

Women in the Marwari Community of Assam: Negotiating Space

Anindita Das
Research Scholar
Department of English
Gauhati University
Guwahati: 781014
adkjulie@gmail.com

=====
Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the nature of space that the women in the Marwari community of Assam endeavour to construct. The community, which is known for its strong adherence to tradition, culture and religion, has a respectable yet crucial place for women. The strict relegation of private and the public spheres in the community is somewhat making it complex for the women to cross the boundary, though a considerable amount of transformation can be observed in their status since their dwelling in the place. The first section of the paper provides a brief overview of the position of women in the community and the latter deals with the argument which seeks to establish the dynamics of space formed by women, substantiating it with the relevant feminist theories.

Keywords: Marwari Women, Marwari Community, Assam, feminism, migration, religion, space, identity, resistance

The gendered spaces have always been the subject of enquiry in feminist studies. The question of space constantly arises in gendered social relations. In feminist discourse “space” has been used as a metaphor to symbolise “female condition,” right from domestic space to larger political space. The notion of space was subverted by the first wave of feminists including Mary Wollstonecraft with the view to expand women’s prospects. Later feminist thinkers such as Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir of the second wave feminism sensationalised the ‘confinement escape’ imagery. The deconstructive, poststructuralist and postmodernist feminisms of the 1980s and 1990s entirely destabilised the idea of “unified or universal time space” with the thrust on a dynamic progression involve with it. It mainly aimed at working against the chauvinist design of confining women’s periphery and possibilities (Shands 3).

During the 1970s, the feminist discourse, which was inspired by the developing active women’s movement, voiced against the stereotyping of women in male dominated literature. Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977/1985) speaks about “territorial unrest” as women are confined to the enclosed spaces of home and family of men. However, “... the

third wave of feminism have pushed the escape imagery out of the rooms and out to boundaries and borderlands” (Shands 11).

The feminist geographers on the other hand address the issue of power relations prevailing in society, and the identities constituted in space and place. They see the feminisation of household and domestic spaces to be the product of patriarchal norms. “The women’s liberation movement demanded accountability, visibility, equality” and also that the “feminist geographers sought to document and bring into geographical inquiry the analytical significance of gendered spatial divisions between public and private...” (Nelson & Seager 3).

This view is further extended as Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson in “Situating Gender” comments “One of the most important effects of feminist geography is to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about women’s and men’s “places” in the societies, communities, organizations, and relationships within which we live and work.” (Nelson & Seager 15).

The women in the Marwari community of Assam are residents of the place either by virtue of marriage or birth. Studies¹ reveal that at present around sixth generation of Marwari women are living in Assam. The Marwaris, who began migrating to the state since the 19th century from Rajasthan, are basically a trading community. Though a section of them who migrated to Assam from Haryana is also called Marwaris, this section is not included in the present study. At the initial phase, the women joined their husbands after they had settled down in the place. Since then, there had been occasional visits to their native places, but many women from the later generations have never been there.

There had been a lot of transformation in their status since the time of migration, which can be discerned from their increased degree of visibility in the public sphere. Several factors contributed to such a change, first and foremost being education. Most of the men and women are educated in the community now-a-days, and the men are pursuing other professions than their traditional business. In case of women, they are being educated to find a good match, rather than with the view to make them independent, as marrying off the daughters is the priority in every family of the community. However, a handful of women have been able to pursue their career with the support of their families.

This paper attempts to look into the construction of a particular kind of space by the Marwari women residing in Assam, both in terms of private and public sphere. It also endeavours to focus on how a few such women defy the straitjacketed norms of the community to create a unique identity. The paper also argues that these women, in their own possible ways, and in a very strategic manner, try to negotiate a little space for themselves, for which they have to face criticism and also need to compromise with their perfect image of being the virtuous mother, daughter, daughter-in-law and a wife. It also

indicates a kind of feminist resistance on the part of the Marwari women, to the restrictions imposed upon them.

The main thrust of the paper is on the case studies which revealed a number of observations that are usually not disclosed or discussed outside the family. In fact, any issue concerning violation of women's rights is confined within the family in the name of family honour. Though the Marwari women are not overtly radical in their approach, within their own religious and cultural settings they are capable of forming some space and assert their identity.

The paper is primarily based on oral narratives of the women, carried out in different districts of Assam, through conversations and interviews during the span of last five years.

“To understand women, their position and their struggle in the Indian society, the perspective of embodiment is imperative, as a woman is undoubtedly located in a physical and psychological space as much as she is in cultural and social domain” (Thapan xiii).

The western feminists have spoken abundantly on spatial segregation based on gender and are making effort to eradicate the difference between the private and the public spheres, as they observed that though it “... is not universal, but in the many cultures in which it occurs, it is associated with lower status for women” (Jackson 58). Thus, experiences of women cannot be generalised, since many other factors such as class, caste, religion, age and ethnicity also become the determining actors.

Like the women of every conservative Indian community, the Marwari women too bear the burden on their shoulders to maintain the tradition, culture and religion. In the context of Assam, most of the older generations of women who were born in Rajasthan and got married to Marwari men established in the place, are very much glued to their tradition and culture in terms of their language, dressing style, food habit and behavior. But the later generation seems to have somewhat adapted themselves to the changing times.

The Marwaris mostly have a close knit family, and traditionally the extended families are seen to be living together, though with time nuclear families are also emerging. They are mostly Hindus and Jains. Among the Hindus there are the Agarwals and the Brahmins. The Agarwal women exercise more freedom compared to others, as they are known to be the more liberal fraction of the community. The Brahmin and the Jain women are comparatively more conservative.

In general, the women in the community are basically housewives, sometimes helping their husbands in their business, though they are usually kept away from the important business matters, confining them only to look after the household.

At present, when many Marwari women in Assam are educated, only a few of them have been pursuing their career as professionals, that too not without compromises. Thus, they either have to equally balance their work and home, which does not become possible, or have to confront criticism to such an extent that they finally succumb to the demands of the family.

The women who receive professional degrees and establish themselves in their respective fields are usually not allowed to go out for work after marriage, rather they would be expected to work from home. A contradictory mindset of the community is discerned in this regard, which is both progressive and regressive at the same time. Within the higher classes of the community it is evident that the women have freedom enough to join the family business, usually holding a very high position, and they seem to be quite satisfied with the arrangement.

“If the women in our society change their mindset and attitude towards certain things, it will be very beneficial for them and for their next generations”, says an educated non-Marwari daughter-in-law of a Marwari Jain family. Her very different background gave her a hard time to adjust in the conservative Jain household. Her mother in law is less sensitive towards her, specifically regarding her career, which is in fact the scenario in most of the households. A kind of tussle perpetually goes on between the women in every family. While feminism proposes that unless and until women themselves come out of the sexist thinking and have a common vision of women’s liberation, it would be difficult to bring change in their status. It thus indicates the “tensions between women in the Marwari community and the predicament of modern feminism as practised in India” (Channa 277).

Thus, the question of space becomes a crucial one for the Marwari women, because of their inability to comprehend what they want for themselves. It is due to the fact that they are conditioned in such a manner which make them put community, tradition, culture and religious interest over their personal wants and desires. They seem to be still stuck in the position which Indian feminists have termed as “self-effacing” (Chaudhuri 22). Hence, though the alternative spaces that the women seek are not expected to be of much radical in nature, cannot be undermined too.

The women in the community have come up with diverse opinion when they were asked about their marginalisation status. The older generations do not even feel that there is any need of individual identity apart from their relationships, especially as a *beti* (daughter) and a *bahu* (daughter-in-law), who need to carry on their shoulders the responsibility of keeping intact *ghar ki laaj* (respect of the family). A few common ideals

of being a “good woman”, such as *pavitrata* (purity) and *patibrata* (devoted to husband) are attached to women. This can be attributed to the fact that they valorise *sati*² and perform *satipuja*.

The Agarwals, who are considered to be the most liberal faction of the society, are ardent worshippers of *Rani Sati*, their lineage Goddess and the epitome of a brave and “self-sacrificing” female figure. Even the women of the community who are born and brought up in Assam are fascinated by and look up to the image and they perform all religious rituals associated with it. In fact, “... family chronologies and oral histories show that the cult of *Rani Sati* developed at about the same time that women began to migrate away from Rajasthan and permanently settle in other parts of India with their husbands” (Hardgrove 261-262). Thus, it becomes indicative of many issues, right from the question of assimilation to the patriarchal undertone of religion as a tool to control women.

It is evident that the religious as well as cultural representation of *Sati* is embedded very strongly in the minds of every Marwari women. To focus on how and what kind of space women are being able to construct within the community which endorses a strict division between the private and the public sphere, the implication of Elizabeth Jackson’s view that “The very division into public and private spheres has been seen as a tool for upholding patriarchy itself, with one sphere seen as an expansive male territory, and the other a domain of female constriction” (58) should be taken into consideration.

So, talking about the kitchen, which has a particular significance in the Marwari community, and seen as an important site in feminist discourse, becomes useful to conceive a few important facts. In every Marwari household kitchen is the domain of the women. It provides a woman with a sense of authority, as well as a space to foster her creativity. But the problematic of kitchen as a space for a Marwari woman lies in the fact that instead of being an individual territory, it becomes a shared space for her, as the Marwaris mostly live in joint families and all the women in the house need to work in the kitchen. It thus subverts the absolute power a woman could acquire from the kitchen.

Another question which arises in this context is that whether the kitchen as a space is an obligatory or a liberating one for the women, as in some strict Marwari households no outsiders are allowed to enter the kitchen, and so only the women of the house need to take care of it entirely, which at times become quite monotonous for them. Most of the women interviewed consider it to be an integral part of their life which they can never disregard, being more of a burden as they are left with no leisure.

On the other hand, the rising financial status of many families has led to the trend of keeping helpers for cooking and other domestic works. The breaking up of the domestic space in the households, which could be the ultimate way to secure unconditional freedom for women, creates another paradoxical situation for the women in the community. As

most of them are not allowed to pursue career or any activity outside the house, the freedom they obtain from the domestic sphere turns out to be of no use.

In this regard, the case study of a Marwari Jain woman of Tezpur reveals that such a situation made her create a tiny yet exclusive space for herself within the house, where she practices her spiritual activities without any interference. She jots down all her thoughts every day and talks to her spiritual Gurus online. She has been looked at scornfully by her husband, children and other members of the family, especially for the reason that she follows the other sect of Jainism than the one followed by her family. Her sense of spirituality when viewed in the light of **bell hook**'s words that say "Identifying liberation from any form of domination and oppression as essentially as spiritual quest returns us to a spirituality which unites spiritual practise with our struggles for justice and liberation" (109) manifests a kind of resistance by the woman against patriarchal religious norms.

There is another case of a woman in Bongaigaon district, who is a devout worshipper of Hanuman³. All her day-to-day activities are related to her devotion to the God, and she gets hysterical, exhibiting signs to be possessed by Hanuman, as she jumps like a monkey and speaks in a coarse voice. She is much revered and listened to in the family for her keen religious indulgence. Her daily routine includes twelve hours of prayer time for which she is spared from all household chores. In the Marwari society, women make religion their way of life and in this particular case the woman's over-indulgence can also be seen as a strategy, as the cause of hysteria in women can be because of their

concerns with the quite rigid discourse on the virtuous women of home and hearth, and the fear of 'feminine complaints' deriving from distressed induced by anxiety- mixed with the desire for little more freedom (Brown 70).

There are similar instances which came to the notice during the study that some women are possessed by the spirits of their ancestors. They address this phenomenon as *pitar* and take it in a very casual manner, as something common and regular occurrence, and do not intend to discuss it outside the family. At the time when a woman is possessed, or said to have been possessed, she becomes hysterical, changes her voice and either suggests something or places some demand. At that particular moment, everyone in the family pays her respect and religiously follows whatever she says. But this study takes up this hysterical behaviour in these women as a medium of expression for them, to their utterly confined physical and psychological being, calling it a means to vent out the accumulated feelings, relieving the mind. Even the feminists interpret hysteria to be the initial step towards feminism and consider it "as a specifically feminine protolanguage, communicating through the body messages that cannot be verbalised... a specific feminine pathology that speaks to and against patriarchy" (Showalter 286). It is also observed that these kinds of cases are gradually decreasing in the community, and this must be very

likely for the reason that women in the community today are not confined as their earlier counterparts for whom the domestic space had been the sole concern.

The participation of women in the communities belonging to the Marwari society now-a-days provides them with the space to move out of the domestic sphere and interact with the other women in the society. Though the communities are not directly involved with the issues concerning women empowerment and not helping in forming individual identities, it facilitates a scope for them to create female bonding and can be considered as a respite from their relegated sphere, where they can express themselves in the company of other women. Most of such communities are religious in nature, specifically of the Jains such as *Terapanth Mahila Mandal* and *Maheswari Mahila Mandal* and others constituted by the Agarwals such a *Mahila Mangal* carry social development activities in the greater Assamese society.

“It is debilitating to any woman in a society where women are warned that if they do not behave like angels they must be monsters” (Gilbert and Gubar 53), and for the Marwari women to emerge out of a system, which strategically confines them, they may need some more time. A few women have already taken the initiative. For instance, a Marwari woman in the Assam Administrative Service chose to remain single, as she did not want to succumb to the prevalent norm that a woman cannot put her work over household duties after her marriage. Another woman, an ophthalmologist by profession, refused to be married in a family who would not provide her freedom to carry on her duties which stretches to long hours, and now she is coping well with her profession and family life. The time, when Marwari women realise what they really want for themselves, and rethink about their situation, would be a liberating one for them as it would surely clear their perspective of looking into things around them.

Notes:

1. In *Builders of Modern India: Jyotiprasad Agarwala*, it is mentioned that Navarangram Agarwala migrated to Assam with his widowed mother from Rajputana, erstwhile Rajasthan
2. Sati here refers to both the sati pratha (the act of self-immolation by widows) which is glorified by the Marwaris, specifically the Agarwals, and also the image of the self-sacrificing Goddess Sati. There are many Sati temples in different parts of Assam.
3. The Hindu monkey God, who is an ardent devotee of Lord Rama.

Bibliography

- Barpujari, H.K. *The Comprehensive History of Assam*. vol 5. Guwahati, Publication Board Assam, 1993. Print.
- Baruah, S.L. *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Guwahati, Swarnalata, 1985. Print.
- Bharucha, Rustom. *Rajasthan: An Oral History: Conversations With Komal Kothari*.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:11 November 2019

Anindita Das, Research Scholar

Women in the Marwari Community of Assam: Negotiating Space

25

- Delhi, Penguin Books, 2003. Print.
- Borch, Merete Falck., et al, ed. *Bodies and Voices: The Force-Field of Representation and Discourse in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies*. New York, Rodopi, 2008. Print
- Brown, Callum G, *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain*. New York: Routledge, 2006. Print
- Channa, Subhadra, *Encyclopaedia of Women's Studies: Women and Religion*. Vol 3 ed. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2004. Print
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee, "Feminism in India: The Tale and its Telling". UTC 6:42 (2012): 19-36. J.Stor. Web 17.05.2016
- Chowdhury, Iswar, Prasad, *Builders of Modern India: Jyotiprasad Agarwala*, New Delhi: Publication Divisions, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1986. Print
- Gilbert, Sandra M., Gubar, Susan. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*. USA: Library of Congress, 2000. Print
- Hardgrove, Anne. *Community and Public Culture: The Marwaris in Calcutta, C1897-1997*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2004. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Feminism is for Everybody*. London: Pluto press, 2000. Print
- Irigaray, Luce, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. New York: Cornell University Press, 1977/1985. Print
- Jackson, Elizabeth. "Gender and Space in Postcolonial Fiction: South Asian Novelists Re-imagining Women's Spatial Boundaries". *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Space in Contemporary Culture*. Eds. Teverson, Andrew and Upstone, Sara. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print
- Jhunjhunwala, Vishnu Dayal., Bharadwaz, Arvind. *Marwaris: Business, Culture and Tradition*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002. Print
- Lindholm, Charles. *The History, Theory and Practice of Psychological Anthropology*. USA: Oneworld Publication, 2003. Print
- Nelson, Lise, Seager, Joni, *A Companion to Feminist Geography*, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print
- Shands, Kerstin, W, *Embracing Space: Spatial Metaphors in Feminist Discourse*, London: Greenwood Press, 1999
- Sharma, Neeta., Borkataki, Arindam. *Women Issues and Perspective*. Nagaon (Assam): Krantikaal Prakashan, 2011. Print
- Showalter, Elaine, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender". *Hysteria Beyond Freud*. Sander L. Gilman et al, London: University of California Press, 1993. 286-344
- Thapan, Meenakshi, *Living the Body: Embodiment, Womanhood and Identity in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage, 2009.