



IIT ROORKEE



NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 56 - REFUGEE WOMAN AND PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

DR. SARBANI BANERJEE
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



Begum Jaan

- Srijit Mukherjee (director) - “When at the behest of the then governor general Lord Mountbatten, the Radcliffe Commission shoddily drew the India-Pakistan border in just five weeks with no proper topographical or demographical study, it sometimes went right through forests, rivers, villages, towns and even houses. The movie is the story of one such house in Punjab, and the fight put up by its matriarch Begum Jaan who adamantly defies the order, saying no government had the right to take away her home.”
- The tale of a strong-willed woman trying to preserve a way of life in her brothel, which was being overwhelmed by fast-moving events centering the Partition.



Begum Jaan

- Brothels were usually situated outside the towns, so Begum Jaan had her brothel in between two towns on their outskirts. The story is about the partition line running through this house and the reluctance of women of the house to give it up. Instead of abandoning the house they put up a tough fight on the attackers.
- The idea of the brothel has been used by the movie to contest the division of the two countries on the basis of religion. It puts forward the question of where people that do not associate themselves with any religion, caste, creed, like prostitutes can place themselves during partition.



Continued...

- Begum Jaan calls it her home, where the customers don't worry or enquire about the caste, creed or religion of the woman. The feeling among the women of the brothel is that "there's no caste here, we are all the same. We're all prostitutes."
- The movie subverts and points out the loophole in the idea of Partition of how an imaginary line destroyed lives of thousands. The line is supposed to pass cutting apart the brothel, one side of which belongs to India and the other to Pakistan.
- A local policeman mocks the line by saying if the Britishers were creating two nations or drawing a line for a kabaddi match.

Refugee

- Gyanendra Pandey-“In the context of 1947, a moment of quite incredible uprooting and violence, displacement in its physical sense refers generally to evacuation and migration. There is, however, another rather unusual aspect to this history of displacement: one that has not been widely discussed. This is the displacement of people who found nowhere to go even after they had been pushed around from place to place - the making of people into refugees in their own homes” (1997, 2261).
- -“Several hundred thousand people were estimated to have been killed; unaccountable numbers raped and converted; and many millions uprooted and transformed into official ‘refugees’ as a result of what have been called the partition riots” (Pandey 2).

Refugee

- Joya Chatterji - -"In the recent scholarly literature about refugees, then, they emerge in a new light. Once seen as hapless victims of profound trauma, peripheral (if sometimes heroic) figures who were "collateral damage" in the unstoppable process of nation-making, they are now coming to be recognized as having been critical agents of nation- creation, whose actions and demands from below often drove policy, changing the state itself in ways that could not have been predicted" (2014, 310).

Refugee

- “In large parts of the new domains of India and Pakistan, being a Sikh or a Hindu (on the one side) or a Muslim (on the other) had become virtually synonymous with being a refugee and a foreign national. Local designations, discrimination between different sections of the different religious communities, was at a discount; and whole religious communities came to be 'suspect'” (Pandey 1997, 2264).
- Partition, writes Butalia “brought untold suffering, tragedy, trauma, pain and violence to communities who had hitherto lived together in some kind of social contract” (7).



Boundary

- Gyanendra Pandey- “There was a very short time – a mere seven years – between the first formal articulation of the demand for a separate state for the Muslims of the subcontinent and the establishment of Pakistan. The boundaries between the two new states were not officially known until two days after they had formally become independent. And, astonishingly, few had foreseen that this division of territories and power would be accompanied by anything like the bloodbath that actually eventuated” (2001, 2).
- The movie starts with a criticism of Sir Radcliffe’s unawareness of the Indian geography and yet the responsibility of the division of the country carried out by him.

Women

- Udit Sen- “Refugee women occupy a contradictory position within partition history. On one hand, they are hyper-visible as the ‘chief sufferers’ of gendered violence, including mass rapes and abductions, that accompanied and followed the partition of India. On the other hand, as soon as the focus shifts from the extraordinary and traumatic events of partition to the mundane and prolonged affair of rehabilitation, women all but disappear from the archives of the state” (201).

Women

- The government of India privileged the patrilineal nuclear family as the relevant unit for the enumeration of refugees and the disbursement of relief and rehabilitation. As a result, the male head of the family emerged as the generic refugee with whom the state interacted. Refugee women were expected to gain access to relief and rehabilitation through their male family members. However, not all refugee women could fit this ideal (Sen 2018, 201).
- Based on this, it can be inferred that had the women from the brothel in the movie given up their residence, they would have had to suffer harder in the refugee camp with no place for them, as they did not hail from a patrilineal nuclear family.

Policy

- Historians have read the state's promise of financial support for single and widowed refugee women, in diametrically opposite ways. They have either congratulated the post-colonial state for acting in the interest of vulnerable widows, or indicted it for discriminating against women and reducing them to abject victimhood (Sen 2018, 203).
- “A closer look at the evolution of official policy towards ‘unattached women’ suggests a complex sphere of governance that cannot be adequately captured through binary narratives of welfare or abjection” (203).

Policy

- “A special Women’s Section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation was set up under Rameshwari Nehru... in order to handle the ‘delicacy’ and ‘magnitude’ of the problem posed by refugee women”(Sen 2018, 205).
- “But not all refugee women came under the purview of this section. It focused on those who had been wrenched out of their familial moorings, i.e., victims of rape, ‘recovered’ abducted women, widows, women who had lost their male family members in riots, or those who had been simply abandoned by their fleeing families” (Sen 2018, 205).

Continued...

- “Refugee women made their way into the official discourse of rehabilitation only through social rupture. The official term for such women, who were regarded as exceptional cases requiring special care, was ‘unattached women’” (Sen 2018, 205).
- On looking at the characters of the movie, we see they stand as misfits for the definition of these ‘unattached women’ since they do not have a male support or have familial ties in the first place. So being refugees for these women gets complicated at several levels.

Continued...

- The post-colonial state privileged men, who were the heads of their respective households, as the recipients of relief and rehabilitation on behalf of their entire family. By implication, the state decreed that the normative position of women within the regime of rehabilitation was to be attached to adult male relatives (Sen 2018, 205).
- As a result, the majority of refugee women remained outside the purview of the Women's Section and were subsumed within the patriarchal family. The state reinforced men's control over female family members, reproducing within the regime of rehabilitation the 'new patriarchy' of nuclear families.

- The care of vulnerable citizens, the unattached refugee women, was demarcated as a sphere of feminine intervention, which could be delegated to social workers and philanthropic organisations. This delegation took different forms. At the highest level, it involved prominent social workers and nationalists, who had a history of working for women's rights and education.
- The social workers, who were frequently treated as 'experts' on the needs of refugee women, seldom consulted unattached refugee women regarding what their needs and aspirations were. The drive to provide education and training did not come from the refugee women. It originated in largely middle-class ambitions and aspirations regarding what constituted progress for Indian women (212).

Agency

- The portrayal of the women in the movie *Begum Jaan* stands as a contrast to the popular portrayal of women in partition.
- The brothel work is a business for these women, their profession. Their house is both their workplace and their home.
- These are women with no ties left, they associate themselves with no caste and religion. Their house is the only asset they possess. As a consequence, an attack on this house will leave these women with absolutely nothing like many victims of partition.

Thank You

