
MARK MY WORDS: THE TRAUMA OF ABDUCTED WOMEN IN TWO SHORT STORIES BY RAMAPADA CHAUDHURY

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the paradigm shift that occurred in the 1990s, the human dimension of Partition has gained visibility within academia, chiefly with regard to abducted women. Their kidnapping, as well as the government measures adopted, deprived them of free will and intensified an already traumatic experience. This paper focuses on their representation in two short stories by Ramapada Chaudhury: “Embrace” and “The Stricken Daughter”. By drawing on trauma and affect theory, it highlights the individuality of the abducted despite their shared background and shows how seemingly opposite historical events—abduction and recovery—combine to bring about a gendered trauma. The ultimate aim is to prove that affection via words, or lack thereof, is the determining factor in the healing of wounds.

KEYWORDS: Partition; Ramapada Chaudhury; short story; abducted women; gender; trauma; affect

RESUMEN *Recuerda mis palabras: el trauma de las mujeres secuestradas en dos relatos de Ramapada Chaudhury*

Desde el cambio de paradigma en los años 90, la dimensión humana de la Partición ha ganado visibilidad en el ámbito académico, principalmente con respecto a las mujeres secuestradas. Tanto su rapto como las medidas gubernamentales adoptadas las privaban de libre albedrío e intensificaban una experiencia ya de por sí traumática. Este artículo se centra en su representación en dos relatos de Ramapada Chaudhury: “Embrace” y “The Stricken Daughter”. Por medio de teoría del trauma y de afectos, se pone de relieve la individualidad de las secuestradas pese a su trasfondo común y se muestra que sucesos históricos aparentemente contrarios como el rapto y la recuperación se combinan para causar un trauma mediado por el género. El objetivo final es demostrar que el afecto a través de palabras (o la falta del mismo) es el factor determinante para cicatrizar heridas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Partición; Ramapada Chaudhury; relato; mujeres secuestradas; género; trauma; afecto

Introduction

The Partition of India back in 1947 is generally regarded as a momentous event of far-reaching consequences. Nonetheless, it was not until its fiftieth anniversary that academia embraced interdisciplinary approaches that led its being studied from a purely historical standpoint to one that prioritised the human dimension of the matter (Butalia, 1998; Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Pandey, 2001). Specifically, the previously hidden stories of abducted women surfaced in the light of these new theoretical contributions to demonstrate that gender hierarchies intensify in an ambience of trauma. According to official records, it is estimated that out of 12 million people directly affected by Partition (Butalia, 1998: 3), approximately 80,000 were abducted women (Menon & Bhasin, 1993: WS4) whose circumstances varied considerably, since some had actually been taken away by force while others had been left behind by their own families in exchange for crossing the border. However, they were all grouped under the same category as a result of forcefully cohabiting with members of religious communities at odds with their own.

The untold experiences of the above-mentioned girls and women progressively made their way into the realm of literature. Through fiction, the emergence of silenced female perspectives challenged hegemonic discourses by drawing attention to the emotional sphere blatantly ignored in historiography. The mere existence of such alternative truth enables a transition from *what* to *how*, that is, once facts are laid bare, it is time for personal accounts to come to the forefront. In particular, short story writers have been especially prone to depicting abducted women in an attempt to convey the brutality and subsequent dehumanization they endured. Saadat Hasan Manto's "The Return" (1948), Rajinder Singh Bedi's "Lajwanti" (1951), Jamila Hashimi's "Banished" (c. 1960) and Lalithambika Antharjanam's "A Leaf in the Storm" (1948) are just some of the most remarkable and oft-quoted examples of the struggles and tribulations they faced.

With this in mind, the article explores the representation of abducted women in two short stories by Ramapada Chaudhury (1922-2018): "Embrace" and "The Stricken Daughter". Whereas variations among authors may also be a result of their diverse views, the marked differences between Chaudhury's main characters could be

interpreted as the accurate reflection of a complex reality rather than as a matter of subjectivity. Additionally, both stories share a Bengali setting which, despite having been bisected by the Indo-Pakistani border, has been frequently overlooked if compared to its western counterpart, the Punjab, a place that has entered the popular imagination as the paradigm of Partition-induced effects (Chakraborty, 2014: 47). Yet, Bengal provides a perfectly suitable background to delve into the connections between the personal and the political while unearthing the gendered trauma that ensued from territorial division.

Therefore, this paper seeks to elaborate on the official narrative of the abducted and push its boundaries in order to encompass an individuality that permeates the works of a single author. In so doing, it is my intention to address the multiple ways in which women dealt with the consequences of abduction within the theoretical framework of trauma and affect theory. By means of examining the impact of communal historical events on particular psyches and analysing selected literary depictions, I aim to demonstrate that the actions of both abductors and national governments serve disparate purposes, yet those of the latter also prove detrimental to women. Consequently, overcoming trauma is reliant on the private sphere and the ability of family members to disregard the dominant ideology and show affection which, if verbal, may even counter official narratives. Far from being simply a tale of violence and wrongdoing, Partition also recounts how the humanity once suppressed is essential to restoring disrupted identities.

Shared History: From National Politics to Gendered Trauma

Abduction led the governments of India and Pakistan to introduce corrective measures, perhaps not only to guarantee the wellbeing of those abducted, but also to preserve the national honour bestowed on women (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 196). Their efforts translated into the *Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act* (1949), which defined abducted people as “a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age”, hence infantilizing adult women. Furthermore, it allowed for the creation of camps where they would be detained until they could be reunited with their immediate families. The resulting Central Recovery Operation did not cease until 1956 and implied either a second uprooting or deliberate disobedience if they managed to avoid law

enforcement officers. In the words of congresswoman Mridula Sarabhai, the plan was “an effort to remove from the lives of thousands of innocent women the misery that is their lot today and to restore them to their legitimate environment where they can spend the rest of their lives with *izzat* [honour]” (Menon & Bhasin, 1993: WS5). Nevertheless, the manoeuvre deprived them of free will just as their captors had done beforehand and led them to ponder on its rightfulness: “if you were unable to save us then, what right have you to compel us now?” (WS6).

The answer was intimately linked to traditional gender-based patterns of behaviour. Since certain men had proven unable to fulfil the role of protectors conferred by a patriarchal society, the authorities adopted a markedly paternalistic approach in an attempt to restore the status quo. Their effort was utterly fruitless given the impossibility to erase the consequences of abduction from the minds of blameless people seldom treated as such. Still, public figures including Mahatma Gandhi were well aware of the roles assigned to men and women in the process of creating national identities and advocated for the innocence of the kidnapped by arguing that “[t]he culprits are those—be they Hindus or Muslims or Sikhs—who have abducted them” (1999: 118).

Cultural manifestations also contribute to the perpetuation of gender roles. For instance, the epic poem *Ramayana*, attributed to Valmiki, ventures into the world of deities in order to depict the abduction of Rama’s wife Sita at the hands of the demon Ravana. The incident denotes a clear parallelism between mythology and the real-life misadventures of women who belonged to a given religious community and were kidnapped by members of another. Likewise, the poem represents an ensuing confrontation between both male characters that concludes with Rama being victorious, Ravana being defeated and Sita being engulfed by loss despite her affiliation with the winning side. Besides its recurrence in stories about abducted women, the *Ramayana* also reinforces tradition by characterising Rama as “the paradigm of the hero king” and Sita as “the perfect wife whose destiny is tragic but whose self-abnegation, self-discipline, love and loyalty to her husband glow in the minds and hearts of the readers” (Knapp, 1997: 201). Needless to say, their story was supposed to set an example for people.

In spite of cultural differences, gender identity remains “a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” in the nature of which “resides the possibility of contesting its reified status” (Butler, 1988: 520). Therefore, a deeply traumatic context allows for both a perpetuation of gender roles and the chance of subverting them, inasmuch as desperate times call for desperate measures. In fact, works such as the two volumes of *The Trauma and the Triumph* (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2003; Bagchi et al., 2009) present, in the very title, the stark contrast between bearing the brunt of Partition and trying to overcome imposed circumstances, as shall be exemplified by Chaudhury’s characters. Both outcomes usually imply engaging in violence, the force from which every conceivable emotion springs (Das, 2008: 284). Although women are thought to stand on the receiving end and femininity is frequently equated with peaceful behaviour and tasked with rebuilding communities (Butalia, 1993: WS13; Ali, 2009: 428), performing violent acts seriously challenges such dominant discourses. Beyond self-defence, pain may also be self-inflicted, as in ambiguous suicides committed to avoid a conversion (Butalia, 1993: WS14). On the one hand, they may be seen as the logical outcome of patriarchal dictates that favour death over dishonour; on the other hand, they stand as an exercise of self-determination, charged with a heroism often associated with the military.

Similarly, the experiences of those living in the Indian subcontinent around 1947 differ from the recurring image of a soldier as the epitome of trauma to accommodate the ordeal of abducted women. Their condition as such entailed two other main forms of violence: the one perpetrated by men who turned rape, female genital mutilation and related practices into a vicious attack against the opposing community by means of humiliating its female members, and that inflicted by their own families through honour crimes or the rejection of the survivors (Dey, 2016: 104). Additionally, being single in a society that took marriage as the norm was another inconvenience that went hand in hand with being torn from their loved ones, deprived of their possessions and denied a sense of belonging. Overall, women faced a scenario for which their previous learning had not adequately prepared them (Butalia, 1993: WS14), so they were obliged to combine the limitations of their ordinary lives with the impositions of an extraordinary conflict (Chakraborty, 2014: 45). Beyond matrimony and patrimony, maternity was another factor closely linked to trauma, given the control nations exercised on female

bodies and on their reproductive behaviour. For instance, the fact that children born of mixed unions lacked a sole religion further aggravated the matter by leading thousands to state tutelage (Dey, 2016: 113).

Nonetheless, “trauma lies not in the shock of the occurrence of the event but in its reception” (Singh, 2015: 185), so the by-products of Partition have a greater influence on the emotional sphere than the division itself did. Regarding that state of turmoil, it is a well-known fact that the word ‘trauma’ derives from the Greek term for ‘wound’. Nowadays it may be interpreted both literally and metaphorically, but Freud’s postulates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) stress the mental factor. Along those lines, the pioneer in trauma studies Cathy Caruth introduces the crises of life and death, that is, “the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (1996: 7), which are respectively linked to Partition/abduction and its aftermath. Even if her chosen examples and foundational texts are predominantly Eurocentric, some key concepts are still relevant across the board.

For a start, comprehension sets a boundary between the known and the unknown that enters the linguistic realm (4). That notion is directly connected with the study of apparently unfathomable historical aspects that confer a false sense of knowledge (22), considering that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own,” but “the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (24). Gaining a full understanding becomes a daunting task caused by the paradox between verbalizing traumatic events as a way to overcome them—sometimes through fictional accounts—while considering that doing so may be regarded as a betrayal of the past. In the absence of language, sensory perceptions bear considerable relevance as they partially convey that reality still incomprehensible. Referring to Hiroshima, Caruth argues that, for the French, the bomb was not the beginning of suffering for Japan, but the end of their own pain (29). That same transnational approach remains perfectly valid on a small scale when alluding to the balance between someone’s wounds and those of others. Furthermore, it resembles the fact that the death of a converted woman meant the end of dishonour for an entire religious community.

The emotions triggered by trauma vary enormously from one person to another. However, if there is a state they all share, that is definitely grief. In the centenarian

“Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud underlines a substantial difference between normative and pathological responses to the loss of a loved one or an abstraction, which are respectively associated with grief and melancholia. Although omitted in his essay, it is worth acknowledging the currently accepted difference between what is felt, i.e. grief, and what is done, i.e. mourning (Lofland, 1985: 173). In this case, the relevance of Freud’s work is not the strictly psychoanalytical study, but its application to the migratory experience. Those damaged by Partition may face the loss of both a relative and their home, that is, they may equally lose their mother and their motherland; yet, for the latter, the completion of the grieving process remains unachievable (Mishra, 2007: 9). Consequently, the already complex relationship between women and land acquires a new dimension, moving from the political agenda of preserving a national identity to the emotional sphere that must confront deicide and displacement.

Loss is also mediated by the circumstances in which it occurs, but that of abducted “women—particularly to the ‘other’ religion—meant more than any other loss, something that seemed to be shared by both men and women” (Butalia, 1993: WS20). The feeling persisted even after they had returned to their families of origin, because more often than not, going back meant experiencing a social death in which “the loss of friendships and relations was felt more deeply than the giving up of property and nationality” (Ali, 2009: 434). Their affliction had to be combined with the aforementioned duty of the female population to restore communities and which, in terms of losing, was closely bound to mourning. The externalization of grief had to be performed privately; otherwise, it would jeopardize the oblivion promoted by political elites (Das, 2008: 294). Hence, literature as a public sign of remembrance acts as a replacement of the denied role while etching facts and feelings in people’s memory.

Rituals and religious practices also involve the alleged purity of certain beliefs against those of other faiths; that is why abducted women and children born in captivity pose a threat to moral integrity. Within affect theory, those disruptive figures induce a sense of disgust that “is not simply an inner or psychic state; it works on bodies” (Ahmed, 2004: 85). Conflicting ideologies extend the binary oppositions brought about by frontiers and exemplify that “[t]o be disgusted is [...] to be affected by what one has rejected” (86). However, some women and their offspring swing between both, so their exclusion by the families deemed legitimate requires another explanation: “an object

becomes disgusting through its contact with other objects that have already, as it were, been designated as disgusting before the encounter has taken place” (87). It follows that a woman is not inherently impure; her rejection originates in her interaction with members of an antagonistic community which is, at the same time, a source of hatred and fear.

In spite of prior remarks on the prevalence of the psychological impact over the corporeal, it is worth alluding to the somatization of certain reactions. As previously hinted, biological reproduction is one of the roles assigned to women in processes of national construction (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989: 7). The reading of them as a territory to be conquered connects the many consequences of inhabiting a female body with those of living in a contested land. As if they were emerging nations, women are unjustly denied the power of shaping their own identity, thus producing a mind-body dissociation that writer Shauna Singh Baldwin explains lucidly and concisely through her fiction: a woman is “[b]ody and no-body” (1999: 309), which is why every process aimed at overcoming trauma leads her to “remember and re-member” (Tripathy, 2014: 84).

The apparent rupture of the body may also break the language. The aforesaid verbalization or omission of the traumatic event opens the door for subjects whose words produce unexpected outcomes. With respect to violence, Veena Das makes a distinction between ‘speech’ and ‘voice’ by conferring on the latter a personal touch absent in the former. Likewise, she associates silence with a choice oriented towards protecting that voice of one’s own and distances herself from Derridian ideas by denying the direct contrast between orality and writing, as well as their respective identification with presence and absence (2007: 8). In addition, the lack of recognition of women by their own communities “might take the form of voices not heard, or it might reveal itself through a proliferation of words that drown out silences that are too difficult to bear” (9). Whichever the case, the voices of women remain unnoticed, either because they lack the means to turn the tide or because the harshness of their experiences halts their words.

If those particularities of communication were applied to the violence of Partition, it could be said that its development “was shown (sometimes with words)

rather than narrated” (10). That prevalence of the visual connects with the graphic aspect of drawing new borders on a map and takes the form of memories, that is, mental images which may be put into words once their content has been accepted. While Butalia refers to those testimonies as “experiences [...] that need further excavation” (1993: WS12), Das does not hesitate to affirm that the memories of Partition require no excavation whatsoever because they are “very much on the surface” (2007: 11), although isolated. What both approaches have in common is that they highlight the need to listen to voices in order to make people visible.

Finally, and in relation to the (im)possibility of narrating traumatic experiences, it is worth mentioning matters of production and reception. The relationship between text, author and reader is necessarily fluid throughout time. Both the written text and its interpretation depend on a situated knowledge that is a result of combined subjectivities and transcends individuals inasmuch as “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (Haraway, 1988: 590). When that specific perspective does not belong to someone who has undergone a traumatic experience first-hand, approaching other people’s narrations is, at least, problematic. In this line of thought, Dominick LaCapra introduces the concept of “empathic unsettlement” to refer to a form of writing that enables an affective approach without making identification implausible (2001: 78). Hence, the goal is for the authorship to use narrative techniques that are disruptive enough to recreate trauma without replacing the sought empathy for mere condescending sympathy. Despite being a balance hard to achieve, the receiving end must understand the possible similarities from a human standpoint without overlooking the differences caused by disparate life courses.

Therefore, between “feeling sorry for you and feeling your sorrow” (Eagleton, 2003: 156), the second attitude is preferable and matches the already mentioned implication in other people’s traumas proposed by Caruth. Although the sources that facilitate the development of empathy are multiple, literature stands as the ideal tool for being “interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is [...] at the specific point at which [they] intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (Caruth, 1996: 3). It is through fiction that people can access stories in which the narrated is as important as the omitted and which combine several speech acts that favour identification with a given

community: “The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing [...] is required for the affect to have an effect” (Ahmed, 2004: 94). As for abducted women, actions tore them apart, but the words of others may enable recovery. In this particular case, some actions do not speak louder than words.

Private Stories: From Unclean Wounds to the Triumph of Trauma

“Embrace” presents the return of Sabita, a formerly abducted woman, to the home deemed legitimate. Rather than penning a simplified reunion, Chaudhury exploits the possibilities of third person omniscient narration so as to show not only the mixed reactions of her relatives, but also the persisting doubts of a main character caught between the affection that should prevail in the private sphere and the adverse impact of her past in the public one. Furthermore, the inclusion of the eight-month-old baby born of the non-consensual relationship between Sabita and her abductor makes the already complicated arrival reach greater levels of difficulty. She is aware that “so many changes had occurred within this short span” (2008a: 339) of one year and a half, making it impossible to come full circle after undergoing a deeply traumatic experience, which is narrated in the second paragraph of the story:

A fire had seared through the darkness that night. And with it, the sound of helpless wailing. The noise made by those blood-suckers and the desperate cries of the innocent people had filled the air. Sabita had woken up from her sleep and it seemed as if a terrible fear had gripped her. There was also an expression of fearful amazement in her parents’ eyes. [...] It was only a few moments’ wait. And then those demons, [*sic*] had lunged forward, with a savage look in their eyes. Those dark, shadowy men. [...] They came closer now. Some of them were armed [...]. And then something had happened which Sabita couldn’t quite recollect now. Maybe she had lost consciousness. She had only watched with mute and innocent eyes. There was blood everywhere (339).

The aforementioned flashback includes three essential elements. Firstly, the chosen lexis succeeds in conveying the brutality of the scene while disregarding bare facts. In addition, branding the attackers as demons establishes an obvious link with mythology by turning them into subjects of Ravana and reinforcing their antagonism. Secondly, the interweaving of images and sounds emphasizes sensory perceptions rather than merely describing the incident. The same idea applies to feelings which, unlike actions, remain ingrained in the memories of the characters. Lastly, Caruthian

theorizations are visible in the problems Sabita faces when drawing the line between the known and the unknown. Such trouble evinces her latent trauma and condemns her to remain silent, which is why she must resort to emotion as a first step towards understanding.

During her abduction, Sabita was overwhelmed by melancholy for “her father, mother, brother and sister” (339). Although it would be far-fetched to claim that her state reaches the level of the homonymous Freudian condition, it does resemble a sense of grief for those relatives who, dead or alive, “no longer existed in her life” (339). The ponderings of Sabita arouse multiple feelings until she is exposed to the guilt that springs from failing to comply with social dictates: “Maybe they had even forgotten the dark stain of dishonour that had fallen on the otherwise untainted reputation of their family lineage” (339). To make matters worse, the later birth of the baby feels ambivalent because that “unwanted and unwelcome child, not born out of love and affection, a mere product of hate and animosity” still is “her own flesh and blood” (340). By the same token, Sabita’s family cannot agree on whether to see her as an innocent daughter or as a disgraced woman right after police officers find her. Interestingly, the rescue attempt only takes up one line in what seems to be an eye-opening creative choice that presents the Central Recovery Operation as a mere formality in order to focus on its long-lasting effects.

The reunion of Sabita and her mother is, at best, uneasy, since they are both covertly aware of the impossibility of erasing an abduction hidden in words yet ever present in their minds. In fact, Sabita takes refuge in silence, for “there was only one thing that she would remember or be reminded of—the memory of those humiliating days of her past” (340). Observing the attitude of the mother leads her eleven-year-old sister Kabita to follow suit. Despite ignoring “the hard realities of life”, the girl already displays “a look of uneasiness in her eyes” (340). Such behaviour, unusual for mothers, daughters and sisters, illustrates how the territorial border is mirrored on a small scale in “the wall that stood between her and her family” (341). As a result, it renders the abductors’ aim of destroying the opposing community successful inasmuch as they manage to sever family ties. Overcoming trauma requires those links to be reconstituted; otherwise, the reality would be “far more painful and unbearable” (341),

thus increasing the unendurable state of having survived, in other words, what Caruth terms the crisis of life.

Due to causes left unsaid, Sabita's father is no longer part of the family, a situation which turns the mother into the head of the household. That is why, in her absence, the tension among the sisters decreases slightly and favours reconciliation. When the three of them come back together, Kabita enquires about the age of his nephew and Sabita's answer confirms that he was born out of a mixed union. The unplanned questioning tackles the identity of the baby, but Sabita denies having named him in an attempt to cover up the traces of the paternal side that prevent her from reintegrating. Her hopes seem viable once she watches her mother hold the baby in her arms. The unexpected show of affection stands in sharp contrast with previous expectations that also confirm how the police disregard emotion in favour of government measures that pursue particular effects:

She was aware of her mother's superstitious and fastidious nature [...]. When the police had come to rescue her, she had pleaded with them. [...] 'I am quite all right here, [...] I don't want to go back home. And even if I do, why should my parents agree to take me back? After all, I have lost my religion and caste now, I have become an untouchable to them.' But the police [...] had quoted law, and assured her that even if her parents were reluctant to take her back, there were orphanages that she could go to (342-343).

After this recollection, Sabita encounters her brother, who shows a milder reaction. Even when she suggests that she would be better off dead, he rules out the possibility by assuring her that "there's no comfort in dying" (343). Instead of adhering to the official rhetoric, Sabita's brother longs for the "many stories" (345) she has to tell. This personal rather than community-oriented approach fosters a relaxed atmosphere, encourages positive thoughts, and triggers childhood memories that come easier than those of traumatic experiences in spite of temporal distance. "The evening sun had just started to fade" (343), and if its metaphorical meaning is considered, it is possible to foresee an immediate turn of events that might put Sabita's wishful thinking on hold. The following paragraphs are extremely short. Formal fragmentation goes hand in hand with contents that delve deeper into sensory perceptions until the protagonist overhears her brother reprehending their mother for having a bath in the small hours:

Looking a little embarrassed, her mother said, ‘What else could I do, tell me? After all, I have been holding and cuddling the baby the whole day.’

‘So what if you did!’ [...]

‘Well,’ Sabita heard her mother say ‘just because she has raised him in her lap, it does not make him a child of this family, does it?’ (344)

That final touch connects with Ahmed’s notion of ‘disgust’, which has an effect on the physical sphere despite its ideological origin. The insistence of the mother to wash Sabita throughout the story loses its anecdotal nature once her ulterior motives come to light. Additionally, religious and social beliefs—although generally unspecified—prevail over family for a woman who displays clear generational differences with descendants who do not share such a deeply-rooted idea of honour. The mother seeks purification through her actions, which link Sabita to her traumatic past indefinitely. Still, the worst punishment comes from the words that construct her as an outcast in her own home. In the same way that the restoration of abducted women can only be effective on a geographical level, never on an emotional one; the combination of politics, faith and traumas is irreversible and hinders any possible demonstration of affection, whether bodily or verbal.

With respect to the second short story, “The Stricken Daughter” presents a similar scenario in which a woman who had also been abducted must abide by legal dictates and accept being handed over to her legitimate family. Regardless of the manifold repetitions, Arundhuti’s case is not exactly identical to Sabita’s. In fact, the issues that set them apart flow from the individuality that pervades their common circumstances. Retrieving the title of Bagchi and Dasgupta’s book, it could be argued that “Embrace” delves into suppressed trauma whereas “The Stricken Daughter” leaves room for the appearance of a potential—albeit never fully accomplished—triumph.

The first page addresses the function of memory. Arundhuti would “return to any of the earlier chapters of her life”, but remains decidedly reluctant to remember an abduction that lasted years: “It would have been indeed better if she could forget it all” (2008b: 323). Silence, altered sensory perceptions and the darkness of the night are also a leitmotiv running through the story that permeates a trauma spanning “[n]ot one, but several chapters” (324), inasmuch as any future happening is inevitably influenced by the past. During her captivity, she considers giving up, burying her head in “unclean

waters” closely associated with the impure, accepting “her much-hated husband” and taking as her own the “child that was born out of that one monstrous act of love” (324). Fiction as a tool to overcome trauma starts to take effect as the main character seeks refuge in her consciousness and as fairy-tale lexis is incorporated. Arundhuti becomes “a princess locked up” who is to be rescued by police officers “of yet another world” (324). She greets them with a nearly verbatim account of Sabita’s words in an attempt to avoid her repatriation, but once again, the lady thought to be helpless is not allowed to choose her future, neither in fantasy nor in real life.

Her home is no longer “the same happy abode of the earlier times” (324) and the reactions of her relatives match those of Sabita’s family; they also share the shame and the doubts. As for novelties, readers are introduced to a neighbourhood which does not feel the pain of others, but pities those who suffer it; that is, they limit themselves to “sympathy” rather than empathy for a woman who, according to them, has “lost her chastity and honour” (325). Proposed solutions include placing the baby in an orphanage, living as a widow or moving out. Nevertheless, Arundhuti wonders whether there is a single “neighbourhood where an open sore wouldn’t attract a fly” (327), since the two forms of violence acknowledged by Dey combine here to prolong the hurt. Although the wound of Partition for women is caused by members of other communities, it is usually those of one’s own that prevent it from healing.

Nonetheless, the main difference between this short story and “Embrace” lies in the economic factor. Arundhuti’s family lacks a paternal figure to provide for them because of previous riots. As a result, the protagonist seeks to “try for a job” (327), an action that would endow her with a certain degree of independence by means of venturing into the predominantly masculine sphere of the workplace. Once there, she encounters Subimal, a former love interest whom she had not seen for almost a decade, given that “all those [they] knew, got scattered” (329). In the absence of physical distance, traumatic events interfere in personal relations up to the point in which Arundhuti is certain that “the disgraceful event [had] paled that love” (329). Affection changes based on previous actions and, regardless of Subimal’s belief in the immutability of minds in a “world [that] is not the same any longer”, those who have experienced trauma first-hand know that they cannot “rely on their own minds” (331).

That is why the main character waits for her mother to tell Subimal the truth about her past while deep down she hopes her words do not produce negative effects.

While that delicate matter is being settled, Arundhuti receives a letter “from that dreaded enemy” who urges her to return “of own free will” (332). Her abductor offers three options: to go back, to hand over their child or to agree on visiting arrangements. Such an unexpected message takes a greater psychological toll when Arundhuti finds out that her friend Madhuri, who happens to be Subimal’s sister, had been abducted and subjected to the “careful avoidance and deliberate forgetfulness” (333) of loved ones who also suffer the absence and rely heavily on the power of silence. The fact that Subimal himself refers to her as a “fallen woman” (334) suggests that the ground rules of a community prevail over the emotional bonds of its members. Her disappearance took place in a train and, beyond its similarities with Arundhuti’s, it highlights the hypocrisy of Subimal, who would not even address the protagonist if he knew about her past. Madhuri also had a chance to return, but was ostracized by her own family. Men could not face having been unable to protect her and women saw their potential marriages compromised by her disgrace. What is more, Madhuri was advised to “hide this personal scandal all her life” (335). Unable to express her trauma, she is kept from rising above it.

For Madhuri’s relatives, her death would have been preferable to dishonour. However, Arundhuti claims that “[s]he might have lived better, accepting her own fate, but it was all of you who created such a national stir” (335). Her words encompass Partition and the exacerbated nationalism that tells women how they are supposed to behave if they want to belong. The main character takes one further step when she appropriates Subimal’s words to affirm that the mind is the most important component in a human being, to which he replies that “the mind is controlled by the body. Once the body is polluted...” (335). His unfinished sentence confirms the prevailing ideology while restricting his opinion about bodies to female ones. Apart from exploring questions of disgust, the allusion to the mind-body dichotomy objectifies women and deprives them of reason by implying that they only obey primitive instincts. Actually, their minds harbour the lasting effects of an “unbearable, mental agony” (336) which did not originate in their bodies, but in the way these were perceived in the eyes of some men.

Opinions regarding Madhuri and Arundhuti drive the latter towards an unhappy ending. Since “[h]er entire life had been destroyed, her respect and dignity had been trampled on, and her right to speak out had been snatched away from her” (336), rejoining her abductor becomes the only viable option. Nevertheless, she forgives neither him nor Subimal, once again pointing out a damage that comes from members of both communities. Regarding her future, her indecisiveness vanishes when she agrees to meet her abductor, accompanied by their child. Going back to him is the lesser of two evils when the alternative is to suffer the rejection of a nation that suppresses empathy to protect its own idea of homeland. That is precisely what turns her decision into an imposition. In her own words, “[s]he hadn’t wanted to come back, after all, it was the entire world that was receding. It was forcing her and everybody else to move back” (338). Eventually, the regression will be detrimental to society as a whole. The much-awaited triumph that could have followed trauma results in the same old wound, thus perpetuating a chain of events in which, once again, the negation of affection brings about ill effects.

Conclusions

Chaudhury’s short stories encapsulate some of the most conspicuous characteristics of what abduction and its subsequent trauma meant for women. In fact, Sabita and Arundhuti embody a reality long neglected in history books. Their shared past is secondary to the variables that come into play after their return, which proves that there is no such thing as a single story when it comes to abducted women. Moreover, the lack of religious specificity throughout the narrative is far from stressing the polarity among communities. Allusions to rituals and beliefs are either veiled or non-existent in an attempt to prioritize the human factor and the traumatic experiences unleashed by Partition.

On another note, the possibility of flouting gender performativity, as observed by Butler, is also appropriate in the process of rewriting, whether it concerns myths or history itself. Disobeying their abductors may be understood as a reaction crucial for survival rather than as an act of rebellion. Yet, when characters who have been forcefully repatriated decide to act against the demands of their own governments, not

only do they subvert the patterns of behaviour imposed on women, but they also undermine the suitability of national and nationalistic policies that subordinate their will to the status quo. Notwithstanding, the stories reveal that subversion seldom lasts as a result of the decisive and somewhat destructive influence of society.

Ultimately, the inner circle of abducted women holds the key to their recovery. While a traumatic experience cannot be totally forgotten, friends and relatives can facilitate integration and adjustment, provided that yielding to intense social and political pressure is resisted. The past of the abducted was the consequence of irreversible actions, the effects of which are still felt. Their future, however, was dependant on words: those included in legal documents, those shaping national identity, those uttered by unwelcoming community members, those used as a tool to overcome trauma, and those of families who could rekindle affection. Just as language destroys and rebuilds, fiction rightly inscribes historical wrongs.

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