



REFUGEE WOMEN IN CALCUTTA (1947-1958) – A JOURNEY IN SEARCH FOR NEW IDENTITY

Nandini Ganguli¹

Abstract

This paper deals specifically with the issues of the Bengali refugee women within the contours of their families and outside the families in Post-Partition Calcutta and its surrounding areas. Apart from various gender specific violence in Pre-Partition times, the changed and altered conditions in Calcutta and the adjoining areas had various repercussions for these women. To understand their position better an attempt has been made to compare the position of refugee and non – refugee women in Calcutta. Also the contemporary attitudes of the general members of the society have been dealt with for a clearer picture of the complexities of the period and different negotiations of these women and the impact of this on their lives and society. A general allegation regarding the Partition in Bengal remains the silence of the literary forms. To counter this argument this paper also includes some novels and films of contemporary or near contemporary period to understand the human dimensions of the Partition and refugee women in Bengal.

Keywords: Bengal refugee women, identity, partition Calcutta, gender violence

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Nandini Ganguli, M.Phil

Introduction

The political Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 initiated a process of discontinuation in every sphere of human life. As the event unfolded there was an all-pervasive uncertainty, in the midst of which violence emerged as the only certainty. People failed to comprehend the changing notions of communities and identities and were perplexed as to 'who' belonged to 'whom' and there was a mingling of religious and national aspirations. The aftermath of this 'geographical' Partition led to a wide array of events. Starting with the immediate physical violence accompanying the Partition, there was a wholesale fragmentation and dislocation of physical bodies and mental states, geographical environment, economic opportunities eventually culminating into the loss of a stable life.

In the border states of Punjab and Bengal the most important novelty in Post-Partition times was perhaps the formation of a new class- the 'Refugees'. With their intrusion in the respective regions, the political, social, cultural dynamics of the regions underwent a transformation and the people who directly experienced this and who indirectly experienced this had to modify and negotiate with the changing situation. Amidst such cross-currents, women had, or were rather forced to play a pivotal role. Generally women represent the traditional or continuous nature of 'normal' patriarchal life. But the enormity and brutality of the Partition and Post-Partition years jolted them out of this 'normalcy'. Primarily they had to undergo the Partition process through specific gendered attacks like rape, abduction and forced existence with the men of the 'other' community. But apart from this, there were many subtle changes, which modified their lives in Post-Partition time.

Among these various issues this paper focuses on the living experiences of the refugee women in Post-Partition Calcutta and its adjoining regions during the period 1947-1958 from a historical point of view. Another connected theme remains the search for a complete understanding of their lives and experiences through some contemporary or near contemporary creative reflections.

Research Design and Methodology

The historiography on Indian Partition began its career with a focus on the elite, the leaders of the two political parties, the Congress and the Muslim League being the chief actors in this phenomenon of epic proportions. Gradually micro-level studies on Indian Partition emerged with focus on different dimensions of history. A specific emphasis on the regions extended the process of writing provincial histories and also tried to find out the relation between core and periphery level, community feelings in locality and its connection with the national level politics preceding 1947. From the 1990s onwards the base of Partition historiography widened more. Instead of focusing on the centrality of the state and other large organizations, this new trend upheld the voices of the people excluded from power.

The study utilized a convenient sampling method mainly due to the fact that, the number of men and women who had survived the concerned time period, (i.e., 1947-1958) is few and inaccessible. As a result, interviews were concentrated on certain areas considered to be refugee-infested areas for the target time period. Furthermore, given the sensitivity of participants' situation, an adoption of a structured questionnaire for interviewing participants was not appropriate. Rather, an opened form of questioning centred around participants' description of the situation, hardships or challenges they went through were employed. Their experiences and anecdotes shed insights on what actually occurred during the target time frame. Noteworthy, the interviews conducted for this research paper formed part of the Author's M.Phil dissertation supervised by Dr Sarada Ghosh, Assistant professor, Department of History, University of Calcutta.

A plethora of hitherto unutilized sources like personal narratives, autobiographies, memoirs, fictional writings, poetries, paintings now came to be utilized focusing on the interface of nation, provinces, Diasporas and women's studies. As a result pioneering works on Women and Partition were

done by Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin¹. The novelty of their works lies in their usage of a vast array of oral histories. By taking into account the pitfalls of using memory as a source in constructing past, they came up with the personal narratives of women and men in the spot. The question of women's agency and the role of the newly formed Indian Nation as the hegemonic patron prophet which thrust upon the abducted women no choice and a single identity opened up imaginative novel ways of gaining more and more insight into the complex position of women. Recently Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta edited 'The Trauma and The Triumph-Gender and Partition in Eastern India' and Gargi Chakravartty's 'Coming out of Partition-Refugee women in Bengal'² have dealt with similar themes of Partition and its Gender perspectives in Bengal with an attempt to present the deeper understanding of the Refugee Women and the Partition of Bengal. Following this trend of emphasizing on varied and new sources an attempt has been made in this paper to uphold the further intricacies in the lives of Bengali Refugee women in Post-Partition Calcutta and its surroundings.

The sources have been used while striking a balance between the Government and Non-Government sources depicting the lives of the refugee women. For a governmental perspective data from the West Bengal Police, Special Branch Records and the Home Political Files and the Reports from the National Library Calcutta have been utilized. As noted above, apart from this, firsthand interviews with some refugee men and women helped in developing a vivid picture of the actual times. The newspapers, journals memoirs, literature and the films led to an in depth understanding of the contemporary environment and also the effects of various contemporary problems on the popular imaginations. Lastly an attempt has been made to consult as many secondary and primary sources as possible to portray the conditions and the negotiations of the refugee women in Post-Partition Calcutta and the adjoining regions.

Rehabilitation: The Government Initiative

The problem of rehabilitating the refugees and giving a legitimate position to them had always remained and still a persistent problem for the existing Government of West Bengal.³ The huge influx of the refugees and lack of a clear-cut rehabilitation scheme aggravated the general problem of the refugees to a large extent. The problems of the refugee women in the initial stages of rehabilitation acquired massive proportions. Many women officials like Renuka Ray, Ashoka Gupta, Manikuntala Sen played crucial roles in this situation of violence and exploitation.⁴ The first and foremost need was to geographically rehabilitate these uprooted mass. But an attitude of denial and dispersal was characteristic of the Government of West Bengal and the Centre, as a result of which the whole process got delayed⁵.

The atrocities of the 1950 riots and the following large-scale migration ultimately compelled the Government of West Bengal to take urgent steps to deal with this large-scale humanitarian crisis. Many

¹Urvashi Butalia-'The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India', Viking Penguin, New Delhi, 1998. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin-'Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998.

²Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds)-'The Trauma and The Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India', Stree, Kolkata, 2003. Gargi Chakravartty-'Coming out of Partition: Refugee Women of Bengal' Bluejay Books, New Delhi and Calcutta, 2005.

³The poor condition of the refugees irrespective of whether they are looked after either by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the Government of India is manifest from the agitation of these refugees. Moreover the condition of the refugees who are not recognized either by UNHCR or the Government of India is the worst. (Refugee Protection in India. October 1997, South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre.)The question of legal and citizenship rights for these refugees also remains one of the most sensitive humanitarian issues for the Government of India.

⁴Renuka Ray, who was also the Minister for Relief and Rehabilitation for the period 1952-1957, in the cabinet of Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, West Bengal, while depicting the deplorable condition of the refugees mentions-" Unfortunately, the refugees' plight was exploited by certain ruthless persons, right from the moment of their arrival, particularly at Sealdah Station...But the refugees were deliberately encouraged to stay on the platforms. In spite of our entreaties and best efforts this resulted in their merciless exploitation, and women, in particular, numbered more among the victims." Renuka Ray- My Reminiscences- Social Development during the Gandhian Era and After. Stree, Kolkata, 2005.

⁵Joya Chatterji- Spoils of Partition, Bengal and India, 1947-1967. Cambridge University Press. U.S.A.2007.

Transit camps, which had been closed, were now reopened to tackle this problem.⁶ The Government of West Bengal made a special category of camps for the displaced women. These camps created exclusively for the families headed by women gradually came to be regarded as women's Homes.⁷ But what needs to be mentioned in this context was the attitude of the Government towards these women's camps. Although some vocational training was arranged for the inmates of these homes, the quantity and quality of such attempts were insufficient to solve the problem of their financial stringency. The amount of Dole for these women was meager. Also the overall conditions of the women in these camps were never taken into account.

A group of non-official women social workers in 1955 made a tour in the states of East Punjab (in Pepsu, a hilly area which was later included in the Himachal Pradesh). This initiative under the auspices of the Central Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation made the differences between the eastern and western region in terms of rehabilitation clear.⁸ A special team consisting of the eminent personalities like Ashoka Gupta, Bina Das, Amar Kumari Varma, Sudha Sen and Sheila Davar made a detailed enquiry of the different Homes and Camps situated in the concerned region. Among such Camps, majority were women and children's Homes.⁹ This tour made the members aware of certain subtle differences between the lives of the refugee women in West Bengal and Punjab. There was a glaring difference in terms of the amount of the doles given to the inmates of the camps. But what was more important perhaps was the lacuna in terms of rehabilitating the refugee women in West Bengal to make them self-reliant. The dearth of Work centres for these women in West Bengal was emphasized upon.

The Permanent Liability Camps, where majority of the inmates were women presented a dismal condition. Sufficient measures were not taken to end this status. Even women were discouraged to take jobs outside the camps. Refusal to follow these rules led to curbing of Camp rights and since many women could not afford to do so they were compelled to live their lives on the insufficient doles provided by the camp authorities.¹⁰ Another basic problem was the absence of sufficient numbers of schools in these camps and homes. As a result the children often remained without any education. They were also not allowed to attend schools in the adjoining regions. The dismal social lives of the refugees were also not taken into account. The report mentions- "There is no social or cultural life, no Puja room or prayer hall and no arrangement for library, reading room and indoor games in any of the camps in West Bengal. There is no occupational organizer within the Homes or attached to the Government who can help in finding employment for the trainee."¹¹ All these factors show a somewhat clear picture of the loopholes of the rehabilitation schemes adopted by the Government. Added to this were the various activities of corruption and inefficiency on the part of the Camp higher authorities, which inflicted untold miseries on the lives of these destitute women.

Rehabilitation-The Non-Government Initiative

Apart from the various schemes of Rehabilitation adopted by the Government there emerged various non-governmental organizations exclusively for rehabilitating women and children. It was through the activities of these organizations many refugee women triumphed in carving out a self-reliant position. In

⁶Before 1950 riots many camps such as dhubulia etc were closed down as the Government assumed that the refugee influx would never resume. But the magnitude of the problem increased as there were massive atrocities in East Bengal both on the life and honour of the minority Hindu population there. Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay- Udvastu Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1970, pg 97.

⁷Hiranmoy Bandyopadhyay- Udvastu, Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1970, pg-97.

⁸Report- East is East, West is West- Ashoka Gupta, Bina Das, Amar Kumari Varma, Sudha Sen and Sheila Davar in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds)-The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India. Vol 1. Stree, Kolkata, 2003.

⁹Mention had been made of various homes such as Gandhi Banita Ashram, Lady Kusum Trivedi Sevasadan, Kasturba Sevasram, Women's Home (faridabad) etc. Op.cit.

¹⁰Experiences of various women in the Permanent Liability camps like Dhubulia, Chamta, Chandmari, Bhadrakali, Bansberia and others conform to this point.- Forgotten Voices from P.L Camps(Article) by Subhasri Ghosh and Debjani Dutta in The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India. Vol 2, Stree, Kolkata, 2009.

¹¹East is East, West is West (Report) in Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds)-The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India. Vol 1. Stree, Kolkata,2003. pg 249.

this context mention may be made of Ananda Ashram, Nari Seva Sangha, All Bengal Women's Home, Mahila Seva Samity, the Women's Cooperative Industrial Home of Uday Villa and others.¹² These organizations played an important role in rehabilitating the refugee women. They tried to provide shelter to these women, who sometimes fell into the category of unattached women. It was these homes, which could support the refugee women in this situation of crisis and also utilize the human resources available in forms of various works of handicrafts.

Among these organizations, some had been created in pre independence times, but during Partition their emphasis was on the rehabilitation of the refugee women. Ananda Ashram, which was established in undivided Bengal, was transferred to Bansdrani in the extensions of Calcutta under the guidance of Shri Charushila Debi. Residential schools and centres for vocational training for women were opened here. Competent girls from various camps were sent to this organization for training.¹³ Another organization established in pre-Partition years was the Nari Seva Sangha. Formed during the great famine of 1943 this organization took up the case of the refugee women. The name of the Sangha lends importance to the fact that it was women in the forms of mothers and sisters who underwent the worst possible sufferings.¹⁴ The Sangha started in an informal manner with providing community kitchens to the destitute women. Gradually the Sangha became an important centre for providing training to these women. Embroidery courses, weaving, block-printing, book-binding, preserving food etc were taught. Other facilities included training, canteen, printing press, nursery school for the under-privileged, and also a working-women's hostel was established. In that troubled times this Sangha also played an exemplary role by providing assistance to the Muslim women and attempted to maintain a secular environment.¹⁵

Another such organization was the Mahila Seva Samity. Founded by eminent social activist Ashoka Gupta exclusively for providing assistance to refugee women in the troubled times of Partition, this organization was formed as a result of suggestion of the then chief minister of West Bengal, P.C. Ghosh, who urged the general population to shoulder some responsibilities of the rehabilitation crisis. As a result many Women's organizations joined hands to form the West Bengal Emergency Relief Committee, which later came to be known as the Mahila Seva Samiti. These different Samitis and their sub groups played important role in uplifting the general morale and condition of the womenfolk in West Bengal.¹⁶ Another important organization was the Women's Cooperative Industrial Home of Uday Villa. Located in the northern outskirts of Calcutta at Kamarhati, this Home deserves special mention for ushering in a cooperative trend among these refugee women and more specifically the unattached women.¹⁷ Apart from self-reliance, it was through this Villa that some kind of permanence was accorded to these women in terms of money and shelter. The co-operative nature of the Villa led to the proper utilization of the fruits of labour of these women. Many women got established and married from this Villa. Also there were some women who came back to the Villa for problems in the outside world and family.¹⁸ The whole environment of the Villa and the spirit of independence which were imbibed in the

¹²Bolan Gangopadhyay- Reintegrating the Displaced, Refracting the Domestic: A Report on the Experiences of 'Uday Villa' (article) in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed)- Refugees in West Bengal, Institutional Practices and Contested Identities, Calcutta Research Group, 2000. pg 100.

¹³ Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay- Udvastu Sahitya Samsad, Calcutta, 1970, pg 99.

¹⁴ 'Grande Dames Of Service - Seeta Chaudhuri's death marks the passing of an age.' Article by Sunanda K. Datta-Ray in The Telegraph, Calcutta, India, February 15, 2003.

¹⁵ An interview with an inmate of the house provides a vivid picture of the situation- " Even Muslim girls came to Nari Seva Sangha for vocational training, says Sukumari Chaudhuri (no relation), who was widowed in the 1946 Noakhali carnage and fled East Pakistan in 1950 to set up house in a *jabardakhal* colony. But I never felt any hatred or animosity towards them. Our teachers, like Bina Dasgupta, were made of different stuff altogether. They taught us to be secular and tolerant. Hers is an epic tale of Bengali struggle and survival, made possible by the Sangha. It gave her vocational training and helped her to find a job with Bengal Lamp, which employed a number of refugee women whom the Sangha had trained." Ibid.

¹⁶ Mahila Samiti Natun Rup- Narir Katha, Ananda Bazar Patrika. May 25, Sunday, 1951.

¹⁷ Bolan Gangopadhyay- Reintegrating the Displaced, Refracting the Domestic: A Report on the Experiences of 'Uday Villa' (article) in Pradip Kumar Bose (ed)- Refugees in West Bengal, Institutional Practices and Contested Identities, Calcutta Research Group, 2000.pg 99.

¹⁸ Bolan Gangopadhyay in her report states- The women members found great solace in the environment at Uday Villa. Those were good old days recalls Sumati Sarkar, a resident since the 1950s. She was a childless child-widow from Barisal. Sumati

minds of the residents there was important for upholding the esteem of these women. The Villa was also supported by various Government aids at different times but it was never totally under direct Government purview.

The most important organization catering to the needs of the refugee women and also to the women in general was perhaps the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity (M.A.R.S). It was established in the Pre-Partition days and dealt with different issues like the ill effects of the famine of 1943, the Second World War, the struggles of the peasant community, harassment of the various village women and the issues of the refugee women.¹⁹ The members of M.A.R.S came from different classes like peasants, workers, urban slums, middle class and some from the elite classes also. A secular character was also a strong point of this organization. Initially women were disillusioned with their present conditions and were not ready to believe the words of the political leaders. But M.A.R.S., with its organizational power penetrated into the lives of the refugees and joined hands with United Central Refugee Council, the main organization of the refugees and also helped many of the Mahila Samities, which sprang up in the colony areas.²⁰ In the initial stages these colony Mahila Samities operated on their own with cooperation from the M.A.R.S. for tackling problems like maintenance of the colonies and anti eviction movements²¹. But gradually all these colony samities and the different units of the M.A.R.S. merged to form a central Women's Organization for the betterment of the women.²² The politicization of the refugee women with the help of these organizations presented a new departure in the lives of these refugee women. Because of the linkage of the women's organizations with the Communist Party some of these organizations were alleged to be centres for imparting the ideals of Communism.²³ But the involvement of the refugee women with the political organizations remained an important aspect of the period. The involvement of a large number of refugee women in the different processions and the demand movements of the M.A.R.S. became a regular feature.

Family, Gender and Employment

Another important constituent of the whole category of Refugee Women was that, the women who became uprooted along with their family members and who migrated to West Bengal with their families. But despite being supported by their families the lives of these women underwent changes which had lingering repercussions for them and also for their families. The very first change in the context of family was the grouping of the refugees according to one male member as head of one family. As a result the 'displaced persons suffered unavoidable disintegrations in their joint families under the impact of calamitous dislocations from homes of regular residence in East Pakistan.'²⁴ This was more important since the typical mindset of the East Bengali Hindu population was in favour of large joint families. Often they included many extended family members from neighbouring areas. But this practice of restructuring refugee families into single units led to some basic changes in the position of women.

obtained shelter in Uday Villa ...she took training first in tailoring and then in pottery here. She continues to perform this job till now. Her parents had been missing when she arrived in Calcutta from Barisal. But later her father traced her in Uday Villa and took her back...she returned to Uday Villa after she found herself superfluous in the family and realized that she had to earn money to support herself.

¹⁹Manikuntala Sen- In Search of Freedom, An Unfinished Journey, Stree, Kolkata,2001. pg 121.

²⁰Representatives of MARS participated in the UCRC conferences. In one of the meetings of the MARS, Renu Ganguly, the president urged the members of the organization to select their representations for the 'Sammilita Kendriya Bastuhara Parishader Chaturtha Sammelan'. West Bengal Special Branch Collections. S.Series-1037/57 v.1957.

²¹Swadhinata, January 11, Monday, 1954, pg 3.

²²Manikuntala Sen, In Search of Freedom, An Unfinished Journey, Stree, Kolkata,2001. pg 183. MARS participated in the different agitations of the refugees organized by the UCRC. For example they protested the police atrocities at the Bhadrakali Mahila Camp and came up with various proposals for redressing the problem there. West Bengal Special Branch Collections. S.Series1037/57- iv.1957.

²³'Like the Mahila Atma Raksha Samity, the Nari Seva Sangha is proposed to be utilized as a platform of the C.P.I. West Bengal Special Branch Collections. S.Series-517/53. C.P.I Women Front. 1953.

²⁴Kanti Pakrashi- The Uprooted- A Sociological Study of the Refugees of West Bengal, India, Editions Indian Calcutta: :India, 1971.

Generally a joint family structure presents a well-knit system where there were some general rules binding upon the members of the family. Women in this type of a family structure occupied a unique position. In many traditional families an old widowed mother or the wife of the main earning member of the family held the most privileged position and she generally had the right to control each and every decision within the family. Another aspect of the joint family structure was the authoritarian nature of the family. Now in changed circumstances women, though unwillingly, were relieved from some of the bindings of the joint family structure.²⁵ For some women nascent decision making power was ascribed to them²⁶. For others, at least initially this system deprived them of a secured family environment and many complained of their situation in West Bengal as one of loose ties as compared to East Bengal where they maintained a more humane bond with distant members of a family and also with the community in general.²⁷

This forced intrusion of these refugee women in West Bengal gradually changed the nature of Calcutta as a city. The formation of the Colonies in the different regions of Calcutta, especially in some fringe areas changed the perception of the city, visibly and also psychologically. The colonies were fast increasing in number and the squatter colonies were outcome of intense struggle between the refugees and the landowners and the police. In such struggles women acquired a unique position. They participated hand in hand with the men in these struggles for food and shelter.²⁸ Apart from this, women and children were sometimes used as human shields during such struggles. The male members of the family often had to flee for life and it was the duty of the women to protect the colonies in their absence.²⁹ Gradually, the basic amenities of life were created single-handedly by the refugees in these colonies.

Education was one of the foremost priorities of these people. The West Bengal Government tried to deal with the issue of the education of the refugees and established different schools in many of the major refugee areas.³⁰ But the requirements were more. So in each colony schools were created almost overnight to ensure education for these refugee children. In each colony one boys' school and one girls' school was formed.³¹ In this context mention may be made of the Jadavpur Sammilita Udvastu Balika Vidyalaya, which was formed in 1951 as a result of the joint efforts of nine colonies of the adjoining region.³² The school remained an important institution in the area. The good environment of education and the involvement of different important educated personalities led to the flourishing of the school and the refugee population of the adjoining areas. Later the term 'Udvastu' was deleted from the name of the school and it started catering to the needs of the general population of the society, refugee and non-refugee both. The current academic records of the school present a glaring proof of the success of such

²⁵Renuka Ray makes this point manifest in her writing.-“... the breakdown of the joint family...has been a major factor in restoring the right of the individual to give expression to his or her own personality. For the women it has been a release from thralldom because men who went out to follow different vocations were subjected to the joint family dictates only within the bounds of the home but for women in had been all-embracing.” Renuka Ray- My Reminiscences- Social Development during the Gandhian Era and After. Stree, Kolkata, 2005. pg 74.

²⁶ Interview with Provarani Ghosh Dastidar (75 yrs old) who now stays in Behala with her family. For her unrestricted conditions in West Bengal helped a lot in increasing her mobility. Also she needed to go out more frequently in West Bengal for the daily needs of family.

²⁷ Interview with Suniti Das (85 yrs old) who now stays in Anwar shah area with her son and daughter-in-law. For her, life in East Pakistan was like one big family. She asserts she had never made any discrimination between her own children and other children in the large joint family. She adds though she is now happy here, Calcutta lacks that emotional bond which they had shared in East Pakistan.

²⁸The contemporary newspapers and women's magazines like Ghare Baire mentions firsthand experience of these women in these struggles.

²⁹ Interview with Rabindra Kumar Kundu(61 yrs old). Previously a resident of Netaji Nagar Colony, he recalls from his memory how his pregnant mother was used as a human shield so that the police and the hooligans of the landlords would spare them.

³⁰Of the 30 new schools that had sprung up, quite a few were mixed ones and seven in West Bengal were exclusively for girls'- The story of Rehabilitation. U. Bhaskar Rao. Issued on the behalf of Ministry of Labour, Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India. Pg 177.

³¹The schools like Sammilita Udvastu Balika Vidyalaya (established in 1951), Baghajatin Balika Vidyalaya (established in 1952), Jadavpur Bijoygarh Sikshaniketan (established in 1951) schools in Gandhi Colony, Nehru Colony, Netaji Nagar Colony and many others were formed during this time.

³²Jadavpur Sammilita Balika Vidyalaya. Yearly Magazine. 2006.

colony schools for imparting knowledge in such difficult times. The enthusiasm among the displaced people from East Bengal, in general, was evident from other sources also.³³ Various cultural functions were conducted in these colonies and women participated and organized such functions.³⁴

With this initial change in the structure of the family, gradually some important changes came in the lives of the refugee women. In the previous 'peaceful' times women were generally confined in the *andarmahals* or the private areas of the household. Though there were always instances of women from elite strata of society to have education and they were sometimes engaged in prestigious employment, but after Partition in 1947 a large-scale intrusion of the refugee womenfolk in the world of education and employment could be noticed. Participation of middle class women in employment had already started with the increasing number of unemployed male members of the society.³⁵ But the years of Partition had a tremendous impact in this respect. 'Between 1951 and 1961, women's participation in educational, scientific, medical and health services more than doubled from 200,000 to 459,000. The Partition and the influx of refugees from East to West Bengal helped familiarize the presence of women across a wide variety of professional and service employment.'³⁶

Various women's magazines like *Ghare Baire* also mention the huge number of names of women job seekers in the employment exchanges.³⁷ These changes in the position of women were indeed result of the Partition. In the Post-Partition times many affluent and middle class families were deprived of their financial stability. Many male members were disabled. Also in the situation of food crisis and rising prices earnings of only one member came to be regarded as insufficient to run the family. Women were forced in such troubled times to enter into the world of employment for financial constraints. At that time this measure was not greeted with excitement and these 'working women' were generally viewed with contempt. They had to encounter various challenges from within their families and also the general public scenario was not conducive to their working in public sphere.³⁸

Another important trend was the nature of the work done by these refugee women. Previously some stereotypical forms of jobs were regarded as honourable for women. With the Partition and the following economic hardships this restricted profile began to change. A large number of refugee women joined unconventional jobs such as making toys and local delicacies. A large number of women also joined the *Bengal Lamp*, which was situated in the vicinity of the *Jadavpur* area.³⁹ Another lot of women joined the theatres and *jatras*⁴⁰ in West Bengal. The Indian People's Theatre Association played important role in this context.⁴¹ Many renowned actresses and some bar dancers were East Bengali in origin. However, the increasing employment patterns of the refugee women should not always be regarded as a liberating experience. Certain important features of the whole situation and the position of the families of

³³ A survey of the West Bengal Government reveals that the percentage of literacy among the displaced persons in West Bengal was even higher than among the non-displaced persons in the State. - Educational Facilities for Displaced Persons From East Pakistan. Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation, March 1960.

³⁴ Such functions took place in camps also such as *Bhadrakali Women's Camp*. *Swadhinata*, Friday, January 15, 1954, pg 4.

³⁵ Samita Sen- Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal (Article) in *International Review of Social History Supplement 5. The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family?* Edited by Angelique Janssens 1998.

³⁶ According to the Index supplied by the Employment Exchange Statistics the average number of monthly women registrants with the Employment Exchange of India was 4,256 per month while in 1957 it rose to 8,563 per month, i.e there was a 100 percent increase during the above mentioned years.

³⁷ *Ghare Baire* was one of the most important journals for the women. A journal of the *Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti*, it was run solely by women and the articles published in the journal were also written by women. *Jibika O Meyera- Sobita Mukhopadhyay*. *Ghare Baire*. 8th Year 9th Issue, Poush. 1336.

³⁸ A special women's column was published in *Anandabazar Patrika* called *Narir Katha* in Sundays. Some debates in this column by the female writers regarding the conflicting role of women as workers and as home-makers reflect the general attitude of negligence of the society and also of the women towards these working women.

³⁹ Interview with *Bibha Basu* (86 yrs old) who now stays in *Ganguli* began area with her daughter's family. She says majority of women in the factory were from East Bengal. She herself was a worker of the Factory and since she was Matriculation qualified, she had to take the job as a worker which was unthinkable for her family and she had to face social stigma for this.

⁴⁰ A form of Folk-Theatre in Bengal.

⁴¹ *Sova Sen- Ora Amra Era*. Thema Publications, Calcutta. 2008.

the refugee women should be taken into account. The refugee women initially did not want to shake off their traditional roles as home-makers. Their hesitation and their day-to-day problems in the public life was an important matter in their negotiations in an alien city life. Generally it is considered economic independence becomes the first and foremost stepping stone for empowerment. But the control of these working refugee women on their own incomes was negligible. The heads of the families still remained to a large extent the fathers or the brothers⁴². Women seldom had autonomy over their own incomes and this dependency despite their economic independence delimited their activities and life as a whole.

Another important repercussion of this condition was the presence of more and more spinsters or the cases of late marriages. In the Post-Partition times of financial crisis the eldest daughters sometimes had to sacrifice their dream of getting married. Generally they remained responsible for the whole family while the younger brothers and sisters could have proper education and get established. In this regard the fact that the working-women had minimal control over their salaries becomes manifest. In most of these families marriage represented the right of the husband over the wife's salaries. As a result many families deliberately did not arrange the marriage of their daughters.⁴³ The traditional Bengali fixation with the issue of dowry also played important role in this context. Thus many refugee-working women had to choose between their imposed economic independence and their cherished role as wives and mothers.

Another offshoot of the problem of the economic stringencies of the refugee population was the involvement of many refugee young girls in the prostitution trade. In many families the presence of sick and disabled family members led to complete breaking up of the financial and moral conditions of the family members. In such instances the only option was the degradation of the women and their engagement in these illicit trades. Sometimes young girls without guardians were forced into such professions by their distant relatives.⁴⁴

Comparison Between Refugee- and Non-Refugee Women

In depicting the position of these refugee women in the altered contexts of West Bengal another aspect which becomes important is the general attitude of the society and also the non refugee women in general regarding the hardships and the new roles of these women. In the aftermath of Partition the large scale violence and the abduction of women by the other community and the physical problems faced by the corrupted men in camps was generally condemned and various writings in the newspapers asked for redressing these attacks on the honour of women.⁴⁵ But the general perception concerning the going out of the women in public sphere was not totally appreciated. From the point of view of the refugee women the more and more engagement of the East Bengalis with education and liberation made them ahead of the original inhabitants here.⁴⁶ Upsurge in general middle class female employment was to a large extent result of the Refugee women's entering into the employment market. The general middle class mentality was more or less against employment for the female members of their families.⁴⁷ The increase in employment patterns in the State of West Bengal was mostly result of the more and more intrusion of the

⁴²Unemployment among women in West Bengal. Government of West Bengal, Labour Department. Directorate of National Employment Service. West Bengal. 1958.

⁴³In this context mention may be made of the Census Records which reveals decrease in marriage rates. Census Of India 1951, Volume VI, West Bengal Part III, Calcutta City. Census Of India, 1961, Volume XVI, West Bengal, Part 10A(book I), Part 10 A (book II) Tables on Calcutta Industrial Region.

⁴⁴Many young women from different squatter families in order to save their sick or disabled family members were forced to take up jobs as prostitutes. Prafulla .K. Chakrabarti- The Marginal Men - The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal. Lumiere Books, West Bengal, 1990.pg 431.

⁴⁵Narir Katha- Udvastu Samasya r Akdik. Ananda Bazar Patrika,10 Feb1952.

⁴⁶Educational Facilities for Displaced Persons From East Pakistan. Government of India, Ministry of Rehabilitation, March 1960. Interview with Bibha Basu, Sailen Biswas, Somnath Bandopadhyay.

⁴⁷The general attitude of the middle class families was against the employment of their female population. Tradition, social customs, and family prestige generally impelled many women to live an orthodox life. Unemployment among women in West Bengal. Government of West Bengal, Labour Department. Directorate of National Employment Service. West Bengal. 1958.

refugee women. Naturally they were ahead of their non-refugee counterparts in this arena.⁴⁸ The non-refugee women not only had lower number of employed women, the working patterns were restricted to honourable jobs like teaching. Refugee women on the other hand with their forced intrusion into the world of employment went beyond this notion of honour and their class positions within their families and also in the larger context of the society came to be compromised.⁴⁹ Old disabled women were forced to bear the brunt of the circumstances all the more stringently.⁵⁰ Dearth of any training and vocation forced them to take up jobs, which were often considered degraded in the perspective of their families.

Partition in Creative Reflections-A Gendered Perspective

The Partition in 1947 altered the border situations in West/East Punjab and in West/East Bengal. In the context of Bengal, it is argued, the voice of the literary imagination regarding this large-scale violence and displacement was marked by a particular kind of 'Silence'⁵¹. The dearth of novels on Partition has been an issue of serious concern among those engaged with South Asian Partition studies. Consequently the engagements of the historians and the novelists have always provided a tilt towards the Punjab experience. But more than a cursory glance into the literature of Post-Partition Bengal reveals the presence, albeit in subtle manner, of the entangled issues of Partition, displacement and reconstitution of lives. The portrayals of the women in these literary works also vary from being victims of the man made violence to agents of change. Another important aspect of this corpus of Partition literature remains the different envisioning of the position of women by the male and the female writers. So discussion of two novels written by female authors of Post-Partition times becomes all the more pertinent for fathoming the depth of the female mind in the backdrop of the troubled times.

Literature

Epar Ganga Opar Ganga

The first novel under consideration is *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* by Jyotirmoyee Devi. Born in 1894 as the granddaughter of Dewan Sansarchandra Sen at Jaipur, Jyotirmoyee Devi's life itself was full of challenges. Despite her privileged economic background, she was married off in a village in Hooghly at the age of ten and was widowed at the age of twenty-five with six children. The curse of widowhood and obsession of the society with strict rituals of a sanctified life led her into the world of literature, which provided an enlightened refuge from the narrowness of patriarchy. Through an indomitable attitude and her engagement with the limited resources available to her, gradually, she developed a critique of the imposed and confined nature of female life. The various issues of women's education, Hindu women's right to property and divorce, the experiences of the aristocratic women in Jaipur, the prostitutes, the widows of varanasi, were voiced by her. But most important in this context, is the fact that she produced a gendered explanation of the Partition and its effect on the women. The main protagonist in this novel, Sutara, a victim of possible physical defilement, faces displacement and degenerates into a past less, identity-less present. Through the whole novel this issue of being cut-off from past intrigues Sutara and she keeps searching into History as a recluse for assurance and acceptance in the society. Gradually the author leads us into the universal problem of the paucity of actual history for women and the interplay of various patriarchal impediments in this context.

⁴⁸According to the Population Census, 1951, percentage of Displaced women in all sectors of work was more than the percentage of the non-displaced population.

⁴⁹Women's Employment and the Household: Some Findings from Calcutta Author(s): Hilary Standing and Bela Bandyopadhyaya (Article) in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, No. 17 (Apr. 27, 1985). According to this survey "Opposition to women working is now little manifest and refugee women demonstrate a more eclectic employment pattern than their West Bengal counterparts. In class terms, these women are steadily becoming declassé. They are generally from families which enjoyed high social status before Partition. Many lost all their-property at the transfer of populations, and most have suffered disruption or termination of education as a result of displacement."

⁵⁰Madhyabitta Samajer Orthonoitic Samasya o boyoshka nari- Narir Katha, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*.Feb 3,Sunday, 1952.

⁵¹Regarding the literary reflections of Partition in Punjab mention may be made of the book- Mushirul Hasan's *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilisation* (1993) where for the first time a translation of Saadat Hasan Manto's story 'Tobe Tek Singh' was translated and published..

The novel starts with a monologue by Sutara Dutta, a Professor of History in Delhi. The incomprehensive and imposed nature of Official History Syllabi transfers her into the realm of another unspoken history-her past. Then, starts the *Adi Parva* of the novel in the backdrop of preceding and perceived peaceful times. The communal frenzy in the Noakhali and Comilla districts of East Bengal in 1946, following the Great Calcutta Killing, comes almost like a bolt from the blue and the world of Sutara turns upside down. Her father disappears, her mother jumps into the pond to save her honour, her married sister disappears and the young adolescent girl, Sutara, loses consciousness as a result of a possible assault and molestation. Through this absence of record of physical violence Jyotirmoyee Devi endeavors to belittle the importance of female embodiment and mocks at the obsession of the society with the superficial perseverance of purity and sanctity for the defiled female body. She regains her life and health in the Muslim household through the humane and nurturing behaviour of Tamij Saheb's wife. Despite being a Muslim, Tamij Saheb's wife understands the trauma of this young girl and predicts the possible behaviour of Sutara's family members for whom her contamination in a Muslim household becomes an important reason for her ostracism. Quite ironically attempts were made to justify these acts of violence with the events relating to History and Religion. This particular and manipulative use of history becomes an important question, which keeps on intriguing Sutara throughout the novel. "She could not understand who had gained and what. But even so, it is not that History has ended. Perhaps she would have to read more, and teach. Perhaps History would be written and rubbed out for eternity, and would be read. But whose History it is after all?"⁵²The alternative visualization of Partition and the study of the actual people and more specifically the real story of the women become all the more relevant here.

Coming back to the original narrative this one night of chaos, physical assault and her stay in a Muslim household becomes the central determining issue in the subsequent years of her life. She is ostracized from her own family. The prolonged negligence, which is meted out to her by her own family, further intensifies her rootless ness. The women within the patriarchal limits of the society also act as bearers of this obsession of patriarchy with Sutara's bodily contamination. Sutara's sister-in-law's mother, who is the mistress of the household, upholds this position most vehemently. Of particular importance in this context is the fact that Sutara is specifically unwanted in the social functions like marriages. Also her very presence is regarded as a negative catalyst for future marriages in the household. Gradually Sutara is deprived of this normal familial space and transferred to a Boarding School on the pretext of education. Once again she had to face the trauma of displacement and finds herself in a company of large number of girls with similar fate of defilement and rejection. Thus patriarchy not only snatches her normal, habitual space but also ascribes a certain restricted space for Sutara.

The constant longing for a Home remains an abiding issue in Sutara's life. With time she understands these internal dynamics of this patriarchal world. She distances herself from the 'normal' spheres of life and takes up a job as a Professor of History in Delhi. Sutara, for the first time, finds an echo of the issue of unacceptance in the collective sentiment of the victims of Partition from Punjab province. Through Jyotirmoyee Devi's writing, perhaps, for the first time an attempt has been made to universalize the problems of these women. Also through an apt skill of minute detailing, Jyotirmoyee Devi provides a vivid picture of Post-Partition Delhi. The imprint of Partition in Delhi becomes evident through the formation of a hybrid geography, society and culture. And in this environment Sutara meets her childhood friend and Muslim neighbour Tamij Saheb's daughter Sakina.. Aware of Sutara's quarantined position within her own community, Sakina comes up with a marriage proposal for Sutara from her family. At this juncture Sutara's negation to enter into a marital relationship with the opposite community emphasizes the permanence of The Great Divide. Despite her acknowledgement of the humane behaviour of this Muslim family, Sutara fails to detach them from their larger communal violent position. The Partition and the subsequent violence emerged triumphant in creating a notion of otherness. The novel ends with Promode, Sutara's sister-in-law's brother proposing to marry her and promising a safe and secured life through marriage, and reinstating her within the parameters of traditional place in a

⁵²Subir Raychaudhuri (ed)- Jyotirmoyee Devi *Rachana Sankalan*. Vol-1. Dey's Publishing House, Kolkata, 1991. pg 133.

society. Sutara, after a long time, hopes for a future where there would be somebody to take care of her. But again, amidst such hopes, she once again relapses into uncertain struggling feelings and thus the Great Divide persists even in the deep corners of her heart.

Swaralipi

The next novel under consideration is Sabitri Roy's *Swaralipi*. Being a member of the communist party of West Bengal, Sabitri Roy dared to go outside the private confines of the household. The struggles of the refugee women in their daily lives were taken up mostly by the communist party and as a result, many of the displaced women joined the communist party during this time. Amidst issues of survival, these women plunged into political activism of the left, taking up issues like regularizations of colonies anti-Eviction agitation, Hindu Code Bill, issue of employment, political agenda of peace movement. Ultimately these events hastened the transformation of these women and expanded their social and public space.⁵³ This novel by Sabitri Roy depicts this aspect of the struggle of the refugee women. Being herself a member of the communist party, she was aware of the intricacies of the Party life and also the different gender problems faced by the women even within the party. Her critical portrayal of the loopholes of the party system even led to her ostracism by the party.

The novel deals overtly with the policies and the activities of the communist party and the vulnerable nature of the politics in West Bengal. Shita, the main female protagonist in this novel, is the symbol of the sacrificing new women, who led the various struggles of the subaltern people against the oppression of the government and the patriarchal society in general. Through this novel a detailed description of the struggle of the refugee women with their children for protecting their squatter colonies becomes important. Even the political abuses could not limit these women within the norms of the society. Thus these novels, for the first time represent the struggle of women for her own identity and position and present the various complexities in terms of their own language and aspirations and try to free them from the general superimposed notion of victimization and lack of agency.

Films

Despite all these literary forms, the most important creative form through which the intricacies of the Partition of Bengal were conveyed was the Films. In the domain of Films on Partition in Bengal, the first and foremost one was *Chinnamool*(1951). Directed by the famous cameraman Nema Ghosh this film is considered to be the first neo realist film in India. Dealing with the complex issue of Partition and its aftermath, this film with a documentary touch captured the true ethos of the event Partition without any exaggerations. Despite being a classic *Chinnamool*, however, could not gain enough popularity. Other Films like *Refugee* (1954), though not comparable to *Chinnamool*'s cinematic excellence, depicted the lives of the refugee population in Calcutta. But in this context, the name which deserves special mention is Ritwik Kumar Ghatak, one of the most genius minds in Indian Cinema and follower of the neo-realist form in film-making. In his own words- "Being a Bengali from East Pakistan, I have seen the untold miseries inflicted on my people in the name of Independence-- which is fake and a shame. I have reacted violently to this and even in my last film, which is yet to be released (*Jukti Takko ar Gappo*) I have tried to portray different aspects of this"⁵⁴. His main films on Partition—*Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Komal Gandhar*(1961) and *Subarnarekha*(1962), play an important role, especially in depicting the diverse conditions of women in the aftermath of Partition. Also geographical environment wise these three films focus on a particular space created by the Partition, the resultant refugee problem and the struggle of the uprooted people in that alien space in their own ways. Women in Ritwik Ghatak's films acquire a distinct position where even in the changed alien circumstances, they assert their individuality, whether by

⁵³United Central Refugee Council (UCRC) which was the most important organization for the Refugees, was linked with the Communist Movement. Many of the UCRC leaders were affiliated to the then Communist Party.

⁵⁴Ritwik Ghatak- Cinema and I. Ritwik Memorial Trust. Calcutta, 1987. pg-76.

sacrificing or by raising a voice against the situation. This multifaceted portrayal of a multi layered event like Partition makes these films reflect the creativity of the filmmakers within the contours of reality.

Meghe Dhaka Tara-1960

Set in the background of a Colony life, the film presents a visual depiction of the changed social and geographical environment from which a specific degenerated way of life emerges-- the colony life. The temporary ness of the houses in the colonies, being made of bamboo materials and the rugged terrain of the colony presents an important visual impression of the problems of the refugees.⁵⁵ The anguished behaviour of the once learned school teacher father, starving mother, relative reluctance and most importantly the emergence of a new breadwinner of the family with the eldest daughter Nita presents a sharp break with the earlier life in Pre-Partition days. The new position of women becomes evident with this repeated portrayal of women as breadwinners and constant conflict between the traditional role of women as a bride in the household and as the breadwinner upholds the true essence of the aftermath of Partition. Nita's sacrifice for her family and her family's claim over her money plays the sole role in opposing her marriage. Her mother's implicit approval to Nita's younger sister's illicit affair and ultimate marriage with Nita's lover, to save Nita's money presents the complex relation between a women's earning money for her family and her marriage. Through the ultimate death of Nita as a result of T.B and her yearning for Life the filmmaker depicts the moral decadence of the family and the creation of a situation as a result of the Partition where Nita was denied a normal life. In the last scene of the film Ghatak emphasizes the continuance of this same situation through the depiction of a similar colony girl with torn sandals like Nita.⁵⁶

Komal Gandhar-1961

In the aftermath of Partition, a strong theatre movement emerged and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) occupied a strong binding force and a platform for many of these uprooted people.⁵⁷ Through these mediums they even conveyed their ideas. In this film the theatre movement becomes the central theme. The protagonists of the films Bhriku and Anusuya, belonging to two rival factions of the same theatre group ends up in creating a unified platform for the transformation of their ideas. Their shared East Bengali origin strengthens their bonds and time and again there are references of this lost land which occupies a central position in their minds and this trauma dictates their behaviours.⁵⁸ Finally Anusuya, the Heroine's decision to sever ties with her fiancé from France and her negation to another displacement creates some hope, which creates a conducive environment even in this alien land. Here gradually, the pangs of the Partition are fading away making place for true rehabilitation. Another important point in the film remains the director's stress on the cultural syncretism present in erstwhile undivided Bengal.⁵⁹

⁵⁵The use of the original colonies like Azad Garh and Shakti Garh as background produces a clearer picture of Post-Partition Refugee life in Calcutta.

⁵⁶According to Rachel Weber – 'like Khuki in Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, the working women with broken chappals (symbolizing the sacrifices women made for the family's survival) became a presence on the crowded streets of Central Calcutta and on various types of public transportation.'- *Re(Creating) Home: Women's Role in the Development of Refugee Colonies in South Calcutta*. Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta (eds)-*The Trauma and the Triumph: Gender and Partition in Eastern India*. Vol 1. Stree, Kolkata, 2003. pg 75.

⁵⁷The Indian Peoples' Theatre Association emerged as a place of refuge for many of the uprooted people. Through theatre new family bonds were created among these people. Many leading actors, singers, directors of the period were part of this movement. Sova Sen- *Ora Amra Era*. Thema Publications, Calcutta. 2008.

⁵⁸The rugged and indifferent attitude of the male protagonist Bhriku and female protagonist Anusuya's restlessness symbolizes the overall vulnerability of the period.

⁵⁹The use of the chorus-'Dohai Ali' emphasizes this spirit. The relentless tragedy of Ritwik- Partha Chatterjee. *Himal South Asian*, November 2003.

Subarnarekha-1962

The last film *Subarnarekha* starts with a very significant portrayal of the clash between the refugees and the hooligans of the landlords while they were creating colonies. Ishwar, one of the main protagonists of the film, is one such refugee who is left with a child sister Sita and an orphan Abhiram. Gradually Sita and Abhiram become mature and they express their love for each other. But Ishwar, because of Abhiram's low-caste origin condemns their relation and arranges for a high-caste groom for Sita. But Sita elopes with Abhiram on the night of her marriage. Years pass by, Sita and Abhiram starts family and have a child. Their dismal financial situation compels Abhiram to take a job as a Bus driver. But one day, he gets involved in an accident and in turn gets killed by the angry mob. Sita, in order to survive, takes up prostitution and by the irony of fate her first customer becomes her brother.⁶⁰ Recognising her brother, Sita commits suicide. Lastly, Ishwar gets the custody of Sita and Abhiram's son and through this child he again thinks anew about his life and the world.

Subarnarekha depicts most-terribly the moral and physical degeneration coming out of the Partition. Ishwar's moral decadence and financial instability of Sita and Abhiram which ultimately compels Sita to take up prostitution as a means of survival. Ishwar ultimately held Partition of the country responsible for both these developments. Though the film depends on certain coincidences for creating the desired portrayal of the scenes, the background of the vulnerable city and the conditions of women in such a situation deserve special mention.

Ritwik Ghatak's films thus reflect the effect of the Partition on the minds of the uprooted people. Moreover in his films the family emerges as a site of both deep harmony and hatred. It is through the family Ghatak expresses the radical transformations that occurred within Bengali culture. This human dimension, though sometimes different from the actual event, presents the polyphonic response the Partition created. Lastly, a ray of hope is inherent in each of these films and this reflects Ritwik Ghatak's faith in the situation and most importantly in humanity, which in turn reflected to a large extent the mindset of the refugees who reconstituted their lives in this alien land despite tremendous hardships.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said despite all these impediments, these refugee women succeeded in expanding their social space in clustered West Bengal. Public visibility of these women enhanced a lot and there was a marked intrusion of these women into the professional world or world of employment for personal and family needs. Even in the newspapers debates can be noticed regarding the adverse impacts of education and economic independence of women as factors affecting marriage and the traditional role of women as home-makers. In such a context the position of the refugee women became all the more difficult. Generally refugees as a class were looked down upon as trouble-makers in the gradual years in the aftermath of Partition. The image of the outgoing refugee women in search of jobs or for the basic daily needs of their families was sometimes considered a bad influence for the original inhabitants of West Bengal. Also in terms of food habits, clothing, dialect and mentality there were certain subtle changes which differentiated the refugee women from the original inhabitants in West Bengal. The colourful and loud dressing sense of the East Bengali women and their dialect were mocked by their West Bengali counterparts. Such a situation led to changed socio cultural identity, economic status and geographical identity of these women. Coming from the simple identity of 'refugee women', these women from East Pakistan started resenting their 'age old' traditions and cultural and social norms within the daily lives of Calcutta. Thus a cross-cultural milieu began to develop through which these refugee women searched their new identity. Their quests for real and emotional recognition in a new social, cultural, political and economic atmosphere were subject to number of opposition from the gendered structure of the 'contemporary system'. Their more and more visibility in public sphere and their inclination towards professionalism did not ensure their 'triumph' over the age- old patriarchal notions of

⁶⁰Many young women from different squatter families, in order to save their sick or disabled family members were forced to take up jobs as prostitutes. Prafulla .K. Chakrabarti- *The Refugees and the Left Political Syndrome in West Bengal*. Lumiere Books, West Bengal, 1990. pg 431.

family, culture, religion, caste and society and gender- discrimination in the day to day lives of their own, but it certainly opened up some hitherto unexplored issues and possibilities.

These refugee women's living experiences and initial struggle for existence challenged the traditional notion of '*andarmahal*' and '*bahirmahal*'- inner world and the outer world. Though the women's exclusive role as homemakers and pride of *andarmahal* remained intact, the invisible obstacle between *andar* and *bahir* began to dilute. West Bengali women in this phase experienced a cultural challenge. They initially tried to resist it by protecting their 'homemaker' identity more intimately, but later on they also accepted this new trend of financial self-sufficiency and free presence in professional and public sphere. But a subtle difference in choosing professions and public activities sustained which marked the 'unique' position and identity for refugee women. Women's power of politicization was another product of these refugee women's attempt of identity formation and struggle for existence. In order to combat their vulnerable condition in West Bengal, they adapted different measures of negotiations and resistance. At this juncture, political parties saw it favourable for them to interfere into the daily lives of the refugees and to mobilize them according to their own political agendas. After Partition, the political process led to more and more inclusion of women in active politics. Apart from the peaceful constitutional political culture of West Bengal, these refugee people along with their women folk popularized the trend of radical protest politics. Lastly the refugee women with their struggles and new roles transformed their positions as being subjects in various acts of violence and became agents of active change and in turn influenced to a large extent their West Bengali counterparts.

The other connected theme in this paper counters the general allegation regarding the relative silence in the creative reflections of Partition in Bengal. Through a discussion of diverse creative reflections of the Partition Process, it becomes evident Partition provided an important undercurrent in all these works which had varied impact on the lives of the migrated people. However, certain differences can be noticed regarding the depiction of the event in the literature and the films. While the literature of the period lacked the emphasis on the Partition as the main event, films contributed more in the Bengal context, often in the form of neo realist films by a group of filmmakers who succeeded most in entrapping the ground realities of the aftermath of Partition. While the literature presented mostly the theme of rootless ness and yearning for a lost glorious home, the films upheld the complex psychological and moral residues of the Partition and the resultant formation of a new culture and society in vulnerable Post-Partition Bengal. The fact remains true that the fictional or the creation does not represent the actual history. But through these creations, the aspirations and mentalities of the society becomes important. Moreover the physical and psychological crisis, through which these migrated refugee women underwent was quite clearly portrayed in these fictional writings and films. Their nostalgic mentality and their constant suffering and struggle within the 'real' changing situation are to some extent related to the personal experiences of these creative personalities. So, the creative world also represented the agony, disaster and desire and the constant process of enquiring into a woman's self-identity according to their method and language.

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