From Communal Being to Individual Belonging: Potential Selves in Shobha Rao's Short Fiction

Andrea Llano Busta
University of Oviedo
Spain

Abstract

Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Woman: And Other Short Stories* (2016) sheds light on gendered traumas that span decades as they adopt new forms: from the often neglected figure of the abducted woman in post-Partition India to sexually abused girls in 1980s New York, to name a few. Most of the female characters in the collection face a suppression of their agency enforced by legal dictates and patriarchal attitudes. This evinces the sharp contrast between everyday reality and social constructions which, despite being meant to create a sense of community, exclude some of the intended members. By drawing on Agamben's theorisation of potentiality (1999), and through the analysis of two of the short stories—"An Unrestored Woman" and "Unleashed"—, it will be argued that being part of a group is not so much a result of yielding to pressure as it is of realising and subverting imposed circumstances. Characters on a quest to fulfil their potential will ultimately demonstrate that, in the absence of social cohesion, individuality and the exercise of free will are essential for belonging.

Keywords: *belonging; gender; India, potentiality; short story*

1. Introduction

The Indian subcontinent had been the jewel in the crown of the British Empire for almost a century before achieving its hard-won independence in August 1947. Besides hastening the division of the land into the emerging nations of India and Pakistan, the end of British

rule fuelled existing religious conflicts that resulted in approximately two million people being killed and over twelve million being forced to relocate. In fact, Partition is considered to have "generated the largest mass migration in modern history in terms of its scale and intensity" (Daiya 2016: 1). Yet, far from being merely a past event, its effects still reverberate through time and, most notably, through space.

A recent example of the multiple and ongoing consequences of Partition can be found in Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Woman* (2016), in which the Indian-born American author adopts said event as a unifying thread for stories that span decades and continents. The particularity of her debut collection is that the dozen short stories included are paired; to be exact, secondary characters in one of them become the lead in another. This narrative choice serves the purpose of showing how disparate life courses are indeed connected and, at the same time, it evinces how different chronotopes also have a major influence when it comes to altering personalities. Furthermore, the varied approaches to issues of memory, migration and diaspora highlight similarities even between stories that share no characters.

That is the case with "An Unrestored Woman" and "Unleashed". The former is set in a village near the Wagah border around the late 1940s, whereas the latter shifts the action to New York in the 1980s. Inasmuch as culture may be traditionally understood as "a weighty set of traditions compelling individuals to act in certain ways" (Fox 2017), it shall be assumed that each epoch and location promote a particular set of rules. At the core of both stories, however, lie displacement and the complex relations of the main characters—Neela and Anju, respectively—with their communities, either in rural or urban areas. Just as the past prompted geographical movements, their engagement with the space they occupy inevitably shapes their identity and suggests that adapting to alien environments may request unmaking the self so as to build it from scratch.

Aware of these external forces, the author asserts her genuine belief that "while the recovery of a person is possible, the restoration of

a human being to her original state is not" (Rao 2016: xii). One may add that, although unrestorable, these humans in a novel state are still capable of developing their potential for personal growth. In fact, the use of negative prefixes in the wording of the titles already suggests a remarkable transformation through "the presence of an absence" (Agamben 1999: 179), that is, the possibility of becoming something which they are not. While Neela will initially stand as someone who cannot return to her original state, she will eventually experience a newly acquired sense of freedom, not only in relation to the self, but also with regard to society. As for Anju, she will also undergo a liberation in letting go of the social attachments that had restricted her choices in the first place.

Despite the various differences between them, both characters will exemplify a transition from questions of being to matters of belonging, since "[t]here always has to be a way both to accept the reality that people live identity but also that there's always the potential for the actualization of other imaginations, of other ways of belonging, of identification, of community" (Grossberg 2010: 325). It is by changing who they are that they may either assimilate into contexts that had initially shut them out or simply acknowledge and accept their discordant selves. Moreover, Neela and Anju are women and, as their rather patriarchal societies will prove, belonging also goes hand in hand with gender identity.

Judith Butler has defined that last concept as a "performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" in the nature of which "resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (1988: 520). Hence, the considerable challenges posed by partitioned India and an unwelcoming New York may call for a perpetuation of gender roles, but they also offer a chance for subversion in pursuance of new ways of belonging. As a result, the potentiality of the characters may be classified into the two types Giorgio Agamben borrows from Aristotle: generic, in which the self is transformed through learning, and existing, in which alterations come from the actions the self decides to perform (1999: 179). As such, Neela and Anju have a generic

potential to absorb patriarchal patterns of behaviour and an existing potential to flout them; only time and space may determine to which extent.

2. "An Unrestored Woman": Belonging Through Non-Being

The opening short story in the collection, the title of which refers to Neela's future state, focuses on a specific group among the women that were affected by Partition: the abducted, who acquired this status after having been taken by force, sometimes through a purchase. Although not always the case, their captors frequently were members of an opposing religious community that attempted to harm those professing another faith by tarnishing the reputation of "their" women. This intercommunal attack compelled the Pakistani and Indian governments to meddle and pass a joint law in order to restore nearly eighty thousand women to their legitimate families (Menon and Bhasin 1993: WS4). The resulting Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act defined abducted person as "a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age" (Government of India 1949: sec. 2.1.a), thus infantilising adult women and severely limiting their agency.

The legally enforced Central Recovery Operation lasted until 1956 and implied a second uprooting that once again deprived these women of free will. It should be noted that colonisers had repeatedly resorted to women as "boundary markers" and signalled feminised unknown lands as territory to be conquered (McClintock 1995: 24). Obviously, the British were familiar with these practices which, in turn, led colonised men to accentuate their hegemonic masculinity to reduce the threat posed by "a colonialist discourse that constructed Indian men as effete" (Derné 2002: 251). It follows that postindependence governmental manoeuvres in the mid-twentieth century were not aimed at guaranteeing the wellbeing of the abducted, but at restoring the status quo with a markedly paternalistic approach: if men had failed to fulfil their manly role as protectors, the state

should mend the situation. Nevertheless, many women attempted to avoid restoration because having been abducted does not necessarily imply that they were content with their lives prior to that moment.

The Act also allowed for the creation of camps for abducted people to be held until they could be reunited with their immediate families. Apart from being a place in which these women could establish a community, the camps represented a liminal space between their lives as captives and that with families of origin that more often than not were incapable of taking back those they thought to be have been dishonoured. For that reason, these women were commonly ostracised by their own relatives. During this chain of events, the abducted personified "*the existence of non-Being*" (Agamben 1999: 179; italics in the original), that absence which is nonetheless present. When they became absent after abduction, the shadow of their tarnished reputations loomed over the religious communities they had been forced to leave behind and, by extension, also over the standing of their governments. Upon their return, many were rejected, but their altered selves, or rather, their non-beingness harboured the potential for them to start over. Although not an abducted woman in the traditional sense, Neela faces some of their trials and tribulations in the same area and period.

The main character is a thirteen-year-old child bride driven by what she terms an "intense hunger" (Rao 2016: 1), be it physical or emotional. She often "crie[s] from loneliness and dread" while "willing it [her stomach] to grow" (6), as if having a baby would put an end to the lack of affection she experiences on a daily basis. Indeed, feeling empty and seeking the opposite of her current situation are a leitmotiv running throughout the story. On top of that, the death of her mother in childbirth made Neela lack a genealogy, but in spite of the absence of a female role model, she was raised in accordance with gender roles. Consequently, she grew up to be an "obedient wife" (5), a potential mother able to bear "no less than ten sons" (2) and, from the moment her husband of two years is presumed to be dead, a widow. It is then that, with no male relative left to guard her, she is

taken to a "CAMP FOR REFUGEES AND UNRESTORED WOMEN" which, in the words of one the village elders, was intended "for items that are useless" (8; small caps in the original). This malicious speech already announces a depersonalisation of the protagonist, who cannot be her former self anymore. Yet, in her not being a wife, she is also capable of being more than a widow.

> To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness. (Agamben 1999, 182; italics in the original)

Once in the camp, Neela's transformation begins as she enters the realm of the homosocial while forging a friendship with fellow resident Renu that verges on the homoerotic. At that point, the protagonist was still "[h]ollow. It was a feeling she could not describe", but she knew "[i]t was not hunger, not anymore" (Rao 2016: 11). Moving away from her previous life becomes a way for her to fill the void. Moreover, she repeatedly "smiled despite knowing that all of them, including herself, were supposed to be in mourning" (9). This unexpected action marks a rupture with normative patterns of behaviour and reveals how Neela is progressively acquiring a newfound sense of self within a community. Interestingly, the group of women that embraces her owes its very existence to exclusion, to wit: the ties that cement social life in the camp are a byproduct of the fact that some women had originally been marginalised.

Neela's inner feelings and ill-timed smiles offer an example of intertextuality with Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), in which the protagonist also experiences relief after her husband's passing brings her oppressive yet socially accepted marriage to an end.

However, there is something else Rao's and Chopin's characters have in common: their partners, who as a matter of fact were not dead, make a final appearance to turn their lives upside down. Right after locating her whereabouts, Neela's husband decides to take her home, but he fails to realise that the attempted restoration will be futile because she now belongs with a different community regardless of where she dwells. As she left the camp, "[s]he thought of all those women dressed in white saris, bald, smiling, filing into the mess tent. She was not among them" (Rao 2016: 11). Still, she was one of them.

By becoming "no longer a widow" (12), Neela acquires another layer of non-being and, in a further overlap with the stories of abducted women, she becomes potentially dead as she starts to consider committing suicide, just as her widowed mother-in-law had done when she heard the news about her son's supposed passing. As she then pondered: "what good were two women, two widows, alone in this world?" (7). In the years immediately after 1947, many women were either martyred by male relatives or coaxed to take their own lives in an attempt to avoid conversion, abduction and/or rape which ultimately amounted to dishonour (Butalia 2000: 165). However, Neela's ending remains slightly ambiguous, for it can be read as a refusal of her 'restored' life through suicide or as a secret plan to return to the camp through the murder of her husband.

The closing paragraphs of the story present Neela sleeping under the branches of a banyan tree, one of the symbols of the Indian nation that had stood there for "hundreds of years" (Rao 2016: 15). Tradition is equally deep-rooted, but communities may be constituted through love instead of norms. Hence, the protagonist reminisces about her time in the camp and how Renu had managed to display the affection for which Neela had longed. Although poisoning herself seems more plausible than doing the same to her husband, a life is taken in any case "[w]ith hardly a thought, almost as if the decision had been waiting there all along" (15). As such, potentiality should be understood not as "something that is waiting at the door of reality to

make an appearance […], but rather as that which is already present" (Das 2007: 9) and, ultimately, completed.

3. "Unleashed": Being Through Unbelonging

This second short story, the fourth in the collection, focuses on Anju and her little sister Meena, who moved from India to the United States when they were twelve and nine years old, respectively. The past will not catch up with them until they are adults, through the presence of a Partition survivor who "remember[s] everything" (Rao 2016: 64). For the sisters, however, the everlasting memory will not be the one of an epoch-making event, but that of the childhood that defined them. As newcomers to Albany, they had to combine a changing sense of self influenced by their diasporic condition with the set identity enforced by social norms and customs. The former is evident in those instances in which the dissimilar weather conditions in their home and host countries are used as a metaphor for their lost personality, particularly through comments about the cold:

> I shook my head free of snowflakes, glanced down at my hands, and realized I could no longer feel them. Or my toes. I'd never known such cold in India, and it had never occurred to me that cold could do such a thing: crawl into you, as a thief into a house, and steal your fingers and then your toes. (62–63)

The second kind of identitarian imposition is manifested the day they play cowboys and Indians with Sean, a teenager in their neighbourhood. When distributing roles, he questions whether the sisters know their "own history" and automatically assumes they are meant to be the Indians in order to ensure historical accuracy, even if they are certain—and rightly so—that they are not "those kind of Indians" (64). The play anyway, and it is thus that social hierarchies begin to be reenacted.

The influence of society on their personas is further aggravated by gender constructs. After being sexually abused by their friend Sean, gossip begins to circulate and both the experience and its telling become the unspeakable that nonetheless leaves a mark on the sisters, especially on Anju. This presents another dichotomy between letting other people define you and presenting yourself exactly as you would like to be known. For Anju, this means tolerating those who deem her "a slut" (66) while trying to assert her own identity. She starts with her often mispronounced name in which people tend to replace the initial back vowel sound with a front one: "It's Anju, […] not Ann-ju. Anju. Like *un*-der, like *un*-til, like that book we're reading in English class, *un*-abridged" (66; italics in the original). Yet, the chosen terms indirectly associate her with something that stands incomplete and in a lower position; only the last word alludes to the necessity of learning the whole story so as to replace a generic potential with an existing one.

This initial definition of the self is matched by one that takes place many years after, when an adult Anju experiences "the feeling of being in a cave. Hidden, wounded, savage" (68) after finding out that her husband has an extramarital affair with no other than her sister. Thinking she is not the perfect wife anymore, she perceives her sudden change to go "unquestioned, unproved" by her partner (69). On the contrary, when confronting her sister, childhood memories emerge and show how both women chose different methods to cope with what had happened to them. Whereas Anju had decided to counterbalance insults by reaffirming who she truly was, Meena opted for adapting to the labels she was given, thus leading a promiscuous life that would ultimately involve her brother-in-law. In her own words: "It got to where I didn't know if I was trying to prove them wrong, or to prove them right" (70–71).

Back when they were in college, for instance, Anju accompanied her sister to have an abortion. On their ride to the clinic, Anju felt embarrassed by the "earth-brown flesh" of her sister's thighs because she "saw her as a man would see her, felt a shudder, a thin and

submerged lust, and thought, *How dare you dress like this? Today of all days*" (69–70; italics in the original). Meena, for her part, raised the subject of what Sean had done to them, and her sister claimed to "remember everything" (70). Apart from establishing a parallelism with the statement of the aforementioned Partition survivor, Anju's words and actions evince how the male gaze that shaped colonial practices is at the centre of both national and personal traumas. Likewise, the censorious attitude to women prevails in a different continent and almost half a century later.

On a similar note, the sisters progressively drifting apart was a consequence of the fear caused by sexual abuse which, according to Anju, "had left her [sister's] body and settled into mine" (71). That emotion, as defined by Sara Ahmed, "envelops the bodies that feel it, […] *as if it* comes from outside and moves inward. And yet fear does not bring the bodies together, as a form of shared or fellow feeling" (2014: 63; italics in the original). As a result, and as previously stated, Anju and Meena confront their past through opposing means. One further proof that the same experience affects them differently is that teenage Meena was constantly teasing her sister and resorting to veiled sexual references even when she clearly knew her comments made Anju visibly uncomfortable (Rao 2016: 74). In fact, the elder goes as far as to express that she is disgusted, which "is after all to be affected by what one has rejected" (Ahmed 2014: 86).

Despite her efforts to distance herself from the past, Anju feels stuck in it. As she puts it: "*I've tried to travel so far from Albany,* […] *and yet here I am again*" (Rao 2016: 75; italics in the original). In order to find a time in which she felt different, she needs to go back to her years in India, in particular, to the day in which she confronted a group of bullies. The realisation that she was not scared "was like being handed a weapon, like stealing the keys to a cage" (77). Although her life events have changed her,

> [r]emembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialization, their becoming possible once again. (Agamben 1999: 267)

This notion applies both to traumatic experiences and to acts of defiance. As Anju finally wonders: "Was defiance temporary […]? Or was it always there, inside of you, […] waiting, at the ready, to launch?" (Rao 2016: 79). The story ends without explaining how she will fulfil her potential except for the fact that she chooses to describe herself as "Anju, like un-leashed" (79). In any case, the adjective marks a stark contrast with previous terms and demonstrates that Anju's existing potential, although long inhibited by her environment, had always been present.

Conclusions

The remembrance of their past lives allows Neela and Anju to harness a new understanding of themselves and of their role in society. In this process, they evolve by fulfilling their potential, yet a question mark hangs over their future. During a life shaped by negative experiences and emotions, Neela was mainly driven by the future and the possibilities it might foster, whereas Anju was oriented towards the past and the manifold ways in which it shaped her present. Nevertheless, the former presumably ended her own life while the latter tried to regain her self-confidence. Although their final actions may seem counterintuitive, what matters is that both make a decision irrespective of traditional expectations, thus moving from a passive adherence to social norms to an active exercise of free will.

Their changing selves also highlight the reciprocity between being and belonging. The influence of her inner circle did for Anju what fellow villagers did for Neela, and their unintended failure to comply with social norms resulted in their non-belonging. From the marginal position they occupied while non-being, they discovered

how to express their non-normative selves so that they could fulfil their potential. Obviously, the presence or absence of female relatives as well as social hierarchies and the remnants of Partition affected the characters to different extents, but their impact was enough to show that belonging depends on affective bonds more than it does on a place of residence.

The notion of honour—whether communal or personal—defines both characters while showing how similar hardships, particularly gendered ones, repeat themselves regardless of time and space. This is as true for a woman living in New York during the 1980s as it is for another one in partitioned India. Hence, both Anju and Neela need to reinterpret the social patterns of behaviour they have learnt if they want to perform according to new personal rules that may enable them to realise their potential. As such, and transposing changes to a real-life setting, Rao's expansion of Partition literature not only succeeds at voicing the unspeakable, but also lends it a universal appeal which favours the generic potential of readers to learn about other people's lives and leaves them on the verge of an existing potential to act.

Bibliography

Agamben, G. (1999): *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited and translated by Heller-Roazen, D., Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2014): *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd edition, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. (Original work published 2004)

Butalia, U. (2000): *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, Durham: Duke University Press. (Original work published 1998)

Butler, J. (1988): "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", in *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 519–531.

Chopin, K. (1894): "The Story of an Hour", online version at https://www.katechopin.org/story-hour/, accessed on 9 July 2020.

Daiya, K. (2016): "Partition", in Ray, S.; Schwarz, H. (2016): *The Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*, John Wiley & Sons, online version at

https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781119076506.wbeps287, accessed on 29 June 2020.

Das, V. (2007): *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Derné, S. (2002): "Men's sexuality and women's subordination in Indian nationalisms", in Mayer, T. (2002): *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 237–260. (Original work published 2000)

Fox, R. G. (2017): "Urban Culture", in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, online version at https://www.britannica.com/topic/urban-culture, accessed on 29 June 2020.

Government of India (1949): Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act, 65 of 1949, online version at https://bombayhighcourt.nic.in/libweb/actc/1949.65.pdf, accessed on 29 June 2020.

Grossberg, L. (2010): "Affect's Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual", interview by Seigworth, G. J.; Gregg, M., in Gregg, M.; Seigworth, G. J. (2010): *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, pp. 309–338.

McClintock, A. (1995): *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Abingdon & New York: Routledge.

Menon, R.; Bhasin, K. (1993): "Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women During Partition", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 17, pp. WS2–WS11.

Rao, S. (2016): *An Unrestored Woman: And Other Short Stories*, London: Virago Press.

Andrea Llano Busta

Affiliation: University of Oviedo, Spain
Position: PhD Student
E-mail: llanoandrea@uniovi.es
Research interests: gender studies, postcolonial studies, trauma theory

Selected publications:

(2020): "Relatos de tiempos inhumanos" (Andrea Llano Busta), in *La Nueva España (Suplemento Cultura)*, no. 1297, pp. 4–5.

(2019): "Género, trauma y afectividad en la narrativa indodiaspórica contemporánea" (Andrea Llano Busta), in *Universidad, investigación y conocimiento: La transversalidad como referente del desarrollo profesional y social*, edited by Álvarez-Arregui, E., Oviedo: Ediuno, pp. 95–103.

(2019): "Mark My Words: The Trauma of Abducted Women in Two Short Stories by Ramapada Chaudhury" (Andrea Llano Busta), in *Indialogs: Spanish Journal of India Studies*, no. 6, pp. 45–64.

(2019): "Reluctant Migration in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter'" (Andrea Llano Busta), in *Ro-Brit Student Journal*, no. 11, pp. 66–67.