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On the Margins: The ‘Subaltern Space’ in Partition Narratives

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Abstract:

The historiography of the 1947 Partition of India is punctuated by the names of political leaders and social events that eventually led to the vivisection of the nation. The cartographical changes resulting in two distinct geographical spaces often push the gendered spaces that became conspicuous as a result of the partition of India, to the margins. While we tend to unravel the nuances of the macrocosmic changes brought about by partition, the microcosmic changes and the simultaneous emergence of a ‘subaltern’ space often evade our attention. Women occupy an ‘interstitial space’ in most partition narratives. They were truly ‘un-homed’. They not only had to migrate from one nation to the other but in the process were also relegated to the margins of the partition narratives; labeled as either ‘attached’ or ‘unattached’ at the time of Partition and the subsequent period thereafter. This paper seeks to underline the obliterated sufferings of women, their silences during the 1947 Partition of India and they being falsely represented on the margins. Based on Ritwik Ghatak’s 1960 film ‘Meghe Dhaka Tara’ and Satyajit Ray’s 1963 film ‘Mahanagar’, I argue that the ordeals of Partition were experienced by women for a prolonged period; in their quest for empowerment they had to struggle and negotiate spaces.

Keywords: Partition, partition narratives, Ritwik Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, subaltern space.

Introduction

Broadly speaking, for Indians, remembering Partition means recalling the dark side of independence, a moment of loss, a moment when the country was divided and that which was lost was immeasurable...but much more that could not be articulated, sometimes not even named (Butalia, 1998.pp viii).

The 1947 partition of India is fraught with memories of macabre violence. The nation witnessed a frenzy of obdurate religious dogmas, orgiastic massacre and a baffling incomprehension of the sudden upturning of 'spaces'-- territorial and metaphorical. Around fifteen million people on both sides of the borders of erstwhile Bengal and Punjab province found themselves suddenly being deracinated from their roots as migrants and refugees in exile. While we engage in profound discussions of the sudden deterritorialization of the primary dwellings such as the birthplace, language, family and culture, during and after the 1947 partition of India, we often disregard the upturning of the gendered spaces¹ Among several other invisible aspects of the partition, the conflict of the gendered spaces and the upturning of the feminine space calls for exploration and documentation. While there are copious accounts of brutalities affecting the feminine space, the gendered nature of the experience of violence has relegated this space to the margins.

In this paper, I examine how the feminine space is falsely represented on the margins of partition narratives. The alternative source of partition narratives – cinema and oral history, help us recognize the otherwise invisible feminine 'space'. This space, ambiguously seen as peripheral was associated with the metaphors of land, honour and valor; key-words that played crucial roles in constructing the idea of nationhood. Narratives that have emerged from the inhabitants of this marginalized space can fill the void in the historiography of partition and bring to the surface the undiscovered accounts that catalyzed the construction of two different nations.

The idea of nationhood is not dissociated from the rigid definitions of gendered 'spaces'; it involves specific notions of womanhood and manhood. In this paper, I attempt to assess how 'spatial' characteristic of the idea of womanhood and manhood affect the construction of nationhood and vice-versa. My argument here is premised on the fact that femininity and masculinity are not looked upon as inherent qualities ascribed to women and men; they often become adjectives that qualify women and men and turn them into 'spaces'. These 'spaces' have been rendered peripheries and their modes of representation connote rigidity. The 1947 partition of India made it evident that the idea of nationhood is equally affected by the gendered 'spaces' and the conflict arising because of their defined spatial allocations. The construction of nationhood and the discourse of nationalism have always tried to locate women within a private domestic sphere while arriving at a definition of

¹ Here I draw reference from Homi Bhabha's concept of a creative space that lies between the discourse or position of the ruling subject and the discourse or position of the subaltern subject. According to Bhabha (1994) this space is inscribed within the communicative situation itself.

women and womanhood. The public or the political arena is always designed to accommodate men and define men and manhood as protectors and defenders of women and the state. The relation of the state and gender are intricately intertwined and it appropriates state violence as a gendered construct. Therefore the suffering of women during and in the aftermath of the 1947 partition of India is rooted in national culture and gendered nationalism.

Women are identified with their physical bodies. This subjects them to oppression in a patriarchal society. Considered as metonymic vehicles for communicating reprisals between opposing patriarchal forces, women had to undergo the worst form of subjugation and bodily theft or harm during the partition. Over 75000 women and girls had to endure the heinous brutalities of the partition paroxysm. Women were abducted, raped and mutilated. They were treated as objects and marked as symbols of possession for they were associated with the metaphor of land/nation. They had to undergo the humiliation of their bodies being reduced to 'mourning sites'². Women's bodies were also looked upon as symbols of a family's 'honour'. Words like honour and purity characterised the idea of womanhood, thereby, becoming essential qualifiers of the feminine 'space'. This leads one to deliberate on the idea of the female body as 'symbol' and also as 'agent' of homogenization. This shall be elaborated later in this paper.

While we look at the social conflict(s) that resulted in the partition, we cannot remain oblivious to the conflict of the masculine space and the feminine space. In this paper I attempt to understand the different ways in which religion, gender and nation intermingle and result in the interpolation of the feminine 'space'. The conflict between the masculine and the feminine space is largely because the female body has always been a contested site the world over. In the context of the 1947 partition of India, the female body as a contested site reassessed the peripheries of the feminine 'space'.

'In the Indian context, the woman's body is a space where culturally coded and socially sanctioned norms of the desirable woman are inscribed.../ Virginitly and chastity are virtues, which are entrenched as part of the socialization pattern of girls' (Mathur, 2008: 54).

² I draw references from Urvashi Butalia's idea, 'History is a Woman's Body', for the female body has always been treated as a site where power is played out and the idea of nationalism is constructed (Butalia 1998. pp.143).

The female body as a 'site' is therefore bereft of the rights to emotional, mental, psychological and physical spaces. The masculine space acts as an interloper of the feminine space. The feminine space is colonised by the masculine space which treats the feminine space as a site that marks their honour and becomes a badge of valour for the masculine space. 'My child, what of a woman? It's her lot to be used either by her own men or by the others' (*translated* in Bhasin and Menon, 2022/1998. p.45). At least half of the millions who ended up becoming migrants and refugees were women. Women were exiled not only from their 'homes' but also from their families in most instances. They were dishonoured by outsiders and abandoned by their own. Here I will employ the theoretical framework as proposed in anthropological studies where 'two primary theoretical orientations towards the body have emerged: the body as 'symbol' and the body as 'agent' (Reischer and Koo, 2004.p.297).

Body as 'symbol' and Body as 'agent'

Violence is almost always instigated by men, but its greatest impact is felt by women. In violent conflict, it is women who are raped, women who are widowed, women whose children and husband are sacrificed in the name of national integrity and unity. And for every fire that is lit, it is women whose job is to painfully build a future from the ashes (Butalia 1993. pp.ws-13).

Following the Partition, it was realized that the history of the formation of the two nations was brutally inscribed on the sites of the bodies of women. The feminine space was not only ruptured but it was also made invisible because the bodies of women were turned into a contending site. Both men and women found themselves at the vortex of a baffling incomprehension unable to reconcile with their outer and inner world. The masculine space has always been an interloper of the feminine space. But in the context of the 1947 Partition of India, the masculine space in the course of acquiring new contours and fortifying their territories, the masculine space overturned the feminine space and 'deployed it in the major re-drawing of the public borders and boundaries' (Bagchi and Dasgupta, 2009/2003. p.5).

In the context of Partition, it engraved the division of India into India and Pakistan on the women of both religious communities in a way that they *became* the respective countries, indelibly imprinted by the Other (Bhasin and Menon, 2022/1998 p.43; italics original).

However, ‘the nationalist or masculinist bias in gendering the nation relegates women and women’s roles to the periphery’ (Nira Yuval-Davis as cited in Alexander, 2011, p.373). As Nira Yuval-Davis rightly claims in *Gender and Nation*, ‘it is women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically’ (ibid.). Nationalism therefore becomes a mode of articulation of masculine prowess in order to repress women and control their sexuality (Mayer cited in Alexander, 2011, p.373). The female body gets differently constructed in the course of her life by patriarchy and varying circumstances. Their bodies are sometimes constructed as ‘symbols’ and at times as ‘agents’. The trope ‘where the land meets the body’—the female body metonymically parallels land and becomes a symbol of masculine desire and man’s ownership (Alexander, 2011, p. 375).

...the dramatic episodes of violence against women during communal riots bring to the surface, savagely and explicitly, familiar forms of sexual violence – now charged with a *symbolic* meaning that serves as an indicator of the place that women’s sexuality occupies in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations.... The most predictable form of violence experienced by women, as women, is when women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by “dishonouring” their women (Menon and Bhasin, 2022/1998, p. 41; emphasis added).

Women have suffered primarily because they were looked upon as objects owned by men; they ‘treat women’s bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed or marked by the assailant’ (ibid., p.43). On 6 December, 1947, both the newly formed nations came to a consensus that women would be ‘recovered’ (ibid.). The word ‘recovery’ had an underlying connotation which objectified women. They were treated as possessions of men of both the newly found nations. The trials and tribulations of women were, therefore, not limited to migrating from one nation to the other. While the nation was moaning its vivisection, women had to find a ‘space’ for themselves. Women, during partition lost not only their ‘homes’³ but found themselves grappling for a ‘space’ that they could identify with. Assimilation posed a

³ The lives of refugees and migrants is characterised by the conundrum of home for ‘home’ is not only a reference to a physical space but it also refers to a mental space of yearning, emotions and friends left behind. Though one might reconstruct the physical home, the emotional space can barely be reconstructed.

challenge for them; finding their own agency in order to transcend from a site to occupy a space in a dominantly patriarchal ecosystem seemed impossible.

In Gyan Pandey's words, partition narratives help us understand, 'histories of confused struggle and violence, sacrifice and loss, the tentative forging of new identities and loyalties' (Bhasin and Menon, 2022/1998, p.8). In our attempt to understand the larger canvas of the partition, we often choose to remain oblivious to the subjects placed on the margins. The social implications of the 1947 Partition of India on the peripheries do not often find a place for themselves in the narratives. Intensely conditioned by political structures and political documentation, we barely try to have an alternative optics of the event. The theoretical framework in this paper helps in understanding the social upheavals during the partition and in its aftermath through the lens of gender. My analysis in this paper is limited to the case of women refugees from East Bengal.

Women Refugees: *Bhadramahilas*⁴ from East Bengal

Although it is suggested that the Bengal province did not witness the hyperbolic ugliness that Punjab had to bear, the plight of women of both the provinces were equally hideous. Understanding the mobility and the transformation of women during and after the Partition requires one to understand the language of gender dynamics. As women gradually developed an agency for themselves and started assimilating in the host city, there was an immediate calibration of the gendered 'spaces' – outer and inner, the home and the streets.

Millions of men, women and children entered West Bengal between late 1946 and early 1971....

Partition made the real difference in the female-male ratio as, according to census data there were 580 women per 1000 men in Calcutta in 1951 as against 456 women per 1000 men in 1941. The female-male ratio further improved in favor of women (612) in 1961. In Urban West Bengal the ratio moved even more in favor of women during the post-partition years (Chakravarty, 2013, p. 583).

⁴ I draw references from the idea that 'the position of women in traditional Bengali society allowed her only to tend to the home' while the man should be the bread-winner of the family. A 'gentle' woman's 'space' should be within the 'private domain of domesticity and child rearing' (Guha-Choudhury: 2009).

‘Ella Moore describes how in the post-independence era, the *bhadralok*, by virtue of his class position, social status and education, became an agent in creating knowledge’ (Banerjee, 2018, p.2). However, the scenario gradually underwent a change with the advent of large number of refugee families in Calcutta (now Kolkata), especially women. Women who ended up on the streets and in refugee camps did not have the same privacy that they once enjoyed back in their ‘home’. These displaced people who ended up being refugees had migrated to India in order to save their lives and ensure their families’ safety. However, once they had migrated they had nothing else to do but wait to move on from their traumatic experience, wait to start their life afresh, wait to establish a life that bore at least some resemblance to the normalcy that once characterised their lives. Wait to assimilate in their adopted land, to be accepted as members of the nation-state. The refugees carved out identities for themselves through persistent effort and a continuous process.

In this history of assimilation, it is interesting to note that the gender politics still continued. Women gained physical access to public spaces but were still falsely treated as the ‘subaltern’. Their emancipation therefore remained partial for ‘the refugee women had to contend with the maleness and class bias of the discourse on public-ness and modernity’ (Sengupta, 2016, p.128). The social implications of the ‘coming out’ of the *bhadramahilas* and their emancipation is a tale of grit and perseverance. ‘The gendered experiences of dislocation create a historical imaginary that critiques postcolonial modernity through the twin optics of family and labour’ (ibid. p.129). For the refugee woman or the emancipated *bhadramahila* was now transcending from ‘M/othering’ to finding a physical space for herself where she could exercise her own agency; in terms of both a continuation and rupture of the nationalist discourse of patriarchy. The sense of displacement for the women migrants and refugees was profound for they were victims of double jeopardy/suffering; not only were they a part of the displaced population but their gender made them subject to severe suppression.

The relationship and practices of these refugee men and women not only had an impact on the physical landscape of Calcutta (present day Kolkata), it also impacted the social-scape – the private and public spaces developed a vocabulary that articulated the desires and aspirations of the ‘subaltern’. It also allowed the women to gradually move from the margins to the centre and open avenues for their narratives to be put forward. Partition narratives have been captured on both celluloid and texts. The experience of partition is unique to every individual; hence a monolithic worldview is not viable to understand the impact of the partition. “No matter how they faced the vivisection --- as refugees, displaced

or rooted to their soil ---the emotional reactions were essentially pluralistic in nature” (Bagchi, Dasgupta, Ghosh .2009: p.x). It must be reiterated that gender too was a determinant of this emotional plurality.

Cinematic representation of Partition gives us a glimpse of the underlying emotional and gendered dynamics. It is essential to note that most of the cinematic representation of partition is not merely a window to the brutality and the blood-bath; it provides a glimpse of the historical consciousness. Cinema becomes a text that constructs a specific history and locality of displacement that is complicated by gender. A phenomenological assessment of Cinema as the text helps us answer the salient epistemological question of the social and political implications of the upturning of the gendered spaces and transformations in the women's domestic and public spaces. To elucidate this I shall refer to two Bengali cinemas – Ritwik Ghatak's⁵ 1960 film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (The Cloud-Capped Star) and Satyajit Ray's 1963 film *Mahanagar* (The Big City) as media of narration that construct experiential truth.

Cinema as text⁶: *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Mahanagar*

As Partha Chatterjee in his review of *Ritwik Ghatak's stories* rightly claims, 'Ghatak's stories stand on their own' (2001.p.164.) Most of Ghatak's films are adaptations of Bengali novels that were written before he entered cinema. However, Ghatak himself being refugee from East Bengal probably could read these novels and later adapt them into his films, thus provides us with an 'insider' perspective of the novels. The 1947 partition of India had a huge impact on the director. It deprived him of the culture of his native land. He had been uprooted from his '*bhite*' (one's ancestral home). His films thus help us understand both the crisis and the revolution that took place among numerous refugees. Cinema is a distinctly different medium of artistic expression. It has the power of capturing nuances and presenting them to initiate a discourse. Geo-political events like the 1947 partition of India rely heavily on prosthetic memory. These memories when translated into cinema put forth aspects that are often pushed to the margins. The politics of gender is one such component which gains prominence in cinema on partition. The agonies, trauma and the plight of the feminine space which I have in this paper referred to as the 'subaltern space' is aptly and best portrayed in

⁵ Ritwik Ghatak himself was a refugee from East Bengal who spent several days on the Sealdah platform because he was among several of the 'homeless' refugees who were waiting to be assimilated in Calcutta. It is therefore of no surprise that he went on to direct *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha* and *Komal Gandhar*, films that portray the angst of partition-induced refugees and their plight of finding themselves a 'home' in their adopted land.

⁶ I derive this idea from Mosarrap Hossain Khan's 'Literature and film: an alternative archive of Partition of India' in Jaydip Sarkar and Rupayan Mukherjee edited *Partition Literature and Cinema: A Critical Introduction*

cinema. It will not be an exaggeration to assert that partition studies would be incomplete if cinema is not understood/ referred to as a text to unravel the nuances that dictated the ‘everyday-lives’ of the partition migrants and the factors that intensified these nuances.

Meghe Dhaka Tara, based on a social novel of the same title by Saktipada Rajguru revolves around Neeta, who with her family was among the many refugees from East Bengal who lived in the suburbs of Calcutta trying to reconstruct a life they had lost. The protagonist of the story, a woman sacrifices her own happiness for her unappreciative family. As with most *bhadramahilas* from East Bengal, this film also portrays the ‘coming out’ of Neeta to support her family financially. Encumbered by the increasing demands of her family members, Neeta sacrifices her personal happiness, her money and her health. Despite such acts of sacrifice, her achievements are hardly ever recognized by the people around her. In the film Ritwik Ghatak presents a ‘visually sublime, idiosyncratically overripe, but provocative and deeply personal account of poverty, disillusionment and exile’ (Nair. 2013) – all the characteristics that described the refugee population that had suddenly become conspicuous in the Calcutta landscape. The key component of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* is the harmonization of the personal with the socio-historical condition. Neeta ultimately becomes the family’s sole-breadwinner. The movie becomes an allegory for the traumatic vivisection of the public and the private, the disintegration of a Bengali middle class and a tale of the emergence of newer forms of patriarchal control. Neeta attempts to recuperate but her cry of anguish becomes only a resonant echo of millions of deracinated people and especially woman refugees who try to lay bare the oppression of their private domestic spaces into the public sphere.

Satyajit Ray’s 1963 *Mahanagar*, based on a short story *Abataranika* by Narendranath Mitra is a reflection of the contemporary realities of the post-partition Calcutta. It presents before us how women going to work had gradually emerged as an economic reality and was no longer an idea of women’s emancipation. This film presents before us optics of the newly emerged forms of masculine hegemony. The film is set in Calcutta during the 1950s. Arati, the protagonist takes a job as a door-to-door saleswoman to boot her family. Earning one’s living was not easy for she had to fight against the control exercised by her family, especially the disapproval of her father-in-law and her begrudgingly supporting husband who asks her to quit her job. Arati eventually becomes the sole breadwinner of her family. The film beautifully portrays how the private domestic sphere undergoes a change when a housewife from a middle-class refugee family in Calcutta gets a job as a saleswoman. The evolving independence of the woman of the household threatens the masculine space. The film is a

reflection of the gender complications that determined the distribution of power both within and outside the refugee families. Members of both the genders struggled for space. The public sphere/space was now a place where women too ventured out trying to extend the territories of the female space. With the reorganization of the spaces, came a 'refiguring of gender'.

The joyous celebration of their sexuality is founded on the reality of refugee-hood that forces them to participate in the labour market to become key agents of visible change both inside and outside their homes. The tradition bound housewife, the unlettered grandmother, the once school-going daughter leave their domestic and limited spheres and come out in the streets, literally. Uneducated women sewed clothes, made *thongas* or paper bags at home or worked as maid servants to supplement family incomes while their educated counterparts taught in colony schools or as nurses and telephone operators/ receptionists in private or government offices (Sengupta. 2016: 136).

Neeta, the refugee girl in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, dressed in a sari with a cloth bag hanging from her shoulders and her tired feet in equally worn-out slippers is an indelible image of several such refugee women who navigated the city of Calcutta, forlornly with memories of a homeland (*desh*) left behind and with the hope of rebuilding their lives from the debris of the past. The contradictions of a displaced life intertwined with the allegories and myths of a post-partition modernity characterised the feminine space that was constantly trying to extend beyond the limits of the private sphere and leave its marks on the public sphere against all oddities posed by the patriarchal society.

Conclusion

The trajectory of a refugee woman's life in the context of the 1947 Partition of India – from being treated as metaphor associated with land to the feminine space eventually gaining their own agency to define the territories of this space deserves to be explored and documented. Women's vulnerability at being sacrificed in the name of 'honour' and valor, her tragic struggle to transcend from being a 'site' to physically owning a space seem eponymous to partition's inner contradictions. Post-partition Calcutta witnessed refugee families of middle-class origin begrudgingly allowing the women of their household to work outside—the public space. The traditional antagonistic attitude of limiting the feminine space

within the private, domestic peripheries could no longer be adhered to. However, the epistemological question that I tried to address in this paper with reference to Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* is: did women's access to public space translate to a wider access to gender equality? One can come to an understanding that despite their foray into the public space, there was lack of agency or one might say it was partial. Yet, it was impactful and should not be pushed to the margins. The marked privileging of a specific gender has tried to control the narrative of the partition while pushing the women and their narratives to the peripheries. However, to develop an understanding one has to look at the misrepresented, feminine space -- the 'subalterns'. For the voices of the 'subaltern' can provide a wealth of perspective to Partition scholarship. With the dissolution of the private and the public and the feminine space finding an exposure to the world of men, albeit partial enhanced their bonds with other women of the community – this was their tutelage in survival. This narrative of survival presents an alternative understanding of the partition which is otherwise fuzzy with violence and religious parochialism. The narratives of the women provide optics of resilience and courage – their journey from initial powerlessness to affirmation of authority in Partition narratives present before us the power of silence, dignity and courage. It helps define the feminine space as a territory of preservation, of assertion against predicament.

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