Chapter 14

Women and freedom

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Feminist movements use many strategies and deploy various political and social theories for the attainment of their goals. In the new globalized order, 'third world' feminisms have taken recourse to a language of rights, seeking to bring in processes like the world conferences or conventions such as the Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for the framing of national agendas and demands. Whilst this has been an empowering strategy, what remains in the background is the notion of 'liberation'. Rights speak a language of equality and fair play, of entitlements and access. From within this arena of a rights-oriented movement, I would like to seek spaces where a redress of women's subordinated position translates not only into a movement for justice and equality, but also highlights the questions of freedom and liberation. These may be the spaces where women's problematic social positioning is highlighted, where the meaning of 'freedoms' as it pertains in a gender-discriminated world can be debated.

This paper will look at the way that notions of freedom enter into women's debates in their struggle for the formation of both personal and national identities or identities as citizens of nations. The paper is divided into two sections, which look at how women's voices were deployed to formulate notions of citizenship and statehood at the end of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The voices selected from these two eras are from different sources: literary sources from Bengal for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and voices from a particular movement in Bangladesh for an illustration of the debate about women's citizenship in the late twentieth century. It is interesting to see how these very different spheres of struggle and articulation grapple with definitions of national spaces and debate the formation of public and private identities of women.

I would like to begin with a well-known essay by Cora Kaplan: 'Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism' (1986). Analyzing the 'split' feminist field, the essay shows the different spaces ascribed to men and women in Enlightenment discourse. Based on an analysis of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), this essay traces the differences in gender to the differentiated terrain of post-revolutionary Europe in the eighteenth century, which had carved out different and more confined spaces for women in the aftermath of the French Revolution. The 'new' post-revolutionary woman could access the rights granted by the new state, only by curbing some freedoms and by bringing herself under the purview of reason and rationality. The freedoms to be sacrificed were psycho-sexual in nature and entailed a curbing of what the eighteenth century had called 'sensibilities'

and that Wollstonecraft herself calls 'a romantic twist of the mind'. This 'sacrifice' of passion for reason creates a gender-differentiated position, and as Kaplan points out, men were carving out spaces that could incorporate both 'passion' and 'imagination'. Wordsworth's 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' written in 1800 is an impassioned document, which squarely puts passion, emotion and imagination at the centre of creative and artistic work.

Taking the *Vindication* as the document that spells out the position of women in the new era, we can easily see that the place of passion and emotion – of what was seen to lie at the other side of sense and reason – is problematic for women. Female sexuality, especially the expression of sexual and romantic desire, is construed as a problem. As Kaplan goes on to say:

> It is interesting and somewhat tragic that Wollstonecraft's paradigm of women's psychic economy still profoundly shapes modern feminist consciousness. How often are the maternal, romantic–sexual and intellectual capacity of women presented by feminism as in competition for a fixed psychic space.
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> (Kaplan 1986: 159)

Translating these concerns into the language of rights and freedoms, the ease with which 'third world' feminisms deploy the language of rights can be contrasted with the ways in which demands for freedoms are cloaked. Freedom in this gendered construction refers to the larger space ('roomier' – as Kaplan says the male romantics had carved for themselves) where passions and emotions have a freer play.

In much of the world, the end of the nineteenth century witnessed a grappling with the issue of freedom from a colonial power. This process was accompanied by a process of self-definition, where nation-states that emerged out of anti-colonial struggles debated and constructed a discourse not just around a set of democratic rights, but around a notion of selfhood and identity. Hence independence meant not only a shaking off of colonial shackles, but coming into one's own – a return to self was seen as part of the process of gaining independence. A hundred years on from that moment, and in the case of the Indian sub-continent, fifty years after the departure of the British, and in the case of Bangladesh, after another war of liberation, it is interesting to look at how those founding concepts have weathered.

I will be looking specifically at the notions of independence and freedom as they apply to women. Women played a central role in this process, as both colonizer and colonized took recourse to notions of captured and debased womanhood as justifications of their position or struggles. Thus the colonialist justified his 'civilizing' mission as one that would 'liberate' women from the oppressions arising out of superstition and barbarity, and the colonized mounted their liberation struggles with an appeal to the mother nation, and saw their task as liberating the conquered motherland. The part that women played in this whole process has been highlighted, and it is interesting to see whether the discourse of freedom initiated by the colonized is different when women enter the field as active agents and actors. Women's voices are important in this context, as women are situated at the crossroads, as it were, between struggles for freedom and the definition of self.

I will be looking at literary writing in Bengal from the end of the last century to show how the issue of freedom entered women's writings. In contemporary Bangladesh

of defining the emerging nationalistic space through a concentration on the figure of the woman. 'Savitri', written in 1877 and published in 1882, is a poem that can be read as part of the reformulation of the figure of the woman as a literary/cultural symbol. It is a long poem that portrays this well-known figure from Indian mythology, a myth which is usually deployed to be the symbol of wifely devotion. Ironically enough, in Toru Dutt's rendition, 'Savitri' becomes a symbol of freedom, of freedoms that were once enjoyed by women in India, but which were now lost. Thus: 'In those far-off primeval days / Fair India's daughters were not pent / In closed zenanas . . . ('Savitri', Part 1, lines 72–75).

The contrast between the inside and the outside is drawn as between the present and the past. It is in the present that Indian women are confined within their homes. Toru Dutt, however, seeks freedom not only in ancient India, but surprisingly enough, in modern Europe. Were we to read her poetry along with her letters, we would notice in both forms of writing an intense desire for freedom. Indrepal Grewal's *Home and Harem* (1996) has a very good reading of the desire for freedom expressed in Toru Dutt's letters to her English friend. 'Freedom' is not seen as political freedom here, but as freedom of movement, as freedom to wander and roam. Women's entry into this new sphere of writing poses the question of how the nationalistic discourse would accommodate these differing notions of freedom. Savitri wanders 'in boyish freedom', and one of her main freedoms was the choice of life partner. The contrast between an imagined and ancient India and the present sense of confinement finds expression in her letters as the contrast between her confined life in her family home in Baugmaree near Calcutta and the freedoms and friendships she had enjoyed during her sojourn in England. Ancient India is thus compared with contemporary England or Europe. The movement is both backwards in time – to the glories of the classical past – but also outwards – outside – for 'other' images of freedom. The notion of the comforts of the mother-nation is offset by the drawing of other sites and arenas where Indian daughters are more comfortable and crucially enjoy a sense of freedom.

If Toru Dutt can be seen as a marginalized literary figure in nineteenth-century Bengal, Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore, is both a 'mainstream' as well as a marginalized figure. She is part of the mainstream that Tagore's literary output stands for in Bengali writing, but she is marginalized in that her personal reputation has always been subservient not only to her brother's, but also to the other literary 'greats' of Bengal, such as Bankim Chatterjee. In her novels, she also examines the concept of freedom via the concept of the new woman. Marriage and the creation of a home are perhaps the main themes in her writing. This home is geared towards the needs of this new woman, a site where all her desires and wishes could find expression. For example, the novel *Kahake* (1898), translated by herself as *The Unfinished Song*, contains long diatribes on the nature of love and whether marital love is qualitatively different from other kinds of domestic love, including that between parents and children. The debate is about women and choice in marriage, and hence hearkens to the definition of what constitutes a home, on how women's desires can be contained within the home. Devi follows the traditional nineteenth-century novelistic 'resolution' device, where personal desires and social realities need to harmonize into a neat ending, to avoid personal tragedy, but the irregularities in her writing – the long polemical speeches which disturb the narrrative or the plot – are emblematic of this need to question the