

***Ghar* and *Bahir*: Spatial and Gender Relations in India and the US during the Pandemic in View of Feminist Utopias**

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Abstract

Ghar and *Bahir* are two different spaces assigned to women and men culturally and sociologically which prefigure the relational dynamics between them. The *ghar* and *bahir* ideology parallels other complementary pairs of gendered characteristics like spiritual-material, selfless-individual, and submissive-possessive. Women's progress was much about stepping out of the domestic realm of *ghar* into the *bahir* of the material world. However, during the pandemic, when people of all genders were bound to the house, men had to step into the domestic realm of women and the spatial distinctions were blurred. The confrontation between men and women in the domestic realm, not for a few hours, but for days at length transformed/affected their relational dynamics. While some men increased the demand for care and attention from women, others contributed to domestic and care work which is thought to be essentially women's work. In some places, the homestay during the pandemic partially diluted the gender relations to create more harmonious households but in other places, it also made the oppressive gender relations more rigid. The paper would try to explore how men and women interacted within the domestic realm affected by the pandemic and how their relational dynamics transformed for better or worse. To understand these subtle changes in family gender dynamics, the paper would keep feminist utopias, Begum Rokeya's *Sultana's Dream* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, as comparative axis to judge how utopian or dystopian were changed family dynamics.

Keywords: Domesticity, Household, Labour, Pandemic, Spatial, Utopia, Dystopia.

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We are the smiling comfortable homes With happy families
enthroned therein, Where baby souls are brought to meet the world,
Where women end their duties and desires, For which men labor
as the goal of life, That people worship now instead of God.

– Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “Homes”

Few lines from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s poem “Homes” depict the glorification of home as the first unit of human civilization, the origin and aim of humans’ gendered life goals. A home has been a veritable space to involve and evolve gender experiences of humans by the separatist formation of *ghar* and *bahir*; the gendered division between the inside and outside the home has created different social realities for men and women where they have their own respective mini worlds different from kinship bonds with the other gender at home. The struggle to achieve gender equality has been long and continuous worldwide, and the failure of persistent efforts makes it a Sisyphean task where the pandemic has caused a slip again. With bringing unprecedented adversities, the pandemic pushed all the genders inside the house, forcing these mini different worlds to collapse and co-exist in one place and creating a possibility of new exchanges and dynamics. Two years of the pandemic have initiated irrevocable changes in our lives from losing and gaining our emotional, psychological, social and economic standards. Rendering women and men together for a long time within the domestic walls have shifted the tectonic plates of gendered relations between them for better or worse. The gendered division of labour also divides the assigned places of work but for the majority of people not part of the frontline work, the pandemic has narrowed down the space to the home, where both paid and unpaid labour is to be done to survive the family. The paper would look at the changed family dynamics during the pandemic in India and America and would weigh and contrast it with century-old utopian literature by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Begum Rokeya in *Sultana’s Dream* sarcastically questions what if men are put into the *zenana*, “Would all their business—political and commercial—also go with them into the *zenana*?” (6). An impossibility even in the realm of utopia has been actualised as a way of survival during the pandemic. There were reports which claimed that men were more vulnerable to the virus than

women. Seeing the exonerating power of the virus to kill people, the extinction of humans with particular sexual bodies or major weaknesses as to bind them to the house is not an impossibility now. We can believe that the world of Gilman's *Herland* or Rokeya Begum's *Ladyland* might be a possibility in the distant future. When reality takes after utopian and dystopian literary creations, the comparison comes inevitably to the hands.

Sultana's dream, a utopian fiction by Rokeya Begum, is about a dreamy visit of a lady from Calcutta to a place called Ladyland where through reversed separatism, women have overpowered men, replaced them at their social spaces and occupations, and have sent men to the *zenanas* which are now called *mardanas* to live a secluded life and do domestic chores. Here, being in charge of public spaces, women have handled warfare, nature, and technology in a way far better than men using progressive uses of the resources and their intelligence. Rokeya Begum has retained with severity the idea of gendered domesticity by presenting home as a prison-like place of passivity reserved for the weaker gender and tasks that do not contribute to nation-building, and this time it is men who are relegated beyond the domestic threshold. Malashri Lal notes, "the threshold is real as well as a symbolic bar marking a critical transition" (25). She argues that men's position outside the home allows them "multiple existences" between the home and the world but women are only allowed one sort of domesticated life. With the exchange of spaces and roles, women have usurped advantages reserved for men in the patriarchal society. Though in the text, we do not get to know views of domesticated men because they have been silenced as women have been hitherto silenced.

Gilman's *Herland* is a women-only world where men have become extinct and, in their absence, women have created a prolific civilisation based on motherhood and love. They have done away with ill-fitting clothes and ill-suited houses to adopt comfortable versions of living. Their unique ways of handling life processes bewilder the men visitors from the distant land of America. These women are perverse to the idea of home and do not understand how women of the other land could be kept at home specifically for child care and domestic work. Gilman sees the gendered nature of the house and the separate sphere of family as dangerous to the development of both women and children. Instead, she professes community rearing where both genders have equal

opportunity to explore and utilise their skills at various tasks. Gilman brings not women of the distant land to Herland but men to introduce them to the intelligent ways women are capable of. Begum Rokeya binds men to the house to make them taste their own medicine. The thought of analysing family dynamics during the pandemic with these century-old utopias in the backdrop owes to the commonality in the emergence of men to the women's space, unfolding their lives and ways of living, showing them the other world of women created in the absence of men's oppressive presence.

Both utopias have displaced men from their advantageous spatial and power-exercising positions, exchanging the position with the subjugated 'other' or 'the second sex,' the women. While Rokeya exchanges domestic space with men, Gilman disposes of it completely but the absence of domestic space originates from the absence of men. In the presence of both the genders, one has to be inside the domestic threshold to maintain peace and social division of space and labour. In the social imagination of utopic lives, men and women rarely share a habitat with ease; however, the pandemic has coalesced both genders forcing them to share a feminine space, hence creating a third form of familial structure. Without the segregation of their places and with no defined rules except patriarchal strictures to shape their workings, men and women stumbled upon each other's activities due to the lack of emotional and physical space, creating possibilities of new permutations of roles beyond orthodox gendered segregation.

Partha Chatterjee in the essay "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" discusses how 1950s modernity in India brought a severe drift in the world outside and inside the house — *ghar* and *bahir*. Men of the families heavily adopted English culture to adapt to the transforming public space and to compensate for this modernization, the house became the sanctum sanctorum of Indian values and its women became depositors of nationalism and values of the native culture. Women were withheld from attaining modernity at the cost of Indian spirituality and were constrained at home, they were idealized as the goddess of the hearth (*grahalakshmi*) and their labour became devotion to the house. Contrary to this men-specific modernity, modernity to women came majorly by stepping out of the private space and claiming social spaces. Women's movement from *ghar* to *bahir* was not reciprocated by men's flow

into the house because it would be anti-modernity for men to choose a weaker space and its corresponding weaker position. We have seen that women's occupancy of public space with men is far from a peaceful co-existence, rather it is ridden with gendered discrimination and violence.

American women's flow into the social space originated from the necessity to take up jobs in the absence of men who had gone as soldiers to serve in the world wars. When men returned to reclaim their space, women had to leave the social space and return home to live a dissatisfied life of limited avenues. Betty Friedan describes that the unhappiness and dissatisfaction arising from life and work at home bred a feminine mystique among women. The private space of the home has been marred by modernity's anti-home stance which degrades everything related to the house whether women, its inhabitants, or the work and products produced in it. In contrast to both the utopias which consider home as a place of seclusion and subjugation, the pandemic has made home a safe place against the havoc of the virus for everyone but the experiences inside the home for men and women were not uniform. During the initial weeks of the pandemic, men considerably enjoyed the leisure of home, getting time to spend with their families, though men's leisure heavily depended upon their economic situation. However, within a few weeks, the home started feeling like a prison due to the limiting avenues it offered to its inhabitants, men had a chance to experience women's home-produced melancholy and frustration of being bound to a place due to reasons beyond their control.

Space is a social process in itself and a platform for it plays an imperative role in shaping our social and self-identification of masculinity and femininity. The ideology of separatism that stringently works in the gendered division of space parallels other divisions that go with public and private—reason-emotion, active-passive and, materialism-spiritualism. These corresponding values shape how men and women create their different subjectivities within their engagement with each other in their respective spaces. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo says, "The greater the social distance between women in the home and men in the public sphere, the greater the devaluation of women" (qtd. in Freedman 22). Pandemic's lifestyle resonated with Rosaldo's feminist solution to the separatist inferiority of women's sphere by increasing the overlap between the domestic and public spheres which would lead to raising the status of women. Not only

women's entry into the public sphere but men's entry into the domestic sphere is necessary for the egalitarian present with existing domestic values. The problem arises in the value system that assigns greater value to the operations of the public realm than the domestic realm.

The Pandemic's lifestyle was struck with the fear of contamination and death. A great amount of work was to be done to clean and sanitise all the objects brought from the outside, to wash the clothes more than usual, to cook food on a daily basis fearing contamination of food from the outlets, to cook interesting food to engage children and family members, in the absence of all the child care facilities and schools, children had to be taken care for the whole day at home. Women were naturally expected to take up the extra burden of increased household work besides their paid work from home. Heejung Chung in an article worries whether the pandemic has returned 1950s American housewives who now have to take the "third shift" for increased domestic labour. The stay at home during lockdown demanded extra moral and emotional strength to wade through the new life patterns varying from the increased requirement of safety to extending the capacity of suffering. It was a test of patience and resilience against all odds, women needed to be the shock absorber of the families owing to the characteristics assigned to their nature. Care ethics, culturally deemed to be women's virtue, was required to survive the pandemic, battle the gloom of quarantine days and serve the infected people at home.

Women were overburdened by providing services to all the members at home, very few men shared the workload but the majority chose not to transgress the patriarchal definition of women's work. Ashwini Deshpande in her extensive data-based research concludes that in the first month of the pandemic men's hours spent on domestic chores drastically increased but subsided in the other months as the pandemic continued (95). By December 2020, there was a clear increase in the gender division of domestic chores. Women's hours spent on domestic chores have increased sharply and significantly above the pre-pandemic average, whereas men's hours have declined in both America and India. America has different family set-ups than India as most women have paid jobs and children are sent to schools and creches for a major portion of the day hence minimising women's role at home

but increasing the pressure of earning to afford those services for their children. In America too, according to Pew Center Research Analysis, the gap in the percentage of men and women satisfied with the division of household chores between them increased during the pandemic. In October 2020, 55% of men say they are very satisfied with this aspect of their relationship, compared with 38% of women (Barroso, *Pew Research Center*).

Home has been a space to domesticate and bound a particular gender, its essentiality is made stringent by the existence of the public space dominated and assigned to men. If home becomes a space to unite rather than demarcate, how the gender roles would play out. Women's return to the home was not seen as drastic as it is for men; women were expected to suddenly take up the household work culturally assigned to them in the patriarchal system. Returning to the house was more displacing for American women as the old notions of the gendered division of labour suddenly became apparent when they had to handle most of the care and domestic work besides their paid work from home. There were no official regulations or any other authority to divide the household work but mutual understanding of men and women had to tackle the bulking load by self-regulating their activities, over which cultural notions took a heavy toll. The structure of a home demands innumerable household tasks for its upkeep and its inhabitants' upkeep as well, dominantly provided by women.

The power exercised by men over the workings of the house and its inhabitants is partly shaped by their absence from home to earn money. They get the supposed right to leisure because of the assumed hard work they do outside the house to run the expenses. There were men during the pandemic who could not earn from home, their continuous presence at home should have jeopardised their authority because it is culturally men who were given the advantages of the public space and a halo of being more important in the house than the women already in it, but during the pandemic men still occupied the position of power within the home. The rise in domestic violence perpetrated by men over women, and vice-versa as well, owes much to the continuous visibility and availability of the victim in front of the oppressor. With restricted access to public spaces, men and women had no moment of relief or escape; in such a situation homes became a prison besides keeping people safe from

the virus. Setting home as a restrictive place for all genders, alike for men and women, does not prove to be fruitful. With the cultural baggage of gender notions, we understand that the real-life utopia should not succumb to spatial separatism or unification.

Women's presence in the men-dominated outer space is wrecked with gender stereotypes where women are subjugated in one way or the other. The women's shift from private to public space is unwanted in a patriarchal society because it makes homes less essential for women and threatens men's domination over both the private and public spheres. The ideal situation demands men and women share both public and private spaces without any gendered differences but before reaching that we need to analyse how other familial setups work. Through Gilman and Begum's utopias, we have seen that the segregationist world is not an ideal substitution and for all genders to live in amity, spatial distinctions on the basis of gender should be eradicated. Modernity in both the countries has mingled men and women in the public space but it still dwindles with the gender disparity. The pandemic restricted genders at home but due to the established gender ideals, the home remained a restrictive place not only because of the threat of the virus but also because it is considered to be a woman's place where men had to take resort and maintain their power.

Spatially and culturally distant apart, Rokeya Begum and Gilman have disliked home as a separate space which pigeonholes women and prevents them from utilising the home as a space of relief. Their utopias have tried to free women from the houses and the social condition produced by the pandemic too has proved home to be a fatal place for achieving gender parity. A patriarchal household failed at achieving gender blending to battle the pandemic life distraught with fear and more responsibilities. Lopa Ghosh, a Global Health Advocacy Incubator, wrote an article in 2020, considering the pandemic a purgatory to reset the gender dynamics; she imagines whether the post-pandemic world will be a feminist one. And three years down the line, I reluctantly would answer her that the pandemic was just another slip in the long Sisyphean journey to achieve gender parities. However, some men initiated to go beyond the gendered division of labour; like the threshold group of men called gentles in Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Underground* and Vandyck

Jennings from *Herland*, who initiated to learn ways of women in their gendered segregated world, few men of our pandemic laden world too gave hope for an evolutionary utopia in real, not in the entirety but at least in a limited section; raising hope for a society where men and women and other genders could live in healthy diversity and harmony without segregating spaces and tramping over each other's human rights. Separate spaces for genders, men essentially in the domestic space or in the public space or not present anywhere at all—do not qualify for a healthy society. Instead, a healthy mix of all the genders would make up for a better society, but that healthy mix should not only be inside the domestic space as shown by the pandemic, but also in the public space. Gilman believing in the constructive nature of domestic structure says, “The home is a human institution. All human institutions are open to improvement” (*Home: It's Work and Influence* 89). We still need social actions and literature which prefigures such a society where *ghar* and *bahir* are not diametrically opposite gendered places, but rather segregated for different purposes common to all the genders.

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