

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Gendering of Space in Tea Gardens: Representation in the Fiction of Indra Sundas

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Abstract

There is an intersection of gender and space. Gender is shaped through the interplay of power dynamics, social structures and cultural practices. Women are the backbone of the tea garden community of Darjeeling yet they live a status of insignificance. They have been pushed to marginality since antiquity mainly because of their gender. The workspace is demarcated; they are deprived of their rightful position and also are subjected to various forms of domination. Feminists argue that women are conditioned to adhere to traditional gender norms and this seriously undermines their aspirations and freedom.

Juneli Rekha (1979), and *Sahara* (1995) Nepali novels written by Indra Sundas bring out the plight and predicament of women in the tea gardens of Darjeeling through an array of women characters. The stories in both novels are set in fictional tea gardens during the colonial regime but can be contextualized even in the present times. It offers an insight into the gender divide, economic and social exploitation and of women of tea gardens. It also points out how traditional gendering and patriarchal prejudice have delimited women's identity and disempowered them from becoming a voice of their own.

Keywords: Gender relations, women, tea gardens, Darjeeling.

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Space and gender are interrelated. Spatial arrangements reinforce gender roles and identities. "...genderization of spaces is effected through the organization of perceptions, and in particular of gazes and the body techniques that go along with them" (Low 121). Women since antiquity have been involved in an enduring struggle against the multifarious facets of gendered spaces. However, there is a persistent lack of complete takeover of women in various spheres because she has to 'fit in' different expected and assigned roles. The baggage of expectations from family and society puts her constantly under scanner for censure. A woman is always supposed to act as per traditional patriarchal norms standardized by society which is an interiorized normative. Lefebvre too has argued that space is a means of production and therefore, a part of society's base. Quoting key ideas from Lefebvre, Christian Fuchs says that there exists a dialectic of social relations and space. Social relations which are only concrete abstractions gain real existence "in and through space" (8). Enforcement of gender inequality through the segregation of space has ever remained a global problem. The tea plantation system is no exception. Debarati Sen has focused on the hierarchical state evident in the tea gardens of Darjeeling which represents all the 'plantation bureaucracy'. Her book *Everyday Sustainability Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling* (2018) points out that gender dynamics is a core reality of tea plantation system. Field supervisors, group leaders and pluckers are mostly Nepali. Management and ownership is retained by other ethnic groups. "Women mostly occupy the lowest strata of the hierarchy with a few female group supervisors" (77).

Historically women have played a prominent role in the establishment of tea gardens. Tea plantations have always been a family-based occupation in the Darjeeling Hills. But ever

since the inception of tea garden life, women have been cornered to the lowest stratum in the hierarchical web of tea plantation management and also within the community. The green lush full tea bushes, the idyllic and romantic landscapes, and smiling women tea pluckers in traditional attire in the hoardings and posters belie the truth about women's deeply ingrained struggles. Mainstream representations of popular culture carefully conceal the plight of these women. A few fictions are written with a view to dealing with the struggling lives of the tea workers which capture various nuances of their predicament.

Juneli Rekha (1979), a Nepali novel by Indra Sundas endeavours to animate the struggle of women in the tea gardens during colonial rule. This story is interesting as it subtly captures the trajectory of women's vulnerability and subservience under domination. In the post-independence era also women are debarred from rightful positions. In addition to that, they need to shoulder the entire familial burden too. In the "Foreword", Indra Sundas emphasizes that this novel is based on realism. He says:

The scenes in this novel are from the past, not from the present and all the events that are there, he heard them with his own ears; saw them with his own eyes; experienced them all by himself. (my trans. 3)

Though women have played a pivotal role in the establishment and sustenance of tea gardens their contributions and sacrifices for the existence of tea garden community is never acknowledged. The story is set in a fictional Meki tea garden. Malini, the heroine of the novel is a young widow. Her husband Dhaney, a gardener in the same tea garden passes away due to the negligence on the part of the management to provide sufficient medical facilities to its workers. He dies due to blood dysentery. Malini is left all alone after the death of her husband. Her neighbour who is a head cook in the White manager's bungalow pleads for a job for her. Initially, he hesitates but then summons her to his residence. "As soon as he saw her, the manager agreed and she became malini of the manager's flower garden in the place of Dhaney"

(my trans. 7). Malini is the feminine term for a female gardener. The choice of name and gender invites careful consideration. The allusion to the fragility of the flowers and the vulnerability of the woman is hinted at the beginning itself. The manager eyes the youth of Malini and is delighted to employ her as his personal gardener.

Malini has a neighbour whose name is Jasey and lives in the next dhura (the British colonizers demarcated the tea garden areas into different dhuras or units where tea workers resided quite away from the manager's bungalows). He is also a widower whose wife has recently passed away. He starts developing a soft corner for Malini for want of a partner. But she is very afraid of his frequent visits. She feels her integrity at risk because of Jasey's attempted proximity. She has to bring the matter to the notice of her villagers. More than worrying about her misery, she has to be concerned about the villagers' judgement. As a newly widowed it is not socially sanctified to seek solace in a male company.

Jasey on the other hand is more worried about his own loneliness rather than the anxiety of Malini. Women's predicament during the colonial days was intensified due to sexual gaze and inappropriate approach by the White managers. Illiterate, young and beautiful women often became prey to them. There was no provision for the protection of the rights of the poor labourers. Young widows like Malini had to live with the fear of social stigma. Inappropriate proximity disguised in a friendly manner from the male counterpart could land her into trouble because the British managers would punish whoever was found not complying with them. Malini's naivety and her conditioning refrain her from voicing out perplexities when her space is intervened. She has to bear the brunt of not just colonial intervention in females' space but that of patriarchal agents too.

Jasey's recurrent visits compel her to inform the neighbours. She swears before everyone to report the matter to their manager. Although she expresses self-contempt about it later she has to do it for her own conviction of social security. Piya Chatterjee in this regard

has said, “one of the most significant codifications of the village’s moral economies izzat is also inscribed into the very geography of plantation” (242). Lefebvre argues that space is produced and is also a means of production but it “cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society” (85). The incident does have a very intense impact on Malini. She is deprived of her peace and sleep. Her difficulty becomes very prominent as she is bound within the spatial confinement of the institution of marriage. Simone de Beauvoir too points out,

marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society...Marriage has always been a very different thing for man and for woman. The two sexes are necessary to each other, but this necessity has never brought a condition of reciprocity between them. (415-416).

Many women are compelled to live within the boundaries of it after marriage. Jasey acts upon his own necessity for a partner and companionship but ignites the patriarchal fear in Malini. As Lefebvre has emphasized, there is an interplay of power relations in spatial representations and thus space is also a medium for control. The patriarchal privilege that Jasey owns makes him ignore that a woman is not guaranteed equal dignity and liberty in society. Malini has no peace of mind, neither at home nor at the workplace. Rather, other societal tools like surveillance of women’s movement, disciplining, conditioning and codification of a female’s behaviour come to encircle her spatial existence. Her dilemma represents how women in the tea gardens are convinced to adhere to traditional gender roles. They are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process. That is why Malini lets her neighbours decide about the matter.

Gender discrimination is deeply embedded in the tea gardens of Darjeeling. Colonization intensified the gendering of the space. Malini’s own space at home is ridden with

acute emphasis on social sanctioning. Economically she has already accepted that she is at the mercy of the British manager for her survival but socially and politically too she cannot be a voice of her own. She feels very uncomfortable and is traumatised when she goes to work the next day after the hue and cry of the incident. The people she meets seem to look at her with resentment. She is afraid of the manager's reaction too. Her helplessness and timidity draw the readers' attention to scrutinise women's condition in the tea gardens and how her emotions too are shaped by this phenomenon of gender construct around space. Gender biases in the plantation community are not only a historical truth but a contemporary reality too. Plantation society has continued to remain a hierarchical set-up. Sarit K. Bhowmik while pointing to class hierarchy in his *Class Formation in the Plantation System* (1981) emphatically states that "the plantation has a distinct form of production organisation which gives rise to certain specific social relations" (9). Plantation as he says is a unit of socio-economic formation and therefore, the factors which are thought to be inherent "are in fact allowed to exist, or are protected, because of the larger socio-economic system" (13). Fuchs quotes Lefebvre and emphasizes that "a social space has physical borders and conceptual boundaries that are socially produced, but always interpenetrates and superimposes other spaces" (9). The plantation hegemony has solidified the notion of 'womanness' which is to be forged for all. Piya Chatterjee has examined these gendered dynamics in the plantations of India. She emphasizes how colonial and postcolonial systems of labour have defined women's roles and identities, on the basis of which they are often marginalized and exploited.

Jasey is evicted from Meki Tea Garden once the incident is shared with the manager. The practice of 'hattabahr' (eviction) was very prominent during the British regime. But in comparison to him, Malini's predicament is more tormenting. The White manager desires to keep her as his mistress. In her workplace, she is not only all alone but susceptible to the evil intentions of the manager. He is in his late 40s whose wife has recently passed away. Malini's

co-workers like Writer Babu, Sardar and the other seniors assume that he would return to England and get married. Eventually, words spread about his interest in Malini. He is contended that he has removed an obstacle on his path. Malini on the other hand is compelled not to leave her work due to poverty. “Malini thinks that she is a helpless and a miserable woman. Where could she go leaving the only job she had?” (my trans. 62). She is utterly perplexed about finding possible way-outs. Her anxiety becomes manifold as she cannot confide it to anyone.

Sahib is the providential of her bread and employment, king of tea garden who can do anything; he can be forgiven for seven murders. He has the right to say anything and enforce any law. Counter measures cannot be resorted to; only to be listened and endured by swallowing one’s own drop of blood or by burning one’s heart into ashes (my trans. 63)

Piya Chatterjee has highlighted this “paternal gaze” in the tea plantations which is a prominent way of ensuring control of women. This implied how in the guise of purported concern the colonial management and authorities have vigorously controlled the lives, labour and spatial freedom of women workers. This gaze which is paternalistic in nature was deeply ingrained during the colonial regime and the same has been continued in the postcolonial structure of the tea plantation system. Independence has failed to shift the power dynamics and male managers and overseers are found to exert dominance over female workers in the current situation too. And as Piya Chatterjee says this is consolidated through surveillance, disciplining and regulation of women’s bodies and behaviour. Attribution of power through this kind of gaze has led to the inheritance of gendered oppression and exploitation. Malini cannot seek an immediate solution to her perturbing problems because she is a victim in the nexus between gender, class and power. She even thinks of committing suicide to escape her present predicament which showcases the extent of her psychological perturbation. She is in great

agony, “either to be Sahib’s mistress and live whole life or run away from the tea garden and go somewhere else, or commit suicide if nothing can be resorted to” (my trans. 66).

Malini’s perplexity points to the wide-ranging and multi-layered factors that have historically pushed the women of tea gardens into marginality due to the operation of gendered binaries. The job of labour is always difficult and in addition to that gender divide, patriarchal fear, social hierarchies and stigma have delimited the aspirations of women tea workers. Malini cannot go elsewhere and start her life anew because she is not educated in the official sense. She lacks the confidence to venture out alone. Traditional gendering and patriarchal norms reinforced by economic exploitation, political exclusion and social stereotyping have restricted women’s autonomy and participation within the workplace and households too. Piya Chatterjee criticizes that even though men and women are engaged in doing similar tasks but there exists body politics which is translated into the field.

These are cultures of separation that reproduce social norms of appropriate gendered behavior in which naturalized biological differences, sexuality and codes of shame and honor are all implicated (205).

In a situation when Malini is contemplating her suicide, Jasey comes to her hut one night hiding himself lest he be noticed by anyone. An evicted person was strictly not permitted to come back to the tea garden again and no one could even dare to. Any attempt to go against the British law would end up in harsh punishment. When Malini finds Jasey in front of her she first apologizes to him and also feels that god has been kind to her. Her job had started to become like a cage for her. The presence of the Sahib would make her claustrophobic. “Sahib was not Sahib in her eyes but Yama in white colour” (my trans. 70).

When she is left with no alternative to rescue herself from the haunting situation she has to concede escaping with Jasey. One midnight when everyone is in deep sleep she escapes with Jasey bidding farewell to Meki tea garden forever. But fate does not allow her to choose

and exercise her freedom; to live her life as she desires. She is unaware that Jasey has informed his new neighbours about his wish to remarry. Malini is not ready to get tied into a marital bond again. She is clueless as to what should be her response to the questions of her elopement. She is not willing to be Jasey's bride but does not have a place to go. "I have come this far, where do I go from here? (my trans. 74). There are no answers; only obliviousness, uncertainty and a perplexing future in store for her. Eventually, she is trapped again in a web of marital bondage. "She did not want to settle with someone again so soon and suddenly but due to the circumstances she had to agree to do so" (my trans. 75).

She naively tells Jasey that he won and she was defeated. But women have ever been struggling to achieve equality in terms of disparity, subjection and gender codification that they are subjected to. As Judith Butler argues in her book *Gender Trouble Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) the construction and fixity of gender identities have continued discrimination against women (she also defends other gender identities). She is very apt in saying that gender is a sequence of acts one has to perform and it is a verb, not a noun "but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (33). The enforcement of gender roles has attributed patriarchy as normative and the tea garden space is no exception with regard to this. As a woman caught up within the circle of poverty in a tea garden and in a patriarchal setup both her perpetrator and rescuer (ironically) is a male figure.

Thus the connotation of the title of the story, *Juneli Rekha* which translated into English as 'moonlit lines' stands apt to describe the existential dilemma of Malini. The metaphor of shadowy moonlight hints at how she fails to carve out her individuality as she is caught with uncertainty and oblivion. Her journey is marked by confusion and obstacles like a path illuminated by shadowy light. The lines within this sphere again are metaphorical of various

boundaries within which a woman of a tea garden has to cope with to live. In the end, her space is conceded when she agrees to submit herself to the web of power dynamics related to gender.

Sahara (1995) is another novel by the author which can be considered as a sequel to *Juneli Rekha* as the story features Meki tea garden with the same manager who had an evil eye on Malini. His name is revealed as Thomas Henley who had made Malini's life miserable and compelled her to run away from Meki. But this novel deviates from the focus on one single woman and looks at the larger context of the plight of the tea garden workers. One needs to see how women in the tea gardens not only in the past but in the current scenario too face constraints in finding a space of their own. Sahara which can be translated into English as assistance is rather ironic as it connotes the difficulties of the tea workers in general and that of women's looming dilemma in particular.

Henley used to keep a 'chokdi' or mistress in whichever tea garden he used to go. By the time he comes to Meki, he is over forty years of age. Some of the women characters in the novel whose lives are encircled by poverty and misery of the tea garden are the protagonist Bhaiman's mother, a widow, Ruplai and Haideni, a widow too. They live an insignificant life because their only identity is a tea garden resident and a worker. Despite Bhaiman's father being a very loyal employee to the managers, his mother has to fold her hands in servitude before them so that the mother and the son can get a job for survival. Tea gardens in Darjeeling lack inclusive and equitable environments when it comes to the gender divide. Gender has always been emphasized as a performance.

Indra Sundas through the representation of gendering of space in his fiction points towards the social and cultural dynamics that is inherent within the tea garden community. His fiction assists in exploring how living arrangements are gendered in nature and there are distinct social spaces assigned to men and women. In the context of tea gardens, socialization is structured along gendered boundaries. Bhaiman's mother cannot aspire more than being a

loyal servant to the managers. One fine day she falls ill and dies, her death causing no difference to the management.

Haideni alias Mandhari's fate is no dissimilar from the other women in the tea garden. Her husband was in the army and knew how to use guns. One day he is shot accidentally and dies while going out in assisting the English managers in hunting. The case is wrapped up because the police, law and the court—everything was owned by the English planters. Haideni does not even get a chance to see her husband's face for the last time. She becomes all alone although Bhaiman and his mother become her assistance in her difficult times. Since she is a woman with none to voice out injustice and inhumanity done to her, her husband's murder is projected as an attack by a bear in the jungle. The managers are not afraid of her because they know that she will never venture with the courage to question their monopoly and cruelty. A tea garden woman worker has always remained quiet in the field and at home too. This subjectification of silence since its inception has ever prevailed within the tea garden community. Women are very rarely found to transgress it.

It is the social conditioning and specification of space that have restrained women from becoming a voice of their own. Thus another character, Rupali although may have developed feelings for Bhaiman is married off to Dhanjit, Chota Writer of Renik tea garden. She agrees to the decision of her uncle and parents because they think that the groom has a better job and a house. It still remains traditional to give away daughters for marriage in the name of security although it may not align with the consent and wish of a girl. It can be said that there is inherent prejudice in the gendering of space. This has perpetuated gender roles and stereotypes. In addition to this, it has also led to the marginalization of women in the tea gardens although they do as much work as their male counterparts and share greater household responsibilities.

Conclusions

The metaphor of evolution cannot be applied to scientific change, not only because it clearly does not work but because it leads to an idealised imagery of science that could have inauspicious consequences. The stage of the psyche may not yet have been passed by science, and philosophy must continue to mother its problem, including discussing the use of technology and its development.

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