



Moussa Pourya Asl (editor)

Gender, Place, and Identity of South Asian Women

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reviewed by [Nandini Das](#)

Edited by Moussa Pourya Asl, the thirteen essays (in the form of chapters) in *Gender, Place, and Identity of South Asian Women* are written by different South Asian (resident, migrant and transnational) authors looking at Anglophone literature on South Asian women. They offer unique insights into the material and discursive formation of gendered identities in the varied contexts of their geographic locations and experiences. The chapters use the triple lenses of gender, identity and place and the literature ranges from negotiated third-space gender subjectivity by Pakistani women, family and home as a 'space,' exploring queer intimacy and gender identity in Bangladesh and narratives by women travellers to European colonies like India.

This book has multiple layers—an editor who has edited this book, the authors of the different essays, the authors of the fictional and non-fictional pieces of literature whose work the authors of this book have written about and the different characters in those works of fiction and non-fiction; and yet, somehow, all of it fits well, beautifully bringing in vivid imageries of the places and times the characters are based within and perhaps which some of the authors are living through.

The concepts of space and place and what they mean, including in relation to each other, have been long contested in the arena of archaeology, sociology, geography, etc. Amidst all the debates, what many feminist scholars agree is that, irrespective of how they are defined, both space and place are socially constructed to embed performances of power that are essentially gendered. Therefore, these performances do not exist outside of social, and thus, power relations. A gendered lens focused on understanding space and a spatial lens concentrated on understanding gender are both incredibly important. Since spaces are divided on social lines, including along binary understandings of gender, women have been historically relegated into the private space?the home and family. How do women understand or imagine these homes?

The first section of the book (Section 1) beautifully explores women?s understanding of home through characters situated in fictional and non-fictional works questioning how they imagine their homes and homelands. This brings in the complexity through which women navigate their everydayness?beyond binary understandings of public-private, good-bad, traditional-modern that are the result of gender and various socio-economic and cultural identities like race, class and ethnicity shaping the space and place and in turn being shaped by them. These ideas are primary

in Chapter 2, by Muhammad Safdar and Musarat Yasmin, which explores 'Spatial Mobility, Pakistani Muslim Female Subjectivity, and Third-Space Between the Secular and the Religious in Kamila Shamsie's Broken Verses,' and Chapter 4, by Saritha Sasidharan and Prasuna M. G., that looks at 'Identity, Roles, and Choices Within the Space of the "Home": in Vijay Tendulkar's Kamala.' Through analysing the female characters, the authors argue that women often have a constant sense of un-belongingness in relation to their homes and homelands because they are often created, controlled and reimagined by men. This theme is central to Chapter 1, (Dis)Locating Homeland by Shilpi Gupta. Liminality of identity by women—where they hold dual identities and are in a flux of in-betweenness is a key concept in Moulina Bhattacharya's Chapter 3, 'The Partition.' Women are always in a state of transit, especially in a patriarchal context that is common in South Asia—with patrilocality playing an important role. Because of this, girls and women are always taught that the natal homes are not their homes as they will eventually need to move into their marital homes after marriage.

Even today, with more women becoming educated, taking up paid forms of employment outside their homes and migrating for better livelihoods, marriage continues to be a central part of their lives, especially with marriage as an institution continuing to be the only socially acceptable recognition for forming sexual relations and for procreation for most women in South Asia. Transnational movement as a result of the global redistribution of labour has increased migration, movement and lived experiences. The in-betweenness of identities in a distant land, because of migration through marriage or through being second-generation immigrants, highlight the ambiguity of understanding which is their home and homeland—those left behind or the current location—highlighting the multiple, contradictory subject positions from each other and among themselves. This is explored in Chapter 5 written by Nipuni Ranaweera that looks at 'The Maternal Presence in Diasporic Women's Lives in the Works of Amulya Malladi and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni.' Regardless of geography and location, spaces and places get constructed and reconstructed through unequal power structures and power relations, with consent and coercion which Anand explores in Pulkita Anand's Chapter 6, 'Gender and Space in Flux in Anukrti Upadhyay's Bhauri.'

The latter section (Section 2) focuses on the making and remaking of identities, gendered roles, and forms of resistance practices in the lives of women. The seven chapters here bring in themes related to contestation and the reconstruction of gender roles and sexual identities. In particular Nur Ain Nasuha binti Anuar and Moussa Pourya Asl, in Chapter 7 explore 'Rewriting of Gender and Sexuality in Tanwi Nandini Islam's Bright Lines' by focusing on different forms of urban protests and social movements, opposition to sexual violence and harassment and the reassertion of subjectivity. Dominant ideas of resistance and contestation are challenged through experiences of the female characters. For example, Garima Singh looks at Afghan women authors' female characters in Chapter 8 'Afghan Women Authors? Discourses of Resistance.' Sometimes, this resistance is in the form of protests and overt resistance; other times, their silence itself is a form of resistance. These negotiations are especially interesting for what they tell us about women's own assessment of opportunities and risks, and for the way in which they make sense of their exercise of agency and juxtaposition of their identities. Kiron Susan Joseph Sebastine's Chapter 9, 'Construction and Reconstruction of Space and Identity: An Analysis of Jasvinder Sanghera's Shame Travels,' and Chapter 11, 'Uncovering the Veiled Experiences: Women, Memories, and the Bangladesh Liberation War' by Kirankumar Nitali and Sandhya Devi N. K. explore these themes. Negotiations are carried out with relation to migration and movement, but as well as within homes that are defined by disproportionate power dynamics. Debalina Banerjee in Chapter 10, 'Spaces of Wrath: Fractured Identities, Violated Bodies, and Silent Women in the Fiction of Shashi Deshpande' and Renuka Laxminarayan Roy in Chapter 12, 'Quest for Space and Identity of the East Indian Diasporic Female Laborers' both focus on themes

of power, home and migration. The point driven home is that through conflicts, migration and crises, women are often left with no option but to appropriate physical and symbolic spaces and try to initiate change. This theme is explored by Sarottama Majumdar in Chapter 13 titled 'Recreating "Home" in Exile: Unfamiliar Terrain, Gender, and Identity ? Immigrant Women?s Writings in Nineteenth Century India.'

The book is well curated, reflecting the nuances of everyday lived experiences of women in different times and contexts through the different pieces of literature. Renowned historian Ranajit Guha once said that 'the truth of human life was not to be found in history which was necessarily built around the life of the state,' but 'was stored in literature which depicts changes in the everyday existence of ordinary people.'^[1] The book *Gender, Place and Identity of South Asian Women* is a testament to that. This book will definitely make readers want to explore the different literature used by the authors in their essays because of the way the authors weave the themes of gender, identity and place with the characters and their settings! It will be a great read for people interested in thematic issues of gender and identity, geographies of gender, and women and migration.

Note

^[1] [Ranjit Guha](#), quoted in Partha Chatterjee, 'Ranjit Guha, the Unconventional Historian,' *The Wire*, 5 May 2023, accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

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