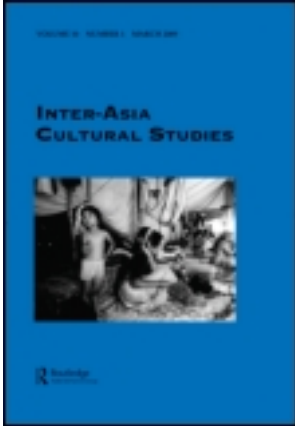


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## Women and freedom

Firdous AZIM

Feminist movements use many strategies and deploy various political and social theories for the attainment of their goals. In the new globalized order, 'third world' feminisms have taken recourse to a language of rights, seeking to bring in processes like the world conferences or conventions such as the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for the framing of national agendas and demands. Whilst this has been an empowering strategy, what remains in the background is the notion of 'liberation'. Rights speak a language of equality and fair play, of entitlements and access. From within this arena of a rights-oriented movement, I would like to seek spaces where a redress of women's subordinated position translates not only into a movement for justice and equality, but also highlights the questions of freedom and liberation. These may be the spaces where women's problematic social positioning are highlighted, where the meaning of 'freedoms' as it pertains in a gender-discriminated world can be debated.

This paper will look at the way that notions of freedom enter into women's debates in their struggle for the formation of both personal and national identities or identities as citizens of nations. The paper is divided into two sections, which look at how women's voices were deployed to formulate notions of citizenship and statehood at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The voices selected from these two eras are from different sources: literary sources from Bengali for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and voices from a particular movement in Bangladesh for an illustration of the debate about women's citizenship in the late twentieth century. It is interesting to see how these very different spheres of struggle and articulation grapple with definitions of national spaces and debate the formation of public and private identities of women.

I would like to begin with a well-known essay by Cora Kaplan: 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism' (1986). Analyzing the 'split' feminist field, the essay shows the different spaces ascribed to men and women in Enlightenment discourse. Based on an analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), this essay traces the differences in gender to the differentiated terrain of post-revolutionary Europe in the eighteenth century, which had carved out different and more confined spaces for women in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The 'new' post-revolutionary woman could access the rights granted by the new state, only by curbing some freedoms and by bringing herself under the purview of reason and rationality. The freedoms to be sacrificed were psycho-sexual in nature and entailed a curbing of what the eighteenth-century had called 'sensibilities' and that Wollstonecraft herself calls 'a romantic twist of the mind'. This 'sacrifice' of passion for reason creates a gender-differentiated position, and as Kaplan points out, men were carving out spaces that could incorporate both 'passion' and 'imagination'. Wordsworth's 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' written in 1800 is an impassioned document, which squarely puts passion, emotion and imagination at the centre of creative and artistic work.

Taking the *Vindication* as the document that spells out the position of women in the new era, we can easily see that the place of passion and emotion — of what was seen to lie at the other

side of sense and reason — is problematic for women. Female sexuality, especially the expression of sexual and romantic desire, is construed as a problem. As Kaplan goes on to say:

It is interesting and somewhat tragic that Wollstonecraft's paradigm of women's psychic economy still profoundly shapes modern feminist consciousness. How often are the maternal, romantic-sexual and intellectual capacity of women presented by feminism as in competition for a fixed psychic space. (Kaplan 1986: 159)

Translating these concerns into the language of rights and freedoms, the ease with which 'third world' feminisms deploy the language of rights can be contrasted with the ways in which demands for freedoms are cloaked. Freedom in this gendered construction refers to the larger space ('roomier' — as Kaplan says the male romantics had carved for themselves) where passions and emotions have a freer play.

In much of the world, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a grappling with the issue of freedom from a colonial power. This process was accompanied by a process of self-definition, where nation-states that emerged out of anti-colonial struggles debated and constructed a discourse not just around a set of democratic rights, but around a notion of selfhood and identity. Hence independence meant not only a shaking off of colonial shackles, but coming into one's own — a return to self was seen as part of the process of gaining independence. A hundred years on from that moment, and in the case of the Indian sub-continent, fifty years after the departure of the British, and in the case of Bangladesh, after another war of liberation, it is interesting to look at how those founding concepts have weathered.

I will be looking specifically at the notions of independence and freedom as they apply to women. Women played a central role in this process, as both colonizer and colonized took recourse to notions of captured and debased womanhood as justifications of their position or struggles. Thus the colonialist justified his 'civilizing' mission as one that would 'liberate' women from the oppressions arising out of superstition and barbarity, and the colonized mounted their liberation struggles with an appeal to the mother nation, and saw their task as liberating the conquered motherland. The part that women played in this whole process has been highlighted, and it is interesting to see whether the discourse of freedom initiated by the colonized is different when women enter the field as active agents and actors. Women's voices are important in this context, as women are situated at the crossroads, as it were, between struggles for freedom and the definition of self.

I will be looking at literary writing in Bengal from the end of the last century to show how the issue of freedom entered women's writings. In contemporary Bangladesh I will look at the struggle for freedom as a part of the women's movement which largely expresses itself as a struggle for rights. I will show how certain demands can be easily expressed and perhaps even hope to be met, whereas other forms of freedom are more difficult to bring into the public discursive arena. The nineteenth-century discourse will be examined through the area of literature, whereas the contemporary struggle will look at women's movements in Bangladesh as they struggle to voice demands of freedom. In both cases, the different sources show women's oblique positioning, and the transformative potential that their presence in any sphere of struggle or discourse contains.

### **Independence, freedom and a sense of home**

One of the most striking literary portrayals of the independence struggle against the British is to be found in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghare Baire* (1985a), translated as *Home and the World*. Written in 1905, this oft-read novel allies its heroine and her longings and desires to the longing and desire for freedom and independence as expressed through the various anti-British

movements of the period. Bimala is shown in a typical scene, looking out of her window, at the landscape outside. Her eyes follow the little winding river, and she imagines the river as it finally meets the sea. She is like that tiny river, bound within its banks, with the ultimate desire of merging with the sea. This desire for freedom is also expressed as one of transgressing limitations and boundaries, of travelling vast expanses and of merging with a greater reality. The novel goes on to describe the pitfalls of this journey. Bimala and her desire for freedom are linked to India/Bengal and its struggle for independence and freedom, and the text serves as a warning of the dangers that stalk such desires.

While we struggle to understand what we are being warned against — women's desire or the struggle for national independence — we can only come to the conclusion that the two are linked. The notion of freedom itself is perhaps enough to open up a whole new horizon, where different constituencies clamouring for this democratic principle will force emerging nation-states to listen to different voices. Women's demand for freedom is highly significant in this context, linked as it is with the special space women are given within the discourse of independence and the formation of the nation-state.

Let us just pause for a moment and look at how women formed part of the debate around nationhood through the various movements of the nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee's 1989 essay spells out for us the place of women in the definition of the nation, and the significant division of the colonial space into public and private, which is echoed in Tagore's novel. The place that women occupied was also perhaps a response to the colonial discourse, which measured the 'development' of a civilization according to the treatment it meted out to its women and the position it accorded them. In this response, a myth of a glorious Indian past was created, and a past that was evoked in order to place women within positions of dignity in an Indian situation.

We can then look at the way these issues are debated within women's writing. For my example, I have looked at the poetry of Toru Dutt, who was writing in English in the 1870s in Calcutta. Marginalized both by the fact that she was writing in English and also by being a woman, her poetry nevertheless can be seen as part of the project of defining the emerging nationalistic space through a concentration on the figure of the woman. 'Savitri', written in 1877 and published in 1882, is a poem that can be read as part of the reformulation of the figure of the woman as a literary/cultural symbol. It is a long poem that portrays this well-known figure from Indian mythology, a myth which is usually deployed to be the symbol of wifely devotion. Ironically enough, in Toru Dutt's rendition, 'Savitri' becomes a symbol of freedom, of freedoms that were once enjoyed by women in India, but which were now lost. Thus: 'In those far-off primeval days /Fair India's daughters were not pent /In closed zenanas .... ('Savitri', Part 1, lines 72–75).

The contrast between the inside and the outside is drawn as between the present and the past. It is in the present that Indian women are confined within their homes. Toru Dutt, however, seeks freedom not only in ancient India, but surprisingly enough, in modern Europe. Were we to read her poetry along with her letters, we would notice in both forms of writing an intense desire for freedom. Indrepal Grewal's *Home and Harem* (1996) has a very good reading of the desire for freedom expressed in Toru Dutt's letters to her English friend. 'Freedom' is not seen as political freedom here, but as freedom of movement, as freedom to wander and roam. Women's entry into this new sphere of writing poses the question of how the nationalistic discourse would accommodate these differing notions of freedom. Savitri wanders 'in boyish freedom', and one of her main freedoms was the choice of life partner. The contrast between an imagined and ancient India and the present sense of confinement finds expression in her letters as the contrast between her confined life in her family home in Baumaree near Calcutta and the freedoms and friendships she had enjoyed during her sojourn in England. Ancient India is thus compared with contemporary England or Europe. The movement is both backwards in time — to the glories of the classical past — but also

outwards — outside — for ‘other’ images of freedom. The notion of the comforts of the mother-nation is offset by the drawing of other sites and arenas where Indian daughters are more comfortable and crucially enjoy a sense of freedom.

If Toru Dutt can be seen as a marginalized literary figure in nineteenth-century Bengal, Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore, is both a ‘mainstream’ as well as a marginalized figure. She is part of the mainstream that Tagore’s literary output stands for in Bengali writing, but she is marginalized in that her personal reputation has always been subservient not only to her brother’s, but also to the other literary ‘greats’ of Bengal, such as Bankim Chatterjee. In her novels, she also examines the concept of freedom via the concept of the new woman. Marriage and the creation of a home are perhaps the main themes in her writing. This home is geared towards the needs of this new woman, a site where all her desires and wishes could find expression. For example, the novel *Kahake* (1898), translated by herself as *The Unfinished Song* contains long diatribes on the nature of love and whether marital love is qualitatively different from other kinds of domestic love, including that between parents and children. The debate is about women and choice in marriage, and hence hearkens to the definition of what constitutes a home, on how women’s desires can be contained within the home. Devi follows the traditional nineteenth-century novelistic ‘resolution’ device, where personal desires and social realities adjust need to harmonize into a neat ending, to avoid personal tragedy, but the irregularities in her writing — the long polemical speeches which disturb the narrative or the plot — are emblematic of this need to question the contours of the home and women’s place within it. Greater rights and freedom of choice for women in marriage seem to be guiding her writing, even at the expense of artistic harmony and balance.

Another mainstream yet marginalized voice from the turn of the nineteenth century is that of Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain. Originally from provincial East Bengal, she established a school for Muslim girls in Calcutta, and her writings concentrate on the position of Bengali Muslim women. In ‘Sultana’s Dream’ (1905), she adopts the ‘literary’ strategy of utopian writing, where she takes the notion of women’s power and desire to the plane of fantasy, and through ‘air-cars’ and fountains etc an ideal world is imagined. This piece of fantasy takes recourse to women’s movement — flying across worlds — and contrasts strongly with her later work *Abaradh Bashini* or *Secluded Women*, which is a series of humorous essays, written between 1928–1930. These essays concentrate on women’s confinement within the home, of the veiling of her body, and through humorous vignettes protest women’s lack of freedom. Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein places women between this fantasy of freedom — of soaring to the sky — and the reality of women’s confined bodies. Looking at her Calcutta school as the space she created for women, this oscillation between freedom and confinement becomes visible. The girls were transported to school in a horse-drawn carriage that was covered with a sheet according to purdah principles, while the education that they got was geared towards creating the first generation of free-thinking Muslim women in Bengal.

How are we to look at these women writers? For this essay, I have just touched on a few writings from women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and I would really like to make the case that Bengali literary history needs to be re-read with a concentration on these marginalized literary voices. Such a re-reading would bring to the fore different dimensions of the terrain in which the nationalist ideal was being debated and formulated. Does this mean that there is a real change in the discourse when we include women writers? This takes us not to the question of the autonomy of women’s voices, but to whether gendered readings can change the outlines of nationalist formations and discourses. Just by looking at the notion of home as expressed in Toru Dutt or Swarnakumari Devi, we see how definitions change. Toru Dutt opens the discourse wider and further afield, whereas Swarnakumari Devi makes an internal exploration to change the contours of the domestic sphere. A different kind of woman — a more assertive one in the case of Devi, and in Dutt’s case, the expression of women’s desire, serves to blur the boundaries between the private and the public and issues of freedom

are brought into the private domain. Struggles for freedom do not pertain to the national struggle only, but enter into the home and struggle to redefine that sphere.

Thus, the blurring of the public/private through women's writings forces a public examination of the domestic terrain, and works towards a refashioning of that terrain. Women's writing and writing *per se*, as we know, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has to be considered within its class constraints, but even this very limited sphere of the emerging middle classes manages to bring out many issues. First, it shows how freedom and the concept of the home are contradictory, and how the woman, meant to be the centre of the home, traverses between her domestic status and her status as an independent citizen of the emerging nation-state. Significantly, it also highlights the transgressive nature of women's desires and opens up a special literary arena in which these desires can find artistic expression. Finally, it seeks to ascribe a kind of constrained freedom to women, a bonded freedom, as it were, in which certain demands can be addressed and others either ignored or suppressed. Women's writings are also interesting in the sense that they show us the emergence of women's voices and in the period under consideration, the veiled and indirect expression of desires and demands.

The tone set by this late nineteenth-century nationalistic discourse persists, and we saw a complete reemergence of it during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The nation was again imaged as a woman, and notions of freedom and independence were related to that figure. While doing so the 'real' position of women did not enter the liberation discourse at all, except in the case of rape cases during the war (and even here the discussion has been very weak and fragmentary). It is in the new context of Bangladesh that we now need to examine the way that women's demands are expressed, the notion of women's freedom brought into view and the various arenas and actors involved in this process.

The problematic and often oblique positioning of women that the nineteenth-century literary sphere delineated for women persists within the newly-independent nations. How women were positioned in India, for example, in the aftermath of the partition and the division of the country has been very well recorded by Urvashi Butalia. Using first-person narratives and interviews, *The Other Side of Silence* (2000) is an account of the displacement of peoples across boundaries, which is the staple of partition studies in South Asia, but a concentration on the displacement of women brings along with it a re-questioning of the borders, a re-questioning of the contours of the newly-formed states. Gender and citizenship — stock words of the rights discourse — acquire new meanings when viewed in this light. What are the parameters that define citizenship and how is the state to formulate and advocate for its gender-differentiated citizens? Though this section is not looking at literary renditions, it will be useful to look at Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's introduction to the second volume of their massive anthology of Indian women's writing, for an understanding of the ways in which women are written out of the national imaginary (Tharu and Lalita 1993).

Similarly, in the series of interviews put together under the title of *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (1998) by Nilima Ibrahim, the newly-emerged nation of Bangladesh is made to look at the status of women victims of war rape. The word *birangona* (feminine for *bir* or hero) had been coined in 1972 to give the status of war heroes to the victims of Pakistani rape. The interviews reveal the very anomalous position that these women occupy within the nation for which it has been said they have 'sacrificed their honour'. Thus rights for women follow a sexed and gendered pattern, and movements for the rights of women have actually to grapple with those positions. At both moments of nation formation, in 1947 and 1971, women's sexual positioning ('vulnerability'/'honour'/'sacrifice') was central in determining their national identity, even their citizenship. Hence it is important to look at how the notion of women's sexuality is debated in women's struggles around citizenship rights and equality within the newly formed national spheres.

Here I will be concentrating on the women's movement in Bangladesh, which is manifested

in a number of women's groups that seem to be acquiring greater visibility over the last 20 or so years. Without going into the various differences in approach, it can easily be said that the women's movement takes recourse to a discourse of rights and democracy. This seems to be the safest and most acceptable ground from which to operate, but it is interesting to see how even within this basically accepted democratic value, there are certain areas that are considered 'difficult'. The difficulty arises regarding what has already been seen as the psycho-sexual sphere, of the freedom to express desire. Control on women's sexuality at the personal and state levels are translated into a curbing of freedoms — of movement, of expression, of work and employment. The women's movement itself tends to mask its demands for greater freedoms, including sexual freedom, in issues such as violence against women or women's health issues instead of speaking directly of women's sexuality. This strategy is useful and often helps to 'smuggle in' a demand for greater sexual and emotional freedom, but it also has its flip side in that by containing demands for greater freedom, it keeps on curtailing freedoms.

### **Women's work, sexuality and freedom**

The literary sphere continues to be the place from where women's desire especially for sexual freedom can be expressed. This is not only in the case of women's writing, but also in the strategies that women's groups adopt for themselves. I would like to take the case of Naripokkho, a woman's group in Bangladesh, which tried to bring the issue of women's desire to the political forefront first through its International Women's Day celebration in 1990. Using a late-nineteenth-century literary text — Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama *Chitrangoda* (1985b) — notions of femininity and masculinity were highlighted as they played themselves out between the male and female protagonists of the play. Female sexual desire as it finds expression throughout the play is juxtaposed with an assertion of female identity and a demand for equality. However, the production had a limited impact. Though it could be viewed as an example of the way that literature could be brought to the service of women's liberation, it did not have the kind of larger social effect that women's movements need to make.

Finally, when the issue of sexuality and freedom did enter the public arena of the woman's movement, it was not through these deliberate and subtle literary renditions, but through struggles of marginalized groups of women, whose living depended on sex work. Through a series of campaigns against brothel evictions (from 1993 onwards), Naripokkho, as well as other women's and human rights groups, brought to the public forefront the issues pertaining to women's sexuality, their status and position in society. A common platform, Shanghati, comprising women's groups, human rights groups, NGOs, journalists, health workers and sex workers' groups emerged out of these campaigns. Shanghati is an alliance of diverse groups and has been working formally since May 1999 to struggle for the recognition of the rights of sex workers. One of its most successful efforts was to win a court case against the eviction of a brothel in Narayanganj, where the judge in a historic ruling gave legal status to women residents of the brothel and to their trade.

The first change that the alliance brought about was perhaps the change in nomenclature — from prostitution to sex work. Despite the problematic associated with the term sex work itself, this change in nomenclature helped to highlight the issues of women's right to work and also of what constituted women's work. Hence by combining the words sex and work, the rights discourse could be brought into play with an emphasis on the right to work and also an opportunity arose which allowed us to debate the issue of sex. The rights agenda allowed the movement to spell out many demands that found an easy resonance in the larger political arena. The coalition, formed of many diverse organizations, can be seen as the way in which women's demands can be articulated through a diversity of groups, and can be used as an example of platform building, and what is gained and lost in the process. Many organizations



in the alliance are lawyers and human rights groups, and maybe the emphasis on rights in the campaign was guided by this fact. However, this essay will look at how this emphasis on rights can be seen to modify the very arena of rights in which it is placed. Despite the presence of multi-interest groups, one of the main strategies used was that of prioritizing women's voices. This had the effect of transforming political spaces, in that it brought voices of sex workers directly into the mainstream of political and social movement, and also gave us a space where again we can look at the 'autonomy' or otherwise of women's voices. Autonomous or not the transformatory effect of the inclusion of women's voices into the political discourse was again made clear. We may have come a long way from the time that Gandhi had expressed 'extreme resentment at the inclusion of prostitutes of Barisaal in the cause of the Congress party' because of their 'immorality' (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 22), but the inclusion of 'immoral' women's voices is still a struggle, and the political mainstream, including the feminist mainstream, is still wary of such an inclusion.

Let us now look at some of the main issues that came out of the campaigns. The first one to look at will be that of women's work, as we struggled to change the nomenclature from prostitution to sex work. The contention here was that this change in naming also highlighted the special nature of women's work, linking it to women's position in the job market in general. This pertained not only to lack of occupational options for women, but to how women's entry into the job market is reflective of the domestic roles assigned to her. Her entry into the public world can be seen as a continuum with her private and domestic roles. Prostitution also brings to the fore the notion of sexuality, based on presumed male predatoriness. What remains unexamined within the purview of prostitution is women's sexuality: she is merely a body to give pleasure. Just as women's pleasure is not at issue in prostitution, so is it not in the other sphere where women function as sexual beings — in marriage. Prostitution is work, not pleasure for women (and incidentally brings up the question of whether work and pleasure can mix), but the very feminized nature of the profession, of prostitution as women's work, showed us how women's sexual pleasure is not an issue, even where agency maybe.

Women perform two major roles within the home — as wife and mother. Both refer to her reproductive functions and hence refer to the arena of sexuality, which includes sexual activity, desire, agency and so on. As women's sexuality is confined to or given legitimacy only within marriage, the question of how sex is organized within marriage remains crucial. Sex is a duty for women, performed to meet the husband's conjugal demands, and in order to produce children — it is sex work. Keeping the continuum between women's domestic duties and the work that is available to her in the job market, prostitution can easily be seen as sex work. Drawing a continuous line between women in public and private spheres helps us to see how women's subordination pertains to both spheres. So while we seek recognition for prostitution and call it sex work, we at the same time, need to look at the positioning of women engaged in prostitution.

### **A question of rights**

The main thrust of the campaign was on rights. This thrust as mentioned earlier was guided by strategic considerations and it was most helpful not only in keeping the coalition together, but in bringing certain other issues to the fore.

Let us look at what this emphasis on rights achieved. One of the main rights evoked, given that it was an anti-eviction campaign, was that to the right to dwelling and called on the sanctity of the home. This had the effect of redrawing the notion of home. Not only were brothels places of work, but homes, where domestic and affective roles were performed. Maternal functions and duties were performed here. Along with the recognition of brothels as homes was the fact that these homes were licensed workplaces. Brothels are demarcated as red

light areas by the government and the sexual trade that goes on here is given legal sanction by the laws of the land. Stressing legitimacy also helped to decriminalize sex trade. Brothel residents emphasized the fact that they paid rent, even at exorbitant rates, and hence reiterated their absolute right to the spaces that they had been living in and working from.

Perhaps even more interesting was the demand for state protection. The law enforcing agencies were blamed for failing to provide protection, as well as for joining hands with the criminal elements involved in the eviction. In this manner, it was the women now who were the legal occupants of these homes and spaces and their evictors the criminals. The government had to answer for their collusion with the evictors and their failure to provide protection. This is again a very significant dimension. The right to demand from government institutions the services and facilities that they are meant to provide is not a very established practice in countries like ours. One of the ways in which feminist groups have been working is to monitor service delivery systems, such as health, or law enforcement agencies, point out the areas where citizens are not given the services that are their right, and work towards making these systems more effective. The demand for state protection and the institution of the court case are really a part of the same process. This campaign is an illustration of the way that the state and government are responsible for the protection of the rights of all its citizens and the ways in which diverse sections of the citizenry can place its demands.

Making the state responsive to women's demands may have a flip side in that it also allows the state to define and determine women's positions. The point that is being made here is one of demand and assertion — of incorporation and citizenship — and that of definition and control. Somehow women have to play between these poles. Even while they are placed at the centre of state control they have to 'prove' their status as citizens. Just as the post-enlightenment positions for women had called upon a redefinition of women as rational beings and hence fit citizen-subjects, so too the demand for state protection and services is based on a notion of 'deserving' citizens. The question whether by allowing state and law-enforcing functionaries entry into brothels and homes ensures greater security or whether it results in a greater state control (or coercion) is really emblematic of the very difficult positioning as citizens or subjects of the state. In a way we can see how these demands fluctuated between the personal and the public — the personal demands for home and the demand to the state for ensuring the security of that home. Again it is women placed at the crossroads between the public and the personal, making the personal public, and demanding public recognition of duties and functions who straddle both spheres. Using the rights discourse was a helpful and empowering strategy as far as the campaign was concerned, helping us to institute a court case for the rights of sex workers to their abode.

### **The incorporation of women's voices**

The other and perhaps even more interesting strategic intervention was the active participation in leadership roles of evicted brothel residents and a direct voicing of their own concerns and needs.

Let us just spend a minute to look at these first-person voices and to examine a notion of truth or authenticity that may pertain to them. These voices did not function as conduits to the 'truth' of prostitution or sex work, but were strategically used to appeal to the audience. Brothel residents wielded the discourse to put forward their demands as they thought fit. The recourse to a notion of rights proved very useful and these rights were demanded on the basis of duties performed. The right to the home was justified through the fact that they paid rent, the right to state protection was demanded on the basis of the performance of civic duties, such as voting, paying taxes and being useful citizens of the state.

The definition of 'usefulness' was interesting. Brothel residents defined the use-value of

their work in terms of a social 'safety valve' and even while they talked about eviction from brothels as a violation of their rights, they did not hesitate to use other arguments to bolster their demands. One strategy of course was the appeal to pity and sympathy — poor women driven out of their homes to walk the streets. The other was an appeal to social order, and the picture of poor women walking the streets was rendered in terms of a spectre that would not only haunt but corrupt social sexual morality. Thus there was no hesitation in using a conservative approach that appealed to the patriarchal *status quo*, to recover the brothels.

It was in the voicing of demands and organizing the campaign that a new form of political empowerment was experienced. This empowerment did not take the form of glorification of sex work as a site where alternative notions of female sexuality may surface, as some postmodernist feminist discourses seem to suggest. On the other hand, the organization of women's sexuality in prostitution rests upon a system of monogamy, and looks at itself as the flip side of marriage. It lays a premium on youth and beauty and old age appears as a dire fate to many prostitutes. Age sometimes brings its own compensations, and some women may acquire positions of power and decision-making within the brothel set-up. Female sexuality and female sexual desire, amongst prostitutes, seems to rely on a notion of monogamous and heterosexual sexuality. Very little emerges about female relationships, except that the hierarchy established by age and beauty is very palpable. It is difficult to look at prostitution as a site of female sexual emancipation, or even as a site where prevalent norms and rules are subverted. It indeed seems to be the other side of marriage — the other institution in which women function as sexual beings.

If we are looking for a 'different' voice within this campaign, it was to be found regarding the question of 'rehabilitation'. The stand normally taken is to 'rehabilitate' these 'unfortunate' women into the mainstream of society and a complete puzzlement ensues when these 'rehabilitated' women protest against the rehabilitation measures. The measures taken in the name of rehabilitation include (a) skill development in traditional female activities, such as sewing; (b) being given inputs, such as a sewing machine, to ease transition into another profession and (c) marriage. Each of these measures has proved to be ineffective. As far as skill development and training are concerned, these skills do not give enough financial return in the job market. It is also unrealistic to feel that a sewing machine will suffice to set up a tailoring shop and finally, women who have been 'married off' find themselves being used as prostitutes by their new husbands, who now become their pimps. In each case, the special difficulty women who have been known to be sex workers may face are not taken into consideration. Employment in garment factories for example, may even be protested by fellow workers, not to say of the fresh forms of sexual exploitation to which their past histories could expose these women. And of course it is facile to speak of rehabilitating women in prostitution into the job market, when we know of the limited opportunities available to all entrants into the job market and when we are speaking of a socially disabled group of women. As one brothel worker put it to the person recommending other jobs — 'Would it be all right for me to be working in your husband's office?' Women were sent into vagrant homes by the government, which they found very demeaning and where they were subjected to fresh forms of sexual exploitation.

The campaign of 1999 turned the notion of rehabilitation on its head, by demanding rehabilitation into brothels, by claiming rights over that space and by the demand that the women engaged in prostitution need to be recognized as citizens with the full rights of citizens. Earlier, sex workers had talked of 'social rehabilitation' and now we have had a demonstration of the full meaning of that term. Social rehabilitation, at one level, means the ability to hold up one's head; to be given dignity and recognition as a fellow member of society, regardless of who you are and what you do, but now the recognition is for the rights of women who are prostitutes, of recognition as workers, as women who are on their own and earning their own keep. One of the strongest statements to come out of the campaign was — 'We do not depend on anyone for food or lodging, so leave us alone'. This assertion of economic independence

immediately places the sex worker in a position of dignity and does not allow the welfare approach that guides rehabilitation efforts to come into operation. The rehabilitation being asked for is recognition as citizens as subjects of the state.

How are we to read these *fin-de-siecle* voices? One obvious way is to read them as an extension of the Enlightenment discourse, as an extension of the constituencies that are to be embraced within the democratic framework. At another level, we can also see these voices as disturbing, not merely clamouring for inclusion, but negotiating change and transformation. Be they the literary voices of the late nineteenth century, or the marginalized groups today, women seem to be asking for a redefinition of the political and social body, of asking for a redefinition of the nation, so that different ways of inclusion can be envisioned. Ideas and definitions of home and nation are directly effected by the literary voices of the past. Today's women are actually seeking to change not only the private dimensions of what constitutes the 'home', but also asking for a public recognition of the variety of images and institutions that that word evokes. It seeks to force the body politic to take cognizance of the different ways of organizing life and sexuality and to make the nation and state respond to each of these changes.

What is also interesting is that in this age of privatization, where all services are being taken away from the state, we found women's groups in Bangladesh coalescing to demand services from the state. With all the prognostications of the demise of the nation-state, it seems that the state remains essential as a last recourse to marginalized groups. This is even true for inter-state situations — as is borne out in the case of migrant female labour and the response to their needs by various women's and human rights' groups. It has been to lobby state and government bodies for better legislation and better protection. It is as though in this vast jungle of globalization, disempowered and marginalized groups can only turn to instruments of state for the protection of rights and freedoms. As the world 'opens up', individual states may yet be necessary for the guaranteeing of human rights and liberties, but the negotiations on which these rights are incorporated can be read to highlight the positional differences between citizens within national boundaries and which is then extended to the position that they may occupy in the globalized sphere where these boundaries do not have the same demarcating status.

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