

## Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women*

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### Abstract

The female narrative of lament and turmoil stemming from displacement during wartimes continues to remain an underexplored narrative in discussions surrounding war and displacement. A critical dimension of this turmoil is rooted in constraints placed on women's autonomy and agency, which are often exacerbated by the aftermath of war. This paper explores the portrayal of female autonomy during the Partition, an event marked by mass displacement, through examining twelve short stories in *An Unrestored Woman* by Shobha Rao. These restrictions on autonomy manifest through multiple layers of control, whether through acts of violence such as exploitation and war crimes, or through the reinforcement of patriarchal structures that assume novel forms during periods of unrest. War therefore introduces not only new forms of physical and psychological domination but also reinforces existing gendered hierarchies, limiting women's ability to exercise free will and bodily autonomy. The paper employs a qualitative, intersectional feminist close-reading methodology, combining thematic coding of Rao's twelve stories with historical context to trace bodily autonomy as resistance, balancing interpretive depth with reflexive awareness of its subjective and trauma-informed lens. Through examining these narratives, the study reveals the complex intersections of identity, trauma, and survival amidst violence and displacement. The study interrogates bodily autonomy as a site of resistance against patriarchal and societal constraints during times of war. Furthermore, it explores the methods of resistance that women employ to reclaim a sense of agency in the face of such restraint and how these acts of defiance reconfigure power dynamics. Ultimately, the research reflects on the concept of restoration by combining frameworks derived from trauma theory and relational feminist autonomy. It reflects the subjectivity of restoration and the methods through which women navigate towards restoring their autonomy and selfhood amid such displacement.

**Keywords:** Female autonomy, Partition of India, Control, Trauma, Survival, Restoration.

### Introduction

The Partition of India was a monumental period in the history of the two nations that it birthed, and perhaps, more significantly, a monumental period in the lives of the people onto whose reverberations and ramifications were inflicted upon. The Partition was marked as a period of

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## Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women*

Kaashvi Jain

intense trauma for women through means of sexual violence, physical violence, and emotional turmoil through the exacerbation of existing patriarchal structures of dominance and control: systems of male authority rooted in family honor, control over women's bodies and decisions, objectification in communal conflict, and rigid gender roles that subordinated women to men.

The period saw men becoming perpetrators of violence as the female body was seen as an extension of the battlefield. Women were brutally gangraped, mutilated, killed and marked with slogans of 'Pakistan/Hindustan Zindabad' during communal riots. They underwent abduction and forceful religious conversions. This violence permeated and existed in familial structures and was observed in the name of protecting the honour of the family. For instance, the Sikh community saw mass killings of women to prevent forceful religious conversions. Consequently, what emerged during this period of heightened violence were tremendously brutal and inhumane acts that stripped the autonomy and independence of women in every way possible. In fact, all psychological, societal, emotional, sexual, and physical attacks and brutalities inflicted on women can be conclusively summarized as an attack on their physical, emotional, and sexual autonomy.

In feminist theory, autonomy is understood not simply as individual freedom, but as relational autonomy, a concept that recognizes how social relationships, power dynamics, and systemic inequalities shape one's ability to make independent choices (Stoljar). Bodily autonomy is particularly critical in this context, as it pertains to a person's control over decisions involving their body, ranging from reproductive rights to consent and healthcare. This is especially relevant in patriarchal societies where women's bodies are sites of regulation and control, making bodily autonomy both a political and deeply personal form of resistance. Recognizing autonomy as relational highlights that a woman's capacity for self-direction is often undermined not by lack of will, but by embedded structures of oppression that limit real choice.

Autonomy is hampered when one of three cases occur-

- a) Excessive submission to the wishes of others; self-abnegation and sacrifice: It refers to situations where women feel the need to relinquish control over their body to meet the expectations/demands of others.
- b) Adaptive preference formation: When one's choices are a product of oppressive societal constraints. This concept highlights how choices made under duress or structural inequality can appear voluntary, but are deeply conditioned by a lack of viable alternatives.
- c) Decisions of agents to adopt harmful practices of potential gender oppression (through continued exposure to oppressive patriarchal structures): In environments where patriarchal norms are normalized, individuals may internalize and reproduce these harmful practices. In such a case, bodily autonomy is not just about who makes the decision, but whether the

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## **Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women***

*Kaashvi Jain*

decision-maker had access to uncoerced information, freedom from fear, and alternative narratives.

War tends to provide another condition for the loss of autonomy: its forceful deprivation, despite all objections. Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Woman* is one such text that examines the varied experiences of women through interconnected narratives, aiming to paint a picture of the general state of women during this time. However, with *An Unrestored Woman*, Rao delves deeper into the psychological complexities of her characters (and by extension, the women of the time) by avoiding simplistic narratives of heroism or victimhood. Her portrayal contains accounts and stories of women from varied socio-economic backgrounds, offering a nuanced understanding of their diverse experiences of trauma.

### **Intersections of identity, trauma, and survival**

Trauma is defined as "relatively discrete, negatively valenced, events causing physical, economic, spiritual, and/or psychological harm with life-altering impacts" (Tedeschi par. 1). Tedeschi's research relates the impact of trauma on the developmental stages of identity in childhood. His analysis shows that victims of traumatic experiences undergo a negative shaping of identity. They tend to have diffused identities (low level of commitments and high ruminative exploration profiles) as opposed to coherent identity status noted in individuals that haven't undergone traumatic events. The taxonomy of impacts of identity functioning after the onset of trauma are essential to the understanding of impact of a trauma on identity and consequent survival techniques and have been explored in the following section.

1. Trauma shaped identity- This refers to substantial shifts in the commitments, goals, beliefs, and overall personality etc. of an individual in response to a traumatic event and usually deeply correlated to that event.
2. Trauma-centered identity- A phenomenon where the trauma an individual experiences is so profound that it becomes the single-most impactful event in their lives and the most substantial part of their personhood.
3. Identity alteration- Following identity loss (also in relation to a traumatic event), an individual may abandon their existing goals, beliefs, values etc. and shift to alternative ones. Alteration can be interpreted as a way of exerting autonomy. It is the most informed stage of the trauma process because after only alteration, lies the possibility of reclamation, and finally restoration.

Literature as an avenue for exploration of trauma stands significant because it poses as a way through which the nature of trauma is revealed either through its witnesses or the ones that experience it. The two ways that trauma novels majorly manifest are either through narrating collective experiences of trauma or depicting incidents of trauma personal to the characters in the

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## **Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women***

*Kaashvi Jain*

novel. Partition literature, particularly, explores the different facets of trauma through diverse lenses and collectively thus comes together to paint a cohesive picture of the impact of the decolonization and split of the nation. It brings to light the human cost of the Partition and the plight of the common man. Through highlighting diverse perspectives, it also uncovers the varied experiences of different groups of people. It becomes a mode for reclamation of agency: transferring the power of narrative from the perpetrators to the survivors. Thus, the impact of trauma and the following struggle for survival stands central to historical and literary analysis in this context.

### **Bodily autonomy as a site of resistance**

In situations as dire as the ones seen in war and displacement, the body becomes the first site of resistance. The way to the reclamation of power first comes from the reclamation of the self. This research defines bodily autonomy as the relational capacity to exercise informed and uncoerced control over one's body, within and against the social and structural conditions that shape choice.

In *An Unrestored Woman*, Neela's act of choosing to take her own life in the face of patriarchy could be inferred as the ultimate act of resistance against the violently authoritative world that worked to trap her. However, her suicide cannot directly be understood as a product of the patriarchy in a conscious way that she comprehended. As she stood on the precipice of either living the rest of her life trapped in a loveless marriage after having tasted true companionship for the first time, or escaping everything that stood to trap her in a cycle of misery, she chose the latter. What now can be understood as an act of rebellion, was simply Neela's only method to survival. Conversely, in *The Merchant's Mistress*, Renu, through a calculated plan, actively seeks to use the identity of her male employer to break free of slavery and sets herself up for a prosperous life in Africa. This illustrates a second type of autonomy: direct, forced, and deliberate. It can be inferred that it wasn't so much as a feeling of independence that led them to rebel; it was more of an exhaustion with their circumstances that stirred disobedience against the structures that sought to control them. In *Blindfold*, Layla's, or rather Zuabida's, act of murdering Bandra came from a place of gut-wrenchingly extreme anger, frustration, and hatred towards the woman that stole her and locked her up in a brothel. Not only that, her anger came from the way she was stripped of her humanity, little by little. In fact this dehumanization followed almost all women in the novel (and by extension, during the Partition). There existed a commodification of women as mere entities to be "taken care of," "used," "handled" etc. And this commodification, exerted by the government, society, and community, contributed to increasing hatred and anger. However, I am of the belief that because of the continued nature of this commodification, it was extremely normal for women to feel like secondary citizens and contribute to this phenomenon themselves.

The question that now arises is at what point in their lives do they decide to break away from the perpetuation of this cycle; when do they reach their 'breaking point'? Rao has explored this breaking point in the aforementioned stories. Neela reaches that point when she finally tastes true love and

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## **Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women***

Kaashvi Jain

companionship in Renu. Therefore, when she is forced to return back to her life where she is sure not to receive a morsel of that emotion, she kills herself. Her breaking point is incited from love and friendship, not anger or control, as is the case in most of these stories. Renu, conversely, is a sort of rebel from the beginning. She is introduced as one, when she chooses to leave the 'comfort' of the camp for unrestored women and executes her masterplan to escape slavery and set herself up for success. Zubaida had a plethora of reasons to reach that precipice; being stolen from her family, prostituted, and used, were reason enough. However, the point at which she decides to escape from the brothel came when Bandra got her only companion murdered. Therefore, for Zubaida, her breaking point comes from a place of anger, bitterness, and blind hate for the woman that took everything away from her.

These acts of autonomy can be inferred directly as an exertion of power. And that exertion of power comes from realisation of the self. Thus it depends not on understanding autonomy as a possibility, but realising it as a fundamental to survival. That is where the key to rebellion lies in Shobha Rao's stories. It is also important to state the agents against which this exertion of power happens. These agents are perpetrators of violence – emotional, physical, sexual, or psychological. In such a way the body becomes a tool of resistance against societal structures of control. Bodily autonomy thus becomes the means for a revolution for women.

#### **Reconfiguration of power dynamics and the full extent of reclamation and restoration**

In all the cases discussed in this paper, and largely, cases that exist during times of war and displacement, the female body exists as property for men; to be used, abused, and treated however they deem necessary. However, the exertion of autonomy, of self right, of independence, and of liberty takes this power away from these captors, and places it back in the hands of the women that rightfully own it. This leads to a drastic change in power dynamics, either weakening patriarchal societal structures, or wholly rendering them powerless.

The prominent power structure noted in the novel was that of militarised masculinity and the consequent resurgence of patriarchy. However, this resurgence also happens in a form that stands novel to society owing to conditions that outlie a society's regular functioning. Therefore, feminism stands "under siege from a synergistic alliance of patriarchy, nationalism, and militarism," (Bacchetta 567). For instance, In *An Unrestored Woman*, Lalla's actions are driven by a sense of entitlement and control, justified by nationalist and communal ideologies. We see multiple instances of this entitlement and control: Neela's father marrying her off as a child and the relief that came from the same, Lalla's wife not being allowed to touch the radio, Neela succumbing to her husband each night as per her duty as an 'obedient wife,' and Lalla sending her to the government camp without her even knowing where she was supposed to be headed. These issues preceded the Partition, being usual examples of patriarchal societies, however, the Partition affirmed and provided another layer of security to the men that exercised such actions.

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### **Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women***

*Kaashvi Jain*

Through her work, Shobha Rao has studied the reclamation of the body and the self in such a case. While self-reclamation is possible, whether full restoration is probable or not remains a subjective question. Defining the concept of restoration through the lens of war and displacement may look like psychological, sexual, emotional, and physical well-being following a period of extensive trauma. However, on a metaphysical level, the true complications of the idea lie on a spectrum and are extremely subjective to the individual and their idea of personal well-being. Another issue that arises may be that even if well-being is achieved, the individual may remain in a perpetual state of torment, prompting the question of whether restoration is possible or not. The meaning of restoration also lies in the way that an individual is unrestored. It lies in the exact sense of what aspect of their personhood is taken away from them. Therefore, the restoration (or lack thereof) of an individual depends on their personal experiences of trauma.

Neela's suicide acted as a way of defiance against a life of misery with her husband. She thus undergoes a reclamation of the self and finally allows herself to exert her will to escape the exhausting situation to the best of her ability. The extent of her restoration cannot be studied because we cannot further review her experience of life, however, the way she experienced a lack of autonomy was through being subjected to a marriage of convenience to a man that led his life separate to hers, disregarding her wants. Her relationship with Renu catalyses her thirst for escape from such a situation and her suicide hints at a sense of completion. Her act of killing herself therefore is in itself, an act of restoration. *The Lost Ribbon*, on the other hand, explores a blatant lack of restoration. The mother, who remains unnamed, is haunted by her past decades after she escaped from them. She is not only affected by her captor's actions, but also the unflinching coldness of the law that inevitably leads to her murdering her daughter. The consequences of her decisions follow her throughout her life, and it can be conclusively determined that in her case, there is neither any reclamation nor any restoration. In *The Merchant's Mistress*, Renu's blatant exercise of autonomy allows her to escape to a free life, away from her past. Thus, her reclamation of autonomy leads to a restored sense of self because the social structures and poverty that weighed her down, now cease to exist.

### Conclusion

This paper has sought to critically examine how female autonomy is systemically commodified, stripped, and reimagined during the Partition, and by extension, times of war and displacement, and the agents that are responsible for such a shift. What emerges from these narratives is the paradox of resistance: while many women appear to passively endure, their choices often reflect deeply complex negotiations with power, survival, and dignity. Bodily autonomy thus becomes the foremost site of both violation and resistance.

To understand this dynamic, the analysis has been grounded in two intersecting theoretical frameworks: trauma theory and feminist theories of relational autonomy. Caruth emphasizes that

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## Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women*

Kaashvi Jain

trauma ruptures identity and temporality, leaving wounds that resist full resolution and return in fragmented memory. In Rao's stories, this is evident in characters like the mother in *The Lost Ribbon*, whose unresolved trauma freezes her in a state of perpetual loss, and Zubaida in *The Blindfold*, whose violent act of resistance nonetheless cannot guarantee psychological healing.

In parallel, Stoljar's analysis on feminist relational autonomy challenges liberal notions of self-sufficiency by recognizing that agency is embedded within networks of relationships and structural constraints. This lens highlights how Rao's characters exercise autonomy not in isolation but within oppressive conditions of Partition, patriarchy, and community expectation.

Combined, these frameworks underscore why restoration after traumatic violation remains deeply elusive. Trauma theory foregrounds the indelible scars that prevent a complete return to wholeness, while feminist autonomy highlights the possibilities and constraints of negotiating agency within oppressive systems. Rao's narratives therefore present restoration not as an endpoint but as a spectrum: at one end lies the possibility of reclamation, at the other, the permanence of loss, with most characters suspended somewhere in between.

What ultimately emerges is the recognition that autonomy, once violently disrupted, cannot always be fully restored. In Rao's exploration of Partition, the restoration of autonomy is less about returning to a pre-traumatized self and more about navigating the fractured space where survival, resistance, and scarred agency coexist.

However, this study is not without limitations. Firstly, the focus on a singular text, while detailed, constrains the scope of generalization. Secondly, the interpretative nature of literary analysis opens space for multiple readings, subjectivity that, while valuable, may risk imposing external meaning onto deeply personal narratives. Additionally, the lack of direct engagement with survivor testimonials or interdisciplinary psychological data from survivors limits the empirical depth of the trauma analysis. Future research could expand on these findings by incorporating oral histories, exploring other postcolonial literatures, or conducting comparative analyses with conflicts outside South Asia. Nonetheless, this paper seeks to analyse and evaluate female trauma narratives and understand female autonomy in the context of power, resistance, and survival.

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*Kaashvi Jain*

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**Displaced Bodies, (un) restored Autonomy: A Study of  
Shobha Rao's *An Unrestored Women***

Kaashvi Jain

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