

Unsettled lives

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Venkata Ramaiah Gampa

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Dedicated to

**The Teachers of
Department of Modern Indian Languages and
Literary Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi.**

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Preface

When people move to new places in pursuit of a comfortable life, they are often met with unforeseen challenges that they may or may not be prepared to face. With their freshly acquired diasporic identities, they struggle to build a space of their own. While they encounter a number of experiences including the longing for their respective native places, they also tend to feel an additional responsibility of making continuous and rigorous attempts to accept as well as be accepted in the new spaces with a completely different culture of its own. The multidimensional complexity of the diasporic existence has attracted writers and thinkers from all over the world to pursue academic research and critical study in this area. As the migrants encounter a volume of problems in the places where they migrate, their physical and psychological experiences have been captured in literature by diasporic writers. This book is a collection of select papers by Indian academicians who explore the themes of homeland, displacement, nostalgia, alienation, assimilation, transnationalism, multiculturalism and diasporic feminism associated with migration in literature.

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Migrant Sex Workers as Diasporic Identities: Indian Literary Response

Shruti

Summary

The plight of migrant sex workers has been neglected by migration and diaspora studies for the longest time. The bloom in mobility across nations has done little to no good for migrant sex workers as they continue to be stigmatised and viewed as victims or criminals. They not only struggle for justified treatment in real lives but also strive to break the cultural and moral biases set against them via stereotyped portrayal in plenty of artworks, where their struggle in the new place and their strive for an identity of their own is merely reduced to a 'bad' or 'fallen' character. This paper attempts to look at select literatures that briefly touch upon the plight of migrant sex workers in India and their adjustments in the host culture of their migrated place. This paper aims to fill the empirical research gap in studies with respect to sex workers by reviewing the mounting evidence of stigmatization attached to their profession in literary domain. The paper first draws attention to the problem of terminology related to the subject area. Next, the paper delves into select Indian narratives which highlight the stories of migrant sex workers. The third section focuses on a comparative analysis of the notions associated with migrants of varied occupations and the migrant sex workers.

Keywords: Sex Work, Migrant Sex Workers, Displacement, Diaspora, Alienation, Identity.

Introduction

Indian literatures range over varied genres, themes and styles, and provide a window for the world to peep in and explore

Indian traditions, lives and cultures. Certain narratives not only serve as significant representations of experiences from everyday lives of Indians but also play a crucial role in upliftment of the society. However, it may be noticed that majority of Indian literatures have often portrayed women as mere receptors situated in patriarchal societies.

Sex work per se never emerged as a social issue inspiring national debate until the recent past where issues of recognition and rights for marginalized women became surfacing. Sex workers have asked for being positioned in the labour markets and decriminalization of their profession, that would lead to their inclusion as mainstream subjects as citizens. This would further facilitate them to erase the social stigma associated with their profession and elevate their social status.

A sex worker, for being seen as a diasporic identity, first needs to be seen as a citizen. And for being seen as a citizen, a sex worker's work must be acknowledged as work, and not be restricted to stigmatized notions of the profession. When women are placed in their immediate cultural contexts or when they migrate to a new setting carrying their cultures along, both events entail multiple expressions and interpretations.

Lack of research and criticism on such literatures hint the negligence of mainstream feminist and post-colonial discourse towards justly bringing the narratives of Indian sex workers on surface. It also highlights the compromised treatment given to the portrayal of the said characters as complex and multi-dimensional identities.

The paper aims to highlight the underlying themes of displacement and diasporic experiences, such as alienation in select works of Indian literature. trace the emergence of Indian narratives on sex workers, analyse problems encountered by sex workers with respect to socio-cultural, economic and political realms.

In an attempt to draw a trajectory of emergence of art works on sex workers in India, the study employs Qualitative and Descriptive Methodology for a systematic evaluation of the select literary texts. Furthermore, the approach and methodology applied is that of Comparative Analysis and Interdisciplinary Studies.

Migrant Sex Worker and Citizenship

In order for sex workers to be seen as diasporic subjects, it is important to recognize them as citizens first. However, it is extremely rare for a sex worker to conform their citizenship by holding the necessary identification documents to validate their existence when most of them adopt fake names to prevent defamation.

It is a very common practice for the sex workers to live by multiple names in order to either save themselves from a possible abuse, or to prevent their family's honour. When it comes to Migration Studies, it is almost impossible to trace stories of 'migrant' sex workers because in order to be called a migrant, one first needs to be identified as a citizen.

For sex workers, the problem stems from the fact that the state can neither recognize the claim for equal citizenship for a group of/among women, nor can it ignore the collective claim of the community put forward in the language of rights. The space of everyday democratic functioning cannot deny a political position to the sex worker. At the same time the institutional and cultural apparatus for normalization cannot easily interact with the sex worker as a figure of modernity.

The practice of sex work, though legal in India, comes with several illegal attributes and means attached with it, which further pushes the sex workers to hide their identities. The problem of attaining legal documents is even more difficult since there cannot be any legal proof of their address and other

information. The Central Statistics Office 2012 identifies “the prostitute not as a worker but a specific category of women in ‘ungainful’ occupation along with beggars and vagabonds”. A sex worker’s freedom of movement is physically restricted to the red-light zones. They cannot dwell anywhere in the residential areas of the city as independent, rent-paying tenant for practicing sex work on commercial terms. Any activity that she undertakes gets written out of the public sphere by the regulatory grid on grounds of immorality.

Since flesh trade, for the longest time, was not considered as ‘work’, the evolution of the term ‘sex work’ is an important benchmark as it acknowledges the efforts, labour, and an expected income associated with the profession.

Prostitution versus Sex Work

Karl Marx in his book, *Private Property and Communism* (Marx, 1844) explained, “Prostitution” as a signifier for the relations between labourer and capitalist. This term, however, came to loosely suggest any type of exchange of labour for money. Marx remarked that prostitution is only a “specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer, and since it is a relationship in which falls not the prostitute alone, but also the one who prostitutes.”

Subsequently, Marxist Cultural theorists like Marcuse, have further expressed in their works that marginalised topics such as sex work are divorced from mainstream trajectories and tabooed, emphasise the need to understand the dynamics which allow them to continue as realities.

The radical political-feminist critique of sex work titled *The Traffic in Women* (Goldman, 1910), skirts around the reasons for the marginalisation of the subject and its absence from everyday conversations, suggesting perpetual gendered violence. *Prostitution and Beyond* (Apte, 2008) explores the space for sex

workers within mainstream feminist discourse, their historical vestiges, and contemporary manifestations.

Swati Ghosh in *Gendered Proletariat* (Ghosh, 2017) refers to a sex worker as being socially useful reproductive labour and deploys Marxian categories of use and exchange value. The book traces the history of sex work through the colonial and postcolonial period in India.

An important change that discussions and movements has caused is that sex workers are no longer ashamed of their profession and do not refer to it as sinful or fallen. The divide of on the basis of morality separates a sex worker from other respectable people.

A shift of name from prostitute to sex worker is may be seen as a shift from an inglorious occupation to that of a regular work and a rightful worker status, which yields visibility and voice. The term 'prostitution' is commonly used in a dehumanising and derogative manner to refer to the people involved in the sex work and its related industry. It may include consensual sex work as well as trafficking.

'Sex work', on the other hand, only means consensually being a part of the sex industry (regardless of it being the first or last choice). The term was first used by Carol Leigh in the late 1980s, and emphasises the fact that sex work is also a job for livelihood. So, a 'sex worker' may be defined as a person who is engaged in sex industry, which includes pimps and brothel owners/managers. Sex work in India is majorly governed by Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. This research study primarily takes into account the literatures and films on female sex workers in India.

Indian Narratives on Migrant Sex Workers

India is a space where we have dialogues and realisations over simplest of topics to the most radical ones. Ranging from

chronicled history, oldest epics, folk literature, and linguistic criticism to recent developments in post-colonial literature, subaltern literature, and popular fiction, there is emergence of collective consciousness that discusses about the unspoken, unique and oppressed. Diversity has furthered the research and narratives about these issues and provided vocal case to both examine and produce not just literary works but also basis of revolution, uprisings and dissent.

However, it may be noticed that majority of Indian literatures have often portrayed women as mere receptors situated in patriarchal settings, who are often subjected to harassment in terms of social, economic and political spheres. The layers of marginalisation thicken further not only on the basis of race, caste, class and profession, but also on account of morality. It is not a surprise then to have very limited literatures portraying stories from the lives of migrant sex workers.

Sex work is chronicled as one of the oldest professions of the world “because it meets an important social demand” (DMSC 1997:2), and sex workers’ cultural location may be traced and often celebrated in ancient Indian texts. Tradition was used as a proof of social sanction for sexual pleasure outside family prevalent in the precolonial Indian culture and thus to historicize the sex worker as an essential service provider for the male population. The modernist logic, on the other hand, used human rights principles to argue for individuals’ choice and liberty. By subscribing to values of equality, rule of law, and democracy, the movement appealed to the imperatives of the nation state to uphold universal values and justice for a worker-citizen. Yet stories of sex workers constitute one of the most neglected segments in contemporary literary and critical discourses.

Despite the global trend of increasing mobility, migrant sex workers are still stigmatised and often silenced. Additionally, migrant sex workers are painted as victims or criminals in

discourses that conflate sex work with human trafficking. They, not only, struggle for justified treatment in real lives but also strive to break the cultural and moral biases set against them via their stereotyped portrayal in plenty of artworks, where there struggle in the new place, their strive for an identity of their own is merely reduced to a 'bad' or 'fallen' character in contrast of other women apparently being portrayed as the bearers of culture and honour.

The Shah's Harlot by Amrita Pritam is one such story where the Shah's wife and his 'harlot' of the title briefly hit a chord and almost instantly empathise with their each other, unless the moral and social obligations begin to hamper their possible admiration for each other.

Migrant women working as sex workers and their plight have been neglected by migration and diaspora studies for the longest time, and even today, there is very little to no work available on studying sex workers as diasporic subjects. The compromised treatment given to the portrayal of the said characters as complex, displaced and multi-dimensional identities, then, comes as no surprise in the given context.

The aftermaths of partition of India and Pakistan exposed the deeply ingrained misogyny in the most brutal fashion, when men (irrespective of the religion they practiced) tortured women from other religions. It was a time when a lot of women turned to sex work for their survival, or out of compulsion.

A Prostitute's Letter to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Quaid-e-Azam Jinnah by Krishan Chander Brings to light disturbing narratives of two young girls—Bela and Batul—falling prey to the violence during partition. The story narrates how the young girls were constantly dislocated, abused and sold from one place to another, and from one person to another until they landed up in brothels.

Though most of the stories written around the time of the partition of India and Pakistan, with sex workers as characters, very briefly presents them as migrant beings, there is one writer in particular—Saadat Hasan Manto—who elaborates the complexities faced by sex workers as migrants in his stories.

Manto worked in and wrote extensively around the Indian city Bombay in early twentieth century. One of the striking features of his exploration of this city was its population with varied backgrounds and ethnicities. In the story *Mammad Bhai*, Manto claims that Bombay had ethnicity of all sorts as almost all the sex workers in the city had migrated from their native lands and were “Punjabis, Kashmiris, Marathi, Gujrati, Anglo-Indian, French, Chinese and Japanese.”

Some of Manto’s other stories like *Khushiya*, *Smell*, *Mummy*, and *Rude* narrate the stories of women who migrated from their respective hometowns to Bombay, either forcefully, or in a misguided manner, and at rare instances, by choice since they lacked any other means of survival.

Patricia McCormick’s book *Sold: Can She Ever Be Free?* Is filled with several such anecdotes that highlight the plight of sex workers who are trafficked across borders with false promises and delusions. The chapter titled *Crossing the Border* talks about one such innocent event where a young girl child, Lakshmi, is excited to be taken to the city by her Uncle Husband and she asks, “when we will cross the border. He says we already have.” This chapter describes the journey of the protagonist crossing the country border. Previous chapters paint her imagination of experiencing a life outside her neglected village, just like any other persons. However, little did she realise that it would involve her to lie to the police that the stranger ‘Uncle’ who is accompanying her, is her husband. She is threatened to be shot by the police, but is surprised to learn that she has already crossed the border. In the next chapter, she is rewarded with

handful of sweets, not for becoming a diaspora, but for her lie which has let her be one.

In another chapter from the same book, one of the sex workers Monica is shown to have saved money for years and attempts to run away to her home. She has longed to be with her family and has held her belief that she'd be reunited with her daughter lovingly. One morning, Lakshmi sees "an unfamiliar figure, hunched over a bowl, picking at her rice" and is taken aback to realise that is Monica. Monica shows her "angry purple bruises" over the arms and shoulders and confesses that this is what her father did to her with his cane. Lakshmi enquires, "I thought you said that they would honour and thank you" to which she snorts and replies, "when they heard I was coming, they met me outside the village and begged me to not come back and disgrace them". It is suggested that Monica could not even see her daughter whom she had longed and planned to meet through all these years of exploitation and torture.

Sex Workers as Diasporic Identities

There is dearth of material on the female migrants of Indian origin in diaspora studies. The alienation of women in diaspora is the indirect manifestation of the subalternization of female immigrants. Women sex workers in diaspora experience simultaneous issues of discrimination and empowerment, emerging from their distancing from and sometimes forced clinching to their cultures.

Alienation, a sociological concept developed by several classical and contemporary theorists, may be defined as a condition in social relationships reflected by maximised distances leading to a higher degree of isolation. The term 'alienation' has a history of varied and contradictory meanings. While Hegel views alienation as only one level in a process leading human beings to discover their true essence, Marx uses

the concept of alienation to denote a wholly negative process. He broadly classifies alienation as economic, social, political, human and ideological. Further, Seeman recognizes the varied features of alienation as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, self-estrangement and cultural estrangement.

The sense of alienation emerges with the rise of a form of self-awareness that separates human beings from the world. So, self-alienation emerges when individuals face the contrast between their lives and others. For migrant sex workers, the trauma is multiplied since not only they are often rejected by their families but also viewed as the 'other' citizens in everyday life. The theme of alienation in lives of sex workers has been dealt in a few literatures of India, finding in them a vulnerable agent which reflects the ethos of Indian society. The sex workers' position in the family, society and culture illustrates the complexities of class and race, the quality of personal relationships and the Indian self-image. An alienated protagonist is a recurrent figure in some of the post-colonial fiction but very few of them are characters based on sex workers. At times, there are sincere attempts to sketch the confusion, frustration, disintegration and estrangement. They often find themselves misfit in the society not only because of evils in society but also socially subjugated stigma and distress within them.

The alienation in sex work may be marked by differences of the protagonist from others with respect to the expectation of a certain set of physical attributes, societal status, and experiences. These experiences are multiplied with the additional suppression on the basis of one's caste, race, and gender. In *Caste and Prostitution in India: Politics of Shame and of Exclusion* (Jha, 2016), it is explained that the fact that majority of prostitutes are from lower-caste category is not merely accidental but schematic of caste system which excludes some from having

equal opportunity. The burden of shame is put on those women in such a way that their feeling of belongingness to a community and perception about their independent selves vanishes.

Alienation may also be caused by an event or chain of events such as physical abuse. However, there is, most often than not, a requirement of the ‘other’ to make the protagonist feel alienated. A lot of sex work activists support the aforementioned argument and add to the claim that poverty, though being a major reason, is not the principal reason for sex workers to choose the profession. While the sex-positive feminists recognize sex workers as gender conforming men and women within a sexual hierarchal system perpetuating power dynamic, most often the transsexuals, homosexuals, fetishists, and sex workers are viewed as and given the treatment of “sexual deviants”. They struggle for their own space due to judgement of their sexual activity with a “democratic morality”.

Several texts quoted earlier bring to surface the range of adjustments that migrant sex workers make in the host culture of their migrated place. Amidst exhausting sex for little money, constant abuse and dreams of mere survival, the migrant sex workers find themselves fiddling in the moments of emotional loss and nostalgia from their native lands. Moreover, they are deprived of all the privileges which people in different professions get perks of. They are even exempted from what may be seen as basic facilities for other workers—medical and health facilities, getting their children admitted in school with a fake father’s name, renting a house with dignity etc., and even after all the movements a sex worker is limited to being “lesser citizens”.

However, unlike most other migrants, they usually do not have a choice and agency to return to their homelands. Unlike others, their migrations do not even have ample room for cultural

inflow-outflow. Their migration encounters hardly bring them any feel-good factor, and while other migrants are often treated with respect in their homelands for managing their survival and earning well for themselves, sex workers are ridiculed for the same. Needless to mention, the idea of belongingness, too, plays very different and twisted role in lives of migrant sex workers. A female sex worker's corporeal 'way of living' is transformed into a modern and liberating form of livelihood in sex work but she fails to become a universal homogenized impersonal wage worker.

Conclusion

Though sex workers have become important subjects in the debates of liberal circles and in the disciplines such as Social Work and Sociology, the arguments and propositions only manage to reach certain heights in terms of studying spaces and justifying sex workers' rights. The alienation of women in diaspora is the indirect manifestation of the subalternation of female immigrants.

It may therefore be necessarily argued that it is not sufficient to talk about displacement, diaspora or the hybrid and in-flux identities without paying attention to the encounters and representations of sex workers in Literatures and Literary Studies.

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