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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 45 – REFUGEE, DESH AND NATION
AGENCY/LACK THEREOF FOR THE IMMIGRANT WOMAN

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Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Udit Sen – There are four stereotyped images of the refugee woman – (a) bodies vulnerable to rape and dishonour, (b) economically and socially marginal members who could, by definition, not be rehabilitated, (c) unequal participants in the refugee movement whose contributions were seen as inspirational and symbolic rather than substantive, (d) bread-owners who transgressed the proper roles of homemakers.
- The Bengali *bhadralok* society's reaction to refugee working women – (a) lamenting their fate by highlighting their deprivation as spinsters (b) pointing to their dishonour of 'sinking' to prostitution. The woman's genuine agency is absent from this rhetoric.



Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Prafulla Chakrabarty – “What is most disturbing is that their way of life is finding acceptance among young men and women of the conformist, traditional society of West Bengal. The abysmal poverty is pulling down the entire, existing social order...”
- The refugee woman’s economic compulsions purportedly turned her into a victim of prostitution. Paradoxically, her immorality sustained the family on the one hand, and corroded honour and social values of the community on the other.
- The males in the colonies referred to these women as indulging in *patal probesh* (descending to hell).



Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Another stereotype of middle-class refugee woman is the self-sacrificing unmarried educated girl, who is the chief bread-earner of the family and 'doomed' as spinster.
- Ironically, besides ruing their fate, not much was done to improve their conditions. The refugee woman was denied the authority of the earner in larger society, nor was there any consideration for the well-being of their health as of the male breadwinner → active without agency.
- While displaced children's schools were state-run, women were helped only by isolated interventions of charity and welfare work.
- These stereotypes were pointed to the working women, who were perceived as destabilizing the orthodox and patriarchal Bengali middle-class value system.

Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Sen - These images hardly reflected the lives and choices of the refugee women. These stereotypes rather pointed to the anxiety of the Bengali male refugees regarding their social status, ideals and traditions that had, in many cases, seen as a 'fall' or were going through trying times.
- The male anxiety transcribed to women's body, causing lament of imagined and sometimes real transgressions of ideal social roles.
- Sen cautions against celebrating Partition and dislocation as a harbinger of women's emancipation in WB. Census record hardly shows any significant changes in the livelihood of the middle-class Calcuttan women. A myth is formed around the refugee woman's image that either blows up or diminishes her beyond proportion.

Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Repeated stress on the 'defilement' of women during Bengal Partition in 1947, both oversimplifies and misrepresents her experiences.
- Even in the subaltern perspective of history recovered through interviews and analyses of Partition fiction, the voices of women are generally in the margins.
- Prafulla Chakraborty's *Marginal Men* mainly talks about struggles of refugees and rise of Left in WB, without mentioning the role played by the refugee women.
- In the rebuilding of lives and articulation of community identity, the imaged figure of the refugee woman inspires the most coveted values and capabilities.



Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- As a third stereotype, the woman was seen as the pioneer. While middle-class women's agitation, from Bengal and other parts of India, had a long history going back to the days of Gandhian mass mobilization, in post-Partition Calcutta, women's participation in the agitations and movements by refugees was represented as unprecedented.
- Women were positioned in the vanguard of organized resistance against the police. This exploited the cultural ethos shared both by the refugees and the government.
- Gender politics and reification of social norms – women seen as a weaker sex who were supposedly immune to physical assaults by men in public. Neglected the risk undertaken by women as norms are forgotten during conflicts.
- Sen – The real utility of the woman in such conflicts and mass rallies was derived from the fact that she was typically not expected to be involved in such activities.
- The fact that women's presence caused extreme discomfiture suggests that she was seen as a misfit and not an effective participant in these struggles.



Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Gargi Chakravarty (*Coming Out of Partition*) - focuses on the active participation of women in Left politics, their public roles in defending the illegal refugee settlements from which there were attempts to evict them, and the middle-class refugee woman's joining the workforce and at times becoming the single/main breadwinner.
- Sen - women's involvement in Marxist circles was hardly a sure marker of their progressivism. Cautions against unqualified acceptance of the working refugee woman's "emancipated" icon. Rather, she looks into the terms under which such participation was allowed.
- Instead of mimetic sources of their social realities or actual inclusion of women's voices in various Partition narratives, what was represented was a report based on cultural constructs.
- The East Bengali Hindu refugee woman's body became a site of sanctity and honour of the East Bengali *bhadralok* community.



Cultural constructs in/through artworks

- Sunil Ganguly's *Arjun* - the “lower-caste”-born Labonyo cannot rise above her situation and is raped by the colony goons, whereas Arjun, a brilliant student and an upper-caste refugee boy in the same colony heads for an affair with a rich West Bengali girl. Caste- and gender-based status quo becomes apparent.
- Atin Bandopadhyay's *Neelkontho Pakhir Khonje* - the placid Hindu East Bengali village-life is shown through the trope of a pious upper-caste Hindu family being served by the loyal Muslim *rayat*, until the “conspiring” Muslim politicians demand for a separate Pakistan. The storyline contains all the stock characters and themes – the poor, backward and lustful Muslim, the vulnerable raped Hindu widow who turns into a seductress, the Westernized and precocious Calcutta-bred children as opposed to the simple East Bengali rural boy, and the Muslim peasant girl's unrequited love for this Hindu boy.

Cultural constructs in/through artworks

- Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* - the communist terrorist groups of Bengal as highly elite and patriarchal coteries, which hold out memberships to the educated middle-class women, but locate them at the fringes of the revolution, using them only as pawns. As the most heretical of the females commit suicide, whereas others become either vain *bhadramahila* or unfortunate victims of men's disloyalty, the setting of the plot points to an aristocratic and conservative milieu.
- Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* - Nita is the symbol of Goddess *Jagaddhatri* (the Mother Giver) and the domestic courtyard a site of collective yearnings of her family members, which materialize to the detriment of her well-being. none of the corresponding male characters – her elder brother Shankar, her father, her fiancé Sanat or her younger brother Montu – are shown in similar mythological shades. In most cases, the *bhadramahila* refugees' good-natured compliance with and assistance to the fundamentally patriarchal nature of refugee struggles adhere mythic perfections to an image of woman, rather than grounding her within her current reality.
- In Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*, the female protagonist commits suicide because she marries a Dalit boy against her elder brother wish, who is the figure of a patriarch.

Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- While Calcutta became a location of contestation and conflicts among the refugees for establishment of their rights, the refugee men found the trope of “women under threat” as useful in underscoring their self-image as victims and mentally tortured persons.
- Rachel Weber – change in structure of houses of the refugees from ancestral homesteads in East Bengal to paltry colony housings in West Bengal had led to “spatial considerations” and “economic restructuring.”
- They involved an apparent breakdown of some of the timeworn *bhadralok* norms and dissolution of gender spaces.
- During the 1950s decade in West Bengal, a huge influx of women had entered the labour force, many of whom had never worked before and never intended to afterwards.

Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- There were high degree of romanticization about the path-breaking role played by the women without examining how women perceived their own actions.
- Weber – Interviews reveal that many women saw their new positions as temporary situational aberrations. Many were embarrassed and did not feel entitled to their public exposure. The moment situation turned normal/better, they returned to their domestic duties and felt they were well-ensconced.
- “Suitable jobs” – teachers, office workers, tutors, tailors and small shop managers, were popularized for women, which could be maintained alongside constant domestic responsibilities. Creating ladies’ sections in public buses and trams was the patriarchal state’s gesture of support towards women.
- Sen – Through extensive ethnographic survey, the refugee woman’s voice, otherwise silent in the process of production and circulation of images of the refugee woman, can be recovered.

Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Archit Basu Guha-Roychoudhury examines the complex nuances of freedom and oppression, which define the figure of refugee *bhadramahila* in post-Partition West Bengal.
- Despite being recurrently treated as a symbol of female emancipation, the working *bhadramahila* refugee's self-liberation was secondary to her duty of supplementing financial depression at home.
- Even as a political drive among the Dalit refugee women was observable in their coming forward to join the CPI-initiated Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti (MARS, 1943), there was no such strong indication of radicalism with respect to the *bhadramahila* immigrants.
- Coming out of the domestic confines meant struggling at a socio-cultural level with West Bengalis and at gendered and economic levels with men in general, which many middle-class-bred migrant women detested → Public exposure as compulsion bereft of choice.



Agency/Lack thereof for the Immigrant Woman

- Manikuntala Sen (foremost CPI female activists) – examines the hoax of female refugees' socio-economic advancement. “Had it not been for the pressures of necessity and numbers, it might not have been possible to push open the doors that remained closed earlier” (quoted in Basu Guha-Roychoudhury 68).
- Namita Roychowdhury - the immigrant *bhadramahila* had started working under pressure rather than with plans of economic progress (Basu Guha-Roychoudhury 67).
- Weber - the working forum ultimately absorbed assumptions of domesticity, rather than emerging as an alternate public domain. Thus, one suspects a relapsing tendency among the better-off refugee women to their pre-Partition pattern of life.
- Basu Guha-Roychoudhury – while the post-Partition times enabled women to enjoy some economic freedom, on the flip side, the literacy rate among displaced Bengali women in general was less than 50%.
- According to statistics - refugee women mostly employed in blue-collar workforce (68). Among the poorer sections, while an immigrant male's daily dole from the government was Rs.20, for a female it was Rs.12, implying that the gendered inferiority of a refugee female was sanctioned at the state level.

Thank You

