



Place/Space and Gender Identity: A Reading of Shobha Rao's "An Unrestored Woman" and "The Merchant's Mistress"

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Abstract

According to post-structural feminism no woman is fully female and no man is fully male. The actual image of gender is blurring. Every individual carries more or less some masculine and feminine characteristics. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) has strongly convicted that not only gender but sex is also constructed or organized. Regarding this issue, space or place as a context plays a vital role in formation of gender or sexual identity of an individual. This paper will focus on two short stories of Indian diasporic writer Shobha Rao. The stories under discussion are "An Unrestored Woman" and "The Merchant's Mistress". These stories belong to Indian Partition literature as they delimitate a true vignette of Indian Partition phenomenon as for their backdrop. At the same time both the stories portray a transformation of gender and sex of the characters. Initially, both Neela and Renu (the protagonists) had heterosexual experiences in their conjugal life, but as the time passes, both became widow and they had to migrate from their home environment and spend life in "refugee camp" which is nothing but an unmentioned 'other space' of Michel Foucault. New space gave them opportunity of having homosexual experiences. So their actual gender or sexual identity is in question. And everything happened after the change of their geographical or social location. Both the stories defray an incarnation of 1947 Indian Partition which imparts an opportunity of seeing mass movement, lives of refugee camp and different life experiences of the protagonists. The actual intention of this present paper is to highlight the issue that how different places or spaces affect an individual's gender or sexual life and help in making a new imaginary map of that individual's geography of gender or sex.

Keywords

place, space, gender identity, Indian Partition

One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.

– Simone de Beauvoir

Judith Butler starts the first chapter entitled “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” of her epoch making book of post- structural feminism known as *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) with this famous comment of Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986). In this book Judith Butler says: “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one”(Butler 6). One can easily detruncate both the statements of Beauvoir and Butler in this way that both gender and sex are constructed (socially, culturally or in other ways). The paper will focus on two selected short stories of Shobha Rao. The first story under discussion is “An Unrestored Woman” (2016) and the other one is “The Merchant’s Mistress” (2016). Here in these stories Shobha Rao very transparently blazons the constructed matter of sex and gender as here we observe that both Neela (the protagonist of “An Unrestored Woman”) and Renu (the protagonist of “The Merchant’s Mistress”) had heterosexual and homosexual experiences in their life. And this pleasantry came due to communal riots of 1947 Indian Partition when they were spending their life in “refugee camp”. In the camp they had to spend time with several women, even had to share bed with them. This was an opportunity for them to come in contact of women and have homosexual experiences. Both Neela and Renu were considered as women in their conjugal life which neared them heterosexual experiences with their husband. This image parades that sex is not fixed for an individual. It is also dependent on occasions or contexts just like gender (which depends on socialization, culture etc.). But the question is what regulates the transformation of sex here in both the stories. Answer is not one rather a combination of many aspects – changing of places, spaces, and contexts etc. In literature, the term space generally implicates abstract imagination of human mind. Indian Partition coerced Neela and Renu to travel from one geographical location to another. Changing of places helped them think about their own mind and make a new ‘space’ of imagination where they could find their true sexual identity going beyond their (social) gender identity. So, an endeavour will be exhibited in this paper that how places (geographical location) and spaces (‘other spaces’) along with different contexts play an exigent role in portraying the transformation of gender or sex of Neela, Renu and other characters.

Shobha Rao is an American novelist and short story writer. Her debut novel is *Girls Burn Brighter* (2018) and her important short story collection bearing background of Indian Partition is *An Unrestored Woman and Other Stories* (2016). Because of her formidability in writing, she obtained Katherine Anne Porter Prize in 2014. Both in her novel and short stories, she has tried to imprint the struggle of people who are generally considered as sexually ‘abnormal’ at least not considered as ‘normal’. Having migrated from India, a diasporic sense is always there in her writing and India as a background always prevails in her writing. Indian partition stories generally portray bloodshed, abduction of women, violence, rape etc. as for their themes. Shobha Rao makes herself busy providing a different taste to the readers of Indian Partition Literature. The different

taste the writer wants to provide us is that sometimes event like partition gives opportunity to some people to identify their own desire or state of mind (space) where they could find their true sexual or gender identity.

Indian Partition gives us an obvious image of refugee camps. Refugee camps reminds us Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias which mean many other worlds within the world. Michel Foucault (1926-1984), one of the great historians, philosopher and modern thinkers introduced a new way of depicting modern urban society giving interpretation of different 'spaces' in his writing "Of Other Spaces" (1986). Here in this work, Foucault portrays a true depiction of heterotopias saying like this:

...there are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites ...are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault, 3-4)

According to Foucault, utopias are imaginary worlds whereas heterotopias are real but different from actual reality. In short, heterotopias are different worlds within our real world. In "Of Other Spaces", Foucault gives many examples of heterotopias such as "ship", "prison", "bar", "cemetery", "garden", "museum", etc. He also says that the examples are not limited, rather they are many more than he has mentioned. Following Foucault's logic one can easily anticipate that the "refugee camps", which were meant for the shelter of the homeless people during Indian Partition, are another ardour of heterotopias where people of different regions live in a congested area with their different culture, lifestyle, mentality and experiences. Different places like refugee camps provide opportunity to people to live in a place which is not familiar to the main stream world. This different world contradicts with their earlier life (real life) which may affect their life in different ways. Such an image we get in lives of Neela and Renu who enjoy their life in the camp coming in contact of same gendered person (female). Here, 'other space' (the refugee camp) helps both Neela and Renu identify their actual gender which is not akin to the gender assigned to them by the society. Refugee camps are generally portrayed as places of human suffering as it is seen in works of other partition writers. So, question may arise why we have a different phenomenon of refugee camp here in works of Shobha Rao. The probable answer may be the lack of male or patriarchal domination. A woman's husband is considered as male domination after her marriage. But Shobha Rao has portrayed a refugee camp of widows. Widows mean those women who have lost male domination. Here, the refugee camp gives freedom to those who were seeking for it. Neela was among such women who got mental space of thinking about her own gender and sexual identity just after coming to the refugee camp ('other space'). So, both physical (the refugee camp) and mental (Neela's mind) 'other spaces' personate a vital role in realizing an individual's own gender and sexual identity.

The short story "An Unrestored Woman" depicts the story of a woman named Neela who lived in accompaniment of her husband (Babu) and her mother-in law. A news came

that Babu was dead due to communal riot of Partition, a “muslim” mob burned down the train “Babu had gotten on with his kettle of tea at Wagah”(Rao 3-4). Lalla, the village elder helped Neela and her mother-in-law giving a wine bottle in exchange of Neela’s “mangal sutra” so that they could forget their pain and have a deep sleep. Lalla thought that being widow Nella is nothing but “useless” and she should not stay there in Babu’s family. He “secured passage for her on a bus headed for a nearby camp. It was set up by the Indian government” (Rao 8) for refugees and un-restored women. There in the camp, “she met Renu on the first night. She was Neela’s age, maybe a year or two older” (Rao 9). Suddenly Neela’s husband came to take her back to his hut on the ninth day which incident seemed painful to Neela than the death news of her husband. She had to return to the earlier place but the memory of Renu remained permanently in her mind, hence she is a woman who was never restored to her earlier ‘space’ (mental). Her geographical location (place) might be changed but she lives in a space of mind where Renu prevails, not her husband.

Neela did not think about her gender which was assigned to her by the society. She tried to perform her duty as a wife (woman). She tried to satisfy her husband’s sexual desire as we get a glimpse of evident in the text:

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 little pain but that had 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. But what she didn’t understand was why he never spoke to her. Why he ate his dinner without a word. Even when the jasmine bloomed lush and fragrant in her hair, and she served him tea in the evening shade of the banyan tree, he’d hardly look at her. (Rao 5)

From the above mentioned textual reference, it is clear that initially Neela tried to be a good wife and satisfy her husband’s physical urge even enduring pain. She was sad not getting attention of her husband, which shows that she possessed love, affection and emotional attachment for her husband. But what was wrong with her was that she was missing emotional attachment from her husband. It may be she was missing her play mates not getting anyone to share her mind. That is why she demanded to hang a “swing” for her from the banyan tree branch. But her husband denied and compared her with a “monkey” who would be satisfied only after getting banana. Banana is very symbolic for a married woman as it is a sign of sexual gratification. From Babu’s comment it is clear that women should not have emotional need in life. They will just fulfil their primary needs as it is decided by patriarchal society. Babu possessed that patriarchal mentality due to this he didn’t care about Neela’s mind. This realization might have affected Neela and her lonely mind was seeking a person who could satisfy her mental desire. When Babu’s death news came to Neela, she was not crying rather she was thinking about her stomach feeling hungry. His death news could not stir Neela. From her reaction one can comprehend that she might have already separated her mind from her husband before his death news. She didn’t need the wine bottle to forget her pain, (even she didn’t feel sad

being a widow) and go for sleeping, rather she was vomiting with the scent of the wine as it is seen from narrator's description: "Her mother-in-law had drunk half the bottle then handed it to Neela. She'd sipped it, not more than a drop or two, and held it in her mouth. Neela had waited till the old woman had closed her eyes then run to the back of the hut and vomited" (Rao 7). Neela disliked the flavour of the wine it is clear, but she would search that same wine bottle in the bag of rice after returning back from the refugee camp to forget the memory of Renu and her temporary freedom, but the irony is that then the bottle would remain empty. So it is clear that Renu was able to satisfy Neela's mental desire talking spontaneously with her which she didn't get from her husband. So, mental satisfaction is also vital in sexual life otherwise it will affect one's gender which was seen in case of Neela.

It was Renu who made Neela laugh after her husband's death talking about "the silliest bump on the top" (Rao 9) of her head. This was the starting of their talking and "they were inseparable after that. They ate together, did chores together, and gossiped together. They played among the tents and fetched water from the nearby well in the mornings. Sometimes they slept holding hands" (Rao 9). In the camp Renu was caring for Neela and she "had snuck in an extra roti for Neela" (Rao 10). There in the camp, they had their homosexual experience as "Neela closed her eyes. The warmth of Renu's neck, the scent of her body, left Neela aching. Hollow. It was a 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" (Rao 11). It is seen that Neela was happy with Renu in the camp as she got both mental and physical satisfaction which was missing in her life before coming to the refugee camp. So the changing of her geographical location became helpful in her life identifying true desire of her mind, which also gave a turn in her life regarding her sex and gender.

But both her happiness and freedom were vanished in a wink of eyes as her husband Babu appeared alive before her and wanted to take her back to his family. The narrator portrays the scene like this:

On Neela's ninth day at the camp Babu came to fetch her. She was ushered into the tent by one of the camp administrators. "Your husband is here," the woman announced. "That's impossible," Neela said. "He's dead"...She blinked and blinked and then she felt faint... She thought of all those women dressed in white saris, bald, smiling, filing into the mess tent. She was not among them. Her mouth filled with the bitterness of the liquid in the dark brown bottle. (Rao 11)

The flavour of wine was bitter to her, because of this she compared her life with the flavour of wine as her husband returned back to her life. There is no doubt about it that she was happy there in the camp with Renu and among the other women as it is stated by the narrator: "Neela knew she should feel sad for her but she didn't. She did feel awful that her husband had died but she was glad that he had; how else would they have met?" (Rao 10) Neela was happy that Renu's husband was dead. But all her happiness turned upside down when her husband came to her life once again. It is as if she had lost her freedom which she obtained after her husband's (supposed) death. She was seeking female association all through the path back to her husband's home from the refugee

camp as she was trying to come closer to the women who sat by the side of her seat in the bus:" ... an old woman with grey-blue hair sat next to Neela...Even on the dusty and crowded bus Neela could smell the clean, scrubbed scent, almost pleasant, in the din of the bus" (Rao 12). After returning her husband's home, what changes we see in her behaviour was that she was almost seeking female accompaniment which goes against the characteristics of her gender (female). Her behaviour could not be considered as 'normal' by the society. So, her sexual or gender identity is in question.

The story "The Merchant's Mistress" starts with the image where Renu anyhow managed to escape from the "refugee camp" two years after Neela's departure. Renu realized that the widows who were staying in the camp had no future as it is evident in the words of the narrator: "Renu was nineteen when she left the refugee camp and travelled to Ahmedabad... She'd been there for two years, just long enough to understand that she, along with the eight hundred other widows stationed at the camp, had absolutely no future ahead of them" (Rao 19). The women of the camp were trained to be "a seamstress (A darajin)" so that some guards or camp administrators could pity and marry them. Renu strongly hated that concept of being a seamstress as she thinks "the sound of the word was a dead end" (Rao 19). All "of the other widows at the camp were delighted when their bald heads began to sprout... they'd scramble to affix an artless ribbon on the top of their heads, or vie for the one cracked mirror in the camp, admiring..." (Rao 20). But her attitude was always different from other widows of the camp. She "refused to...let her hair grow out" (Rao 20) and "what she loved – beyond even her own understanding – was the feel of the wind on her scalp" (Rao 20). All these aspects about Renu indicate that she loved to adopt the attitude of a man but at the same time she wanted to be a woman as it is her wish that: "... she would be a farmer's wife, with its days of toil and earth and anguish, measuring the rains as one measures sugar into a teacup..." (Rao 20). So, there is no doubt about it that she had both masculine and feminine attitudes which could easily differentiate her from other 'normal' women of the camp.

It is not that only Renu's attitude was like that of a male but her figure also resembled to that of a male one. This is described by the narrator in this way: "the first time Renu travelled as a man was while on her way to Ahmedabad" (Rao 17). After leaving the camp she got into a train. The passengers of the train took Renu for a man. A lady among the passengers asked Renu why she had been there in the lady's compartment. "It took a moment for Renu to realize she was talking about her. That she had mistaken her for a man" (Rao 18). After that, Renu "walked through to the men's compartment and settled into a slim space...All the men around her were smoking and playing cards and eating...and paid her no attention. She watched them for a while... then fell into a deep and dreamless sleep" (Rao 19). This textual information is very significant as it gives many aspects regarding her 'gender identity'. First of all, the men of the compartment could not recognize her actual gender looking her figure, even they took her as a man, Renu she felt herself secured in her male like appearance as a result she was able to take a deep sleep even there in the men's compartment. It may be that from the last incident, she had started to believe that she had masculine features. This realization puts question mark on gender roles and identity of an individual who was considered as woman by the society.

Renu liked to go with her “destiny” and took the path of Ahmedabad by train. “She reached Ahmedabad the next morning. She wanted to take a bath so she walked from the station to Sabarmati and, concealing her shawl under a thicket, waded into the river” (Rao 26). There she met “a group of laundresses” who also took her for a ‘man’ and later observing very close they recognized her gender and the narrator portrays the scene in this way: “One of the laundresses, a young girl, bright with sunlight gleaming on her wet face, pointing at Renu’s chest and laughed. “So you’re a girl” (Rao 26). With the help of those laundresses she took a job at the house of a beautiful “memsahib” who is wife of a diamond merchant. What was worth mentioning about Renu was that she had a strong sense of comprehending sensuality of any person. At first sight she could understand that the memsahib was not happy at all even having luxurious life and jewellery. Renu could correlate the sadness of the memsahib with that of Neela whom she met in the refugee camp. At this moment narrator says: “there was silence. Renu looked at her and sensed the kind of sadness she had sensed in Neela. But why should a destitute girl in a refugee camp and the wealthy wife of a diamond merchant have the same kind of sadness?” (Rao 27-28). Renu might not understand the link, but we the readers can easily comprehend the problem of both the ladies. The problem is none other than emotional attachment which was missing in relationship between Neela and her husband, and also between the memsahib and her husband. Both Neela and the memsahib were seeking a partner who would not give pain during sexual intercourse and also provide mental and physical pleasure which they got later coming in contact of a same gendered woman Renu.

After that, Renu used to have homosexual experiences with that memsahib (Savitri) on a regular basis. “This went on for two years. The memsahib would go to her husband’s bedroom and when she returned late into the night, she stripped off her jewels and left a trail of them leading from the door to the bed, where Renu waited for her” (Rao 28-29). Their homosexual intercourses are portrayed by the narrator like this:

Sometimes, before she had even finished undressing, Renu would pull her into the bed and kiss her shoulders and tie up her hands. Then she would tickle the loose ends of the chunni over her body until Savitri squealed with delight before wrapping it tightly around her slender neck. It was only then that Renu lowered herself between her legs. Savitri would gasp for breath, but then she would also smile. (Rao 29)

The above mentioned quotation very transparently depicts the thought that here Renu is playing the role of a male sex partner and Savitri is playing the role of a female sex partner. This shows that some homosexual females always look themselves as female and don’t want to change their gender. They want to remain female forever. Then question may arise why those homosexual females want same sex partner. The answer is given already earlier – lack of emotional attachment between two heterosexual partners (husband and wife).

Renu, the same person who was playing the role of a male sex partner during her homosexual intercourse with Savitri, was then going to have heterosexual intercourse with the diamond merchant where she would find herself in the position of a female partner before the merchant. Renu would speak to the merchant for the first time during

the third year of her employment. She would be summoned by the merchant to his quarter for his physical pleasure. Most of the time, the diamond merchant remained in addiction of “opium”. Renu considered him as a boring man in spite of having huge wealth. When she went to his quarter to make him pleased, he said to Renu: “You look like the boy I always wanted to be” (Rao 32). This shows that the diamond merchant was not satisfied with his ‘sex body’. He might have a transgendered mentality which sought to get some feminine peculiarities in his biological body. In short, he wanted to be a ‘mixed one’ like Renu. This is evident also in his behaviour while he was going to have sexual intercourse with Renu:

Then he looked at her, for so long that Renu didn’t think it possible without blinking... she raised her eyes to his and saw that he was hardly there; that his eyes had such a faraway look in them, a look of such forlornness that she wondered if it was best to simply leave. But then he took her hand. He gripped it, really, and it seemed to Renu that now he was pleading with her. Not pleading, no, but searching. Searching for something he had lost. As if she might know where it was. As if she might help him find it... as soon as she opened her mouth he covered it with his, and kissed her. (Rao 32-33)

The above mentioned excerpt mingles the image that the diamond merchant might not find his desired look (a look of both male and female) in the sex body of Savitri hence their sexual relationship was a mismatch, which resulted a boring relationship between Savitri and him. But the merchant didn’t feel bored with Renu. In this way “...Renu came to be a lover to both the diamond merchant and the diamond merchant’s wife. Her days were divided between them. In the afternoons she visited the merchant. They made love ... she helped the memsahib prepare for her evening with the diamond merchant, and then waited for her in her bed” (Rao 33). This is how Renu, Savitri and the diamond merchant were carrying an obfuscating image regarding their gender and sexual identity.

Renu later realized the truth that in” the end the diamond merchant and Savitri would have their money, and each other, but what would Renu have?” (Rao 36). She made a plan to steal the diamonds and after taking a disguise of the merchant, she would leave for Durban (South Africa). But when the merchant gave a relevant opinion about the story she told him the day before, for some moment she thought not to fulfill her earlier plan as she understood that the merchant was in true love with her and she should not cheat him. The statement by which she was diverted from her plan was: “You know what, Renu? You’re the candle and the match” (Rao 37). Renu’s actual gender and sexual identity (a ‘mixed one’) is portrayed very clearly in the words of the diamond merchant. Though the merchant had eructated this statement without having the knowledge that she also made love with his wife, but the irony is that his innocent statement is wholeheartedly true. Renu possessed both heterosexual and homosexual mentality which questions the actual gender or sexual identity of Renu once again.

At the end we see that Renu went to South Africa travelling by ship and taking the disguise of the diamond merchant even she could manage her voice and transformed it into a male’s one: “ she had practiced deepening her voice so that when the captain said, “Does it suit your needs, sir?” Renu paused, settled the air deep in her throat, and said,

“It’ll do” (Rao 38). It may seem that Renu is heartless and devoid of imagination. But it is not like that. On her way to South Africa she recalled everyone to whom she was emotionally attached. “She thought about Gopichand (her husband), and the naïve, young love she had left for him. She thought about Neela, sweet, scarred Neela, and how their love had defied everything” (Rao 38). She “thought about the diamond merchant, the one who – in her own way – she had loved the most” (Rao 38). Renu overcame all these barriers because she found the purpose of her life taking lesson from the blinders of the horse: “...the blinders were to focus the horse so it wouldn’t be distracted, to keep it from looking sideways, to give it straight course, a goal... purpose” (Rao 25). After listening about Durban (a distant unknown land to Renu) from the diamond merchant, she found out her actual purpose of life which was exploring new unknown land. It is generally believed that males are born explorers. So, Renu’s choice of life indicates her inclination towards masculinity. What was engrossing about Renu’s personality was that she acted according to the theory of her mind as a result a practical output was seen in her activities. All these were missing in Neela, Savitri and also in the diamond merchant.

Renu’s personality was somehow different from Neela whose perfect metaphorical representation would be the banyan tree of her courtyard, as its existence is static, it could not move from its place. Neela was just like the Banyan tree and couldn’t move from her place that is why she demanded a “swing” before Babu so that she could move from her place at least for a moment. Babu never hung a swing for Neela. So, the image of swing is very symbolic, with the help of imagination (swing) she would be able to visit the refugee camp and meet her desired person Renu. On the contrary, Renu compared herself with a river which had a purpose of travelling a long distance through unknown lands. She is relentless regarding her purpose as the narrator described: “... once you had purpose, Renu understood, standing in the dim winter’s morning..., you had everything. You were a river knifing your way through a gorge of sheer rock and red cliff; everything you needed was inside of you” (Rao 25). For that reason, Renu was able to overcome her sexual desire and went on her path alone to make money and be economically independent. Neela husband was a representative of patriarchy where she was trapped having a female body. But for Renu, she possessed almost a sex body just like that of a male which helped her on her way to get permanent ‘freedom’ which is a desire of every dominated woman of patriarchal society. Her ‘mixed’ (male and female) personality helped her achieve her goal (“purpose”). Her feminine characteristics helped her please the diamond merchant, steal his wealth (“diamonds”) and get economic strength (an unavoidable reality). And her masculine characteristics helped her get freedom, travel freely and explore different lands. Everyone has this quality, as stated in post-structural feminism. But very few persons like Renu could comprehend that knowledge and become successful, happy and contented as it was seen that: “Renu had been content, even after Neela had left” (Rao 24).

A woman will never achieve her freedom so far male domination is there in her life. Neela got a taste of that freedom (but for a short while in her life) getting opportunity of going to the refugee camp, but she lost her freedom when her dead husband returned back to her life as a living one. On the contrary, Renu could manage to make a world of her own where she had no male domination as her husband was truly dead. Everyone

believes that we have come to this world for suffering but if an individual is able to make his/her life happy and contented staying in this world, then that would be an achievement. Renu is such an individual who created a new map of her own gender and sexual identity which might not match with any recognized gender identity of our society. And by doing that she was able to make a world of her own gender or sex, where she was happy and contented. All these aspects were out of far reach of Neela because she was unable to give a practical shape of her own world which was there in her mind or imagination, and as result she was unhappy and dissatisfied. It may be that she will be busy searching the “wine bottle” throughout her life. And for Savitri and the diamond merchant, they were also failure like Neela. Sex is not all about body, genital organs or physical pleasure rather it is very much about mental or emotional otherwise all humans would have come under one category of sex (heterosexual). This contention is very much true for Neela and Savitri and diamond merchant.

Whatever happened in lives of Neela and Renu and other characters regarding their gender or sex highlights some aspects – changing of geographical or social locations (places), making mental spaces regarding gender or sex and different contexts. All the above mentioned aspects were very important forming the geography of gender or sex of Neela, Savitri, the diamond merchant and specially Renu. Their actual gender or sexual identity is in question, it is as if they possessed a blurring image of their own gender or sex which provokes the main credence of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) that both sex and gender are socially, culturally or contextually constructed or organized. In reference to these selected short stories of Shobha Rao, Indian Partition as context (background) plays a vital role in portraying her characters’ actual gender or sexual identity. Different spatial contexts provide them opportunity thinking about their own gender or sexual identity and making an imaginary geographical map of their own mental space regarding sex or gender.

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