

Spatial Politics of Female madness and Mobility: A Reading of Fulmani and Her Search for 'Home' in Shankha Ghosh's Partition Novella *Rows of Areca Nut Trees*

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Abstract:

Most of the partition narratives being set in Punjab portray the western side of partition and the Partition of Bengal having received comparatively less attention is kept at the periphery in the academic domain. But the eastern part of India has witnessed repeated partitions and very few writers are known for writing about the Partition of Bengal as compared to the writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Khushwant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto, Urvashi Butalia writing about the partition of Punjab. Instead of focusing on the violence and displacement occurred due to partition directly the partition novella of Shankha Ghosh represents the gendered dimension of spatial movement and corporeal mobility of a female subject in the context of partition. Situated within a complex intersectional framework of space, gender and madness the character of Fulmani is going to be studied through a critical feminist spatial reading approach which is pivotal to the understanding of the psychological journey of Fulmani whose purported dissent to madness is a cultural construct. Her negotiation with the space challenges the restrictions set by the dominant patriarchal narratives that discipline the bodies of women and territorizes them during the critical phase of history. Partitioned geography characterized by the ruptures and fragmentations reinforces these restrictions by translating the idealized space of domesticity into the site of politic, a space of control through surveillance and discipline. By examining how her mobility is restricted and how her refusal to conform to the norms is categorized as madness, this article exposes an intricate relationship between the notions of gendered space and madness that is supposed to operate as a critique to patriarchal power dynamics and a form of resistance as well.

Keywords: Partition, Spatial theory, Madness, Marginality, Disciplined Mobility

Nilu with his family have paid visit to the home of his maternal grandparents and this home is on the other side of the border, the East Bengal. Due to the partition of 1947 India is already divided into two independent countries. East Bengal is what East Pakistan was after partition. This visit to the ancestral house is an annual affair for Nilu during Durga puja each year but as of now it is going to be the last visit for Nilu because it is a different country now. Nilu is very much unwilling to come back to Calcutta leaving his grandparents, relatives, friends of childhood and he wanted to stay back in East Bengal. In Shankha Ghosh's *Rows of Areca nut Tress (Supuribaner Sari)* we are introduced to a mad woman, Fulmani, who lives a lonely life. When

Nilu, with a view to meet her for the first time, goes on searching for her, she is found suddenly in the loft where she spends her time like a loner writing poems. Although the rest of the family members feel that the woman has turned mad living unaccompanied life, Nilu chooses to stay with her. He questions to himself about her madness and occasionally refuses to think her so.

“It is said that Fulmami has gone mad. Nilu tries to reminisce about her past words, in no way he is going to accept that Fulmami has become insane... Well, who is a mad? And if she goes mad by chance, would not she write poems anymore?..”(10-11)

Nilu understands that her public performance is not like that of a mad woman as Fulmani greets him at the very first sight as a part of formal cultural practice and involves in a rational conversation. Ghosh asserts that madness is here a social construct. Promila represents the societal norms of reason and productivity to which characters like Fulmani refuse to conform. The behavior of Fulmani violates and contradicts the family norms set by the gender stereotype and therefore is treated insane. Fulmani has been isolated through the organization of space. But Fulmani is found to write even beautiful poems that Nilu prefers to listen to being recited from her own mouth. The poems speak for her and she recites the poems only before Nilu as nobody in the house understands her. In one of her poems she writes,

“My heart does not feel good

Don't know why the heart

Feels this way since the morning

There are so many people around

But I fear that there are none for me” (27)

While giving a pen picture of Fulmani the author, at the same time has introduced a male figure in the story. He is Nilu's Sejomama who doesn't follow the gendered stereotypes and norms like Fulmani but is not treated as lunatic. In the history of humanity, down the ages the word 'woman' has become comparatively more synonymous with 'madness' than a man. In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter shows that it has become a cultural practice to associate woman with madness as they defy the patriarchal norms of the society. (Showalter 20) Women are more likely to be classified as mad in the previous centuries as they in the gender binary remain in the opposite to men who are supposed to dominate the sphere of socio-cultural matrix with principles and ethics. She argues that in society, women 'are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture and mind'.(Showalter 22)

Nilu understands that nobody likes Fulmani in the house. This disliking may result from the patriarchal demands that Fulmani refuses to respond to. She does not perform the ritual of worship and prayers in the evening, an auspicious time of the day. When Didima expresses her

deep resentment against Fulmani, Nilu thought that she was talking about his Sejomama. But Didima denies and says,

“No, I am talking about your Sejomama. Fulmami only knows to sleep, from the very evening she falls asleep. This is a big problem.” (19)

...If he (Sejomama) has really gone to rescue the citizens of a country, then it is a good job. Why Didima gets angry with him? But the point is he has a very confused state of mind. Nilu finds him crazy for different types of things at different points of time...

Nilu can understand that nobody in the house likes Fulmami...If somebody stops suddenly before her and asks “What are you saying?”, then she looks at him with wide-open eyes and thrusts out her lips and turns away her face. Is this called madness?(23)

...where did you hide for all the time? Are you nobody from this house?

Fulmami stops for a while. Then said: ‘No, I am none of this house.’ Then again: I am nobody from any of the houses.(24)

Haunted house haunted house

Row of old broken bricks

Full of wild weeds, creepers!

When I walk around alone in the roof

In the evening what do they say unto me?(28)

Pramila’s madness, if seen from an exclusionary perspective stems from her experience of trauma. “ Some women are more at risk of distress and pathologization than others, including women of color, poor women, lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender women, and those who have experienced trauma and abuse” (Ussher 2). She is refused to be recognized and included by the family members within her own domestic sphere and thus the romanticized notion of home as a site of protection and nature being jeopardized, the home turns out to be a space of neglect and isolation for her. The subjugation to the oppressive nature of patriarchal system and the domestic exclusion (alienated in the domestic space) result in a long term trauma and cumulative emotional disturbance that strip her of identity and mobility, both physically and emotionally.

Home thus serves to be a symbol of confinement and immobility for her. Home is a form masculine space and all forms of spatiality have interconnection with power (Gilbert 1998) and this disciplinary power is present in every sphere of society. Residents of home, specially the women and children internalize the normalized judgment of they should react as they feel the possibility of being watched by the agents of patriarchy just like the prisoners of a prison. (Foucault 2020) A restriction on mobility is like a norm imposed by the patriarchal society on

women to which Didima is no exception. Sankha Ghosh says, “Nilu and others have never seen Didima to go outside.”(47) But Didima has been able to break this notion as once in a year she definitely comes out and enjoys wandering from shrine to shrine during the puja festival. Nilu says, “but she (Didima) goes out in the evening of Mahastami for sure because she must go around and visit eight statues of Durga goddess in total. Nobody knows who has made the rule. Didima even is not supposed to know this. But no one has the courage to defy it..” Nobody knows who introduced such a peculiar ‘Rule’ of mobility for Didima and the fact of enjoying that privilege by none other than Didima is unknown to everybody and kept a secret. Didima is not questioned anymore for her mobility as she has now become the essential part of the patriarchal power structure and is now an authority. On behalf of the patriarchal society, Didima and the mother of Nilu enforce and impose the roles of a female gender on the female body of Fulmami and to be a woman it needs a continuous performance of the roles. Pramila wants to roam here and there but her movement is desired neither by the inmates of the house nor by the people of society. She is found wandering sometimes in the bushes, sometimes sitting on the rooftop or within a small shed under the staircase and sometimes by the canal or pond. Didima and other family members are very much annoyed with this. Even a neighbor called Nitai Dutta puts an objection to Didima regarding the wandering nature of Fulmani when he says, “ She is said to be moving around in the wilderness, is it? But she is a woman and unattended..”(49) Nobody in the society allows Fulmami to roam about because she is a woman. The perception that woman, unlike a man has a limited access to the public sphere and that of confining her to a domestic sphere is a common stereotype having its root inevitably in the roles that are imposed upon the biological bodies or genders since its inception. Gender discrimination is evident when Fulmami is questioned by none of the family members or even by the members of society for his aimless and unrestricted mobility that he enjoys. He does not care for his wife, Pramila or the others of this house and he has no relation with them for a long time. He is supposed to be granted immense privilege to explore and dominate the public spaces and in doing so, he does not face any judgement or question from the society because his autonomy is not exceptionalized by the societal norms. Mobility of Fulmani is restricted to the degree that she is denied any spatial movement and this immobility or restricted mobility is a form of domestic violence. It explores the gendered dimension of mobility. The hermeneutics of the spatial, as Edward Soja points out, is contingent with the cogito or the ontological essence of a subject and therefore the relation between space and ontology is dialectical as one is interfered constantly by the intrusion of the other. The inviolable paradigm of home is considered as the foundations of ontological essence and is “vital space” or in another word “our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the world”.(Bechelard 1969:4) Partition has affected this sacrosanct spatial, “ a primitiveness which belongs to all.”(1969:4) Bechelard’s understanding of this paradigm of intimacy like home resonates with Lefebvrian consideration of “lived space” which is a part of Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad. “Lived space” is a subjective phenomenon that incorporates an individual experience of a space. American cultural theorist Fredric Jameson says, “we have often been told, however, that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, I think it

is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.” (1991:16) The intersections between gender and physical mobility (Büscher 2016) uncover a bitter truth that mobility is operated by the patriarchal control of space. (Parikh 2017) Thus not allowing a woman to leave home or the imposition of disciplined mobility, when encountered from a gendered perspective relegates a female agency to the domestic sphere and constrains the power of woman as compared to her male counterpart, here the husband of Fulmani. Nitai Dutta, Didima and others discipline mobility through patriarchal control and surveillance. Mobility is cleverly restricted by power and this power is invisible as it works very cleverly through surveillance. This gendered nature of mobility or the nature of inequality involved in this seems absolutely normal as it works through self regulation with time and not by force from outside anymore. Foucault argues (1979) that internalization of the restrictions results in self regulated immobility of the prisoners for whom physical violence is no more needed to apply. Foucault overlooks the gendered dimension of disciplined mobility and scholars like Bartky (1990) argues that a woman feels watched like a prisoner in the masculine space of society and domesticity and undeniably the power of male gaze is in a constant process to shape and regulate her behavior according to the norms of patriarchy.

Nilu says,

“And Fulmama? Nilu gets angry whenever he ponders over him- Fulmama has been away from home for a long time and he is no longer in touch with anybody of this house anymore. Sometimes he is reported all of a sudden to be wandering somewhere near Dibrugarh of Assam, sometimes it’s heard that he is near Vagalpur of Bihar. But nobody understands why he keeps moving around in Bihar-Assam like this or what his intension is behind all this things. Everybody suspects that he has probably turned into a hermit...”(34)

Pramila’s corporeal mobility being restricted she often by dint of her imaginative mobility (Urry 2002) took refuge in her poems. She writes,

“That bird of the morn
Calls me to fly all along
Who shall I say that to!
No one will realize it
Everyone will call me crazy
So let’s keep secrets a secret.”(29)

The image of the flying bird in her poem is suggestive of a desire for mobility and an endeavor to liberate her chained self from confinement. She recites all her poems before a young mind,

Nilu who is supposed to understand all her problems since he lives in Calcutta and does not belong to her society directly. She wanted to break her immobility and leave the home as the home is supposed to be a confinement for her. Nilu understands the meaning of a home and after partition he has come to visit his birthplace probably for the last time. Unfailingly he also understands that for Fulmani home is supposed to be a place somewhere outside her domestic space, probably the nearby old house beyond their backyard pond. On the other hand, Pramila identifies herself with this 'six Anna house' that is found abandoned and dilapidated. She cherished a long desire to go to that unattended house and spend some time over there. On one occasion accompanied by Nilu, she gets a chance to visit this old house. But after spending some time outside the house when she realizes that she will be criticized for her wanderings like this, she comes home running. No sooner had she entered the house than the inmates started questioning her. Didima says,

"Here you are! Where have you been all this evening? Don't have you shame? Will you turn us mad too?... I feel disgusted now for this type of unbearable trouble for years. Fie upon her! Feeling completely exhausted listening to others on a regular basis. How long shall I be able to hide all the things from public this way? Why go around in the neighborhood and create disturbances unnecessarily? If she wants to behave like an insane why doesn't she go inside and do as she wishes? She has completely devastated me like this."

Pramila is treated like a puppet that has no mobility rights. This mobility is a form of capital or resource that she is robbed off. She has not the "capacity for spatio-social mobility"(Kaufmann et al. 200, p.750) because she is not a working woman.

Fulmami of Nilu is sought to be controlled and disciplined by the mother of Nilu, another agent of patriarchal society and her refusal to accept the fixed role set within this cultural framework turns her marginalized in social, cultural and family relationship. Nilu's mother says,

"We all have come here for these specific days of the year and you are expected to look after that and stay close by. Why don't you do that for a little bit? My mother cannot handle everything in the kitchen on her own as she has grown older with time, don't you see that? You could at least help her in the kitchen for a little while, couldn't you?"

Rotating the doll in her hand Fulmami said in a calm voice, "I don't like to go to kitchen"(30)

Assuming that only women will cook in the kitchen is a gender stereotype and this is harmful since it delimits the choice of Pramila and overlooks her needs.

The presence of a doll in the hand of Fulmani suggests her craving for a child and this can help her acquire status and a sense of belongingness as giving birth to a baby is of great significance in Indian society. If a woman conceives and gives birth to a child, a number rituals and religious

performances occur centering around her fertility and the in-laws give her the right to enjoy the property and wealth of the husband. (Sundby & Jacobus, 2001) But if a woman fails to reproduce she is ostracized for her infertility and she is denied minimum healthcare services, food, alienated, barred from entering religious ceremonies and even thrown out of the house so that the husband can get a chance to marry a more fertile woman. (Singh, Dhaliwal & Kaur, 1997) A study has shown that psychopathology is present in infertile females to a larger degree in terms of anxiety, trauma, depression, suicidal ideation for infertility results in a serious social stigmatization (Zahid, 2004) and the character of Fulmani and her isolation has a strong connection in relation to this. The affective dimension of domestic violence produces trauma and alienation and testifies that domestic space is a site of politics, a territory of cultural production and is a form of coercive control that limits the autonomy of Fulmani. The disruption of domestic discipline in the form of withdrawal and silence shows the resistance that is culminated in the act of escape by Fulmani. Ghosh captures the inherent disorder of the characters who are victimized to partition and he also utilizes madness as the most effective metaphor for chaos encountered by Fulmani to whom borders lose its meanings. The erratic behavior is no more than a cultural construct. The mutterings of mad are considered nonsense and the rhetoric of the politicians are considered as discourse. The men/women of unreason are deprived from the right to choose his/her own abode. The lack of freedom reminds the lunatics of Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* and the characters like Fulmani has never been able to come to terms with the division of India.

Footnote

All the translations are mine.

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