



A gender perspective study on international migration through a detailed analysis of the female protagonists in the novels of Shumona Sinha

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Abstract

People move across international border to settle down for a shorter or a longer duration due to various reasons. It can be a movement of an individual, a family or a group. The reason for migration may be voluntary or forced in order to flee conflict, persecution or other situations that affect their security or livelihood. When we look deeper into the migration of that of women in specific, it is due to the result of the practices and the policies in the country of origin which discriminates women, for instance, limiting their access to resources or educational opportunities, or by hindering their political participation. The gender inequality is considered a powerful factor leading to feminine migration and it is also a key factor which differentiates the experiences of migrant men and migrant women in the society of destination. Through migration women obtain economic, political and social expectations that cannot be realized in the country of origin. This paper presents the various scenario of the female protagonists from the novels of Shumona Sinha, who migrate to seek their autonomy which is denied in their country of origin.

Keywords: migration – feminine migration – international migration

Gender studies

Gender studies focuses on the socio-cultural role of male and female in the society. Gender studies investigate the disparities between men and women and the implications of such disparities within societal context. One of the major important aspects of the focus is how inequality is produced and reproduced in gender relations in human society. Gender studies interrogate how gender becomes a discriminating tool in the distribution of labour, care, property, income, education and political process in general. Gender is an important factor shaping people's thoughts, perception, behaviour and most importantly their identity in all facets of life. The communities create norms, values, expectations and gender specific responsibilities. Fair treatment of women and men according to their respective needs is termed as gender equality. When there is a classification of the needs between women and men, we come across structural discrimination or unequal treatment on the basis of sex which is often rationalised by cultural, institutional and administrative rules. The inequality usually hinders access to resources, income and opportunities of a particular sex and leads to feminisation of social problems as the women question about their inferior status and demand recognition in their social position. It is also observed that there is no universal gender role as there are historical and cultural variations across the globe. These variations help the migrant women to have a better life style or something different from their place of origin.

Migration

"Migration is defined as change of residence with no restriction to distance covered. Every act of migration involves an origin, a destination and an intervening set of obstacles." Migration theories seek to understand the reasoning behind and motivations for the decisions of individuals and households to move from one location to another domestically or internationally.

Women migrate for a whole range of reasons such as poverty, displacement from the land, debt, and many other external constraints over which they have little control. These problems are shared with men, though their impact is always gendered. The decision to migrate is influenced by wage differentials in sender areas and in receiving areas, but this is only one element in the decision to migrate. Some non-economic factors are especially important causes of migration for women. Marital discord and physical violence, unhappy and broken marriages and the impossibility of divorce often influence women's decision to migrate. Migration also offers women and men the opportunity to transgress sex-role behaviour, but this is especially important for women, as the constraints on women's behaviour are usually greater than those on men. Migration often allows women to escape discrimination because of other aspects of their gendered lives, particularly those who have suffered because of age or their position within the family. These interrelate with perceived or real opportunities for women after migration and, thus, influence migration. Women may perceive migration as a means of resisting and escaping at least some aspects of the oppressive structures in which they live their lives. It may provide the opportunity to improve financially their own situation and that of their families. It provides the opportunity

perhaps to avoid or leave unsatisfactory, violent marriages; and perhaps to restore self-respect and justice through collective action and resistance in the course of migration.

Shumona Sinha, her life and her works

Shumona Sinha is a current generation Francophone author (born in Calcutta, India), who lives in France. In the novels written by this Franco-Indian writer, it can be noticed that she makes reference to her personal thoughts, emotions, and experiences by making the characters in the book attribute such feelings or face certain scenarios. She herself being an immigrant the scenarios are the original portrayal of the feminine condition as an immigrant. She often portrays the experiences of individuals navigating through the challenges of living in foreign country, dealing with cultural displacement and struggling with questions of identity

She has written five novels in French. *Fenêtre sur l'abîme* (2008), *Assommons les pauvres!* (2011), *Calcutta* (2014), *Apatride* (2014), *Le testament russe* (2020). She has been conferred with various awards for her works in French. Le Prix Valéry Larbaud, le Prix Eugène Dabit du Roman Populiste, le Prix du rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature françaises de l'Académie française, Grand Prix du roman de la Société des Gens de lettres, are a few to mention. Her novels have become a part of scholarly programs to discuss the questions of identity, exile, writing as a woman, writing in a foreign language in the universities of France, Germany, USA, India, etc. She has also translated and published several anthologies of Bengali and French Poetry. She came to France as an English language assistant in a school in Paris, and later did her higher studies in the Sorbonne University. In 2009, she was recruited as a legal interpreter by a French translation agency, which sent interpreters to OFPRA. She was fired from OFPRA when her second novel appeared in print as the novel recounted her experience at OFPRA. It was indeed a bold step to question the authorities using the power of literature and it proves that - A pen is mightier than a sword.

Fenêtre sur l'abîme, this book tells the story of a young Bengali girl who is rejected by her family because of her love for a married French man. As a child she is gifted with a lot of books of prose and poetry written by Tagore by her intellectual parents and she becomes an avid reader of Tagore. She starts writing a personal diary which she finds one day completely burnt by her parents as the diary had love quotes from the poems of Tagore. The young girl is on the verge of a mental breakdown triggered by physical and emotional abuse that she was subjected to by her family in Calcutta. She leaves to France as a student and eventually marries a French man, a father of four children. She leaves to France in the hope of escaping oppression by her family and society. The marriage with an illustrious professor gave her a status in the society of destination. But with the monotony of life she struggles to make sense of her existence which impacts her life experience and her mental health. Through this novel the author portrays that:

“At the receiving end, women’s experience of migration is mediated by immigration policies and rules that often, in very subtle ways, continue to treat women as confined to a male-regulated private sphere. In cases where women do enter as a spouse, their entry is conditional and reinforces dependency on their husbands.”

Assommons les pauvres! Narrates on how people particularly from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh come to stay in Europe, with a lot of dreams and fancies. It was an award winning novel. She received le Prix Populiste in 2011 and le Prix Valéry-Larbaud in 2012. The story revolves around a young girl from Calcutta who works as an interpreter in The French Office for Protection of Refugees (l'OFPRA - l'Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides), in France. As the author portrays the hardship of the refugees to claim a legal immigrant status, she describes also the criticism faced by the young female interpreter. In spite of the young girl's authoritative position at the French office she is often abused and offended by the refugees. The young lady has a bitter experience as an immigrant herself unable to see the degrading lifestyle of her countrymen and as woman faces the insane thoughts of her countrymen arriving from a patriarchal society. The refugees being at the receiving end could not tolerate a woman interrogating them at the OFPRA. Wherever she moves around the city she is threatened, insulted by a refugee whom she had questioned about the genuineness of his claim for immigration. The refugee makes her feel guilty for not being able to help them in obtaining their claim for immigration. He harasses her with her pleas in an underground train. It escalates to threat and insults which provokes her to hit him with a wine bottle. She is held up in a dark cellule. She is questioned by a Monsieur K, the interrogation officer. The officer's attitude reinforces the position of the young lady as an immigrant in France.

« Auriez-vous eu le même geste de colère et de violence s'il s'était agi d'un homme de ce pays ?.... Un Européen, je veux dire. »¹ (Would you have made the same gesture of anger and violence if it had been a man from this country?... An European, I mean.)

The detailed and lengthy interrogation revolves around questions, justifications and narration of events about her immigration to France. When left alone the young female protagonist ponders over the incident which forced her to do this violent act. She realises that the moments of gender inequality, the moment she had heard that a woman cannot descend so low to expose herself to the world and earn a living had provoked her to act violently. The novel *Assommons les pauvres* clearly states that:

“There are various forms of oppression based on gender identity, race, social class, sexual orientation and ability. But whatever is the oppressed class, most oppressed will be female.”

Apatride describes the intersecting destiny of three young women: Esha, Mina and Marie. The three young girls struggle in their own way to gain freedom and dignity in their different worlds. The first, Esha, an Indian immigrant living in Paris and an English teacher in a suburban high school, wonders, disillusioned by life in the capital and by her profession, about the reasons which pushed her to stay in France. She faces many racists' incidents, fights, and insults. She is deceived by the reality and understands that she can never get rid of her foreigner identity. She is treated like a refugee and is never believed to be a teacher. At work place she is treated like a dangerous foreign element.

« Esha comprit alors qu'elle ne pourrait jamais s'éloigner d'elle-même, de son image, de son ombre. Elle ne pourrait jamais s'éloigner des zones troubles, car elle les portait en elle, sur sa peau, son visage, tout au long de son corps... »² (Esha

¹ SHUMONA Sinha, *Assommons les pauvres!*, éditions de l'Olivier, p.49

understood then that she could never move away from herself, from her image, from her shadow. She could never get away from the trouble spots, because she carried them inside her, on her skin, her face, all through her body ...)

The second, Mina, is a peasant near Calcutta, who fights to live her clandestine love with her cousin and to save the family plot of land from expropriation by an automobile company. Unlike other girls in her village she takes part in the protest along with the other farmers. She leads the protestation against the project which is willing to take away the farming land of the village. She is intimidated and insulted by the political leaders. Even during her internal migration from the village to the city she couldn't avoid the gaze of the mean men. When she gets down to the avenue she hears a man whistling at her as if he was calling out for a dog, she avoids his gaze and goes her way where she comes across another man staring at her.

« Comment savoir ce qui avait provoqué cette traque soudaine, les fleurs vives et sauvages de sa tunique ou la longue natte noire qui ondulait dans son dos comme un serpent, ou encore l'odeur qu'elle dégageait de peur....Son corps la trahissait-il ? »³ (How to know what had provoked this sudden stalking, the bright and wild flowers of her tunic or the long black braid that rippled in her back like a snake, or the smell she gave off with fear... Her body betrayed her?)

Later on the body of the young girl is found half burnt and buried near the site of the automobile project.

The third girl is Maria, a French woman by adoption, originally from Bengal, who goes to India in search of her biological parents. She wanted to return to her native country, she could no longer bear the suffocating atmosphere of Paris as she was frequently falling ill. She always wanted to migrate to her homeland.

« Elle avait rejeté la ville, ou c'était la ville qui l'avait rejetée, elle ne le savait pas... »⁴. (She had rejected the city, or it was the city that had rejected her, she didn't know...)

Though India is the homeland of Maria, she is still seen as a foreigner. As a little girl her migration was forced and now on her return back to homeland she receives cold stares and curious behaviour from her neighbourhood.

The novel *Apatride* reflects on the condition of female migrants in India and France. The place of women is constantly called into question by the heaviness of traditions, religions and male superiority, always confiscating social and political powers.

On the contrary to the immigrant experiences, Shumona also narrates about the experiences of a migrated woman as she returns to her native place. *Calcutta* is another significant work of Shumona Sinha. In this novel she offers a blend of memoir and fiction. This memoir is a deeply personal account of Shumona's return to her hometown, Kolkatta, after spending several years living in France. She explores her complex relationship with the city, delving into its history, culture and her own experiences of her childhood. She feels displaced and faces challenges to reconnect with her roots as she examines the impact of globalization and urban development on the city's social structure. The memoir also captures the essence of Kolkatta and its contradictions, juxtaposing the beauty and vibrancy of the city with its poverty, overcrowding and social inequalities.

Conclusion

It is important to understand the causes and consequences of international migration from a gender perspective because hierarchical social relations related to gender shape the migration experiences of migrants, whether male or female. The motives for migration are complex and cannot be understood purely as a response to economic motives in the case of labour migrants, or as the desire for family reunion in the case of dependants. For women in particular, migration may offer opportunities for greater personal autonomy and escape from intolerable pressures to conform to conventional roles. Thus the participation of women in migration depends on the social roles of women, their autonomy and capacity to make decisions, their access to resources, and the existing gender stratification in countries of origin and destination.

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² SHUMONA Sinha, *Apatride*, éditions de l'Olivier, p.65

³ SHUMONA Sinha, *Apatride*, éditions de l'Olivier, p.79

⁴ SHUMONA Sinha, *Apatride*, éditions de l'Olivier, p.154