

Discrimination and Alienation of the Displaced in Krishna Sobti's *A Gujarat Here, a Gujarat There*

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Abstract In August 1947, the Partition of India and Pakistan was accompanied by riots, bloodshed, mass casualties and migration, which has left a bitter legacy to this day. With no accurate accounts of how many died or lost their home, estimates suggest that around a million people died, ten million migrated across the border and thousands died from diseases and malnutrition. The uprooted people from both sides lost their loved ones and are displaced from their homes. They feel alienated in the new unfamiliar place because they are continuously haunted by the past and feel no strong connection to the new land. They are treated as 'refugees' and 'outcasts' in the newly settled land. In this context, Krishna Sobti's novel, *A Gujarat Here, a Gujarat There*, documents the relentless struggles of the central female character, a refugee of Partition, against unfair discrimination in the host country because of her identity as an outsider, a woman and a refugee. Through the textual analysis of the novel, this paper explores how characterising refugees as outcasts in the receiving country hinder their integration and pushes them to the margins of the society. It also highlights how discrimination can result in creating systemic social barriers to belonging and physical and psychological alienation which isolates individuals and damages their sense of self.

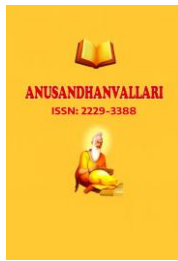
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Introduction

Refugees and asylum seekers are some of the most underprivileged and ill-treated people in the history of the world because they were compelled to leave their homelands due to the fear of persecution or actual persecution at the hands of the dominant group and seek haven in another host land. Refugees' sufferings are threefold. Firstly, they are uprooted from their motherland and forced to flee leaving behind their homes, possessions and their loved ones. Secondly, during the flight they bear witness to the violence, bloodshed and loss of a family member or friend and endure harsh environmental conditions. Finally, in the host country, they face discrimination and marginalisation and because of it they suffer alienation and struggle to adapt to the new place, establish their identity and integrate within the mainstream society. The refugees' transition phase, as a result, is filled with wide-ranging physical, social, and psychological challenges as they resettle in the receiving country. Women's refugee histories are often marginal to mainstream discourse and have been relegated to the periphery; both in the histories of Partition as well as scholarship on the wider Punjabi diaspora. A gendered reading of partition through the memories of women attempts to comprehend an alternative history and experiential space. These narratives provide illustrations of ignored voices, which are absent in statist discourse. *A Gujarat Here, a Gujarat There* is a part memoir, part novel, written by Krishna Sobti, that documents the relentless struggles of the central female character, a refugee of Partition, against unfair discrimination and marginalisation in the host country because of her identity as an outsider, a woman and a refugee. As she was born in a village in Gujrat city, Punjab province, which later became a part of Pakistan after Partition, the author herself became a migrant. In this novel, Sobti reveals her own and her family's experiences of Partition interspersed with observations about refugees and migrants

Discrimination and Alienation of Partition Refugees

The novel follows the story of a young migrant trying to navigate through her new life in the partitioned India.

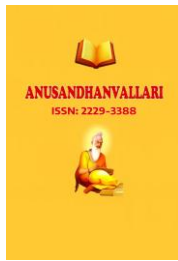


It delves deep into the trauma of her displacement and her silent suffering due to the lost connection with her homeland. The author describes the aftermath of Partition and the displacement and homelessness of refugees as “homes turned to loony bins, all thanks to politics. The whole city full of beings ejected from their homes. Full of human rags. By stations, platforms, train tracks; down galis and lanes; in chowks and bazaars and ruins; massacres scattered everywhere—willy-nilly” (4). Sobti is only a half-refugee because her immediate family was living in Delhi, but both her paternal and maternal grandparents’ homes were on the other side of the border. She had her roots on the other land, and, additionally, she was studying in Lahore at that time. The story begins with Sobti returning from Lahore to her home, where her refugee relatives are gathered, wounded, weary, and defeated. All they talk about is their hate for Muslims and the inefficient government. Seeing all this, Sobti feels rootless, uncertain, anxious and lonely in Delhi. To escape the confusion and pain that surround her, she applies on a whim for a position at a preschool in the princely state of Sirohi.

Discrimination based on cultural geography and ethnography has serious repercussions on the construction of identities. It is the intersection of refugee women's socially subordinate status as women compounded by the stigmatisation against their other identities, such as if they happens to belong to a marginalised group or an oppressed race or religion, or if they are a refugee, which result in the discrimination of them. In this regard, refugee women are affected due to unfair discrimination and marginalisation based on their identity as an outsider, a woman and a refugee. In Sirohi, the protagonist is marginalised for being an outsider (a migrant from Delhi), a refugee (from Lahore and Gujrat) and a woman. In a number of ways, she is reminded that she is a refugee (*śaraṇārthī*) and it is as such that she is perceived by others. Zutshi Sahib, the Principal of Colwin School, also discriminates against her. Zutshi takes her to the school and on the way he asks many intrusive questions. He asks her, “Are you Sindhi?” (Hindus whose origin lies in the Sindhi region) (29). He tells her that there are many Sindhi refugees in that area and if she fills out a refugee form, she will get free rations and blankets. Hearing this, Sobti feels discriminated and refuses to answer him.

The word ‘refugee’ is given in the novel as a label to those who are dislocated, looted, and impoverished in the aftermath of Partition. People call refugees as “camp dwellers”, “looted, impoverished person”, and “a crowd of looted uprooted” (30). The dominant group does not want to accept these refugees in their midst because it would lead to the sharing of resources with them. They think their opportunities and money are taken away by the refugees. Their accusing gaze proclaims, “God protect us from the refugees. These looted wretches won’t find peace until they’ve robbed the government themselves” (70). This irrational hatred creates a divide between the refugees and the mainstream, inevitably leading to discrimination. As such, Sobti’s ethnic attire becomes a mark of her refugee status, which leads to distinguishing her as a cultural outsider, leading to further discrimination. When Sobti and Zutshi go to meet the new Chief Minister of Sirohi, Gokul Bhai Bhatt, she feels the eyes of the crowd following her and taking note of her attire. She does not see much difference between “their round lehengas with choli and her round ghararas with kurtas” (68). However, the crowd’s speculative eyes teach her to regard her clothing with a new eye. The partition of attire, which again labels her as a ‘Sindhi refugee’, segregates her in the minds of people, reinforcing the boundaries between the majority and minority. This biased identification based on cultural attire and ethnic identity makes her feel alienated and discriminated instead of welcomed in the society.

Discrimination can result in creating systemic social barriers to belonging and physical and psychological alienation which isolates individuals and damages their sense of self. As such, when Sobti is still indecisive about accepting the job, Zutshi tries to undermine her confidence by mentioning that no one expected her to come here and another experienced candidate has also been granted an interview. He needles her indecisive behaviour through sly and veiled comments. He tries to discourage her from taking the job so that a male candidate will get the job, which will be convenient for him. Later, Zutshi asks her if she would be available to dine at the Medical Officer’s house. He tells her he would pick her up but he never shows up because the second

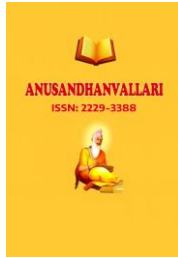


candidate appeared for the interview. Zutshi ascertaining that the protagonist is a refugee woman tries to both physically and psychologically isolate her and damage her sense of self by undermining her confidence. The protagonist suddenly feels lonely and alienated in the unfamiliar city of Sirohi. As soon as the protagonist reached Sirohi she was perceived as an outsider and a refugee which creates an degrading, intimidating, humiliating, hostile and offensive environment that hinders the integration process.

Unless there is integration with the mainstream, refugees will continue to suffer further discrimination and alienation. Integration will act as a barrier against discrimination to a great extent. In order to integrate, the marginalised individuals must internally empower themselves and externally seek social support to withstand the pressure of exclusion, discrimination and alienation. In this regard, Sobti internally empowers herself to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society without having to lose her own cultural identity. Empowering oneself helps in acquiring a strong sense of autonomy, confidence and identity. These attributes help the individual to actively adapt to the new environment and find ways to resist, disrupt and subvert the opposing forces while rejecting the imposed labels and stereotypes that restrict them. In doing so Sobti is able to reclaim her agency and identity and dismantle the psychological, emotional and social impact of discrimination and alienation. She cultivates inner strength and exhibits the spirit of resistance as she navigates through the socio-political terrain of Sirohi in search of a sense of belonging and a redefined identity. Learning from the servant boy, Devla, that the other candidate, Mr. Popat Lal, would get the job and Zutshi is telling everyone that she would not stay here, Sobti finally decides to accept the job. She confronts Zutshi's manipulation to oust her by submitting the joining report in the District Office. This rebellious act becomes a significant movement in her journey because it symbolises her resistance to discrimination and oppressive forces that try to displace her.

Accepting the job marks the beginning of her emotional and psychological integration into the new place, as she finally "began to feel a connection with this city spread over the ancient ground" (59). On her way to the guest house when she encounters an infuriated Zutshi, who demands to know who gave her the authority to do as she wishes, she confidently replies that she is her own person and thinks for herself. Her firm and calm reply reflects her growing inner strength, unwavering courage and self-worth. Sobti is aware of the challenges she would face in Sirohi. Even more discrimination and social exclusion from people like Zutshi who will try to silence and isolate her. However, her inner strength and psychological resilience helps her to withstand the oppressive forces and to adapt to the lifestyle of the host society.

To facilitate physical integration, refugees must seek external support and build allies to create a sense of belonging with the place and people around them. In their first meeting, Sobti, through her bold and straightforward personality, has gained the favour of the Maharani and cultivated the friendship of Miss William, the companion of the Maharani. The Queen Mother's trust in her gives her hope and courage that she can sustain herself in the traditionally male-dominated and hierarchical Sirohi society. The Queen Mother praises Sobti for her self-confidence in submitting the joining report and calls her a "brave and clever girl" and tells her these qualities are "the mark of a displaced person" who is beginning to make her own way in the world (73). Her recognition and appreciation of Sobti's determination and courage act as a symbolic acceptance and approval of Sobti's efforts and resilience. She, thus, encourages and supports Sobti to pave a way for herself in Sirohi. As such, Sobti, amidst all struggles, establishes a good interpersonal relationship and affinity with the people around her. The Maharani support implies her standing with Sobti against the systems of oppression. This support becomes inevitable when Sobti faces subtle and manipulative resistance from local officials like the Inspector and Mr Champak Lal. They are tasked with the duty of helping Sobti to choose an accommodation in Sirohi. They try to make Sobti accept a house in the bazaar, which she immensely dislikes. She asserts her choice to live in a cottage they pass by, which they try to dissuade by stating that it is haunted and under repair. As such, she employs subtle resistance as she writes to Miss William and gets the permission of the Maharani to live in the cottage. Choosing her own living space symbolises Sobti finally finding a sense of belonging and



connectedness with the place and people around her. It provides a quiet reprieve living in the cottage as if “a pleasant dream had been granted her in the midst of a dust storm. So lovely after the trials she’d faced up to now” (87). Thus, she circumvents the obstructive officials and reclaims agency over her living conditions through the external support. It marks the beginning of her metamorphosis from a displaced outsider to a fearless individual who is starting to establish a place for herself in the new environment.

Conclusion

To conclude, the novel sheds light on how refugees, particularly women, face layered discrimination as displaced individuals and as outsiders in their host country. The refugees are ascribed a negative identity which creates a divide between them and the mainstream, inevitably leading to marginalisation and constant micro aggressions. However, Sobti’s journey shows not only resistance to discrimination and alienation but also the creation and establishment of positive relationships and a new identity in the host country, amidst its constant micro aggressions. Earning the Queen Mother’s trust and support lead to her gaining external support in the hostile environment. This reveals how inner strength, courage and emotional and psychological resilience, compounded with the external social support systems, can empower the refugees to reshape their lives and destinies.

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