



Coming Out Of Hindu Refugee Women In The Public Sphere

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Abstract: This paper attempts to study the role of women in recreating the space in the process of resettling in the outskirts of Calcutta. If Partition has destroyed a whole generation of women, it has also provided an opportunity for many women to move into the public sphere which was even unimaginable to many women before Partition. Such large-scale displacement of women made the country think about workplaces where women were a new presence and on political mobilization where women began to participate in great numbers. Not all women welcomed this newfound independence. This individual freedom was also a form of slavery, a burden which one can neither carry, nor avoid. Women's dominion, sphere, and location have always been inside the house and have been connected, across time and cultures, to a private world apart from a public one inhabited by males. Compared to their male compatriots, women were far more vociferous. Since they were more receptive to criticism and more eager to speak out against the system when surrounded by supportive individuals, refugee women were the first to organise. Even the screaming fits that hungry kids would throw at home had to be dealt with. This is how women started to take care of both the outside world and their homes. Hindu refugee women gradually started to make their public debuts.

Index Terms: Partition, Hindu, Refugee, Women, Workplace,

This paper attempts to study the role of women in recreating the space in the process of resettling in the outskirts of Calcutta. Rachel Weber makes a discrimination between the traditional and privileged women making the passage from the home to the world and the passage in the case of the displaced refugee women:

The type of analysis which separates spaces so rigidly and then speaks of a coming out does not reflect the complex relations between women, power and space. Women do not simply cross these borders when they cross the thresholds of their houses. It is not as simple as the same in Satyajit Ray's interpretation of Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) when Bimala walks through the splendidly-lit corridor into the public world of men and nationalist politics. Refugee women did not really move into not really move into public life, but rather the domestic world expanded to include their participation in political, community and economic affairs. (Rachael 78-79)

It has been seen that the uprooted or dislocated women refused to succumb to the dictates of faith. They kept their new shelter in camps and refugee settlements and at the same time ventured out to acquire skills and earn. In West Bengal, particularly, the historic assertion of the refugee woman as the tireless breadwinner changed the digits of feminine aspiration of a Bengali housewife and altered the social landscape irrevocably. According to Butalia if Partition has destroyed a whole generation of women, it has also provided an opportunity for many women to move into the public sphere which was even unimaginable to many women before Partition. Due to the political turmoil of the 1940s, many women went back to East Pakistan to resume their unfinished work. After Partition, this intricate meshing of the political life of the women meant a drastic restructuring of the private-public dichotomy. The post-Partition state in Bengal was like old wine in a new bottle! Such large-scale displacement of women made the country think about workplaces where women were a new presence and on political mobilization where women began to participate in great numbers.

Women's existence was formed in a new environment by the sexual exploitation of them, frequently physical, in the daily battles of survival and the demands of the labour. Writings and personal accounts by women provide ample proof that the new obstacles kept them away from the harmful legacy of cultural nationalism. Strong Gandhian activist-women like Suhasini Das or Ashalata Sen, who had respected Gandhiji's pledge to communal harmony, had remained in East Pakistan to promote women's self-help and literacy. Remarkable historian of women's involvement in this struggle Manikuntala Sen (1987; 2000) describes the Partition as having come after upsetting the workers' and people's solidarity that had been carefully established. Under the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti, the Communist women-activists had organised women in the Tebhaga movement, and they were able to use this support network in the fight to provide Bengali refugee women a dignified existence.

The disturbance after partition left scars on the early years of independence. About 1949, Calcutta began to overflow with refugees who first took up residence on Sealdah's railway platforms before establishing refugee colonies on the city's periphery. The refugee population turned Calcutta into a militant, furious, communist metropolis where middle-class women displaced from the safety of their country homes came out to work. As Rachel Weber learned from her interviews, not all women welcomed this newfound independence. This individual freedom was also a form of slavery, a burden which one can neither carry, nor avoid. The Bengal Partition filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak has captured the essence of the new refugee women in the reestablished colonies on the outskirts of Calcutta in the epic figure of Nita, the protagonist of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Star Veiled by Clouds), the working lady with broken chappals who represented the sacrifices women made for the family's survival. Here is the sorrow and victory of Bengal's uprooted women. These uncommon accounts of the suffering of women combine myth and fact in a useful synergy. (Bagchi 27)

A country divided leaves its people in a highly unstable situation. They are compelled to leave their homeland in quest of a new place they must discover for themselves and call home, but where they are not born citizens. If one has experienced it, one may understand how incredibly awful it is. If we closely examine the homes of refugees, we will see, in one way or another, signs of uprooting. The emotional legacy that succeeding generations inherit, however, is even more painful. They were always a part of Partition during their growing up years, even if they were not its direct victims. It is very difficult to identify inherited psychological heritage, but they also become victims indirectly by listening to different stories and experiences.

Before discussing the idea of home as it is understood by women, let us examine the circumstances surrounding the departure of refugee women into the public domain. Why is it such a graphic subject if women have to leave their houses for work? They are in charge of turning a house into a home by adding warmth, affection, and the aromas of home cooking. Women's dominion, sphere, and location have always been inside the house and have been connected, across time and cultures, to a private world apart from a public one inhabited by males. Both areas have particular social and economic implications: the enshrinement of the morality, selflessness, and caring ethic that are purportedly present in the home as opposed to the world of men where profit and self-interest are paramount.

Speaking about the house increases the strain on the domestic sphere, women's turf, and requires a greater dependence on the resources and tactics found there. To allow this reorganisation of space, the lines between public and private areas go back and forth. Considering refugees, we must examine the idea of "displacement" from their point of view after they were uprooted from their home nation. Men and women experience this equally, but when a refugee woman views "displacement," it refers to moving from the private to the public domain. For a woman raised to live inside the four walls, relocation means something else entirely. Then, if that lady has to leave her house in order to provide for her family as a breadwinner, that is another type of displacement that sometimes goes against their will. Still, she chooses this life when there is no other way to provide for her family and kids.

The biggest housing scarcity to date was gripping Calcutta, leaving middle-class Bengalis attempting to live free from the state. While some were able to buy and rent homes, others traded their East Pakistani properties with Muslims. Legally obtained land was designated by the government as private colonies of refugee settlement. Some other groups of individuals invaded government-owned or privately owned empty properties by force. That is the idea of “jabardakhal”. Since most of the refugees built their hutments in wholly undeveloped and unsuitable regions, they had to clear the ground, down trees, build tube wells, and dig drains in order to find a place to live. In addition, the monsoonal floods exposed them to contagious infections.

Having grown up in these colonies on little plots, the refugees saw them as their own setups that they could change whatever they pleased. Living in government camps was not to their taste; they chose to live in these colonies. When the government became involved in resettling the refugees in public housing, they refused to go to government camps in the crowded city centre since they had built their “place of living” according to their own specifications. The refugees, who were uprooted individuals who were unsure about the permanence of their homes, may change their surroundings and their requirements on their own lands. Maybe the thought of being uprooted and having to relocate again tormented them. The refugees developed their families and money, but they built rooms to their hutments fairly slowly since they were reluctant to settle. Plot allocation suited the refugees’ need for flexibility and control over their own lives and permitted regular upgrades and changes.

The building of refugee colonies and the change from a large “bastu” to a small “bari” required both a physical rearranging and a change in the emotional ties to the home. Gender and women’s connection to public and private areas were refigured along with this reorganisation of space. Rebuilding the household and the nation was the new objective at this time, and women’s roles both within and outside the house shifted to meet these new obligations. Houses were spread out in more rural, sparsely inhabited parts of East Pakistan. An “andarmahal,” or women’s separate area, was located mostly around the kitchen or an inner courtyard. Sometimes the “andarmahal” was a whole other structure with a separate pond for washing dishes and taking baths. In general, the women’s sphere was meant to be physically apart from the “bahir,” or outside, men’s dwelling area, and from the “kachharighar,” or workplace. Depending on the particular family, the degree of rigidity in the separation between “andar” and “bahir” varied, with male family members and even elder female relatives upholding the barrier. The only exception to this ban was for visits to family members.

Their homes in Calcutta were small and their families lacked the funds or property to construct a separate inner area when they first arrived. Actually, after moving to a completely new nation, it was challenging to create more than one room. They were not well enough off or employed in respectable jobs to have fulfilling lives. With the relocation to West Bengal, the physical barriers separating the private and public domains vanished. Women were now forced to share their quarters with males, sleeping in the same room as their male relatives, for the first time, even though they were not permitted to gaze out to the male quarters. Their introduction to the world of men exposed them to fresh concepts and the political and commercial concerns that the men talked about. It resulted in a politicisation and an increasing consciousness of the community issues brought about by the refugees residing in the colonies.

The society of the refugee colony as well as the houses were structured differently overall. The settlement’s spatial layout featured several layers: certain plots had direct access to a street, but these plots were encircled by more plots, and so on. As so, getting where one wanted to go frequently required crossing over someone else’s land. Most of the people walked or had to hire bicycles or autorickshaws since the streets were too narrow to handle vehicles. A short walk from even the furthest point of the village were the temple complex and the market, two hubs of activity.

One may wonder, perhaps, whether all of this literature about refugee settlements is necessary. My goal is to draw attention to the evident way that the transition from a secluded society to a heavily populated colony with a bazaar influenced women’s entry into the public domain. This form of settlement led to increased contact with the community—both neighbours and strangers—as well as knowledge that resulted from getting to know other people in the same situation. (Moser) Women had to leave their homes to fetch water from the pump by themselves, talk about the most recent scarcity of rice or kerosene, trade useful tips and relate personal experiences. Women in the community developed friendships, closeness, and a fresh connection with other women with the passing of “andarmahal”. Before Partition, these public spaces like bazaars were not even thought of being accessible by women. Now, nonetheless, they might go into the public domain.

Financial need drove women “out of their homes.” In the 1950s, hordes of women—who had never worked outside the home before and who, in East Pakistan, had never actually meant to—joined the wage workforce. They had lived in places devoid of the professional, service-oriented economy that a big metropolis like Calcutta could sustain. Without the properties and the combined incomes of a big joint family to support them, women found appropriate occupations. They started off as tutors, teachers, office workers, tailors, and small-business owners. The working women who sacrificed their comforts at home for the family’s survival, became a familiar sight on the congested streets of central Calcutta and on different kinds of public transit. Ladies’ section on public buses and trams provided women who opted to enter the public domain symbolic refuge from the state.

Compared to their male compatriots, women were far more vociferous. Since they were more receptive to criticism and more eager to speak out against the system when surrounded by supportive individuals, refugee women were the first to organise. When their men returned home broken, women had to beg money and go out for meals. Even the screaming fits that hungry kids would throw at home had to be dealt with. This is how women started to take care of both the outside world and their homes. Hindu refugee women gradually started to make their public debuts.

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