

Stories of Memory and Passion During the 1947 Partition of India

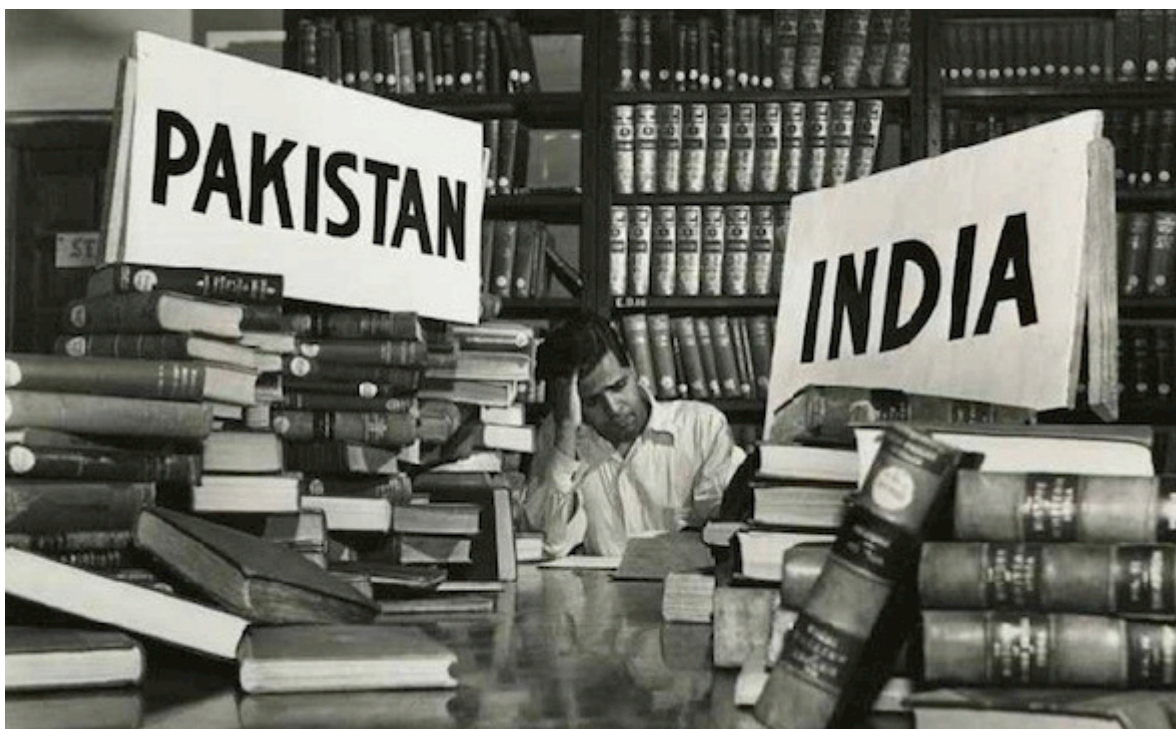


Photo taken from www.guruprasad.net

There is something daring in the way [Shobha Rao](#)'s writing goes straight for the intimate, impulsive, hot hearts of the people in her debut story collection, [An Unrestored Woman](#) (Flatiron Books, 2016) set during the [1947 Partition of India](#).



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BIRTH OF INDIA'S FREEDOM



Pandit Nehru

NEW CABINET OF INDIA

Fourteen Members

PANDIT NEHRU TO BE PREMIER

NEW DELHI, August 14. The new Cabinet of India, which will function from August 15, announced tonight, will consist of the following: Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru—prime minister, External and Commerce

NATION WAKES TO NEW LIFE

Mr. Nehru Calls For Big Effort From People

"INCESSANT STRIVING TASK OF FUTURE"

Assembly Members Take Solemn Pledge

WILD SCENES OF JUBILATION IN DELHI

From Our Special Representative

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 14. ENTIRE DELHI KEPT AWAKE TO WITNESS THE HISTORIC EVENT OF USHERING IN THE FREEDOM OF INDIA AT THE HOUR OF MIDNIGHT.

Unprecedented scenes of enthusiasm were witnessed both inside and outside the Constituent Assembly Chamber, where nothing, soaring humanity wildly

STATE VISIT TO KARACHI



Their Excellencies Lord and Lady Mountbatten speaking to service representatives at the Maharaja Airport on their arrival in Karachi from India on Wednesday.

LORD MOUNTBATTEN GREET'S PAKISTAN

Mr. Jinnah Re-Affirms Firm Friendship With Britain

FRENZIED ENTHUSIASM IN BOMBAY

Crowds In Festive Mood

THE national flag was hoisted over the 76-year-old Bombay City Secretariat at midnight when the citizens of Bombay greeted the dawn of independence with intense devotion and frenzied rejoicing.

"Citizens of free India—you are now free"—said the Prime Minister, Mr. B. G. Khan, in raising the flag at the midnight ceremony, which was attended by all Ministers and departmental heads and employees of the Bombay Government. His declaration was greeted with cheers from the thousands who gathered at the approaches to the Secretariat.

A strong police guard kept order with the greatest difficulty in the excitement of the ceremony when they first arrived and hurriedly proceeded through the building to the balcony of the Secretariat. The flag was hoisted at the hour of midnight and the citizens of Bombay, who were gathered in a multitude of groups, which lined the city at midnight in a wild, frenzied manner, a jubilation of joy, if they got the right way, or were unobscured. The hoisting of the flag was a historic event and the citizens of Bombay were not only packed in groups, but excited themselves as they sang "Vande Mataram" at the apex of the nation's freedom.

"MAY BOMBAY PROSPER"

Governor's Message GOOD WISHES TO FREE INDIA

Sir John Cobbin, Governor of Bombay, has sent greetings to the people of Bombay Province on the occasion of India's independence as a full-fledged Dominion.

The message says: "This is the appointed day. At midnight let the independence of India be proclaimed. Let the people of India rise up and take their place in the world."



Image taken from www.scroll.in

Historical fiction tends to operate in distances, temporal or cultural or otherwise. We are invited into the action as birds perched on eaves, kept aware of our own watching; whatever identification we have with the characters is a byproduct of knowing the grander context of that historical moment.

Rao breezes past those lens adjustments with ease by taking us unequivocally close to her characters. There is an urgency in her opening lines; we must go with her. She will take care of us, but we must go. We must breathe the same air, feel the same hunger, must tie ourselves to these individuals' devotions, passions and longing. It is from these common muses that Rao begins to reveal her understanding of Partition, which cast [so much violence into civil life](#).

Twelve stories trace the lives of women, children, and men affected by the violence and social upheaval of the 1947 Partition, when India and Pakistan formed two sovereign states, secular and Muslim, respectively. As boundary lines were drawn, a tremendous number of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, relocated to live within their religious majority groups.

Religious violence engulfed the border towns; the most vulnerable among the migrants were women and children. It is estimated that one million people were killed during the migration. Kidnapping and sexual assault affected more than 80,000 women on both sides of the conflict.



A woman sitting on the floor holding her baby, both weak from malnutrition and abuse.

Photo taken from www.blogs.tribune.com.pk.

An effort to recover kidnapped women and return them to their families began in 1949, two years after Partition, by which time many displaced and abducted women had remarried, born children (some by rape), or had taken work to support themselves and their families. The [Recovery and Restoration Act](#) presented a confusing and often undesirable means of reunion. In some instances, recovered women did not want to return to their families, who considered them impure. Children born of rape held an even more complicated status in the eyes of the law.

As with any history of mass migration or social violence, where incomprehensible body counts blur lived experience, the task of interpreting and conveying how the struggle may have felt is an enormously important one. With the help of [Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*](#), a collection of first-hand accounts and memoir which served as a resource for these stories, Rao probes the conflict at the level of the individual. We feel the betrayals of family and press against the walls of coercion, displacement, and violence that so many women faced.



Families were cut to half as men were killed leaving women to fend for themselves.

Photo taken from www.bbc.co.uk

Portraying characters on all sides of the conflict, Rao asks us to think deeply about how memory works, how we respond to pain, and how we can find ourselves in the most impossible situations. She points to one such impossibility in her

preface:

“Though the commonly used term for [kidnapped women identified and returned to their old homes by the Abducted Persons Act] is recovered women, I have chosen to refer to them as restored. The distinction may seem trivial, but it is necessary, for I believe that while the recovery of a person is possible, the restoration of a human being to her original state is not.”

Restoration may be impossible, but lives are ever intertwined. We see certain motifs reappear deftly in subsequent stories. The sun is ever blaring and intrusive. People are compared to mists—thick, cruelly opaque, but insubstantial in time. Renu, a strong young woman who befriends the protagonist Neela at a rehabilitation camp for widows in the tragic title story, becomes the protagonist of the next story, “The Merchant’s Mistress,” a grand heist involving two passionate affairs and a daring impersonation. Their brief sisterly bond is a kernel of light in Neela’s oppressive marriage and a crack of grief in Renu’s determination to get free.

It is fitting that Rao begin the collection with these two linked stories. In the chaos of Partition, women did what they had to do to survive or escape their pain. Suicide was common; there are reports of women’s bodies filling the shafts of wells in certain besieged towns. But earning a wage for the first time also became more common, giving some women a sliver of economic freedom. What had once been deemed improper became necessary. Renu, unbroken by her ordeal, survives and reinvents herself; for Neela, cruelty at the hands of the men in her life cannot be overcome.

In another pair of linked stories, a British officer, Jenkins, must inform the wife of an Indian police officer in his employ that the man, Abeet Singh, died in a skirmish earlier that day. We learn that Jenkins, chased out of England after being caught with a man, had fallen frustratingly in love with

Singh. "He felt that some understanding had eluded him; that if life had ever had an nobility it had most certainly, and most perversely, passed him by." In "Unleashed," decades have passed, and Jenkins is a doorman in a New York City coming to the aide of a young woman, Anju, whose complicated relationship with her vivacious sister has left her drunk and grieving by the building's garbage bins. The stories are about the walls we hit and cannot penetrate – with people, with ourselves – and though each is marked by frustrated passion, as are many of the characters in these stories, Jenkins and Anju find each other. They see each other as they truly are. Holding hands in the elevator, their two cold histories interlaced, something malleable and penetrable and warm is reintroduced. We are relieved for Jenkins and proud of Anju. Happiness begins with small moments of understanding, it seems to say.



Sikhs escaping violence across the Indo-Pakistani Punjab border in 1947.

Photo taken from [Wikipedia](#).

Rao's narratives often center around layers of memory and the significant choices that mark them. In "Such a Mighty River," a senile former cartographer by the name of Debnath becomes lost while searching for Rekha, his abusive prostitute. Decades earlier, he was a married man who, after failing to meet his wife Sarojini at her workplace one night, walked all over town searching for her. Debnath's desperate and tender search for Sarojini inserts itself in his search for Rekha and her seedy pimp. A joyful reunion with Sarojini in the past coincides with a bitter ending to the story in present time, but only the reader sees how far Debnath has fallen. Consolation lies in a trick of memory: Debnath retains only his best ones.

In languid and inventive sentences flush with emphatic rhythm, Rao paints glimmering portraits of her characters in their settings. Pain and oppression and stalled passion may imbue these lives, but so too does beauty. In "The Road to Mirpur Khas," a wife becomes a prostitute to keep herself and her husband from starvation. The husband's missteps with money and her calm resolution eventually drive him to a euphoric delirium:

"On another shore, perhaps, the desert has an ashen end; and forests are merely silent folded wings. On that shore poverty doesn't have an animal stink. And when we touch the face of another, we draw onto their skin a moonlit path, and not the metallic rust of our weakness and our fear. But on this shore, on this morning, there is only money."

Some of the characters seem drawn from myth; others are very much of their time. At its heart, this is a collection of stories about relationships, ones in which the basic threads connecting husband and wife, servant and master, beholder and beheld confront a larger course shift in history. The political intricacies of this massive mid-century border maneuver dance only at the edges of these stories. Redrawn map lines, [Gandhi's Salt March](#), and other historical text-worthy

events receive passing mentions, but Rao clearly favors the more elemental drama of this period.

As each story unfolds, one gets the sense that so much of what occurred in Partition never found its way onto the record. What stories will be told of the [current mass migration out of Syria](#) in the coming decades? How can we adapt and grow our interactions with history to account for the intricacies of these affected lives, and in so doing, see what is at stake for our present?

We look to stories like these to help us bear witness.

Order your copy of *An Unrestored Woman* (Flatiron Books, 2016), [here](#).