

Being in Superposition: Migrant Women, Modern Subjectivity, and the New Collectivity

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Mythical Foreigners: Female Exile and the Foundational Disobedience

In her Strangers to Ourselves, a poignant study of foreignness, Julia Kristeva traces the literary history of migrants and points out incisively: “It is noteworthy that the first foreigners to emerge at the dawn of our civilization are foreign women – the Danaïdes.”¹In this foundational myth of Argos, the fifty daughters of Danaus were ordered to marry the fifty sons of his brother Aegyptus. In the exilic story of these itinerant women, it is crucial to point out that not only were the Danaïdes fleeing their native land but, particularly, the laws of that land and the enforced marriages. Beyond Greek antiquity, we can further trace our civilization in the originary expulsion and lapse of the Judeo-Christian tradition, within which also *the mythical exile as well as the notion of otherness is found in and founded on the female disobedience*. Human condition and human history, as we know them, begin with the expulsion from Eden, for which Lilith and Eve were not given the credit as foundational mothers but were expelled as monstrous begetters of human suffering. Manifold women’s exile starts from their initial, fundamental position which puts them outside the border of symbolic language which organizes social institutions and laws, governs the production of socio-cultural meaning, and renders women muted historical subjects.

While neglected and underrepresented both as a mythical and a historical subject, migrant women have become the decisive markers of our contemporary times. In these times of dramatically increased international mobility and migrations, we are witnessing an unprecedented number of women on the move. The mythical reference to women as figures of socio-cultural otherness and to migrant women as unruly foreigners who unsettle multiple socio-cultural borders thus sets the historical stage for the discussion of women’s migrations which tend to be even today enforced, violent, and driven by socio-economic necessities.

Women in Modern Migrations

Women are experiencing drastically greater possibilities for voluntary movement as well as a dire likelihood of enforced displacements. Their migrations are happening within the context of global market economy whose means for the movement of the people and capital may be highly advanced but its labor division and profit sharing run along well-entrenched lines of racial/ethnic/class/gender hierarchies. Furthermore, the multi-media digital technologies are bringing greater number of people together while increasingly keeping people confined to virtuality. Many of these techno means, however, are enabling migrants to keep closer ties to their originary geo-cultural locales than ever before.

I use the term “migrant” not only to cover a broader spectrum of migrant conditions, such as exile, dislocation, and immigration, but also to indicate a change in the contemporary demographic movements which is marked by an overall greater mobility and greater socio-cultural and economic capacity of people to move repeatedly; to be more mobile and less settled. The term “immigrant” seems to connote a singular act of moving to a new settlement and, consequently, focusing on the processes and problematics of adjustment and assimilation; while “migrant” carries with it a sense of restlessness. Additionally, I want to distinguish a migrant’s conditions as those of somebody who experiences more dramatic socio-cultural changes such as new locations and new languages, and in that sense I want to mark a greater difference between migrants and established diasporas.

Being in Superposition: Multiple Placedness in the World

Granted that one of the key features of our times are global migratory movements, this paper examines how these contemporary trends and developments affect, inform, and reconfigure modern subjectivity; which, in turn, constitutes one’s individuality and identity as socio-culturally and econo-politically recognizable. More specifically, I trace and articulate the shift in and evolution of modern subjectivity through the emergence of migrant women on the global scene, whose existence among different geo-social locales and value systems I name here as *being in superposition, whereby they can be experiencing synchronously multiple placedness in the world.* Subjectivity here refers to subjective experiences and subjective consciousness as resources for individuality formation and formulation – the conception of an individual as she (re)presents herself and appears in the world. Furthermore, subjectivity refers to a subject as a being called to act(ion) as well as to a way of relating to others.

As I explore the properties of the smallest scale social entity and a mobile physical system of a migrant, I turn to the language of quantum mechanics and the term superposition for its greater capacity to elucidate the possibilities of multiple positionality. What I find conceptually productive in the term superposition is the notion that a physical system such as an electron exists partly in all its particular, theoretically possible states or configuration of its properties simultaneously; but, when measured, it gives a result corresponding to only one of the possible configurations, thus the notion of the observer as participant but also as a reductive force. Similarly, a migrant’s simultaneous existence among multiple social systems and multiple loci of her consciousness is reduced by traditional categories of national, political, and other forms of assumed identifications and allegiances. This discussion situates the modern subject along the intersecting lines of race/ethnicity/class/gender and in relationship to, rather away from, the universalized, disembodied, rationalized, and lionized individuality of traditional conceptions.

Working and developing away from such traditional conceptions, sciences and arts of our times and the burgeoning of interdisciplinary studies have been informing and registering a dramatic

shift in our general worldview. I align here my understanding of the migrant subject and the migrant modes of existence with Alfred North Whitehead's conceptions of process philosophy, embodied mind, and occasions of experience. Process philosophy identifies metaphysical reality with change and dynamism. It has its counterpart envisioning in the sphere of physics through Ilya Prigogine's distinction between physics of being and physics of becoming and the understanding of reality as experiential, as a process of continual (re)invention, rather than given material. Taking off from such philosophico-physical perspectives, the emerging modern worldview is characterized by the notions of interconnectedness, participatory universe, transformational processes and being as becoming.

Individualism and the Diversified Self

Expansion of our consciousness thus changes the conditions for individuation. Consequently, individualism as the key feature of our times needs to be rethought and reconfigured. In her meditation on the possibility of modern human bonding entitled Flesh of My Flesh, Kaja Silverman points out that insistence on uniqueness in narrowly defined individualism leads to the point at which we as unique individuals are bound to be rivals if not enemies.ⁱⁱ I ask then: How can we conceive of individualism within and along the lines of interconnectedness? How can we protect women's emerging and precarious autonomy and, thus, individual autonomy at large as we focus on creating the new global community?

Regarding the figure of a foreigner, Julia Kristeva asserts: "Whether a constraint or a choice, a psychological evolution or a political fate, this position as different being might appear to be the goal of human autonomy (. . .) and thus a major illustration of the most intrinsic, most essential part of civilization."ⁱⁱⁱ In that sense, women migrants are the socio-cultural figures of utter difference, whose existence can be viewed as being in superposition. *Superposition is applied here for a conceptualization of the self as a set of positions in relations. Dynamic, relational, multipositional and diversified individuality* thusly conceived keeps a sense of unique positional configuration, always escaping one-dimensional categorizations, while simultaneously allowing for multitude of affinities, intersecting, and solidarity.

As I explore the properties of individual as the smallest social system, the microcosm of an individual migrant, I want to emphasize that superposition accounts not only for the complexity of the subject matter but also for the precarious roles of the observer. To measure the given subject's many discrete aspects requires the subtle skill of discretion. On the one hand, we need to recognize that we cannot simultaneously measure the subject's position and velocity and that any definition we offer would have to have the capacity to account for the subject's continuous change and transformation. On the other hand, we need to acknowledge that we can observe the subject only by interacting and interfering with it. *As gendered and mobile self-conscious spaces, migrant women's existences, termed here as metalives, highlight multiple loci*

of consciousness and modes of identifications and emphasize the zones of their negotiations as existential, epistemological, and aesthetic distances of self-reflection.

Gendered Psychogeography and the Ethics of Home

Migration alters and reconfigures one's psychogeographic orientations. Once the borders are crossed, the bigger the world gets the more concentrated the one is on the self, which is now experienced as an expansion within which we recognize home differently and integrate aspects of the new space as somehow recognizable. It is erroneous to identify home with stasis, clear-cut boundaries and identity, and fixity. It is delusive to associate home with familiarity, safety, and comfort – that which is, in fact, projected as the feeling of "being-at-home." I invoke here the life and work of Theodor Adorno, quoting his grave irony: "it is part of morality not be at home in one's home."^{iv} What does this imperative statement mean for women who have been exiled to private spaces and systematically confined to home; systematically contained and trained to contain themselves in the domestic domain, that is to stay and stay put? How can women act upon Adorno's instructive proclamation with conviction and effectiveness?

To get to the multiple planes of diversification and dynamization of personal space and subjectivity, it is necessary to unhinge critically the conventional bind between women and body (identification with the natural, irrational, and emotional) as well as women and space (identification with the static and the land – motherland, Mother Nature etc.). Womanhood as gendered self-space is magnified with hypersensitivity in the migrant situations.

By tracing the meridians of migrant female psychogeographies, I want to point out that the most immediate impact of migration is, however, examined through the body. Experiences of different orientations and surroundings, climate, food, spatial/linguistic/legal regulations throw the body as the moving and transforming habitat into focus. The necessity to situate the subject makes the subject necessarily spatially constructed through, what Avtar Brah called, the "lived experience of locality."^v The questions of the history, locale, and national allegiance come to the forefront at which all the former demarcations and orientations are destabilized, questioned, and problematized. The gendered position further complicates such orientations, and to prominence come questions and problems of how/what it means to be out of one's proper place in terms of locale, home, tradition, beliefs, and gender proper to name just a few. The meaning of one's (im)proper place is negotiated primarily on the bodily site. As an embodied system, the female self holds multiple systematically delimited spaces which need to be re-examined for potential nostalgic trappings of fallacious unification, reconstitution, and homing.

The Ectopic Subject and the Exquisite Individuality

Out of the connection between spatialization of subjectivity and superposition, I examine *women migrants as the ectopic subject - the always already out of place identity* pulsing vitally somewhere not expected, not naturalized, not sought, not allowed, or not recognized. The ectopic subject is a challenge to the understanding of identity because it is there where you are looking and it is somewhere else— *as being-in-superposition it is always (not) here and (not) there*. That which we look for to identify in the ectopic subject is always in part going to avail and yield affirmation, but always also leave many other aspects unaccounted for. As being-in-superposition it is being-in-relations among multiple loci of consciousness as points among which we intuit and estimate our living, transforming ranges – our microecologies. Consciousness itself is a set of relationships between the mind and the world as the spheres of sensing, sensibility, and sensuality from which we derive and compile a sense of identity. The subjective ectopy as the complex individual out-of-placedness problematizes, furthermore, what, how, and why it means for one in relation to what, how, and why it means for another – thus subjective ectopy is an ethical question. The marginalized and mobile female positions are self-examining perspectives on collective consciousness, which should understand that the capacity to accommodate the marginal, the different, and the shifting is the measure of the flexibility, thus survival and success of a society.

It appears that subjectivity here emerges still via a structuring effect by being viewed as an arrangement of mobile positions. However, it is not by Hegelian structuring – by negation and splitting as well as overcoming and overpowering; but, rather, by multiplication and inclusiveness (at the risk of reproducing negation here). It appears as a mobile arrangement of multiplicity without totality; totalizing via synthesis would in fact be reductive – reducing a person to a story, a role, a character, a case, a profile, a belonging, a political affiliation and so on. It opens up further politics of multiple positionality and posing as and associating with others along the lines of multiple appearances in the world. A displaced, disoriented individual endowed with ingenuity by necessity acknowledges that all positions could be viable directions; all positions are potential directions to a way, a way out, a way toward, a way out of no way. *This kind of exquisite individuality is a delicate, difficult subject in continual seeking marked by fine discrimination.*

The subjective ectopy as the complex individual out-of-placedness opens up referential spaces for otherness and opens up socio-political spaces for another. Overidentification with a position leads to repeated performance of a persona – displacement, conversely, has the potential of expansion. Migrant subject unsettles such negotiations, and migrant female subject further complicates and problematizes any simplistic settlement, emplacement, and any assimilationist and/or repatriationist project.

Settling of Subject Positions in a Social Field and the New Collectivity from Within

Among the multiple loci of consciousness in superposition arises the question of how they relate to each other and how they are connected into and within a personhood. Beliefs and values organize them and hierarchize them. Beliefs and values are reinforced and confirmed by a shared social field within which we reside, to which we contribute and with which we interact, and which recognizes us as and interpellates us as subjects. By such calling upon us, the social field is reductive and summons us to a subject position, which is, in turn, recognized as a calling in terms of legality and legitimacy, private and public, and personal and professional expectation/function. The self, however, is and remains always in excess of its roles, functions, and classifications.

As a migrant traverses and a migrant woman most often trespasses multiple social fields, they have the capacity to open up internal multiplicity and expand the spaces among the loci of consciousness so as to open up a greater inquiry into the values of assumed cultural certainties. That is why migration as an expansion is experienced as deeply unsettling in numerous ways. Adherence to the overdetermined social field results in settling with comforts of and rationales for narrowly-defined belonging, but it also precludes other modes of connecting to otherness along plural lines of relating.

That is why even when we may not believe in everything a social field offers and/or enforces, as certain religions for example, we still want to hold on to the notion of culture with respect for the tradition, continuity, certainty and repetition of ritual that settle us, so that we get in return a confirmation of values that help organize us. When in migration we experience disorientation, the shifting of that which orients us locally and logically in geo-social locales (regulated by social codes) opens up the self and space activating differences within ourselves. The experience is unavoidably marked by anxiety even within benevolent circumstances. All this, of course, is possible to contemplate if our physical existence is not under direct threat. The migrant self could be experiencing trauma, suffering, terrifying uncertainty and anxiety, aimless roaming and loss, but the self thus experienced, seen, and felt is not fractured, fragmented, and evacuated but rather multiplied. It is a plenum capable of replenishing and ennobling not only herself but also all the geo-social locales which she occupies.

As an opening unto oneself, *superposition is not only a realization of the multiplicity within the self but also a gathering of one's positions into a collectivity from within*. However, opening of those multiplicities leads not only to an opening of the ways in which we experience the self as it appears in the world but also in the ways it is called to act in the world. Superposition is thus here developed into the idea of collectivizing from within as a means to multiple politico-poetic postures (relating to another's positions with empathy and in reciprocity) that lead to opening possibilities of multivalent relating to the self and to others.

Female Individualism and the Neoliberal Politics

With particular claims to diversified subjectivity of women migrants, we need to take into consideration, however, Gayatri Spivak's astute critique of female individualism and the dangers of locating and pinning it down. Addressing certain entrapping tendencies of the feminist criticism, she speaks of the "mesmerizing focus on the subject – constitution of the female individualist."^{vi} This paper aims to decentralize and unpin that subjectivity; it aims to interrupt such overdetermined focus on the condensed subjectivity. In relation to the contemporary socio-political developments, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff inquire: "Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?"^{vii} Female subject is showcased today as the favorite and ideal subject of neoliberalism and its ideology of empowerment, freedom, autonomy, and choice – of the particular feminist Bildung (as emancipatory narrative and representation; development trajectory and image). However, the questions of freedom and choice need to be rethought as presentment of potentially fallacious alternatives as in, for example, abortion and migration.

If female subject is the ideal subject of neoliberalism, then ethnic female subject appears to be one of its ideal projects – one that confirms the need for monitoring and civilizing other cultures and countries, where women's issues are used as a means and measure of judgment. Such political stance runs tremendous risks of championing women as it uses women's issues to evacuate other's politics while also hijacking and controlling women's actual political projects. Recognition of one's multiplicity, of one's internal differences turns superposition into an ethical question and leads to the recognition of the multiplicity of another allowing no fixity of position and no fixity of identity. It pitches one into uncertainties and reconsideration of how we can more inclusively relate to ourselves as well as to each other from our multiple spaces. While it may be preoccupying, it is also revitalizing. Moreover, recognition of one's reductive, interfering, but also participating role as an observer in turn augments transformative preoccupation with superposition.

Multiplicity and the New Community

Superposition as collectivizing from within becomes a necessity for the possibility of modern community. Recognition of the multiplicity of the self saves us from a reduced, thus diminished self but also from the reductive self who cannot anymore diminish others to a calling, an appearance, a position. Activating and engaging internal differences so as to relate to others along multiple lines of identification, alignment, and association, such subjective configuration re-creates and co-creates multiple ways of calling upon each other in mutual recognition.

Toward such recognition, a great impetus, energetic charge, and motivation has been coming from women who are roaming the globe. For the new, coming community being in superposition as collectivity from within is a necessity and a precondition emerging from an intimate and immanent transformation. Registering the already present social conditions as

well as the possibilities for the next stage of our personal and collective development, this paper conceives of a notion of subjectivity emerging from our increasingly multiple placedness in the world. As such, it is both a more faithful reflection of our internal and social realities and a more hopeful projection of the future of those realities in the making.

References

ⁱ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 42.

ⁱⁱ Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of my Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 42.

^{iv} Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 184.

^v Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 192.

^{vi} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of the Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 117.

^{vii} Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 7.