

## **Gendered Wounds of Partition: Stories of Survival from the Narratives of Butalia and Sidhwa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Research paper examines the 1947 Partition of India through the deeply human experiences of women, as portrayed in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*. While mainstream histories often focus on political negotiations and territorial divisions, these texts shift the lens to women as their bodies, identities, and homes became the battlefields of communal conflict.

Butalia's work, grounded in oral histories and personal testimonies, uncovers the silenced narratives of women who endured abduction, sexual violence, displacement, honour killings, and the fraught process of "recovery" by the newly formed states. Her interviews are focussed on trauma, memory, and silence intertwine in shaping women's lives long after the violence subsided. In contrast, Sidhwa's novel uses the innocent perspective of a child narrator to reveal the way the Partition infiltrated everyday domestic spaces, culminating in the brutal abduction of Ayah, an event that symbolises the larger violation of women's bodies during communal upheaval.

Together, these works examine a nuanced and compassionate understanding of women's suffering and resilience during Partition. By foregrounding female voices, they challenge patriarchal histories and demonstrate that women's experiences are central and are not supplementary to the narrative of Partition. This study argues that acknowledging these gendered wounds is essential to building a fuller, more humane account of one of the subcontinent's most defining historical ruptures.

**Keywords:** Testimony, Sexual Violence, Partition, Communal Conflict, Gendered Violence, Survival.

## Introduction

The 1947 Partition in India is considered to be one of the most tragic and defining moments in South Asian history. The event resulted in large-scale migration, loss of life, destruction of homes, and deep emotional wounds. While much has been written about the political leaders and decisions that shaped Partition, women's experiences were often ignored or erased. The journey across borders by foot, train, or caravan brought unimaginable dangers as mobs targeted women to insult the opposing community. Many women jumped into wells, committed suicide, or were killed in mass honour killings to escape violation. Even after the violence ended, women continued to suffer. The newly formed governments of India and Pakistan started "recovery operations" to bring back abducted women, but this process often ignored their voices and desires. Women who had settled into new lives were forced to return to families that sometimes rejected them, seeing them as "tainted." Their trauma was not only physical but psychological, shaping their lives long after the Partition ended. Their memories were filled with silence, fear, and unspoken pain. While official histories focused on political events, it is the testimonies of these women that reveal the deepest wounds of 1947.

Urvashi Butalia is an Indian feminist writer, historian, and publisher known for her groundbreaking work on gender, Partition studies, and women's histories. She is the co-founder of Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house, and later established Zubaan Books, that continues to publish feminist scholarship and women-centred literature. Butalia's most influential work is *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (1998). This book reshapes the way we understand Partition by turning our attention away from political leaders and official records, and instead toward the lives of ordinary people and the stories that were left untold. Women, Dalits, children, and families bore the real weight of the tragedy. Through patient conversations, personal interviews, and years of listening, Butalia brings forward memories that had long been buried in silence. She captures not only the historical facts but also the emotional and psychological scars that the violence of 1947 left behind. Beyond Partition studies, Butalia writes and speaks on women's rights, feminist activism, sexuality, and social justice. Her essays and edited volumes include *Women and the Hindu Right*, *Speaking Peace*, and *Partition: The Long Shadow*, continue to shape feminist scholarship in India. She is widely respected for giving voice to historically ignored

and for bringing human stories, compassion, and gender sensitivity into public memory and academic discourse.

**Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*** tells the story of the 1947 Partition of India through the eyes of Lenny, a young Parsi girl. Her innocent perspective allows readers to see the impact of Partition on ordinary people, especially women, in a very personal way. The novel shows how women suffered the most during the violence, with their homes, safety, and dignity often under threat.

Characters like Ayah, who is abducted and assaulted, represent the experiences of countless women during this time. Yet, the story also shows their courage and strength as they try to survive and protect their sense of self despite the chaos around them. By focusing on the everyday lives of people in a household and neighbourhood, Sidhwa makes the large political events feel human and close.

In this research, *Ice-Candy-Man* helps us understand women's experiences during Partition were shaped by both fear and resilience. It works alongside Urvashi Butalia's oral histories by showing the emotional and personal side of these historical events. The novel reminds us that behind the statistics and politics were real people with real struggles, especially women who lived through unimaginable hardships but still found ways to survive.

### **Women as Targets of Violence**

*The Other Side of Silence*, shares the stories of women who endured these horrors. She writes, "Women were abducted, assaulted, and forced into marriages they did not consent to, becoming the battlefields of communal hatred" (Butalia 112). This shows that the attacks were deliberate and systematic. Women were not merely victims of random violence. They were targeted in ways that threatened their autonomy, family ties, and sense of safety.

The effects of such violence lasted long after the immediate danger had passed. Many women carried emotional scars for years and faced social stigma within their own communities. Families were broken, lives were uprooted, and the sense of security that women once had vanished. By recording these experiences, Butalia reminds readers that Partition was not just a political or territorial event. It was a deeply human tragedy that profoundly affected women and left lasting wounds on their bodies, minds, and lives.

**Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*** shows women's lives were deeply affected by the violence of Partition. The novel is told through the eyes of Lenny, a young girl, that makes the fear and horror feel very immediate. Women in the story, like Ayah, face abduction and sexual violence, revealing how ordinary life was disrupted by communal hatred.

Ayah's abduction captures both the terror of the moment and the broader impact on women in her community. Sidhwa writes, "Ayah was taken in the night, and with her went the safety of every woman in our neighbourhood" (Sidhwa 102). This illustrates that an attack on one woman spread fear across the entire community.

Sidhwa also shows the emotional and psychological weight of being targeted. Women endured fear, uncertainty, and the loss of freedom and dignity. Despite this, Sidhwa highlights their courage and strength. The story reminds readers that these events were real human experiences filled with pain, endurance, and survival. Women's lives and bodies were at the center of Partition, and their stories are vital to understanding the full impact of this historical tragedy.

### **Trauma, Memory, and Silence**

Many survivors carried memories of violence, loss, and fear that stayed with them for years. Silence often accompanied these memories. Speaking about the horrors was difficult because of social stigma and the pain of reliving traumatic experiences. Silence became both a shield and a burden, allowing women to protect themselves and their families while also containing the weight of unspoken suffering. She writes, "Many women did not speak of what happened to them for years, carrying memories that haunted their daily lives" (Butalia 55). This shows that trauma affected every aspect of life and memory preserved the pain long after the events ended.

Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* presents similar experiences through the eyes of Lenny, who observes the fear and uncertainty faced by women around her. She reflects on Ayah's abduction and the atmosphere of dread in her household, saying, "I did not understand why people were hurting each other, why Ayah was gone, but I knew nothing would ever be the same again" (Sidhwa 45). This perspective demonstrates that trauma affected not only those directly attacked but also those who witnessed the violence, spreading fear and uncertainty through families and communities.

Both texts show that trauma, memory, and silence are deeply intertwined. Women endured violence silently, their memories carrying the emotional burden of Partition. These narratives reveal the invisible suffering of women, emphasizing that understanding Partition requires attention to their experiences, feelings, and resilience.

### **Persistence Amidst Pain**

Even in the face of unimaginable suffering during Partition, women showed remarkable strength and determination. They carried the weight of social expectations, communal pressures, and personal loss while finding ways to continue with their lives. Their resilience was not only a response to violence but also a conscious effort to reclaim dignity, identity, and control over their own lives. This aligns with Judith Herman's theory of trauma recovery, emphasizes on healing involves establishing safety, remembering and mourning the trauma, and reconnecting with life and community. Women in Partition lived this process in both subtle and profound ways, demonstrating the human capacity to survive and rebuild.

In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia shares accounts of women who rebuilt their lives after abduction, displacement, and assault. She writes, "Even amidst the loss and horror, women found ways to rebuild their lives, quietly asserting their dignity" (Butalia 176). This reflects Herman's stage of reconnection, where survivors reclaim agency and personal strength after enduring violence.

Bapsi Sidhwa presents a similar vision in *Ice-Candy-Man* through Ayah. After her abduction and the trauma she endured, Ayah returns with quiet but undeniable strength. Sidhwa writes, "Even after the violence, Ayah returned with quiet strength, a reminder that survival was itself a form of courage" (Sidhwa 210). Her journey embodies the active reclamation of life after trauma, showing that courage and persistence are central to rebuilding identity in the aftermath of violence.

### **Challenging Patriarchal Narratives**

Traditional accounts of the Partition often focus on political negotiations, territorial divisions, and male leaders. In these narratives, women's experiences are frequently overlooked or reduced to footnotes. Both Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* challenge this perspective by placing women at the center of the story. They

shift the focus from events and borders to the human cost of violence, making women's lives, struggles, and resilience the core of historical understanding.

In *The Other Side of Silence*, Butalia foregrounds women's voices through oral histories. She records their experiences of abduction, sexual violence, displacement, and loss, showing that women were not passive witnesses to history but active survivors whose stories carry the emotional truth of Partition.

“Twelve million people were displaced as a result of Partition. Nearly one million died. Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, 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 families and collective memory” (Butalia 35)

By documenting their testimonies, Butalia restores their presence in history and highlights the ways in which women's experiences were systematically ignored or silenced in mainstream narratives. One survivor reflects, “We were living with the memory of loss, with no one to listen to our voices, no record of what we endured” (Butalia 87). These accounts emphasize that history is incomplete without including women's perspectives.

Similarly, in *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa uses storytelling to bring attention to the domestic and intimate spaces affected by Partition. Through Lenny's perspective, readers witness the fear, suffering, and resilience of women like Ayah. By presenting the events of Partition through the eyes of women and children, the narrative challenges patriarchal history, showing that the human impact of violence is as important as political developments. Sidhwa writes, “Ayah was taken in the night, and with her went the safety of every woman in our neighborhood” (Sidhwa 102). This simple observation highlights the ripple effect of violence on communities and emphasizes the centrality of women's experiences.

The men drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet — that want to move backwards — are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child's screamless mouth. Her violet sari slips off her shoulder, and her breasts strain at her sari-blouse...(Sidhwa 188)

Storytelling itself becomes a tool for reclaiming agency. In both texts, women's voices are no longer silent or supplementary. By telling their stories, they assert their humanity, document their suffering, and regain some control over their narratives. Memory and narration allow them to resist erasure and demand recognition. Butalia's women speak of trauma, resilience, and recovery, while Sidhwa's characters embody these experiences in fiction. Together, these texts demonstrate that history is not only political but deeply personal. By challenging patriarchal frameworks, these narratives invite readers to see Partition not just as a political event but as a human tragedy where women's lives, voices, and choices matter. They restore agency to those who were silenced, demonstrating that history is richer, fuller, and more humane when women are at the center of the story.

### **Conclusion**

The Partition of India in 1947 was not merely an event of political separation; it was a deeply human tragedy marked by violence, displacement, and profound loss. Their experiences were shaped by gendered violence, forced migrations, and the collapse of everyday life, yet their stories have too often been missing from mainstream historical narratives. The voices in *The Other Side of Silence* and *Ice-Candy-Man* bring these experiences to the forefront, reminding us that to understand Partition fully we must listen to those whose lives were irrevocably altered by it.

Urvashi Butalia's oral histories emphasize that women's suffering was both widespread and deeply personal. In her work, women recall not only the violence but also the enduring sense of loss and memory that shaped their post-Partition lives. As one survivor noted, women lived with "the memory of loss" that continued to affect them long after physical wounds had healed (Butalia). By recording these testimonies, Butalia restores dignity to experiences that were long forgotten or ignored in official histories.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* complements this historical account through fiction that captures the emotional reality of Partition. Lenny's reflections and Ayah's survival create a narrative space where readers can feel the impact of violence, fear, and resilience intimately. Scenes such as Ayah's return with "quiet strength" illustrate that survival was not merely physical continuation but a reclamation of self in a world that had attempted to strip women of their agency (Sidhwa 210).

Research and critical studies highlight the importance of placing women's experiences at the center of Partition history. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin note that traditional accounts often overlook women, leaving their personal suffering invisible. In *Borders and Boundaries*, they argue that women's stories are not merely supplementary but essential to understanding Partition.

Taken together, these voices demonstrate that acknowledging women's experiences is essential for a more complete and humane understanding of Partition. Women were not merely passive witnesses of history; they were active agents in survival, memory, and the reclamation of their lives. Their courage, endurance, and determination provide a lens through which we can see the broader human impact of Partition. By foregrounding these stories, Butalia and Sidhwa remind readers that survival and resilience were central to the Partition experience. Recognizing women's experiences allows us to understand not only the physical and political consequences of Partition but also the emotional and psychological toll it took on individuals, families, and communities. Their narratives transform history from a record of political events into a deeply human story of endurance, agency, and hope in the face of unimaginable adversity.

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