

Chapter 2

Centring Gendered Narratives of the Indian Diaspora

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Coupled with the assumption that diaspora etymologically associates geographical movement with male agency, this study examines the multiple ways in which gender has hitherto remained marginal to the narratives of a diaspora. Studies on the Indian Diaspora have often shown that women have not, traditionally, been active agents, and that the decision of moving is often a male one. This privileges the male narrative at the expense of numerous, undocumented narratives of women who have travelled, forcibly or otherwise, to different parts of the world over the course of the last three centuries. This study investigates existing scholarship on gender and diaspora, focussing on the lacunae of studies on socially disadvantaged women outside the first world. Tracing the rise in diaspora studies over the last three decades, it underlines the manifold ways in which research on the diaspora has been determined by class, thus often rendering invisible a number of women, who add to the national economy by working in the Middle East, and focusing, only briefly, on them as victims of exploitation—as suggested by the mainstream media and government officials. This study calls for a more dynamic approach to the migration of women within the Indian context as it is incorporated into the framework of diaspora studies, centring the various layers of the gendered migrant experience and then moving on—beyond the binaries of the narratives of the victims.

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Introduction

Dear Kumari,

I, of course, do not know if Kumari was really your name,

It became a custom in the Gulf to change the name of the servant upon arrival,

The mama says to you, “Your name is Maryam/Fatima/Kumari/Chandra,”

Even before she gives you your cotton apron,

The same apron that the previous Kumari used

before she ran away.... (Kareem 2016)

Mona Kareem’s address to the South Asian domestic worker in Saudi Arabia reflects on one of the most iconic pictures of diasporic exploitation—that of the migrant woman working in the domestic confines of a conservative family. While pointing towards a significant phenomenon in migration in the Global South, this picture focuses on a single aspect of the migrant experience, undercutting the layered, complex exigencies of migration and diaspora among women. Long swept under the rubrics of general diaspora studies, the role of gender in the process of migration and subsequent settlement have only recently become central to scholarship, despite the fact that women have always been essential to the process of migration. Often seen as being passively accompanying male relations, the central role played by women has only recently been recognised for its economic, social and cultural potential. This ‘feminisation of migration’ (Piper 2008, 4), however, largely addresses the contexts of migration to the West, most often from developing countries in Asia and Africa. Such studies privilege notions of belonging, negotiating domestic roles and re-defining changing diasporic identities as diaspora intersects with gender, race and class in new geographical spaces. While imperative to diaspora studies, this work reflects on a very specific experience of diaspora while ignoring other, numerically substantial experiences of migration within the Global South where gendered labour is primarily perceived to be service-oriented, including nursing, palliative care and domestic work. When such areas are discussed, they are most often viewed through the prism of exploitation and victimization, thereby denying agency and choice to the woman migrant and her narratives. Such women have often been spoken for, most often by privileged scholarship, which marginalises their contributions to the economy, the family and themselves. This article attempts to centre gendered narratives of the South by exploring the multiple ways in which agency is sought and established by those women who leave families to work in foreign lands, almost always leaving their own families in the hands of the larger family and community. Such migratory patterns tend to be long-standing and often replicate conditions of diaspora in terms of negotiation of power and self. While focusing on the ‘everyday life’ (Hannam et al. 2006, 3) of Indian migrant women workers, this paper focuses on a hitherto marginalised narrative of expatriate experience, while suggesting that diaspora

scholarship establish a wider framework which could contest largely victim narratives, and centre the complex and heterogeneous experience of gendered diaspora. While acknowledging that diaspora, as a literary and sociological term, remains distinct from migration this paper uses the terms interchangeably as the two have gradually coalesced to situate themselves as significant facets of transnationalism.

Migration as Diaspora

As the scholarship of diaspora expanded following Tölölyan's famous definition of the diaspora as 'the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (1991, 4) many critics began to note the very messy turn that it was taking, away from the very specific focus on the Jewish and the Armenian experience (Bauböck and Faist 2010). Tölölyan pointed to its expanding possibilities of this term by suggesting that '[t]he term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community' (4–5). In 2012, Tölölyan responded to the assertion that the term had gone rogue by accepting various different categories: 'Such crowding is not merely additive, but transformative. As Ferdinand de Saussure pointed out in 1916, no term has its meaning independently, but rather acquires it in its relationship to, and nuanced difference from, related others' (4). Shuval (2002) too suggests that 'the term diaspora has acquired a broad semantic domain. It now encompasses a motley array of groups such as political refugees, alien residents, guest workers, immigrants, expellees, ethnic and racial minorities, and overseas communities. It is used increasingly by displaced persons who feel, maintain, invent or revive a connection with a prior home' (41). Temporary migration has only recently been considered a significant part of diaspora studies, primarily because it fulfils the criteria established by early studies on the diaspora involving a notion of home, the return to which remains an essential desire as well as a common sense of community across the globe. Further, global concerns of transnationalism have ensured that migration is no longer associated with service workers who are inevitably economically weaker, but have now begun to include technocrats and workers in multinational companies who travel and stay in different countries on short tenures.

Gendering the Diaspora

Taking cue from Gopinath's (2005) observation of the etymological underpinning of diaspora a male act of dispersal and procreation in a new land and Kosnick's (2010) suggestion that such androcentric images assert 'male procreation and patrilinear descent' (123), scholarship on diaspora has focussed on the multiple ways in which gender has remained marginal to predominant work on the diaspora.

This is primarily because the state has historically privileged male immigration while women have accompanied them under family joining rules. As Jain (2009) suggests, in the United States, H1B and H4 visas empower the male complete control over their family as the dependent (usually the wife) cannot work. This is, historically, supported by such Acts as the British Nationality Act of 1948 through which migration to Britain was primarily male as they came with work permits for specific jobs. This is still primarily relevant in the family joining programmes of various countries where the family is defined as a husband requesting immigration for his wife and children (Kosnick 2010). Women's migration was thus historically seen to be a part of the larger movement of families (Pessar 1999; Thadani and Todaro 1984; Weinberg 1992). As Pessar (1999) suggests, men were seen more prone to take risks, with women 'portrayed as guardians of community tradition and stability' (578). In all this, the domestic roles of women and the hegemonic roles of men as providers of the family remained unchanged. With the change in global capitalist contexts, migration came to be more feminised, in so far as women came to be seen to offer radicalised and gendered services in specific industries, particularly as caregivers. The reduction of welfare facilities in various western countries allowed for large-scale emigration of women, albeit in ways that replicated their traditional roles. Thus, even when women were recognised as an important section of the migrating group, it was often in positions which duplicated the existing patriarchal hierarchies (Hagan 1998; Piper 2008). The repercussions of these large-scale migrations—particularly from the Global South to the North, at various micro- and macro-levels of the individual and the community, and the effect of such migrations on the migrant, the home left behind by women—remain rich areas of research. Yet, such works primarily focused on the binary of migration, being either emancipatory or limiting for women, pre-empting more complex intersection with race, class and colour.

As Pessar and Mahler (1999) demonstrate, early attempts to correct the gender bias in migration studies resulted in a plethora of work which almost eliminated the focus on male migration, thereby missing out the point of including gender in migration studies: '[b]oth omissions are objectionable, and both missed the more important theoretical innovation of treating gender less as a variable and more as a central concept for studying migration' (814). Pessar and Mahler's later establishment of a framework called 'gendered geographies of power' (818) allowed for the study of social agency by examining the various ways in which women negotiate within multiple diasporic contexts and complex relationships by examining the individual as well the social, hierarchical contexts within which transnational migration was experienced. While admitting to gender as a central differential, such an approach allows for a problematic study of the way in which gender is 'imagined and lived' (818). Nicola Piper's work similarly incorporated the recognition that gender remained an important consideration in migration studies, particularly the recognition that migrants 'leave *and enter* gendered and stratified societies' (Piper; *italics author's*). This has far reaching implications for the study of gendered diasporas' impact, not only on the individual's relationship with the host community but of further impact upon return, thus addressing

concerns that migration cannot be seen to be a homogenous single journey. Piper's study suggests that increased prosperity in the developed world coupled with the reduction of availability of jobs for males in the country of origin as well as increased visibility of women's work as seen through increased remittances, all contribute to the centring of gender in migration and diaspora studies. This is particularly valuable when research is located in specific contexts, which could aid in the development of a body of work privileging gendered narratives and agency. Piper's work on Mexican and Guatemalan women in North America as well as other case studies of South–South migration, particularly in South-East Asia, point to the multifarious ways in which migration takes place in the global context. It is a project that continues to be relevant in South Asia which is one of the largest exporters of human capital in the world.

Women in the Indian Diaspora

Poet Meena Alexander's poignant articulation of the diasporic experience, 'I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations, uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing' (1993, 3) evokes the sense of loss, nostalgia and memory that has become characteristic of the Indian Diaspora, the largest diasporic group in the world. In fact, (World Bank 2015a, b) remittance data for 2015 shows that India is now the largest recipient of remittances from overseas at \$69 billion, having taken over from China which received \$64 billion. This comes from the more than 16 million Indians who are accounted to live overseas, according to the statistics of 2015 of the (United Nations 2016). These groups have been richly investigated from diverse perspectives including the historical roles played by early Sikhs in the United States, the politics of identity among Indians in the United Kingdom as well as the multiple journeys of Gujarati Indians settled in Uganda and subsequently England. The historical diaspora of the indentured labour began to gain cognizance in recent years, particularly with the rise of biographies seeking to find voices for those whose journeys along the Indian Ocean remained silent for a long time. Studies such as those of Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) and Gautra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: Story of Indenture* (2013) and Mehta's *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (2015) established a framework within which to investigate the establishment of the Indian Diaspora in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Surinam, Fiji and the Caribbean. The role of women in such communities has only now begun to be investigated with such works as Bahadur's, which examine homemaking and language retention strategies of indentured women. Scholarship revolving around Indian women, particularly those socially advantaged (and had thus come under the category of Skilled Worker visas) in the West, has become more popular in the last two decades, with focus, not only on gender as a variable in the migration process, but with specific regional, linguistic and religious studies. This has been largely facilitated with the growth and popularity of Indian writing in

English, including those of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri in the United States and Meena Syal and Kiran Desai in the United Kingdom. Collections such as the *Indivisible: An Anthology of Contemporary South Asian American Poetry* (Banerjee et al. 2010) as well as online journals such as *Desilit* and *Jaggery* attempt to bring together the experiences of Indian women as people of colour, problematized by race, ethnicity and dress. Thus Naidu (2008), Puwar and Raghuram (2003) explore how Indian women negotiate identities through the maze of public spaces while Rayaprol (1998) examines the role that women play in sustaining culture and community through their involvement in Indian temples. In the private sphere, women negotiate between traditional roles as homemakers and mothers, while facing other more public forms of struggle such as wage inequality, the lack of flexible working hours and paid leave. In this context George (2005), Hussain (2005) all suggest that women seek to recreate their roles of adapting, creating memories and establishing of a home culture through material and non-material forms of belonging, by creating transnational identities and by ensuring continuity with the homeland. In this sense, women's migration lacks agency as it is framed within the larger contexts of family expectations, usually as established by patriarchal assumptions. As Al-Ali (2010) suggests, 'The control of women's bodies and sexualities is key in the context of constructions of ethnic and national communities, especially when in flux' (120). While problematizing gender within diaspora studies, such a framework fails to reflect on the multiple strategies adopted to make creative spaces within which autonomy and agency is articulated.

An important consideration within scholarship revolving around gender in the Indian Diaspora is its preoccupation with class. Two major trends have thus emerged. On the one hand, transnational capitalist forces have allowed for a focus on the rapidly rising class of technocrats in the Western hemisphere, negotiating diaspora through strategies of religion, language as well as cultural tropes such as dress and culinary reinventions. On the other, emerging scholarship on indentured communities along the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean have investigated historical diasporas (the first wave) and their sporadic links with the homeland, primarily owing to the recognition accorded to them by the Indian State. Such research has successfully created an Indian Diaspora, which is both historically rooted and contemporary at the same time. However, a significant area which this scholarship continues to ignore is one of the most populated as well as economically significant regions for the Indian Diaspora—the GCC (Gulf Cooperation States) which is populated by more than 6 million Indians (40% of the total number of overseas Indians), of whom, more than 10% (600,000) consist of documented women (Ozaki 2012). Existing studies show that most of these women are domestic workers with low literacy levels and many of them actually work in the Gulf without valid documentation, making it difficult for them to access organizational help (Kohli 2014; Rajan and Joseph 2015). Including the narratives of women working in the GCC countries into the scholarship of the Indian Diaspora is essential, not only because they have been hitherto marginalised and remain outside the boundaries of established literature, but because their narratives are an example of how migration studies can help to problematize everyday lives by investigating its intersection

with social structure, personal, familial and professional lives. Methodologies to ground such research within the Gulf, enabling conceptualizing of such gendered diasporas is presently minimal and requires sustained focus.

Indian Women in the Arabian Gulf

Scholarship on the Indian Diaspora in the Gulf has only recently developed, although most of the work revolves around remittances and the condition of the migrants, the latter owing largely to its focus by the Western media. Very little literature (Vora 2013; Gardner 2010; Deffner 2014; Mehta and Onley 2015) is available regarding the social, cultural and personal lives of the Indian Diaspora perhaps because it lives in geographical proximity to the homeland. Research on women migrants have shown that women migrate as caregivers (nursing and old age homes), as teachers, or as domestic help. Kohli (2014), Shah (2013), Potnuru and Sam (2015), Percot (2015), among others, have brought out the rise in the number of women going to the Gulf as domestic help as well as nurses. While the exact number of women who work as domestic workers cannot be completely ascertained, Ozaki's (2012) report summarises the context of women in the Gulf:

Overall, women constitute approximately 15% of the total migrant workers from South Asia: 6.5% in Bangladesh; and approximately 10% in India and Nepal. In Sri Lanka, women constituted 52% of the total migration outflow in 2009. The majority of women migrant workers from South Asia are involved in domestic work followed by manufacturing. A small portion of them also work as nurses. Most of them are illiterate or only with the elementary level of education (4).

Few studies (Percot 2015; Potnuru and Sam 2015) have focused on specific areas in which women have been involved in the Gulf. Percot's study of nurses from Kerala reflects on the liberatory possibilities of migration for conservative girls for whom migration to the Gulf is often a stepping-stone to the West. Potnuru and Sam's research investigates the changing trends among women migrants in the various countries of the Gulf, suggesting that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates retain the largest pool of Indian domestic workers. More recently, the India Migration Report has released a special issue on gender and migration, including a study by Rajan and Joseph (2015), which examines the conditions of women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. This study reflects on the empowering nature of migrant work in that women are seen to make an effective difference to their communities and families back home through their remittances: 'Migrant women workers play an important role as drivers of development both at home and at the destination and should not be obscured from analysis' (10). This is in direct contradiction to Sahoo and Goud's (2015) work in Telangana which suggests that women did not benefit considerably through their migration as much of their remittances went into paying off recruitment agents and travel expenses. Jain and Oommen (2016) also suggest that migration to the Gulf remains problematic for

women as ‘[t]he South Asian countries, except Sri Lanka, have approached women’s migration within the framework of patriarchy with restrictive policies and irrational conditions’ (29). Such policies include the Indian government’s age restriction whereby women below 30 are not allowed to work in the Gulf countries, making illegal migration more rampant. Rajan suggests that, rather than having the State impose regulations which deny agency to women who may want to work abroad, more facilities need to be set up to provide recourse to domestic workers by giving them access to more information and help via NGOs and embassies in the concerned countries. Jain (2009, 17) similarly asks if the ‘flexibilities’ of the Indian government go beyond the patriarchal protection of women, from exploitative marriages to ‘recognition of women’s agency in shaping everyday processes’.

The limited fieldwork available about Indian women domestic workers has thus focused upon them as voiceless victims of a patriarchal State before and after migration. On the one hand, migrant women who leave India as domestic workers to the Gulf are viewed by the Indian government as potential victims of exploitation, but on the other, the remittances which are sent home by these women, however modest, represent a large contribution to the immediate community, which often sees a direct improvement in developmental indicators such as education, health care and mortality. Remittances thus achieve more than what the State actually does, in providing for welfare of the individual and the community. This is corroborated by reports of the United Nations (2016), which maintain that migrant women workers typically invested their remittances in ‘schools, wells, hospitals and local development’ (Clarke 2013, 5). It is thus imperative for studies on gendered migration to the Gulf States to investigate the multiple conditions of migration, both from the origin and destination perspectives, in order to voice individual as well as collective experiences of domestic workers and its impact on the individuals, their families and their communities. An example of how complex such a narrative can be is illustrated by a closer study at the way in which domestic workers operate in the GCC countries, most notably through the use of the *Kafala*.

The *Kafala* system of sponsorship entails a citizen of the countries in the GCC to sponsor a worker for individual/domestic use or for a company, which they may have registered. Such individuals are thus tied to their sponsor for the entire duration of their stay. Sponsorships are usually for a period of 2 years after which the contract can be renewed if so desired, by both, the employer and the employee. This much-maligned system is often termed modern day slavery as it ties the workers to a particular person at whose mercy they remain. Women workers are often brought as domestic help and thus find accommodation inside the home of the sponsor or their relatives. This, as Rajan and Joseph (2015) note, limits their access to the outside help and even makes documentation difficult as they are consigned to private spaces. Kohli (2014) also adds that women domestic workers—do not come under the purview of the labour laws of the local governments as they—are considered to be part of the local family. While the *Kafala* system of employment in the Gulf is rightly seen to be demeaning, restrictive and actually illegal in other parts of the world, many migrants have been able to find ways to surmount such obstacles and work on their own. This is largely because the local employer does not require

all the workers who they may have sponsored. For a certain amount of monthly payment (ranging from \$50 to \$100), they allow these workers to find work independent of the sponsor. This 'free visa' is a system which is as common as it is illegal, for it benefits the migrant woman as well as the sponsor. Having paid their sponsor, women are free to work as part-time help in several houses instead of just one, thus earning more per household. Working in this way enables them to decide on their working hours as well as ensuring leisure hours. Women in such cases tend to share accommodation with other women from their states in India, thus sharing the chore of cooking and entertainment options such as watching television programmes in their languages (Mehta and Onley 2015). In addition to domestic work, women with such visas are beauticians in saloons, cleaners and nannies in nursery schools and secretaries in small companies. They send as much money as they can at the beginning of the month to the caretakers of their children, often keeping just enough for their own rent, groceries and phone cards.

Such 'free visas' are rampantly used throughout the Gulf countries in spite of their being of an illegal nature. The way in which women make use of this legal loophole in sponsorship regulations provides an insight into a critical, subversive strategy adopted by migrant women in the Gulf to seek advancement in their employment as well as to evade exploitation. Such strategies empower them to make decisions pertaining to, not only where and how long they will work, but in what way they disburse their incomes as they are often in touch with their family back home, notably their children. Within a system, which is rigged entirely against the migrant domestic worker, the 'free visa' offers possibilities of agency within the larger framework of strict employment regulations. It also affirms the heterogeneity of the migrant experience of women, particularly those not privileged by class, thus asserting their agency even amidst seemingly impossible contexts.

Conclusion

Pessar and Mahler's (1999) conceptualization of the 'geographies of power', with regard to gender in migration studies, points to multiple ways in which the notion of gender could be researched beyond the binaries of victimhood and empowerment. Their categories of 'geographic scales', 'social locations' and 'power geometries' point to the intersectional relationship between gender, social hierarchies and social locations (7). Drawing upon (Massey 1994), they suggest that people exert power over these forces and processes as well as being affected by them. Such a conceptual framework, imperative in the investigation of the situation, role and responsibilities of Indian women in the diaspora, remains still in its nascent stages. The way in which gender intersects with social hierarchies through the very act of migration, the negotiations with existing models of patriarchy, and the subversive strategies adapted to in order to negotiate within and through such contexts, remains an important aspect of the exploration of gendered diasporic spaces. As evidenced from an exploration of women domestic workers in the GCC countries,

homogeneous narratives of victimhood and exploitation, while being relevant to the study of migration and diaspora, must include wider discussions of agency, choice and empowerment. The multiple levels in which women negotiate their roles as migrants requires scholarship which represents the complex nuances of real lives, not the oft repeated syllogisms of patriarchal protection.

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Women in the Indian Diaspora

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