

In her assessment, Pooja emphasizes how Butalia’s oral history method reveals the profound suffering these women endured, highlighting the connection between gender and communal violence. “Many writers talk about memories, nostalgia, remembering, dislocation, exile and pain of Partition’s victims, but Butalia completed a difficult task of meeting as many as Partition survivors.” (Pooja 73) She points out that by elevating women’s voices, Butalia’s work subverts conventional historical narratives and provides a more complex understanding of the effects of the Partition. The analysis emphasizes how crucial it is to address the psychological and physical harm inflicted on women, which is frequently overlooked in popular narratives. Butalia’s sympathetic depiction of these women’s tenacity and the

complexity of their circumstances is praised by Pooja. Pooja's review concludes by confirming that Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* is an important work of feminist literature that offers priceless insights into the gendered aspects of Partition trauma and the resilience of women in the face of hardship. There is much research done on Partition literature with focus on religious divide, but this paper is a comparative study with main focus on the lived experiences of the marginalised sections of Indian society portrayed in the selected texts.

Discussion and Analysis

"Women's history is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women." (Lerner 3) Because they are and have always been historical actors and agents, women are vital and fundamental to forming society. "What women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded neglected and ignored in interpretation." (Lerner 4) Men and women are the centre of the world, yet no man has ever been left out of history due to his sex, but all women were. "The men seldom spoke about women." (Butalia 100) Feminism as subservience and masculine dominance are characteristics of female characters in male control. "The history of Partition, as I knew it, made no mention of women." (Butalia 100) Feminist historiography focuses on the pursuit of identity and belonging in the wake of the Partition, with a particular emphasis on women. The "history of Partition was a history of deep violation - physical and mental - for women." (Butalia 104) The section of society that tolerated and sustained the atrocities of something created by the male authority was women. "Throughout history, women have been marginalized and projected as the weaker sex." (Ahluwalia 29) They have been subjected to every kind of violence and trauma by the male community. The frustration, vexation, and exasperation were imposed on society through women, as they were

considered a marginalized section of society, without their individuality, voice, and thoughts.

Rituparna Roy, in her book *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh* writes, “experiences of women at the time of Partition” remained excluded from both subaltern and elite historiography. The feminist viewpoint gained traction in the 1990s, especially female writers “saw Partition as male narrative in which women were sacrificed or abducted or recovered in a conflict which gave primacy to community and hierarchy at the expense of individual rights.” (Roy 19) “The Partition of India was a cataclysmic event. ... The scale of the violence and suffering was unprecedented in the history of the subcontinent.” (Talbot and Singh 125) An enormous human catastrophe, the Partition of India was a devastating occurrence. Countless lives were lost, communities that had lived together for ages were split apart, and millions of people were displaced. The extent of the agony and bloodshed was unheard of in the subcontinent’s history. “The Partition was not simply the outcome of religious animosity. It was a complex process driven by a confluence of factors, including political rivalries, economic anxieties, and social tensions.” (Talbot and Singh 45)

Brutal and indiscriminate violence accompanied the Partition. They killed, sexually assaulted, and kidnapped men, women, and children. Whole communities were uprooted and forced to escape for their safety, while homes were looted and torched. There are too many horror and suffering stories to list them all. “Never before or since have so many people exchanged their home and countries so quickly.” (Butalia 3) But it was the women who severely suffered this catastrophic and disastrous event. “As always there was widespread sexual savagery: about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion).” (Butalia 3)

However, the common version of history and narration does not contain this subaltern version. The plight and pain of women were overshadowed in the male narratives about the Partition and its aftermath. The female version of this event is contained in the stories and memories of the people who were directly affected by the Partition or in the generations of those families. “It exists privately in the stories told and retold inside so many households in India and Pakistan.” (Butalia 4) The “women’s own desires and aspirations had to be pushed in the background.” (Butalia 89) The ‘heroic’ and ‘valorous’ elements of these terrible deaths are frequently emphasized in survivors’ accounts of mass suicide, mainly from men. Abducted women went into the realm of silence, while the killed women went into the realm of martyrdom. Often the women were traded for the freedom of the family or the whole village. During the time of crisis, women proved to be the savior of society from the mass killing, and suffering at the cost of their honour, life, and dreams (although their views and desires were very inconspicuous). Still, the family did not readjust, did not make any new space, and did not take in a ‘polluted’ person. They “had simply been abandoned by their families or forgotten about.” (Butalia 89) The communal-conflict-historians always had a notion that the aggressors on women were always ‘outsiders’, but the feminist-historians looked at the event of Partition from a different outlook where they found that “so many women had been picked up by men of the same village. So many older women had been abducted – women in their fifties and sixties.” (Butalia 107) This showcases that women were not safe and honoured anywhere, even in their communities. Therefore, for women, the event of the Partition was not at all easy, no matter if it was religious in nature. A. J. Fletcher (Commissioner, Ambala and Jalandhar Divisions and High-Powered Officer for Recovery of Abducted women and children, India) prepared a list titled “List of Non- Muslim Abducted Women and Children in Partition and Pakistan Side of the Cease-Fire Line in Jammu and Kashmir State”, which was never

released to the public as it got more and more complex by each passing day post-partition. For women, the memories of the Partition of India were “difficult to forget but dangerous to remember.” (Mondal 145) They must contend with the accusation, rejection, and exclusion of their honour and dignity by their own families and communities, while also bearing the burden of their tragic history. Women had changed after Partition. They changed as persons in attempts to cope with the new circumstances, either the memories of death, the acceptance of forced conversion, or the atrocities of physical abuse and rape. “As days passed their past went deeper.” (Mondal 147)

Amrita Pritam in her poem “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu” invokes Waris Shah, symbolic of a patriarchal figure. She asks him to portray the plight and pain of women in Punjab, like the portrayal of Hir’s pain and suffering by Waris Shah. Amrita Pritam’s poem deals with the de-centring of masculine authorship, a feminist strategy that is subaltern and subversive. It is “a template for reinterpreting to address points of historical, political, and cultural conjuncture in Punjab through a gendered lens.” (Kazmi 3) The poem has a feminist perspective on the national historical debate. For at least four hundred years, the tale of Hir has been told orally and poetically in Punjabi culture through *kafis*, *dohas*, *qissas*, folksongs, and *raas*. “The violence and destruction wrought by Partition would spur her to write her most well-loved and oft-quoted poem: *Today I Call on Waris Shah*.” (Kazmi 7) Pritam uses pictures of Punjabi countryside and rural life to effectively evoke a sense of location. She conjures the land’s topography. To speak about the unimaginable realities of Partition, she looks for another Waris Shah (she is evoking a patriarchal figure to pen down the voice of women as it is overshadowed in the presence of the male voice). She wants to find a man who can give “voice to the ordeals of the voiceless women” (Kazmi 10) and who can create an emancipatory cultural identity in a culture that has made it plain that women would bear a

disproportionate amount of the responsibility of nation-building. The horrific resurrection of the poet is demanded by the extent of violence, innumerable rapes, kidnappings, and killings of women. The poems that are with hidden meanings are “very difficult to translate.” (Aqil 4782) Pritam presents women’s suffering using personification, metonymy, hyperbole, variety, metaphor, and rhetorical tactics. His (Waris Shah) words of unadulterated love have been forgotten by the Punjabi people. They brutally battled and murdered their compatriots. “The poet uses language under pressure to pass a message to the world akin to a distress call, to communicate about the strife and scramble prevalent in her country.” (Ahmad 202) “Pritam portrayed women not just as victims but as resilient individuals who endured immense hardships with courage and dignity.” (Ahluwalia 32)

In the poem “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu”, the villain is the patriarchal society. It is a Partition work with an anti-patriarchal stance and a feminist approach. The poet calls out to Waris Shah (1722-1798) who is considered to have penned down the cries and the sufferings of women. He is an exceptional patriarchal figure who empathizes with women. She asks him to become the voice of the victims. She relies on Waris Shah who is considered a saviour. Amrita Pritam asks Waris Shah, a figure in time past, because the times have changed, and so do the men. There is a negative transformation of men. People during Partition time required a saga of love (the poet refers to Waris Shah’s *Hir Ranjha*). Waris Shah’s writing expressed suffering and cries. He portrayed the anguish and turmoil of Hir in such a captivating and beautiful way that it left an everlasting impact on coming generations. She wants to make sure that Punjab gets rid of its cries. Pritam presents the affliction and agony of the people of Punjab, especially women through the disastrous scenes of the Punjab topography, where the ‘fields’ which symbolize vegetation, fertility, and prosperity, are now entombed with unidentified bodies. The river ‘Chenab’ was looked at

as a river of lovers (Amrita Pritam mentions the river in her autobiography). But now, the river has been “mingled with poison by some” (Pritam, “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu”). The poet very carefully uses the word and does not deliberately refer to the Britishers as villains. She presents Punjab as the microcosm of the earth. The atrocities tolerated by the land of Punjab have already been experienced in the form of two world wars. The loss of faith and compassion acts as a “torrent of pollution” (Pritam, “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu”). Men and women have lost a lot in the journey of the Partition. The same wind which was happy has been transmuted into a poisonous nature. These winds appear to be hissing snakes. The forests of Punjab emanate very painful music that gets marked with the cacophony of the Partition. The “voice” of the women, their identity, ideologies, expression of their concerns, and their individuality have been suppressed and oppressed by the “serpents” (Pritam, “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu”). The “serpents” refer to the patriarchal power and toxic masculinity. It is the same decisive powers responsible for this destructive history. Amrita Pritam presents the dichotomy between men and women and how women were not actors, or decision-makers but only passive subjects.

Amrita Pritam personifies Punjab. The limbs of Punjab have turned blue, and now it is on its deathbed. She later presents a complete focus on the plight of women. People of Punjab derived aesthetics from every part of life. The “threads” refer to the matrix of life. But the thread is broken from the shuttle (Pritam, “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu”). The women of Punjab are strangled, as they are not allowed to express themselves. Their lives are compartmentalized, and their creativity is suppressed. The gatherings in which women used to share their pleasures and pains are dispersed. There is no hope of going back. The gatherings are trampled upon. Women are cut off as society’s integral part. Amrita compares the journey and human life to the “boats” (Pritam, “Ajj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu”). The journey and human life which were stable, now are left from the ports to sink. The lives of

women are burdened with so many responsibilities. The event of Partition has forced the women be cut off from their roots and their families. They are double dislocated. Pritam calls men “despoilers” because they cannot tolerate beauty and happiness, and therefore, leave no scope for women’s empowerment. She also alludes to the men as “Kedu” and expresses that Partition is a result of patriarchal power and desires. According to the poet, gone are the days when men were concerned with pain and suffering. She, therefore, relies on Waris Shah as she cannot trust any other man. That is why she goes back to the past. According to her, the saga of *Hir* and *Ranjha* remains incomplete as today’s pain and suffering of women are not penned down. Through the poem, Amrita Pritam expresses that history has largely ignored women and their feats, roles, and attainments, and it would be drastically different if seen through women’s eyes.

Urvashi Butalia’s seminal work *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* focuses on the often neglected and silenced experiences of women during the Partition of India in 1947. Her book gives a voice to the women who suffered the most during the traumatic event but whose stories have largely been marginalized in mainstream historical narratives. Women’s experiences of Partition were shaped by violence, displacement, and social upheaval, yet these voices were silenced in both historical accounts and public discourse. Butalia, through extensive oral histories, brings these voices to the forefront, allowing women to share their personal stories of pain, loss, and survival. The violence faced by women—whether through sexual assault, abduction, or the loss of family—was deeply intertwined with the larger political and religious tensions of the time. However, this gendered violence was often overlooked in favour of focusing on the political aspects of the Partition. Butalia focuses on the personal and emotional impact of Partition on women. By documenting their accounts, she

challenges the silencing of women in historical narratives and calls for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of the Partition's impact.

Butalia explores the complexities of memory and trauma, showing how women grapple with the psychological scars left by the Partition. The author demonstrates how women, in many ways, had to navigate not just the physical violence of the time but also the social stigma that followed their experiences of violence and displacement. By interviewing women who lived through the Partition, Butalia allows them to reclaim their narratives, thus empowering them and offering a form of resistance to the dominant historical discourse. Butalia emphasizes the importance of recognizing and including women's voices in the historical record, particularly when discussing major events like the Partition that have lasting social and cultural consequences. She has conspicuously contributed to the understanding of women's roles in the Partition and argues that their stories, long silenced, are integral to a fuller, more comprehensive understanding of this pivotal moment in history. She refrained from talking to women because she reasoned that there were so many levels of silence ingrained in these histories that maybe she could do her research by going elsewhere—certainly would continue to reveal some of the quiet. She highlights many gruesome events and pains suffered by women. Women jumped “into wells to drown themselves so as to avoid rape or forced religious conversions, fathers beheading their own children so they would avoid the same dishonourable fate.” (Butalia 5)

Butalia focuses on the story of ordinary people, especially women. She highlights that “some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the ‘other’ religion...” (Butalia 35). She mentions the interviews of women who have directly suffered the atrocities of the Partition, such as Basant Kaur and Damyanti Sahgal. She mentions an incident where Bir Bahadur Singh's father killed his sister and Mangal Singh killed seventeen members of the family. There prevailed a sense of loss, guilt, sorrow,

and grief. The refugee families struggled a lot. “By the time things became more ‘normal’ their presences had already become somewhat shadowy.” (Butalia 89) She presents the story of Zainab and Buta Singh which has become a legend. Even in this story, the voice of Zainab is not even heard. Male voices are significant in her story. Butalia provides references of many sources such as newspapers and memoirs. A woman’s journal *Manushi* published a review of a Gujarati book *Mool Suta Ukhde* which was a documentary of a woman named Kamlaben Patel who worked with raped and abducted women. Nearly 75000 women were raped and abducted, and if Kashmiri women were included the figure would reach one lakh. She found an incomplete but horrifying list of thousands of women containing 21,809 names, Hindus, and Sikhs who were abducted and reported missing. The ‘right’ home for Muslim women was Pakistan and for Hindu and Sikh women, India, rather than the place where these women may have truly wanted to live. Theoretically, everyone might select the country to which they wanted to belong. However, the women who were kidnapped did not. There was forcible evacuation and difficulty in the acceptance into their families. There was so much reluctance to accept women that Gandhi and Nehru had to appeal to women that they remained ‘pure’. Such was the plight of the women. The women who had children had two choices, either to keep their children and live in *ashrams* forever or to give them up and go back to their families. The women who were pregnant were appointed places to have children or to have mass abortions which were state financed. The recovery operation for abducted women continued for nine years.

In the case of Mangal Singh, women and children sacrificed themselves for death since it was better than the conversion and rape that would have most likely occurred. It was an honour issue rather than one of worry about how they may give themselves. The women could not defend themselves. They were weaker and more susceptible

to conversion. They might be sexually assaulted and contaminated with the seeds of other religions, which would contaminate both the person and the group. Another such incident was the mass suicide of ninety women from Thoa Khalsa, Rawalpindi. They jumped and drowned themselves in the well. The sacrifices of women elevated their families. There was a gruesome gamut of violence against women. The abduction and rape of women, the physical mutilation of their bodies, the tattooing of their sexual organs with symbols of other religions, and family violence were common. The women who sacrificed themselves were considered 'martyred' to 'save' the purity of religion. However, how can we ever determine the 'truth' about these occurrences? The voices of the women themselves cannot be readily recovered, much like with kidnapped women. All the narratives she has cited in her book, except for Basant Kaur, are written by men. Thus, it is obvious that we cannot unquestionably assume that their voices represent the feelings of the women. As a result, their behaviour is repositioned into the easily symbolized domain of victimhood, non-violence, and community sacrifice—their function within the home anyway. Releasing these women from violence and authority is another way to honour them as representatives of the family, community, and country.

Conclusion

This paper underscores the critical importance of recognizing and amplifying the silenced experiences of women during the Partition. Both Pritam and Butalia use their respective works to shed light on the gendered violence, trauma, and displacement faced by women, whose stories have been marginalized in mainstream historical accounts. Butalia's oral histories provide a powerful platform for these women to reclaim their narratives, offering a nuanced understanding of their suffering and survival. Pritam's poetry, on the other hand, captures the emotional and psychological scars left by Partition, emphasizing the lasting impact of the traumatic event on women's identities and social

roles. This study emphasizes that the Partition cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the role of women and their experiences, which have been historically suppressed. The research also highlights the importance of incorporating subaltern voices into broader historical narratives to ensure a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of this pivotal event. Ultimately, the works of Pritam and Butalia are essential in expanding the scope of Partition studies, providing a much-needed feminist perspective on the historical and emotional legacy of this defining moment in South Asian history. It opens various exciting avenues. One promising direction is an interdisciplinary approach, blending history, sociology, literature, and gender studies to explore how the emotional and psychological impacts of Partition are represented in literature. Further research could compare the works of Pritam and Butalia with those of other writers, such as Ismat Chughtai and Saadat Hasan Manto, to reveal different narrative traditions and the representation of women's experiences.

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