

Book Review

Gender, conflict and migration. Vol. 3, Ed. Navnita Chadha Behera, Series Editor, Meenakshi Thapan. New Delhi, Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, 2006

This book in some ways upholds some of the traditions inherent in work already done on migration, namely, unravelling stories of gendered migration, complicating and often rejecting notions of choice in migration, tracking migrants in pre and post-conflict situations. But it is equally keen to inject relatively new ideas into the migration discourse and introduce new ways of thinking about and analysing processes of migration. Some of these innovations include discussing the class-nuanced heterogeneity of female migrant experiences, the social and political opportunities that conflict and migration present to women, the troubled relationship of migrant women to their erstwhile homes, the implications that certain international legal categories and their interpretation can hold for refugee women.

This volume amply substantiates Navnita Chadha Behera's claim in her *Introduction* that foregrounding the structural nature as well as the individual instances of gender discrimination is necessary to the analysis of gendered experiences of women in the face of conflict and conflict-driven migration. The third in a series of five volumes, the other volumes explore aspects of gendered migration in relation to the politics of identity, poverty, work and marriage. Meenakshi Thapan in her series introduction describes the commitment of the contributors to unravel the migration of women as prompted by independent and self-sustaining reasons. As a whole, the book critiques migration as a universal process that men and women participate in for similar reasons. The various essays are rounded in their perception of the 'vulnerability' of women before, during, and after conflict, citing different sources of vulnerability of women to state power, institutional frameworks and social norms. But the contributors are eager to emphasize the possibilities of the empowerment of women, however ambivalent, in situations of forced migration.

Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake describes the opportunities and the relative freedoms that present themselves to internally displaced, especially younger generation, Tamil and Muslim women in post-conflict zones in north-east Sri Lanka in the form of a distance from caste and gender hierarchies, newfound responsibilities for engaging with authorities and discovering new "spaces of economic agency" (p.178) Senanayake allows both civilian and armed women the experience of such agency, though there is no mistaking her scepticism of the form that such agency enjoyed by women in combatant roles takes, given that they are often co-opted by ethnic, national aspirations. These possibilities are somewhat diluted though by such women's encounters with violence at the hands of emasculated

husbands and their constant fear of regression to a pre-war gender status quo in situations of peace. Mary O' Kane too invokes the term 'empowerment' in her descriptions of the women's movement in Burma's borderlands with Thailand among other countries. In an astonishing narrative, she describes the bold efforts of some women activists who take advantage of their statelessness to lobby for international recognition of the Burmese opposition movement. Mary Kane is however keen to emphasize the determination of these women to challenge subservient notions of women's participation and to make their movement one for women's rights as much as for democracy. Especially novel is her treatment of borders as implying transversal, porous, non-static boundaries marked by forms of political expression and interactions between local and global.

If Senanayake and Mary Kane challenge traditional perceptions of displacement, so does Nayanika Mookherjee. Apart from outlining the new skills and capabilities that women in East Pakistan discovered during the war that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh, she complicates the tale of migration as something that can entail adventure, romance and discovery without obscuring the well-known persecution and slaughter that the period saw. She employs the narrative of the Bengali film 'Muktir Gaan' to insert heterogeneous, compositely gendered, middle class receptions of the war, reminding us that a wide section of the middle class along with villagers and workers were affected by the war. In capturing such varied class experiences of the war, Mookherjee also attempts to challenge settled notions of the 'subaltern' and the discounting of experiences other than the subaltern ones in the context of migration and Bangladesh.

Another theme that the contributors approach from different directions is the theme of citizenship. Contemplating citizenship as something that is within the reach of the conflict-stricken people of East Pakistan, Mookherjee raises the question of citizenship as "the conjuring of citizenship rights" rather than "forfeiting citizenship rights" (p.88). Urvashi Butalia links citizenship with troubled questions of choice in the face of nation, family and community and in the context of abducted women who are conferred citizenship through their mediating relationship with their husbands. Consequently, in the tug of forcible recovery between India and Pakistan, and between East and West Pakistan, not only were women forced to be citizens of this or that country against their choice, but their children, because they were fathered by kafirs or infidels, were denied citizenship and given away for adoption. Rita Manchanda too writes on such mediated citizenship, but she exposes the predicament of Bhutanese refugee women in Nepal who have to cower under the protection of their male relatives for their access to daily rations as household cards are usually issued to male heads of the family (except in the rare instance of divorce). Both Butalia and Manchanda argue against fraught conceptual distinctions between forced and voluntary migration, refugee and migrant, migration and dislocation, with Manchanda citing instances of different countries in South Asia infantilising their migrant women.

The essays in this volume are particularly sensitive to the aesthetics, politics and memories of various spaces, the most predominant of these being the space of 'home'. In her recounting of the experiences of displacement of Afghan women to Pakistan, Saba Gul Khattak deconstructs conflict, focusing attention on the attack that such conflict entails on the 'homes' of these women, breaking a silence that many feminists keep on this space, owing to their aversion to this space that they associate with domestic violence. But Khattak revives this space as laden with identities, their creativity, nurturing memories of warmth and plenty, relationships that Afghan refugee women cherished. They often likened their home with their 'watan' or nation, though many of them appreciated the deceptive protection that home held out and reconciled themselves to never being able to return home. Anasua Basu Raychaudhury captures similar moods of nostalgia for home among refugees from present-day Bangladesh in the bleak surroundings of the Cooper's camp in West Bengal immediately after the partition of Pakistan. Others like Butalia are more suspicious of women's homes as a space which weighs heavily on Indian and Pakistani women as they are forced to return home to satisfy community and state expectations.

Most of the authors are conscious of memory as a complex tool that guides personal narratives but also leads them to blur different periods of time. Raychaudhury for instance remarks that the past, present and future ceased to have their separate character for an East Bengal-based refugee woman in Cooper's Camp, largely due to the uninterrupted suffering that she underwent. Others like Khattak comment on the abiding comfort that memory provides to refugee women far away from home, though it became tainted a little with the painful unfolding of events. Furrugh A.Khan however makes a crucial link between memory and certain kinds of narratives: state narratives or meta-narratives invariably delineate memory of a nation's history as a coherent, chronologically unfolding, almost inevitable account of events while individual stories are often punctuated with breaks of forgetfulness, pain and confused recreation of events. According to Khan, state narratives fall back on community-specific images of violence, seldom capturing the abrupt moment of dislocation or the disruptions in livelihood caused by conflict and migration and focusing instead on grief on a grand scale. Many others like Nayanika Mookherjee, Urvashi Butalia and Rita Manchanda also critique state narratives as they entail not only incomplete histories but also dangerous policy implications as in the construction of a certain movement of people in history as voluntary migration.

The last two essays discuss the limitations of implementing the international refugee and asylum law in South Asia and the restrictive application of the refugee asylum law in judgements concerning South Asian applicants in UK respectively. Oishik Sircar identifies the various banes of the international refugee law as it is implemented in South Asia, its constricting definitions of what constitutes persecution against women, who

the perpetrators of violence can be---private actors are often discounted, and which kinds of conflict yield to legitimate persecution. Sircar makes a strong case for evolving clear national and refugee asylum laws in South Asia. Anthony Good narrates a bewildering story of case law in determining asylum eligibility of South Asian applicants, especially women, in the UK. In excluding many applicants from asylum protection, courts mostly found that their membership in a 'social group' or the invocation of 'political opinion' did not conform to the Courts' interpretations of the Convention reasons. They therefore denied women asylum if they were persecuted by private armed groups, state-employed soldiers acting in an individual capacity, or if they were persecuted for expressing what the courts construed as personal opinions (as against political opinions).

Immensely satisfactory in the range of subjects it intends to cover, this volume must however be faulted with being crowded in its eagerness to bring together the dynamic themes of gender, conflict and migration. Faced with the task of making links between them, the authors sometimes cramp ideas that interfere with their mostly well-reasoned arguments. But this may be inevitable in a volume that is determined to uncover and reframe in an as comprehensive way as possible the gendered nature of conflict and conflict-driven migration.

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