



THE FINAL SOLUTION: HINDU REFUGEE WOMAN AS SEX WORKER

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

In post-partition Calcutta, various depictions of the partition's misery centred on the plight of Hindu middle-class refugee women. The Bengali refugee woman was not mainly perceived as a victim of sexual assault. The pictures of her suffering were created in the context of the Bengali refugees' effort to reconstruct their lives in West Bengal and Calcutta, and had a more commonplace character. The refugee woman who becomes a sex worker is always viewed as a victim of economic pressure. This paper seeks to identify the refugee women as bread-winners in post-Partition civilised society of Calcutta who violated the traditional role of women as home-makers. Mallika, the female protagonist in *The Final Solution* chose sex working as a means of providing for her little son. Mallika's strength of character and presence of mind win the hearts and minds of her readers. The story depicts the experiences of Bengali middle-class refugee women who do not easily fit within the paradigm of Bengali women's emancipation.

Keywords: Partition, Bengali, refugee women, sex worker, bread-earners

The Final Solution, a concise work of fiction authored by Manik Bandopadhyay, is a remarkable contribution to the body of writing that explores the intensifying refugee crisis in Calcutta following the 1947 Partition of India. The story chronicles the narrative of Mallika, who resorted to engaging in sex labour as a method of financially supporting her young son. Despite facing the imminent threat of death, Mallika showed remarkable resilience by confronting both her child and her family. Mallika's resilience and astuteness captivate her readers, despite the daunting challenges she faces. When faced with no other viable alternatives for employment, she is compelled to participate in the sex industry in order to afford a more desirable present for her child. This text provides readers with sufficient justification to reassess and re-examine the historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of Indian society prior to, during, and following the holocaust resulting from partition. Men engaged in violent conflicts, using female bodies as a battleground to establish their superiority over one other, but ultimately failed in their attempts. Women experienced abduction, rape, and social marginalisation as part of their daily lives, but the signals of their approaching calamity were not acknowledged in the prevailing discourse.

During the period after the partition of Calcutta, there were several portrayals of the suffering caused by the partition, with particular focus on the difficult situation faced by Hindu middle-class refugee women. The Bengali refugee woman was primarily not seen as a victim of sexual assault. The images depicting her anguish were produced within the framework of the Bengali refugees' endeavour to rebuild their lives in West Bengal and Calcutta, and possessed a more ordinary nature. Jogen Choudhuri's artwork portrays a woman who has been displaced, accompanied by a child, at Sealdah station. Another remarkable image is that of a weary refugee woman marching through the streets of Calcutta with a baby on her hip, which carries strong political connotations. Apparently, there is the depiction of a selfless refugee woman who refuses to marry and works tirelessly to provide for her family. Lastly, there are migrant women who are either enticed or coerced into engaging in the sex trade due to economic pressures. These are the enduring images of refugee women that have left a lasting impression on the collective memory of India. These representations place the refugee lady in the public sphere, in line with the commonly held belief that the trauma and disruption caused by partition enabled middle-class women from East Bengal to break out from the confines of their homes.

Among the numerous images portraying the young women residing in Calcutta's squatter settlements, the stereotype of the displaced girl who is forced into prostitution has been the most widespread. Sudeshna Banerjee's interviews with refugees who were young boys in the 1950s contained several references to young immigrant ladies who were involved in prostitution and brought shame to the colony. The perception of the refugee woman transitioning into a sex worker is consistently framed as a consequence of economic constraints, portraying her as a victim. While her immorality may provide support for the family, it also undermines the honour of the entire society and weakens communal values. The photographs captured her anguish against the backdrop of the Bengali refugees' endeavours to reconstruct their lives in West Bengal and Calcutta, and they possessed a more commonplace nature. The refugee woman who engages in sex work is commonly seen as a victim of both economic difficulty and the trade itself. While her immorality may provide support for the family, it also undermines the honour of the entire community and weakens shared values. This article aims to identify refugee women in post-Partition Calcutta who deviated from the traditional gender role of women as homemakers by engaging in employment outside the household to support their families. The bulk of the sophisticated people in Calcutta expressed their concern over the plight of immigrant women who were forced into engaging in sex trade.

Furthermore, the employed refugee lady challenged the traditional and male-dominated Bengali middle-class moral framework, both by engaging in prostitution and by being the only provider for her family. The difficulty presented by this figure is initially situated within a discourse centred around immorality, and subsequently within a story that explored a social disaster. These two pictures might be seen as the opposite of the official narrative that portrayed immigrant women as economically unproductive and hence unsuitable for living. Perhaps, the disparity between the societal ideal and the actual socioeconomic conditions in post-partition Calcutta may shed light on this predicament. According to the prevailing beliefs of the Bengali middle-class, the ideal role for a woman was undoubtedly confined to the household, focussing on domestic responsibilities. The refusal to provide economic opportunities to refugee women in official discourse is based on a reassertion of this cultural norm. The portrayal of immigrant women as employed individuals contradicted the existing system of values. The public's fascination with the latter two pictures can only be attributed to the deep discomfort they caused by challenging established social standards and values. This raises the question of how well the image of the breadwinning refugee lady reflected the socio-economic reality of the majority of East- Bengali migrants.

The story depicts the widespread violence that women suffered amid the intense community division. *The Final Solution* is a story about a refugee family during the 1947 Partition and how people lost their morals, principles and ethics while craving for power and money. It gives a vivid description of the condition of women in the refugee camps and rehabilitation centres which left an everlasting impact on their mental well-being. They were physically and mentally shattered when they were forced to leave their own homeland and had to struggle for existence in a new city. The story is about Mallika, the main protagonist who arrived in Kolkata with her family in the clothes they were wearing and had to take shelter in public places like the Sealdah Railway Station. It depicts the main protagonist's opposition to a society which is patriarchal and corrupt and which forced her to enter into prostitution to save her family and her son. She had no other way than to compromise herself to the situation.

The Partition has caused such a profound sense of insecurity that people were compelled to reluctantly embrace their state of extreme poverty. The narrative unveils the sudden transformation of individuals into homelessness, emphasising the family's unsettled and unpredictable way of life in a vulnerable setting. The irony of possessing a "mattress kingdom" (19) is intensified by their enduring relocation. Those were challenging times for women, since many were inclined to exploit their circumstances. Upon being approached by the tout Pramatha, Mallika became aware of the perilous situation when he offered her the opportunity for "some jobs still available for women." Despite recognising the risk, Mallika's decision to agree was driven by the sight of her emaciated child "now reduced to a skeleton", as she said that "there is no other way out for us." (21). While physical wounds may be easily healed, the psychological and emotional trauma caused by the Partition was unending and indelible. She, being a mother could not see her child endure the pangs of starvation. The maternal instinct compelled her to endanger her own physical well-being and integrity. She surrendered and declared, "Okay, I'll do whatever you ask: dance naked if you so wish. But you will find a room for us first, won't you? An enclosed space and a drop of milk for my child, otherwise he will die" (22). After Pramatha completed all the preparations, she fell to her knees and tearfully asked, "Are you a man or god?" (22). Due to her awareness of the systemic and premeditated sexual exploitation, she felt a significant weight on her shoulders. She expressed to her sister-in-law Asha, "I would be ready to die if that could keep my child alive." (23). Individuals such as Pramatha, who claimed to be experts in social matters, closely scrutinised every woman who had suffered from the violence that occurred during the Partition, leading to displacement, destitution, and homelessness. This applied not only to Mallika, but to all women in similar circumstances. These kinds of individuals who pretend to be social workers were eager to mistreat Asha, Mallika's sister-in-law, and they were also delighted to accomplish two goals at once.

Mallika turned to prostitution in order to protect her kid and family from the starvation that was imposed upon them as a result of the Partition. Due to prevailing societal upheavals, women often had to face significant challenges in securing adequate career opportunities, since they frequently face closed doors in their search for work. Regrettably, it got increasingly effortless to engage in the commercialisation of their physical selves. However, she struggled to surrender. She experienced pain and actively resisted Pramatha's sexual approaches. The readers are presented with a vivid portrayal of her intense suffering with the following statement, "She had accepted the fact that Pramatha was going to engage her in sex work, but she couldn't

tolerate the thought that he had planned to enjoy her first, before introducing her to the profession.” (29). After drinking a few glasses of wine, he embraced her and pulled her close to his chest, saying, “It is how I want you... come and be with me for a while and then you can go back...” (29). This is an example of how a patriarchal culture feigns assistance towards women, only to exploit them. Men are unwilling to offer assistance unless she has something to offer in return. Prostitution, however demeaning, becomes a dehumanised and essential activity when there is no one there to assist the individual involved. She felt compelled to participate in such abhorrent behaviour in order to secure a more favourable outcome for her family.

Pramatha's attempt to engage in a sexual act with her might be seen as a violation of her trust in him at a deeply personal and intimate level. The act of adultery beyond her threshold of tolerance, prompted her to ultimately asphyxiate him, resulting in his death. The term “the final solution” refers to the money she takes from the deceased man's pockets. Mallika had exhibited heroic qualities when was faced with perilous circumstances due to her unwavering determination. However, under her circumstances, malicious entities that deprived her of her honour and belongings also caused her to psychological distress. After successfully defeating Pramatha, she became more self-assured and enquired, “What did he take me for? Am I weak just because I'm a woman?” (30). Therefore, she displayed bravery by thwarting Pramatha's plan to use her and other women due to their vulnerability, and fearlessly stopped Pramatha's attempts to approach her by strangling him till he died. Her last act of revenge is a suitable conclusion to the stories of suffering experienced by innocent, trusting women at the hands of vindictive, cruel sexual sadists. Maliaka's tenacity in the midst of challenges captivates the readers, particularly when she stayed undeterred by the story's dramatic catastrophe and, by sheer will and resourcefulness, achieved a gratifying denouement. The conclusion's unexpected and perplexing impact is comprehensible considering the circumstances, albeit the finale's artificiality and absence of predictability. Ultimately, her composed and rational attitude eliminates any uncertainty regarding the correctness of her behaviour. The woman enquired the group straightforwardly, “Have you all eaten?” We'll never go hungry again, Thakurjhi.... Four times a day, my son will drink milk.... Every night I'll wear my tattered sari to the train station. Yes, I know the sharks will come and get me if I'm out here. You know Thakurjhi that this time I will be armed with a sharp knife.” (46) Due to the prevalence of brutality as a means of social bargaining during the Partition, she opted to consistently carry a knife for self-defence.

Despite being a humiliating task that couldn't be avoided at that particular point of her life, the narrative is noteworthy for its emphasis on female perspective and refusal of male dominance and degradation of the female body. She had transitioned from a state of powerlessness to actively influencing the destiny of herself and her loved ones. The intense maternal affection that motivated her compensates for any moral remorse she may have had. The tale chronicles the experiences of middle-class Bengali refugee women who do not conform to the conventional narrative of Bengali women's liberation. The prominence of refugee women's participation in the public domain is highly emphasised. The author refrains from making moral or legal evaluations of the refugee mother, and the reader is likewise obliged to withhold judgement due to the profound despair of her circumstances. When the specific conditions under which women publicly reveal their sexual orientation and are acknowledged are defined, the issue becomes quite intricate.

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