

# Boundaries of the Self



Boundaries of the Self:  
Gender, Culture and Spaces

Edited by

Debalina Banerjee

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Spaces  
Edited by Debalina Banerjee

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## PREFACE

This book is an attempt to capture the spirit of the conference on *Women and Spaces: Engendering and Re-gendering Identities* organised by the departments of English, Economics and History, Vidyasagar Evening College, University of Calcutta; in collaboration with Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark, Kolkata, on the 29th and 30th of August, 2011. The presentation of academic papers, a talk on women and trafficking by the ex-Commissioner of Kolkata Police, a presentation by eminent theatre personality Saoli Mitra on her plays, followed by the screening of a special film on women and trade, *I<sup>3</sup> Three; yet one!* by Pramod Dev (independent director), made it a laudable attempt. The topics ranged from colonial spaces, music and empowerment, photography and visibility, and animation films, together with hardcore feminist theory and feminist interpretations of texts, corporate globalisation and its impact on women, women scroll painters, the sex worker in Bengal, identity issues concerning Bengali Muslim women, the life and times of Kadambini Ganguly (the first woman medical practitioner of Bengal) and class inside the household. While all papers presented at the conference have not been included in this volume, some very interesting additions have been made – from microfinance, advertisement, diaspora, re-conceptualisation of class/gender in terms of textual readings, women's education in nineteenth century Bengal (backed by some rare archival data) to the assessment of educational institutions, namely schools, as modern Foucauldian institutions. The entire initiative of the conference and the book would not have been possible without the unending support of the Principal, Dr Ramswarup Gangopadhyay, and my fellow colleagues, Swati Maitra, Debashis Joddar and Suparna Pal, from the departments of History and Economics. Discussing women's issues with them on a hot summer evening, over a hot cup of tea, had resulted in the conference. A special thanks to Debashis Joddar for sticking with me through thick and thin in almost every aspect of the conference, especially in handling the financial burden. My colleagues from various academic disciplines and members of the conference committee – Sarbari Ghosh, Madhumita Dasgupta, Samir Kumar Ghosh, Rahul Mazumder, Tamal Das, Sarajit Sardar, Sandip Mukherjee, Debashis Bhattacharya, Ujjal Chakraborty, Sudarshan Pal, Soukhen Joarder and Sushmita Saha – helped make this event a success. They further made me realise the relevance of bringing out such a book with its remarkably interdisciplinary character.

Swami Sarvabhutananda, Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Golpark, Kolkata, Late Mr Utpal Biswas and other staff of the institute, through their unconditional support, helped in the germination of the idea and this book would not have been possible without them. I am extremely indebted to University Grants Commission for providing necessary and vital financial assistance so that our efforts could see the light of day. I extend my gratitude to Cambridge Scholars Publishing for approaching me and giving me this wonderful opportunity to work with them. And last but not the least, a heartfelt thank you to Tanushree Mukherjee for her commitment, sincerity and astute analysis of the texts, without which this book would not have taken its final shape.

“How would you define a woman?” I had asked, talking to a class at the University of Vienna. Surprisingly, the answers were similar in their configuration of a woman merely as a being with breasts, genitalia and the power to procreate. Such anatomically deductive hypothesis seemed to shrink women into the symbolic washroom icon marked ‘Ladies’. The category called ‘woman’ is diverse in its ‘authority of experience’, cutting across spaces, cultures, communities, ethnicities, nationalities and so on and so forth. Feminism, in terms of theory and praxis, has long branched out into various schools of thought. Hence, planning a conference on women’s studies only threatens to open up divisive histories. Therefore, the right way to debate and discuss ‘women’ seemed to be within the notion of ‘spaces’ with their inherent plurality of ‘feminine’, ‘feminist’ and female (to borrow Elaine Showalter’s terminology) identities.

The workings of patriarchy become markedly visible within the networks of social, cultural, political, historical and economic spaces. Ideology is insular and sectarian. Hence, following any one ideological paradigm to probe into women’s issues seems impossible in terms of policy and significance. Interrogating patriarchal politics that is both ‘sexual’ and ‘textual’ tends to open up the centres and the margins – the loci of patriarchal positioning/repositioning in society, literature and culture. And as these spaces drift, collide and coalesce, we get representations of women both ‘real’ and ‘imagined’. Spaces are, therefore, intrinsically linked to boundaries. Because gender identity and construction involves remaining ‘fenced in’ and ‘breaking out’ in the context of hegemonic power play, it is irrevocably connected to the question of transgression, violation and emancipation. Iris Young observes that “a space seems to surround women in imagination which they are hesitant to move beyond... women’s space is not a field in which her bodily intentionality can be freely realised but an enclosure in which she feels herself positioned and by which she is confined.” John Berger, in his



essay “The Split Woman”, assesses the presence of women within Western cultures – existent solely in the restricted space of male desire. Such Panopticism, reminiscent of Foucault’s ‘Panopticon’, is true of all cultures and generates a space where women are constantly under male surveillance vis-à-vis ‘gaze’.

The aim of this book is to address the intersections between gender and identity by critically examining female spaces. It has famously been argued that men and women are made in culture. The book seeks to explore how spaces – social, political, literary, cultural and historical – affect the identities of women, whether creative, personal, collective, urban or global. Through the scholarly approaches of the international and national contributors, we wish to probe into these spaces and analyse the problematic of gender identities as they are constructed, reconstructed or deconstructed through processes of appropriation, subversion or signification. This book hopes to provide a significant direction in women’s studies through dialogues and discussions on the various facets of ‘space’ and how, in turn, it generates a rhetoric of agency and power or, again, how it annihilates attempts at emancipation and empowerment.

The main purpose is to further explore the diversity of women’s experiences and their contributions across cultures. The book attempts to examine knowledge and practices in the light of gender differences and suggest new ways to “conceptualise the relations between the self and the ever changing global communities”. Its interdisciplinary nature, drawing from the humanities, arts and social sciences, will give it a wide readership among students, teachers and researchers. Since women’s studies is one of the most sought-after disciplines of the contemporary academic world, this book will generate interest and contribute to the dynamic nature of women’s studies research. The title of the book is taken from Dr Usha Bande’s stimulating keynote address at the conference. The fluidity of gender identities, as they are performed (courtesy Butler), is best exemplified by the metaphor of space. Going beyond boundaries in terms of gender and culture would effectively highlight the processes of gendering, engendering and re-gendering. I end with an excerpt from an interview of Rituparno Ghosh given to Kaustav Bakshi. Ghosh observes:

...our identities are subject to the body which again is a boundary... I believe in transcending that boundary... the body is in a state of transition... perennially... so is my identity. Therefore, it is not desirable to identify with a single category. It is, in fact, impossible. Everything is in a state of making... eternally... nothing is ever complete... the same is true of the body and, therefore, identity. It’s a continuous process. (<http://silhouette-mag.wikidot.com/vol10-3-kaustavbakshi>)



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

USHA BANDE

At the very outset, I would like to compliment the organisers for the theme of the seminar, **“Women and Spaces: Engendering and Re-gendering Identities”**. Without referring to feminism, the theme covers the whole area that comes under the term patriarchy and its associated web of economic, political, social and religious regulations that enforce the domination of women by men. The theme of the seminar, “Women and Spaces: Engendering and Re-gendering Identities”, offers a broad spectrum of women’s reality. This single word – feminism – is enough to describe the grand network of oppressive forces, suggesting that male domination stretches across national and cultural boundaries, touching various facets of life. This encompasses a vast range of concepts like gender, identity, spaces, self, revision/re-vision/representation/representation and language. This seminar will certainly be focusing on these aspects, taking into consideration genres like fiction, poetry, drama, autobiographies, films, media, and travelogues.

Women’s exclusion from history stems from gender formation. Gender role differentiation is associated with gender differences in behaviour, attitudes, and dispositional traits. This differentiation also leads to gender stereotyping. Engendering suggests empowerment which is a necessary ingredient for challenging and transforming unequal political, economic and social structures. And re-gendering means to review the gender stereotype and correct the picture.

As I sat to write this address for the seminar, a poem read long ago, popped up in my mind. The title is “A Feminist Poem on a Flower” and the line that captivated me was: “A flower has no words/And the words that a woman has are not meant for speaking.” Flowers symbolise beauty, delicacy, self-sacrifice and giving. Silence signifies inarticulation and the resultant invisibility, loss of self and loss of identity. The premise of the seminar may not be directly flowers and women, words and silences; but it implies these and a lot many other aspects. The theme of the seminar

addresses two categories: Spaces and identities and the third, on which these reflect, is the 'woman'. Woman, as a category, stands bracketed as the 'other' by patriarchal norms and implies existence of boundaries that hem her in from all sides – cultural, moral, societal, familial and linguistic. That is why I titled my address as “Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture and Spaces”.

Central to this orientation is the question: Is there a woman's space? Is there an identity for a woman distinct from her social-familial identity? Identity as an individual? Don't we remember Mira's mother in Shashi Deshpande's, *The Binding Vine*? She would not show her horoscope to the astrologer on the plea that her welfare lies in the welfare of her children and husband. I remember a story titled, “Mera Ghar Kahan” (Where is My Home?), in which a young girl, dislodged from various houses where she works as a domestic help, wonders in the end, ‘Mera ghar kahan?’. Do women have a home which they can call their own? These are some of the questions problematised by feminists to uncover women's exclusion from home. Let us turn to a few lines of a poem by Anamika:

Ram, go to school!  
 Radha, cook a meal!  
 Ram, come, have a sugar cake!  
 Radha, sweep the house!  
 Your brother will sleep now, go and make his bed!  
 Wonderful! A new home!  
 Ram, look, this is your room!  
 And mine? Silly girl,  
 Girls are air, sunshine, earth  
 They do not have a home!  
 Those who have no home  
 What place can they have?

Space signifies existence of an identity and identity requires space. This proposition has been beautifully revealed by a poet unable to find a space to sit and write:

“Hubby's room/has no entry  
 For even a beetle.  
 No disturbance please!  
 In children's room/No entry for silence.”

So what does a woman writer do? Sit in the kitchen. “Kitchen is an island/unto itself”, reiterates the above poem. This is not a new situation. Just think, where did the famous novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, get written? At the dining table, literally. Nearer home, in a short story in Hindi, “Hatya”

(murder), the persona of the writer lives with her family in a small two-bedroom flat in a city. She has no place to sit and write. She cannot switch on the bedroom light as it would disturb her husband. The other room is her in-laws' bedroom. She goes to the kitchen and switches on the light. And lo, at that very moment, a rat, scared by the light, runs helter skelter; utensils come crashing down; members of the family rush to the spot only to discover the sheepish *bahu* of the family standing like a culprit. They scold her for disturbing everybody. The writer says, the story she wanted to write is thus murdered – “*Hatya ho gayi!*”

Space does not mean only physical or geographical space. It also means mental/psychological space. It has always been difficult for a woman to find time and space to write. That is where the need for engendering and re-gendering becomes important so that she gets a space to indulge in an intimate encounter with the self, recognition and an openness whereby she can achieve self-definition. She becomes a crucial mediator between the word and the silences, between forms of feminine ‘écriture’, to use Cicoux’s term, and a culture that would deny them in the most violent manner.

Now we come to the question of borders and boundaries. Borders and boundaries supplement each other – in geography and topography, in life and relationships, in the mind and the body. The moment a border is created, the territory is demarcated – this is mine, that is thine; I and you; never ‘we’. “Borders,” says Jasbir Jain, “are significant markers of nation formation and go on to create communities and identities. Borders mark territorial limits, define cultural practices and signify ownership and belonging” (Jain, 2009:1). In her novel, *Cracking India* (also titled *Ice-Candy Man*), Bapsi Sidhwa interrogates the very concept of dividing the country by the stroke of a pencil. *Ice-Candy Man* is a powerful reconstruct of the traumatic events that destroyed the pace of a normal individual’s life. Amitav Ghosh calls it *Shadow Lines*, signifying unreality generated by political motives.

But once the line is drawn, identities are formed and ownership is asserted. What remains is the psychological damage with which the public struggles. The political realities of India’s partition impinged further on the gendered realities of the affected communities when women suffered – rape, rejection and second separation. Those who have read Sadat Ali Manto’s short story “Open It”, shiver at the pain and torture of the sufferers of partition. The significance of such incidents lies in the way in which the author shifts the concept of identity into a different spatial mode, suggesting that because of the created difference, on the basis of religion and culture, the barriers become permeable and crossing the

border both metaphorically and literally, an act of triumph for the avenging community and an act of punishment for the victim community. In determining relationships between people, literature suggests an aesthetic in which transgression, disorientation and the uncanny become alternative strategies of living between spaces and identities.

Coming to the question of women's identity formation and the border marked for her, we realise that it signifies limits set for her – a kind of *Lakshman-rekha*. Thus, metaphorically, boundaries suggest moral distinctions between what is permissible and what is possible; what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Restrictions and restraints draw the identity line and create the concept of the 'other'. Identifying someone as the 'other' means marginalising him/her vis-à-vis the 'self' that is 'me' and is tantamount to creating distance and allotting 'spaces'. Space can have spiritual as well as psychological connotation; likewise, it can be social and mental. To feminist theorists, relationship between gender and space is significant. When first confronted with literature on the nature of space, one is puzzled by obvious alternatives: Real and perceived; phenomenal and behavioural, ideal and material. These are broad and contrasting conceptions and within them, there can be other related sets denoting place, religion, gender, location, locale and situation.

In literature, representation plays a significant role in engendering and re-gendering women. The dictionary meaning of representation is: The act of representing or the state of being; something that represents as an image or a symbol like a verbal or pictorial portrait.

Imagination and preconceived notions play an important role in the creation of representation. Representation deals with the questions: Who can speak, on behalf of whom, for and about whom? In feminist studies, this debate has been going on for a long time. For feminists, one of the important aspects of representation is to enable women to re-present themselves because they have not been able to speak for themselves or present their viewpoints; or they were relegated to the margins.

Representations are based on social reality and hence are social constructs. That is to say, there are always taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs behind every representation. Let us put it in the form of a question: What do we visualise when we utter the word 'woman'? The answer to this generates a stereotypical image: A person bound to domestic work, one who nurtures and brings up children, small in size, low in IQ, home-bound, subordinate and submissive, soft and tender, needing protection and so on. Indeed, women are not represented as independent agents or individuals but as part of a context, that is, in the perspective of family, friends, and colleagues.

Women are objects rather than subjects, passive rather than active. Often, their passivity extends to victim-hood. Men, on the other hand, are represented as decision-makers – powerful and in control of things. We all know the phrase ‘wear the pants/trousers’? Well, a person who ‘wears the pants’ controls things and makes decisions. In family and also in society, it is the male who has the prerogative to make decisions and is in a subject position. The constitution of the secondary position of women is thus determined by gender.

An interesting episode recorded by an interviewer, who was seeking a male viewpoint for his study on feminism in Africa, needs be referred to here. A 26-year-old married man, Aon, asserted during the interview that it is the man who is unquestionably the head of the house and the wife must live according to his rules. Aon was a tailor (the business not so stable) and claimed that everything in his home was his property. He, therefore, controlled what the wife and the children had too. The interviewer says that he was surprised when Aon said bluntly: “Personally, I beat my wife very often – whenever she does not obey my orders. Women, at times, behave like children and have to be ‘straightened up’. They, at times, talk too much and have to be shut up!”

If you are able to represent yourself as you are, you assume the subject position and concomitantly, the rest are the ‘others’. The process of ‘othering’ is inseparably linked to self-representation. In the patriarchal system, man is in speaking position, so he is the ‘self’; all those about whom or for whom he speaks are the ‘other’. The speaker has the active role and an element of control. Women have so far been deprived of this central/active role and are mute.

Feminist critics have emphasised analysing literature, media and other fields to study women’s representation by both men and women. Some of the prominent texts of the 1960s and 1970s like Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own: British Women From Bronte to Lessing*, and many others, have questioned the social frameworks in which women have been relegated to stereotypical images of passive, masochistic and male-identified. In short, they have interrogated the unquestioned acceptance of men’s portrayals of women. Acceptance means submission to the existing socio-cultural structures; it also means acquiescence to the culturally constructed, one-sided view of women’s reality.

So, they dug out women’s tradition of writing, their history and the use of language to ascertain their need to express themselves as they are, what they are, and what they feel. That is to say, they wanted a ‘voice’. Caroline Ramazanoglu, a feminist critic, opines that the most obvious principle of

social transformation is to take women's own account of their experience as part of their situation thus allowing previously silent voices to be heard and also making the other side (patriarchy in this case) aware of their joys and sorrows, problems and strengths. In gender studies, the issue of representation is a significant one for research as well as for political activity. Representation covers the fields of literature, politics, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and, in fact, many other disciplines because representation/voice is an important factor for access to power.

Gender is the key issue when discussing representation. Gender as a social category is important to explore what counts as a woman. But gender needs to be understood as something that is expressed, singled out, and positioned within theories of embodiment, their meanings and relationships. Gender involves three elements: Meaning and signification (social experience); social relations of men and women (psychological aspect); and social identity (symbolic element). These three aspects are important to understand what being a woman represents and how women represent themselves.

An important question feminists ask is, how do women represent themselves? First, being a woman represents being weak or being 'different' from the male sex. In portrayal of women, masculinity sets the boundaries. Feminists resented this and wanted to explore what being a woman represents for a woman. Representation is women's attempt to think about themselves as women. In literature, it stands for their own writings in which they can express their innermost feelings and experiences. Let us take, for instance, the experience of motherhood; it is special to women and only they can understand its joys and pains and only they can represent the experience authentically.

But representation must take into consideration its opposite, i.e. misrepresentation, which is beset with dangers. No act of representation can ever take place entirely outside of ideology. And women, as part of the existing ideology, also participate, knowingly or unknowingly, in acts of misrepresentation. For example, there was a time when woman writers were looked down upon. A woman entering the literary field was seen as a freak, someone who belonged to the margin, a second rate person, and if at all she was allowed some space, it was a special favour. When Charlotte Bronte gave her novel, *Jane Eyre*, to Robert Southey for perusal, his acerbic reaction was, "It is not women's business to write." In her novel, *The Binding Vine*, Shashi Deshpande records how a renowned poet, Venu, reacts when the young protagonist, Mira, shows him her verses. He rebuffs her saying that a young and beautiful girl should leave poetry to men;



women's poetry is to give birth to children, implying, thereby, that the patriarchal system thought of women as body and not as brain.

I am tempted to quote here what Nabneeta Dev Sen recounts in her opening lecture at a Sahitya Akademi Conference, 'Women Writing in India at the Turn of the Century'. Male writers are usually not very respectful of woman writers and their writings. Example:

"Hi Nabneeta, I liked that earthquake poem of yours in *Desh* this week."

"Ah, did you? Thank you! I liked it too. It is not mine though, Bijoya wrote that one."

"Ha, ha, is that so? I thought it was you." (Sen 2009: 5-6)

In another conference, she was identified as Kanu Mishra and in yet another, as Kabita Sinha. In one case, Sen got so irritated that she decided to make fun of their negligent attitude and going on the stage, she said, "I am not Kabita Sinha, I am Mahasweta Devi." Those who knew her and understood the joke saved the situation from blowing up. The point is, as a poet says, "They read us/casually, as one reads/ the torn pages of a child's notebook, before it is made into paper cones for *Chanajorgaram*."

So we put it thus: Representation means presenting the perspectives of those who have not been able to represent themselves. We need to understand the individual experiences of women but we also need commonalities to be ascertained and experiences to be made collective. In this context, we need to examine the ways in which representation of gender helps structure cultural perception of women. In the Indian socio-cultural psyche, a woman is deified as a *devi* or goddess. But this is also misrepresentation of a social reality because by putting a woman on a pedestal, man denies her human weaknesses, desires and wants. She is seen, not as a human individual, but as a symbol. Indian feminists like Yashodhara Bagchi, Jasbir Jain, Sussie Tharu and many others are trying to explore how Indian women define themselves and are defined as women within various systems of representation. Allowing women to define themselves means accepting their identity and identity is important to understand them as unique individuals in their own right.

When women attempt to redefine their roles and expand their arena of choices, patriarchy resents these notions because their actions may necessitate re-structuring of the existing social and political norms and also because redefinition may lead to self-definition and identity formation. Articulation of identity has to be understood as the function of historical, social and material circumstances.

Women try to capture in their writings those moments that are crucial in the shaping of their identity as gendered subjects. Notions of femininity,

of respectability and of honour often shape the reaction of women to questions of sexuality. In the film, *Fire*, for example, Deepa Mehta uses feminism in a manner that does not fit into the normal, socially accepted discourses. The film generated feminist discussion regarding the representation of lesbianism and also incurred the ire of society. Representation in cinema requires both language and visual depiction; other disciplines like literature and social sciences depend on language to delineate reality.

Language is not neutral; it is not simply a carrier of ideas but is a shaper of ideas. It is a means of self-expression and is co-related with socio-cultural facts of one's upbringing, environment, class, nationality and other basic attributes. This is called 'language socialisation' which means people learn how they are expected to categorise themselves socially and how people in those categories are expected to talk. Thus, women, as a category, employ language differently from the way men do and hence, 'women's language' is believed to display their female identity. Researchers claim that language and gender are related to the association between language and the social contexts because it is the social context that forms our concepts of how men and women use language. Feminist linguist Deborah Cameron argues that the activities that women and men participate in and the way they communicate provide clear indication of the relationship of language to gender. Men and women differ in their communicative manner and critics assert that language ideology plays an important role in the gendered use of language.

Language is the main reason on which all claims of gender difference depend. Some linguists believe that women are aware of their low status in society. So, women use language that is powerless and has been developed as a way of surviving without control over economic, physical or social reality. Critics also claim that women speak politely because they are secondary in status to men and because politeness is expected from the inferior towards the superior. However, we cannot make sweeping and generalised statements in this matter as language use is governed by social and cultural factors and is different in different cultures. But it cannot be denied either that women are at a disadvantage because language is a male construct and women have to use the 'master's language' as it is; they do not and cannot have their own language.

In gender studies, discourse analysis answers questions about social relations, personal and social identity, self-definitions, dominance, and social and personal adaptation. Let us take an example to see how discourse analysis works. In the novel titled, *Forever Free*, written by Raji Narasimhan, some woman characters talk about the protagonist thus, "It's

like a man, she is, arguing and going to the bottom of things. She's like a man." Even if we do not know the context, we can analyse these two sentences to reveal different aspects: (1) The protagonist is a woman ('she' pronoun); (2) she appears to be a strong character (personal trait); (3) women do not argue as vehemently as men do (social expectation); (4) women do not go to the bottom of things (generalised ideology); and (5) the women who are discussing the absent woman seem to resent her because she is 'like a man' or maybe, they appreciate her for her independence. The above two sentences from the novel are silent on the nuances we brought to light by our analysis. This means that 'silence' also articulates many things and needs to be understood.

'Silences' mean those statements that are in the background, that are not expressed but have been understood. In the above example, the speakers did not say that they are jealous or that they disapprove of the protagonist. They are silent on the issue but we can notice it. Silence also means lack of voice, overt restriction placed on speaking or prohibition imposed on expression, exclusion from highly valued forms like rhetoric, or public speaking. Terms such as 'absent' women, 'missing' women and 'invisible' women indicate women's silences. The idea behind discourse analysis is to detect silences. In her book, *Discourse Analysis*, Barbara Johnstone observes, "learning to notice silences means learning to 'de-familiarise' the familiar." (Johnstone 2002: 58-61). This is one way that may lead to giving power and control to the 'silent other'.

Cinema, literary works, art, rhetoric and many other fields offer a lot of potential to study and understand the role silences play. For example, in the film, *Peepli (Live)*, discourse analysis can show us many 'unsaid' things about our present socio-political system. Another example can be the 1982 film *Arth* where silences and social insecurities of a single woman and the psychological problems generated by guilt can be analysed. Silences can be read in male writings as well. In Manohar Malgonkar's novel, *The Princes*, the king often boosts the morale of his son by exhorting him to 'Be a man'. It means, 'be strong and brave'. The sentence does not say 'women are weak'; it is silent but reveals the intended meaning and the social expectation that men should be strong.

In re-gendering, women's oral traditions, storytelling and myth-making abilities need to be studied. One of the challenging fields is revisionist myth-making. Revisionist myth-making redefines the culture and women's place in the culture. They speak of the past, re-interpret it and re-write it from the woman's point of view. If the woman was absent from a mythological tale, revision gives her the desired presence. Feminist critics consider it an act of survival.

Issues raised by woman writers of the sub-continent vary from gender-bias to violence; exposure and censure of social evils like poverty to the economic and moral iniquities to the inhuman caste bias and dehumanising superstition; from corruption to nepotism, as also from nostalgic reminiscences to the alienating forces of modernism. Kishwar Naheed, a Pakistani poetess, vociferously defends those women who have the guts to speak up. Society may call them 'sinful women' but they, though unconventional, have the courage to articulate and stand for truth.

Another poetess, Razia Hussain from Bangladesh, interweaves the horrors of war with the promise of life. Razia Hussain, a Dhaka-born poetess, is a peace activist and feminist. In "The Sound of Leaves", she depicts war and the resultant violence. Her motherland is ravaged by the hand of the power-hungry male but the earth cannot be left barren. Neither the poet, nor the earth, which is being torn apart in the battle to possess her, submits passively to violence:

War, only war all twelve  
months of the year. Our eyes are cactus plants,  
the thorns growing inward to pierce our tenderest nerve.  
Still, sometimes the sound of leaves makes me open my eyes to the sky.  
Again the mind begins to build its nest among quiet wings,  
the shadow of the Shal tree falls green  
over my house over the smell of this warm, wet earth.

In the field of fiction, woman writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin, Yasmin Gooneratne, and, of course, woman writers of India, have made remarkable contribution. In *Ice-Candy Man*, Sidhwa lets her own nightmare be expressed through Lenny: "I feel no pain, only an abysmal sense of loss – and a chilling horror that no one is concerned by what's happening". This 'no one' is none but the political leaders responsible for the partition. Now, more than six decades after Independence, things have not changed much. There is still communal disharmony, religious fanaticism and political connivance. Many woman writers are focusing on issues such as these and countering the charge that women's writing is only sentimental crap.

In the postmodern scenario, women are taking to what postmodern critics call 'dedoxification' or reverse writing. They are writing from the angle of the subaltern – women, tribals, servants, dalits and others. The fact that woman writers are speaking up and breaking age-old traditions reveals the beginning of 'the freedom of the mind'. According to Virginia Woolf, it denotes the possibility that, in course of time, the mind will be free to write what it likes. Self-assertion of authors or their protagonists'

consciousness of their plight does not necessarily proclaim feminism. But the sporadic portrayals of resistance and protest derive from the deeply felt lack of expansion and the necessity to breathe. These are, indeed, brave women. By thus writing resistance, woman writers are opposing evils and empowering themselves.

Writing means breaking the silence, speaking up. And speaking up is a difficult proposition for women even in the present day scenario. Society is not yet ready to hear other voices or exonerate the woman. But then, patriarchy is not to be judged by a few bad men who beat their wives and a few good men who care for them. It is to be seen in its totality as working within the politics of power structures. It is this power structure that woman writers take cognizance of when they write texts showing options open to women. In depicting women's representation, literature is expressing a plea for control, empowerment and women's agency. Women must, therefore write, as Helene Cixous says. Women must write so that they are read by men. I am tempted to quote what Nabneeta Dev Sen says:

We need to be read and known by our fathers, by our husbands, our lovers, our sons. If we want to change the system we must work together as family units. It's a period of transition that we are passing through and we must carry our families with us. Our life work must not look like a proselytisation plan, the change should come within, as a natural process of development in the family structure. We shall always remain woman writers; no amount of backlash can put us back into our shell again. It is broken. Once for all, we know who we are. We want to know what the whole of life is all about. Not only ours, but theirs as well. (Sen 2009: 18)

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## CHAPTER TWO

### APHRA BEHN AND COLONIAL SPACE

#### MARGARETE RUBIK

Aphra Behn was an English poet, dramatist and novelist at the end of the seventeenth century. She was the first woman writer to make a living from her pen – a career which, before, had only been open to men. She was forgotten for two centuries because of changing tastes and moral precepts until she was put on the literary map again by Virginia Woolf. Woolf exhorted all women to “to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds” (Woolf 59).

In her life, Behn transgressed borders in more than one sense. In the seventeenth century, poetry was an ‘acceptable’ genre because women could compose it at home and circle it among their acquaintances in a non-competitive manner. But by writing for the public stage, Behn entered a space traditionally connoted as male. At that time, Gallagher argues in “Who was that Masked Woman?”, a female playwright writing for the public theatre was equated with a public woman, that is, a whore. When it came to women, Restoration audiences and critics tended to conflate the public and private space. There was a prurient interest in the private lives and affairs of actresses and female playwrights while no one cared for the behaviour of men. It was assumed that the plays they wrote and the roles they starred in reflected their private lives and morals. A woman who, like Behn, wrote sex comedies, was assumed to have experience in the field. The fictional space of the theatre was seen as a direct mirror of her lifestyle. The private sphere of the female dramatist and the fictional text worlds which she invented were fused and became inseparable. Despite such wide-spread prejudices, Behn managed to cross class borders by being accepted in the royalist aristocratic circles.

But even before she began her career in the theatre, Behn transgressed gender borders: She was employed as a government spy in the Netherlands and ended up in debtors’ prison because the king did not pay her. Earlier still, in her youth, she travelled to Surinam, an English colony at the

mouth of the river Oroonoko in South America.<sup>1</sup> She described this experience in her novel, *Oroonoko*, a fictional tale with some semi-autobiographical elements.

It is characteristic of the gendering of spaces even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that several critics accused her of being a liar, of never travelling across the Atlantic at all and of having copied her descriptions from contemporary travel reports.<sup>2</sup> Of course, it was unusual for women to travel such distances. Female overseas travel only became popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and even then, the adventures of single woman travellers like Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley were curiosities. If we look at the 18<sup>th</sup> century, female travellers like Lady Mary Wortley Montague or Anna Maria Falconbridge accompanied their husbands on official journeys. We do not know in what company Behn travelled to Surinam but by now, it is fairly certain that she did go there – because of her accurate knowledge of political functionaries and the fauna and flora there as well as some expressions from indigenous languages.<sup>3</sup>

The novel, *Oroonoko*, is a fictional tale about an African prince lured on board a slave ship and transported to Surinam where he is united with his lost love and later tortured to death after a failed slave rising. The narrator, who bears some similarities to the author, only occupies a role in the background. The story consists of two parts connected by the two places of action: Coramantien in Africa, in what is today Ghana, and Surinam in South America.

From the formalised descriptions, it is fairly clear that Behn was never in Africa herself. She may have gained knowledge of that part of the world either through travel reports or, more probably, through the clichéd conventions of Orientalist plays or, perhaps, through the narration of the African prince Oroonoko – if indeed, such a person ever existed. In the novel, this warrior prince initially operates in the outdoor space, committing heroic acts in battle. But the story focuses on the indoor space as soon as his beloved, Imoinda, is forced to enter the old King's harem. The harem was already a fascinating place to writers of the Restoration period and became increasingly so after 1706, when the first English translation of the *Arabian Nights* was published. Western tales about the harem often follow a stereotyped pattern, featuring a sexually aggressive sultan, an innocent virgin and a true lover who tries to free her. In Behn's novel, Oroonoko gains entrance into the forbidden space of the harem and

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<sup>1</sup> For Behn's life, cf. Maureen Duffy's biography.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for instance Bernbaum.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Dhucq 40-41.

manages to consummate his marriage with his betrothed. But she is sold as a slave in retaliation. The lovers are then re-united in America.

The second part of the narrative is set in Surinam. The narrator passes herself off as an eye-witness, fusing tragedy, romance and adventure narrative with ethnography and natural history. She not only claims to have been Oroonoko's confidante and hence his appropriate biographer but also styles herself into an explorer of indigenous South American tribes, goes on tiger hunts and is the only survivor of the colony's turbulent history to tell the hero's story. Thus, she enters a sphere to which, at her time, only privileged males had access.

In her description of the fauna and flora of Surinam, the narrator praises the abundance and beauty of the country. The colony seems to her a treasure-house, full of marvels and useful produce from spices, and fruits to exotic animals and valuable timbers.<sup>4</sup> As is typical of colonial fiction,<sup>5</sup> aesthetic pleasure at the beauty of the land is fused with a calculation of the economic profit its exploitation could yield to the English – which explains her frustration at the fact that the English lost the colony to the Dutch a little after her departure from Surinam.

As in so many travelogues, Behn waxes enthusiastic about the wonders of the New World – the “wonderful and surprising forms, shapes, and colours,” (Behn 75) – exotic sights and smells, and trees bearing blossoms and fruits at the same time. In the course of the narrative, however, the idyllic atmosphere gives way to shocking details of mutilation and torture and the horrible smell of rotting bodies. If Behn started out by painting Surinam as a place of exotic beauty, she ends up by depicting the colony in the hands of a bloodthirsty lower class mob devoid of any humanity.

Behn constantly juxtaposes dichotomous images of the colonial space even in her description of colonial relations with the South American Indians. At first, Surinam seems to be a contact zone of mutual love and respect. The British colonists are said to “caress [the Caribs] with all the brotherly and friendly Affection in the World” and to live with them in “perfect Amity” (Behn 75). The true reason for this profession of friendship, however, is economic expedience and fear that the natives, by far outnumbering the white colonists, might rise in rebellion and overrun the settlers (as, indeed, they later did under Dutch rule). Since the colonists do not dare to force the indigenous population into slave labour, they import Africans to work on the plantations but dread the possibility of a revolt on their part as well. Far from being a place of peaceful coexistence,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rubik “Teaching *Oroonoko* in the Travel-Literature Course.”

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Spurr.



the colony seems rife with fear and dishonesty, exploitation and enslavement.

Similarly, contradictory impressions are conveyed by the imagery with which the Caribs are described: On the one hand their naiveté makes them seem like Adam and Eve before the Fall, giving the narrator “an absolute *Idea* of the first State of Innocence, before Man knew how to sin” (Behn 77). Pre-colonial Surinam is thus constructed as a paradisiacal space, contrasted to the corruption of white civilization. Yet, the narrator, nonetheless, seems to prefer the ‘fallen’ civilization of her own sophisticated culture to this stone-age innocence. On the other hand, the self-mutilation of the Indian war-captains, who slash away at their ears and noses to prove their prowess, jars with the image of Eden as does the news of their later cruelty during an insurrection against the less diplomatic Dutch colonists, when “they cut in pieces all they could take... hanging up the mother and all her children about her; and cut a footman ... all in joints, and nailed him to trees” (Behn 120).

Though Behn refuses to sentimentalise the Caribs, it is important to note that she never uses terms like ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ for them. The phrase “*below the wildest Salvages* [i.e. savages]” (Behn 126), which Oroonoko employs in his stirring address to the other slaves, is reserved for the whites and their shocking cruelty and treachery. It is they who introduce the Indians to the concept of lying; they betray Oroonoko more than once and torture and kill him in a bestial way. In a biblical scenario, they are the true embodiments of evil. However, even the noble savage, Oroonoko, commits a shocking cruelty when he decapitates his pregnant wife in order to save her from falling into the hands of the pursuers. The colony of Surinam, then, is both paradise and hell.

The description of the indigenous American population is also interesting for another reason. The narrator and some of her friends (including Oroonoko, who is, in this scene, subsumed within the white travel party) make an excursion to an Indian village which has supposedly never been visited by white people before. Instead of assuming the typical attitude of explorers and travellers directing their curious gaze on foreign ethnicity and thereby asserting their superior subject position vis-à-vis the foreign objects of scientific investigation, Behn reverses the power relations. Her narrator is willing to surprise the American Indians with “something they never had seen, (that is, White People)” (Behn 121), thus turning her white travel party into curiosities for the amusement of the indigenous villagers. To be sure, the white tourists come for exotic ‘Diversion’ (Behn 121), but they are also aware of being, in their gaudy robes, a sight of ‘numberless wonders’ (Behn 121) for the Indians. For

once, the European travellers are keenly aware of being somebody else's 'other' and of being subjected to an objectifying gaze. Indeed, the Indians wonder whether "those things [the Europeans] can speak", have "Sense, and Wit" and can talk about "of affairs of Life" (Behn 122).

By making this trip into a remote Indian village and entering into close physical contact with foreign ethnicity, Behn's narrator, once more, claims a space that is not normally open to women. The house is the place generally allotted to women. For all her social pride at occupying the best house in the colony, she never sees the domestic space as a sanctuary. Rather, it is a site of deceit where she spies on Oroonoko and tries to keep him amused so that he will not think about a rebellion. It is also a space where she feels most vulnerable to attack. The woman who ventured into the jungle to go on expeditions and tiger hunts now fears that, if she stays in her house, the revolting slaves will cut her throat – in spite of her supposed friendship with their leader. Although she firmly placed herself in a male position before, she suddenly uses the female privilege of timidity and flees down the river when the revolt breaks out, removing herself from the place of action. Later, she bitterly regrets her desertion since she claims that, by her authority, she could have saved the hero's life. But she later re-assumes the masculine role by acting as Oroonoko's biographer. Behn's text consistently deconstructs stereotypes of race and gender.

Let us, in comparison, briefly consider some 18<sup>th</sup> century female travellers: Lady Mary Montague is best known for her description of a Turkish harem in *Turkish Embassy Letters*. Unlike European men, she could enter the private space of Turkish women and was invited to participate in their pastimes. Thus, she visited a women's bath (although she herself refused to take off her corset). She also learned to appreciate the veil as a protection for women who wanted to walk out into the streets unknown, clad in garments which screened them from the public space in which they moved. Behn, we have seen, craved access to spaces reserved for men. Montague, in contrast, valued the all-feminine sphere about which prurient men could merely speculate.

Anna Maria Falconbridge, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied her husband to Sierra Leone to defend and protect the rights of the Nova Scotia black loyalists who had been invited to settle there. She published a collection of letters about her experience. Unlike her Restoration predecessor, her impression of the tropics is mainly negative. The country is not Paradise but an 'inhospitable' wilderness in which she experiences terror and "hardships unprecedented" (Falconbridge 81). Like Behn's narrator, Falconbridge, too, travels into the interior of the country – only to

be terrified by a hostile tribe which threatens to kill the white party if it does not leave immediately. She is equally scared of the local African ruler and during an invitation to his feast, is reduced to gibbering hysterics. On the other hand, she refuses to be confined to a narrow cabin on board the ship, which she likens to a prison. In fact, Falconbridge feels safest in the comfortable houses of the factors – no matter that they are slave traders. Although her vision of the colonial space is much more negative than Behn's, she, too, blurs the borders between the colonial space and the metropolis by presenting the managers of the Sierra Leone Company as much more hard-hearted, stubborn and cruel than the indigenous kings.

We have to wait a long time before we meet another female traveller as open to encounters in the colonial contact zone as Aphra Behn. The case of the Austrian Ida Pfeiffer comes to mind. She, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, alone and fearlessly travelled to the head-hunters' territory in Sumatra. Pfeiffer's arrogation of the male privilege of scientific travel to remote places of the earth and her insight that the colonial space offers an opportunity for women to transgress narrow gender roles and to escape confinement in the domestic sphere is indeed reminiscent of her well-known Restoration predecessor.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# RE-GENDERING THE HARDBOILED GENRE: THE CRIMINAL FEMME FATALE IN RAYMOND CHANDLER'S FICTION

MAYSAA JABER

Raymond Chandler is a canonical writer of hardboiled crime fiction, a distinctively American genre of crime writing that developed in the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s, fully maturing in the 1940s. The genre depicts a world of crime and corruption usually with a male detective oscillating between the rich elite and the seamy underworld of gangsters and dangerous women. Chandler's work introduces a large number of what I term 'criminal femme fatales' – women who go beyond the arena of dangerous sexuality to enter the realm of criminality. These criminal femme fatales use their sexual appeal and irresistible wiles both to manipulate men and to commit criminal acts, usually murder, in order to advance their goals with deliberate intent and full culpability. This essay aims to complicate the notion of the femme fatale as simply a seductive and threatening woman by arguing that there is more to the femme fatale in American hardboiled crime fiction than is usually allowed for. While feminist scholarship regards the femme fatale as a sexist construction of male fantasy and treats her as an expression of misogyny that ultimately serves to reaffirm male authority, I aim to open the closed doors behind which this archetype of the femme fatale is trapped.<sup>1</sup> I reconsider her role,

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<sup>1</sup> While the femme fatale has been carefully studied in cinema, she has not been the subject of sustained critical attention in crime fiction. It is indeed film scholarship that has played the most vital role in formulating critical attitudes regarding the femme fatale. Feminist film scholarship, which flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, saw the classic film noir of the 1940s and 1950s as ripe for analysis, reading the femme fatale figure of this film genre from a range of perspectives, with many analyses circling back to the question of the femme fatale as an objectification of male desire. Laura Mulvey's theorisation of the male gaze is perhaps the most

beyond her image of an ‘evil’ seductress, as a complex character, a force that drives the narratives and a figure that prepares the ground for more nuanced readings of the constructions of gender and sexuality in the genre.

Specifically, I will examine representations of this figure that open a space for imagining female agency. By agency I refer to the ways that criminal femme fatales demonstrate power, intelligence, and independence as they successfully mobilise their skills in a male-dominated milieu (both textually and at large). As such, these female characters break normative conceptions and expectations of gender roles by challenging the pattern of female submission, domesticity, and dependence, and also break the fixity of the genre that is often described as ‘masculine’.<sup>2</sup> My argument, therefore, offers possibilities for examining the femme fatale against the grain, expanding the margins and loosening the tensions between gender and genre, and inviting a more reparative feminist reading of the role of women in hardboiled crime fiction beyond the discourses of objectification and misogyny.

Chandler consistently depicts murderous women whose representations are, nonetheless, interconnected with his detective, Philip Marlowe, who occupies a central position in Chandler’s fiction<sup>3</sup>. I will argue that while Chandler’s criminal femme fatales do serve as foils to Marlowe in his professional and moral capacity, they do not do so simply to underline the detective’s power and ‘heroic’ qualities. Rather, the criminal femme fatale destabilises the status of the detective as ‘hero’ and questions his mastery. The narratives achieve this through the representational dynamics that Chandler uses to portray his female characters. They are not always visible in the sense that they do not dominate the narratives with an overpowering presence and we do not see them commit criminal acts. Their agency is located, however, in what I will call (in)visible roles. That is, despite or because of indirect avenues through which female agency is mobilised (whether through absence, or retrospective reading of agency, which I will

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influential and oft-cited example used in feminist scholarship on the femme fatale. For studies of the femme fatale in film noir see, for example, Kaplan, Maxfield, Hanson and Grossman.

<sup>2</sup> Hardboiled crime fiction is considered “male oriented” both as far as its notoriety as a “masculine” genre and the history of its literary criticism are concerned. Masculine toughness and masculine codes are essential in hardboiled narratives, and are part, as Jopi Nyman argues, of a larger ideology of masculinity: “the focus is now on the different constructions of gender and their relationship to culture and history rather than on an individual writer’s intentions” (39).

<sup>3</sup> All of Chandler’s novels except one – his last finished novel *Playback* (1958) – contain criminal women, although *The High Window* (1942) and *The Little Sister* (1949) do not present their female protagonists as femme fatales.