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Beyond the Border: Displacement, Memory, and Belonging in Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*

Shruti Rupam[1*] Prof. Uday Shankar Ojha[2]

[*1]Research Scholar, Department of English, Jai Prakash University, Chapra, Bihar, India

[2]Research Supervisor, Department of English, Jai Prakash University, Chapra, Bihar, India

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Abstract: The Partition of India in 1947 produced a political division between India and Pakistan alongside widespread displacement, violence, and family separation. Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* examines these consequences through oral testimonies, family histories, and written records, foregrounding experiences that are often marginal to accounts centred on political negotiations and national independence. This article analyses the relationship between displacement and belonging in Butalia's work. It argues that displacement is not limited to physical movement across a border: it also involves the disruption of relationships, memories, and social structures through which individuals understand home. Using a qualitative interpretive approach, the article considers the significance of remembered places, divided families, gendered violence, and the post-Partition recovery of abducted women. It also examines oral testimony and silence as ways the past is remembered, interpreted, and sometimes withheld. The analysis suggests that belonging after Partition cannot automatically follow from resettlement or national identification. Rather, it is negotiated through unequal relationships among individuals, families, communities, and states. By bringing intimate histories into dialogue with the political history of Partition, Butalia's work demonstrates that the effects of territorial division extend beyond migration and persist in the continuing reconstruction of home, identity, and historical memory.

Keywords: *Partition of India; displacement; belonging; oral history; gender; memory; Urvashi Butalia.*

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Introduction

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 marked the creation of India and Pakistan as independent states, but it also generated displacement, violence, and the separation of families and communities. In an excerpt from *The Other Side of Silence*, Urvashi Butalia estimates that approximately twelve million people moved between the newly constituted territories. She notes that estimates of deaths vary considerably and places these large-scale events alongside memories preserved in individual households. (Butalia, 2007)

The scale of Partition is often expressed through political chronology, demographic estimates, and the drawing of national boundaries. Such accounts are necessary for understanding the conditions of independence and territorial division. Yet they do not, by themselves, explain how people experienced the loss of familiar places, the separation of relatives, or the changing meanings of community. A border may be represented as a line on a map, but its effects extend into domestic life, personal relationships, and memories of home.

Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* addresses this relationship between public history and intimate experience. Drawing on interviews as well as diaries, letters, memoirs, and parliamentary documents, the book examines the experiences of people whose lives are not always central to political accounts of Partition. Its subjects include women, children, and lower-caste communities, as well as members of Butalia's own family. (Urvashi Butalia, 2001)

This paper asks how Butalia's work represents displacement and belonging beyond the physical crossing of borders. It argues that displacement in *The Other Side of Silence* is both geographical and relational. Geographical displacement refers to departure from or loss of a physical location. Relational displacement refers to the disruption of the networks of kinship, familiarity, care, and recognition through which a place becomes meaningful. These dimensions are connected but are not identical. A person may reach a new residence without recovering a sense of home; a family may remain emotionally divided even after some of its members have found safety.

The paper also argues that belonging is not automatically restored through resettlement or through membership in a newly defined nation. In Butalia's work, belonging is negotiated through family relationships, memories of place, gendered expectations, and the authority of the state. These negotiations can produce security and continuity, but they can also expose individuals to exclusion or constrain their ability to speak about what has happened.

The discussion proceeds in four stages. First, it considers home and displacement in relation to remembered place and family separation. Second, it analyses the gendered dimensions of

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violence and the recovery of abducted women. Third, it examines memory and silence as both sources of historical knowledge and challenges for interpretation. Finally, it considers what reconstruction after displacement can mean when the restoration of a former life is impossible.

A teaching guide to Partition studies identifies Butalia's interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses as an important contribution to histories of violence and dislocation. It also notes scholarship that challenges the dominance of Punjab-centred narratives by examining migration across the Bengal border. (Khan, 2007)

These approaches do not make political history irrelevant. Instead, they complicate the assumption that political decisions alone can explain the consequences of territorial division. The history of a border also involves the journeys, absences, material losses, and altered relationships experienced by those who live through its creation. The significance of everyday experience is particularly clear in oral histories. Research on the use of Partition testimony in teaching describes how survivors' accounts can foreground ordinary life and suffering in ways that differ from state-centred forms of remembrance. (Jayagopalan, 2016) Such accounts make questions of home and belonging historically significant rather than treating them as private matters outside the scope of historical inquiry.

Butalia's work participates in this shift by placing personal narratives alongside other forms of evidence. The resulting account does not simply replace political history with individual memory. Rather, it asks what becomes visible when state records, family histories, and survivor testimony are read in relation to one another. (Urvashi Butalia, 2001)

Critical work on *The Other Side of Silence* has explored the relationship between oral history and memory, including the difficulties of relying on recollection. One study considers how survivors' memories can complicate the relationship between identities associated with life before Partition and those shaped by its aftermath. It also identifies the reliability and selectiveness of memory as issues for interpretation. (Chaithanya V, 2023)

This concern should not lead to a simple opposition between unreliable memory and reliable official history. Oral and written sources are produced under different conditions and for different purposes. A personal account may preserve details absent from an official record, while an institutional document may offer information that a narrator could not have known. Both require attention to perspective, context, and omission.

Gender is another major concern in Butalia's work. Studies of Partition violence have examined women's abduction, sexual violence, displacement, and the practices through which states and families sought to define their place after recovery. (I & M, 2026)(Kapoor, 2019) These discussions are especially relevant to belonging because they reveal that a person's assigned community and their own wishes may not be treated as equivalent.

This paper brings these strands together. It contributes to reading home, family, gender, and memory as connected dimensions of displacement. Rather than treating belonging as a feeling that follows the end of migration, it approaches belonging as a relationship shaped by material circumstances, social recognition, and political power.

Home, Place, and the Experience of Displacement

Home is central to the study of displacement, but it cannot be reduced to a house or a geographical coordinate. A dwelling becomes home through relationships, routines, familiarity, and expectations about security. It is a place where people recognise others and expect to be recognised in return. This distinction helps explain why displacement may continue after a person finds another place to live. Physical shelter addresses an immediate material need, but it does not necessarily replace lost relationships or restore the social world associated with a former home. The difference between housing and belonging is therefore not merely semantic: it identifies two related but distinct dimensions of resettlement.

In the opening excerpt from *The Other Side of Silence*, Butalia describes families divided, homes destroyed, and villages abandoned. She then turns from this broad account to the particular stories preserved and retold within families. (Butalia, 2007) This movement from the collective to the intimate suggests that mass displacement is not simply a numerical phenomenon. Each departure occurs within a specific world of relationships and obligations.

The loss of home also changes how the past is experienced in the present. A remembered place can retain emotional importance even when a person no longer lives there. It can connect an individual to an earlier sense of self while simultaneously reminding them that the conditions under which that identity was formed have changed. In this respect, home survives as memory, but memory cannot necessarily restore home as a lived social environment.

Butalia's account of her parents' relationship to Lahore illustrates the distance between a political understanding of territory and an emotional understanding of place. She describes Lahore as a city associated with her parents' memories. Her father recalls fleeing to the sounds of gunfire and fire, while her mother recounts returning to bring younger relatives to India. (Butalia, 2007)

These memories do not describe Lahore in a single way. The city is associated with attachment and familiarity, but also with danger, departure, and urgent family responsibility. Its meaning cannot be reduced to its location within Pakistan after Partition. It remains part of a family history that extends across the border. The mother's return journeys complicate the idea that migration was always a single movement from danger to safety. Her actions suggest that departure could be followed by further journeys motivated by obligations to relatives. (Butalia, 2007) The border did not erase those obligations; instead, it made their fulfilment more difficult. Reading these recollections through belonging reveals that a person's relationship to place can be divided. The location of present residence may differ from the place that remains important in memory or from the place where family members are still located. Such divided attachment should not automatically be interpreted as an inability to settle. It may reflect the continuing significance of relationships that territorial separation did not dissolve.

Memories of home may emphasise the value of what was lost, but they are not necessarily complete descriptions of earlier life. Butalia notes that stories of pre-Partition coexistence can involve an idealised view of the past. (Butalia, 2007) This observation guards against presenting the period before Partition as

uniformly harmonious. Nostalgia can nevertheless be historically meaningful. An affectionate memory of a former neighbourhood or community may reveal what a narrator associates with security, familiarity, and social connection. Its significance lies not only in whether every detail can be independently confirmed, but also in how the remembered past helps the narrator interpret subsequent loss.

A critical reading must therefore avoid two extremes. It should neither accept nostalgia as a complete account of the past nor dismiss it as merely inaccurate. Instead, it can ask what is remembered, what is absent, and how recollection changes in relation to later experiences. This approach treats memory as evidence of both historical experience and the continuing interpretation of that experience. (Chaithanya V, 2023)

Family Separation and Relational Displacement

The separation of families demonstrates why displacement cannot be understood solely through the movement of individuals. Family members may leave at different times, remain in different places, or acquire different relationships to the newly established states. A political boundary can therefore divide a household without dissolving the emotional and practical ties that bind it.

Butalia's own family history forms part of her investigation into Partition. Her account of her mother's journeys to bring younger relatives to India shows how the demands of kinship could continue across dangerous and changing political conditions. (Butalia, 2007) The journey is significant not only as a movement between territories but also as an effort to respond to family separation. This example helps clarify the idea of relational displacement. The loss at issue is not limited to a former address. It includes the interruption of ordinary forms of care: the ability to live with relatives, communicate with them, and fulfil responsibilities without crossing a newly established border. Physical distance and political division reshape what family membership requires.

Family separation also complicates a simple distinction between arrival and departure. Reaching a place considered safer may not end uncertainty if loved ones remain elsewhere. A person's sense of security can coexist with continuing concern for relatives whose circumstances are unknown or precarious. Belonging is thus distributed across relationships that do not necessarily occupy the same territory. Family can provide resources through which people survive displacement, but it should not be assumed to be an uncomplicated refuge. Families also have expectations about loyalty, respectability, gender, and silence. These expectations can affect whose account is heard and which experiences are considered acceptable to discuss.

The ambiguity is important for understanding belonging. Inclusion within a family may offer care and continuity, while also requiring individuals to conceal experiences that others find difficult or shameful. A person may be physically present within a household but unable to speak openly about the events that brought them there. Scholarship on gendered Partition violence observes that women could face coercion and violence from members of their own communities as well as from those identified as outsiders. (Ekta, 2025) This finding complicates any assumption that belonging to a family or community is automatically equivalent to safety.

In Butalia's work, the family is therefore both a source of historical knowledge and a subject of inquiry. Family stories preserve experiences of Partition, but they may also contain omissions, disagreements, and difficult questions. (*Of "Selective Amnesia and Memory Are at the Root of the Relation Ship between Human Beings and Their History. This*, n.d.) To read these stories critically is to recognise that intimate relationships can sustain memory while also shaping its limits.

The consequences of Partition extend to people who did not experience the events of 1947 directly. Butalia describes growing up with stories of violence and displacement within her family. She recalls that, at the time, these accounts seemed to belong to a different world. Her later involvement in relief work after anti-Sikh violence in 1984 changed the urgency with which she approached such stories. (Butalia, 2007) Her account illustrates that inherited memory is not fixed. A story heard in childhood may be interpreted differently after later experiences alter the listener's understanding. The meaning of the past is therefore shaped not only by the person who narrates it but also by the person who listens. Inherited stories can create attachment to places that a later generation has not experienced in the same way as its parents or grandparents. They can also transmit unresolved questions. A family may repeatedly refer to a lost city, a journey, or a separation while leaving other aspects of the experience unspoken. The later listener inherits both what is said and the limits of what is known.

This process does not make the experiences of different generations identical. Butalia's position as a listener differs from that of her parents, who remembered Lahore and displacement directly. Her work nevertheless shows how the past remains present through acts of narration, listening, and reinterpretation. (Butalia, 2007)

Gendered Violence and the Politics of Belonging

A study of displacement that does not attend to gender risks treating movement and belonging as if they were experienced under the same conditions by everyone. Scholarship on Partition identifies forms of violence directed at women, including abduction and sexual violence, as well as the continuing effects of these experiences on their relationships with families, communities, and states. (I & M, 2026)

Gendered violence also exposes the symbolic role that women can be made to occupy in narratives of communal identity. When women are treated as bearers of a family's or community's honour, violence against them may be understood by others as an attack on the group. Yet this symbolic interpretation can obscure the person who experienced the harm. It risks transforming an individual into evidence of collective injury while neglecting her own wishes, relationships, and understanding of events.

The problem does not end with the immediate violence. Ideas about honour and respectability may also shape how a woman is welcomed afterwards and whether she can speak about what happened. Belonging can become conditional: acceptance may depend on expectations established by the family or community rather than on the individual's own account. This is why gendered displacement cannot be described solely as a physical change of location. It can involve the loss of authority over one's identity and the conditions under which one is permitted to belong. The boundaries of community are not only territorial; they are also maintained through social judgments about who can return, under what conditions, and with what recognition.

The post-Partition recovery of abducted women reveals a tension between institutional definitions of belonging and individual agency. Research on the legal category of "abducted women" explains that state measures sought to facilitate women's return to what authorities understood as their original homes. The same analysis argues that these measures could disregard women's wishes and restrict their autonomy. (Kapoor, 2019) The language of recovery suggests a return to a prior condition. Yet the meaning of return becomes more complex when an individual's circumstances have changed. A woman may have experienced coercion and violence, formed relationships after displacement, feared rejection by her earlier family, or faced several of these circumstances simultaneously. These possibilities cannot be resolved by assuming that a state-defined destination is necessarily experienced as home.

Acknowledging women's later wishes does not require romanticising relationships formed under coercive conditions. Rather, it requires distinguishing between two questions: whether violence occurred and who has the authority to decide what should happen afterward. Both questions matter. A practice intended as rescue may still create further harm if it excludes the person concerned from decisions about her future. (Sandhu, 2026)

The distinction between rescue and belonging is therefore essential. Rescue names an intervention from the perspective of an authority or observer. Belonging concerns a person's social relationships, attachments, and possibilities for recognition. The two may coincide, but they cannot be assumed to do so in every case. Emphasising violence should not require describing women only as passive victims. At the same time, identifying agency should not imply that people acted under conditions of unrestricted choice. Decisions made amid violence, displacement, and unequal power require interpretation that recognises both action and constraint.

The concept of situated agency is useful here. It directs attention to what an individual could do within particular circumstances without assuming that the range of options was fair or extensive. It also prevents a simplistic opposition between complete powerlessness and complete freedom.

A careful account must remain close to the available evidence. If a woman's own words are absent, her preferences should not be invented to complete a narrative. Scholarship on the representation of marginalised voices cautions that accounts attempting to recover those voices may still reproduce forms of silence through their own selection and framing. (Singh, 2026)

This concern applies to the language of "giving voice." An interviewer or writer may create conditions in which a testimony becomes available to readers, but the published account remains shaped by questions, selection, translation, and interpretation. Ethical listening requires attention to those mediations as well as respect for what cannot be known.

Oral History, Memory, and Silence

Oral testimony changes the scale at which Partition can be studied. It allows the historian to ask how political division was experienced in a household, a journey, or a remembered neighbourhood. Such questions do not replace the study of states and leaders; they show how political events entered the conditions of everyday life. Research on Partition oral histories identifies the importance of everyday experience in accounts of suffering and remembrance. (Jayagopalan, 2016) In this context, a remembered home or a disrupted family relationship is not merely an illustration of a larger event. It is part of the event's historical substance.

Butalia's method is also significant because oral accounts are brought into conversation with other materials. The book's use of interviews alongside diaries, letters, memoirs, and parliamentary documents enables different kinds of evidence to illuminate, complicate, or qualify one another. (Urvashi Butalia, 2001)

This approach does not guarantee that every contradiction can be resolved. Different sources may preserve different perspectives or address different questions. A parliamentary record may reveal an institutional policy without establishing how every affected person experienced it. A personal account may illuminate lived consequences without documenting the full workings of the institution. Reading across sources requires recognising both their value and their limits.

Memory is not a direct recording that remains unchanged over time. A narrator recalls the past from the circumstances of the present, and the meaning of an event may shift as later experiences make different aspects of it salient. Research on memory in Butalia's oral histories identifies this selectiveness as a challenge to any simple account of historical reliability. (Chaithanya V, 2023)

Yet selectiveness is not necessarily evidence that testimony has no historical value. It can itself be an object of interpretation. A recurring reference to a lost place may show the importance of that place in a person's self-understanding. A change in emphasis may indicate that a later event has altered how an earlier story is understood.

Butalia's description of her own changing relationship to family stories demonstrates this point. She recalls initially hearing Partition narratives as accounts of a distant time, then approaching them differently after later violence and relief work. (Butalia, 2007) The historical value of the account lies partly in the relationship it establishes between the remembered event and the conditions under which it is recalled. Memory should therefore be read neither as a transparent transcript nor as an obstacle to historical knowledge. It is a form of evidence that requires attention to narrative position, context, and the relationship between past and present. Silence is central to Butalia's inquiry, but it should not be given a single explanation. A person may not speak because of pain, fear, social expectations, privacy, uncertainty, or the absence of a trusted listener. A silence in a published account may also reflect what was not asked, recorded, preserved, or selected. The ethical difficulty is that silence can be significant without being fully interpretable. To assume that every silence has the same meaning risks replacing the narrator's perspective with the reader's expectation. A critical account must be able to acknowledge an absence without claiming to know exactly what lies behind it.

Butalia's discussion of family interviewing raises questions about who asks questions, how they are asked, and when a silence is probed. (*Of "Selective Amnesia and Memory Are at the Root of the Relation Ship between Human Beings and Their History. This*, n.d.) These questions position listening as an ethical practice rather than a neutral act of collecting information. The interviewer's desire to know must be balanced against the narrator's ability to decide what to disclose. Silence may also exist within an otherwise detailed account. A narrator may discuss a journey or a lost home

while leaving another experience unspoken. Such partiality does not automatically make the testimony incomplete in a dismissive sense. It may reveal the conditions under which a story can be told, while also establishing a limit that the reader should not cross through speculation.

Reconstructing Belonging After Displacement

The end of a journey does not necessarily end displacement. A person may acquire shelter, develop new relationships, and participate in a community while continuing to remember or grieve what was lost. Resettlement is therefore better understood as a process involving both material and relational dimensions. Material conditions matter because a sense of security depends partly on access to a place to live and to social and economic support. But material security alone cannot reproduce a former network of relationships. A new home is made under changed circumstances, not simply substituted for an old one.

This distinction also changes how recovery is understood. If recovery is imagined as a return to the exact conditions that existed before displacement, it may set an impossible standard. Belonging after rupture may instead involve establishing new forms of continuity while recognising that some losses cannot be reversed.

Butalia's attention to personal and family histories makes this complexity visible. Her account does not require the reader to choose between the proposition that people rebuilt their lives and the proposition that the effects of displacement persisted. Both can be true. Narratives of Partition need to account for both suffering and action. People affected by displacement cared for relatives, sought safety, made decisions, and reconstructed aspects of daily life. But describing such actions as resilience can become misleading if it implies that violence was overcome completely or that survival cancels loss.

The same caution applies to victimhood. Violence and coercion must be named, but people should not be reduced to those experiences. An interpretation attentive to belonging asks how individuals acted and formed relationships while remaining alert to the constraints under which they did so. This balance is especially important in relation to testimony. A narrator may describe loss without presenting a story of recovery; another may emphasise practical action while leaving emotional consequences less explicit. Neither account needs to be forced into a predetermined narrative in which suffering is either total or fully overcome.

Butalia's work supports a more open understanding of reconstruction: belonging may be pursued through care, memory, and new relationships, but it can remain fragile, unequal, or incomplete. The task of interpretation is to make these tensions visible rather than resolve them prematurely. A border divides political territories, but it does not necessarily end the attachments through which people understand themselves. Butalia's account of Lahore and her family's experiences shows how a place across a national boundary can remain significant through memory, kinship, and narratives of departure. (Butalia, 2007) These attachments do not automatically oppose national identity. A person may identify with a state while also retaining a connection to a birthplace or family history located beyond its borders. The difficulty arises when political categories are treated as the only legitimate basis for belonging.

The continuing significance of Partition should not be understood as a claim that every later conflict or difficulty has a single historical cause. Rather, Butalia's work demonstrates how earlier experiences can remain available for reinterpretation. The past persists through stories, silences, and attachments, but its meaning is shaped by later circumstances as well.

In this sense, the border is both a political division and an analytical problem. It draws attention to the mismatch that can emerge between the territorial organisation of states and the less easily divided relationships through which people make lives.

Conclusion

The Other Side of Silence challenges an understanding of Partition confined to political division and mass movement. By attending to testimony, family history, and written records, Butalia directs attention to the ways a national rupture entered homes, relationships, and memories.

This paper has argued that displacement in the work is both geographical and relational. The loss of a place is connected to the interruption of kinship, familiarity, and social recognition. As a result, resettlement cannot be equated automatically with the restoration of belonging. A person may find shelter while remaining separated from relatives, attached to a remembered place, or subject to conditions imposed by family and community.

The gendered experiences considered here make the politics of belonging especially clear. Violence against women and the subsequent practices of recovery expose the distance that can exist between an institutional definition of where someone belongs and that person's own relationships and wishes. The distinction between protection and control is therefore central to any account of return.

Finally, oral history makes these experiences available for inquiry while raising methodological and ethical questions. Memory is selective, testimony is mediated, and silence cannot be assigned a single meaning. These limitations do not diminish the importance of personal accounts. They require historians and readers to approach them with care. Butalia's work ultimately shows that borders divide more than territory. Their effects continue in the reconstruction of homes, the negotiation of family relationships, and the memories through which later generations encounter the past. Belonging after Partition emerges not as a final condition guaranteed by arrival, but as an ongoing process shaped by loss, attachment, power, and the possibilities of being heard.

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