Chapter 2

Reflections on Some Relevant Scholarly Debates

In this chapter I engage with some of the debates that are relevant to the forthcoming chapters. This is not a traditional literature review and as such is far from comprehensive. It is more in the nature of laying out some of the debates and ideas that the thesis has attempted to engage with.

2.1 Reflections Some Debates on Sexual Modernity in India

Questions around sexuality have been raised in a variety of contexts in modern India and clearly predate feminist concern. For a large part of this period what was at stake were not women's rights to their bodies but elaborate codes of honour (national, caste based, community based, religious) that were inscribed on the bodies of women. However, in the last three decades feminist concerns have played an important role in addressing sexuality.

Women’s sexuality has long been the ground on which debates regarding tradition and modernity are played out. In colonial contexts for instance, the women question was central both to the British justification of colonialism as the civilizing mission and to Indian arguments asserting variously their golden past and their acceptance of scientific modernity. As Partha Chatterjee (1989) has famously argued, the nationalist resolution of the contradictions posed by these assertions were predicated on the separation of the material and spiritual worlds. On the acceptance of western science, technology, rational forms of economic organisation and modern methods of statecraft on the one hand but the preservation of the inner core the spiritual domain where, the east, and therefore India was superior. This had important implications for ‘the woman question’ as ‘the home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing
this quality’ (p.243). Chatterjee argues that it was the ‘new middle-class family’ that was at the centre of these resolutions in which the ‘new’ woman was subject to a new patriarchy. This ‘new woman’ was neither westernised nor part of indigenous tradition but the sign and symbol of a reformed and reconstructed classicized tradition (p.244). This consciously constituted dichotomy, Chatterjee suggests was not a rejection of modernity but the attempt to ‘make modernity consistent with the nationalist project’ (p.240).

The division of ghare-baire – ghare, the inner world of tradition and continuity which was the sanctum to be guarded by women and baire, the hurly burly of everyday life which was seen as somehow impure and rough and had to be dealt with by men – was thus normalized. This did not mean that the woman could not be modern, in fact it was important for the Bengali woman to be educated and have an understanding of the outside world, but this did not in anyway take away from her primary feminine role within the home as mother and wife.

Chatterjee’s arguments focus on middle-class Bengali women, suggesting that the middle-class are the group on whose bodies nationalist ideologies are sought to be written. I would like to extend these arguments to suggest that such a dichotomous resolution continues to be part of the response to questions of Indian-ness, nationalism and women’s sexuality even in the 21st century. Middle-

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22 Lata Mani’s (1999) work on sati and Tanika Sarkar’s (2000) writings on the Age of Consent Bill have separately demonstrated how nationalist concerns around sati and child marriage were centred on scriptural sanction, cultural survival and the civilising mission. Women as subjects with agency were completed absent from these debates. Even post-independence resolutions of abducted women in India and Pakistan were centred around protecting the national honour. The contradictions arose when the honour of the nation (in rescuing abducted ‘Indian’ women and restoring abducted ‘Pakistani’ women) were in opposition to the narratives of community and family honour in the Indian context where death was preferable to the return of defiled daughters, wives and sisters (Urvashi Butalia 2000, Kamla Bhasin & Ritu Menon, 1998).

23 Hindu nationalists today, similarly see the family as a location of resistance where the woman becomes the crucial instrument that holds the family together. By identifying the nation as a family, the role of women in the public sphere is seen as an extension of their domestic duties. Women in the RSS women’s wing the Rashtriya Sevika Samiti continue to identify themselves with the family to the extent that the first three heads of the Samiti (pramukh sanghehalikas) are known, not by a professional title as the first two leaders of the RSS are – Doctorji and Guruji (Teacher) – but by names that are kinship markers: Mausiji (maternal aunt), Taiji (elder sister/ aunt), and Ushatai (elder sister). As leaders and role models for the women of the Samiti, and the Hindu nation by extension, the pramukh sanchalikas embody the notions of hegemonic femininity in the nationalist discourse.
class women continue to be the medium through which the nation seeks to project simultaneously its acceptance of modernity and the preservation of that inner core that makes it uniquely Indian, in the present case, Hindu and upper caste Indian. Contemporary modernity as defined by through the processes and events of globalisation includes the visibility of women in the market as professionals but more importantly as consumers. I would like to argue that the dichotomy between the material (or the external) and the spiritual (or the inner core) are now embodied in the sexually desirable body / virtuous heart of the middle-class Indian woman. In ways that are clearly much less cohesive yet nonetheless significant the construction of the nationalist project in the 21st century – the project of presenting India as a economically liberal and socio-culturally globalised nation – is predicated on the nuanced construction of a woman who is sexual (externally) yet spiritual (internally).

Chatterjee’s understanding of the ways in which such private public schisms defined the nationalist rhetoric have been critiqued for both their essentialism and their insufficient consideration of the centrality of caste in constructing nationalism, thus reproducing the caste bias of the nationalist movement (Rajagopal, 2000). In projecting the middle-class Indian woman as the canvas of a uniquely defined modernity, I acknowledge that there is also simultaneous need to understand how codes of Indianness and modernity are being written on the bodies of lower class and lower caste women. In relation to gender debates in development, Mary John (2000) has argued that Development’s understanding of poor women as efficient users of resources and as good risks making ‘sound economic sense’ and in this sense as the good subjects of modernity, especially relative to their men who are seen as prone to violence and therefore as ‘‘bad’ subjects of modernity and its rationality, undeserving of the rights of citizenship’ (p.119). These narratives she suggests are in consonance with both the new economic policy and an upper caste communal culture. I would like to take-off tangentially from this argument to suggest that middle-class, upper caste women may then be seen as the best possible subjects of both modernity and a citizenship that is marked by consumption. The ‘modern consumer-citizenship’ of the middle-class upper caste woman in her capacity to transgress the inside-outside
boundaries of space is not an threat to the narratives of a new liberal India, they are in fact indicative of its very success. On the presence of women in the public spaces of consumption is predicated India’s entry into the global cultures and practices. And as I shall demonstrate the presence of middle-class upper caste women in certain spaces of consumption are indicative of its very modernity. However, as suggested above, this modernity is constructed as uniquely Indian by its connection to virtue and respectability. It is for instance embodied in the myths about beautiful Indian women who are sexy and yet compliant wives and mothers, images circulated for global consumption in the carefully modulated tones and composed responses of Indian beauty queens.

Uma Chakravarti (1990) writing on the period of social reform suggests that there are times where the question of culture is so fraught that it must be reinvented, recreated and given a homogenous shape. She suggests that colonialism especially in the late 19th century was one such time. I shall argue that the times we live in are yet another such time. And once again what is being constructed is not just Indian womanhood but also a class.

Once again, in India we find ourselves at a historical juncture where a ‘new middle-class’ is the focus of national debate. And once more it is women’s sexuality that is one of the important grounds for and of this debate. This time round however, women are certainly more than mere objects of the debate. To a greater or lesser extent, they are subjects with agency actively intervening in these debates as media and marketing professionals, as academics and NGO professionals, and as women making everyday choices and decisions. The fact that women are expected to simultaneously embody both cultural Indian traditions and sexual modernity provides spaces for a subversive performance of gender. I also suggest that in a very different way, private-public boundaries are being redrawn yet again as we grapple with new technologies, new modes of being public and private citizens.

As new technologies construct the public sphere in different ways, as the world of MMS, internet chat rooms, toon porn characters increasingly people our world,
new questions are being asked and answered in different ways. Simultaneously, the subject, Indian woman and the middle class are being placed within the new private-public boundaries in ways that seek once again to circumscribe women in new ways within the private even as they are permitted access to circumscribed spaces within the public as professionals and consumers. However, these boundaries are far from uncontested as films, civil society debates, activist groups and individual women challenge them on an everyday basis negotiating how and where these boundaries might expand and where they must not. In these debates women are central players in drawing their own boundaries and strategizing within the terms of the debate to maximize their access to the public sphere and negotiating their right to sexuality in a world where concerns of sexual health and rights are being debated in international fora including in mainstream fora like the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1993.

2.2 The Media, Sexuality and Questions of Representation and Consumption

The various media are an important form through which these images are circulated – print, television, film, the internet, and advertising in all of these, are located in several simultaneous contexts of geography, multiple ideologies of religion, class, caste and gender, and also various forms of resistance to the dominant ideologies. Chandiramani et al (2002) in their review of selected studies on sexuality record that the "mass media is the single most cited source of information about sex and reproductive health. Televisions, film, newspapers, billboards and hoarding were listed as the most popular sources through which adolescents learn about sex" (Chandiramani, 2002:3). These images circulate ideas about what it means to be Indian, modern, and desirable in the 21st century.

There is a significant body of literature that engages with the question of how these images both represent women and impact women’s self images. It is important to engage with this literature in order to contextualise the ways in which middle-class women are interpellated in relation to the contemporary
debates on sexuality and consumption. This section will attempt to outline some of the relevant literature.

Naomi Wolf (1990) points out how the presence of beautiful women in what she calls soft pornographic depictions in the media oppress all women. Jane M Ussher (1997) in her book, *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex*, has an entire chapter titled 'The Script of Femininity: Sex Romance and Beauty'. Tracing compelling hegemonic pedagogic narratives beginning with fairy tales, through girls comic books, teen age magazines, male cult heroes, romantic fiction, beauty advice, clothes fashion, super models, sculpted bodies, adult women's magazines, soap operas, and television talk shows, Ussher suggests that women internalise the passive scripts of femininity. Angela McRobbie's (1991) study of the dominant representation in British teen magazines, argues that girls seek romance in response to male sexuality. Further, sexuality itself is often seen as yet another product that can be bought within a consumer oriented culture.

It is worth engaging with the question of intent here. Susan Faludi (1992) in a path-breaking empirical study argued that the American media actively works against women in the issues it represents and the ways in which it chooses to represent them - sensationalising some and ignoring others in a clear anti-women bias, suggesting that the women's movement had brought women little but grief.

At the same time, it would be limiting and shortsighted to see women simply as passive consumers of the media. Some scholars have suggested that women are well aware of the restricted contexts and reading offered by the media and often read against the grain. Janice Radway's (1984) ethnographic investigation of women readers of romantic fiction cautions against the assumption, that the effects on readers of media texts can be deduced from semiotic analysis of the texts themselves. From her investigations, it emerges that the readers' prime motivation in reading the romances is to seek escape from the domestic pressures laid upon them in their daily lives. Favourite heroines were almost invariably described as 'spunky', 'extremely intelligent', 'independent' and 'unique' and Radway came to the conclusion that the women saw that romance fiction
demonstrated that men were attracted by such qualities. Thus, the fiction 'encourages them to believe that marriage and motherhood do not necessarily lead to loss of independence or identity'. The women saw the act of reading as combative and compensatory. Whilst the narrative form of the romance story is ideologically conservative and may, by and large, be seen as a recommendation of patriarchy, the fact remains that the women readers develop oppositional readings. What is important about Radway's study is that it shows us the importance of breaking away from an exclusive focus on the political economy of the media or on textual analysis and focusing on the actual conditions of reception and interpretation.

Lise A Lewis (1990) offers an insightful reading of MTV where she suggests acts of resistance first on the part of female musicians (she names Tina Turner, Pat Benatar, Cindi Lauper and Madonna) and ultimately by female audiences as well. She argues that even though MTV at first addressed largely white male adolescents, this bias against women in music was unable to completely disable female musicianship. She suggests that though the subversive tactics of the four women musicians mainly a coherent textual system of female address was able to emerge to challenge MTVs conventions of male address. The videos, she argues, were infused with symbolic discourse on the meaning of gender, prompting female audiences to reflect on their own experiences of gender.

There has already been a fair amount of work in the West and in India examining the media and its treatment of the woman question. The media is important because it has a large impact on the way in which people perceive issues and these include those in relation to sexuality.

Vimal Balasubrahmanyan (1988) in her study of the ways in which the media has depicted and articulated women, women's issues and feminism suggests that the media ends up subverting the women's question implicitly or explicitly. She points out with several illustrations how a serious report will have a headline that trivialises the issue or even ridicules it. She also nuances the study by examining the responses of the readers/audiences to various portrayals of women and the
women's question arguing that even feminist messages can misfire and a great deal rests with the viewer/reader. She also explores the ways in which particularly advertising uses women's issues to sell products which may have complex ideologies often antithetical to feminism underlying them.

Sonia Bathla (1998) in her study of the media's coverage of women's issues and the women's movement suggests that the media continues to operate within assumptions regarding women which are located in brahmanical, patriarchal ideologies. She argues that the media reflect a taken-for-granted perception thus being complicit in making women's concerns invisible in a larger democratic polity.

Ammu Joseph and Kalpana Sharma (1994) in their study of the print media during the period 1979-88, focusing on four major women's issues dowry deaths, rape, sex-determination tests and sati argue that most mainstream papers do not take an openly anti-woman line. However, the mainstream print media does tend to focus on events and this leads to the neglect of women's issues, many of which are linked to processes rather than events. Their study is particularly interesting because though it focuses largely on the English media, it also includes chapters on Hindi, Tamil, Bengali and Gujarati press.

Ammu Joseph in a chapter on women's magazines argues that women's magazines are "in many ways, the marginals of the press - ignored by the majority of media professionals, belittled by the rest and taken less seriously than even a men's magazine which depends for its audience on nude photographs and prurient humour" (Joseph and Sharma, 1994:113). Joseph further asserts that while the press ignores or trivialises women's magazines, many in the women's movement demonise them. She argues that critiques in "alternative women's publications" often attribute questionable if not diabolical motives to both publishers and editorial staff, seeing women's magazines as playing an integral part in a conspiracy to protect and defend capitalist patriarchy designed to ensure that women remain subordinated. Joseph argues that these critiques though in many ways valid, often demonstrate a "faulty understanding of the basic realities of the press in general and women's magazines in particular". Even women
journalists who would like to use these critiques to support their own struggles for change from within are often unable to do so because of the misrepresentations, errors and conspiracy theories within these critiques which make them vulnerable to easy dismissal by editors and publishers (Joseph and Sharma, 1994:114).

Elsewhere, Joseph (2000) has pointed out that women journalists are themselves subject to a great deal of sexism and sexual harassment in the profession. She suggests that working the night shift becomes an issue of protection of women which often adversely impacts women journalists careers. Single women journalists who keep late hours are looked at in askance by neighbours. All of this suggests that women journalists as a category would be inclined sympathetically to the women's movement.

Returning to the chapter on women's magazines, Joseph (1994) also noted that like other consumer oriented foci, the media had also jumped onto the "new woman bandwagon" and were seeing women in the context of a consumerist culture. However, this differed from earlier articles where issues of consumer rights were discussed. the more recent trend was to be more frivolous focusing on issues of consumption and suggesting that liberation lay in acquiring consumer goods. She writes: "The focus now seems to be on helping middle and upper-class readers become superwomen-cum-little-women - the entrepreneur or professional par excellence who is also the hostess with the mostest, the super-efficient housekeeper, the smart and decorative wife, as well as the loving and attentive mother" (Joseph and Sharma, 1994:116).

In the Indian context, feminist concerns with the media and sexuality have focused largely on issues of obscenity and pornography. However, these debates have remained at the level of questions of representation and concern around the objectification of women and indecency. Concerns of representation of sexuality have been articulated in the language of objectification and once again find address in legal solutions through acts like the Indecent Representation of Women Act, 1986. The Act was passed ostensibly in response to the demand
raised by the women’s movement against the derogatory representation of women in the media.

The Act aims to prevent the indecent representation of women where indecent is taken to mean ‘the depiction in any manner the figure of a woman, her form or body… … in such as way as to have the effect of being indecent or being derogatory or denigrating women or is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality…’ (Indecent Representation of Women Act, 1986).

Flavia Agnes (1995) argues that the campaign itself was conservative in its articulation in that it campaigned against the nudity of women and their depiction in suggestive postures thus tacitly reinforcing ideas that anything sexual in relation to women maybe seen as obscene and reiterating women’s asexuality. Agnes argues that under the Act educative material on sex could also be termed ‘indecent’. Furthermore, the equation of indecency with nudity creates a situation in which other stereotypical depictions of women in servile roles do not come under the purview of the Act (p.137-138). This can be seen for instance from the Bombay High Court ruling in the case of the film *Pati Parmeshwar* which depicts the leading actress in a position of servility and glorifies the indignities meted out to her. Of the four judges who heard the case, three perceived the depiction to not come under the purview of the Act. Agnes avers that this case is an indication of how the Act will be interpreted by Indian courts and leaves us with little doubt as to who’s interests will be served (p.141-143). Agnes’s pessimism is not misplaced, in the years following the Act, it has easily lent itself to being co-opted by conservative agendas and the moral police.

Shohini Ghosh (1999) takes these questions further exploring feminist engagements with the media and questions of censorship. She mounts a strong argument against feminist support to censorship suggesting that ‘In an already censorious climate, feminists and minorities would benefit more if they demanded more speech and diverse representation than seeking to silence already existing spaces’ (p.235).
Using globalisation as a lens, Mary John (1998) interrogates the area of sexuality with reference to the media, the various political economies of beauty and the opening of new spaces to understand sex and conjugality in popular Hindi cinema. Mary John’s highlighting of the institution of marriage puts heterosexual desire and intimacy back on the feminist agenda as an important area of inquiry and theorising. John points out that critiques of heterosexuality (its intimate connection with patriarchy exemplified in the slogan *the personal as political*) resulted in a climate where not only was heterosexuality seen as politically suspect but also seen as unthinkable within feminism. Through her focus on heterosexuality John has drawn our attention to the loss that such hegemony implies.

In discussing the beauty contests in relation to concerns of geography and globalisation and from the perspective of eroticizing the exotic, Rupal Oza (2001) focuses on the 1997 Miss World pageant held in Bangalore, India. She argues that in this instance India itself was packaged ready to be consumed. She suggests that the opposition to the contest was mapped on women’s bodies, where the underlying sentiment was that women’s bodies need to be controlled in terms of how they are represented in public (p. 1089).

### 2.3 Some Debates on Sexuality and Spatiality

Sexuality, globalisation and public space have both been the subject of intense discussion in the last decade and the literature review will attempt to layout some of these debates in ways that set the stage for the thesis chapters providing the context in which they can be read.

As important markers of segregation and reinforcement of social power structures, spaces, both private and public are hierarchically ordered through various inclusions and exclusions. In the context of access to public and other kinds of spaces the power structures that operate include: gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age and physical ability.
Here the term, “space” refers to a complex construction and production of an environment - both real and imagined; influenced by socio-political processes, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements which provoke different ways of being, belonging and inhabiting. This space simultaneously also impacts and shapes the social relations that contributed to its creation. Feminist analyses of the 'production of space' have pointed out the ways in which gender mediates in the production and structuring of space. Their work raises a host of questions pertaining to how gender relations are manifested in space and in turn how spatial relations influence the construction of gender.

Space is relevant in the context of my work as the thesis focuses on the new private spaces of consumption. In order to contextualise and understand these it is imperative to examine the debates in relation to public space and women location within it, to engage with questions of respectability and the drawing of invisible but no less real boundaries around women. These questions will help frame an understanding of women’s presence in the new spaces of consumption.

Drawing on the work of several feminist scholars of space, I use the term 'gendered spaces' to refer to the socially constructed geographical and architectural arrangements around space which regulate and restrict women's access those spaces which are connected to the production of power and privilege in any given context. Such a construction of power hierarchies in relation to space are not restricted to gender alone and the fact that this work largely addresses gender is not intended to negate the relevance of class, caste, ethnicity, age or disability or indeed their competing claims to a similar analysis.


Often when we refer to space, we actually mean a specific place. Public space in the context of this thesis then refers to public places, which here include sites like: streets, public toilets (in neighbourhoods, on streets, and railway stations), market places (bazaars and department stores), recreational areas (parks, maidans, restaurants, cinema houses) and modes of public transport (which include buses, trains, taxis and rickshaws) as well as sites like bus-stops and railway stations. When I use the term ‘place’ is use it in a context suggested by Doreen Massey (1994), where the identities of ‘place’ are seen as being always unfixed, contested and multiple. Places are also viewed as open and porous and not defined by placing boundaries around them (p.5). It is also important to clarify that public space is only a part of the larger construct of public sphere. Public sphere includes not only public spaces but also public institutions, roles and positions produced over time transforming the economy and polity and in turn getting transformed in significant ways.

Public spaces have been historically understood to be the preserve of men; a position that reinforces male control and authority over women as well. Women's restricted access to public space is connected to what one might call a notion of 'defilability' -- of both spaces and women themselves. This implies that women's presence in particular privileged spaces, usually public, may threaten the sanctity of these spaces; at the same time, women themselves face the threat of being defiled in public spaces, especially at particular times of the day.

Women then are expected to demonstrate a ‘purpose’ in accessing public space so that their presence may not be ‘misread’. Linked to what one might call the

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27 Therefore for instance when in the late 18th and early 19th centuries Mary Wollstonecraft, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill wrote advocating the entry of women into the public sphere as rational beings or in the 1960s Betty Friedan encouraged women to find employment outside the private home to seek fulfillment they were referring to an occupation of the public sphere as well as public space. In this sense I use public space in a narrower sense, though of course any discussion of public space is intrinsically linked to the larger concept of the public sphere. (See for instance, Wollstonecraft, Mary. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Printed at Boston, by Peter Edes for Thomas and Andrews, Faust’s statue, no. 45, Newbury-street, MDCCXCI. [1792]; Bartleby.com, 1999. www.bartleby.com/144/. [Date of Printout]; Mill, J.S.(1869) "The Subjection of Women", in Rossi, A. (ed) Essays on Sex and Equality 1970.)
tyranny of purpose is the concomitant manufacture of respectability. When a woman is attacked in public space – the question of what she was doing there in the first place is inevitably asked along with variations on the themes of what she was wearing and whom she was with.

Women’s access to public space and the promise of a kind of protection in public space is conditional upon women being able to visibly demonstrate their respectability. This demonstration takes varied forms from the wearing of symbols of matrimony, to the presence of protective men and the carrying of bags and other parcels to illustrate purpose. This then is a very conditional acceptance of women into public space, an acceptance that may be withdrawn at any time. It is not an acknowledgement of citizenship but a concession to convenience. Women do after all need to shop and commute to work – and these tasks are not necessarily incompatible with the assertion of their primary location in the private.

This anxiety in relation to women’s sexuality does not remain a discourse related neurosis; it conveys itself to women in multiple ways demanding that women modify their behaviour in order to conform to the requirement of ‘respectability’ that they may be seen as ‘good’ women whose sexuality is to be ‘guarded’ rather than ‘violated’. This sense of anxious entry into public space is reflected in women’s body language in those contexts.

The idea of waiting in a public place has become linked to the to the idea of being a 'public woman'. The image of the public woman becomes associated with that of the prostitute, the woman who is publicly available. Indian criminal law is also based on a similar understanding of the proper place for female bodies. Under the provisions of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1988, while sex work is not illegal, soliciting in public places is. The law prohibits sex-workers from soliciting in public places and restricts them to specified areas. 28 This then

28 Zigmunt Bauman (1995) writes, “For women, of course, this idea of waiting in a public space is attached to the idea of being a 'public woman': the most likely outcome of becoming a public woman is to become a prostitute... The woman's body is made available and criminalised because she waits in a space which is not hers, in which she is out of place” (p.12). (Bauman, Zigmunt , 'Making and Unmaking of Strangers', Thesis 11, No 43, 1995).
means that any woman who is perceived to be in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong dress or walking in the wrong way could be booked for soliciting.\textsuperscript{29}

The idea that women ‘ask for trouble’ by dressing or walking or talking a certain way or by simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time is tied to the distinction between respectable women, those who should be protected from the potential defilement of public space, and the non-respectable women, those who conversely are seen to defile the sacrality of public space itself. There is an acute anxiety that localities will be misread, that women will be misread – that the non sex worker will be read as a sex worker.

Here, I would like to argue that there is something very specific about the street walker and her ‘gaze’, that in some sense, disturbs the power hierarchies in public space, leading to strong sanctions against their presence.\textsuperscript{30} This then takes us to a point made earlier, that just as some women face the threat of being defiled in public space, so also some (other) women may defile the sacrality of public space by their very presence. I use the word ‘other’ in parenthesis to suggest that these two categories are seen as referring to different ‘kinds’ of women – the one who can be defiled in public space (i.e. the 'respectable' woman) and the other who will potentially defile public space (i.e. the 'public' woman, the prostitute). Here it is important to note that for the so-called 'respectable' woman - this classification is always fraught with some amount of tension, for should she transgress the carefully policed 'inside-outside' boundaries permitted to her, she could so easily slip into becoming the 'public' woman — the threat to the sacrality of public space.

The debate on sex-work is contentious and fraught with hostility. Among groups that seek to improve the working conditions of sex workers there is a disagreement on whether the location of sex workers is that of victims or agents. From a variety of angles the label of being a sex worker brings with it stigma and

\textsuperscript{29} See for instance, Vibhuti Patel, 1994.

\textsuperscript{30} Here, I use the feminine pronoun as generic largely because it is the presence of women street-walkers and sex workers I am concerned with. However, this is not an attempt to deny or erase the presence of male street-walkers/ sex workers in public space.
loss of rights, and one of the most important rights that sex workers lose is the right to freedom of movement as professionals for though sex work is legal, soliciting in public is not. Even when sex workers are not soliciting they are harassed by the police.

These notions of ‘respectable’ and ‘unrespectable’ women and their capacity to influence or be influenced upon by public spaces are neither new nor unique to the Indian context. Even in nineteenth century Britain, for instance, legal measures were undertaken to control and police the sexual activity of ‘fallen women’ particularly in London through the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864, an Act later repealed in 1886 (Walkowitz, 1992). A similar surveillance of prostitutes was sought in Paris as early as 1836.

In a variety of national, cultural and temporal contexts and spaces, efforts have been made to regulate the sexuality of women by binarily categorising both women and spaces into ‘private’ and ‘public’, ‘respectable’ and ‘fallen’,

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31 In her work on late Victorian London, Judith Walkowitz (1992), suggests that “the prostitute was a central spectacle in a set of urban encounters and fantasies” (p.21). She cites Stallybrass and Whitle (1986)’s position that “what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central” (italics in original), arguing that the prostitute embodies this paradox. Walkowitz meticulously chronicles and complexly juxtaposes commentaries detailing the “social geography of vice” and reflecting the class structure of London by focusing on the kinds of prostitution taking place (p.21). Walkowitz argues that by the 1840s, the streetwalker had become a source of considerable anxiety – simultaneously a source of disease and an object of pity. Official concern over prostitution as a dangerous sexual activity and a potential source of physical and moral pollution led to the passage of the first Contagious Diseases Act in 1864 (followed by the Acts of 1868 and 1869) (p.22). These represented the state’s effort to control and define the boundaries of public sexual activity of women. The Act provided for the medical and police inspection of prostitutes in garrison towns and ports (Walkowitz, 1980 cited in Walkowitz, 1992).

32 The repeal was the result of a successful campaign mounted by middle class moral reformers, feminists and radical workingmen, among whom were Josephine Butler, Annie Besent and John Stuart Mill (Walkowitz, 1992, Zivi, 1999). See Karen Zivi (1999) for an exposition of John Stewart Mills' opposition of the Contagious Diseases Act and the theories of subjectivity within which his position can be located. (Zivi, Karen, "Resisting Regulation? JS Mill's Opposition to the Contagious Diseases Act (The Abridged Version)" in Marianne DeKoven (ed.) Power Practice, Agency: Working Papers from the Women in Public Sphere Seminar 1997-1998, New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1999).

33 Wilson (2001) points out that French bureaucrat, Alexandre Parent-Duchâelet initiated similar investigations into prostitution in Paris. His survey appeared as early as 1836. His position was that each prostitute must have her own dossier and that the state should have as much information as possible to facilitate the task of surveillance. (Elizabeth Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture, Women, London: Sage, 2001.)
‘controlled’ and ‘uncontrolled’. However, the lines of division between these categories are neither as clear nor as well defined as the regulating authorities (whether they are the state, community or family) might have preferred.

Even as streetwalkers claimed parts of London for themselves, ‘respectable’ women entered public spaces as working women (largely employed in the shops to assist women shoppers) and as women shoppers in the new feminised world of department stores. This co-habitation of the same space by 'respectable' and 'unrespectable' women caused no small amount of confusion to the London police. In the years following the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, they were caught between the pressure to crackdown hard on prostitutes and remove them to other quarters (of the city), and a barrage of protests against the false arrests of respectable women (Walkowitz, 1992:24).

Reflecting on the Indian context, one realises that the situation is very similar. The presence of ‘respectable’ women in public space was sought to be controlled and defined through a time regulation in the Factories Act of 1948. A clause under this Act made it illegal for women to be employed/work between 7 p.m. and 6 a.m., thus defining the temporal boundaries when ‘respectable’ women would or even could be legitimately seen in public space.  

Leela Fernandes (1999) also points out that this new law applied only to the service industry where as export-oriented jewellery and electronics industries were able to successfully modify the Factories Act to suit their needs of having women work in the night shift. The new law also required restaurants to close at 12.30 p.m but Five star hotels catering to transnational businessmen were exempt from this legislation. Fernandes sees this as a marker of the complex and paradoxical connections between the middle class morality drive of a chauvinist government and the needs of the economic forces of globalisation. (See Fernandes, Leela, "Gender and the Management of Globalisation in India", in Marianne DeKoven (ed.) Power Practice, Agency: Working Papers from the Women in Public Sphere Seminar 1997-1998, New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1999)

As recently as March 2003, the government proposed an amendment to section 66 of the Factories Act, 1948, which would ratify the ILO night-work (women) convention to provide flexibility in the employment of women during night-shifts. This was done largely in response to the needs of businesses like the software industry and call-centres. The government also proposes to make it mandatory for employers to have adequate safeguards for occupational safety, health of women, protection for their dignity and honour and and facilities for transportation from the work premises to the nearest point of their residence (emphasis mine). (The Telegraph, Calcutta, 05 March, 2003).
A social anxiety about the ‘place’ occupied by women in public ‘space’ also has an acute impact on women’s own anxieties in regard to these public spaces, sometimes to the extent of pathology in the form of agoraphobia, the fear of open spaces. Esther da Costa Meyer (1996) records that agoraphobia has been interpreted by different authors to suggest – fear of the marketplace, fear of public squares, dizziness in public squares, and fear of streets. She argues that agoraphobia often manifests itself in conditions of domesticity – which reinforce women’s location within the home and deny them roles in the labour force. This was particularly true of middle class and affluent women. Agoraphobia, in this sense then can be seen as an allegory for the sexual division of labour and the inscription of sexual difference in social and economic roles of women and men on to public space.\(^{35}\)

Susan Bordo (1993) suggests that psychopathologies (like agoraphobia, hysteria and anorexia) are forms of embodied female protest that are inscribed on the body simultaneously cultural texts and the loci of social control. She argues, however, that as 'protest' against the strictures of society that restrict women (in the case of agoraphobia for instance the ideology that decrees women's proper place is in the home) these are not effective in anything more than conferring a sense of 'power' on the protestor. Such protests do not have any implications for changing either society or the lives of women who embody them because there are embedded in the same cultural contexts that produce them.\(^{36}\)

In contexts and situations when the risk of violence against women in public space, real and/ or perceived is greater, agoraphobia assumes an endemic form. Not just space but also time is an important factor in determining agoraphobia. As Meyer points out in almost ominous tones, “at night, in most large cities, all women are agoraphobia” (p.153) (emphasis in original).


\(^{36}\) Susan Bordo *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993).
Class is an important determinant not only of access to public space, of who might be seen where, but also of how notions of threat and ideas of risk are constructed in relation to public space, contextualised around unspoken, but no less real for that, boundaries that control these spaces. The intersection of class and morality complicates not only women’s negotiations of risk but also the kind of visibility they may have access to and the modes through which they are represented.

Centrally, the rhetoric of safety for the middle class woman creates a fallacious opposition between the respectable woman (read: middle class, upper caste, heterosexual married or would be married Hindu woman) and the vagrant male (read: lower class often unemployed male cast as migrant outsider). Built around endogamous sexual rules that decree that outside men should not be allowed sexual access to ‘our women’, a tension is created wherein the respectable woman becomes the potential victim of sexual assault and the vagrant male becomes the suspected perpetrator. Both the person perceived to be the potential molester and the potential victim of the act of molestation are both denied legitimate access to public space on these grounds.

Seeking access to public space on the grounds of respectability and class is both classist and sexist and will not in any way buttress the claim to citizenship. This is the reason that various ‘reclaim the night’ marches across the world have remained symbolic protests and not contributed substantially to expanding spaces for women.

Class differences between women also determine access to public space. However, in this context class interacts critically with age, community, education levels, kind of locality, and the socio-cultural context of the family and the living situation of the woman concerned. However, my research suggests that even the most desirable of urban female subjects, the upper-middle class consumer, is only offered conditional access to public space.

This conditional access often assumes the shape of privatized spaces such as malls, coffee-shops and multiplexes and one of my endeavours in this thesis will be to illuminate the kind of access afforded by these rarified spaces as well as to
engage with why and how they act to draw new boundaries around women’s access even as they legitimate new ways of defining citizens and non-citizens.

2.4 Architectural Imaginations and Gendered Exclusions

Before engaging in a discussion of the design of coffee-shops and the particularities that render the coffee-shop as desirable space, it is worthwhile to reflect on questions of public architecture and their role in facilitating or obstructing women’s access.

Architecture may be viewed as one of the culturally produced artefacts defining and designating spaces. When I speak of architectural exclusions I refer to the ways in which built form creates an environment where women are made to feel unwelcome and un-catered to in public spaces. I refer to a style and form of architecture that intimidates and demands that the user adapt to its cultural construction. I refer to an urban planning which is determined with the notion of the neutral user or citizen in mind forgetting that such an avowal of neutrality usually conceals several biases and hierarchies of access to space. The notion of the neutral user is one of the great fallacies of architectural practice. It discounts the role of physical and architectural practice in reinforcing and indeed recreating structures of subordination and exclusion that work against women. Spaces are designed with the assumption of democratic access – an assumption which works against the rights of marginal citizens. This takes many shapes like an architecture of exclusion, an inadequacy of infrastructure and insecurity and vulnerability to violence.

It would be quite facile to talk about masculinist architecture in terms that are derogatory without positing alternatives that allow for a greater freedom to women and children to occupy spaces without being overwhelmed. Masculinization as a process would therefore need to be clearly defined for all its manifest characteristics to be exposed and expatiated upon. Considering that the notion of strength has been made into a virtue in most classical architecture, it would be most illuminating if we were to assess the various ways in which this
idea of strength gets communicated to us. Which are the adjectival certainties that it spawns? An architecture that is virile in its vision, buildings that protect and guard the spaces enclosed tightly brooking no interference, massive edifices that soar up only to dwarf every other act of architecture in the vicinity.

Within an architectural discourse itself it is notions of ‘neutrality’ and ‘professionalism’ that are seen as virtues rather than any focus on gender inequality. For women architects seeking acceptance within the profession often means disassociating themselves from any talk of gender difference. From the feminist perspective, questions of architecture and feminism have only become an area of enquiry more recently (Coleman, 1996). The following section will seek to profile some of the voices that have theorised questions of gender, exclusion, mobility and social space.

Elizabeth Grosz (1995) argues that the erasure of women and femininity in architecture is part of a larger male-defined-and-controlled discourse of production of a built environment which ignores the bodies and contributions of women. She invokes Plato’s concept of *chora* (a mythological bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, mind and body). She argues that “the notion of *chora* serves to produce a founding concept of femininity whose connections with women and female corporeality have been severed, producing a disembodied femininity as the ground for the production of a (conceptual and social) universe” (p.113). In Grosz’s theorisation, *chora* can only be designated by its perceived as passive functions of nuturance and protection which are in contract to those perceived to be active - procreation and production. *Chora*’s function is neutral and leaves no trace of its contributions thus allowing for its erasure. Using the metaphor of the feminine *chora*, Grosz suggests that in the material world, men produce a conceptual and material universe construction upon a negation of the contributions of women and mothers. In conceiving of themselves as ‘self-made’, men have disavowed the maternal debt leaving both themselves and women homeless. Women then are ‘contained’ within dwellings they have neither built nor were built for them, they are enclosed in men’s

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physical space, circumscribed by men’s conceptualisation of the universe. She suggests that now it is not enough to merely change architecture by ‘adding women’. What is needed is a complete reconceptualisation of space and place to arrive at “new perspectives, new bodies, new ways of inhabiting” (124).

Mary McLeod (1996) review of contemporary architectural theories and practices critiques the preoccupation of architecture with deconstructionism and the concept of ‘otherness’. This quest for difference and the assumption that ‘difference’ or ‘other’ is inherently better than status quo, she argues has shifted the attention away from everyday spaces. She argues the limitations of a social and political vision of architecture (influenced by Foucault and Derrida) that focuses on ‘otherness’, disruption and break thus making negation into an ethic. McLeod critiques Foucault’s suggestion that certain unusual places (like “the museum, the prison, the hospital, the cemetery, the theater, the church, the carnival, the vacation village, the barracks, the brothel, the place of sexual initiation, the colony”) contribute to the understanding of social order by providing point of rupture. She points out the erasure of spaces such as are the residence, the workplace, the street, the shopping center, and the more mundane areas of everyday leisure, such as playgrounds, parks, sporting fields, restaurants, and cafés from his list. She argues:

… one of the most striking aspects of Foucault’s notion of heterotopia is how his concept of “other” spaces, in its emphasis on rupture, seems to exclude the traditional arenas of women and children, two of the groups that most rightly deserve the label “other”… Women have a place in his discussion primarily as sex objects—in the brothel, in the motel rented by the hour. (… (also) his exclusion of the house as heterotopia because it is a “place of rest”). … In fact, in the writings of Foucault and some of his architecture-critic followers (…) display an almost callous disregard for the needs of the less powerful – older people, the handicapped, the sick – who are more likely to seek security, comfort and the pleasures of everyday life than to pursue the thrills of transgression and “difference”. (p.10).38

How can we create a more inclusive architecture? What would be the defining characteristics of an architecture that does not intimidate? One must acknowledge that a substantial part of the intimidation of structures is contributed by socio-cultural contexts in tandem with architectural structures. A significant element contributing to the process of intimidation and concomitant exclusion are the sex-ratios which are balanced against women. Unfavourable sex-ratios keep women away and the cycle continues in a self perpetuating manner. Is there anything specific about architectural structures that intimidates or excludes women and/or the more vulnerable among the populace?

Deborah Fausch (1996) attempts to create a blueprint for a feminist architecture. She suggests that architecture which directly engages with the body and takes cognizance of bodily experience and transcends mere vision could potentially be viewed as feminist. This does not imply reducing women to their bodies but rather to incorporate a regard for the body as integral part of architecture. A concern with the body is not a guarantee of non oppressive attitudes but it can by taking into account the lived experience of the body, give a validity to the “sense of self bodily” - a sense shared by both sexes. This, Fausch believes, can be perceived as a subversion of the Cartesian desire to erase the body and become only the mind.39

William Whyte in his study of New York city plazas has suggested that the most welcoming and best designed and located of them with the largest potential seating space and safety quotient have a larger proportion of women users. He suggests that women are the more discerning users. I would like to extend his analysis to suggest that women are also more sensitive to an architecture of exclusion, more willing perhaps to be intimidated socialised as they are into viewing themselves as intruders in public spaces.40 Whyte worked with a variety of hidden cameras and perhaps the time has come for a similar study to be conducted in Mumbai.


Jane Jacobs in her widely read work on American cities first published in 1961, suggests that the safest streets in a city are the most used streets and vice versa. A safe city street she argues has three main qualities: first, a clear division between public and private spaces where one does not slide into the other. Second, “there must be eyes upon the street”, that is residents and strangers must be oriented towards the street not away from it. And third, the street must be fairly busy, both to add to the numbers of ‘eyes’ belong to users of the street as well as to induce residents of buildings adjoining the street to watch it in significant numbers. Constant activity, avers Jacobs, makes for interesting streets, and people only ever watch interesting streets. (p.35). She suggests that such surveillance though necessary need not become a grim reality but in fact can be almost casual in its effectiveness. Stores, bars and restaurants, according to her, work to aid safety. Jacobs insistence on the clear demarcation of space into public and private betrays an American preoccupation with individual privacy, where only public spaces should be open to such ‘eyes’.41

The foregoing discussions has a larger relevance beyond this thesis and the questions it raises are complex and multi-faceted. In relation to my thesis however they inform the next three chapters which navigate some of the terrain in which my fieldwork was conducted.

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