

The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political

Natasha Lan

Volume 36, Number 1, 2020

Symposium: Beyond the Global Compacts

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069759ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40771>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Centre for Refugee Studies, York University

ISSN

0229-5113 (print)

1920-7336 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lan, N. (2020). Review of [The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political]. *Refuge*, 36(1), 111–113.
<https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40771>

Copyright (c) Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees, 2020



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

the gap left by non-functioning citizenship. She further gives an overwhelmingly negative description of civil society. She considers “the rise of nonstate actors, from terror networks to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” in exacerbating the shortcomings of models privileging state sovereignty without reflecting on how civil society action might otherwise challenge the system and advocate for the rights of those excluded from it (23).

While compelling as a concept to analyze contextually disparate forms of exclusion, reliance upon the conveniently neat terminology of “non-functioning citizenship” risks obscuring accountability within these mechanisms of marginalization. Using “non-functioning citizenship” as an elastic catch-all phrase may thus inadvertently disguise the interests and motivations of actors responsible for the human rights violations Kingston describes. In order to counter such exclusion, might it be more useful to break down the “lack of functioning citizenship” to pinpoint which specific human rights are ineffectively protected? More so, for the term to achieve its full analytical and ethical credibility, its use must be accompanied by more robust consideration of

the context-specific agents and power structures perpetuating these protection gaps.

In presenting the problems around non-functioning citizenship, Kingston’s book helps to recognize the reality that “citizenship itself is a gradient category, with most people fitting on a spectrum somewhere between full and noncitizenship” (221). However, the richness of her case studies naturally presents challenges in bringing these disparate contexts into robust analytical conversation. Her call for a reassessment of how the institution of citizenship functions (or does not) raises the question of whether state recognition can ever ultimately be fully inclusive. As she points out, if rights are attached to citizenship (and its effectiveness), we are ultimately dealing with a politically limited model of equality. More functioning forms of citizenship can partially ameliorate, but not eliminate, this systemic problem of modern human rights.

Thomas McGee is a PhD researcher at the Melbourne Law School’s Peter McMullin Centre on Statelessness. He can be contacted at thomas.mcgee@student.unimelb.edu.au.

The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political



Paulomi Chakraborty

New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, 313 pp.

The *Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender, and the Political* examines the Partition of India, the result of which is known today as two countries independent of British rule: India and Pakistan. Paulomi Chakraborty’s book is a rich tapestry of prose. Through several conceptual themes, Chakraborty elucidates the broad question of the relationship between woman, as a figurative category, and the political. The first theme shows that political *collectives*, as referred in dominant discourse, are also gendered—“woman” symbolizing the collective. In the second theme, *nation*, the refugee woman is doubly marginalized; she is an in-between figure, within and without national location. The third theme, *Partition*, connects the concept of the “everyday world” framed through domestic lives of women, to the political world, during a violent historical event. She specifies *the political* as encompassing being, idioms, culture, practices, and belonging.

Chakraborty’s book is an ethnography that interrupts the dominant discourse around the 1947 Partition, which aligns

with patriarchal rules of representation, tends to silence women, and objectifies them as bodies meant for reproduction of the nation. From introduction to conclusion, the book imagines the refugee woman post-Partition and outside of the nationalist discourse; in chapters 2, 3, and 4 she analyzes three narrative texts in support of the argument that recognizes political participation, desire, and agency of women. Throughout the book, Chakraborty intentionally avoids sequencing historical moments chronologically, to emphasize her point that there is no clean sense of progress in the representation of woman, as a figure, and the political world. In this study she consistently discusses contradictions in women’s political activism. Where appropriate for the book, Chakraborty translates readings of original texts from Bengali to present her analysis of rhetorical traditions in Partition representation.

Chapter 1 is titled “The Problematic: ‘Woman’ as a Metaphor for the Nation.” In this chapter she presents the problem of women’s bodies as the location for “nationalist”-communal

violence and postulates why. In each of the three succeeding chapters Chakraborty analyzes a selected text as a mode of intervention that supports her argument. The texts “show how a different way of imagining woman is being shaped post-Partition around the refugee woman” (18). She argues that the problem is cyclical: “The nation [is] reified as a woman, women are abstracted; their agency, subjecthood, and desire are erased. When women embody the nation, they are reduced to physical bodies, empty vessels, in order to hold the reified nation” (96). The three texts through which Chakraborty challenges the issue are Jyotirmoyee Devi’s *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga (The River Churning)*, Ritwik Ghatak’s film *Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud-Capped Star)*, and Sabitri Roy’s *Swaralipi (The Notations)*. Each chapter begins with a summary of the text, and, crucial to her argument, a biography of the author, providing deep insight into the texts’ ability to reflect the themes. In presenting the reader with a detailed account of each author’s experience of subordination in career and life path, Chakraborty further strengthens her arguments. The effect is a *mise en abyme*, an insertion of a story within a story as a non-linear continuum, in support of the problematic that locates woman as a metaphor for the nation.

Chapter 2 analyzes Devi’s *Epar Ganga, Opar Ganga*. First published in 1967 and translated into English as *The River Churning* in 1995, Chakraborty describes the book as a “textual intervention in the discursive process of metaphor formation.” Chakraborty maintains that myths enable the persistence of narratives denied by history. *The River Churning* changes the way women are read by telling the story from a woman’s viewpoint rather than present her narrative as myth. Partition as myth reduces its extraordinary violence to historical and, implicitly, ordinary times. The novel targets the violence of Partition and the subsequent patriarchal violence. Chakraborty emphasizes that all refugees in the novel are women. Bearing this in mind, the nation as an institution of colonial modernity and women’s gendered experience translates as a continuum of an extreme form of everyday violence. Throughout the book she critiques the absence of a documented women’s history; for Chakraborty, the novel uses the mythical in place of the absence of documented collective public memory. Chakraborty’s reflections on *The River Churning* illuminate the historical silencing of women. The novel “understands Partition violence as violence perpetrated by patriarchy; it puts an emphasis on commonality of women” (112). The protagonist of the novel is a Hindu refugee caught in a border riot and given shelter in a Muslim home. The author chooses only to allude to the rape of the woman and does not use the scene of trauma as a literary device within the plot. “The novel critiques a characteristic of patriarchal society by refusing to give evidence. Simultaneously, the novel critiques the readers’ inclination to not trust a woman’s silence and

[public] desire to probe the details” so that she may be judged and others’ treatment of her may be assessed (129).

Chapter 3 is a compelling depiction of Ghatak’s 1960 film, *Meghe Dhaka Tara (Cloud-Capped Star)*. Chakraborty’s brief biography of Ghatak includes his reputation as a filmmaker marginalized for his unconventional approaches, compared to the Bombay Hindi film industry. He used Brechtian aesthetics to make the familiar strange. His style of filmmaking, which did not follow codes of realism, made his audience uncomfortable. Posthumously, his work generated a cult following. His approach to cinema radicalized notions of the melodrama as established by the commercial films of India’s Hindi film industry. For Chakraborty, the film illustrates patriarchy against women in the abstract figure of *mother*. *Mother* as a figurative category is depicted as at once chaste and simultaneously the site of reproduction for saviours of India. Woman is thus a mystical symbol of the nation and land as body. On both sides of Partition, ethnic conflict gave permission for the objectification of women’s bodies; claimed as possessions needing protection as well as subjects of violence. Rape of both Hindu and Muslim refugees on the “opposite” side of the division was accepted as an act of nationalism. The film’s narrative tends “towards the exploitative, sacrificial aspect that is forcefully planted onto [the role of] motherhood” (177), which is contrary to romantic ideals of mothers as always giving, selfless, and compassionate. It exposes the notion that normative motherhood is constructed motherhood.

The fourth and final chapter is titled “Beyond the Metaphor,” a telling of the refugee woman as an agent of radical politics. Sabitri Roy’s *Swaralipi (The Notations)*, a 1952 novel, is committed to socialism over feminism. Though Roy writes from a feminist perspective, feminist liberation is not the political goal of the novel; Chakraborty attributes this to an historical distrust of the left in India during Roy’s time. Set against the two years following Partition, it critiques the practices and corruptions of the Communist Party of India. “The refugee women in [the novel] are key figures who straddle [divisions such as] the private and the public; the personal and the political; the home and the world; the emotional and the rational” (217). Chakraborty provides overviews of Roy’s novel, its plot and characters, and expands on the perceived and practised divisions. It is written from the vantage point of lived gendered experience, of women’s participation in politics. “As alternatives to the pervasive divides, the novel attempts to compose a way of living in which there is no disjunction between personal and political ethics” (222). The novel explores the question of what kind of political collective is possible and desirable (215). It is critical to note that *Swaralipi* was denounced by the Communist Party three months after its publication.

The Refugee Woman: Partition of Bengal, Gender and the Political inspires further investigation of the argument

that woman, as a figure, can rewrite her gendered script. Chakraborty offers visual interpretations of three texts creating thick descriptions of how each addresses language, history, and myth as a driver of a continuum of extreme forms of everyday violence. The book interrogates normative representations of the Partition of India and has the capacity to deepen the audience's knowledge, no matter the level of familiarity with the topic. Though the book does not read like a poem, there is an overall rhythm to it as Chakraborty thoughtfully circles back to themes and analogies. "This book is a study of the relationship between women and the nation in what postcolonial studies would describe as the

early decades of postcolonial nationhood in the Indian context" (271). Chakraborty concludes the book by addressing why she focuses on the Hindu woman. She acknowledges the absence of the Muslim woman in her study and states that her intent is not to perpetuate a view that the Partition of Bengal was only the site of Hindu trauma.

Natasha Lan is a master's student in education and an administrator at the University of Toronto. She can be reached at natasha.lan@utoronto.ca.

Unravelling Europe's "Migration Crisis": Journeys over Land and Sea



Heaven Crawley, Franck Duvell, Katherine Jones, Domon McMahon, and Nando Sigona
Bristol: Policy Press, 2018, 183 pp.

Despite popular conceptions, large-scale migration into, within, and out of Europe is not a new phenomenon, let alone a "crisis." If anything, as Crawley et al. demonstrate, the "migration crisis" is a policy-driven predicament: a creation of mismanaged, disjointed, and inhumane migration policies that fail to consider the geopolitical and historical contexts of global movement. Migration in itself is not the "crisis." Rather, it is the ill-informed responses to contemporary mobility flows that contribute to the exacerbation of humanitarian predicaments around the world. The prevailing notion that migration across European borders constitutes a "crisis" of epic proportions has dominated the public and policy spheres across the continent. Crawley et al. argue that such "crisis"-driven narrative fuels ineffective responses that fail to address the needs of refugees and migrants arriving on European shores.

Prioritizing the journeys and decision-making of refugees and migrants themselves, *Unravelling Europe's "Migration Crisis"* provides insights into the drivers, triggers, and mobility constraints of refugees and forced migrants; their lived experiences during their precarious journeys; and their reception upon arrival in Europe. This comparative study of four European countries is a result of in-depth data analysis of over 500 interviews with refugees and migrants who initially arrived in Greece, Turkey, Italy, and Malta during the "peak" of the migration "crisis" from late 2015 into early 2016.

Each chapter takes readers on a journey along the path of migration. The book first describes different itinerant

patterns emergent from distinct migration routes; it then takes the readers through the decision-making processes of refugees (i.e., when, where, and how to leave); next, it critically examines the role of smugglers in navigating border controls; it then proceeds to describe the dangerous journeys that refugee and migrants embark upon to reach safety and a new place to call home; and finally, it looks at how Europe responds to arrivals of refugees and migrants at its borders. Several key findings from this book demystify common assumptions about migration into Europe. First, the research debunks the myth of migration as a single flow of refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean. The second myth exposed is that migration across the Mediterranean Sea is driven solely by economic opportunities. A third myth debunked is that the refugees and migrants coming into Europe undertake a direct journey from their countries of origin into an intended European state.

Myth #1: A Single European Migration Flow

Crawley et al. highlight the fact the migration into Europe is not a single (Mediterranean) flow, but rather composed of multiple routes and journeys of people from different countries of origin—such as Middle Eastern countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Syria), as well as African states (Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Eritrea)—who are driven away from their home countries. A key finding reveals that most people arrived in Europe "after making *multiple* decisions about where and when to go rather than by making a singular and