Chapter 3
The Middle Class Woman and the New Spaces of Consumption

3.1 Introduction:

Mumbai since the beginning of the process of liberalisation in the early 1990s has been a city where the contexts of consumption have rapidly changed. There have been a boom in various businesses, restaurants, shopping malls, department stores, and up-market clubs and bars. All of these show-case the increased capacity and willingness of particularly the middle-class to spend money on consumption goods.

While it is true that women in general have restricted access to public space relative to men, not all women are barred in the same way. Through their access to both economic capital through private infrastructure and cultural capital through education, middle class women have greater access to public space and are highly desirable in the privatized ‘public’ spaces – the new spaces of consumption.

3.2 Shrinking Public Spaces and the New Destinations

Public space in Mumbai is shrinking.42 As the city increasingly seeks to exclude those who do not fit into its vision of itself as a global modern city, we find that

42 The ratio of open space per thousand residents in is 0.03 acres as against more than three acres in New Delhi and Kolkata. The National Commission on Urbanisation (1988) suggests that the ideal ratio of open spaces is 4 acres per 1,000 persons. New York City has 6.3 acres per 1000 residents or 25% of its area as open space.

According to the NGO, Action for Good Governance and Networking in India (AGNI) records in the BMC’s Development Plan Department show that the city has seen the maximum number of de-reservations of open spaces in the last five years with a total of 12,738 sq metres, 1/7th the size of Oval Maidan, and essentially land meant for playgrounds and gardens, were de-reserved in that period. (Hindustan Times, March 27, 2007).
spaces of leisure and recreation disappear or are policed stringently or have to be paid for. The city becomes an unsafe and unwelcome space to walk or indeed to inhabit in any way. The streets are visualized to be full of danger and dirt, avoidable for those who have alternate choices. The cartoon parody of the citizen who drives to the park in order to walk is no longer laughable in Mumbai.

Of course this might actually be necessary since there are fewer and fewer parks and other kinds of open spaces like maidans available. Where open public spaces do exist, they often tend to be badly maintained or policed stringently, both discouraging popular use. Most of them are not equally welcoming to all and are often governed by an impulse not to include but to exclude. Open spaces like parks are frequently seen as an invitation for what is termed as ‘anti-social-activity’. The assumption is that if open public spaces are provided, then the marginal citizens will misuse or vandalise them.\footnote{For instance one article in the Hindu said: “In the absence of illumination, many of the parks are taken over by criminals and anti-social elements after nightfall. Hordes of beggars, lepers, drug pushers and sex workers invade the precincts. The ornamental lamps that adorned the once verdant parks in the city have either been stolen or damaged. Burnt-out bulbs are seldom replaced and street lamps in the vicinity do not function. Saplings planted by Corporation gardeners are often stolen. Citizens complain that the parks double up as operating bases for burglars.” The Hindu, Tuesday, Sep 09, 2003}

Such anxieties in regard to the take-over of public recreational spaces by ‘anti-social’ ‘elements is not peculiar to the Indian context. Writing about Los Angeles, Mike Davis (1990) points to the aggressive use of outdoor sprinklers in parks. He offers the example of Skid Row Park, where to ensure that the park could not be used by over-night campers or the homeless sprinklers were programmed to come on at random times during the night. The measure was copied by stores to drive people away from the footpaths at night.\footnote{Davis, Mike. 1990. ‘Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarisation of Urban Space’, in Michael Sorokin (ed) Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space, New York: Hill and Wang.} Las Vegas has now adopted an ordinance making it an offence to feed “the indigent”. Many other cities in the USA, have similar regulations limiting the distribution of charitable meals in parks. Most have restricted the time and place of such
handouts, hoping to discourage homeless people from congregating and, in the view of officials, ruining efforts to beautify downtowns and neighborhoods.

Kroker et al (1990) argue that in the USA walking is a threatening activity not just in the inner city where violence and police terror are common, but in suburbs across the country. Walking is seen as something that only the dispossessed do – a socially unacceptable activity, threatening to the mental peace and security of the propertied. They argue that walking in America outs you in the position of Simmel’s stranger, the person who by their very presence disturbs the field, summoning forth judgments on their conduct. (p450).

In fact, Kroker et al (1990) suggest that in the absence of safe places to walk in the USA, the shopping mall becomes the logical destination. They suggest that this is the safe place to exercise especially for women. For in the mall everyone is a stranger but with an important difference: “strangers in the mall are engaged in parallel play, safe in the policed crowd from victim city. … The owners of the mall like it of course, but only up to a certain point. … they have a definite image they want to portray – up-scale – so they have security guards to move people around and out.”(p.450).

Mona Abaza (2001) cites a study by Ricardo Ferreira Freitas (1996) conducted in Brazil where he suggests that the shopping centre symbolises the ideal city. “This space is protected from pollution and nature. … Paralleling the rise of violence over the last two decades, shopping centres have increased in Brazil from one in 1980 to 19 in 1995 as a way of providing non-violent monitored space. In Rio, they talk about the Barrashopping 973,906 square metres) as the largest shopping centre in Latin America as a place associated with ‘humanizing’ space against violence.” (Freitas 1996 cited in Abaza 2001).

The irony of creating middle-class havens of ‘non-violence cannot be lost on us. The endeavour then is not to make the city itself more ‘humane’ but to create pockets where the more privileged of its citizens can escape the real city where an inhumane violence resides. As Arjun Appadurai (2000) puts it, ‘The rich in these cities seek to gate as much of their lives as possible, travelling from guarded homes to darkened cars to air-conditioned offices, moving always in an
envelope of privilege through the heat of public poverty and the dust of dispossession.’

Privatized recreational spaces such as shopping malls, coffee shops, restaurants and cinemas are increasingly being represented as the new public spaces of the city. Many women, particularly middle-class women, told us repeatedly that they often spent their leisure time in such places and viewed them as substitutes for public spaces. These privatized public spaces create the illusion of access, courting as they do middle-class consumers. Yet, it is imperative that we distinguish these spaces from real public spaces for in the guise of public-ness, these private–public spaces are steadily replacing public–public space, such as when spaces ear-marked for parks and playgrounds are sold for commercial use on the premise that even the existing parks are not being used.

This move to privatize leisure is one that is replicated in other cities in the world. Writing about Egypt, Mona Abaza (2001) suggests that the shortage of public gardens means that the new shopping malls are used by the youth to socialize and mix in groups. She points out that though the government encouraged the construction of public gardens, these were all fenced off fro the public on the pretext that Egyptians behave badly in public and litter the place (p.101).

Increasingly one finds that in Indian cities as well, the malls, the new spaces are consumption, are becoming a significant destination for the middle-classes. Until recently in the Indian context, malls had strong colonial over-tones referring to the long walking roads built for both strolling and shopping and many will have in their travel photographs captured for posterity pictures of themselves on the Mall Roads of Shimla or Mussorie. These Mall roads, though they implied something similar, were clearly not interchangeable with each other having their own peculiarities and specialities. Recently, however ‘mall’ has come to suggest the North American kind of shopping space, one that somehow transcends the local.
In fact, Zygmunt Bauman (1996) suggests that the word mall means strolling. He writes:

‘Malls’ in its original meaning refers to tracts for strolling, now most of the malls are shopping malls, tracts to stroll while you shop and to shop while you stroll. … Shopping malls make the world (or the carefully walled-off, electronically monitored and closely guarded part of it) safe for life-as-strolling.

3.3 Public Spaces and the Moral Police

Parks as open public spaces are also used to impose a specific ‘moral vision’ of order on the city. The response to the presence of ‘anti-social activity’ or vagrant ‘elements’ has been to either not have parks at all or to turn them into spaces which are watched and policed in order to keep them beautiful. Middle-class citizens groups have sought to make parks to comply with a notion of middle-class aesthetics and morality – timings for opening and closing, rules about edibles, lists of do’s and don’ts in the park, and the presence of visible security signify not just concerns of beauty and cleanliness but also of morality.

In Mumbai, as in many cities across the country, this morality is peculiarly directed at public displays of romantic affection, and sometimes even the mere presence of couples. In a city where the private home is often a space of crowding, couples seek privacy along the promenades or in parks across the city. In some ways, the public offers them an anonymous sanctuary. However, increasingly, in city public spaces, couples are being censured for even holding hands, an act that that is ostensibly threatening the ‘moral fabric of Indian society’. At various times police personnel have been directed to discourage couples from public displays of affection by shooing them away or even arresting them on grounds of obscenity and/or immorality. In fact, this so-called ‘moral’ policing has also been imprinted on the body of the city through the design of public space infrastructure such as park and promenade benches with dividing armrests and singleton seats. For instance, in Joggers Park, there are individual seats set in singles, twos and threes but no benches. The manager of the park
explicitly stated that this was to prevent couples from ‘misbehaving’.\textsuperscript{45} Similarly some years ago, in the Five Gardens area of Dadar, park benches were made into single-seaters by the local corporator to discourage couples from engaging in what he termed as ‘indecent behavior’\textsuperscript{46}

The Mumbai police have periodically targeted courting couples in the city on grounds of obscenity and/or immorality. In November 2004 the police arrested 43 couples on the promenade at Bandra Reclamation for ‘indecent behaviour’. In April 2007, the police fined at least 80 persons in a drive against ‘indecent behaviour’ in the same area. At the present time, such moral policing is aimed at heterosexual couples but this is reflective of the invisibility of same sex couples rather than any progressive politics. In fact the situation as such is worse for those of alternative sexualities. If heterosexual couples find it difficult to find undisturbed spaces, for same-sex couples it is virtually impossible.

In a time when streets are being cleaned of hawkers and street dwellers in a bid to claim global status for our cities, what does the act of cleaning up streets, promenades and parks of public acts of affection or carnality for that matter signify? I would argue that if cleaning a city’s streets of its marginal citizens is an act that represents global aspirations then the denial of public displays of affection is an act that represents the drawing of narrowly defined homogenising cultural boundaries.

\textsuperscript{45} These conservative agendas are imprinted on the aesthetic body of the city in the shape of altered park benches which have arm rests between single seats ostensibly to cast a literal spoke in the romantic wheel. In surveillance terms couples in public spaces were monitored by the police in the wake of dictats imposed by Shiv Sena leader Pramod Navalkar when the Sena was in government in Maharashtra. These orders were however imprecisely defined leaving definitions of what was deemed to be improper to the discretion of individual officers. For some this meant that couples could sit on Marine Drive on Bandra Bandstand for instance facing the road but not facing the sea. For some it meant that they could not sit there at all. These attempts became in many ways something of a joke but they were all too serious. Of course couples continue to occupy these spaces but the fact that such policing could be undertaken without overwhelming and vocal protest from civil society says something of potential for culture policing. For instance, Joggers Park has signs in many places prohibiting ‘eve teasing’ or ‘misbehaving’. The word misbehave is illustrated by displaying a diagram of pink lips (which are obviously of a woman) which is crossed clearly referring to misbehavior of a romantic kind.

\textsuperscript{46} ‘Here, Love is a four-letter word’, Aneesh Phadnis, The Times of India, Mumbai, April 12, 2002, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/6609031.cms
The problem with public displays of affection then is the publicness of it – the violation of the taboo of mixing the artificially but nonetheless firmly drawn private and the public. The question often asked of couples cooing on Mumbai’s streets is – don’t you have a house and privacy? And the truth is that often they don’t. They don’t because there are parental restrictions, they don’t because their houses are too small and occupied by too many. When public displays of affection are sought to be pushed indoors it is the morality of the middle classes that is being enforced – the morality that demands two bedroom hall kitchen flats and closed doors.

Within the market economy, there is a clear class distinction in access to erotic bliss. For instance, Mary E John (1998) has argued, among other things, that the foregrounding of the romantic conjugal middle class heterosexual couple reinforces class distinctions in a manner which asserts “pleasure for ‘us’ and fertility control for ‘them’”. She points out that these have their location in middle class fears of encroachment by an undifferentiated poor.

The arrival of a global sexuality then being celebrated by the media, is one that is both deliberately exclusive and claustrophobically narrow. A sexuality that demands a visible public consumption even as it circumscribes the private expression of desire. A sexuality that recognises the desires of only a certain class which must only be located in the sanitised spaces of shopping malls, coffee shops, multiplexes, resorts and middle class model homes. A sexuality that requires perfect, toned, able, deodorised preferably heterosexual bodies, though discreet gay and lesbian bodies of the appropriate class and profession may not be entirely taboo.

This celebration then contracts rather than expands both spaces where sexual desire might be expressed and forms in which it might be expressed. It negates the couples in parks and promenades who have no other space in the city. It erases the slum dwellers who must make love under cover of darkness as they share space with others. Most of all it negates people’s desires to claim the city as their own in defiance of the arbitrary boundaries of public and private. It is this negation that allows the police to harass couples in public space. It is this
negation that allowed the travesty that occurred in Meerut. It is this negation that allows expressions of consensual sexual desire to become objects of public outrage in the same breath as acts of coercion, assault and rape.

The taboo on public displays of affection then is not just about the boundaries of Indian culture, it is also about the constitution of its new middle class in a time where only some desires and some sexualities are validated and permitted in the public while others must be hidden away as secrets to be forgotten.

3.4 The New Spaces of Consumption

Shopping malls have only come to Mumbai in the last decade.\textsuperscript{47} The first mall in Mumbai opened only in 1997 after which there has been a proliferation of shopping malls, coffee-shops and night-clubs. In the last decade, at least five large malls have opened in the city. The earliest one was the Crossroads (1997) at Haji Ali followed by High Street Phoenix (1998) inside a mill Compound at Parel, the R-Mall (2003) at Mulund, Inorbit (2003) in Malad, Nirmal Lifestyle (2004) at Mulund and CR2 (2004) at Nariman Point. These have been followed by a number of other malls, many owned by the same companies and so there are several Inorbit Malls and also several malls which are owned by the same company that owns R-Mall. There are also many other mid-sized malls in Juhu, Andheri, Kandivili and Malad. Many more are in the offing and much of the area sold or leased to real estate developers in the former mill land area in central Mumbai will be inevitably converted into malls and multiplexes. This is true not just of Mumbai but other metros and even smaller towns.

So also in various parts of the city, coffee shop chains, most prolifically Barisata and Café Coffee Day, are extending their spread. These coffee-shops are in many ways replacing the Irani Cafes as the most preferred spaces for young college

\textsuperscript{47} The first enclosed mall was built in 1956 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA designed by Viennese émigré architect Victor Gruen establishing him as a pioneer in the design of malls. For the first time a shopping structure that was completely introverted was built that severed all perceptual links with the surroundings giving the potential ‘retail drama’ inside uninterrupted centre stage (Crawford 1992).
and professional people to sit and talk over endless cups of tea or coffee. In these spaces tea and coffee cost upwards of Rs. 20 and usually over Rs. 50. Coffee shops of this kind are a recent phenomenon in Mumbai. Night-clubs and discos have always been a part of Mumbai’s night-life but their numbers have grown in an unprecedented way.

In my research with middle-class women when I asked them where they hung out, many spoke of the malls and coffee-shops that had given them what one woman, an architect called, “a space to call our own”. Of course it is important to flag here that these spaces do not belong to women, not even to middle-class women, but they do constitute the most preferred consumers of these space. It is also important to place on record that these spaces are not public spaces but are rather private spaces that masquerade as public spaces, where entry is ostensibly open but in reality regulated through various subtle and overt acts of intimidation (intentional and unintentional) and exclusion.\textsuperscript{48} The presence of middle class women in these spaces defines particular spaces in the city as desirable places for the middle classes to live, work or be entertained. The presence and the performance of a class habitus of these women are very important in the construction of the global city.

I use ‘habitus’ as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu to refer to a socialized subjectivity, a way of theorizing the socially produced self and of understanding how social relations become constituted within the self but also how the self is constitutive of social relations. Habitus is also visible in the way one stands and walks and inhabits space, in manners of speaking both of accent and idioms, in styles of dressing (Lawler, 2004). Though for my purposes I refer to habitus in relation to the body, the term extends beyond embodiments to include attitudes and tastes as well often carrying with it the weight of individual and collective history.

This chapter explores the new spaces of consumption and display in Mumbai: malls, coffee-shops, up-market bars and nightclubs and focuses on the ways in which both class, gendered embodiment and heterosexuality are constructed in these contexts. It examines some of the assumptions of modernity that are implicit in women’s presence in these spaces as consumers and shop-assistants. It argues that the presence of women in these spaces, is significant to the projection of Mumbai as a global city, in that visible women signal a particular kind of modernity, one that fits into the vision of a capitalist consumer economy.

It examines the assumptions of heterosexuality that underlie these spaces and explores middle class women’s experience of pleasure in these contexts, where they are often simultaneously the consumer and the consumed. Even as it engages with women’s narratives of pleasure, it also examines the limitations of these spaces in terms of how this pleasure is defined and bounded.

Despite these limitations women often suggest that these spaces have provided ways for them to engage with pleasure that they link to forms of self expression. This chapter will engage with the kinds of expansions these spaces offer especially for expressions of heterosexuality and attempt to analyse what they mean for women.

The methodology I use in this chapter is a mix of ethnography and in-depth interviews. Between 2002 and 2005, I conducted in-depth interviews with upper middle class women engaging with concerns of sexuality, representation and consumption. These did not explicitly reflect on malls though some of my respondents mentioned malls in their responses to questions. At this time my work focused more on questions of representation and embodiment in general. Since then I have become more interested in the new spaces of consumption. From 2007-2009 I have also spoken to many young women, especially in colleges on questions of sexuality and consumption. And between 2003 and 2006 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in three malls in the city: High Street Phoenix in Lower Parel, R-Mall in Mulund and InOrbit Mall in Malad. It is important to add here that all three malls have changed considerably since 2006 and my observations reflect both the spatiality and the textures of between four
and seven years ago. I would argue that while the spaces may have transformed superficially, this will not substantially alter the ways in which people interact with these spaces.

Where names are mentioned I draw on my in-depth interviews (these are pseudonyms and details of respondents are provided in annexure A. Where simply mention an age and perhaps other details I refer to interviews conducted during the many hours I spent in participant observation in these malls.

### 3.5 Middle Class Women and Gendered Consumption

These new spaces of consumption actively court a certain kind of woman. Middle and upper middle-class women particularly are invited into these private-public spaces as consumers, while lower middle-class women enter these spaces as saleswomen and are introduced to global cultural practices of consumption in these contexts. Western feminist scholars have pointed out that some of the consumer aspects of 19th century industrial modernity had women as key players, particularly in restaurants and shops both as consumers and salespersons of images and objects (Bowlby 2001, Domosh & Seager 2001, Walkowitz, 1992, Wilson 2001). Others have pointed out the limitations of celebrating the consumption of middle-class women without regard to the compulsions of working-class and poor women to take part as producers (McRobbie 1997). Also it is worthwhile noting that much of the consumption and purchase that takes place is either part of the apparatus of disciplining female bodies or an effort towards the embellishment of the private realm underlying women’s private location.49

In urban India, these new spaces of consumption – the malls, coffee shops and night-clubs – are engaged in the construction of a global modernity, one based on a selective and particular visibility of women that underscores India’s claim to

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global transnational citizenship. This version of modernity may be apparently outwardly similar but is also profoundly different to the mid-late 19th century modernity of some West European and North American cities. The outward descriptions of shopping – of women as consumers and shop assistants, the spaces of restaurants and tea-rooms paint a familiar picture. On the other hand, the new Indian shopping modernity is based in a largely service rather than an industrial economy. It also follows a pre-existing notion of visible modernity. In this sense, it is a self-conscious modernity constructed in a time that is also simultaneously post-modern and aspires to be post-feminist.50

For Anne Friedberg (1993) the shopping mall represents a “pivotal site, the key “topos” of post modern urban space” (p.109). So then in the Indian context are malls and other such spaces representations of the modern or the post-modern? In one sense because post-colonial states in a relative sense have never really ‘achieved’ modernity since the goal posts kept shifting, can they now be seen as post-modern?

The debate is particularly interesting because of the use of the term modernity in a more colloquial sense in the public sphere. The term modernity is becoming, via the media, a term used often to describe a condition aspired to creating a more self conscious desire to achieve this modernity promised often through the consumption of specific commodities and the access to specific spaces.

In the narrative of the city, the new spaces of consumption remain important markers of modernity. Within these spaces it becomes possible to truly transcend the poverty, dirt and third-worldness of the city immersing oneself in the smells, textures and experiences of consumption that parallel those in first world cities. Anne Friedberg (1993) writes: The mall is a contemporary phantasmagoria, enforcing a blindness to a range of urban blights – the homeless, beggars, crime, traffic, even weather (p.113). At the outset, it is important to clarify that these spaces are accessible to only a small minority of women and that access to such

50 By post-feminist, I mean that the new spaces of consumption are not necessarily anti-feminist but in fact co-opt some elements that might be seen as feminist which often speak to a younger generation of women anxious to disassociate themselves from the images of frumpy and unattractive that is the stereotype of the feminist.
consumption is limited and excludes a large group of men and women, many of whom may be involved in the production which facilitates this consumption.

Mall design is similarly characterized by the use of glitzy transparent barriers that both invite some people and keep out others. Malls, in addition, also have security guards whose very intimidating presence regulates the kind of people who feel able to enter such spaces. These spaces also mimic each other in design, creating a sense of familiarity—once one is acculturated into the codes of one mall, it is not very difficult to navigate another. They generate a sense of familiarity that is both circumscribing and reassuring at the same time. No wonder then that many middle-class women I interviewed referred to the mall as a ‘public’ space where they frequently hung out. However, keeping out those deemed threatening does not take away the pressure on women to reproduce the structures of both femininity and middle-class respectability in these new spaces of consumption.

Discussions around consumption are often polarised between a defence of its pleasures and a critical assessment of its capacity of co-option. Some feminist scholars in the 1990s have focused on women’s agency and the pleasure in consumption often read as being transgressive, even sexual. What these arguments do is allow women’s access to public space and participation in consumption to be seen outside the discourses of capitalist oppression and ‘false consciousness’. However, as Angela McRobbie (1997) points out, an excess of attention to the meanings around consumption have led to the processes of exclusion which structure and limit access to consumption being ignored. Anne Friedberg (1993) like Mike Davis summarises the problems of exclusion from the shopping paradise: The all-too-familiar “street person” with shopping cart conducts a dire parody of a consumer culture gone awry. As a grim reminder of the excessive valuation of the perceptual mode of shopping flanerie, the flaneuse as a “bag lady” can stroll the “aisles” of a derelict urbanity, where shopping can be done without money, the “shelves” stocked with refuse and recyclable debris (p.110). In the Indian context this has meant that while the urban woman
consumer is made hyper-visible, the informal home-based wage working woman is erased from the contemporary urban rhetoric of the city. Political complacency and the vision of consumer culture as an arena of female participation and enjoyment have permitted questions of poverty to be erased from the debate. That said however, scholarship has articulated the one-dimensional nature of these consumption-based spatial cultures (Friedberg 1993, Sorokin 1992). The same structures that invite some women into the arena of global consumption act to impoverish other women (and men) and more significantly to render them invisible.

Do these new spaces of consumption then transform the space of cities for even some women – the middle and upper-middle class women? Do they facilitate an access and the possibility of enjoyment? Do they hold the possibilities of flânerie for women?

Elizabeth Wilson (1991) has pointed out that though women, along with minorities, children and the poor have never been recognised as full citizens and granted open and complete access to the public spaces, they have nonetheless "survived and flourished in the interstices of the city, negotiating the contradictions in their own particular way" (p.8). She argues that the while the city may be a place of growing threat to men, to women, it in fact represented a place of freedom and liberation, facilitated to some extent through deviation and disruption.51

Freedom and liberation, in the sense suggested by Wilson, then are also dependant on the greyness and ambiguity of city. It is the interstices of the city, particularly a city like Mumbai, those in-between spaces that allow room for negotiation and spaces for manoeuvre. It is this ambiguity that allows for the city to be experienced viscerally and texturally and creates spaces for pleasure and even erotic possibilities. It allows women to slip into these in-between spaces as anonymous individuals and enact/ perform an act of 'citizenship' in being able to access public spaces. By this, I refer to those formations of city life, static and

kinetic, socio-architectural (certain kinds of streets, for instance) and demographic (certain kinds of crowds, for instance), that allow a woman opportunities, occasions and possibilities to negotiate public spaces more effectively. In arguing this, I echo Iris Marion Young's (1995) defence of the city, which suggests that urban eroticism is integral to city life. City life, she argues offers 'difference' as the erotic and promises the 'pleasure and excitement' of stepping out of the mundane and routine 'to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising'.

Richard Sennett (1977) has argued that the processes of modernity altered the forms of public space to render them more mysterious and threatening but also simultaneously more exciting and sexualised. In thus arguing that city spaces be allowed to retain the space of imagination one cannot but engage with the figure of the flâneur. The flâneur is one the key figures embodying the experiences of modernity. The flâneur here the impassive stroller, the man in the crowd "symbolises the privilege or freedom to move about the public arenas of the city observing but never interacting, consuming the sights through a controlling but rarely acknowledged gaze, directed as much at other people as the goods for

54 Elizabeth Wilson (2001) explores the origins and meaning of the word flâneur. She quotes the Nineteenth Century Encyclopedia Larousse as suggesting it may be derived from the Irish word for libertine. In this the flâneur is defined as 'a loiterer, a fritterer away of time, associated with the new urban pastimes of shopping and crowd-watching'. He (emphasis mine) could exist only in the city, the metropolis and though 'the majority of flâneurs were idlers, there were among them artists, and the multifarious sights of the astonishing new urban spectacle constituted their raw material' (p.75).

She argues that though by the mid 19th century the flâneur was recognised figure in Paris, an anonymous pamphlet published in 1806 may actually be the first reference to the activities of flânerie. It describes a day in the life of 'Monsieur Bonhomme' a loiterer of the Bonparte era setting out clearly all the characteristics attributed to the flâneur by Baudelaire and Benjamin. These include 1. Spending the day simply looking at the urban spectacle; 2. Spends time in restaurants and cafes frequented by actors, journalists and painters, and is interested in the arts; 3. Interested in the behaviour of the lower ranks of society; 4. Interested in dress as an important part of the urban scene; 5. (and less characteristically, says Wilson) women play but a minor role in his day and though he notices women there is no indication of his own erotic life. Particularly striking, points Wilson, is M. Bonhomme's marginality (p.75-76). (Elizabeth Wilson, *The Contradictions of Culture: Cities, Culture, Women*, London: Sage, 2001.)
sale. The flâneur embodies the gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic" (Pollock, 2000: 162).

Several writers and thinkers about and of the city have reflected on the idea of *flânerie* seeking to understand questions of location, identity, class, gender, and role. Benjamin traces the flâneur from the pre-Haussmannian Paris through the creation of Haussmann's boulevards and the beginnings of department stores suggesting implicitly a linkage to an intensifying process of commodification. Donald (1999) reflecting on Benjamin, in turn, reflecting on Baudelaire points out that the flâneur 'embodies a certain perspective on, or experience of, urban space and the metropolitan crowd'. Donald suggests that Benjamin and Baudelaire share more than a way of seeing and experiencing the city but also a concern with the representation of space and its transitory, fleeting and contingent nature especially given Baudelaire's contextual position of seeing the Paris he knew torn apart to make way for Haussmann's creation. Benjamin's fascination, he argues, with the new Paris is linked to the way in which the rapidly changing city bore an aura of elusiveness. In the international fairs hosted by Paris at the end of the 19th century, Benjamin saw the origins of the creation of the spectacle teaching a mass audience to derive pleasure from mere visuality.

This apparently meandering discussion of mid-19th century Paris has a point beyond a general fascination with the figure of the flâneur. In brings to my mind, a very different context, that of late 20th century and early 21st century Bombay/Mumbai. The last decade has seen a rapidly changing streetscape, where global brands and chain stores begin to occupy larger and larger spaces in the visual landscape of the city as corner stores give way to department stores, run-down loss making cinema houses give way to multiplexes. Elsewhere in the city a large IMAX-Dome theatre and four screen multiplex dominates not only its surroundings but also people's visual mind-map of this part of the city, almost erasing both the salt pans (which in the larger space of the imagination could hold

56 James Donald, Imagining the Modern City, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 44-46.
vestiges of the Salt Act and the freedom struggle) and the chemical spewing flame topped refineries (monuments to India's erstwhile quest for industrial self-sufficiency) which nestle cheek by jowl in an incongruous juxtaposition.

As the more imaginative traveller/tourist/aspiring flâneur may have noted perhaps in the unknown recesses of his/ her memory every city or town holds within its streets, its corners, and its moments traces of another city. A nuance or a subtle unclear sense of perhaps déjà vu – a sense of experiencing the aura of one city or town in another. This experience is clearly one that may be very different for different people and has much to do with location, identity, individual imagination and memory. However, even as Indian cities aspire to a global cultural identity, this unique perception of finding, if even for a moment, traces of one city/town within another is altered irrevocably by another much more universal, more literal similarity. Each city now begins to resemble another in a more easily recognisable way. Citizens of Bombay/Mumbai, Delhi, Madras/Chennai, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Pune all encounter in their own cities the global interior designs and first world scents of a Shopper's Stops, Crossword, Westside, or Barista to name only a few among a host of showrooms of various brands of clothes, jewellery and other accessories.57

These new and multiple spaces in varied locations are rapidly eroding the sense of ‘discovery’ facilitated by finding oneself at home in another city and fundamentally alters the possibilities for flânerie. In fact, Geeta Kapur (2003) may not be entirely too pessimistic when she suggests in a recent essay that ‘the twentieth-century figure of the romantic exile or flâneur, is now too easily subsumed by global travellers and culture shoppers’ (p.49).58 However, nonetheless from the perspective of the woman citizen is it is simultaneously interesting to note that these new spaces are increasingly inhabited by women, albeit largely women belonging to the upper middle and upper classes.

57 I owe these insights to many discussions and reflections with Abhay Sardesai, in different cities and at varied such ‘moments’.

58 Kapur, Geeta ‘subTerrain: artists dig the contemporary’ in Indira Chandrasekhar and Peter C Seel (eds.) body.city: siting contemporary culture in India, Delhi & Berlin: Tullika Books & The House of World Cultures, 2003, p.46-83.
At this point it is relevant to return to nineteenth century Paris where it was suggested that while the department store was 'undoubtedly a symptom of the decline of the flâneur, it was perhaps an institution 'created to invent the flâneuse'? It could be argued that these new public spaces of the department store and the cinema created possibilities for women to appear safely and respectfully in public by reconfiguring the boundaries of outside/inside and public/private (Donald, 1999:49). Similarly, in Britain, by the 1860s restaurants, tea-rooms and department stores in Britain began to grow and many of these offered facilities exclusively for women, thus transforming middle and lower-middle class women's experience of public life (Elizabeth Wilson, 2001:81).  

The more immediate question that concerns me, is does the female flâneur, the flâneuse exist? Massey (1994) suggests that the notion of a flâneuse is impossible because of the unidirectionality of the gaze. Flâneurs are the observers rather than the observed and Massey uses the case of painting to suggest both women’s exclusion from space and masculinity of the modern gaze.  

Wilson (2001) points out that in many ways the flâneur has emerged not only as a man of pleasure but also as one who takes 'visual possession of the city'. In feminist debate he is the 'embodiment of the male gaze' and 'represents men's visual and voyeuristic mastery over women' (p.78-79). While this may then suggest that the concept of the flâneur is unvaryingly male, that a woman could never be cast in the role of one who might perceive and comment on the city. Wilson avers that this is not necessarily the case.  

Wilson (2001) also suggests that the flâneur’s masculinity is itself constantly threatened by the labyrinthine ambiguity of the city in the context of modernity. She writes:

59 An interrogation of the outside/inside and public/private boundaries within public space is linked to class concerns deserves a complex and involved discussion. This is particularly relevant in the context of twenty-first century Bombay/Mumbai given the global visualities described above. However, in the interests of exploring flânerie, particularly the possibilities for female flânerie, that discussion will have to wait for another essay.

60 Massey Doreen, Space Place and Gender, op cit.
“...the flâneur represented not the triumph of masculine power, but its attenuation. A wanderer, he embodied the Oedipal under threat. The male gaze failed to annihilate the castrate, woman. On the contrary anonymity annihilates him. His masculinity is unstable, caught up in the violent dislocations that characterised urbanisation. It is the flâneur, and not his impossible female counterpart, who is invisible. ... he (the flâneur) stoically recorded what he saw and acknowledged in his own person the challenge to patriarchal thought and existence constituted by the city of modernity” (p.87-88).

Janet Wolff (990), however, suggests that women were almost completely excluded from the public sphere. She writes: "the public world of work, city life, bars, and cafes was barred to the respectable woman". Wilson (2001) argues that this was in fact far from the case and that women were increasingly being seen in restaurants and shopping centres even in the mid-nineteenth century. She also draws attention to the women writers of the 19th century, namely George Sand who adopted male attire in order to be able to roam the streets freely and also Delphine de Girardin, a successful novelist, poet and playwright under her own name who adopted a male pseudonym for the column she wrote in a newspaper, the content of which might have come of the pen of any Parisian flâneur. Using these as cases in point, Wilson cautions against an overemphasis on the passivity and victimhood of nineteenth century women and points out that the lines of demarcation between public and private; between virtuous and fallen women were nowhere near as definitive or unambiguous as they were meant to be (p.84).

If one has to suggest possibilities for the flâneuse then what shape would these take? How and where can one locate women who 'walk the city' both as sex-workers and non-sex-workers?

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61 Wolff, 1990 cited in Wilson, 2001. Though Wolff acknowledges the presence of the woman as shopper, she suggests that the act of shopping was largely ignored in the literature of modernity. Wilson contests this suggesting that the 'literature of modernity' so sarcastically referred to by Wolff was in fact replete with the shopping aspect of urban life. And shopping and window shopping, she argues were central to the identity of the flâneur even in the times of M Bonhomme (p.81-82). Elizabeth Wilson, op cit.
Wilson suggests that that the prostitute cannot be seen as a flâneur/ flâneuse because her activities are insufficiently ambiguous and overtly sexualised. This raises questions about the connections between sexuality and flânerie that have to do with issues of both control and class. The male flâneur who is 'vaguely sexualised' and who even if he is working does not easily appear to be so, clearly belongs to a class different from that of the prostitute. He is in a position to perhaps 'buy' her body thereby asserting a degree of control, within limitations, over her sexuality. This process cannot take place in reverse. In this sense then the prostitute remains the object of the gaze, even if she were to return the 'male gaze'. If one were to then consider the possibility for a flâneuse who is not a prostitute but perhaps belongs to a class similar to that of the flâneur? What are the possibilities offered here? Also concomitantly what are the similarities and differences of locationality between the prostitute and the non-prostitute in the context of public space? Finally what are the possibilities for the two women to separately and together subvert the male gaze?

Linked to the questions of who can be the flâneur/ flâneuse are the many complex and pressing questions of citizenship. In this context it is important to negotiate with the authorial dimensions of the act of flânerie and what it may signify in terms of a ‘gaze’ that reflects and reinforces the power structures of society in defining not only who has access to public spaces and how but also who is allowed to represent them and in doing so shape the discourse of urban living. It is thus imperative for us to engage with the notion of a democratic citizenship that allows space for diversity, difference and varied notions of pleasure in negotiating the city.

For instance, Helen Scalway (2001) in a very exciting way, attempts to explore the complexity of being a woman drifter, a flâneuse in London, of being “a woman who walks the street but isn’t a street walker”. Scalway goes provides a fascinating and nuanced account of a search for a space in the city, a quest for a fuller citizenship. She concludes her essay by arguing that

“ultimately, then the would-be city drifter in the feminine mode finds herself in a position where flânerie in its inherently territorial and controlling meanings, is neither possible nor desirable. Indeed it is only in
developing practices of counter-flânerie that the streets of the multi cultural millennial city may ever hold space for all its users. This is walking which is about negotiation and regard for the Other: the street where relationship is possible: citizenship”.

Scalway’s vision of ‘regard for the ‘Other’ is crucial to the creation of city spaces which allow for multiple renditions and interpretations of space and flânerie and allow for a meaningful citizenship to develop.

3.6 The New Spaces of Consumption: Examining Mall Spaces

In this section I explore the spaces of three malls in Mumbai locating the class contexts that operate both within the mall and between the mall and its neighbourhood. I attempt to understand the extent to which these malls are able to transcend the sense of the local. This is hinged not around the relative ‘success’ of the malls but rather one that seeks to examine their location in a city that sees itself as a global modern city in a post-modern time. In one sense, all of these malls (mostly on their websites) articulate a similar sense of the ‘desired consumer’ – the upper-middle-class person with a disposable income.

The three malls studied are:

• High Street Phoenix at Parel in Central Mumbai where old mills are being converted;

• R-Mall in Mulund, an eastern suburb with a large population of Hindu Gujaratis where the prices of real estate have concomitantly risen; and

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63 In the USA the home of mall cultures, most malls were built outside of cities where land was cheaper and parking space was plentiful. In the context of Mumbai, however, this has to be reconsidered and perhaps only Inorbit on the Malad Link Road fits in any way this image of a mall built outside the city. Even Inorbit is not quite outside the city but in a space in the process of being shaped.

64 Property prices in Mulund shot up 75% to Rs 2,800/sq ft in less than two years between 2002 and 2004. (Muthukumar & Amit Bhandari, The Economic Times, 22 November 2004).
• Inorbit on the Malad Link Road, a space reflecting the new BPO culture mixed with its old predominantly Christian past.

The malls are located in relation to carefully calculated data on how many potential customers with what kind of spending power are part of a given locality or likely to venture there.65

All of the malls have large department stores, a discount grocery store and variety of restaurants and food outlets. While the stores in the three malls might be almost exactly the same, one might argue that the negotiation of the mall with its location, both its architecture and its environment, may actually produce a varied set of experiences.

Big Bazaar is a discount grocery store along the likes of the American K-Mart. It is located in both High Street Phoenix and R-Mall and tries to embody the aesthetic of the bazaar, using stall like fronts with ‘vegetable vendors’ behind them to sell vegetables. This in a sense offers people a sense of personal attention of the kind they are used to from their regular vegetable vendors while still managing to provide the ‘modernity’ and ‘hygiene’ of a mall-store. It is, however, interesting that the rhetoric of hygiene has not in an overt way made its way into the discourse of such stores, it is more the convenience of shopping under one roof for all you need that dominates.

Street food enters the space of the mall and gets sanitised. Corn, sugarcane juice and even a gola traditionally street side vending have been converted into sanitised food items inside malls advertising the use of clean water and demonstrably having the sales persons use plastic gloves while serving. This serves simultaneously to sanitise the food and eroticise the space giving it a sense of local ‘flavour’. There are also a number of restaurants as well as fast food chains in each of these malls that ostensibly cater to every taste. Barry Smart (1992) refers to this array as ‘food-porn’.

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65 See for instance interview with Mr. Anand Sundaram, General Manager, Inorbit Malls for a detailed assessment of how customers for the mall were calculated including their potential spending capacity. (http://www.indiainfoline.com/view/170704.html)
Malls are also often tied to Multiplexes and all of the three malls studied already have attached multiplexes Fame, Big Cinemas and PVR respectively. This reflects a global trend that marries entertainment and shopping industries.

High Street Phoenix, built as it is around the modified structures of the textile mill cannot completely transcend its past. Even as the mills around it transform into up market shopping, multinational offices and high rise housing – the chimneys continue to visibly dominate the landscape and chawls surround it, ever present reminders of a different city, another time.

In one sense I would argue that it is fitting that the malls will replace the mills – as the modernity defined by industrialization and steel gives way to a modernity defined by consumption and software. These malls to be located in the centre of the city become the new ways for the city to tell itself the story of modernity. The mall is in one sense also a narrative – an architectural construction / representation of the modernity of consumption even as the mills were a representation of the modernity of science, technology and industry.

Development and the vision of the modernizing nation through science – the vision harking back to Enlightenment ideals gives way to the immediacy of consumption that promises the achievement of nirvana not in the future but in the present. Various articles in business and economic newspapers and sections of newspapers quote home-buyers and consumers extolling the virtues of malls in satisfying their desire for a particular lifestyle that they see as global.

Even as the textile mills transform into up-market retail shops, multinational offices and high rise housing, the older structures remain, ever-present reminders of a different city, another time. The swanky new edifices of Central Mumbai cannot completely transcend their past. Significant numbers of former mill workers still live in the area. Both the defunct textile mills and the residential chawls for the workers are located here.

In these areas, the city of production and the city of consumption look each other in the face. In the master narrative of this city, malls have replaced mills as the
desired markers of modernity. The former spaces of production must now be aestheticized, their original functions and inhabitants displaced. Where retained, as in the High Street Phoenix mall complex in Mumbai’s Lower Parel area, the empty shells of the original structures—with their large sky lights, nineteenth-century cast-iron pillars, and towering chimneys—seek authenticity by invoking the nostalgia of a glorious industrial past.

High Street Phoenix is divided into various different shopping spaces – some more hip and expensive than others. This mall has transformed considerably since 2006 and some of the spaces I refer to in my observations do not exist today.

On one early field visit to High Street Phoenix, there was a square courtyard like space that was used for tele-visual and other marketing promotional activities. It was also a space that had vending stalls that had the potential to create a public space kind of texture. One evening as a new about to be launched television soap opera was being promoted the courtyard was full of important-looking advertising professionals handing out balloons and t-shirts and who invited a group of women between 20 and 40 onto a makeshift stage at the back of a van and engaged them in singing and asked them questions. There were other young people college students and young women watching. There was also a large group of mostly lower middle class men (again between 20 and 40 years of age) standing and watching, their eyes glued to the action happening in front of them. An interesting dynamic appeared to be developing – a ‘sense of the public’, albeit circumscribed by television advertising needs.

This courtyard also had small stalls that sold food that was much cheaper than the restaurants though of course not as cheap as the hawkers. This was a space where people of different classes could hang out – it was in a sense a liminal space – neither inside the mall nor outside. However since my study this space has more or less disappeared as have most of the little more affordable stalls. It has been eaten into from various sides by new shopping spaces and next to it a Multiplex and multi-storied car park have come up and there has been no effort to re-create a similar space.
R-Mall is very well aware of its location in Mulund: a Hindu Gujarati and Kutchi suburb articulating this on their website as well. There is an attempt to both create a sense of history and also of its contemporary importance. It locates the suburb in the city extolling simultaneously the virtues of the city itself.\(^{66}\)

It is interesting to note that the announcements for customers are made in Gujarati and English but for the staff only in English. This suggests to me an attempt to reach out to their Gujarati speaking customers and their spending power while still retaining the idea that in the global modern mall the language of communication was English. R-Mall (self avowedly) has a strong sense of place – inside of this mall despite its typical ‘inward oriented’ architecture- its mixed crowds, its Gujarati announcements create a strong sense of the Mumbai suburban.

R-Mall in terms of size is the smallest of the three. The customers at the R-Mall are more mixed than those in either High Street Phoenix or Inorbit. R-Mall unlike the other malls also has a facility for rolling the trolleys to the main street from where public transport can be hailed. Also on Wednesdays which are ‘Women’s Day’ (10.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. only) at the mall they reimburse women customers their autorickshaw fare if customers spend over Rs. 500 at the mall once again suggesting that customers without cars are welcome. This may perhaps be due the notion that women who are home-makers and their likely customers on weekday afternoons do not drive themselves or an awareness of the mixed nature of the suburb and the possibility of attracting lower-middle and middle- middle class consumers.

\(^{66}\) The website says: Compared to the rest of the country Mumbai’s social calendar is always full. Mumbai is shopper’s paradise (sic). There is hardly anything under the sun that you cannot buy here. You can get the latest designer outfits, curios and antiques and anything you care to imagine. … The suburb to the North-East of Mumbai, i.e. Mulund, also is enriched with a special historical importance, information ranging back from AD 800 to AD850 of this suburb is available (sic). The suburb with a population more then 10 lakh (sic); has been adding extra importance and flavour to the very existence of Mumbai, by its history ranging from ancient era to the 21st century as also through its present state (sic). Major population of Mulund are of Gujarati and Kutchhi community (sic). Majority of people are engaged in business activity and indirectly, Mulund is the business capital of Mumbai. (www.rmall.org accessed in August 2006).
On one such Wednesday visit, I found a number of special events and prizes on offer. One could attend a *bindi* making session, throw hoops around a few gifts to try and win them and get a free plate of *pani-puri*. One could get any numbers of these freebees for every additional Rs. 500 spent. The timing of the Women’s special day makes it clear that it’s for women who do not work outside the home. And so in the interests of authentic ethnographic experience I found myself sitting in a chair at a cosmetic counter having a “make-over” for free. As I initiated a conversation with the young woman wielding the implements of my transformation, I discovered that it was her first day and that she had just finished her twelfth standard. She was temporary but hoped to get a permanent job in the mall as a saleswoman. She had been taught how to do makeovers the previous day by another employee at the store. At this point in the conversation I was tempted to jump out of my seat and run but persevered.

There are also lower middle class consumers at the R Mall particularly in Big Bazaar and one of the families I spoke to said that they lived in Mulund and had brought their relatives who lived in Mira Road to see the mall, one of the attractions in the suburb in which they lived. Their pride in living in a suburb that housed such an up-market space was evident.

There are also a large number of women in the mall who appear to belong to trading families – and on speaking to some of them this is confirmed. They are much less self assured and lack the sense of belonging that some others who may economically belong to a lower income group, but possess cultural capital.

The public space outside the R-Mall is potentially fascinating. The foot-path is wide, either by design or encroachment. There are some trees with circular seating around them. The increasingly ubiquitous fairy lights that seem to suggest a perpetual festivity of shopping are wound around the trees. There is some security outside as also some rickshaws hanging around.

There are generally people hanging out in this space outside the mall that creates the sense of a ‘public’ space. Despite the surroundings of the LBS Marg and the presence of the Richardson Cruddas factory just opposite that gives of an air of emptiness and abandonment, the space outside the R-Mall seems to have an aura
of safety and welcome. However, this is true only of the footpath directly abutting the Mall. At either end and across the road as suggested earlier, the area is dark and could be seen as threatening. The street entrance of a large store: the Westside store is also a source of light and movement of people.

R-Mall appears to create a sense rootedness in its suburb and a sense of community, but there is also a sense that this community can become very parochial, something substantiated by our research on Mulund itself – that it defines itself by strongly excluding those seen as outsiders. This then also means that women are required to reflect their belonging visibly. In addition, the very sense of the local produced by some malls then acts as a barrier to the vision of the mall spaces as a global-nowhere space.

Inorbit the third mall is built around what used to be a garbage dump. The mall, in terms of square feet of retail space certainly the largest of the three – is located on the Malad Link road, perhaps the most representative of a nowhere space. This is an area that has only recently in the last decade been inhabited and substantial parts of it were earlier marshy land.

Inorbit is located within a larger complex: Mindspace also built by the same company. Mindspace houses largely the expanding BPO industry. The effort appears to be creation of a kind of lifestyle. Given its location as an emerging cosmopolitan suburb in terms of the heterogeneity of its population, sought as a desirable residence by young upwardly mobile professionals, this mall that was built on literally nothing perhaps is the mall that most transcends its sense of place.

The Mall has a number of benches scattered all over (certainly more than any of the other malls) for people to sit. And one finds that almost all of the benches are being used – either by young people talking on their cell phones, by mothers feeding their children, and by friends chatting.
The mall spaces in many ways have begun to approximate for a filtered group of people, spaces where they can hang out. It is worth however, engaging with the limitations of such spaces, especially for women.

3.7 Gendered Embodiment in the New Spaces of Consumption

In the daytime, the mall space is dominated by women. Women are walking around the mall – strolling, gesturing, browsing, often with other women. On weekdays, one sees a large number of apparent home-makers largely browsing, eating lunch and drinking coffee at random hours. When I say, walk – I mean that literally – for in most of these malls there is little space to sit outside of the restaurants. I saw several women in the up-market restaurants talking, laughing and gesturing loudly; their body language demonstrating a sense of comfort and belonging that one has not really seen anywhere else. These were largely upper-middle class women often in what appeared to be kitty party groups (especially in R-mall). There are also college students and professional women in their lunch hour (especially at the High Street Phoenix mall).

I watch this sense of “comfort” carefully and notice here unlike on the streets women do not appear to look over their shoulders in anxiety. This is not to suggest that anxiety is absent in their demeanour but this anxiety seems linked more to appearance as I watch women reapply their lipsticks, look at themselves over and over in mirrors in clothes shops and department stores and keep fiddling with their hair. I asked one woman I met browsing in a clothes store whether she felt less worried about being stared at in a mall – and her response was telling. She said she’s not worried about being attacked but she’s much more aware that she has to dress in a certain way to avoid being ‘out of place’. On the street she said while she was careful of attack she felt less visible. In a mall she felt much more aware that people might judge her.

One notices that these spaces have unofficial dress codes signifying belonging. This idea of appropriate clothing is one I dwell on in length in this chapter. In these contexts women often play out various scripts of femininity, evocative of
the ‘docile disciplined bodies’ suggested by Michel Foucault (1977: 135-169). In this sense then while on the one hand women are present in the public in their roles as consumers, they are also simultaneously the consumed. In their dress, deportment, and gestures women demonstrate an internalisation of the male gaze. Moreover, it is worthwhile noting that much of the consumption and purchase that takes place is either part of the apparatus of disciplining female bodies or an effort towards the embellishment of the private realm underlining women’s private location. At the same time, it would be simplistic to see these practices of dressing as merely disciplinary effects – many of the women in these spaces are wearing particular clothing in explicit rebellion of the norms of their homes and communities. One young woman spoke of how she would change her clothes in college because she was not allowed to wear sleeveless t-shirts and blouses at home.

Discussing t-shirts and blouses, it is important to mention the proliferation of t-shirts with various messages on them. These provocatively read: Eye-Candy, Porn-Star, Single & Unavailable, Temptress, Sexy, or even Pop My Cherry suggesting in various ways women’s sexual availability. We see them in stores and on women in malls and elsewhere – they seem to speak simultaneously of a new sexual assertiveness on the part of women and a sense of internalising a vision of themselves as sex-objects. Despite my own sense that such co-opted sexualities do not represent any kind of a threat in the form of a radical questioning of gender or sexual norms – they appear to cause no little anxiety to the guardians of societal morality. These anxieties are reflected in college dress


68 In a workshop with young lower-middle class college going women who are first generation learners, they described how they were not allowed to wear jeans outside but would buy them and wear them with other women friends at home. What they articulated was the pleasure of certain kinds of clothing, partly because it was forbidden and partly because it signified another world to which they desired to belong. As one of the girls put it, “We can imagine that we too are modern”. ‘Modern’ is not a random choice of words, it represents for these young women, the world that they, through their education, have access to in some ways but not in others for at home they need to demonstrate even more clearly that in being “allowed” to access education they have not lost their “traditional” values and become too “modern”.


codes discussed in some detail in Chapter 2 and the policing of young couples in public spaces. Many colleges and universities across the country have instituted dress codes. In most cases, girls are prohibited from wearing jeans and sleeveless tops. In some cases, uniforms are prescribed for college students.

Women’s own articulations reflect a kind of schizophrenic effort to both conform and rebel. One young woman in a t-shirt that read: Eye-Candy – said she wore it because it fitted well and wasn’t too concerned with what it said. Another young woman in a college workshop where we were discussing dress-codes was wearing a t-shirt that said ‘Single & Unavailable’ – she said that she felt dress codes in college were acceptable to ensure that students dressed appropriately.

The important thing to note here is that the tools of modernity in the shape of attire and often demeanour do not replace the traditional, they merely modify and mediate its expression. There is a whole new trend where women wear western outfits that are the height of fashion accessorized with their mangalsutras, sindhoor, chooda or other signs of Hinduness, particularly Hindu marital status. Talking to a group of women about the contradictions that this might suggest I was taken aback to hear vehement protests. “I am not embarrassed about wearing my mangalsutra with my Jeans”, declared one woman. “I don’t see what’s so incongruous about it”, argued another. “I can wear western wear but that doesn’t mean I have to let go of my Indian identity”, said a third.

I also recollect reading a newspaper article on how symbols of marriage were now fashionable in a world of various soap operas where women sport medallion-sized mangalsutras. In a pan-Indian way – sindhoor, mangalsutras, choodas have transcended their regional and community locations and may even be worn as accessories. But before one is tempted to view these acts as subversions, it is important to note their role in women’s efforts towards manufacturing respectability.

In an interview on dress codes in colleges, one principal suggested that it was not just the length of the skirt or the depth of necklines that were a problem but also the messages on clothing which she felt were obscene.
These visible symbols of marriage in the public space act as ‘keep-off-I’m-taken’ signs for a public that is well able to decode them. Women in fact report that they get less harassed when they display their ‘marital’ status. In fact even women who are not married wear them when they travel late at night. I would like to argue that these function as barriers as effectively perhaps as veils establishing women’s private location even as they enter the public. I am not suggesting here a division between the private and public but in fact the opposite— that such markers can create a bubble of what appears to be the domestic even as women ‘transgress’ it. In the fifth chapter I examine the gleaming glass windows of coffee-shops to argue that these too work as modern/post-modern veils to establish women’s respectability within them.

At the same time women’s articulations of their experience in malls, more particularly of their sense of their bodies and capacity to wear clothing they enjoy seems to suggest that despite these boundaries and limitation, women nonetheless find enjoyment in these spaces.

Preeti who is a management consultant says, “When I go out I often worry about whether I’m dressed appropriately. Somehow one wants to fit in and look like one is aware of the latest trends. I often go to shopping malls to check out what the fashions are.” Rajul who is an interior designer says, “I keep myself informed about fashion trends. It is important in my profession to project the right image. I would not want to be seen in clothes that are outdated. It would be embarrassing.”

One of the women I spoke to in R-Mall said that she and her husband come to the mall on weekends and she wears clothes that she doesn’t otherwise wear as she lives with her in-laws who are quite conservative. “This is the time we can spend with each other and I like to look nice for him (the husband)”, she said.

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70 As an aside, I remember a discussion where one woman I know who travels late at night said she had a cheap mangalsutra that she wore as protection. I argued from my own political position that I could not envisage wearing one even for practical reasons like protection. A third woman with us exclaimed in horror at the sacrilege of this woman desecrating the symbolic value of the ornament in this way given both her cavalier attitude to it and her single status.
If these mall spaces are not spaces of false consciousness and I do not believe they are, nor are they spaces of unmitigated agency. Hillary Radner (1999) writes: “Does consumption always work in the service of a hegemonic structure or are there ways in which consumption offers a space for resistance against the very structures it would appear to represent? (p.86). Meghan Morris’s (2000) study of shopping centres in Australia initiates a “feminist study” of shopping practices implying the possibility for shopping to be a form of critique. Morris writes: Like effective shopping, feminist criticism includes moments of sharpened focus, narrowed gaze – of sceptical, if not paranoid, assessment. (p.171)

Women’s presence in these malls and the imagery of consumption (through advertising) often suggests a spatial mobility – women are represented walking in public, driving cars (including Sports Utility Vehicles) – even if these continue to be circumscribed by a certain femininity. On the one hand I would argue that these reflect once again the creation of spaces for some women to engage the public in a limited way while erasing the possibilities for subversion. Nonetheless such public visibility of women does not go unnoticed and, as Doreen Massey (1994) argues, is in any case threatening to an established patriarchal order.

Clothing is also very important in facilitating access and signifying belonging, in other words clothing marks clearly your class. As the following quotes suggest women think a great deal about what to wear.

*On one day, I was just hanging out with a cousin when my aunt decided she wanted to go to the mall – and I was dressed in my dirty jeans and shapeless t-shirt and had oil in my hair. I was so embarrassed I wanted to die. I prayed I would not meet anyone I knew. (19 year old college student).*

*There’s no dress code as such. In fact if you look too dressed up it looks like you are trying too hard. (18 year old college student).*
Well... you have the wannabes, the behenjis and the normal girls. The wannabes try to look cool but we all know they are not. The behenjis have lower-middle class suburban written all over them. The normal girls... will probably wear jeans and a t-shirt. (Excerpted from conversation with college students).

The important thing about looking like you belong in a mall is dressing right but looking like you didn’t try at all. Taste and distinction as Bourdieu (1979) suggests are signs that are encoded into practices of embodiment. Bourdieu (1979) writes:

Taste is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs, of continuous distributions into discontinuous oppositions; it raises the differences inscribed in the physical order of bodies to the symbolic order of significant distinctions. It transforms objectively classified practices, in which a class condition signifies itself (through taste), into classifying practices, that is, into a symbolic expression of class position. (p.175).

Angela McRobbie (2004) engages Bourdieu’s ideas of taste and distinction in analyzing two British television programmes of the ‘make-over’ genre – where individual participants (or ‘victims’ as McRobbie calls them) are ‘helped’ to transform themselves by experts. McRobbie points out that for the upper-middle class experts – their own good taste is presented as having been acquired naturally as part of how they were brought up. She suggests that despite the apparent distribution of cultural capital in the act of such transformations of the self, they are not democratizing for two reasons. One, they enshrine the superiority of the upper-middle class tastes and habits. And two, there is no suggestion that the ‘victim’ will ever truly belong to the same social group as her superiors. McRobbie (2004) argues that in the present British context this may be seen as a demonstration of how class antagonism is legitimizied. She suggests that women moving into the workplace have brought about a certain kind of autonomous feminised individualization where new gender hierarchies are reflected through new regimes of polarized class differences “shabby failure or well groomed success” (p.101).
I would like to extend McRobbie’s argument into the Indian context in a tangential vein. For instance increasingly, exclusive designers now have shops in the malls selling clothing that is often copied by the comparatively less expensive department stores. It is however, important to note that such clothing is still expensive. A pair of cotton trousers in a mall department store like Shopper’s Stop or Lifestyle will cost upwards of Rs. 800. However, a similar pair of designer trousers will be easily between ten and twenty times that amount. Elizabeth Wilson (2001) however does, in a study of fashion as a spectacle suggest that Simmel’s trickle down theory of fashion is inadequate to understand the many different and simultaneous fashions of different groups in society.

In the malls one sees many young women who appear to be dressed similarly. This includes both consumers and shop assistants. However, as the young college women articulate this apparent democratization of fashion does not suggest a levelling of differences between them. I argue that the apparent democratization of clothing creates a false sense of equality that fools no one. Not the lower-middle class women who dress like their upper-middle class compatriots, and not the upper-middle class women who can tell at a glance ‘who really belongs’. The shoppers might confide her anxieties regarding body-shape to the shop assistant but this does not render irrelevant the counter that marks the haves from the have-nots. The fact remains that the shop assistant cannot afford the dress the shopper is trying to fit into.

The saleswomen in the malls are inevitably dressed in skirts and blouses and usually choose to speak to customers in English underlining the location of the mall in a specific culture-class context. These young women and others like them inhabit almost schizophrenic worlds – living in their one-room lower middle class homes and working in the swanky several-thousand-square-feet malls where they are required to display the accent and demeanour which reflects the class and status of the goods they sell.71 They are typically not very well paid but

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71 One magazine article profiles the young women who work in these malls and the different worlds they straddle from their one room chawls to the malls and how they transform themselves to perform their roles as sales-women in these malls. (Saumya Roy, ‘Twixt Chawl and Mall’, Outlook, Jan 12, 2004)
are trained to dress in a manner that mimics that of the customer and to embody simultaneously an attitude of servitude towards those who are potential customers and reserve to those who appear to not be able to afford the goods. Those in the latter category often get treated with the condescension. In this sense objects in a larger class matrix transfer their aura to those who sell them.\textsuperscript{72}

A group of lower-middle class young women at the High Street Phoenix said that they only come there in a group as it gives them a sense of comfort. They are intimidated both by the luxury as well as the demeanour of the sales assistants towards them. They said that they tend to stroll outside the shops and not enter them.\textsuperscript{73}

Shop assistants arrive at their jobs largely in salwar kameez’s which they change into the typical skirt or trousers and blouse uniform of the store for which they work. In conversation some of them reveal that though their parents think it is acceptable for them to work as saleswomen and even return home late when they are on the later shifts, it is still not really acceptable for them to wear knee-length skirts (though jeans and trousers with un-tucked tops may be acceptable), as these are seen to be the dress of pre-pubescent girls and not fitting for young women to wear. They are also seen as one young woman told us, to be the dress of the Christian women.\textsuperscript{74}

Young women also articulated the embarrassment of not finding clothing in their size, particularly if they were large.\textsuperscript{75} They said that saleswomen would be most unapologetic and the sub-text they read was that they could not expect to find

\textsuperscript{72} This condescension is located in a larger marketing strategy – a luxury commodity can only remain one if few people have access to it. The dilemma is how to restrict access while expanding consumption and markets. One advertising professional who has researched such luxury products pointed out that for instance brands like Mount Blanc and Louis Vuitton are not happy with the idea that people who mispronounce their brand names can now buy them because it lowers the symbolic value of the brand. In explaining this to me she used the notion of ‘imagined communities’ of elites.

\textsuperscript{73} Typically they would not buy but would perhaps eat an ice-cream or buy a small ticket item.

\textsuperscript{74} This is important because in a parochial sense it is Christian women who are seen to be more sexually forward. This is an important comment on the ways in which community marks women but a longer discussion of this is beyond the ambit of this essay.

\textsuperscript{75} From what they tell me, one can never be too thin for today’s fashion.
something in their size if they did not conform to the standards of prevailing fashion. There is now some clothing in large size and also one store devoted to large sizes but young college girls are equally embarrassed to buy from these lines as this would to them appear as an admission of their inability to measure up.

In addition to sexual respectability women are also expected to produce sexual desirability in keeping with the globalised image of the new urban middle class woman. Class becomes a marker of women’s capacity to reflect a desirable modernity through approximating a kind of ‘respectable sexuality’. Being able to carry off certain kinds of skin revealing or form fitting clothing is seen as a marker of a woman’s confidence even ‘modernity’. In my research I encountered often the opinion that those women who can carry off an attitude, clothing or demeanour with a certain confidence are less likely to be publicly harassed by men. It also assumes that women belonging to a certain class are more likely to look comfortable in jeans or a skimpy top than women who don’t or are first generation wearers of jeans – the habitus that comes from possessing cultural capital. For instance, one woman in Lokhandwala, Andheri, articulated this when she said: *Wearing a noodle strap is ok for a smart girl but not for others who only look cheap.*76 The idea here appears to be that women who through their habitus can signal a social distance are not seen as soft targets for harassers.

I am more than a little skeptical of any notion that suggests that women and the way they hold themselves might be responsible for public harassment. My own discomfort here is that it appears as if the discourse of modernity then places on women not only the onus of manufacturing safety but also of assuming that when they cannot do so it is their own fault for being as it were inadequately ‘modern’.

If a selective visibility of women as professionals and consumers is desirable to the image of the city then the question we need to ask is – how does this impact these women’s access to public space? My interviews suggest that such access is

76 Lokhandwala is an upmarket area in Andheri West built in the 1980s.
limited to the privatised public spaces of malls, coffee shops and multiplexes within which also women feel compelled to manufacture not only femininity but also class respectability – that is to look like consumers who can afford to shop. Young women often articulated that there was an unspoken but no less real for that dress code in these spaces. The mall and coffee shops might be seen as a sanitized spaces where one encounters strangers but without the strangeness that might make them threatening. Sennet (1974) suggests that fashion is an important way of signalling particularly class and status in public places thus taking the sharp edge of the sense of anonymity and disorder. The pressures to conform and the apparent democratisation of clothing then must be read with the ways in which class circumscribes the ways in which women both see themselves and are seen by others and the implications this might have for their access to and comfort in even these limited spaces.

These spaces also manufacture the illusion of a public modernity. For instance, while couples in public spaces are censured for holding hands, and ostensibly threatening the moral fibre of Indian society, inside coffee shops couples, particularly heterosexual couples, may cuddle without fear. As long as they dress class-appropriately, 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.

These are environments which create the illusion of public space, carefully protected through glass barriers from where the “risks and uncertainties of everyday life are carefully edited out” (Banerjee 2001). These risks include the presence of the lower classes, particularly lower class men. Keeping out those deemed threatening however, does not take away the pressure to reproduce the structures of both femininity and middle-class respectability.
3.5 Articulating Desire: Women’s Narratives of Consumption

Despite my own reservations in regard to the new disciplines of sexuality as well as my skepticism about the capacity of spaces like malls and coffee-shops to offer anything resembling real liberation it is nonetheless important to ask what it is that these spaces offer women? What does the act of consumption do for women? In other words, does retail therapy work or does it merely provide a new opium for the middle-class female masses/classes? Here, one is compelled to point out that in many ways for urban Indian women, it is the market and the consumer focussed media that have become the spokespersons for modernity and that these are compelling voices. While it is important to examine the limitations of such consumption based modernity, it is also relevant to explore the spaces created by this to examine how middle-class women and indeed consumer culture are being represented/constructed.

The ‘sexual transformation’ engendered by the media and the processes of globalization, taken up with some enthusiasm by some sections—particularly the upper-middle—of the middle-classes, has in some ways expanded both the spaces where women can be sexual and the ways in which they might be sexual. I use the term sexual transformation as distinct from sexual revolution because the changes taking place are driven by a market-oriented media and consumer goods industry; they are premised not on ideological grounds but on economic ones and cannot be seen as revolutionary. Furthermore, to be sexual in the manner legitimized by these processes is to conform to a new vision of ‘modernity’ rather than to protest or rebel. Nonetheless despite my sense that this access to consumer goods is not a marker of agency, I asked respondents their own experiences of both earning and spending money and of being and becoming consumers in relation to questions of choice.

Most of the women articulate very strong positive feelings of control and access to choice related to their incomes. Poorva suggested that earning money gives her a sense of power. She says, “I thoroughly enjoy the fact that I make a lot of money. In fact, earlier when I went shopping I would feel a great sense of power when I realised that I could afford anything I wanted. Not that I bought too much
but sometimes if I felt like buying a Elizabeth Arden perfume that cost 3000 rupees all I had to do was pull out my credit card and not worry. I think that was a major victory for me. Being able to spend money on myself without guilt.”

Financial independence also often provides a sense of control and self-esteem. Says Naina, “Being financially independent has always been important to me. Not so much for what I can buy but because of what it signifies. When my husband and I married he was in marketing and I was in consulting. Because of the nature of the industries, I was earning almost twice as much as him – a situation both of us were quite comfortable with. But some of our friends were not. They kept suggesting to him that he move to consulting. I actually enjoyed the fact that I made more money than him. It seemed to redress the otherwise general gender bias in society.”

Leena articulates her sense of loss at having given up work to raise her child, “Even though I know I will eventually get back to paid employment, it feels weird to not be earning after so many years. It’s not very comfortable and yes there are probably things I used to buy for myself that I wouldn’t buy. It may not be rational because I know the worth of the time I give my daughter and it can’t be measured in money. But still having money can be empowering.”

Access to consumer goods can also mean the pressure to be perfect as Aalia suggests, “I enjoy spending money on myself but particularly on my house. Whenever I see something in a magazine, I feel like I ought to have that. Sometimes I worry that my house is not perfect and that it should be but most of the time I enjoy having beautiful things around me. I enjoy shopping and especially the malls – I live near a mall and love the smell of new things in the mall. Sometimes I just stroll and window shop.”

Not just the pressure to be perfect but also the pleasure of consuming, “At any given point I possess and use several brands of bath and shower gel. I love seeing them and the smells and textures give me great pleasure. I used to feel guilty about being a consumer beyond my needs but I enjoy it so much that I always succumb. Once I was discussing this with a friend who is a market researcher and she said that according to market research terminology women who spent on
skin care rather than colour cosmetics are seen to be inner driven rather than outer driven – that is do things to please themselves. This provided a kind of rationale to what I was doing even though I know it was so much hot air.”

Sneha articulates an awareness that consumption is not necessarily the answer, “I try and stay out of the consumerist rat race. In fact, my husband and I decided that we’d never own a house – it was too bourgeois. But of course a child changes everything.”

Consumption, especially of power toys can be a thrill as Rajul puts it, “I feel a strong sense of power when I drive. I feel like I am in charge and in control. I enjoy nothing more than driving long distance. And my husband is happy to let me drive. I would have hated to be with one of those men who think they have to be the ones to drive all the time.” And Shaila corroborates, “I enjoy being mobile and I love my car. I like knowing that I’m not dependant on anyone, not even my husband to get me anywhere. I enjoy the feeling of being my own person and the bigger the car the more confident I feel. At night, I like driving the Sumo. Men drivers don’t think they can intimidate you so easily then.”

Though none of the narratives could be read as feminist narratives, in fact, both Shweta and Sneha seem to implicitly acknowledge that consumerism is anti-feminist, they nonetheless articulate a connection between income and independent decision making. It would be fallacious to assume that the ‘power to consume’ is a source of liberation. Despite the circumscribed nature of this independent decision making, some of these narratives do articulate an agency associated with not being answerable for ones choices. Most of the women articulate very strong positive feelings of control and access to choice related to their incomes. Aalia and Shweta suggest a visceral pleasure in their consumption while Rajul and Shaila articulate a bodily freedom they feel at the wheel of a car. What is peculiar to these narratives is that they are all located in a particular class context. That is, these practices of consumption and the kind of incomes that give access to them would not be possible in a lower income context. While these choices are not necessarily liberatory by themselves, they do articulate the exercise
of a certain agency lined to pleasure – a pleasure that as Poorva articulates, she taught herself not to feel guilty about. It is important in a context where women are socialised into the fine art of denial and sacrifice from a young age not to underestimate the potential power of pleasure to create in the future more radical choices. At the same time, its limitations are also clear. What women appear to articulate is often a kind of corporate feminism – a concern with individual choices but not in ways that translate into political action or even see issues that are personal as political.

Middle classness has been framed differently in the last two decades. Prior to this there was a popular colloquial notion of ‘middle class morality’ – the perception that the middle class were bound by social norm, particularly sexual norms, in ways that the very rich and the very poor were not. In the last few years magazines like Cosmopolitan, Outlook and India Today have mapped the changes in Indian middle class sexuality through surveys. Though the authenticity of these responses can always be debated it is clear that the middle class is being visualised very differently. This is not to suggest that the heterogenous middle classes themselves do not continue to entertain a sense of their own ‘morality’ but rather to argue that the boundaries of this ‘morality’ may have shifted considerably. I argue that what has changed is that there is now an assumption that being middle class does not necessarily preclude being sexy. Negotiating sexuality as middle-class women often means engaging with questions of morality as well as pressures to be sexy and sexual, that is, to be heterosexual. In relation to the regimes of beauty and fashion to a great extent women conform in the quest of sexual desirability but respondents also articulate contradictions that suggest that they are not passive objects and do not necessarily accept externally imposed boundaries. They both conform to and challenge notions of appropriate femininity. Women suggest that there are changing notions of morality but nonetheless it continues to be important to be respectable. For women, being respectable often means playacting the scripts of sexual femininity in public while making it clear that private spaces cannot be transgressed. As professionals, the image that many respondents feel they have to
strive for is that of someone who competent yet feminine and who will not seek concessions to her gender but is yet not a feminist.

The media images of sexuality are certainly circumscribing but I would like to argue that their very presence creates a legitimacy for women to not just discuss sex but also to explore other avenues, even if they are linked to consumption, that might give them pleasure. I would like to argue that even as we seek a greater liberation that comes from women having real choices, it would be short-sighted not to recognise that in the short term we may be able to use all legitimisations of women’s pleasure in subversive ways to finally make a case for a more open-ended sexuality that is not tied to the practices of consumption. I would argue that among the reasons why feminism has not been able to intervene successfully in the area of sexuality is its refusal to engage with the ‘market’. I argue that there is a need for feminism to engage with ideas of consumption and desire if we are to be able to speak to a large majority of women.

3.6 Rethinking the New Spaces of Consumption

In a consumption driven economy, shopping is an act that is both respectable and respected. The buyer therefore occupies a very privileged position. In our research on Mumbai I found that the spaces where women, especially middle-class women, are visible are inevitably spaces of consumption: shopping malls, coffee-shops, lounge bars, night-clubs and discos. While many women articulate pleasure in these spaces, nonetheless, access to spaces of consumption demands a demonstration of the capacity to buy, and obvious, if unspoken, codes of dress and conduct underwrite women’s presence there. Moreover, while most of these spaces masquerade as public spaces, they are actually private spaces. Women’s presence in these spaces thus remains circumscribed and fails to adequately challenge the hegemonic narrative of the public/private binary.

Global capital has made pleasure related to consumption legitimate. However, this is a very limited understanding of pleasure. As I have suggested earlier, for women, middle and upper-class privatized spaces might offer a kind of
circumscribed and ‘protected’ fun, but this too is conditional. In this kind of fun, the risks are corporately calculated and managed by those who run malls, night clubs and other such spaces. And safety here has a price—the same space will not welcome a working class woman who does not appear to have the means to buy commodities. It is only as a consumer, and a conspicuous one at that, that a woman can have fun here. This notion of fun is then inextricably tied to the act of consumption.

It is important at this point to reiterate that new spaces of consumption like coffee shops and malls are not public spaces, but privatized spaces that masquerade as public spaces. Limited access to such private–public spaces creates a veneer of access for women, pre-empting any substantive critique of the lack of actual access to real public space. While 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.

As recent incidents have shown, despite the circumscribed nature of this fun, even these spaces of consumption are also being increasingly threatened by right-wing fundamentalists breathing fire and brimstone at ‘Indian’ (middle class) women’s increasingly western ways. In January 2009, a self-styled moral policing group attacked women who were lunching at a pub in Mangalore on the grounds that the women were ‘violating traditional Indian values’. Since then, a number of other such incidents have been reported in the region, including unprovoked attacks against women particularly those wearing ‘western clothes’ on the streets of Bangalore. Though these incidents have been geographically restricted to some parts of the country, they indicate a larger atmosphere of cultural conservatism brought on by anxieties about the very visibility of middle-class women without purpose, even in privatized public spaces.

Questions of morality in the new spaces of consumption are complexly layered. On the one hand, women are not just tolerated but actively desired not just in malls but also in spaces such as discotheques and pubs. 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. This might appear to contradict the
larger narratives that perceive women as a source of sexual disorder in the urban
context. However, despite the apparent contradiction the two narratives are in
reality part of the same logic. ‘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 bars/ pubs/ discotheques, muscle-men actively ensure that there is no
overt harassment of women. Outside these spaces of course, anything is possible.
These privatized ‘public’ spaces are then spaces where women who can afford to
‘buy’ (occupy) them are ‘safe’ in a similar tenuous and ambiguous way that they
are within their homes - that is safe from the unwanted attentions of outside men
(Phadke 2005).

Interestingly, as the mall developed around it, Fire and Ice closed shop for
various reasons among which were that the increasingly more accessible
(particularly to working class men) space of the mall with its discount department
store (Big Bazaar) and a fast food restaurant (MacDonald’s) created a context
which made the upper class women patrons of Fire and Ice the object of a lower
class male gaze: This situation caused discomfort and was not in keeping with the
image of the club. This is also the story that was circulated by the Fire and Ice
management. In view of this, it may also be seen as a move by the management
to reinvent that bar – something that is essential if they have to stay solvent in the
increasingly competitive world of up-market bars and clubs.

I have argued elsewhere that the anxieties around the mixing of classes –
particularly of middle class women with lower class men are responsible for all
manner of restrictions and regulations for women.

Even middle-class women who conform to normative ideas of respectability are
at best invited into the ‘privatized’ public as consumers. Despite their desirability
in these private spaces, women continue to have only conditional access, not a
claim to public space. Privilege, then, does not bestow, on even limited numbers of women, unlimited access to public spaces in global Mumbai.

Morality has not ceased to be an issue but it has been re-defined. There is still a notion of what it means to be middle class. Sexuality, specifically heterosexuality has become through multiple ways including media images and access to spaces such as the new spaces of consumption part of the narratives around the middle class. Women’s narratives through the interviews suggest that markers of femininity – both contribute to an expansion in the spaces that women may seek for sexual expression but also simultaneously ensure that these will not threaten larger structures of patriarchy. These ‘disciplines’ become the boundaries beyond which women cannot trespass. Women have to manufacture respectability in addition to being attractive.

Professional women might be found late at night sipping martinis in up-market Mumbai bars and Miss India aspirants might take to the cat-walk in high-cut-in-the-thigh and low-cut-at-the-neck swimsuits. Coffee shops provide women belonging to a certain class with spaces that masquerade as public to ‘hang out’ in. These coffee shops also become the sites where heterosexual romances are played out, something which I engage with in detail in Chapter Five. However, these are acceptable only so far as there is a tacit understanding that these are the external markers of modernity and that at core, middle-class women are as virtuous as they have ever been.

Much more work needs to be done before one can adequately analyse women’s complex and often contradictory relationship with a commodity culture. At the same time women talk of a sense of control vis à vis the act of making choices. In relation to questions of body image and consumption, it would be too pat and inadequate to dismiss their narratives as false consciousness. The sense of pleasure that women experience in ‘indulging’ the bodily experience is something that we need to take into account when we are attempting to understand the experiential discourses of sexuality in the 21st century.