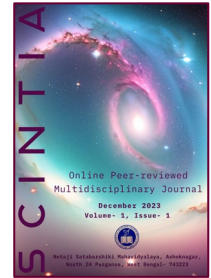


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Relocating in the City: A Study of the Working Women in the Refugee Colonies in Sabitri Roy's *Badwip*

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Abstract

*The mainstream accounts of 1947 Partition typecast women mostly as passive victims of violence and forced migration. Contrastingly, literature on Partition has posited women in the positive role of being the bread-earners and active agents of comprehensive socio-economic shifts. Not disregarding the trauma of displacement and memories of violence, the fictional accounts represent such women earning their emancipation from boundaries of narrow domesticity, entering the public space and often subverting the machinations of patriarchy. Refugee settlements around Calcutta not only changed the urban cityscape but also created a space where women had to engage in the public to sustain their private. The changing dynamics of gender affected the larger society, creating the new class of working-class women, the new Bengali 'Bhadramahila'. The present article is going to look into the nuances of the life of the refugee women, their coming out and its larger ramifications with reference to the novel *Badwip* by Sabitri Roy.*

Keywords: Partition; Gender; Space; Identity; Class.

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The Partition of 1947 affected mass migrations across Bengal and Punjab borders, resulting in significant changes in socio-cultural demography in both states, along with its burdens. The urban cityscape of Kolkata was expanded and redrawn by the mushrooming refugee colonies in the next couple of decades. According to the CMDA estimate, in 1961, the refugee migrants to the city comprised of 18% of the total population of the city of 29.27 Lakhs and the conservative estimate was that 'on the whole, the net inflow of refugees to West Bengal is estimated at about 6 million upto 1973' (Chaudhuri. P. 1983).

As turning away the refugees was put out of question, the government turned their attention to re-settlement and rehabilitation. However, the number of displaced persons was a contentious issue. Smt. Renuka Ray, the Relief and Rehabilitation Minister in the B.C. Roy government of West Bengal stated that 'the total number of refugees in the eastern region was estimated in 1956 at the colossal figure of 4.1 million' (p. 156). Ashoka Gupta, member of AIWC and the Central Social Welfare Board gave another estimation:

Starting with the Noakhali riots in October 1946, the influx of refugees from East Pakistan continued in spurts and by the end of 1951, 28 lakhs Hindus had crossed the border and entered West Bengal, Assam and Tripura. By the end of 1956, the total figure came up to 39.84 lakhs. In addition to this number, a large number of persons, approximately, another 30 lakhs had also crossed the border within this period but did not register themselves as refugees. Therefore,

the total figure comes up to 69 lakhs even on moderate estimation. (p. 194)

By the end of 1957, the government was discussing sealing the border and disbanding relief camps by July 1959¹. Among the government camps there were camps for rehabilitation, permanent liability camps, and camps for single women and rehabilitation and vocational training centres for destitute boys and girls. But the constant swelling in the number of refugees rendered the camps completely inadequate for the purpose. The refugees started establishing squatter colonies in and around the city. Assessing the importance of these refugee settlements on the urban map of Kolkata, it can safely be said that the refugee migration extended the orbit of urban living beyond the limits of the city and brought the outlying suburbs within the reach of the metropolitan space. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay who worked as a government rehabilitation commissioner, and he gives a detailed description of the efforts made by the refugees themselves to establish colonies and the supplementary efforts of the government to recognize and sustain them in his book *Udbastu* (the refugee) (Bandyopadhyay. H. 1960).

Contemporary Bengali literature grasps the theme of overall moral crisis generated by a violent uprooting and the compulsions of survival. In the poems of Samar Sen, Bishnu Dey, Shankho Ghosh and Buddhadev Bose, in the stories of Jyotirindra Nandy, Subodh Ghosh, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Premendra Mitra, Ashapurna Devi, in the novels of Sabitri Ray, Shaktipada Rajguru, Sunil Gangopadhyay and Kamalkumar Majumdar we find the consistent portrayal of a greying city, of people struggling to survive, of colonies and their inhabitants and, later, the unification and rise of the refugees as a political force in the 50s and 60s.

Looking into the city of Kolkata in the post-Partition years to assess the socio-economic and political repercussions of the arrival of large number of refugee families to the city, the women were forced to come out of their domestic space looking for work in the times of hardship and deprivation. The economic mobility in an urban space obviously involved gender mobility, refashioning the definition of a modern woman earning her bread, competing with men for jobs in factories and offices. These refugee women, by their participation in the workforce, interrogated notions of labour and family, both in the public and the private spaces.

The overnight built refugee colonies symbolised a space where refugee women, in particular, redefined their ideas of domestic space and labour. The erstwhile sprawling houses with separate inner sanctums for women were now replaced with a hut in the colony, often with just one room. Their privacy is shrunk to the minimal and their public expands to include more and more of their lives. Such changes involve a 'reorganization of space' and 'with this reorganization of space came a refiguring of gender and of women's relationship to her public and private worlds' (Weber. R. 1995). This fragile yet growing relationship of the women with the public space involved more political activities and greater collective responsibilities. They went to marches against government policies of rehabilitation, attended meetings of refugee councils, often stood up in the defence of their homes against the violent attacks of landlords and their goons. The active participation in survival struggles and the changes in fortune brought significant changes to their lives. In an essay titled 'Take a Girl like Her' (1968) Ashok Mitra writes poignantly about refugee women who are forced to come out to work to support a family that has now been reduced to utter destitution. It is a common enough story: the father ill, the brothers' young, so the burden of the family falls on the girl who becomes a breadwinner for them:

Take just any girl like her, for there are several thousands. Does the tragedy of her existence- or even her withering- count for anything at all? A total transformation of society, do we include the import of her frail being in our calculations? The uprooting of the existing class base will perhaps come one day, but it would be sheer cussedness to suggest that meanwhile she must wait. Her stepping out itself will be a blow for social transformation. (Mitra. A. 1976).

¹ "Amrit Bazar Patrika, 21 October 1957 reported that in a meeting of WBPCC, M.C. Khanna, the Union Rehabilitation Minister who was attending, decided that 'the border won't be sealed immediately but to fix a time limit after which date the fresh arrivals will not be treated as refugees and the Government will have no responsibility for their rehabilitation.'"

The East Bengali women were proactive in terms of transformation because the middleclass women in Barisal and Dhaka had education and were allowed somewhat limited social interaction as an integral part of their lives. The refugee woman's journey across the border and through intense hardships, their lonely struggles in an alien environment made them capable of withstanding the crises of poverty and destitution and optimistically look around for alternatives. In the urban space of Kolkata, the refugee women undergo a process of political radicalization and an opportunity to fight for the rights of herself and for others. The transformations caused by displacement in a woman's life are often memorably portrayed in the literature of the 50s and 60s.

Like Shaktipada Rajguru's *Meghey Dhaka Tara*: The Cloud-Capped Star, 1958 (Rajguru. S. 2001), later made into a film by Ritwik Ghatak, Sabitri Roy's novel *Badwip* (The Delta, 1972) is a text crucial for looking into the changes in the life of a refugee woman as she begins her life in a metropolis or its suburbs. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta writes about Roy, "In her writings the personal aspect of gender ideology enters into an extremely significant symbiosis with the political and enriches the horizon of our understanding of the gendering of post-Partition lives" (Roy. S. 1972). Roy's last novel, *Badwip* (The Delta) was published in 1972 along with some children's stories. Like *Swaralipi*, a novel banned by the Communist Party Roy's *Badwip* deals explicitly with Partition and focuses on the complexities of the Bengal Partition and its relation to the leftist movement in Bengal.

Badwip revolves around a refugee family consisting of Dhiman, his wife Khawna, his son Jishu and his sister Dhruba. Their residence in the colony is made up of

...two rooms with asbestos sheds, two long verandahs on the north and the south, a space of grassy open area in the front with a yellow flowering *kontidhari* tree since that moment, this land was theirs. A mere touch of that soil sent a feeling of animal happiness through him'. (10, translation mine)

Roy places the focus of her narrative on public space by moving away from this shelter and into the world outside. The complex interweaving of various characters and stories adds a larger dimension to the refugees' struggle for survival—on the personal level as well as collectively.

Dhiman and Dhruba are involved in active politics, having meetings, walking in protest marches and encouraging other refugees to raise their voice for their rights. While Dhruba is assertive about their political activities and the possibilities of a constructive politics in their new land, Khawna, the other lady of the house, comes across as a dreamer who prefers to remain steeped in her idyllic past and the nostalgic memory of accompanying affluence. While listening intently to the political discussions, her mind drifts to the life she left behind, adorned with memories of a lost home, riverbanks, starry skies, moonlit rice-fields etc.

Published in 1972, *Badwip* is Roy's last complete novel, and it provides a steady and continuous introspection into the Bengali society and the changes in its fabric since Partition. The characters like Dhruba, Dhiman or Khawna are sharply portrayed, and they are not presented by Roy as inert victims of Partition, rather they are modelled as active participants in the socio-political life of the city. Rather than their suffering or descriptions of pain, the novel celebrates the struggle of the characters and their success in retaining their humanity. The large canvas of the novel 'graphically highlights various spatial sites at which colony identity was produced and reproduced.' (Banerjee. S. 2003). Through the clear outlining of various spaces Roy succeeds in merging the public along with the private. For example, Dhiman's house is a private domain for the family, a much-loved space for his games and it is also a meeting place for the activists as well. They involve themselves in the 'vast repertoire of the typical activities that marked the public sphere in the colonies - defending the colony, clearing the jungles for further settlement, helping establish the colony school and the colony market, organizing youth festivals, arranging cultural programmes, holding party meetings and mobilizing support for general strikes, hosting zonal meetings of the United Central Refugee Council, negotiating with the authorities for a post office in the locality' (Banerjee. S. 2003). But these activities are continually interspersed with various social, emotional and psychological realities.

Highlighting the gendered aspects of colony formation, one of the effects of refugee resettlement is a shift in the power

relations within the community, both within the family and outside in the public space. The earliest settlers in the colonies were the middle and lower middle classes who earlier isolated women exclusively in the domestic sphere. The migration to urban space completely altered such patterns. While forming the colony, women had to actively participate in community. The contingency of colony formation necessitates active participation by both men and women while the destitution of the life of a refugee makes it necessary for the women to join the workforce so that the family can be sustained. This coming out of women in the public sphere is an indisputable effect of the displacement caused by the Partition. By sewing clothes, making paper packets (*thongas*), teaching in colony schools they could barely supplement their family incomes but this attempt at earning a living transgressed the conventional boundaries of a woman's life in Bengali society. Middle class and lower middle-class women transgressed the boundaries of the domestic space and joined the workforce. This swelled the number of workers in small scale cottage industries in the state. They became vegetable sellers, salesgirls or vendors, and worked as maids, cooks or seamstresses, or as teachers, clerks or telephone operators to make ends meet. Gargi Chakravartty in her book *Coming Out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal (2005)* observes: 'With the gradual disintegration of joint family structure, patterns of life underwent radical transformations. The concept of *andarmahal* for women no longer existed, either in colony hutments or in low rented rooms in the suburbs or cities. This virtually brought an end to the public-private divide, bringing women out of seclusion' (Chakravartty. G 2005). This coming out of women and gathering their agency for themselves, had a far-reaching impact on the social and cultural fabric of Bengal society.

Badwip contains a long list of women characters who enrich the narrative network and infuse the text with energy, determination and vision. Despite belonging to the 60s and 70s Roy made a radical departure from the normative narrative ideology of the times. The abundant presence of characters like Dhruva, Khawna, Pushpo, Sarbali, Tara, Sahara and Ambadebi suggests a changed gender relation in the city. In the trams and buses there were so many girls. Some go to esplanade, others to colleges, offices or others, including secular and religious places. Some have plaits, some buns loose or tight. It was quite usual to see the public transports full of female passengers, well-dressed, wearing a wristwatch to keep time and wearing various saris, all of them going to work.

Roy's novel points to this new role of women in the urban metropolis which signified a shift in the socio-economic structures. As narrated by a character in Jyotirindra Nandi's *Baro Ghar Ek Utho*, this is the age of women (Nandi. J 1956). It is no more possible for women to think about honour and shame and prestige, to sit back and relax. None can be able to sit at home, male or female. They will have to work, till they get married, and even after that, if required. As a by-product of Partition, a new working class was created out of the middle and lower middle-class women, symbolically presented in the popular image of a woman dressed in a sari, a cloth side bag on her thin shoulder, worn out slippers in her feet, tired, drenched in sweat, wading through the city alone and lost in herself. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subharanjan Dasgupta have surmised that the refugee women moved ahead of being victims to a position of triumph, achieving a sense of confidence and ability to survive and attain success in the face of stiff hurdles, 'In West Bengal, in particular, the historic assertion of the refugee-woman as the tireless breadwinner changed the limits of feminine aspirations of the Bengali *bhadramahila* and altered the social landscape irrevocably.' (Bagchi & Dasgupta, 2006).

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