



# ‘Daughters of the East’ Encountering the World: A Reading of Bashabi Fraser’s Feminine Trans-self

Arpita Chakrabarti

Assistant Professor in English, Asansol Girls’ College, West Bengal, India  
[arpitachakrabarti100@gmail.com](mailto:arpitachakrabarti100@gmail.com)

Received: 11 Dec 2021; Received in revised form: 06 Feb 2022; Accepted: 15 Feb 2022; Available online: 24 Feb 2022  
©2022 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract**— This paper situates Bashabi Fraser, a British South Asian poet, within the larger domain of “Women in Literature”. I would argue that Bashabi Fraser, who is of Indian origin and whose current location is in Edinburgh, Scotland, is not just a mere diasporic writer. Her poetic oeuvre offers a unique lebenswelt of the “globizen” (global citizen). Bashabi describes herself as the ‘daughter of the East’ who dis-homes her nationalist anchorage to encounter the larger world and her poetic universe unfolds through this complex encounter between her ‘two worlds’, her home and the larger world. As a woman writer, she upholds the ideology of transnationality or the feminine trans-self that deflates the patriarchal concepts of bordering, control, occupation and regimentation. Rather than being border-restrictive, the linkages, interdependencies, connections, contradictions, and discontinuities of gender experiences in multiple contexts are highlighted in Bashabi Fraser’s writings.

**Keywords**— *bordering, interconnectedness, feminine, transnationality, trans-self.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

South Asian feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty had recommended implementing a transnational solidarity approach to combat the patriarchal structures, an approach that does not presume the existence of identical priorities or common identity but focuses on concrete interconnected and interrelated issues that can lend themselves to productive activism and alliance-building across borders (Mohanty 2003, 109). Literary representations by new generation diasporic South Asian women writers like Attia Hosain, Kamala Markandaya, Ravinder Randhawa, Meera Syal, Monica Ali, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed and Rosie Dastgir highlight and complicate the issues of race, ethnicity and gender in relation to the rhetoric of multiculturalism. These women writers do not strengthen the duality of local and global but rather they present a tension between them based on urban imaginaries. British South Asian women poets like Debjani Chatterjee and Bashabi Fraser question ‘what is meant by home’ in a global imaginary that is characterized by hybridity, fluidity and movement in the emerging transnational character of

culture. Their works offer a nuanced picture of the cross national and cross civilization fusion and friction and help understand a world in which cultural boundaries are permeable. These British South Asian women writers, particularly Bashabi Fraser in this case, highlight the challenges to the project of “denationalizing” and asserts a different notion of the “regional/transnational” from the feminist perspective. Fraser represents a rhizomic imaginary of conflictual past, shared present and possible future of interconnectedness and use the trope of the feminine trans-self to suggest an alternative discourse to patriarchal closures and boundaries.

## II. THE RIVERINE/ FEMININE FLOW OF LIFE

In her epic poem *From the Ganga to the Tay*, Bashabi ushers us into the credo of a shining, flowing liquid geography of the feminine, both rivers and the rain, which is very unlike the static geography of the land under the threat of colonial violence. The shine and light of mobility

forces the national to morph into the transnational and if the land typifies the nation, the feminine/riverine or the liquid geography of water posits the idea of the 'trans-national', of the beyond of the non-land-ic. In an article named *The Scottish Jutewallah*, Bashabi Fraser cites the example of the transnational Scot corresponding across national boundaries, while retaining fraternal links. As Stewart had remarked '[i]mperialism must be "deterritorialized"' (Stewart 1998, 194), the Scottish jutewallah re/-crossed boundaries of nation, stayed in touch with the 'homeland', benefited from the international network of trade in countries where fellow Scots had settled, and made the transition to a decolonized structure, while maintaining a regional identity in India through time. The association of the colonial encounter between the two countries had established a connection between the two rivers which lingered in the collective memory as social and cultural history of bygone days- memories of language, dress, cuisine and culture. The indigenous 'corchorus' (plant which is the source of jute) in the plains of the Ganga was 'gathered in bales/ of raw jute, heaping /ships waiting/ in your Bay/which would later/ weave their way from your port of Calcutta/ to the city /of Dundee/on my banks'(Fraser, 2009,32) to promote a thriving industry. The history of these two rivers therefore becomes the history in continuum- which embraces the past, flows into the present and leads into the future.

Tortured by the reminiscence of the Partition after Indian independence, the bracketed existence, where land was owned up and controlled- 'that ruptured/ all vision/ of a continuous dream'(Fraser, 2009,38), the Ganga laments the line drawn up 'on the mind map of men, / though my waters / refused to be divided by them'(Fraser, 2009,38). In contrast to this constriction, the Tay and the Ganga bring up examples of associations- Bangladeshi cuisine in the Scottish highways, reference to the great architect, Patrick Geddes who preserved Varanasi's beauty, or the Scottish engineers in their bungalows along the Hugli river, all speak of the continuous dialectics between fluidity and anchorage – 'this curious blend / marks my land/ emblematic / of civilization itself. (Fraser, 2009, 42). The 'truncated entity/ in the identity/ of two nations... which cut up their land / and their people / in a wrench that tore/ minds, but / could not succeed / in ripping my waters/ or carving boundaries / on my fluid freedom-' (Fraser, 2009,56) is the victory of the trans -versal feminine flow that symbolize our liberation from the encircled regimentations and fixed identities of patriarchy. The Ganga and the Tay flows with that 'certainty of continuity'(Fraser, 2009,69) to let (our) water's sacred truth/ seep into human consciousness/ as the source of

life'(Fraser, 2009, 69). This 'sacred truth' of mobility and fluidity of the transnational feminine consciousness finds expression in the 'borderlands' that disseminates rhythms of harmony. Brubaker suggested that there were three core elements as constitutive of the diasporic phenomenon. The first is dispersal in space; the second, orientation to a 'homeland'; and the third, boundary maintenance (Bultmann, 2009, p. 3). Unlike this suggestion, a new narrative of the transnational identity is created in Bashabi Fraser's experiences as a woman writer, experiences that transcends the diasporic characteristics of the sense of loss and exile and finds a home in the world. Bashabi Fraser's *trans-versal* situatedness "between her two worlds" of India and Britain, reminds us what Seni Seneviratne, British Sri Lankan poet wrote:

*People ask*

*Where do you come from?*

*I say:*

*From more places*

*Than you imagine ...*

*People ask*

*Which half of you is white?*

*I say:*

*There are no halves in me*

*Everything is whole*

*I am a myriad of mingling*

*Multicoloured stories*

*Whispering wisely down*

*Through centuries*

*People ask*

*Where do you belong?*

*I say:*

*In the World ...*

("People Ask", Seni Seneviratne, *Masala*, 38)

### III. THE NOMAD WOMAN

As a bi-national woman writer who divides her world between India and Scotland and carries both the world within her, Bashabi Fraser's poetry encompasses the experiences of a woman who live in cultural borderlands and spaces between cultures. Having spent her childhood in London, completing her secondary school education in the Himalayas and then coming to Edinburgh for research and ultimately homing in Edinburgh, she crosses and re-

crosses the borders between Britain and India with curiosity and interest. There is no sense of ever having left 'home', as there is a sense of homecoming in both journeys. Robert Alan Jamieson in his Introduction to *Tartan and Turban* confirms that Fraser's poetry 'celebrate difference while finding commonality. It reminds us that the links between Scotland and India, particularly Bengal, are complex and old, and that although there are many differences, 'we look at the same moon.' And that it maps another kind of country too, that of woman, as daughter, bride, mother, outsider, victim and so on''. As a transnational women writer, she 'carries my(her) two worlds with me(her)' Bashabi Fraser's poetry portray an ability to transverse both cultures and to translate, negotiate and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion. Her poetry maintains a dual frame of reference, a feeling of both here and there, of double belonging, as described by Golbert (2001) as double-consciousness that develops in maintaining and participating in transnational social fields and having a transnational notion of the self. This is a refusal of fixity often serving as a valuable resource for resisting repressive local or global situations. In her own words, 'My two nations have lived with me whenever I have travelled between them, as my research and writing, both academic and creative, combine and cover the socio-cultural historical links in books whose titles reflect my diasporic interests' – the titles include- *A Meeting of Two Minds: the Geddies-Tagore Correspondence*, *Rainbow World: Poems from Several Cultures*, *Tartan & Turban*, *From the Ganga to the Tay*, *Scots Beneath the Banyan Tree: Stories from Bengal* and *The Broon Scots*. In all of these, she explores the intermeshing of culture and identity, dislocation and relocation, otherness and belonging, memory and nostalgia, conflicts and freedoms. Her writings through comparative and multicultural perspective enables readers to probe and provoke analyses of 'home', 'sisterhood', 'community'-experiences fundamental to lead the way towards a feminism without borders, a feminism fully engaged with the realities of the transnational world. Her situatedness within a transnational space gives her a sense of how national and transnational processes of the oppression of the feminine overlap.

According to the poet, 'I have a dual existence, where the 'here' and 'there' merge and converge; at its best, it can be a prismatic luminosity of rainbow inclusivity and at its worst, it can be bafflingly disorienting. However, it is where I belong, a no-man's interstitial space which I have chosen as my own, a mindscape of immense creative potential and possibility. My in-between positioning gives me a certain advantage, an objectivity and even a weapon with which I can question, challenge, reflect on issues in

both my countries, without feeling the need to conform to the 'norm.' Her poetry, therefore, becomes a concurrent study of two cultures, nostalgia, memories for a long desired 'home'/'space' bereft of dissension. This new trope of literary imagination cannot any longer be understood in terms of the existing centre-periphery models'. This 'symbolic economy of the new global culture' is based on reciprocal rather than hierarchical relationships. Fraser's poetry exhibit an example of border-crossing feminist discourse that has the power to offer transformative options for disrupting oppression and advancing liberation in global and diverse cultural contexts.

Silvia Pellicer-Ortín in *Transitional Women in the Transnational Era: Female Voices through Art* (European Review, 2017) has shown how transnational and global mechanisms have affected identity and memory formation processes in various ways in women.. Bashabi Fraser's poetry in a similar manner can be viewed as an empowering tool for these women to acquire a voice as well as promote empathy for the modern global subject. In the sub-section *Daughters of the East* of the anthology *Tartan and Turban*, Fraser explores the contradictions embodied in the complex female identity as well as the possibilities to challenge the assumed versions of femaleness. By creating spaces where the public and the private, the individual and the collective, the personal and the historical can establish an interactive dialogue, Fraser creates resisting narratives that call attention to the subtle chauvinist mechanisms that subjugate women on a daily basis –

*My grandmother says*

*She will fast*

*And why? – I ask...*

*She fasts through many a weary day*

*And I have reasoned why*

*-Is it to chase the dark away*

*That rules her measured sky?*

(Fraser, *On a Moonless Night*, *Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004, 19)

The patriarchal structures that have traditionally oppressed and subjugated women find yet another expression in the western world and find new form of resistance. It focuses on the diverse experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the globe; they transcend nation-state boundaries and speak to a wide range of interacting forces that have an

impact on gendered relationships and experiences in a geopolitical context.

*In my village, I am the widow*

*I went into mourning ten years ago,*

*Black is my colour, interrupted by the white...*

*...my daughter-in-law said*

*I should colour my world in dress, scarf and shoes,*

*...So I switched off my neighbours*

*And relations from my memory*

*And for the moment became one of them.*

(Fraser, *The Village Widow, to Jane, Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004, 31)

In an attempt to encompass "border work" and communication across traditional global boundaries; which occur at global, regional, and local contexts; Bashabi's poems identify the feminine self as third-culture person who attempt to integrate multiple cultural identities (Horne & Arora 2013, 48) at the same time bear the 'strangeness' as a strength. Her poems communicate strangeness in the subtlest of ways -

*For me it held no semblance of reality*

*Till a spurt of nationalism forced on me its entity...*

*Till marriage cut off all experiments*

*And limited me to that one unchanging flame...*

- *For I disavowed it*

*Consciously, deliberately, till one day*

*A friend said, wear it as a birth-right*

*And so I did, and do though the man's away.*

(Fraser, *Bindi, Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004, 32)

Historians of women and of gender have long recognized that women are commonly represented as both the 'inviolable centre' (of the nation, the region, the community, the family) and as 'symbolic border guards', upholding and reaffirming the demarcation between that which they represent and the 'other'. But the crossing of the frontier holds out the promise of freedom and adventure, a chance to escape the constraints laid on one's identity and opportunities, thus creating a liberating 'trans' space for the woman. The molecules of the 'trans' generate a desiring field of unbracketing – of jubilant exodus, of a kinetic ontology of motion, of heaving with a

splurge of flux and a passionate desire for union. Fraser shares her legacy of the 'trans' identity with her daughter and continue to challenge how one thinks of identity. The new 'mestiza' consciousness, or a way of seeing the world grounded in existing at a crossroads and containing dualities, will pave the way for revolutionary change for coming generations.

*The tunes that I cannot sing*

*I now sing through you.*

(Fraser, *As I am Renewed Through You, Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004, 37)

And again,

*Her small firm breasts*

*Nestling hopes and certainties*

*Of bridging the distance*

*Between the new roots*

*And old loves in*

*The land where the sun rises*

*To set dreams aglow...*

*And my daughter*

*Unfurls her pretty petals*

*Wet with the dew of expectation*

*To combine her two worlds*

*In a freshly created pattern*

*Of movement and melody.*

(Fraser, *To My Daughter, Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004, 41)

Fraser's poem creates this poetic imagination of the 'trans' that celebrates the uncluttered sewage of living that knows no land-ic bondage or a national filiation. The transnational feminine consciousness creates many things, they unite, they coalesce, they liberate and they instill the revolutionary zeal to transform. Victory of the trans –versal feminine flow that symbolize our liberation from the encircled regimentations and fixed identities of patriarchy. This 'sacred truth' of mobility and fluidity of the transnational feminine consciousness finds expression in her poem.

*In me you will find*

*The Truth and the Word.*

*...I stand at the centre, resolute,*

*Unwilling to multiply or be divided*

*Except in your dreams of the ABSOLUTE.*

( Fraser, *I am the ABSOLUTE*, *Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004, 42)

The later poems in this section deal with the harrowing experiences of war, migration, partition in the psyche of the woman. The woman represents the world-consciousness where

*All over the world's white page*

*We create lines...*

*...Forever*

*Separate , guarding our territories*

*Like wary cats...*

*Like bison, tethered to custom*

*Gnawing the ground, snarling, to convey*

*This is my plot, don't you dare enter it*

*Though I am ready to invade yours.*

( Fraser,*Borders and Boundaries*,*Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban,2004, 45)

Both within nations or communities and between nations, women are used to embody the line or the boundary which signifies the identity of those who belong to the collectivity against the threat of external aggressors or other cultures. The symbolic importance of borders emerge as intriguing places in the construction of identity.

The feminine consciousness with its idea of the 'trans-national', of the beyond of the non-land-ic where a woman is portrayed '*born to walk free/ to traverse her expanse/ to thrive in liberty.. of plunging the ocean or dashed(ing) through the green meadows*' shine in the light of mobility which is ruptured by static geography of the land under the threat of imperialistic violence.

*It was my body that they*

*Riddled with no trace of sorrow*

*Chopping and scattering it*

*With no thoughts of tomorrow.*

(Fraser,*Shadow Lines*, *Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban,2004, 51)

This is perhaps the ultimate experience of the feminine trans-self who identifies herself with the natural, free flowing unregimented existence battling and struggling against the overtures of patriarchal demarcations.

*I am the daughter of the earth...*

*And nurtured great hopes*

*Of completing my journey*

*Where it had begun...*

*But intangible shadow lines*

*Criss-crossed my path*

*And obstacles obdurate*

*Set aflame wrath...*

(Fraser,*Shadow Lines*, *Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004,51)

The victory of the feminine trans- self is in finding a new narrative that challenges the shadow lines –

*This land is mine*

*For I was born here.*

*This land is yours*

*For you have*

*Made it home.*

( Fraser,*This Land of Mine*,*Daughters of the East*, Tartan and Turban, 2004,49)

In one of her poems, Fraser celebrates her adopted homeland-

*Beating down the bracken beneath our feet*

*We tore glossy branches of holly.*

( Fraser, *Trekking in the Scottish Highlands*, With Best Wishes from Edinburgh, 2001,88)

At the same time, the other home she left behind is never far from her thoughts and she keeps returning to it-

*You might think that I have left / it all behind*

( *To Ma and Dad ('Baba')*,With Best Wishes from Edinburgh, 2001,82)

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Bashabi Fraser's writings and her life as well, subvert patriarchal dominations and enunciates a 'trans-versal space', an existence in-between the two countries she resides, her homeland and her hostland. While taking a detour of this globizen identity in Bashabi's poems from the perspective of women who on one hand voices the trauma of displacement but on the other elucidates as Saskia Sassen opines, 'a kind of mutual interaction with attempts to understand global structures, national politics and international economics.' (Vertovec 2009, 104). we come across a nomad-self which is a speculative matrix of envisioning a Deleuzo Guattarian approach to the 'trans', locating it into the plane of immanent possibility, in which

the virtual will-to-become is actualized through intense molecular desiring processes. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987,137 )

In that way, the *trans-verse*, traverses all systemic structures of social technologies, or organizing machines, postulating boundaries, the 'inert wheels', fixed identities, etc. To *trans-versalize* is to inaugurate literature as a Deleuzian 'desiring machine' that denotes a pure time-to-come, suspended now in the womb of time, slowly unleashing its immanent 'line of flight', imagining the impossible possible, or the compossible, desiring for semantic and syntactic fluidity, envisaging a poetry without solid words, like the Deleuzian 'body without organs' - undifferentiated poetic incorporeality, forming a single noetic plenum – interfused, confluence-ial, a transfused horizon where each retains its singularity in the 'World Republic of Letters' (Cassanova,2004). This is, therefore, a will-to-manifestoise-the-flow, or a kind of will-to-ceaseless-becoming of multiplicities, of interconnected forces, something that admits no stable ground but only of dynamic quanta and therefore, to be understood only in terms of difference rather than bordered identity. (Bogue 1989, 65). In this creative *line of flight*, words liquify the lands, fashion a driftology of grounds, dismantling all forms of 'Oedipalisation' (Bogue 1989,194-196) or of 'slicing of the waters of life', of sovereign control or representational arborescence.

Her poems therefore reveal new spaces and patterns in the quest for social justice, and also seize opportunities to build sustainable alliances from the transnational feminist perspective that is interested in toppling the same enemies.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Anzaldua, Gloria.(1987). *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books.
- [2] Bachelard, Gaston.(1983).*Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, (Bachelard Translation Series), Pegasus Foundation,
- [3] Butalia, Urvashi, Ritu Menon eds. (1993). *In Other Words: New Writing by Indian Women*, The Women's Press Ltd.
- [4] Bogue,Ronald. (1989). *Deleuze and Guattari*, Routledge.
- [5] Cassanova,Pascale. (2004). *The World Republic of Letters* , Harvard University Press.
- [6] Deleuze, Giles and Felix Guattari. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press.
- [7] Fraser,Bashabi. ( 2017). *The Homing Bird*, Indigo Dreams Pub.,UK.
- [8] Fraser, Bashabi. (2004). *Tartan and Turban*, Luath Press,UK .
- [9] Fraser,Bashabi. (2009). *From the Ganga to the Tay*, Luath Press, UK.
- [10] Fraser,Bashabi.(2001). *With Best Wishes From Edinburgh*, Writers' Workshop. Calcutta.
- [11] Gordon T Stewart. (1998). *Jute and Empire*,Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press.
- [12] Horne, S. G., & Arora, K. S. K. (2013). "Feminist multicultural counseling psychology in transnational contexts" in C. Z. Enns & E. N. Williams (Eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Multicultural Counseling Psychology*, Oxford University Press.
- [13] Mohanty, C.T. (2003). *Feminism Without Borders and Decolonising Theory, Practising Solidarity*, Duke University Press.
- [14] Steven Vertovec. (2009). *Transnationalism*, Routledge.
- [15] Seneviratne,Seni. (2005). *Masala: Poems from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*, edited by Debjani Chatterjee, Macmillan Children's Books.
- [16] Tanja Bultmann, Andrew Hinson and Graeme Morton. (2009). *Ties of Blood, Kin and Country:Scottish Associational Culture in the Diaspora* , Guelph: Centre for Scottish Studies.