

## Review article

# Partition Trauma and Women: Unending Lament in Shoba Rao's *An Unrestored Women and Other Stories*

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### Abstract

The Partition of India has gained widespread scholarly attention as a result of its massive political, social, economic, historical and moral significance in not only the affected countries, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but also the whole world. However, not much attention has been paid to the experiences of women during the partition particularly with regard to the violence inflicted upon them, the consequent trauma and then the inevitable reliving of those horrors in memory. This paper on Shobha Rao's collection of short stories, *An Unrestored Women and Other Stories* (2016) attempts to analyse select fictions and female characters who were victims of Partition, including those who experienced life in refugee homes and repatriation camps, the hitherto concealed narratives.

**Keywords:** Partition, Trauma, Women, Shoba Rao

The Partition of India like cancer continues to remain relevant with its unpleasant pungent smell in the present political scenario of postcolonial nations of Indian sub-continent. Its uncontrolled communal meiosis stands as a constant threat to the national integration of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, its literature works as a magic potion of integration in the cultural consciousness of Indian sub-continent by representing the seismograph to scale tremors and aftershocks of dire consequences of the time and again rise of divisive forces. It makes people alive to the pulse of violence erupt due to communal frenzy and its aftermath traumatized memories of the succeeding generations.

The literature of Partition is a collection of uncanny folklores of physical and psychological violence which like Hiroshima and Nagasaki lingers on from generations to generations. Creative oeuvre, thus remain a perennial medium of arousing the slumbered and lending the readers moments to feel the dreaded past of the India-Pakistan split- a tear that still wets the eyes- of the generation who saw it happen- like a fountain. While the atrocious partition remains alive in the consciousness of the ones who lived every moment of it, the late-comers and unaffected ones live it through the eyes of the characters they read/see.

The testimonies of women who sacrificed themselves for the honour of their family and suffered the consequences of displacement, destitution, forced marriage and rape, challenge the very rhetoric of nationalism and statehood. It shows that men and women occupy different spheres of the state, roles and responsibility wise, and as a result, during such chaos, they experience different turmoil and trauma. Although, while talking about Partition, one deals with the trauma and tragedy faced by women; the lesser but more important aspect of delayed but positive outcome of this

tragedy is barely studied. Thrown into a strange territory, losing their family for the sake of honour, raped and brutalized, these women transformed themselves to enter the workforce, become economically independent and headed the households.

Besides the India-Pakistan Partition, the series of riots in East Pakistan following the February Riots of 1950 and the finally the civil war of 1971 and the formation of the independent nation state of Bangladesh also saw similar effects on women. The people of East Pakistan became refugees in their own country and these women had to pay the cost of escape with their chastity, lives of their families and their own lives, every single day. The main victims of minority targeting, these women were rampantly abducted, raped, forced into marriages as well as forced to abandon their children and family. On their way to West Bengal, women were humiliated and tortured by Pakistani soldiers and customs officers, the effect of which still lasts in the society today.

"An Unrestored Women" reminds readers of the intense experiences of people during the time of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent. In the event of the colossal transfer of people from one new nation to another, there were specific brutalities inflicted on women (Hussein). The consequent trauma till date remains largely unaddressed. There were violent kidnappings of women. Rao's narratives are more or less documentary in tone; she engages in reworking the violence and trauma that ensued during the time of Partition. The issues of murder, cross-gender identity, and escape are discussed in the story "An Unrestored Women". To start with Neela in "An Unrestored Women", reveals a bi-sexual identity, when she has passionate affair with Renu, a woman in the refugee camp, and is later compelled to return to her ostensibly dead husband. The same Renu, who is clearly bi-sexual in "The Merchant's Mistress", escapes murder and burial by resorting to cross-dressing. She escapes to South Africa in men's clothing, assuming the male identity of her erstwhile lover and employer, the merchant. "Blindfold" is a story of violence and vengeance. The story revolves around a brothel madam who haunts the Peshawar streets, after her favourite prostitute attacks her and leaves her almost dead. In "The Memsahib", the violence, vengeance, and trauma become so excessive that the story dissolves in its own excesses. "Unleashed" is a contemporary Indo-American teenager's story of anxiety and trauma. Partition of India and Pakistan and the ensuing riots that forced many people to migrate to other places, forms the backdrop of the story. The protagonist Sofia thinks that people are supposed to leave the places they are born into and the places they are meant to die into, and people wander the world as defenceless children. Throughout the journey, people move away from the abode of peace, and undergo turmoil and challenges.

"The Opposite Sex" tells the story of Mohan and his disputes with the father of the girl he wishes to marry. Mohan, a government commissioned cartographer engages in redrawing the boundaries of the father's land. Interestingly, the land which was originally allocated to India now stands transferred to East Pakistan, thereby handcuffing Partition violence with intricate family politics. Shobha Rao explores the perception of men towards women as 'property' that can be owned, bought or conquered, similar to land. In Mohan's attempts to halt the marriage of the girl he loves by deliberately redrawing the local map and thereby making the girl's father lose his land, a similarity can be seen in treating women and land as 'personal property' of men, that can be owned or bought.

"An Unrestored Woman" set in the aftermath of Partition of India and Pakistan, is an unusual story. Partition plays a huge role with its consequences coming as a silver lining for the protagonist, Neela. Married at the young age of thirteen, Neela's innocence is accurately portrayed by Shobha Rao, who has the advantage of being a woman herself and thus having an insider's perspective into a woman's mind. Neela, only remembers being hungry and stealing food on the day of her marriage, a poor girl who rarely sees delicacies like those served on the day of her marriage. Her story is common to

that era, she has no say in her own marriage, she remembers "...both of them (her father and husband to be) bent and perching over the details of her marriage like two crows over a piece of stale bread" (Rao, 2016, p. 02). Married to an uncouth man nearly twice her age, Neela's life is not what a woman expects from a marriage. Her husband though shy at first progressively becomes rough and only uses her for sex, and she endures everything taking it to be her duty as a wife. Her husband is a stranger to her with whom she never has a meaningful conversation.

They hadn't been so bad in the beginning. He'd seemed just as shy as she was when he'd reached for her in the dark. There had been blood and a little pain but that soon passed. It was only after a few months that Babu had become rough. Tugging at her sari, pushing himself inside her, slapping her if she resisted. She knew it was her duty, a part of being an obedient wife, and she bore it without a word of complaint. (Rao, 2016, p. 05)

Two years later, during the violence which ensues in the wake of Partition, news reaches to her of her husband's demise in the train to Lahore. She becomes a widow at the age of fifteen and her life becomes as colorless as her widowed mother-in-law's. Scared of a difficult life ahead, her mother-in-law arranges for poison for the two of them, "She was crying again. We'll drink this tonight, she said, slipping a thick bottle into Neela's hand...What is it? Neela asked, something to make us sleep, her mother-in-law said" (Rao, 2016, p. 07), and ends her life, but Neela doesn't end her life. The village elder makes arrangements for Neela to be taken to a refugee camp, setup by the Indian government, where "items that are useless" in Lalla's words go. (Rao, 2016, p. 08)

It is here that Neela finds a friend in another widowed girl, Renu. "She was Neela's age, may be a year or two older. Her wide eyes were lustrous and pretty even under her shorn head. She was as thin as a reed..." (Rao 09). A very upbeat girl by nature, Renu soon shows Neela a side of life she had never known. Renu had known a better married life than Neela and she shows Neela, a girl who had never even seen her mother, the comfort and warmth of an embrace. They form an intimate relationship and start making plans for a future together,

The warmth of Renu's neck, the scent of her body, left Neela aching. Hollow. It was feeling she could not describe. Though she could describe what it was not: it was not lonely, it was not sad. It was keenly felt but it caused no pain. It was not the skin of a banana. Nor the leaves of the dusty banyan tree. It was not hunger, not anymore. (Rao, 2016, p. 11)

But Neela's husband comes to fetch her from the refugee camp and she is dumbstruck to find her husband alive, "...her mouth filled with the bitterness of the liquid in the dark brown bottle" (Rao, 2016, p. 11). Suddenly, she loses her friend and the first place where she found companionship. That night when her husband sleeps after taking her, Neela digs up the remaining poison and ends her life of misery and neglect with a husband who is a stranger to her.

"An Unrestored Woman" is an unusual Partition story. The story surprisingly shows that as a result of the violence during Partition Neela gets a glimpse of a better life. Otherwise the story sadly is timeless, and only the fateful occurrence of Partition brings the unexpected enlightenment of Neela to a life outside marriage and her subsequent tragic escape from her married life.

"The Lost Ribbon" is a story set in the violent aftermath of the Partition, in post-independence Pakistan and also in India, forty years down the lane. The story deals with a traumatic memory; a kidnapped Hindu girl gives birth to a girl, and must decide on whether she should kill the child with a mother's mercy or let her live and suffer under her abductor's cruelty.

In "The Lost Ribbon" Shobha Rao unearths a harrowing narrative which has never been touched upon by historians except as statistics to estimate the number of rapes, deaths and instances of

violence. The cry of each raped girl is as painful as of a million. This is a story of an abducted woman, who narrates her story but who has not been given a name by the author, as if the name was lost with her spirit when she lost her family and her meaningful life. Born in India, near a town in Calcutta, she knows only the simple pleasures in life, the highlight of her possessions being a white ribbon which she describes to be one bordered in red and golden color. She narrates her story in a hepatic series of flashbacks, exactly like she describes her remembering some parts of her memories “as if I were a pebble flying through the air” (Rao, 2016, p. 107) on the water of a lake. During the riots which ensued at the time of Partition, her family is trapped inside the house and she is the only one to escape from her burning home. A Muslim man from the newly formed Pakistan happens to chance upon her and takes her to a remote hut somewhere in Pakistan. She remembers the first time she is raped and the feeling of losing everything.

It’s almost as though our thoughts were pebbles skipping across a pond. Take, for instance, that first time. I was fourteen. Now, when I think on the night, think of him pushing up my *lehenga*, smothering my face with his free hand, stuffing his fingers into my mouth to muffle my screams... (Rao, 2016, p. 107).

She flashes back to the time a girl took her cherished ribbon from her; she remembers crying, but still her heart, alive and strong beat in her chest. She loses her heart the day she was raped. Living a non life of constant pain, struggle and violation, the birth of her daughter, Noora, becomes a high point in her life. She feels alive again, having a purpose in life. As chance would have it, soon she gets a chance to be rescued from her hell albeit without her daughter, as she is a child of Pakistan. She decides to stay on as she cannot bear to leave her daughter behind, but finally she chooses escape from a life of constant pain. She knows what pain and suffering waits in the life of her six-week-old daughter, and therefore she kills her.

In one the grief lingers and then passes with time. In the other, it is relentless. It is unerring.

And it throbs—said the burn—like me.

Funny isn’t it?

And so I looked at you and I looked at you and I held you and I held you and then killed you. I killed you. (Rao, 2016, p. 121).

But the sight of her daughter’s ribbon haunts her. The Partition took her family, her life, and finally her daughter, the one source of light in her diminished life. After forty years in a government run hostel for single women in India, her only reprieve is counting lentils. She looks upon the beautiful, smiling faces of the young girls and wonders what she is looking for and realizes that she still searches for her Noora. A young girl, Leela adopts her as a friend and often gives her company; she nags about her habit of counting lentils. Finally in response to the nagging, Noora’s mother answers that it helps her to remain distracted from the constant throbbing pain. Even after forty years the wounds of Partition throb constantly, but her heart’s desire is revealed when she says if only she could have a little more time of light (Noora).

However, the traumatic experience of women during partition has been best explored in the short story, “The Merchant’s Mistress”, it is the journey of Renu, from her life as a farmer’s wife to becoming the mistress of a diamond merchant. The impact of the Partition on women is shown by the author in Renu’s reminiscences of her life before the Partition, particularly the scene of mob violence during the Partition chaos that resulted in her husband’s death and the loss of all her

property. As a result, Renu ends up a widow, without any belongings or property, depicting the helpless plight of women during this era. The essence of trauma is stressed at the point when Renu realises that as a consequence of Partition and its violence, none of her life's expectations or wishes will occur, since she has nothing left. And in that moment Renu understood one last thing; that nothing she'd imagined of her life, of her destiny, would ever come to pass. Not one thing remained. Not one- except- and these she saw as angry open mouthsgnawing at the tender twilight sky- the Shivaliks still stood. (Rao, 2016, p. 21).

### Conclusion:

It can be concluded that the issues discussed in the stories are all ideologically and emotionally interwoven around historical events and how women are victimized during times of violence and the consequent trauma they experience. The abduction and rape of women can be seen as settling of scores between communities, followed by violence and looting that accompanied the Partition of India, and Pakistan. The fate of women during this time ranged from rape and murder, to conversion and marriage. In some unfortunate cases, governments helping in locating and repatriating lost women do not work out since many families refused to take back their 'dishonoured' daughters. In patriarchal society, such dishonoured daughters bring disgrace to the family, community, and religion. In some cases, women chose to stay with the families wherein they were abducted, since they knew that the natal family will not take them back. The anguished adjustments of survivors involved endurance of extreme pain even in their new marital homes. The wrenching of Partition from other part of the country, society, and religion, to absorption in the new, challenging, and hostile environment was endured by the women outliving these events and that period.

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