



The Art of the Interview: Oral Testimony and Narrative Ethics in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*

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ABSTRACT :

This article explores the interview as both a methodological and ethical tool in constructing counter-histories, with a focus on Urvashi Butalia's seminal work *The Other Side of Silence*. Moving beyond the archival silences of state-sponsored narratives about the 1947 Partition of India, Butalia foregrounds voices traditionally left out of historical records—particularly those of women, lower-caste individuals, and the abducted. The interview, in her work, becomes more than a data-gathering technique; it is a form of witnessing, of facilitating speech in spaces shaped by trauma, shame, and collective silence. This paper examines the interview not only as a means of recovering lost stories, but also as a feminist practice rooted in empathy, ethical listening, and narrative negotiation. Drawing on theories of oral history, trauma studies, and feminist historiography, it argues that Butalia's work exemplifies how the art of interviewing can reshape the boundaries between history, memory, and storytelling. By closely analyzing selected interviews from the text, the article reflects on the interviewer-interviewee relationship, the performative aspects of memory, and the delicate balance between speaking for and enabling others to speak. Ultimately, it positions the interview as a transformative, political act capable of disrupting hegemonic histories and enabling marginalized voices to be heard.

Keywords: Oral history, feminist methodology, Partition narratives, testimonial ethics, narrative memory, trauma, voice, silence.

INTRODUCTION:

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (2000) stands as a landmark in the historiography of the 1947 Partition. While traditional historical narratives often privilege political figures, state documents, and public discourse, Butalia's project shifts the lens toward the everyday, the intimate, and the unheard—particularly women, children, Dalits, and abducted individuals whose experiences were buried under nationalistic retellings. Central to this intervention is her use of the interview as a tool for both reclaiming history and questioning the limits of what is traditionally accepted as historical knowledge. Butalia's work is not merely about retrieving facts; it is about listening to memory, emotion, and trauma. Her interviews surpass the conventional boundaries of the researcher's role, shifting away from that of a detached observer. Instead, they reflect dialogue, empathy, and mutual vulnerability. As she writes, "What I offer are stories, fragments, pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that has no one shape, no one pattern" (p. 6). The book is shaped not by a single narrative, but by multiple and often contradictory voices that reveal the subjectivity and complexity of remembering.

The interview, in *The Other Side of Silence*, becomes a feminist method of historical recovery. It allows space for silences, hesitations, and emotions to emerge—elements often excluded from official archives. Butalia acknowledges her positionality and the ethical dilemmas inherent in asking people to relive painful memories: "How does one ask a woman about the pain of her children being killed, or about being raped, or abducted?" (p. 12). This self-reflexivity constitutes a vital ethical aspect of her approach. Moreover, trauma complicates the act of telling. Many of her subjects speak in fragments, or not at all. For example, she recounts how a survivor, Ram Pyari, "talked for hours but gave me almost no detail. It was as if the pain was so great that the only way to tell it was to talk around it" (p. 148). Here, the interview becomes a site where silence speaks as loudly as words.

Oral History and Testimony

The practice of oral history has increasingly been recognized as a method of historical recovery that privileges subjectivity and lived experience, especially among marginalized communities. Central to this tradition is Alessandro Portelli, who argues that the value of oral testimony lies not in its factual accuracy but in the meanings and interpretations people assign to their experiences. As he writes in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, "oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did" (Portelli, 1991, p. 50). This shift from fact to meaning is crucial to understanding how trauma and memory function in Butalia's interviews, where the truth of experience is often emotional and symbolic rather than chronological or verifiable.

Paul Thompson, in *The Voice of the Past*, emphasizes the democratizing potential of oral history, noting how it "gives back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place" (Thompson, 1988, p. 1). Butalia's work reflects this ethos. Her project to collect testimonies from abducted women, Partition survivors, and socially marginalized individuals actively decenters official narratives and state-sponsored silences. Oral

history, in this framework, becomes a political and ethical intervention, in addition to a methodological one.

Feminist Methodology and Ethics

The interview in *The Other Side of Silence* is also shaped by feminist methodological principles, especially those that stress empathy, positionality, and the relational nature of knowledge. Feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Trinh T. Minh-ha argue that knowledge production is deeply situated and political, and that “voice” is both a right and a risk. Trinh’s notion that “there is no such thing as a true or false story” (*Woman, Native, Other*, 1989) resonates with Butalia’s willingness to allow contradictions and uncertainties to co-exist in her interview narratives.

Linda Alcoff’s pivotal essay “The Problem of Speaking for Others” (1991) raises critical questions about the ethics of representation, especially in cases where privileged subjects speak on behalf of the marginalized. Alcoff suggests that researchers must always interrogate their positionality and power in the research process. Butalia engages directly with this dilemma: “What does it mean to ask people to speak of things they have not spoken of for decades—and then to write about it?” (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 7). Her self-reflexive engagement and transparency about her position as an upper-caste, urban woman underscore her feminist commitment to ethical listening.

Sara Ahmed and Nira Yuval-Davis further enrich the feminist framework of ethical listening and witnessing. Ahmed (2000) emphasizes that listening is not passive; it involves emotional labor, response, and responsibility. Yuval-Davis, in *The Politics of Belonging* (2011), examines how categories such as race, gender, and religion influence whose voices are recognized and whose perspectives are acknowledged. In Butalia’s work, the decision to foreground marginalized voices—such as those of Muslim women, Dalit men, and abducted children—challenges traditional historical authority and broadens the scope of what is considered legitimate testimony.

The Interview as Narrative Space

The interview in *The Other Side of Silence* is not simply a data-gathering tool but a narrative space—a site where memory, trauma, and identity are performed, negotiated, and sometimes resisted. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism, interviews are inherently relational and polyphonic, shaped not only by the speaker’s voice but also by the listener’s presence and response. This view is echoed by Elliot Mishler, who writes in *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative* (1986) that interviews are jointly produced narratives, co-authored by both interviewer and respondent.

This dialogic process is especially relevant in contexts of trauma, where memory is often fragmented, nonlinear, and filled with gaps. Butalia’s interviewees frequently hesitate, contradict themselves, or shift between the personal and political. Instead of smoothing over these disruptions, she portrays them as integral to the emotional fabric of memory. This is what Dori Laub terms “the impossibility of witnessing one’s own trauma alone”—requiring the presence of an empathic listener to bear testimony.

Moreover, the performative aspect of memory is crucial. Testimonies are not just recollections; they are acts of meaning-making. In narrating their pasts, survivors often reconstitute their sense of self. As Butalia notes, “the stories people tell are as much about the present as they are about the past” (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 8). The interview becomes a space of healing, confrontation, and sometimes silence, where the act of telling may itself be therapeutic—or deeply unsettling.

Finally, interviews in Butalia’s work are marked by emotional labor, both for the narrator and the interviewer. Moments of crying, long silences, and storytelling fatigue are frequent. This highlights that oral history—especially when dealing with trauma—is not neutral. It is visceral, embodied, and emotionally charged. Butalia’s sensitivity to this dynamic reinforces the need for an ethics of care in conducting interviews, where the goal is not extraction of information but mutual recognition and trust.

Theoretical Framework

The structure and ethos of Urvashi Butalia’s *The Other Side of Silence* are informed by multiple intersecting theoretical frameworks that illuminate the nuanced complexities involved in interviewing trauma survivors. This article examines the interview as a methodological and ethical practice through the lenses of trauma theory, narrative ethics, and feminist oral historiography, highlighting the processes and moral responsibilities inherent in recovering silenced voices. Central to the interviews in *The Other Side of Silence* is the intricate challenge of articulating trauma.

The core of the interviews in *The Other Side of Silence* lies in the complex task of narrating trauma. As Cathy Caruth explains in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), trauma is not fully assimilated at the moment it occurs; instead, it returns belatedly, often in fragmented, non-linear forms. Caruth suggests that trauma “is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (p. 4). Butalia’s interviews often mirror this disruption—testimonies are marked by pauses, repetitions, silences, and contradictions, all of which signal the limits of language in expressing trauma. Similarly, Dori Laub, writing on Holocaust testimonies, emphasizes the relational aspect of witnessing: trauma can only be fully spoken in the presence of a listener who “hears” rather than merely “records.” In this sense, Butalia’s presence as an interviewer becomes crucial to the act of bearing witness.

This introduces a second dimension of analysis: the ethics of narrative. The interview is not a neutral act of documentation but a deeply ethical encounter shaped by questions of power, care, and responsibility. As Arthur Frank and Cheryl Mattingly argue, narrative ethics foregrounds the moral dimensions of storytelling and listening—particularly when dealing with pain and memory. Butalia acknowledges this tension in her own positionality and openly reflects on the risk of retraumatization: “How do you ask people about pain? How do you know when to stop asking?” (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 12). In her method, silence is not a failure but a meaningful space—one that must be respected. Allowing interviewees the freedom to withhold, contradict, or drift into silence affirms their agency in the narrative process.

Finally, feminist oral historiography provides the broader methodological and ethical scaffolding for Butalia’s approach. Drawing from thinkers such as bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Linda Alcoff, feminist oral history challenges the traditional authority of the historian and calls for relational,

empathetic, and reflexive modes of knowledge production. The aim is not to speak for others, but to create spaces where others can speak for themselves, and to remain attentive to the power asymmetries embedded in the act of interviewing. Butalia's careful attention to caste, gender, religion, and regional identity reflects this ethic. By centering subaltern voices—especially women whose experiences were doubly erased by patriarchy and nationalism—her interviews become not just sources of data, but acts of resistance and reclamation.

Interview as Dialogic Encounter

In *The Other Side of Silence*, the interview is not a one-way process of extracting facts, but a dialogic encounter—a co-creation of meaning between speaker and listener. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, the interview space becomes one in which meaning is negotiated rather than simply retrieved. Butalia does not present herself as a neutral chronicler. Rather, she occupies multiple roles: as listener, mediator, feminist, and historian. She frequently inserts herself into the narrative, not to center her own experience, but to make visible the relational process of storytelling. For example, in her interview with a woman named Raji, a survivor and witness of sexual violence during Partition, Butalia notes: "It was difficult to know when to push and when to stop... her eyes filled with tears, and I wasn't sure whether to continue. But she insisted on telling the story" (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 138).

This moment underscores the mutual agency in the interview—while Butalia may be guiding the conversation, the storyteller retains the power to speak or withhold. This shared authorship subverts the traditional hierarchies of historical narration.

Silence, Hesitation, and Fragmentation

One of the most profound contributions of Butalia's work is her attention to silence—not as absence, but as a communicative act. The interviews are replete with pauses, hesitations, and lapses in memory, which signal not a failure of narration but the inexpressibility of trauma. Silence becomes both a defensive mechanism and a testament to pain.

In an early interview with a Sikh man who had participated in honor killings of women in his family, Butalia notes:

"He started speaking, then stopped. There was a long silence. I could hear his breathing. Then he said, almost in a whisper: 'We had to do it...'" (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 101).

Here, the hesitation and trailing off are as telling as the words themselves. The man's moral conflict, guilt, and inability to fully articulate his actions are captured in that silence. Butalia resists the urge to fill these gaps with interpretation, allowing the silences to stand as they are—fragments that carry meaning beyond language.

She also observes moments where women, in particular, either forget or choose not to remember. In cases of sexual violence, women would often divert the conversation or shift blame, reflecting internalized shame. Butalia does not treat these deflections as inaccuracies but reads them as expressions of cultural conditioning and psychic defense.

Ethical Responsibility and Reflexivity

Butalia's approach is marked by ethical reflexivity, a hallmark of feminist oral history. She is deeply aware of the power imbalance embedded in the act of interviewing, particularly when engaging with survivors of violence and marginalization. She writes:

"There were times I felt like a voyeur, intruding on grief that was not mine to witness" (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 18).

Her discomfort becomes a central part of the narrative. Unlike conventional historians who seek to efface themselves for the sake of objectivity, Butalia foregrounds her subjectivity—her identity as a woman, a feminist, and an Indian deeply implicated in the legacies of Partition.

This self-awareness leads her to make methodological choices grounded in care. For instance, she allows interviewees to set the pace of the conversation, avoids rephrasing their words for academic clarity, and includes their silences and contradictions. In doing so, she honors their narrative autonomy.

Moreover, Butalia's shared cultural and gendered identity with many of her interviewees enables a deeper level of trust and disclosure. In one case, a Muslim woman confides in Butalia about being abducted and forcibly married during the Partition riots, saying:

"I would never have told this to a man. You are a woman; you understand" (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 172).

This moment underscores how positionality affects access to knowledge. Butalia's feminist ethics do not demand objectivity at the expense of empathy. Instead, they validate emotion as epistemology, framing care and relationality as central to knowledge production.

Memory, Pain, and Healing

Interviews in *The Other Side of Silence* function not only as tools of historical reconstruction but also as spaces for emotional reckoning and healing. For many of the survivors, especially women, it was the first time they had ever shared their stories. This process is fraught—storytelling is simultaneously cathartic and painful.

In a poignant example, Butalia recounts the story of Sakina, a woman who had been forcibly taken from her family and later "recovered" by the state. During the interview, Sakina vacillates between resentment and resignation, unsure whether she identifies more with her natal or marital family. Butalia writes:

"She wept when she spoke. But at the end, she said, 'I feel lighter now. No one has ever asked me these things before'" (*The Other Side of Silence*, p. 204).

Such moments demonstrate how the act of narrating trauma—when facilitated with care and ethical attention—can offer a form of release or validation. The interview becomes a ritual of witnessing, where pain is not erased but acknowledged in its full complexity.

Yet, it is also essential to recognize that not all narratives lead to healing. Some interviewees found the recollection of events too raw, leading to abrupt endings or emotional breakdowns. Butalia respects these limits, refusing to coerce disclosure or seek neat narrative closures. This recognition of narrative unpredictability—where stories resist neat arcs or redemptive endings—reveals her commitment to narrative integrity over narrative completion.

Implications and Broader Relevance

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* demonstrates how the interview can function as a radical act of historical recovery, particularly within feminist historiography. Beyond the context of Partition, this methodology holds wide-ranging applications across contemporary and interdisciplinary fields. In feminist research, the interview challenges hegemonic narratives by centering voices that have been historically marginalized—especially those of women, caste-oppressed groups, and survivors of violence.

In refugee and displacement studies, for instance, interviews serve not only to document forced migration but also to humanize experiences that are often reduced to statistics or political rhetoric. Similarly, in Indigenous communities, oral testimonies have become key tools in reclaiming erased histories and articulating sovereignty. Projects that gather survivor accounts of residential schools, or stories of cultural continuity in the face of colonial erasure, often rely on ethical, community-led interviewing practices informed by models similar to Butalia's.

Moreover, in the context of climate-induced displacement, interviews can capture the lived experiences of ecological loss, land dispossession, and community fragmentation—elements often absent in policy discussions. These testimonies add qualitative depth to data-driven climate research, emphasizing loss, identity, and belonging.

What this diverse applications share is a common methodological thread: the need for empathy, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility. Butalia's work underscores that interviews are not just information-gathering techniques, but relational and affective encounters. They must be conducted with sensitivity to trauma, consent, and power dynamics. In a time when many global crises are entangled with histories of silencing, the interview remains an indispensable and potent tool for truth-telling and justice.

Conclusion

In *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia offers more than a history of Partition—she presents a compelling methodological intervention. The interview, in her hands, becomes a means of producing counter-narratives, disrupting the patriarchal and nationalist discourses that have long dominated public memory of 1947. By privileging voices that were silenced—women, Dalits, children, and others—Butalia reframes history as a dialogic and contested space.

Her approach exemplifies the core principles of feminist oral history: attention to voice, care, and ethics. Rather than extracting testimony, she facilitates storytelling, often under emotionally fraught conditions. She is acutely aware of her positionality and the ethical challenges inherent in interviewing survivors of trauma. Her recognition of silence as narrative, and her refusal to smooth over contradictions or absences, marks a significant advancement in trauma-informed research.

Butalia's contribution lies not just in the content she records, but in **how she records it**. She highlights the emotional labor involved in both telling and listening, presenting the interview not as a passive instrument but as an active, evolving relationship between the speaker and the listener. The stories she collects are incomplete, interrupted, and often painful—but it is in their fragmentation and ambiguity that their truth resides.

Yet, as powerful as the interview may be, it has its limitations. Memory can falter; pain can distort; silence can persist. But these are not flaws in method—they are part of the terrain of working with human experience, particularly in contexts of violence and displacement.

As scholars and practitioners continue to engage with oral testimony in various global contexts—from war zones to refugee camps to climate-affected regions—it is crucial to carry forward the methodological sensitivity and ethical attentiveness modeled by Butalia. Her work is a reminder that the act of listening itself can be an act of justice, and that through careful, compassionate interviews, we can begin to recover the voices that history has tried to forget.

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