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## BOOK REVIEW ON “THE REFUGEE WOMAN: PARTITION OF BENGAL, GENDER, AND THE POLITICAL”

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**TITLE OF THE BOOK:** “THE REFUGEE WOMAN: PARTITION OF BENGAL, GENDER, AND THE POLITICAL”

**AUTHOR:** PAULOMI CHAKRABORTY

**PUBLISHER:** OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 27 JULY 2018

### **Abstract**

This is a book review of *The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political* by Paulomi Chakraborty, which highlights the effects of partition on the condition of women refugees and how refugee women predominantly impacted the political movements across India and give these movements a more gendered approach. Its clear, succinct, and easy-to-read format supports its claim to be a brief introduction and proves its usefulness as a valuable reference on women refugees in India with special emphasis on Bengali women.

In the starting, the authors give a short overview of the book, moving forward, the authors highlight how the book contributes to the existing literature and lastly, the authors highlight the critiques found in the book during the book review. This review treats the critiques of the book as a point of departure to probe deeper into critical questions that the rights of refugee women face today.

### **I. Introduction**

*“To be called a refugee is the opposite of an insult;*

*it is a badge of strength, courage, and victory”*

-Tennessee Office of Refugee

In the literature of Partition, women and their sufferings play a central role. They have traditionally been thought of as less valuable than men. Women have been portrayed in partition literature as only objects of pity and desire, and have rarely been seen as independent agents. Instead, they have been seen as “marginal, secondary, and in their affiliations to males as mothers, wives, sisters, or mistresses.” Since “women are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the

public and the political, where history is made,” their absence as subjects of history is *Journal of Migration Affairs*. Consequently, they have no part in it<sup>173</sup>. For a long time, women’s perspectives were marginalised in global refugee literature, a phenomenon that is also apparent in Indian Partition historiography, where they were considered to be “outside” the Partition discourse. For women, Independence remained an ‘abstract’ thing<sup>174</sup>, as they had to work out ‘new strategies of survival in a

<sup>173</sup> RITU MENON, NO WOMAN’S LAND: WOMEN FROM PAKISTAN, INDIA AND BANGLADESH WRITE ON THE PARTITION OF INDIA 1-12 (Women Unlimited 2004).

<sup>174</sup> GYANENDRA PANDEY, REMEMBERING PARTITION: VIOLENCE, NATIONALISM AND HISTORY IN INDIA 13 (Cambridge University Press 2001)..

completely alien land<sup>175</sup>. They endured abuse and violence, which they had to deal with on a daily basis. Men were not treated any differently by displacement, but women's gender identities made them much more vulnerable and the embodiment of victimisation. Every nation has a gender of its own. The idea of a country as an "imagined community" is fundamentally based on gender<sup>176</sup>. There is a gender difference between those who envision the country and those who envision it. Despite playing a crucial role in the establishment and formation of nations, women have historically been marginalised and underrepresented as subject agents in the imagined community.

The objective of this review is to give an overall assessment of the book. We will give a summary of the book and its addition to the growing corpus of writing on female refugees in Part II. We have made an effort to look at the book's structure and logical flow before delving deeply into its importance in comparison to other works of literature.

In Part III, we shall present our critique. The book has been critiqued on two principal grounds. Firstly, the author throughout the book imagines a woman as a metonymic, secondly, the author failed to deliver the exact configurations related to the trauma either in the form of political or religious. The book review culminates with a conclusion, summing up our analysis of the book.

## II. Overview and Contribution

Women of all ages were specifically targeted by violence during the Partition, as is widely recognised. A longer history of women's political activism, which began with the man-made famine in Bengal in 1943 and the *Tebhaga* peasant rebellions of 1946-1947 and 1948-1949, has found newer echoes in refugee groups.<sup>177</sup> These linked histories serve as the

foundation for the refugee woman's imagination in various cultural tales about the West Bengal split. A significant chunk of the problem came from the women themselves, utterly constituted by women for the reason of just being reincarnated, active, agentive, and also desiring beings, regardless of matter to their subjectivity in these terms was sanctioned or even recognized. Some women, of course, went much after simply disrupting the sign with varying degrees of thoughtfulness and diction.<sup>178</sup> The author's contribution to the field may be highlighted in the book's layout and content.

### A. Chapterisation

The Book is divided into 8 chapters. The first, titled "The Refugee Women from East Bengal,"<sup>179</sup> provides a 'Women' as a Metaphor for the sovereign state and concludes and ends the chapter with a Study of Refugee Women from the portion of East Bengal. Thereafter, the author's second chapter was first published as an essay titled 'Politics of Representing Gender Violence: Jyotimoyee Devi's The River Churning'<sup>180</sup>, in the book, *Disnarration: The Unsaid Matters*, which was edited by Sudha Shashtri hence published by Orient Blackswan Private Limited in 2016.<sup>181</sup>

The author of this book focuses on three major texts of the Bengal Partition that offer the imagination of the refugee woman. She chose to concentrate on the book in a certain manner because, in her interpretation, others show how a different way of envisioning women is being developed in the decades following Partition. More especially, in her understanding, their figuration of refugee women challenges the mainstream discursive rambling conceptualization of women as the

<sup>175</sup> JUDITH BUTLER, PERFORMATIVE ACTS AND GENDER CONSTITUTION: AN ESSAY IN PHENOMENOLOGY AND FEMINIST THEORY 519-531 (The Johns Hopkins University Press 1988).

<sup>179</sup> Ushashee Nandy, *The Refugee Women in West Bengal and its Influence on Bengali Culture*, 2 IJRESM, 581 (2019), [https://www.ijresm.com/Vol.2\\_2019/Vol2\\_Iss12\\_December19/IJRESM\\_V2\\_I12\\_141.pdf](https://www.ijresm.com/Vol.2_2019/Vol2_Iss12_December19/IJRESM_V2_I12_141.pdf).

<sup>180</sup> SANDIP BANDYAPADHYAY, BENGAL PARTITION – BATTERED BACKGROUND: BROKEN MINDS 32 (Radical Impression 2013).

<sup>181</sup> SUDHA SHASTRI, *DISNARRATION: THE UNSAID MATTERS* 100 (Orient BlackSwan 2016).

<sup>175</sup> 32 ANJALI BHARDWAJ, PARTITION OF INDIA AND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES: A STUDY OF WOMEN AS SUSTAINERS OF THEIR FAMILIES IN POST-PARTITION DELHI 32, 5-6 (Social Scientist 2004).

<sup>176</sup> Patricia R. Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler, *Transnational Migration: Bringing Gender in*, 37 IMR 3, 812 (2003).

<sup>177</sup> ASOK MAJUMDAR, *THE TEBHAGA MOVEMENT: POLITICS OF PEASANT PROTEST IN BENGAL 1946-1950* 372 (Aalar Books 2011).



nation/community/collective. The fourth issue is that, within the larger framework of the book, the chapter largely examines women as signs during the colonial era, whereas the next three chapters follow the disruptions to women's economies as signs during the postcolonial (post-Independence/post-Partition) era. It is not assumed that women were signs during the colonial era and that they became agentive subjects or started to rebel against being reduced to signals during the postcolonial era. It wasn't an easy evolution to follow. This potential of unintended binary construction is attributed to the design of this book, which focuses on Partition texts. In this context, the discussion of the normative Partition discourse in the last section of this chapter, though brief, is crucially important. In the three chapters that follow, the author expresses his thoughts on normative partition as well as the difficulty with interventional Partition texts.

### B. Summary

One of the most horrifying moments in the history of the Indian subcontinent was partition. Hundreds of thousands of people died as a result, with certain areas reaching massacre proportions. Subsequent Indian estimates of the deceased range from the official British figure of 200,000 to 2 million<sup>182</sup>. As far as forced and coerced migration goes, the "people swap" between newly independent India and Pakistan (both East and West) remains the greatest in recorded history. Millions of Hindus have migrated into the new states of West Bengal, Assam, and Tripura after crossing India's eastern border with East Pakistan. The ceremonial, and absurdly cautious, estimate for eighteen years from 1946 to 1964 places the total at little under 5 million<sup>183</sup>. About 1.5 million Muslims moved from West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, and Tripura to East Pakistan during that time. Similar to Punjab, Bengal province was split up into areas having

a common history, culture, and system of government. While limited in this important area, the author nonetheless sees the 'refugee woman' as a relevant figure for examination, with certain goals in mind.<sup>184</sup>

### III. Critique

Using both metaphor and metonymy, the authors of this book review contend that the nation's perception of women as metaphors is challenged by the image of the refugee woman, who also stages or signifies a movement towards a metonymic one. The woman refugees continue the trend of the nationalist struggle in the past, indicating the change of metaphor to the metonym in a new political setting. When we consider the image of the women refugees in the early years of postcolonial nationhood, the struggle becomes more evident, fierce, and interwoven.

#### A. Imagining the Women as a 'Metonymic'

The representation of women as metonymic symbols of a group is challenged by the image portrayed by the the refugee woman and the historical aspect of these women in Bengali politics and society after the partition. This makes us aware of the novel concepts of political identity that these women have claimed. Partition portrays the refugee woman as a progressive personality that illustrates the brutality that results when women become pure metaphors rather than metonyms in a particular collective discourse.<sup>185</sup> Then, women are the nation; they are not a component of the whole, but rather a pure substitute. The refugee woman represents an immanent critique of the process and brings the cruelty of metaphor-making to light.

<sup>182</sup> ADAM JONES, GENOCIDE A COMPREHENSIVE INTRODUCTION 268 (Routledge 2006).

<sup>183</sup> PARTITION MUSEUM, <https://www.partitionmuseum.org/partition-of-india/bengal-assam> (last visited Jan. 23, 2024).

<sup>184</sup> ACADEMIA.EDU, [https://www.academia.edu/110583940/The\\_Refugee\\_Woman\\_Partition\\_of\\_Bengal\\_Women\\_and\\_the\\_Everyday\\_of\\_the\\_Nation?uc-g-sw=49235292](https://www.academia.edu/110583940/The_Refugee_Woman_Partition_of_Bengal_Women_and_the_Everyday_of_the_Nation?uc-g-sw=49235292) (last visited Jan. 23, 2024).

<sup>185</sup> Roshni Sharma and Priyanca Mathur Velath, *Encountering 'Identity': Refugee Women and The Partition of the Subcontinent*, JOURNAL OF MIGRATION AFFAIRS (Jan. 24, 2024, 9:15 PM), <https://migrationaffairs.com/encountering-identity-refugee-women-and-the-partition-of-the-subcontinent/>

## B. Insufficient Configuration of the word

### 'Trauma'

Using "the trauma and the triumph" runs the risk of reinforcing the blindly positivist notion of a "post-trauma recovery," in which the traumatised party believes they have fully and permanently "worked through the past." Such traumas, which authors associate with the Bengal Partition, left behind excesses that even succeeding generations were unable to "work through." Writers make their case while considering Adorno's well-known criticism from his article "The Meaning of Working Through the Past" which highlights the notion dismisses the actual transformation from the past that projects the conscience that breaks its fasinational potential," as Adorno notes.

We might also study the analysis made by Lloyd's in his essay on the Great Irish Feminine. In this article, Lloyd emphasised on living a life in a more positive behaviour rather than culminating a decisive living. Even while the Partition did, in some ways, free women from the shackles of old-world patriarchy and brought the newer method of life. The authors would agree if it were said that women's experiences of the Partition, with its dual texture of both enablement and loss, are more nuanced than men's. However, the authors strongly disagree with any idea that the complexity created by the Partition lessens in any way the experience of the women during that time. Additionally, the authors do not see any positive significance attached to the Partition experience—even if the Partition's beneficial "improvements" were proposed as a byproduct of the process and should not be utilised as a foundation for comprehending the Bengal Partition.

The authors of present the critiques to give the insight between the traumatic and the historical, ordinary and extraordinary, and everyday nation-building. Moreover, the review suggests a situation where both success and trauma must be taken into account, the Bengal Partition must have been extremely traumatic. Further, the authors review to highlight the

relationship between the country women and the country and investigate whether other types of collectives become available as more enabling alternatives in defining political collectives. It would be hard to think of the occurrence in terms of "trauma and beyond," which would negate the possibility of combining the trauma with its opposing extreme in a single instance. This would prevent us from immediately assessing the brutality of the metaphor and its resistance in the given context.<sup>186</sup> The early postcolonial nationhood of India and the link between women and the nation are the main topics of discussion for the writers of this book review.

The authors portray refugee women as a symbol of the promise for political practice in the early years of postcolonial nationhood, as well as someone who signals a change in the postcolonial age.

## IV. Conclusion

The above analysis shows that Refugees belong in the parameter mainstream rather than floating on the margins. Refugees and especially women refugees might flee to save themselves but were continuously targeted, thrown out by the state. Furthermore concerns to Refugee women and human rights there is still a theoretical and practical gap exist between the protection of women refugees. It is hoped that every reader who encounters Paulomi Chakraborty's writing will be forced to reflect as thoroughly as these two readers did. Overall, this work is far superior to the plethora of brief introductions and commentary on women refugees that have recently inundated the market. The women refugees will receive considerably greater coverage if the critiques raised in Chapter III could be administered by the government. For this reason, a citizen would be well advised to consult this book to become familiar with the subject's foundations.

<sup>186</sup> Jeff Hearn, Sofia Strid, Anne Laure Humbert, *Violence Regimes: A Useful Concept for Social Politics, Social Analysis, and Social Theory*, SPRINGER LINK (Jan. 24, 2024, 10:54 PM), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11186-022-09474-4>.

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