Chapter 4

The Public Display of Private Sexuality: Case Study of Lingerie

4.1 Introduction

Her figure rivalled that of the epic Barbie doll. Her bra was made of fine lace and her fire-engine red panties whispered seductive messages. She stood there in a brightly lit corner of the mall her eyes unblinking and unembarrassed.

I stood there staring for a long while, watching others watch her and perhaps more significantly, watching others walk by as if there were nothing very unusual about her presence, passing her by without a second look as if it were perfectly acceptable to be out there parading oneself in one’s underwear. I was standing in the lingerie corner of a large department store in a mall and the statuesque long-haired woman I was gawking at was a rather life-like life-size mannequin. The year was 2005 and I wondered what had changed to allow such an ‘undressed’ figure, albeit a mannequin to become almost commonplace in the space of the mall.

This chapter furthers the arguments made in Chapter Three and engages with the specific case of lingerie in the public domain, focussing on the new forms of display, selling and advertising to ask if the greater visibility of lingerie has significantly transformed the ways in which female sexuality is seen in urban Mumbai. Does the visible presence of lingerie in malls and exclusive lingerie shops indicate a grater space for an articulation of female sexual desires? Does the presence of mannequins such as the one I was staring at mean that women might now dress as they choose?

In this chapter I look at the old and new spaces of lingerie display and sale as well as advertisements for lingerie, mostly print and a few television advertisements, and attempt to read between the lines to examine the various
meanings that attach to the display of women’s lingerie in early 21st century Mumbai and more importantly to ask what such displays might mean.

4.2 The Changing Face of Lingerie Display

My grandmother referred colloquially and collectively to all underwear (it wasn’t called lingerie then) as “unmentionables”. And in many ways, unmentionable they were in “polite company” until quite recently. But something seems to have changed at least in middle-class Mumbai where women are happy to discuss the intricate pros and cons of strapless versus transparent straps not just with each other but also sometimes in mixed company.

As Rajul pointed out, there was a time when one was so nervous about one’s bra strap showing since it was considered “not nice”. Now, she suggests that one is more concerned that the bra strap should be funky or interesting and often one actually wants it to show. It’s no longer considered to be “bad fashion or worse “bad behaviour”. Lingerie it seems in some select circles has come a long way from something that had to be hidden and dried in the deepest recesses of your bathroom to something that is an object of fashion. This is also apparently true of the ways in which lingerie is sold.

Department stores in malls and a few niche lingerie stores have changed the aesthetic of the display of lingerie for the middle and upper-middle classes. Prior to the department store, middle-class women’s lingerie was always sold behind small shop counters tucked away in discreetly opaque, if not very aesthetic, cardboard boxes.

These were shops that one would find in local markets usually close to railway stations as this is where many markets in Mumbai are. The shops would often be unmarked except of be a few samples pinned to a cardboard in the shop window or sometimes a headless limbless torso wearing a demure bra going by the brand name Maidenform or something similarly discreet. The shop rarely sold only underwear, usually being a mix of nightwear and underwear or sometimes, larger
shops that had small counters selling underwear. These shops continue to co-exist alongside the newer forms of display and sale and only a few months ago I saw a sign outside one such shop that read: *Ladies sales girls present.*

Apart from the few rather unremarkable displays all the underwear, both bras and panties were in drawers opening on the inside of the counter or in medium sized cardboard boxes that would be pulled out one at a time for the buyer to look at. The bras and panties were stacked inside these cardboard boxes without much concern for aesthetics of display.

Bras came in three colours: black, white and beige (also called skin – though the colour looked like nobody’s skin tone). There was no “fitting” as we now know it – that is nobody measured your bra size. Usually you found a size by trial and error and once you found a size that fit you, you went back for more. In these middle class shops there wasn’t much lace or colour on sale and bras tended to be functional rather than sexy.

There were usually naïve young girls selling them or dour middle aged men their expressions schooled into careful indifference of the fact that they were selling you unmentionable items of clothing. Neither were particularly trained to sell underwear and simply brought out the merchandise for your inspection. On your part, you chose as quickly as possible and in the words of one woman I met during my research in the malls, “got the hell out of there”.

Shweta recounted that when she was a teenager, there were no trial rooms and if you wanted to try out a bra you were sent into a little cubby hold that looked rather unclean surrounded by large boxes of goods. There was no mirror and one had to manoeuvre oneself around the boxes. She recollects that it was rather uncomfortable. Shweta’s reminisces resonate with my own. Only I also remember having been told by friends that these spaces often had peep-holes to facilitate the resident voyeurs and so would look around me anxiously to ensure that nobody could see.
At this point it is important to note that a cheaper non branded kind of lingerie has always been sold in public displayed on hangers and on temporary clothes lines on footpaths in various parts of the city from Maharashtrian Dadar to predominantly Muslim Mohammad Ali road and wholesale Crawford market (or Jotiba Phule market as it is now called). These are hung on bamboos and sometimes hangers with the bras strung up by one arm-strap without excessive consideration to how this might appear.\textsuperscript{77}

The basic premise behind this enterprise is the price and it is not just customary but expected that you will haggle. Panties are laid one on the other according to price range on the movable wooden stands. This space despite selling inner wear garments is not sexualized, but rather seems to be an extension of the bazaar aesthetic where women could potentially simultaneously buy night gowns, bras and bhaji. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that even before lingerie came out of the middle class closet, women buying on the streets would take their time to “touch and feel” the fabric and haggle over price. Even if there wasn’t that much choice, the options were all hung up and there was no hesitation, unlike in the little middle-class railway-station market shops in asking to see several pieces before deciding on one or none.

Earlier the bras here too mimicked the black, white and beige aesthetic of the middle classes mechandise but now there is a plethora of colours, fabrics and sizes and often there are a several such hawkers on the same street rendering the space almost over-run by women’s lingerie. Not only bras and panties but bustiers, camisoles and lace teddys are displayed apparently without a tinge of discomfort.

This is a fascinating space that deserves much more attention that is being given in this chapter. Among the questions that come to mind are the contexts in which this merchandise will be worn and I would hypothesize that the contexts will mimic those seen in the advertisements selling lingerie for middle-class women but for now that is mere conjecture and this study will have to wait for another time.

\textsuperscript{77} Strung up rabbit skins one friend called them.
4.3 Displaying Lingerie in the New Spaces of Consumption

A significant seventy per cent of the Indian lingerie market is unorganised. These are often the bras and panties that are hawked on the stands along streets that were discussed earlier. However the remaining thirty per cent is no small chunk and it is this branded version of lingerie that is the focus of this chapter.

Since the 1990s there has been an expansion of the brands available in the market and a non-exhaustive list includes: VIP, Triumph, Lovable, Vanity Fair, Daisy Dee, Libertina, Juliet, Rupa, Peter Pan, Enamour, Jockey, Van Heusen, Marks & Spencer, Body Care, Lady Care, La Senza, Lee Cooper, Trylo, Under colours, Victoria’s Secret, Aubade. In many cases a number of these brands are marketed by the same company. For instance Lovable, Vanity Fair, Daisy Dee (mid-price), VIP are all marketed by the same group, Maxwell industries. Lovable was launched in 1996, followed by VIP Feelings, and Vanity Fair and Try (a Korean brand of men’s and women’s lingerie).78

Malls are seen by owners and managers of up-market brands as ‘clean environments’ for the locations of lingerie stores, unlike the streets in India.79 I would read this articulation of ‘clean environments’ to refer not only to the physical cleanliness of air-conditioning away from the noise and pollution of streets but also its distance from the potentially contaminating lower class gaze in ways that were discussed in detail in the earlier chapter. When they say ‘clean environment’ they may also mean spaces where the kind of mannequin I was staring at, would not be gawked at, where a certain amount of display of plastic skin does not raise eyebrows.

In department stores lingerie is usually located in a corner of the women’s section of the store. Department stores like Shoppers Stop, Westside, Pantaloons and Lifestyle have a separate lingerie counter stocking both international and domestically owned brands of lingerie. There are also exclusive little lingerie

shops\textsuperscript{80} where the lingerie is displayed, on models and in racks of hangers, carefully clipped to the best advantage, where the potential buyer can see and touch it and it is not uncommon to see groups of women or girls deliberating over a possible purchase. Women buyers and salespersons in these spaces are now visible to others in the mall. In these malls there is no attempt to hide away the lingerie section, in fact, one might argue that the attempt appears to be to draw attention rather than to fade into the background.

Women hang around the displayed merchandise and pick up pieces to try on and head towards the trial rooms. As I watched them return, I noticed that they often did not buy. Picking up a conversation with one woman who was browsing I discovered that she was an architect with a project in the area and she often stopped by the lingerie section of this shop in the mall to while away her time between meetings, “just in case she found something that took her fancy”.

In these new spaces of consumption “fancying” the little bit of fabric that makes up a luxury bra could be a potentially expensive proposition. Lingerie prices for even Indian brands have risen exponentially in the last fifteen years and prices for a single item can range from Rs. 300 to Rs. 5000 or more for some brands. The Managing Director for India and Sri Lanka of an international lingerie brand was quoted as saying, that they keep pushing up the price points but women seem willing and able to pay for their products. The President and Chief Executive Officer of a department store was quoted in the same article saying that the average price of lingerie had increased from Rs. 278 to Rs. 409 while the sales were growing.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{80} Among such shops are the La Senza in Delhi and Bangalore and Aubade (now closed) in Mumbai (but these are of course not the only ones). These are located in major malls as these are seen to be ‘clean environments unlike the streets in India. La Senza claim that they do not have sales staff but trained ‘fashion consultants’ (Brand Watch, www.imagefashion.com, March 2005). The La Senza store located in Bangalore’s Eva Mall even has a lounge area and serves tea and coffee (The Hindu, Metro Plus, Banagalore, 25 July 2005). The La Senza Store in Delhi is located in the DT Mega Mall in Gurgaon. Adish Oswal, MD, AM Ram Trading which markets the brand says that “shopping for lingerie in India is embarrassing for women due to the absence of a specialized lingerie outlet and the presence of inexperienced and often male sales staff”.

\textsuperscript{81} Challapalli, Sravanthi. ‘Lingerie maker Triumphs despite higher prices’, The Hindu Business Line, Sep 05, 2009,
What is it that makes middle-class women pay so much for a product that is often, though not always, hidden inside their clothes? “I enjoy splurging on myself sometimes”, said one woman with whom I traded stories of how difficult it was to find some sizes. Another woman I spoke to said she only does it occasionally so it doesn’t really make a huge dent in her finances. A third woman looked wickedly at me and said that sexy lingerie and perfumes are her only indulgences. I will return later in this chapter to the question of why women are willing to spend so much money on one piece of lingerie. Many of the shops have saleswomen who are trained to measure correct sizes and offer advice. These women are available to discuss sizes with the customer and if she's shopping alone some of them offer to check the fit as well. The trial rooms in both the malls and the stand alone shops tend to be comfortable if not spacious and covered in mirrors on at least three sides, a far cry from sharing space with the storage boxes.

The shift in the display of lingerie might suggest both a greater space for and an increasing compulsion for women to be sexual. That inner wear need not be hidden away (both in a shop and on the person) as a guilty secret suggests a more public expression of women’s sexuality. Among women who wish to be seen as trendy, innerwear has become an important part of the whole look and it has become a fashion statement to wear low cut jeans or trousers that reveal the upper part of the panty or to have bra straps peeking out of wide cut necks. This of course is not new or uniquely Indian. Since the early 1990s in fashion shows and advertisements for high end fashion products and even designer products it has become almost de rigueur to show lingerie.

One article in a popular national newsmagazine discusses how times have changed in the world of lingerie – it claims that if our mothers were squirmy about their underclothes making sure nothing was showing, and the next generation was more comfortably casual about it not too bothered, the young

women today “match the colour of their bra straps to their shoes…”. This is a long way from the little chords that always lined inside sari blouses which were designed solely to keep bra straps in place.

In interviews, some professional women in highly paid positions of some power articulated how wearing lacy and satin lingerie under their buttoned blouses and straight trousers (the new uniform for corporate women) makes them feel more feminine and sexy. Susan Faludi (1991) in her scathing review of the American backlash to the women’s movement points out that the conception of femininity embodied by restrictive clothing diminishes women’s ‘masculine threat’ within the workplace. The distinction between feminism and femininity however is not as sharp or static as Faludi suggests and both the selling and advertising of lingerie often slide uneasily and ambiguously between the rebellious and the conformist.

In a discussion with some college students, one of them said rather insightfully, that her wide necks and peaking out bra straps annoyed her mother intensely and so at home they were still a form of rebellion but in college everyone was wearing them and so not to do so might suggest you were too square and so became a form of conformism. The young woman’s response then suggests that what is happening here is far from uncomplicated. Rebellion and conformity then co-exist side-by-side rather than in watertight separate categories.

In interviews with upper middle class women, some of them articulated their decisions in regard to buying and wearing innerwear as acts of some agency and choice. As one woman put it in an interview: “I like the thought that under my demure Indian *salwar kameez* is the satin and lace lingerie appropriate for a sex-goddess”. Another woman said she liked to match her bra colour to her clothes. A

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83 Lingerie has been used in the past as an element of rupture. Art Historian Lucy Bowditch (2001) discusses a collaborative effort between Korean artist Nam June Paik and cellist Charlotte Moorman where Moorman during a performance plays the instrument nude from the waist up except for Paik’s piece of TV Bra for Living Sculpture – a clear plastic bra made out of two mini-monitors. Bowditch writes: “The breast, or its fetishized equivalent the bra, as the site of desire and attention has been replaced by the TV through the boob tube, the device used for mass communication replaces that which is private, intimate apparel.”
third said that no-one could police her underwear. A fourth talked of how she liked to wear satin and lace lingerie in reds and purples but since she lived in a small flat with several others mostly in-laws, she had to dry her ‘risqué’ underwear hidden under her towel at night.

I would like to argue that women are willing to spend large sums of money on lingerie because they are convinced that this is something they are “doing for themselves”. Here one might argue the limited nature of choices offered and suggest with some truth that these expressions of sexuality are among the scripted ways of being sexual for urban women in 21st century India and may be seen as evocative of the ‘docile disciplined bodies’ suggested by Michel Foucault. However, it would be both patronising and fallacious to dismiss women’s experiences as false consciousness. In Foucault’s understanding the docile body is not one that is in the grip of falseness but rather one in the grip of training and habit. This training and habit here might be seen in the ways in which women are willing to make themselves into already pre-defined ways of being sexual. I will return to this line of argument later in the chapter but it does merit a much longer discussion, one which is beyond the mandate of this chapter.

Foucault's analysis of power has been successfully used by several feminist scholars, Susan Bordo, Jana Sawiki, Sandra Bartky among others, to understand gendered inequities of power. Foucault (1977) argues that the gaze is internalised to the point where each individual is his own overseer, exercising surveillance over and against himself. Bordo (1999) argues that Foucault's ideas are useful in understanding the practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of power and control. She argues that like Foucault, we too should not think of power as something one group has and uses against another but should focus on the "network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination in a particular domain" (Bordo, 199:167)

Foucault (1983) also pointed out that where there is power there is also resistance. To which Bordo (1999) adds that prevailing norms have transformative potential, the female performance of docility may have
consequences that are personally liberating or culturally transforming. She points out that Foucault's work enables us to both understand the 'grip' of systemic power on the body and to appreciate the 'powers' of bodies to resist that grip.

Sandra Bartky (1990) lauds Foucault’s account of the disciplinary practices that produce the “docile bodies” of modernity but critiques his assumption that bodily experiences are undifferentiated. She suggests that men and women have different relationships to the institutions of modern life. Bartky examines some of the disciplinary practices that produce a “feminine” body – “those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface” (p.65). Bartky argues that these disciplinary practices reflect a modernisation of patriarchal power. She suggests that modern disciplinary power regulates women without violence or public sanctions, by centring normative femininity in a woman’s body – specifically its assumed heterosexuality and appearance (p.80).

Much of the advertising for women’s lingerie carries with it the suggestion that the intended audience is the man in her life who has to be either enticed away from other interests or seduced into not straying. Some do focus on the pleasure of wearing luxurious or sexy innerwear but these too are often located firmly within normative heterosexual contexts. And as many women have articulated in interviews sexy innerwear is often not the most comfortable. In different interviews respondents pointed out that under wired bras that push one’s breasts up supposedly enticingly often dig into the skin, thongs which are supposed to be sexy minimalist underwear lodge themselves uncomfortably between the buttocks. One respondent suggested that, strapless bras sometimes hold up by sheer anxious will power.84

Using advertising images from the media I would like to suggest that the apparent public displays are indicative not of a greater acceptance for public

84 In fact one of the popular myths in regard to the desired shape of a woman’s breasts – firm and up tilted is the (for most women dreaded) pencil test. A pencil is placed under a woman’s breasts; if it falls down she passes, if it stays where it’s placed, she fails indicating sagging breasts.
expressions of sexuality but showcase in fact its location firmly in the private domain.

4.4 Lingerie Advertising: The Private Location of Public Intimacy

Looking at advertising one realizes that what is being promoted is the trend of innerwear as outerwear. That the trend is supported by consumer markets is demonstrated by the fact that there are market study researches being conducted on it. Women’s innerwear in India is pegged by KSA Technopak, a market research company, as the highest growing segment in apparel. That lingerie is literally serious business is testified by the fact that there is an annual All India Body Wear Meet, the first of which was held in Kolkata in 2004.

The last decade has seen the arrival of a number of international lingerie brands in India. The Lovable brand of women’s innerwear appeals to what they classify as the different facets of a woman – practical, professional, seductive, virginal, and elegant. Among their ads, one print ad for a design called Rebelle has the accompanying line: Explode Softly. Explode softly does carry more than the suggestion of orgasmic innuendo and has the woman unzipping her skin coloured body suit to reveal her blue denim coloured bra. While it carries with it the posture of the male gaze suggested by Laura Mulvey, at the same time it does focus on the woman’s pleasure.

85 In the US, in 2003, a market research study was conducted specifically on innerwear being worn as outerwear, focusing on identifying and profiling the consumers who are wearing innerwear as outerwear, analyzing how long they have been part of this trend and which brands and items of innerwear are most often worn fully exposed. See: http://www.npd.com/fashionreports/innerwear_outerwear.html.

86 Businessworld, February 2004

87 According to KSA Technopak, the lingerie market in India is expected to grow by almost 700% by 2009. They suggest that the growth of the lingerie market has been aided by new retail space with the rise of malls and emergence of organized retail formats. (Purvita Chatterjee, Business Line, Hindu, 21 September 2005).


89 I know from a short stint in market research that these classifications are arbitrarily arrived at in an office somewhere and then tested out in focus groups conducted for the purpose of understanding consumer responses.
It is difficult to understand or theorise the nature of this pleasure – or to claim it as pleasure at all given that the depiction of women’s bodies is steeped in feminist debates about the male gaze.

Mulvey's (1975) work on the male gaze recognises that viewing is a phenomenon which incorporates gendered dimensions of power. Mulvey's theorising, however, does not leave much room for the female spectator. Suzanna Danuta Walters (1999) argues that for Mulvey the female gaze seems to be characterised either by narcissism or by a kind of masochistic identification with one's own objectification. She argues that appears to be no space for an "authentic female gaze". Walters discusses Radway's (1984) work on women readers of romance and Hobson (1990) on women watchers of soaps and argues that there exist possibilities for "reading against the grain". These readings are derived through ethnographic and interview based studies. In relation to the female gaze she writes: "The motivation for much of this spectatorship (of female gaze theory) is to move away from situating women as victims, completely unable to do anything but consume our own objectification… Female gaze theory locates resistance in women's ways of seeing images and constructing meaning" (247). At the same time she cautions that just because the possibility of reading against the grain or subversively exists does not automatically suggest that a majority of women will do so. We should not forget the unequal power and male domination present in the mass produced imagery.

Another ad for a Lovable design called Encircle the wireless under wire bra, is much less subtle and is sold with the rather patronizing line: The bra inspired by physics. Appreciated even by dumb blondes.

Lovable sells a T-shirt bra called Tease. A television ad for the product has a teenage girl appear on the screen with a t-shirt that reads: ‘Look hard’, in the next frame ‘And you’ll see’, Next frame: (just) Words. And the voice over tells us that its USP is its seamless so one can wear t-shirts without the seam showing. It also underlines the need for women to wear fitting t-shirts that are in fashion without displaying the bra seams which would be considered tacky. Fashion rules now dictate that a bra strap showing is sexy (unlike in the past when it may have been
seen as untidy, among other things) but a seam showing under through the clothing is an indication of lack of style.

One print ad for the Bodycare range of underwear has a white couple in a playful mood in bed with a line that reads: *Pleasurable moments are spent in bodycare comfort*. Another ad has the woman standing wearing lacy panties and bra, a ring of diamonds glittering at her navel and ears, holding a choker of white stones at her neck. We can see the reflection of her back in the mirror behind her as she looks to a point outside the frame not meeting the readers’ eye. It is a classical position assuming the active male gaze and the passive female recipient of it.

*Vanity Fair* has one print ad that has the woman give a seductive sidelong look at the reader while a host of little men illustrated as colourful insects surround her suggesting that men are drawn to her as moths to the proverbial flame that will devour them. The text reads: *Fatal attraction*. The Baseline for the product reads: *crafted from desire*. One might read this ad as suggesting that women might also become femme-fatales in the right lingerie. However, while the ad does not appear to censure this, nor does it in anyway suggest that this is a desirable mode of being for women.

Much of lingerie advertising is located in the context of promoting heterosexual intimacy. The brand *Jockey* advertises men and women’s innerwear together with the line: *Jockey: The next best thing to naked*. One print ad is in two separate frames, one of which features the woman by herself and the next the heterosexual couple. The first frame has the woman watching herself as she undresses. The second frame has the man sitting on what appears to be a kitchen counter as the woman stands between his splayed thighs feeding him a strawberry. Both wear white underwear and the man even wears socks (part of the *Jockey* range for men). The suggestion seems to be that the innerwear creates the intimacy of togetherness or privacy and invites the reader to play voyeur.

Not all heterosexual intimacy has been acceptable to the powers that be.

In 1998, models Bipasha Basu and Dino Morea advertised a Swiss brand of underwear brand Calida. The image had Dino Morea tugging Bipasha Basu's
panty with his teeth. The tagline read, "And you thought your appetite for indulgence could only be whetted by Swiss chocolates". This was clearly unacceptable to the then Minister of State for Cultural Affairs, Anil Deshmukh.

A French brand called Aubade was sold exclusively during my research though a store called Studio Lingerie at the High Street Phoenix mall, on a floor that houses only designer wear and accessories. The outlet is now closed. The baseline for their products was: wear to seduce. It was run by a French man-Parsi woman husband-wife team, and in a conversation with them, the husband smilingly said ‘what better way can women occupy themselves than to shop and look beautiful’, while his wife visibly cringed.

Aubade had a monthly newsletter sent by e-mail. The June 2004 newsletter subject line reads: Tempt him away from the football. Inside the mail asks: Fed up with football? Our lingerie will make your man think twice about putting the TV on!!!. In the November 2004 e-newsletter, Aubade offered two new collections: The Liaisons Dangereuses Collection and the Geisha Collection. In

90 The price range for Aubade lingerie is Rs. 1500-2300 (www.imagesfashion.com, May 2004).
February 2005 for Valentine’s month *Aubade* lingerie was marketed as the perfect gift for both him and her to give each other. The woman to buy some for herself and thus please her man (and also herself) and for the man to gift her (and by that token himself). Women’s lingerie is clearly cast as a sex accessory. In April 2005 to celebrate their first anniversary in India *Aubade* offered thanks to a host of unnamed customers among whom were:

*Our youngest client who was just 14 but looked 18!! 😊*

*The young bride to be who left our shop happy to have spent more on her lingerie trousseau than in her wedding outfit, claiming that the lingerie will be more useful and appreciated by her man than the outfit. Isn’t she right?, they ask.*

In March 2005, they encouraged women to buy *Aubade* to celebrate International Women’s Day, in their words: *A good occasion to remember that in today’s world Women can still be fragile even though they run entire businesses and homes!*

*Aubade*’s vision of why women wear sexy inner wear needs no additional comments. As suggested by their February newsletter, *Aubade* also encourages men to buy women lingerie. However, the proprietress at *Aubade*, Quorum section of High Street Phoenix tells us that though they sometimes get men wanting to buy lingerie for their wives or girlfriends they seldom know their size.91 Online *Aubade* offers tips for seduction with the disclaimer that these should not be taken seriously.

Advertising for lingerie smoothly juxtaposes the everyday – the All Day Wear bras by Lovable for instance – with the erotic and the exotic. Women in the ads are not necessarily always passive recipients of the gaze but appear to actively solicit a particular kind of reaction. This is substantiated by interviews where women articulate the ‘feminine power’ of assuming the role of the seducer. At the same time these images are disciplined by the unvarying slenderness and youth of the bodies advertising the lingerie.

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91 Apparently, some buy anyway (despite the fact that the prices start at Rs. 1000 and they do not take stuff back).
Jane Juffer quotes the work of Hillary Radner who discusses the “New Woman” described as the “unabashedly narcissistic professional woman”. This Radner avers is the woman hailed as the consumer who shops for her husband’s pleasure but as a means to “externalise her self worth as properly her own…The woman as subject is invited to take control of the process whereby she represents herself. At the same time, she is constantly reminded that she must submit to a regime that externalises figurability through product usage”. (Radner quoted in Juffer, p.31).

It appears as if the male gaze is no longer central to the image presented of the woman. However, the focus on women’s pleasure of various kinds and the representations that it throws up is not necessarily incompatible with the ways in which women were represented as objects of the gaze. Women instead are invited to pamper themselves or to splurge on a new luxury range of lingerie. Many women do articulate pleasure in spending money on themselves and enjoy the feeling of both control and indulgence that it gives them.

This might then offer a partial explanation to why women are willing to spend large sums of money on tiny pieces of crafted fabric. The amount spent on the product creates the sense of value that women place not just on the product but also on themselves. As one market researcher told me, women who spend money on products like lingerie or body creams and shower gels are in market research jargon referred to as “inner directed” (as opposed to those who are “outer directed” and spend money on more obvious items like colour cosmetics). The more money women are willing to spend on products that ostensibly only they (and their partners) will see, the more they are seen to value themselves. For middle-class women this is a powerful incentive to partake of yet another form of self gratification, retail therapy, that appears to affirm their self-hood assuring them that they do indeed love themselves.

Further buying particular kinds of products also provides the assurance not just to women but indeed to all consumers that they are indeed part of a class, the class that has arrived and is being wooed.
Advertising for men’s underwear is also often full of sexual innuendo but these tend to suggest the power of the product to attract women in the plural rather than the suggestion that it will drive the ONE woman in his life wild with passion. One ad that appears both in print and on television has the man wearing the *Euro* brand underwear being mock attacked by a slew of women leaving lipstick marks all over him in various hues of red, pink and purple with a line that reads: *Be prepared to be assaulted.*

Another television advertisement for men’s underwear has a pair of lacy women’s panties drying on a clothesline that are swept away along a charming Mediterranean town to unerringly land on a clothesline on which hang a pair of men’s *VIP Frenchie X* underwear. No sooner do the panties settle on the line than they glide across the line to delicately and coyly snuggle up to the men’s underwear while the words of the accompanying lyrics in a female playback: *Finally I’ve found the one and it feels so free now that it’s just you and me* personify the woman’s panty suggesting that *she* has found ‘the one’ but does not necessarily suggest that *she* is ‘the one’ or that the man here personified by the *VIP FrenchieX* underwear shares this perception. The sub-text appears once again the appeal of the product to women.

In fact, when VIP was first launched in India in 1971, it was advertised by actor Dalip Tahil who appeared in his underwear and maroon robe rescuing damsels in distress from would be molesters, once again focusing on the socially acceptable appropriate masculinity of the wearer. Interestingly when VIP Frenchie X advertised hunky studs clad in g-strings on large hoardings and newspapers across Mumbai, protests were made in regard to obscenity. The ads showed larger than life size men wearing skimpy briefs with the tag-line: *Makes a Big Impression,* once again playing on the image of size and virility. The police responded by issuing notices to the advertisers and manufacturers of the product.

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93 “I don’t think our X Factor ads are obscene. Mythological characters and our weightlifters have been wearing small briefs for years, but no one objects. Unless we show the underwear, how can we advertise it?” says Vinay Reddy, of the Maxwell group that markets the product.
to pull down the hoarding advertising. The manufacturers and advertisers responded by pulling down the hoarding ads but issuing a print ad with the visual of the man’s midriff, a bath towel wrapped around his waist, the top portion of his red briefs peeking out. *Now making a bigger impression*’ read the slug.

It is particularly interesting is that in the underwear market, it is advertising for men’s underwear that has come in for censorship as being obscene. Not just hoardings but also television advertisements have come under fire. Advertisements for Amul Macho and Lux Cozy brands of men’s underwear were banned from screening by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry in July 2007 under the Cable Television Network Act. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry banned both these advertisements deeming them indecent, vulgar and suggestive and thus violative of Rule 7 (8) of the Advertising Code prescribed under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act 1995, despite them being cleared by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI), the self-regulatory body of the advertising industry (Narrain 2008).

The Amul Macho advertisement begins with a demure woman apparently a newly wed her sari paalv draped over her head, descending the stairs of a common washing area, where other women have gathered and are chatting amongst themselves. As the woman walks down the stairs the other women look on. The demure looking woman suddenly holds out what is apparently the husband’s underwear (rather large) and stretches it suggestively as the other women’s eyes widen in what the viewer must assume is disbelief mixed with envy. She then begins to rub and squeeze it almost defiantly washing it. Her actions get more suggestive and she appears to be getting more and more turned and she suddenly pounds it as the other women wince. Her eyes are closed in some sections and she appears to be almost orgasmic. The advertisement ends with the punch line -- Amul Macho: Crafted for Fantasies and in the Hindi

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95 This advertisement is available at [http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=5559329442899560049#](http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=5559329442899560049#)
In the Lux Cosy advertisement, a washerwoman calls at an apartment to pick up the laundry and a man wearing a towel answers the door. She cooes at him, “Nikaliye na” (Take it/them out) as she eyes his towel wrapped body. The man stammers “Kya?” (What?) to which the woman responds “Kapde” (Clothes). As his towel drops, leaving him only in his underwear, she eyes him flirtatiously.

A similar advertisement with a woman flirting with the man in Lux Cozi was also
deemed obscene. This advertisement has a woman in a red bikini thanking the Lux Cozi clad man for finding her lost dog with a kiss on the cheek and clearly ogling his apparent erection as she does so. The tagline reads: Apna Luck Pehen Ke Chalo (Wear your luck).

Image from website: http://goodtimes.ndtv.com/gallerydetails.aspx?categoryid=4&picID=524&picno=6&ShowID=0#BD&cp

What these advertisements seem to have in common is that all of them have women ‘appreciating’ men’s underwear demonstrating a clear sense of sexual pleasure and even to an extent agency. I would argue that what was deemed obscene by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry is not so much the display
of men’s ‘assets’ but that these assets were being obviously and unashamedly enjoyed by women.

Another recurrent theme in men’s underwear ads is its contribution to men’s confidence and success. An ad for Jockey has a man in his underwear dominate the frame with another image of him in the shadows dressed for success with a copy that reads: You wear success with ease. It springs from the confidence and the comfort you feel within.

Hanes, an international brand of innerwear for men has a print ad with a sporty looking black man as the model. That people of other skin colour are apparently seamlessly integrated into the advertising of lingerie in India without any explicit explanation seems to suggest that lingerie is located in a trans-national space.

4.6 Desirability, Shame and Privacy

I would like to argue that the very public display of this so-called inner sexuality serves to reinforce the point that the final expression of intimacy is a private act. For women the act of becoming seductive yet respectable women is vested in the skill with which they are able to assume the outward appearance of sensuality while preserving an attitude that says look but don’t touch, being outwardly modern does not mean I am not a good virtuous Indian woman. This assumption involves the internalisation of the public – private divide into the body and psyche of the woman, now expected to carry off these contradictions without giving the wrong signals.

Jane Juffer (1996) profiling the selling and advertising of the lingerie brand Victoria’s Secrets in the USA argues that Victoria’s Secret succeeds where others fail precisely because it understand the need to locate lingerie in the private realm which allow lingerie to become an illicit pleasure without threatening the private-public boundaries which might suggest a more radical understanding of public
female sexuality. Discussing the Victoria’s Secret catalogues Juffer (1996) writes, “Bringing together the pornographic with the everyday in a format geared toward female pleasure and autonomy suggests a certain potential for deconstructing the private-public division that has worked to contain female sexuality within a traditional definition of home.” (p.31).

In the Indian context in addition the private and the public are often super-coded with notions of the Indian and the Global. The art of modernity is now not dissimilar to the one described by Partha Chatterjee in reference to colonial Bengal where women are expected to manufacture an outward modernity even as they preserve an inner modesty (reflective of their cultural Indianness). I would like to argue that lingerie is symbolically firmly located in the realm of the global-modern and does not, if it stays there, threaten in any significant way the over-arching structures of urban middle class super-woman-wife-mother based patriarchy. The right-wing ideologues harangues about women’s clothing, or lack thereof, only serve to underscore this.

A new play on the old acronym ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) interpreted as the Shivaji Park Maharashtrian grand-mother’s response to inner-wear as outer-wear, Ago Bai Chaddi Distiahe (Oh My You can See her Panty) only underlines the humourous and almost affectionate understanding that we live in two worlds: the modest Indian and the global modern simultaneously, without threatening to radically alter any power structures in the location of female sexuality. The ‘shame’ of showing underwear which might have held the potential to ask questions about women’s expressions of sexuality is immediately subsumed under the more conformist discourse of fashion and the generation gap in its perception.

Women strategize very carefully when they wear innerwear as outerwear: usually seen inside the ‘clean environments’ described by lingerie brand managers – inside coffee shops, night-clubs, up-market restaurants and discotheques and

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96 This view is shared by those in the business of selling as well. Paco Underhill (2004), marketing guru suggests that the American lingerie store, Victoria’s secret is selling sex appeal making it okay for the average woman to wear racy underwear. It treads the fine line between sleazy and sexy using pinks instead of reds.
malls. One never sees women showing underwear on a public transport. It is often carefully concealed behind a bulky jacket. The onus then is on women to simultaneously manufacture safety and respectability even as they demonstrate modernity and desirability, smiling all the time.

That inner wear has come (in some cases literally) out of the closet does not necessarily imply a change in the norms around sexuality in a spirit of radical questioning. I would like to argue that the display of lingerie parallels a display of women in ways that emphasize that such a public display is only legitimised by the fact that what is on display is merely part of the erotic demonstration effect of global consumer cultures and in fact underscores the point that the logical consumption of this public display (of both women and lingerie) will take place in private and its intended consumer is only one man: boyfriend or husband.

Is there space to reclaim lingerie from the supposed conspiracy of market and heterosexual privacy? The meanings that individual women and girls across class – those who buy in exclusive boutiques and those who buy in noisy bazaars, those who are the saleswomen and those who are the buyers – attach to the display, advertising, buying and wearing of lingerie are always fluid, often contradictory and very difficult to label as conformist or rebellious even at any one given time. At some level the display of lingerie also challenges our understanding of public and private, blurring them creating slippages in the ways in which we define both, even as it imposes new circumscriptions.

4.7 Whither Agency: Some Concluding Thoughts

In blurring boundaries however circumscribed the presence of lingerie in the public and its suggestion of sexual intimacy and pleasure alters something about the public and hence out capacity to engage with it. However, the question of  

97 It is important to underline once again here that a search for the celebration of female agency in seeking pleasure does not imply a dismissal of questions of pain and suffering. (McRobbie 1997)
whether some women’s capacity to buy lingerie visibly and semi-publicly, constitutes an act of agency, is a possibility I approach with extreme caution, perhaps even suspicion (for surely it cannot be so easy!).

My wariness has multiple locations, but here I will dwell on only five of them.

Firstly, buying lingerie as agency suggests unambiguously that the ‘world of commodities’ might offer some types of freedoms to women, perhaps sexual freedoms and even the suggestion of transgressive pleasures. Yet, these apparently co-exist in a world where an on-screen kiss brings charges of obscenity and bar dancers may not pursue their profession. If lingerie may be bought in public but couples may not hold hands on the street, what is the nature of this agency?

Secondly, when locating agency in consumption contexts it is advisable to never forget that consumption contexts are about many things but also inevitably about class inequalities. Buying lingerie in public assumes a certain cultural capital as surely as consuming lingerie in private assumes a bedroom with closed doors. The display of lingerie may then signify a strong class bias that reeks of what Mary John (1998) calls ‘pleasure for us and population control for them’. What is the nature of an agency that recognises only the desires of a certain class? What is the value of an agency that might only be expressed in the sanitised spaces of shopping malls, coffee shops, multiplexes, resorts and middle-class model homes?

Thirdly, an agency that seemingly endorses contemporary gendered norms of public and private must be examined very carefully for any signs of co-option. The agency that might be present in the buying and wearing of sexy lingerie is both privately exercised (in the shape of small rebellions that may bring pleasure) and privately located. While it may provide individual women with pleasure and a sense of agency, which is of course not to be sneezed at, at the same time it has few larger implications. What then can one call an agency which allows even a restricted political only when it is cast as personal.
Fourthly, when we speak of pleasure and agency what exactly are we speaking of? The pleasure of wearing sensual lingerie and the desire for the perfect toned deodorised bodies that this lingerie often demands may also be seen as similar. Both involve apparent decision making and agency – at the same time they may also be seen as performing as docile disciplined bodies – and therefore then as simultaneously agency and non-agency.

Finally, as feminists we have not adequately been able to engage with questions of agency. I would extend this to argue that nor have we been able to adequately think though question of pleasure. These questions of pleasure are at the root of some kinds of ‘agency’ that the global consumer markets purport to offer women. As feminists then it is as important for us to engage pleasure-agency today as it has been for us to address pain-violence-victim, always recognising that they mutually constitute each other.