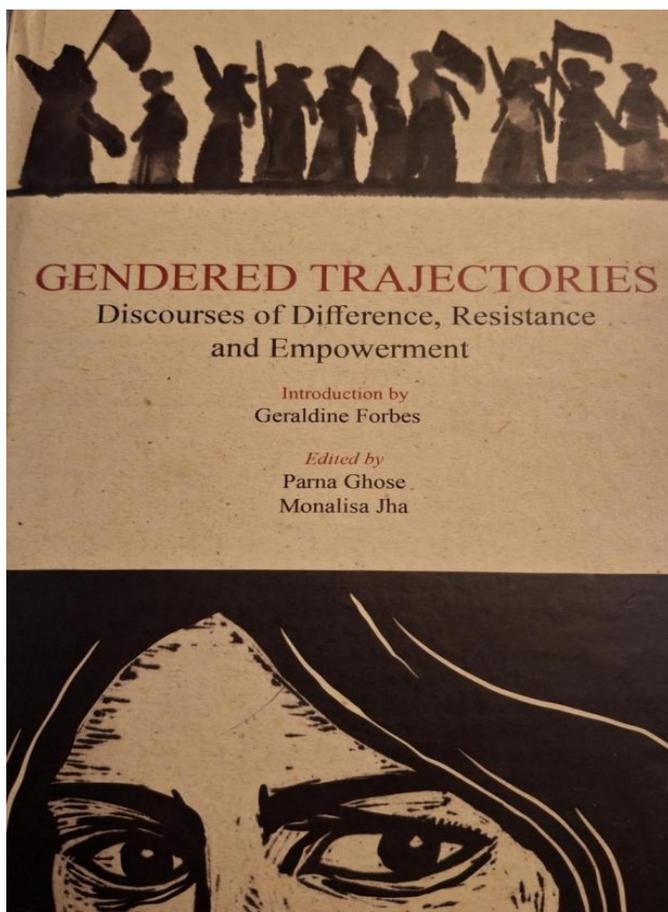


Parna Ghose and Monalisa Jha (eds), *Gendered Trajectories: Discourses of Difference, Resistance and Empowerment*, Kolkata: Setu Prakashani, 2025, 312 pp. ISBN:978-81-965816-5-7



This anthology is a result of a workshop which explored the multifaceted dimensions of women's experiences towards the close of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. The workshop was specifically conducted to raise and disseminate the awareness that women's studies is more than an academic discipline, as it involves knowledge and understanding, policy-shaping, and ground level work by both government and non-governmental agencies. It aimed to throw into focus the absences, erasures and neglect of women's narratives of pain and struggle, resistance and achievements from 'his'tory.

The seventeen chapters in *Gendered Trajectories* cover a wide swathe of focus areas: politics, society, education, literature, science and the history of science, labour, media, health, sexuality, law, crime, violence, and processes of redressal and reform. The collection thus brings together a broad range of concerns ranging from Dalit feminist political thought to women's participation in the informal economy and the labour market. Many of these key issues are flagged in the introductory essay titled "Women's Movement in India" by Vibhuti Patel who offers a comprehensive and sweeping account of women's studies in India. These are issues to do with gender discrimination, structural and other forms of violence, ecological disaster, epistemic injustice, and intersectionality. Issues of disability and gender responsive budgeting are all placed in perspective and examined through a gender lens. Debi Chatterjee's essay, "Her Story Unfolding over Time" captures both the local and global reach of feminist developments, mapping the terrain and the global arena very well. Both the introductory essays are extremely useful for students and researchers of gender studies.

The third essay – "Women in Indian Freedom Struggle: An Overview" – makes for an interesting read since it includes some not so well-known women, in addition to the ones we already know about. The focus here is on women in history and not so much on women's history. Strategies of life narration are also mobilised in a few essays which look at first person narratives and offer fascinating accounts and illustrate the significance of life narrations as a significant tool and method in women's studies and ethnography.

The most incisive essay titled "Remembering the Re-membered Birangona" offers a very poignant account of women who had been snatched away by marauding forces from their homes, both natal and marital, during the 1971 war of liberation against (West) Pakistan, gang raped by soldiers of the opposing army, leading in most cases to estrangement from their families. The term *birangona* or war heroine is euphemistic, to say the least and the irony is further compounded by the fact that the 'compensation' offered by the government later goes to the families of these women; the same families who were not willing to take them back once their purity and honour had been sullied. In a situation like the women who experienced displacement in the 1947 Partition, concepts of home, belonging and later, 'rehabilitation' assumed complex overtones and had to be redefined given the ground realities. Calling the women freedom fighters (*muktijoddha*) is both tokenistic and a belated form of reparation. The essay on women's authorial assertions based on their autobiographies is also a well-researched piece and a welcome addition to the gendered trajectories of burgeoning subjectivities. Some of these areas have received considerable critical attention already but the addition of fresh

theoretical perspectives certainly brings in a measure of epistemic worth/richness. Similarly, the essay “Wife in the Rigveda” is a close reading of the text.

Many of the essays in this collection offer a competent, in-depth analysis, summarizing and reflecting on the significant intervention and existing scholarship in the field. At times, some are a little patchy and inconsistent in quality, aim, and focus. Again, there are essays with depth and nuance like the essay on travel writing, *inter alia*. “Interpreting the Female Gaze” places 19th century women’s travels in the context of the late 20th century and finds that the scenario has shifted to the extent that the idea of ‘solo’ travel undertaken now by some women travellers and bloggers would have been unthinkable even a few decades ago. By discussing the generic interplay between travel writing and other allied genres like autobiography, the author avers that “travel writing enacts a logical transition from the ongoing focus on autobiography, subjectivity and multiculturalism” (176).

While many of the essays are contributions from experienced academics, there are a few chapters which fail to connect the specific topic to the larger framework and orientation of women’s studies. The chapter on Kamala Markandaya overlooks an important detail, and this may leave some readers confused. The essay in talking about Markandaya does not really throw light on why she (Kamala Markandaya) should be singled out for special mention when other writers have explored the experiential world of women and the genre of domestic realism more effectively and with greater depth of analysis. It could have explored Kamala Markandaya’s writings in the context of Indian women novelists like Anita Desai or Ruth Praver Jhabvala or even later writers like Shashi Deshpande and others.

The other essays which connect the literary and the socio-cultural are certainly meaningful contributions to the anthology. Some of Tagore’s short stories which capture the impact of dowry on young women’s lives and the lasting shadow it cast on them is narrated through stories built on the regressive custom of dowry. Perhaps the only ‘choice’ in such a situation was a foreclosure of choices for sensitive young women who were often shown as dying or committing suicide in an unbearable situation. The only way to escape the stranglehold of patriarchal arrangements like dowry was to remain a spinster like Kalyani in the story “Aparajita,” one of the stories by Tagore discussed by the author.

Similarly, essays which draw upon issues germane to women’s studies make a lasting impact. “Notes on Engagement with Dalit Feminist Thought” gives the reader a snapshot of recent developments in Dalit feminist studies.

Particularly innovative in this volume is the inclusion of case studies which discuss experiential realities of women's lives through the lens of a psychologist/psychiatrist and provide arresting vignettes in the narrative style. The essay has both authority and authenticity, but a little analytical and theoretical rigour would have enriched it further.

The account of women in the police force, "Her Story-in Police" is commendable both in its historical analysis as well as in the closely observed empirical detail. Based on a first-person account, the chapter charts the trajectory of women in the police both in ancient and medieval, and then colonial and postcolonial India. If both genders suffer from a tendency to be cast into stereotypical roles by society, women in the police force are even more likely to be stereotyped. However, by charting some recent initiatives, the chapter ends on a promising optimistic note. Parliament committees on empowerment of women have in the last decade and a half, reviewed the working conditions of women police in India.

In fine, this present volume is a notable addition to the growing corpus of research material in the terrain of women's studies. The volume would be of interest to teachers, researchers, and students alike. Though the primary focus of many of the essays is Bengal, there are many which refer to a pan-Indian reality and to other cultures from the Global South. The idea of gendered trajectories of women's subjectivities and lived experiences are organised, shaped, and moulded to add to a growing and valuable archive of women's studies in India.

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