Chapter 5

Intimacy, Transparency and the Structures of Morality in the New Spaces of Consumption

The young woman two tables away had her bare foot on the young man’s lap as he idly stroked her toes and caressed her payal clad ankle, his head bent towards her intently, their attention apparently completely on each other.

Another day, another coffee-shop, another heterosexual couple are deeply engrossed in each other. They sit close to each other, one hand each linked on the table, the other hand each not visible, sharing a single cup of cappuccino, their whispered conversation punctuated by laughter and giggles.

In a third moment, two women at the adjoining table are deep in conversation, one gesticulating expansively as the other listened. I eavesdropped shamelessly as they discussed politics, their bosses and a common friend’s disastrous love-life. Their conversation suggested that they were close friends but they could well have been lovers.

5.1 Introduction

As part of a research exercise that was conducted several times in different groups and contexts, participants were asked to locate a variety of people (women and men of different ages) in a given neighbourhood at dusk. The neighbourhood had one space called a ‘tea shop’. Whether participants located women in this ‘tea-shop’ often depended on what kind of ‘shop’ they imagined it to be. Those who imagined it to be a road-side ‘cutting-chai’ stall never located women inside it; those who perceived it to be an Irani café or an Udipi restaurant

98 Exercise designed by Shilpa Ranade as part of research and pedagogic initiatives on the Gender and Space project.
conditionally located some women inside it; but an over-whelming number of those who imagined this to be an up-market coffee-shop of the ilk of a Barista or a Café Coffee Day placed women inside it.

The women they imagined of course were upper-middle class women who possess as discussed earlier, a certain cultural capital that comes from among other things education. These are the women whose virtue the moral police seek to protect and whom the nation wants to showcase as “modern but Indian”. Coffee-shops are among the new spaces of consumption that create the illusion of being in public space, but a ‘public’ space that is rendered sanitised and safe because of the subtle structures of exclusion that operate. The price structure in these spaces render them exclusive and accessible only to those who can “afford them”. As suggested earlier these people who can “afford them” are among those considered to ‘belong’ to the city. I would like to further suggest that these people then constitute for each other unthreatening others and form a kind of class-community within which certain kinds of intimacies are permissible. These are spaces whose respectability is unquestionable, partly because of the assumed class of their patrons, so that they become spaces that these chosen women might inhabit without raising suspicious eyebrows. So much so that these women might also conduct romances in these brightly lit unthreatening spaces without inordinate fear of loss of reputation – most of the time anyway. This chapter will explore the construction of a particular kind of heterosexual intimacy in these post-globalisation spaces of consumption.

Coffee shops, specifically Baristas and Café Coffee Days, have been studied across the city in order to understand how class offers women a particular kind of circumscribed access from where they might engage public space vicariously. These have sprung up since the mid 1990s in many cities in India. The locations of the cafés I studied were: Café Coffee Day on Carter Road, Bandra, Chowpatty and near CST stations, Barista at Chembur, Shivaji Park and near CST station. These coffee-shops are also different from the Irani cafes and the Udipi restaurants – the other spaces where people might seek to have coffee.
One also finds couples in Irani restaurants and Cafes, often run by Muslims or Parsis of Iranian ancestry – often located at street corners, spaces that, I was told, were seen as unlucky for Hindu business people. Couples might be found here drinking tea and cakes but it’s a space that open to the street usually and often populated by older men passing the time of the way.

Udipi cafes selling mostly south Indian food are also often havens for their affordable food but the high traffic of customers in most of these means that nobody can sit for long. They also tend to be seen as family rather than couple spaces so certainly it would be difficult to be intimate here.

In a city like Mumbai where the private home is often a space of crowding and lack of privacy, the public offers an anonymous sanctuary. One often sees couples carving out a private spaces for themselves - sitting along Marine Drive or Bandra Bandstand or wherever in parks and along promenades. As discussed at length in Chapter Three, such public displays of affection have been frowned upon and often come in for severe sanctions.

Interestingly, for now at least coffee-shops appear to be exempt from this kind of surveillance. The central question I address in this chapter is what makes it acceptable to neck in a coffee-shop when even holding hands maybe frowned upon in some parks? What are the structures that render the couples invisible to the censuring gaze?

Coffee advertising in India has unvaryingly invoked a kind of sophistication, savoir faire and often an easy intimacy which bespeaks cultural capital excluding those who do not belong. The smell of coffee is the smell of foreign airport lounges and twenty-four hour coffee shops in five-star hotels and more recently of upscale bookshops.

Only some of the people on the promenades and parks can afford to be in the coffee-shop, so clearly those in the coffee-shops already are located in a
particular class context. There is a sense that couples are not being watched in coffee-shops or perhaps more significantly the gaze of those sharing the space is coded as being part of the new morality structures. This is a morality that allows for young women to spend intimate hours with young men without jeopardizing their reputations as respectable women from good families. This is the new morality that the lower classes might misread. It is the morality of private bedrooms in 2 BHKs, a morality afforded, as I will argue by the construction of coffee-shops as a particular kind of classes space. Specific boundaries frame women’s and therefore the couples presence in these spaces as “normal” and respectable. What are also being played out are upper-middle class gendered and classed identities. The coffee-shop is also a space where a class is being constituted – not just an economic class but also a cultural class.

The coffee-shop then is framed within a notion of ‘people like us’ that is, people around whom we can “be ourselves”. The notion of being in a coffee-shop means being among people of the same class – here a look is likely to be read as flirtatious rather than harassing. The ambiguous lines between the private and the public in the coffee shop allow for a particular construction of intimacy. In conversations with women users of coffee shops, I asked them what distinguished the coffee shop as a space to sit in for them? One woman said, “one only sees the educated crowd and never sees local people. Moreover, only educated people enjoy such spaces”. When I asked what she meant by “local” people, she hesitated and then said, “you know the riff-raff”. Her assumption that only “educated” people enjoy these spaces suggests also the fallacious assumption that the lower classes are somehow differently social. Another woman said, “A rickshaw driver would not be found there - it is also a matter of affordability”. A third woman articulated what she saw as coffee-shops occupying a different moral universe, “Coffee-shops are more comfortable. The difference again lies in the crowd. In Udipis, aunties might stare at you if you are smoking”. What she does not mention is that smoking in not allowed inside the coffee-shops but only in the seating space outside. In fact smoking is no longer allowed in any public spaces including all restaurants. Another woman articulated the class lines that
demarcate what gets seen as a welcome or unwelcome look, “Coffee-shops are more comfortable as one is not watched in a dirty way”.

In the new global spaces of consumption, there are also new norms in relation to sexuality where the heterosexual couple is at the centre of all consumer fantasies. In the new spaces of consumption a different morality operates that is removed from the dress codes of colleges and the anti-romance tirades of public ‘public’ spaces. As long as they dress class-appropriately, consume some coffee and look like they belong the presence of couples and even their displays of affection are not looked on in askance but in fact constitute part of the message these spaces are striving to convey: that these are global spaces with global rules where one can leave behind the city and its parochial cultural contexts.

5.2 The Construction of Intimacy: A Lot can Happen over Coffee

In fact the coffee-shops specifically strive to convey a sense of intimacy in their invitation. One coffee-shop suggests this rather explicitly in their tag line which reads: ‘A Lot Can Happen Over Coffee’.

All these coffee shops have a predominantly young clientele, and the space of the café is designed with a similar texture. The coffee-shops are a chain and each shop looks exactly the same in different locations. There are newspapers, games and in the Baristas usually a guitar and in the Café Coffee Day’s a newsletter called Café Beat, which discusses distinctly youthful concerns.

The space that is created is expressly welcoming to young people with disposable incomes, is also linked to what I would call an aura of heterosexuality to the space. The space actively constructs itself as one where young heterosexual couples may spend time. The service staff also tends to be young, usually in their early 20s. Conversations with them reveal that they have been instructed to let people sit as long as they like, as this is seen to be an important selling point of the space.
Many coffee shops in the city are dominated by young heterosexual couples. While some couples do consciously choose the more secluded tables at the edges; many appear unconcerned about public demonstrations of affection. The couples sit there, eat, drink, sometimes argue or have serious conversations. The space is clearly a private space where they are concerned. There is an aura of privacy that envelopes them – in their performance they seem genuinely unaware of the presence of others. They may sit at the edges and at less visible tables but the primary desire appears to be for privacy rather than to hide as such.

In conversation, one young woman told me that she and her boyfriend often go to a Barista to sit as here they are not afraid of being hauled up. What is interesting however, is that just as couples go to parks and promenades far from where they live to avoid being seen by people who know them, so also this young woman mentioned that the Barista she and her boyfriend frequent is located far from their homes. What is interesting here is what appears to be a certain level of lack of concern about the more ‘anonymous’ gaze but this does not preclude the continuing anxieties about being seen by those who ‘know’ them.

At the Chembur Barista, one often sees couples who are obviously married with the women sporting sindhoor, the Punjabi chooda and glittering mangalsutras. They seem to be young – in the mid-twenties usually – and the women are often dressed in fairly dressy churidar-kurtas – the kind that you might expect newly-wed women to wear in the world of soap operas. At the Carter road Café Coffee Day, one sees college couples who are obviously unmarried. The women tend to be uniformly thin, but this is not necessarily true of the men some of whom are quite rounded. The couples sit there and eat and drink, probably snatching some private time. They sometimes argue and often seem to have serious conversations. The space is clearly a private space where they are concerned.

One also finds couples with babies in carriers at the Chembur Barista especially late at night. I managed to get into conversation with one such couple who laughingly told me that they come to the Barista to fight as they live in a joint family where there are too many people and they would rather not air their differences in ‘public’. I found this choice of words fascinating. Here the notion
of the public is inverted where the family, the ostensible location of privacy is designated the ‘public’ and a space such as a coffee-shop which though privately owned is located in the public domain, becomes ‘private’. This once again buttresses my sense that people are able to carve out for themselves bubbles of privacy. They attempt to do this in parks and promenades and if they can afford it they do so in the relatively secluded (and private) space of the coffee-shop. Once again the anonymous gaze is rendered invisible. It is rendered invisible because in this space certain kinds of performances are seen as ‘belonging’ to this space.

The coffee-shop is a space where the intimacy of heterosexuality is performed repetitively by different bodies, at different times. As they sit there the young men will touch the woman’s face or run his hands through her hair, they feed each other and sit close holding hands. They may kiss or even sit so close as to be almost sitting in each other’s laps. As a researcher observing couples in the coffee-shops one feels rather like the voyeurs I encountered in the parks. As an aside it is worth recounting that in our ethnographic observations in parks, I encountered not just couples seeking privacy but another kind of animal, the young men who followed couples around and watched them. As an observer one felt much like this species. To rid oneself of this feeling one invented lives and stories for the protagonists of ones notes. This couple looked really like their family disapproved. Another couple was too clandestine for words.

My fictional assumptions notwithstanding, in some ways the identity of most of these coffee-patrons were clear. Without wanting to erase the complexity of individual lives and experiences, it is possible to suggest that these couples reflect the global’s city’s desirable new modernity – where romance is permissible within limits. They are anonymous in the coffee-shop as individuals but hyper visible as members of a particular class. This apparent contradiction the invisibility and visibility of the people acts in tandem with the kind of intimacy afforded by the space. An intimacy that relies not on dim lighting but its opposite, bright lighting and glass windows that demonstrate that nobody has anything to hide in a coffee-shop.
5.4 The Design of Coffee-shops and the Construction of Public Intimacy

The coffee shop is about the day, and does not invoke the dangers or the restrictions that the night does. Even if one goes there at night, the space is well lit unlike a bar or lounge. The night invokes and conjures up a sense of intimacy that is sexual – the coffee shop ironically does not even as it permits various kinds of intimacy including the sexual. Perhaps the coffee-shops allows this intimacy particularly because it seems to preclude it. The bright lighting invokes the respectability of the day (even at night, which contrasts with discos which are dark even during afternoon jam sessions) which combined with the innocuousness of coffee (relative to alcohol) creates a space that presents itself as an unthreatening.

There is an innocuousness to coffee quite different from the perceived dangers of alcohol. The innocence and implied class of coffee is reassuring both to parents and to young women themselves. Coffee shops are respectable then in a way that bars or lounges might not be. The expansive use of glass in the design of these spaces contributes to this sense of comfort.

The glass creates the illusion of public – even as the lighting inside creates the sense of both transparency and intimacy. The glass creates not just the illusion of access and the seduction of display, it also offers up the assumption of transparency. The illusion that whatever happens inside is an open book. It generates a particular kind of consumer culture – of intimacy that is “seen”. I would like to suggest that this “seen-ness” acts not to question contemporary moral codes but rather to reinforce them.

What are the shifts created by this seen-ness? In one sense coffee-shops are not hypersexual because the décor and lighting render them open, transparent, inviting. They blur a boundary between public and private simply because they appear accessible to the outside. One of the main reasons for this is the copious use of glass in the design of these spaces. The use of glass as the defining feature renders the space of the coffee-shop ironically, simultaneously both, public enough and private enough to be respectable. They are public in that, they are open to the view of the street. They are separate in that they are not only, not
actually on the street but are also class restricted and protected by being coded as new consumption spaces.

Through umpteen cups of latte and many voyeuristic hours of eavesdropping one witnessed one scene over and again. That of the glass doors and walls being spitted and polished to gleaming perfection. Talking to the cleaner I was told that he had been instructed to ensure that no fingerprints appeared on the glass.

The glass then must remain ever pristine maintaining its balancing act providing the illusion of both openness and privacy. The glass offers access even as it restricts it. The glass acts as a barrier mediating inclusion and exclusion and also simultaneously creates the demonstration effect of display creating in those on the outside the desire to be inside. Here glass is the barrier that defines class.

If iron was the important representation of modernity, might one see glass as the reflector of post-modernity. Is glass the quintessential material of post-modernity with its ability to reflect whatever the individual wishes?

For Walter Benjamin, the single phenomenon most emblematic of Parisian modernity were the Arcades – the covered passages under elevated iron and glass ceilings, along which were some of the most elegant shops in Paris. It is important to note that these innovative buildings were dependant on iron, the material that played a significant role in the many inventions of the Industrial revolution. Commenting on Benjamin, Margaret Cohen (2004) writes: Displaying the commodity as pure fetish, completely severed from its links to production and use, the arcades offered a privileged place to contemplate the commodity’s powerful fascination, the pleasure and desire it inspired.

Marianne Conroy (1998) suggests that as much as the arcade symbolized modernity for Walter Benjamin, the shopping mall seems to represent to many critics the dystopic elements of the condition of post-modernity linked to the limited pleasures of consumption. She argues that the mall becomes an important site reflecting post-modern subjectivity.
I am interested in examining the ways in which the design of these spaces – coffee shops and malls reflect the axes of inclusion and exclusion into them. In this section I focus particularly on the gleaming glass windows that are the hallmark of many malls and coffee-shops in Mumbai and other cities. The glass acts as a barrier mediating inclusion and exclusion and also simultaneously creates the demonstration effect of display creating in those on the outside the desire to be inside.\(^9^9\) Here glass is the barrier that defines class. Some malls at one point used to demand to see proof of this in the form of a credit card or mobile phone before people were allowed to enter.\(^10^0\)

In an earlier chapter, I suggested that visible symbols of marriage function as veils defining women as unavailable. Here, I would like to suggest the possibility that glass in these contexts becomes an allegory for a veil, which restricts the gaze inside the new spaces of consumption to those who are admitted inside.\(^10^1\) In one sense given that glass is a material that invites rather than obstructs the gaze this may sound contradictory. However, if one were to examine the exteriors of

\(^9^9\) In another vein, the glass and also the mirrors add to the multiplication of images and colours of the space, goods and people, creating a sense of expansion (Fiske et al in Jon Goss 1993). The glass also acts to focus all attention inwards. Goss (1993) argues that even in glass house malls one can rarely look out – except at the sky and within the mall one is unaware of the time of the year or the location (p.32). Jackson (1996) points out that in the US completely enclosed malls for their capacity to control the climate so that any day was ‘perfect shopping day’ came to be seen as superior to any open shopping.

\(^10^0\) Despite its pretence of being public and its invitation to people to come become part of a specific public, the malls are a private space that allow owners to restrict entry.

\(^10^1\) At this point a slightly unrelated but nonetheless relevant questions occurs to me. Why is it that glass modern but the burkha pre-modern? Unlike in Islamic societies where the veil raises contentious discussions around questions of modernity, in the Indian context the veil is seen to be unequivocally pre-modern and conservative. Within the public the presence of the public veil, the glass indicates a safety measure that allows women access to these new spaces of consumption unhampered by what might be seen as sexual harassment allowing the kind of privacy that enhances consumption. The veiled woman however, is seen to disrupt the creation of the public modern by bringing the uncomfortably private into the public. The actual veil is a problem in a way that glass is not. Or even in a way that marriage symbols are not – since the larger public space is constructed simultaneously as Hindu and modern where one does not automatically exclude the other. In Islamic worlds the veil is seen to allow access to the outside world (Mona Abaza 2001, Nilufer Gole 1996, Christopher Houston 2001, Sameera Khan 2007). In some ways one might see glass as performing the same function in that it allows women to be in the ‘public’ in particular ways that permit visibility without sacrificing respectability. In this sense the private and the public are no longer clearly distinct but embedded within one another in the same space in ways that create a kind of discomfort which necessitates the placing of various barriers that clarify these confusions of private and public.
the malls particularly, the glass focuses on products being sold in the window displays and though it is also possible to view activities inside in many cases, the glass nonetheless acts as an inhibiting presence especially to the lower class gaze.

Sometimes the inhibiting presence of the glass barrier extends to the space immediately outside it as well. In many of these coffee shops (like the Barista near Sterling cinema or the Café Coffee Day on Carter road) the seating spills outside the glass barrier. However, though one sees poor people and sometimes beggars on the footpaths outside these spaces there is an invisible line that demarcates these glassy class-defined spaces that they do not breach.

The women I spoke to implicitly and explicitly acknowledged this in their comments. One said, “I like the glass as one can see the people outside but at the same time I am not bothered by people from outside who can see me.” Another woman corroborated, “I prefer a glass enclosure to walls. Although, I am in a coffee-shop, I know what is happening outside. I don’t feel secluded”. And a third, “The glass enclosure makes me feel visible to the outside world, I can see what is happening, what the weather is like; you can see people and don’t feel isolated or lonely”. And yet again, “I like the glass as the place feels more open”. And once again, “The glass makes the area look more spacious and although one can see outside, one is not directly exposed”.

Glass then, for middle-class women, plays the role of both barrier and guarantor of safety in relation to coffee shops: a barrier against the unwanted intrusion of the outside gaze but also the apparent safety of transparency. Observing women, I found that women on their own chose to sit in very specific places: usually at the edges of the shop facing the street with their back to the wall. Women often instinctively protect their backs and locate themselves where they can see people approaching them. This is interesting given that all the women I interviewed unanimously said that they do not feel the threat of harassment inside coffee shops though of course “sometimes people stare inside as well”. Women articulate that the glass makes them feel a sense of ‘openness’ as they can see what’s happening outside but still be separated from it. The Gleaming Glass windows then convey messages of exclusiveness that are gendered and classed.
In this sense the private and the public are no longer clearly distinct but embedded within one another in the same space in ways that create a kind of discomfort which necessitates the placing of various barriers that clarify these confusions of private and public.\textsuperscript{102}

5.5 The Limitations of the New Spaces of Consumption

The intimacy created is not only heterosexual. Women come with each other too – the feminised space of the coffee shop where confidences can be exchanged and sexual transgressions can be discussed. Women come on their own too and sit there working or talking on their cell phones. Just looking around continues to not be an option for most women. As one woman explained, “I would feel really odd to sit there doing nothing. But if I carry some work or my laptop with me, I can enjoy my coffee without feeling uncomfortable”. These spaces allow them to be in the ‘public’ in particular ways that permit visibility without compromising respectability.

This place to hang out however, comes with a price tag attached and one is not merely referring to the cost of the coffee. The private and the public are no longer clearly distinct but embedded within one another in the same space creating a potential ambiguity and therefore the need for women to continuously demonstrate their respectability.

The fact that women’s access even to such places of new consumption is fragile is demonstrated by an incident in an up-market neighbourhood of Mumbai. In May 2006, the local police in Lokhandwala in Andheri West alleged that they had received complaints that women sex-workers were fixing up clients in the open seating spaces outside some popular neighbourhood coffee shops. As a result, the police prohibited the coffee shops from serving customers in the outer open area outside their restaurants. The connotation was clear: any woman sitting

\textsuperscript{102} This is clearly visible for instance, in the context of night clubs in the distinction of women in the roles of consumers and performers. Women as consumers in night clubs are welcomed into the new spaces of consumption but dancers in the down-market bars have been barred from dancing.
in these spaces could be perceived as soliciting. This accusation was met with outrage, but nonetheless many women stopped sitting out.\textsuperscript{103} Even in these spaces then, women have to carefully monitor their own movements and demeanour.

The Lokhandwala incident clearly suggests that only one kind of heterosexuality is acceptable, that organised around middle class monogamous notions of love and romance. Every couple in every coffee-shop may not reflect this “ideal”. However, the presence of couples underscores this ideal- the notion of privatised public hetero sexual one-on-one romance that enticingly endorses rather than threatens the formation of a class’s identity and its visions of itself.

As recent incidents have shown, despite the circumscribed nature of this fun, these spaces of consumption are also being increasingly threatened by right-wing fundamentalists breathing fire and brimstone at ‘Indian’ (middle class) women’s increasingly \textit{western} ways. The incident in Mangalore in January discussed in some detail chapter two is a case in point.

There is apparent contradiction in the ways in which women’s presence in the new spaces of consumption plays out. For instance, in discotheques and up-market bars, where women are actively desired demonstrated by among other things the fact that many discotheques and pubs will permit single women or all women groups but will not do the same for men on their own. On specified days of the week women are allowed in without the cover charge. The logic at work here is one of legitimacy - the presence of women, provides the space with a certain aura. ‘Good’ women in the context of the public are a sign of both modernity and a marker of the ‘safety quotient’ of the said space. Inside these spaces, the assumption is that women are ‘safe’ in a similar tenuous and ambiguous way that they are within their homes - that is safe from the unwanted attentions of \textit{outside} men.

However, despite such desirability, it is important to point out that the \textit{reputational location} of women even in these new spaces of consumption is not free from ambiguity and the possibility of threat. In August 2004, a colleague

\textsuperscript{103} [DNA, May 31, 2006 and June 2006]
was at the Provogue Lounge, a bar in the High Street Phoenix mall, which is a clothes shop by day and a bar at night, when it was raided by the police for staying open after the regulated closing time. My colleague, a young woman in her early twenties, narrates that all customers were lined up and their names taken, even as lights and air-conditioning in the bar were switched off. She avers that the police constables were rude and aggressive with the women in a way that they were not with the men. The underlying feeling that communicated itself to my colleague was that as women they had no business to be in a bar late at night. There may also be a subtle class dimension to this aggression, in that lower-middle class men like the constables in an everyday sense may often find themselves at a disadvantage when dealing with upper or even upper-middle class professional women. The situation of the night and the vulnerability created by the raid allowed the police an upper hand, the kind of upper hand they could not lay claim to with upper class men. This space however, problematic it may be in itself, is also not entirely unthreatened.

Chennai, for instance, has seen the rise of a debate around concerns of couples kissing on dance floors in a discotheque and of women drinking at a fashion show. This has led to a discussion on the purity of Tamil culture and the role of women within it. This is interesting given that these are once again the spaces marked as transnational where ‘modernity’ is constructed and demonstrated.\(^{104}\)

These incidents are interesting because they bring up not just gender contradictions but challenges a class that has become used to being privileged in the consumer market. It also highlights the fact that however, co-opted we might see these spaces to be they are not unthreatened spaces.

It is important at this point to reiterate that new spaces of consumption like coffee-shops and malls are not public ‘public’ spaces, but privatised spaces that masquerade as public spaces. Limited access to private-public spaces creates a veneer of access for women pre-empting any substantive critique of the lack of actual access to public-public space. While the presence of women in these spaces might give individual women an opportunity to hang out, it does not in

any significant way change the limited nature of women’s access to public space nor does it adequately challenge the dominant idea that women’s proper place is in the private.

Despite their desirability in these spaces, women only have conditional access, not a claim to public space. Even middle class women who conform to normative ideas of respectability are at best invited into the ‘privatised’ public as consumers, but do not have the right to public space. Privilege, then, does not bestow on even limited numbers of women unlimited access even to limited spaces. In global Mumbai, even the most desirable urban female subject is unable to engage the city on her own terms.

Despite the privilege that accompanies these spaces, women still feel compelled to strategise to produce respectability. These exclusive spaces of consumption presented as haven of safety for women do not preclude the operation of the politics of morality and exclusion but are indeed reflective of them and structurally rooted in them.

Conditional consumer citizenship and the placing of gender as an important constitutive element of localities, in this sense then has served not to offer women, even middle class, more access to public space but rather created fissures been the different groups denied access to public space, in the process allowing the Supreme court to rule that real public spaces in the city are not needed at all. This then sidelines the need for the city to provide public spaces that cater to the needs of all citizens.

For middle class women these spaces do not offer unmitigated access, they come with a price tag attached. This price is extracted in the form of the demand to retain the structures of both femininity and middle-class respectability. In the final analysis then even privilege does not bestow on women unlimited access even to limited spaces.
5.6 Some Concluding Notes: The Global Coffee-shop

If Michel de Certeau critiques the view from above, then the space of coffee-shops make a good case for a critique of the micro inward looking view of the city. The coffee-shop only appears to subvert the boundaries that restrict women’s access to public space. If there might have been the possibility for some subversion in the performance of various forms of intimacy this is overturned by the fact that the coffee-shop morphs into a bubble of privacy. Others in the space are erased under the guise of belonging to the same class and the notion of anonymous urban life. The coffee-shop unlike the neighbourhood Irani café does not facilitate gossip or build relationships between strangers. On the contrary what it promises is that if one so chooses strangers will remain strangers and not only that, they are also always “people like us” and therefore constitute unthreatening others.

The coffee-shop with its first-world smells, its sanitised décor and its gleaming glass windows facilitates what I would like to call a trans-national dislocation of space – that is, this space could be anywhere in the world which lifts it from its socio-cultural familial context. It loses its sense of place and becomes a space – a space that is removed from the codes of conduct demanded by particular places.

The cosy intimacy of these interiors suggests that one need not venture into the bustle of the street but might have access from the secluded airconditioned confines of the coffee-shop. This negates the possibility of a dialogue on public pleasure. In fact it not just negates it – it devalues it – for real romance it suggests happens here in spaces that are global, that transport you to other worlds, allowing you to transcend the complex realities of your own city.

Coffee shops afford those of a certain class, heterosexual couples but also same sex couples and women in general access to the possibility of intimate engagement in the privatised public. Yet the presence of these spaces actually reinforces the undesirability of intimacy in public by giving a small privileged segment the illusion of access to public space.
The coffee-shop, however, delightful it might be should not lull us into a false sense of bourgeois access or to negate the need for public spaces that are friendly towards different expressions of intimacy, pleasure and joy. In Mumbai today in defiance of all moral policing couples continue to occupy parks and promenades though their claim to these spaces is both tenuous and contested.

The claiming of public pleasure and intimacy has the capacity to challenge class based claims to public space, to question the artificial and arbitrary drawing of public-private boundaries and most importantly undermine a conditional access that is based in repetitive performances of respectability.