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Between Home and Work: The Many Cities of Refuge in Jyotirmoyee Devi's 'Shei Chheleta'

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which Jyotirmoyee Devi, in her short story 'Shei Chheleta', maps post-partition Delhi to make visible women who were abducted during Partition and are silenced and forgotten in dominant historical narratives and memories of families and communities. The city that in the years following Partition and independence was at the centre of the discourses of refugee rehabilitation on the one hand and nation-building and development on the other, is mapped through women's everyday occupation in the story. While tracing the routes and routines that young, respectable refugee women traverse for education and work in the city, and in the everyday domestic chores of the refugee homes, the author also explores the spaces of leisure, rest, and wandering that lie in between these routines. Through these, she offers a glimpse into the multiple lateral cities that are embedded in the capital city, as well as the women who disappear in them for the sake of urban and moral order.

Keywords

lateral cities, refugee, abducted women, home, Partition

In official history as well as in fiction, art, and memories of the community, post-Partition Delhi has been celebrated as the site of reconstruction by Hindu and Sikh refugees from Punjab. The capital of the newly independent nation, reeling from communal violence and an unprecedented influx of divested refugees, is rebuilt through the sheer *purusharth* of the hard-working refugee in narratives like V. N. Dutta's 'Punjabi Refugees and the Urban Development of Greater Delhi' and Yashpal's epic novel *Jhootha Sach*. Migrant women are celebrated for donning new roles in taking up work outside the home and launching families into small and big enterprises that lifted them out of the poverty that displacement brought upon them (Bhardwaj). Simultaneously, there are records of the vast expansion and development of Delhi through the planning and building of refugee colonies and the rehabilitation projects undertaken by the new state (Kaur).

However, beneath the mythical narratives of development and progress of the city and its refugee population from Punjab, lie numerous microhistories of peoples and spaces with disparate trajectories (Roy 5). Within and along the planned city lie numerous 'lateral', 'unintended', unplanned cities (Sen 2977, Nandy 2, Prakash 2002 5) that neither become 'obsolete' (Prakash 2002, 5) nor develop into urban marvels. Unacknowledged and illegitimate, these cities and their occupants thrive on, separated from the spaces of development by 'physical space' and the 'the space of power' (Prakash 2002, 5). Often, they offer refuge from the upright and legitimate 'refugee'.

This paper explores the ways in which Jyotirmoyee Devi's short story 'Shei Chheleta' disrupts the narrative of the city of hard-working refugees by mapping post-Partition Delhi through the movement of migrant women. Structured through urban encounters and women's relationships in the city, the story momentarily opens a gateway from the planned city of refugee colonies, parks, temples, and schools to the 'unintended city' of slums and beggars. As it charts migrant women's mobility for new opportunities in education and employment enabled by the refugee rehabilitation efforts of the new state, the story simultaneously explores urban spaces of anonymity for these women. In signalling the overlap and intersection of the planned and the unintended city, of women's purposeful movement and their anonymous wandering, the narrative makes visible the intertwined existence of abducted and respectable refugee women and undermines the absolute separation of the two in normative patriarchal discourse.

In the story, translated as 'That Little Boy' by Debali Mookerjea, a young refugee girl from Punjab, Rajkumari (Khatri) Mehra meets a beggar woman with a little boy in an uncanny urban encounter. Raj, who is a student in first year in college, is leaving Queen's Park with her two Bengali friends to catch the bus home, which is in a refugee colony in Karolbagh. A beggar woman with a little boy asks the girls for money and seeing Raj's Punjabi dress, specifically asks for an '*orna*'. As the girls joke among themselves and hand the woman some change, the beggar asks Raj about her home, her *pind*, and when Raj mentions Anarkali Bagh of Lahore, the beggar retreats and quickly disappears. As the girls recollect later, 'It seemed like she said "Ah, *meri* Raj"' (Mookerjea 134). On reaching home, Raj gets busy with her share of household chores in a large family of grandmother, father, uncles, aunts, cousins, and younger siblings. She prepares the *tandoor*, makes *rotis*, and after the entire household has eaten, sits down to her own

dinner with her aunts. When she finally climbs into bed on the chilly winter night, Raj sees the beggar woman again in her mind and knows that the woman is her mother.

Raj recalls the day, almost a decade ago, in Lahore in 1946, when her family and neighbours were woken in their large house by the police in the middle of the night and were bundled into trucks that sped with them to Khasa, a village close to Amritsar. She recalls the family's realization that her mother had not climbed into the truck, their inability to wait for her as violent mobs got closer, and the frantic search for her at the border in the hope that she had managed to board one of the other trucks. As the day wanes, however, Raj's family loses hope. As Raj recalls, '(S)he had been left behind in Lahore forever. Lost forever. She had not been able to leave the house. And she was in trouble' (Mookerjea 139). From here on the mother is presumed by the family to be dead.

As the older Raj falls asleep, dreaming of her mother in her old home in Lahore, 'smiling, talking with them clothed in a white salwaar, a colourful silk upper dress and a light-blue chunni' (Mookerjea 140), Raj sees again the little boy, hugging her mother's knee. The next day, Raj reaches Chandni Chowk early and before she goes to the school in Billimaran, where she teaches adult women, she goes to Queen's Park to look for the beggar. Between her own classes at college, her duties at the Adult Education Centre, and her interminable chores at home, Raj visits the various beggar haunts of Delhi day after day, hoping to meet the woman again. Unable to share her thoughts with her family, when she finally confesses her feelings to her friend Baruna, the latter gives voice to the question that has played over in Raj's mind since she first saw the woman: "And that boy? What's he to you? Your brother?" (Mookerjea 144).

In the story, Devi maps the alternate Delhis that exist simultaneously, through many migrant women. On the one hand is the Delhi of refugee women of the respectable middle classes, mapped through bus rides from home to school, colleges, offices, and strolls in the parks. Marked by new opportunities for education and employment for refugee women, this city has at its centre the fixity of the home, albeit a refugee home, characterized by a specific way of life. On the other hand, Delhi is mapped in the story through the beggar women who exist invisibly on the edges of Queen's Park and outside the numerous temples in the city. In these insulated lateral cities of the respectable refugee women and the beggar women, the writer uncovers an overlap that enables the recognition of the abducted woman.

Located in the period of about a decade after Partition, the story unfolds by following Raj's movement across the city. In the first encounter, the city is characterized as bustling with young women who travel by buses and on foot for education and employment. At the Department for Education of Adult women in Queen's Park, where Raj and her friends Baruna and Sujata have applied for jobs, 'female applicants were solicited' (Mookerjea 131). Teaching duties can be assigned in any of the numerous neighbourhoods surrounding the Centre, 'Salimgarh, Billimaran, Kharibauri, Karolbagh, at the Harijan colony in the Valmiki Mandir area, or in any other locality, for three hours in the afternoon' (Mookerjea 131). Along with the remuneration offered, it seems like the perfect opportunity for the young women who can attend their classes at college in the morning and reach the Centre in time to teach the rudimentary syllabus to young and old women in the afternoon.

Even as two out of the three friends are Bengali, Raj is framed as a ‘refugee’ in the narrative through various devices. While all three girls have applied for the job, Sujata and Baruna feel that Raj stands a greater chance at getting the job because she is ‘from Punjab and a refugee too’ (Mookerjea 132). In her short meeting with Guptaji at the Adult Education Centre office, Sujata finds that he is quick to presume that her ethnic identity as a Bengali implies a lack of fluency in Hindi. Although Sujata, like Raj, has completed her school education in Hindi from Indraprastha School in Delhi, Guptaji’s attitude indicates the reconstitution and realignment of Hindi language in Delhi with new cultural identities. In the informal, quotidian functioning of the state machinery, the Punjabi refugee is increasingly identified as worthy of rehabilitation aid in the form of education and employment, and as capable of transmitting Hindi language and culture. For Raj, whose family cannot meet the expenses of her college tuition and books, since ‘(w)e had to leave everything behind and escape in a hurry’ and ‘(n)ow times are very difficult’ (Mookerjea 132), the job is invaluable and indeed holds prospects for a better life. The city, then, aligns and comes together, in a manner where the young refugee woman from Punjab, despite poverty and abject conditions, is assimilated into new networks of education, employment, mobility, and opportunity, as well as new cultural citizenship through the Hindi language. She occupies the landscape of Delhi as a moral citizen engaged in constructive work.

Simultaneously, the narrative frames Raj as a refugee in the way it recounts in detail the home left behind in Punjab and the cultural aspects associated with home, recreated in refugee existence in spaces of displacement. In the refugee colony at Karolbagh, Raj’s home is recreated through a detailed description of the household and its habits, and of women’s space in it. In kneading the dough, making *rotis* in the *tandoor*, rubbing them with *ghee*, making the accompaniment of *mahki-daal*, in the order in which food is served, in the sleeping arrangement on rope-cots, in the description of Raj’s *salwar-kameez* and *chunni*, and of the blouse and *kachhera* that she wears to bed, the cultural and bodily habits of the refugees are catalogued. The everyday chores of Raj and her two aunts in the large joint family where the former, although just a girl, has to take over the share of work that would have been her mother’s, define the legitimacy and sanctity of the home, and the proper place of women in it. Raj washes and irons clothes, spins cotton into thread, and weaves it into quilts and mats. When she recalls her mother in the home in Lahore, she does so in just such a setting-- ‘distributing the *rotis*, the *parathas*, the pickle, and the milk... smiling, talking with them clothed in a white *salwar*, a colourful silk upper dress and a light-blue *chunni*’ as the children eat breakfast before they leave for school.

The middle class refugee woman’s everyday routine of chores at home complements her legitimate place in the city and its network of schools, buses, and offices. The ‘circle of daily duties’ (Mookerjea 135) around the house, like the timetables of bus routes and classes at the college and at the Center for Adult Education, constitute her as an ‘unmarked “neutral” woman’ (Phadke, Ranade, and Khan 23), as well as a ‘good little woman’ (Phadke, Ranade, and Khan 22) albeit a refugee. At the same time, it reflects the ordered, planned city that respectable women occupy. However, in her everyday navigation of the city and the home, the narrative follows Raj to unaccounted

spaces of in-betweenness. While the girls travel by bus to college in the morning, and to Queen's Park for 'work-related reasons' (Mookerjea 133) in the afternoons, '(s)ometimes they wandered around the garden, eating roasted peanuts. Or the famous Dalmoot from Ghantawala's shop on Chandni Chowk. Or, dahi vada. Whatever they pleased' (Mookerjea 133). In mapping these spaces where middle-class women walk or travel when no one is looking, in moments of time when their everyday chores are complete, or not yet begun, the writer creates the space for the encounter with the 'unintended city'.

On the day on which the story begins, as Raj and her friends walk towards the bus-stop still munching peanuts that they had been sharing in the park, they are approached by the beggar woman with the little boy. In Raj's initial lack of recognition of her mother, the family's narrative about her death is reinforced through the entrenched insulation of the hard-working middle-class refugee from the faceless beggar. The girls joke among themselves when the beggar woman asks Raj for a *chunni*, they offer her coins and some peanuts. However, as the beggar inquires about Raj's *pind*, her home before partition, she trespasses into the domain of the home, of roots, and of the past, that are the privilege of the upright and industrious refugee. Even as Raj notes the trespass in the recesses of her mind, the presence of the little boy by the mother's side makes conscious and social recognition of the mother impossible.

The figure of the abducted woman is seldom recuperated as a brave survivor or as a living person embraced by the community in narratives of Partition. In the gendered violence of Partition women's bodies became sites where the honour of the community, family, and nation was scripted through sexual violence and abduction on the one hand, and through the forced repatriation of abducted women by the state on the other. In *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* Veena Das has shown how the woman's body

became a sign through which men communicated with each other. The lives of women were framed by the notion that they were to bear permanent witness to the violence of Partition. Thus, the political programme of creating the two nations of India and Pakistan was inscribed upon the bodies of women. (Das 56)

The protection, as well as the defilement of the woman's body, was conflated with the protection or defilement of the honour of the community. While the symbolic violence of rape and abduction, written upon women's bodies, that were governed by codes of purity and pollution, made the recovery of abducted women by the state essential, it paradoxically made re-entry into their original families impossible or fraught with silences.

Among the multiple kinds of violence that converge around the figure of the abducted woman is the violence of enforced silence and censorship of narrative. Oral historians of feminist scholarship of the Partition have noted how, in memories of families, those women who were killed by their own families for fear of abduction as well as the women who killed themselves, by jumping into wells, for instance, were remembered as heroes and martyrs (Butalia 208). However, those who did not readily choose the heroic option of self-sacrifice in the service of family honour were silenced and omitted in the narratives of honourable families.

In the crystallized narratives of the family, then, women who had the potential of confusing sharp divisions between Hindus and Muslims, women who had been abducted or raped, and women who had borne children by Muslim men and yet chosen to live, were all 'forgotten'. (Das 63)

Das has written of the practices of the state as well as of families of abducted women regarding children born from abduction as being 'premised on the assumption that the fruits of sexual violence should not be visible' (77). She shows how the entry of abducted women back into families was often accomplished by the state's willingness to absorb these children in orphanages, or through social workers' intervention in facilitating abortions (78). The rights of the women themselves as well as of their children remained absent and silenced.

In 'That Little Boy' Devi creates an important intervention into such forgetting, and enables a remembering, by making visible the material and affective spaces where abducted and forgotten women continue to live, in the midst of respectable refugees and their cities. Raj's mother, who gets left behind in Lahore during migration, is presumed by her family to have died. On reaching Amritsar safely, while they look for her in the trucks arriving from Lahore, the family hears tales of plunder in their *mohallas* from the people still arriving. 'Women fearing violation had jumped into wells, into rivers; some had consumed poison or had found other ways to die. And those who could not had been carried off by the looters (Mookerjea 139).' From this point, Raj's family chooses to assume that her mother is dead. As Mookerjea writes, 'whether by suicide or murder, the only contingency imaginatively viable for her family is death, implementing a deliberate closure on the other 'less respectable' and sinister possibility – her abduction and rape' (Mookerjea 130).

The writer, however, through the chance meeting in the city with the mother as beggar, enables a remembering and the imagination of another possibility. Like the time of in-betweenness when the girls sit in the park before they board the buses that will take them home, there is the moment when, in her home in Karolbagh, after completing all the chores in the house, Raj lies at last in her bed. Here, as she retrieves the day's encounter in the stray, clandestine, half-articulated thoughts in her mind, there appears a weak but recurring 'what if?...' (Mookerjea 140):

Quietly, so that even her mind would not guess, she asked herself, "Couldn't mother escape, she didn't die? She's alive?" (Mookerjea 139)

The presence of the little boy by the mother makes a complete remembering, and a cognition and acknowledgment to her family and community impossible. The boy, born during her time away from the family disrupts the imaginary of the mother as a pure and inviolate entity (Butalia 278), and one who can desire nothing beyond her original and only legitimate family. As evidence of the mother's abduction and violation, he signifies the insurmountable social distance between the physically intertwined lateral cities of Delhi, the refugee city and the city of slums and beggar colonies. The 'burdens' (Das 63) that women carry, shared equally by Raj and her mother, appear here 'not only as a form of violence from men of other communities, but also as a form of violence emanating from their own men' (Das 63).

However, in the unaccounted space of Raj's routine in the city, like in the unaccounted space of her mind between work and sleep, the mother who has been banished forever can live as beggar. In this remarkable mapping of spaces of rest, leisure and wandering for middle-class respectable women, spaces that cannot be assimilated in discourses of domesticity, work, or education, the writer enables the remembering of the abducted woman by the daughter.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau, while writing about cultural 'consumers' and users within dominant systems of production, has shown how, while users are assumed to have a passive role, they also operate as 'producers' in 'what they make or do with the products of these systems' in everyday practices (xii). He describes this kind of production, hidden in consumption, as 'devious', 'dispersed', and one that 'insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order' (xiii). Occurring clandestinely in everyday practices like speaking, walking, and cooking, this kind of production operates within dominant systems when users appropriate and manipulate the 'vocabularies of established languages' (xviii) in small, invisible, quotidian, and creative ways to serve their own interests.

He describes such 'ways of operating' in everyday life as 'tactics' (xix). As opposed to 'strategies', which may be read as carefully crafted, planned actions, based in knowledge, foresight and the ability to see the system, tactics are spontaneous, opportunistic acts, performed in seizing the moment. They can neither be planned, nor accumulated, since they emerge in relation to the context at the given moment. He describes everyday practices like talking, reading, shopping and cooking as tactical, where users grab and poach moments and opportunities to their advantage, and introduce an element of play, while following the order and remaining within the system. These operations are 'indissociable from the present instant, from particular circumstances and from a *faire*' (33). For de Certeau, 'a tactic is an art of the weak' (37) and often consists of no more than clever tricks and discoveries.

In 'That Little Boy', Raj's half-formed, tentative, secret, 'tactical' thoughts about her mother's existence outside the patriarchal narrative of her family and community are explored through the tactical nature of her movement across the city. Over the next few days, between de-boarding the bus at Chandni Chowk, and reaching the school at Billimaran, Raj goes to Queen's Park to search for the beggar woman. 'She knew all her students would not have arrived as yet. After all, they too had responsibilities at home' (Mookerjea 140). In the evenings again, between the end of class and the time to board the bus, Raj finds the opportunity to visit the beggar haunts.

The beggar colonies are defined by the absence of the 'proper' routines and cultural codes that constitute the 'home'. Here people wear 'scraps of clothing' and eat the 'foodstuff they had earned that day' (Mookerjea 140). Soon joined by her friend Baruna, Raj visits, over subsequent days, beggar haunts at the temples at Daryaganj, those of Dauji and Gopalji near the fort in front of the parade ground, the Birla temple, the Kali temple, the bank of the Jamuna, the temple of Hanumanji, where 'Every evening women flocked to the devotional readings at the temples' (Mookerjea 141). In her tactical

wandering through the city when nobody is looking, in places that are simultaneously temples and beggar haunts, in the chance discovery of the unintended city intertwined with the planned city, the writer challenges and unsettles the categorization and silencing of women.

In the ways that Raj and her friends poach moments of anonymity and wander into the ‘unintended city’ as they traverse the routes and circuits of education, employment and home in the capital city, they create momentary, fleeting spaces for forbidden relationships like the one with the mother. Like de Certeau’s ‘tactics’, Raj’s thoughts and movements, her search for her mother, take form within the organised system and city and do not become sustained ‘strategies’ of resistance. Yet, they can be read as momentary appropriation of the system by the user to her advantage as the story brings into focus the everyday lives of ordinary women in the unremarkable yet overlapping spaces of the home and the street.

The mother, however, has adopted urban ‘strategies’ by ‘perfecting her beggar-speak and cultivating an ingratiating smile’ (Mookerjea 130). She remains elusive and irretrievable in Raj’s wanderings across the city. There is a consensus between the mother and the family, and between the city of the middle-classes and that of the beggars, of the impossibility of such a retrieval. At the same time, the story retrieves her from the disappearance and death imposed by ‘refugee’, patriarchal narratives. By mapping the city through women’s movement, it creates the space for female alliances like the one between Raj and Baruna, and between Raj and the mother. The urban landscape as an experienced space becomes the means of exploring the possibilities of women’s existence outside the confines of patriarchal and nationalist or community-centered narratives. The ‘dominant urbanism’ (Prakash 2015, 501) where ordinary women remain invisible in the city as beggars on the one hand and as respectable girls from bourgeois homes through the performance of appropriate dress, speech, gait, and time-tables on the other, gives way, in the story, to a ‘subaltern urbanism’ (Prakash 2015, 501) of the city as lived space for women. Almost a decade after partition, in the planned spaces for refugees in the developing urban capital, this chance intrusion of the unintended city and its inhabitants triggers an unsettling of the patriarchal code that determined women’s lives during Partition and banished abducted women into silence and invisibility.

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