

# Women and the Conflict: A Study of Two Works: *The Sleeping Voice* by Dulce Chacon and *the Other Side of the Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* by Urvashi Bhutalia

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**Abstract**—The present paper is a study through narratives from two different spaces. The two works, *La Voz Dormida* (*The sleeping voice*) and *The other side of the Silence* and their respective authors Dulce Chacón and Urvashi Butalia try to turn their reader's attention towards the problems and miseries of women in conflict situations. The continued use of the woman's body as a site of enactment of the power of men has meant that women have to endure more suffering in times of conflict. Studies have shown that men and women suffer differently in times of conflict and, in general, it is women who suffer more if any disturbance occurs in the society.

In the present work, I propose to do a comparative analysis of the psychosocial condition of women in circumstances of conflict of Post-civil war of Spain and after partition of India. The article looks into the various aspects of the depiction of women protagonists through whom the experiences of women after Spanish civil war and partition of India is documented. In the two works, readers are made aware of the socio-political condition of Spain and India of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both the authors through oral narratives try to recreate the history thus, recuperating the voice of those women who suffered physically as well as mentally during partition of India and Spanish Civil War and post war respectively. Dulce Chacón through her characters creates vivid picture of the Spanish society of 20<sup>th</sup> century focusing specially on role of women who were raped and killed due to clash of ideologies. Similarly, Butalia turns reader's attention towards the miseries and sufferings of women in Punjab during partition of India. Both the authors have tried to give voice to those unknown faces whose painful stories were left unheard and buried in the history.

*La voz dormida* by Dulce Chacon deals with the socio political situation of Spain of 20<sup>th</sup> century, where a clash of ideology divided Spain into two groups called nationalists and republicans and this division resulted in mass murder of innocent people, where brother killed brother and the cruel side of humanity was at its peak. The Spanish civil war that started in 1936 and ended in 1939 with the victory of Franco. The victory of Franco resulted in exile of thousands of people especially those who were against him. Franco's regime did not spare even children and women. Those people who escaped from Spain saved their lives but those who did not had to face harsh brutalities of the regime. Many men along with women were murdered and jailed. Women were of no exception under Franco, women were supposed to adhere to strict guidelines of what it meant to be a woman: being a wife and mother, devoting herself to her husband, and having virtually no individual freedom.

**Keywords:** Women, conflict, civil war, partition

*La Voz dormida* of Dulce Chacon effectively portrays the extreme physical and psychological repression directed at Republican supporters and their families in the immediate Post-Civil War years and beyond. The novel mainly deals with the story of four women named as Hortensia, Tomasa, Reme and Elvira and their experiences in the prison of las ventas and also about the relatives of prisoners like Pepita, sister of Hortensia and many more. They are jailed because of their sympathy towards republicans during Spanish Civil War. Among the male protagonists are Felipe and Mateo. This work of Dulce Chacon is a tribute to those women who suffered, struggled and fought bravely during and after Spanish civil war. This novel deals with the sufferings of women who on the one side lost the war and the other side lost their families in the war. The novel starts with the description of Hortensia, who is pregnant and is sentenced to death because of her support to nationalists.

Likewise, the year 1947 is considered a crucial year in the history of India, when the British left India and divided the country into India and Pakistan. For some it was a year of celebration, but for others it was a year of sadness, sorrow and suffering. It was the year in which, on the one hand, India gained its independence, but on the other hand the partition was carried out. Partition left people with no choice but to migrate from one place to the other, Hindus and Sikhs had to immigrate to India, while Muslims had to migrate to Pakistan. During this migration countless people have lost their lives from both sides, children were killed, women were raped and abducted. It was a sad period in the history of India. Partition has affected the lives of hundreds and thousands of people who, on the one hand, became foreigners in their own land, on the other side lost their families, friends and relatives. More than anyone else this partition has affected women more who became a mere object of this political and geographical division of the countries. Women suffered in many ways

throughout this process of partition. This partition had landed the woman in a place where they neither belonged to their families nor to their country, since they were kidnapped, raped and mutilated by members of other communities and, at the same time, were killed and encouraged to commit suicide by members of the family to protect the honor of the family.

Urvashi Butalia's book: *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from Partition of India* incorporates interviews of partition survivors, mostly women. This book by Butalia describes the brutal incidents of partition in detail. Main protagonists of Butalia are not heroes of history, but ordinary people, women, children and people of low caste. She weaves the stories through personal interviews with people who personally faced torture and brutalities during the split. This paper explains how partition changed the lives of so many people focusing especially on women and children. She explains how partition not only divided two countries geographically, but many hearts. She continues to describe the effect of partition on the lives of people who lost their jobs, estates and their families in this disturbance. The people were forced to emigrate because the new government had created a feeling of mistrust and the people had no choice but to emigrate leaving all their belongings. She describes that women suffered greatly during the partition as they were seen as an object by this society and how in times of partition countless women were raped and abducted and many families in order to save the family's pride, killed their daughters, wives and mothers or forced to commit suicide. Author explains that this tensed situation had forced people to cross all the boundaries. Men killed their own women, mothers, daughters and wives jumped into the wells or rivers with their children. And the neighbors who lived together from the ages suddenly became an enemy of another because of this political divide. Women were raped and kidnapped and on the other hand their own families rejected them calling them contaminated souls and these women had no choice but to live with their abductors. Children born during this process are often seen as "others" because they belonged nowhere and even their mothers rejected them, and most of these children find their refuge often in ashrams or in orphanages. Partition has given so many wounds in the body and the mind of the people and these wounds are not even cured after so many years of partition.

This article intends to do a comparative analysis of both works. The two works depicts the unfortunate condition of women in the society during the time of turbulence. In two works condition of women is clearly reflected. In both works we see women as a definite victim of war. During the time of the Spanish Civil War and the partition of India, women were made as an object of sexual violence and their struggle for equal rights was not accepted by the society and were left to face brutal torture of the regime. On *The Other Side of Silence* of Butalia, women were seen as a victim of patriarchal society where women were tortured, murdered, raped and paraded naked to dishonor other religious communities and to some

extent to satisfy lust. These works clearly reflect the position of subordination of women in society.

In these traumatic situations where on one hand the male members of the society raped the girls of another religion and the same was carried out by the male members of the other religion. Partition produced a confrontation between people of two religions: Hindus and Muslims. In the end the women suffered a lot in these clashes. In this clash the men showed their heroic and superior nature by committing crimes against women, but when the process of partition was over. The same society refused to accept these women as their mothers, sisters, wives or daughters. Nobody took their responsibilities and they were forced to live in the shelters built by the government where they spent their entire lives in solitude. Through this we can see the cowardly act of society that refused to accept their own women, who were rescued by the government from their abductors and for this reason many women knowing the reality decided to stay with their abductors. Here, we can see the heavy sacrifice made by women who were silenced over the years and tolerated the atrocities of society sacrificing their lives, their dreams and desires. The true story of one of the survivors and victims of partition, Damyanti Sahgal reflects the impact of partition on women's life. She describes how she had to travel from one place to other in order to save her life and how she suffered without food, money and security. After so many painful days she found an ashram in Haridwar, where she had spent her major part of life in solitude. Damyanti, who has been seen as a person who was very fond of dresses and cosmetics and keeps herself up to date, but loses all her interest in life and killed all her dreams and desires after witnessing and experiencing events of partition. How her dreams shattered and she became dispirited is clearly shown in these lines:

"When I was in Kotra, when I decided not to get married, I was married to my God, my thakur, I loved him alone, and that was why I was ending a kind of life ... Earlier, of course, I used to be very fond of dressing, caring for my figure ... and then I said, my father thought something had happened to my brain and I used to wander only by praying, and it was in this condition that the partition happened."(Butalia, 1996: 118)

Likewise, in the novel *La Voz Dormida (The Sleeping Voice)*, the author portrays the grim conditions endured by the women in the prison, due to chronic overcrowding, poor hygiene standards, meagre food rations and a lack of basic medical care, as well as regular episodes of torture and other forms of punishment. Through the novel which the author writes after researching and interviewing the prisoners who were victims of the cruel dictatorship of Franco regime we can see the pain, suffering, injustice and cruelty through which political women prisoners had to go. As we can read in the novel, Tomasa, who witnessed the killing of her entire family by Francoist soldiers, before being sent to prison, was

punished with several months of solitary confinement for biting off the toe of the statue of a baby Jesus instead of kissing it during a religious holiday. She is left to weaken without any medical help or adequate nutrition; she survives only because another inmate risks her life to save her. Sole, a midwife in her pre-prison life, is asked to help in the infirmary and sees her chance to clandestinely help the dying Tomasa. Claiming to go wash the other empty solitary confinement cells, she regularly hides some puree at the bottom of a pail and uses a medical tube to pass it through the keyhole of Tomasa's cell door.

(My translation from Spanish to English)

"She knelt, lifted her face and brought her mouth close. And succumbed, as a calf feeds on its mother's udder" (Chacón, 2002: 188)

Here, it presents clearly how women suffered inside the prison and lived under fear but at the same time we can see the social and political solidarity among the prisoners helping and even putting their own life at risk in order to save their inmates or so called family members right under the noses of the prison guards. Pepita, sister of Hortensia always come to visit her in the jail. She is basically her connection to the outer world as she is the only person who gives Hortensia news of Felipe. In the novel, we see how the relatives of the prisoners also suffered and gone through the fear of death as in the case of Pepita, sister of Hortensia who is not interested in politics as she knows the result of being part of it. For instance, when Pepita goes to visit her sister in jail, her sister asks her to exchange letters and messages between her and her husband through one of the friends of Felipe, she first says no to her due to fear of suspicion or death but later she agrees. How she is feeling at that time can be clearly seen in the novel;

(My Translation)

"And she rolled over in bed, right and left, asleep and awake, and she fell to the ground. . . (Chacón, 2002: 66: 69)

It is clear from the above lines how Pepita feels before one night when she had to go to the mountains to exchange the letter. The entire section reflects an anxious stream of consciousness and internal monologue that jumps incessantly from one thought to the other.

In both works, what we see common are women, as a victim, but at the same time, these women are brave in both works. In Chacon's *Sleeping Voice* the main female protagonist Hortensia is optimistic about the future who most of the time is seen writing in a blue notebook and always encourages others saying that one has to live to tell our story. Through her writings she wants to be alive in the memories of her daughter and she looks like very brave in the novel. She sacrificed her life, but she never asked for any mercy. The other female protagonist Pepita who is not as brave as Hortensia, works as a messenger for her and her husband is seen many times putting his life at risk when she goes to meet

Paulino, The Black Jacket to the mountains. While in Butalia's work, Damyanti Sahgal is seen as a very strong that she leaves her house at the time of partition and goes from place to place alone after making long journey without food and money. Finally, after facing the difficulties and obstacles, she finds a safe place for her although a hermitage where she spends most of her life in solitude. In *La Voz dormida* (Sleeping voice) Elvira is seen in the novel challenging male domination and leadership. She challenged to Mateo who comments on seeing her washing clothes and told her that her husband would be very lucky. Elvira responds to Matthew that male domination has come to an end and now men and women are equal.

While in both works we see these women becoming subject to extreme physical and mental tortures. They are also seen as displaced people who lived in the solitude for years, but never shared their traumatic experiences with others.

As, Azra Hromadzic explains in her work, *Female Body and (Ethno) Political Violence*, women are victims of incredibly horrible atrocities and injustices in situations of conflict; this is undeniable. As refugees, internally displaced, combatants, heads of household and community leaders such as peace activists and builders, women and men experience conflict differently.

In *La Voz Dormida (The Sleeping Voice)* we see the condition of women in the prisons where they lived in dirty cells fighting food shortage and lack of hygiene. Many prisoners died of diseases. They lived in such conditions, since they were imprisoned for fighting for their rights. In the novel, we see one of the guards of the prison cut Elvira's hair because she broke the discipline of the prison. This act is seen as an extreme punishment for Elvira, because it is she who likes her hair a lot and to cut her hair as a punishment means giving her the physiological pain of separating something from her body that she likes. It's like taking ones identity. Because, girls' long hair is generally considered as one of the important female characteristics. While the other incident in which Tomasa, who witnessed the murder of her whole family by Francoist soldiers before being sent to jail, is at some point punished with several months of solitary confinement for biting the toe of the statue of a baby Jesus instead of kissing her during a religious holiday. She lets herself languish without any medical help or proper nutrition she survives only because other cellmate risks her life to save her.

As Radhika Coomaraswamy, in *Sexual Violence* during wartime says women's body become a battlefield in which opposing forces fight. In these cases, we see the women's body becoming a battlefield where the winning side tries to show their power and victory.

In Chacón's novel, these women are tortured by nationalists, but in the work of Butalia women suffer these tortures, punishment and humiliation by their own family members. Where their own brothers, uncles, parents, kill them. Like, Bir Bahadur Singh, he narrates about her sister's death

by his own father in order to save her from the Muslims. We see here, how women suffer physical and mental torture and trauma in conflict situations. These women suffer in many ways during the times of war. In conflict times, these horrible experiences of women change their lives completely and they all their interest in life. Women turns into a paralyzed body that has life, but not feelings.

As, Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf say: violence against women in conflict situations is one of the great silences in the history and women are more likely than men to end up being displaced. In both works, one can observe in the life of women, the presence of a silence that was buried with the burden of terrible experiences of wartime: the slaughter of their kinship, rape, physical and psychological repression by the hands of their enemies, who were once their neighbors. As we see in the novel, *La Voz Dormida (The Sleeping Voice)* one of the important characters Tomasa who is silent and never shared with her cellmates about her traumatic experiences of her murdered family who were massacred before her eyes at the moment in the time of Spanish Civil War. Here, I quote from the book;

"Silence makes its round making crazy. Survive. And round and round. We are not going to make it so easy ... And against history, so that the madness does not accompany the silence.... To resist is to win. She screams to fill the silence with the story, her story, her own story ... It's time for Tomasa to tell her story. Like a vomit of the words that have been silent until this moment. Like a vomit of pain and rage. Silenced and sordid time that escapes from her lips tearing the air, and tearing her from inside "(Chacón, 2010: 213)  
(My translation)

Similar silence, Butalia also mentions in her book, "*The other side of silence*". Through interview with one of the survivors of the partition, Damyanti Sehgal who becomes an internally displaced person, narrates her life experiences during and after the partition of India. For the first time in her life she expresses her sufferings with the author. As author also mentions;

" According to her, it was the first time she was actually talking about everything that had happened, the first time she said, that someone had asked her, for the first time she was remembering with and for someone. Even for her sister and niece, the experiences she related were new"(Butalia, 1998: 113).

Other elements of suffering that we see in both works are displacement. In two works, we see the displacement of the people who suffered during the time of the partition, as well as during the Spanish civil war. But more than men, women were displaced. As Charles Keagley and Eugene R Wittkopk, in their work, *World Politics: Trends and Transformation*, point out that women are the most affected by the conflict. The escalation of violence in a conflict creates threats to physical

integrity and thus leads to forced migration. This gives rise to the creations of refugees and internally displaced persons. The same situation is seen in both works. In *La Voz Dormida*, we see all the protagonists are displaced because of the Spanish civil war. Some people are seen as living in exile, others in jail and in most cases people do not have the whereabouts of their relatives. As in the work of Chacon, we see the protagonist Pepita who lives with the family of Don Fernando, as a servant and her sister is a prisoner and her parents are dead. She does not have a stable place to live. Another incident of this displacement is reflected in the case of Paulino, who goes with his friend in a prison, to visit a wife of a friend, there he learns that his grandfather is still alive and his sister is a prisoner. Later, he managed to free her from jail and they go to the mountains to continue their fight. While, in Butalia's work this displacement is reflected through the protagonists Ranamama. Her uncle Ranamama, during partition, when all Ranamama's brothers went to India, he stayed in Pakistan. His displaced family disapproved of him, and there had been no contact for forty years, when Butalia crossed the border to find him for the first time. Her uncle, despite so many years and despite not knowing her face gave him a warm welcome. And during the interviews with her uncle he told her all his history and how he became a displaced person not for pleasure, but by the hands of circumstances. He explained her that he had to suffer a lot after the partition. As he had to change his religion he was never accepted by his own family or his friends. Even his children rejected him. I quote his words below;

"I am like a stranger," he said, "a man bewitched in my own house by my own children" (Butalia: 1998: 65)

Another element of suffering we see is sexual violence and of women becoming a property during the time of disturbances. Although it's not visible much in the work of Chacon but lively present in the work of Butalia. As Susan Brownmiller states when a woman is captured by a group of warriors she is the common property of all of them, every night, until they come to her village, when she becomes the special property of her individual captor, who can sell or bet her when he likes

We see this situation in the work of Butalia through the protagonists Zainab and Buta Singh. Where Zainab victim of partition who while translocating from India to Pakistan was kidnapped and many people raped her and is finally sold to Buta Singh, who later marries her. Another element of the sufferings of women that we can see in both works is the concept of "honor".

As Cynthia Cockburn asserts, it is often for the safety and honor of women and daughters that men are asked by their leaders to sacrifice their women. Sometimes, patriarchy forces them to kill women and children to keep them safe. And in the same way Seifert mentions, rape of the woman carries an additional message: it communicates from man to man that men around the women are not able to protect "their" women.

Therefore, they are wounded in their masculinity and are marked as incompetent. We see in the work of Butalia where they show the endless number of women murdered by their own families reflects this attitude where men feel they are incompetent to save the women of their family and therefore use the weapon of "honor" to kill these women in order to protect their family's honor. In this work of Butalia one can find many husbands who killed their wives, many children who killed their mother's and even parents who killed their daughters. Newborn and young masses were killed. And in many cases women committed suicide by consuming poison or jumping into the wells. Here, we see how women become an object of honor during times of war in which they are forced to commit suicide or are murdered by their relatives. In the work of Butalia we find the real testimonies of the people who have suffered the war and these are the people who themselves have killed the women of their families or have seen killings. And the people themselves killed their family members and used the word martyr for them in order to hide their cowardly act of killing innocent women who had no role in creating chaos. And when these women recovered from their abductors their own family members rejected them because they saw their defeat in them. While in Chacón's novel we see this honor through one of the protagonists Felipe, who is seen so often, denying taking Elvira to the mountains because she is a girl and the girls should not live there, because according to the norms of patriarchal society he is seeing himself as her protector and if something happens to Elvira he would be seen by himself as his own defeat.

The study has shown that, in any situation of conflict, women are placed in a disadvantaged position and are the most affected. However, it is the humanitarian and politically conscious voices that get stronger. They are mourning mothers for their dead and missing children, widows who struggle to keep the family and community alive. They are refugees displaced from the house, raped and killed in the war. We can also observe that one of the consequences of conflict situations that open more public spheres for women and is not limited to the domestic space. It has new and additional responsibilities it plays for the survival of their families and communities. Through the study of two famous literary works: *La Voz Dormida (The Sleeping Voice)* and *The other side of the*

*silence; Voices from the partition of India*, written respectively by Dulce Chacón and Urvashi Butalia, I have analyzed the situation of women, especially during the war or conflict situation. Through the analysis of both works of India and Spain, we can see how women are seen as a bearer of family "honor" who is sacrificed from time to time in order to save the honor of family and community. In both works, the authors show the dark side of patriarchal society its particular modes that is operated during the war where women become an object. Butalia, examines in her work the wild and brutal side of this patriarchal society that tortured women and seen them as the weak sex at the time of partition. In many cases, women were raped and abducted and many families in order to save their honor were killed. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that in this patriarchal society women always suffer both in conditions of peace and in a conflictive situation. Whether it is Spain or India or anywhere in the world their sufferings are universal. We see that both works contribute in the recovery of the memory of the past that was buried long ago in history. And these works, open a forum for debate for the recovery of post memory and portray with new perspectives the truth of the history of both countries. These two works have contributed greatly to the recovery of the past through the collective memory of many survivors of wartime.

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