

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved- (Sr. No. 62952)

Public Space and Women

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Abstract

The article proposes to problematize the notion of 'public space' by positing it in the context of access by male and female members of the society. The question of access to 'public space' is largely governed by the power equation that exists in the society. The patriarchal society restricts the movement of women and their access to public space and heavily curtails the freedom of women. This nonetheless handicaps the creative and enterprising activities of women who live in the shadow of fear for a number of reasons. The heavily sexualized popular culture accentuated by cultural products like films, songs, etc. breeds a kind of fear psychosis in women. No wonder while a large number of women face actual violence and atrocity, others undergo perceived threat even in their movement in public space. The article further seeks to make sense of the 'fear' perceived by women, and also tries to suggest possible measures that may be adopted to ensure greater safety for women. The article endeavours to shed light on the way the sexual violence against women may be understood. The issue may not be properly understood only by looking at it from the violence perpetrated against women by men, but by understanding the sexualisation of culture. The popular culture nourished by the patriarchy with its sexist ideology is largely responsible for commodification of women. The article gestures towards a more nuanced and critical understanding of 'space' and popular culture for better understanding of the nature of 'fear' perceived by women in their access to public space.

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Key Words- *Public Space, Popular Culture, Sexual Violence, Fear Patriarchy.*

The widespread incidents of attacks and atrocities inflicted upon women across the social strata have forced us to rethink the issues of women's safety in public space and also to critique the increasingly growing sexualization of culture. Most of the attacks hurled against women are primarily sexual in nature, and therefore a critical understanding of the prevalent culture and cultural products may help us understand the issue of violence against women. Even though women in urban spaces enjoy relatively greater access to various security arrangements and stronger surveillance, they still are not immune to attacks most of which are sexual in nature. No wonder this creates fear psychosis in women whose movement is severely curtailed. Such gruesome atmosphere prevailing in most of Indian cities and towns, aggravated by images circulated in print and electronic media, creates strong feelings of fear among the women folk. The present paper seeks to critically address this issue of 'fear' injected in women who are forced to remain confined within the four walls of the room.

Public space therefore is to be understood properly so as to locate the source of 'fear' in women. The fear of potential violence, particularly its sexual orientation, has been an integral part of the experience of most women in India across social, regional divides. While atrocity and violence on women in domestic spaces have been more or less discussed in a systematic manner, and legal options have been adopted in an organized way, sexual violence on women in public spaces remain largely a momentary affair making headlines in newspapers. In other words sexual violence inflicted on women in public spaces rarely attracts and sustains the attention of all concerned unless it becomes the so-called a grave one, like the unfortunate incident that took place in Delhi¹ in recent times. The fact of the matter therefore is the normalization of sexual violence in public space, and thus these incidents never attain that amount of seriousness that warrants public debate, academic discussion, and legal intervention. Such prevailing ambience retards the intellectual growth of women, curtails their freedom, endangers their job opportunity, and minimizes their

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participation in public spaces. The origin of real or potential fear in women about the sexual violence may be traced in the frequent incidents of violence on women in Indian cities and towns, as well as the horrifying images of violence and atrocity repeatedly telecast in electronic media. There are two primary aspects of the fear— a) frequent incidents of violence—molestation, rape, murder etc., b) inordinate/exceptional delay in the legal proceedings involved in bringing the perpetrators to book. The rampant incidents of various types of violence, particularly sexual atrocity, perpetrated on women irrespective of their age and social status become a source of deep fear. The sense of potential (sexual) violence against women emanates both from their personal experience of molestation, harassment (in work place or public places), torture, rape, murder as well as from the experiences of other women—known or strangers. In fact these experiences—direct or vicarious structure the daily lives of women whose movement is restricted, and they lose various opportunities. The daily occurrence of violence against women as reported in newspapers and television automatically create a deep sense of fear in young women who develop some sort of fear psychosis in facing the outside world. Interestingly such gruesome incidents force the guardians to restrict the movement of women outside their familiar environment for the fear of potential danger.

It has been seen that women's involvement in outer world has attracted sexual violence against them, and this has much to do with the patriarchal values operating in the society. In fact violence has been generally used as a tool to control, domesticate, and enforce the so-called discipline upon women who seek to transgress the socially sanctioned boundaries. It is for this reason sexual violence against women, and the resultant loss of so-called 'honour' are matters of extreme concern for women. Since the patriarchy looks upon women as the custodian of purity, bulwark of honor, the outraged woman becomes a burden in the eye of the patriarchal society. Such social pressure and the patriarchal culture compel ordinary middle class women to look upon the incidents of rape, and sexual violence as a kind of warning against stepping into the public sphere. The frequent occurrence of sexual

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atrocities inflicted upon women in public space has not only limited the free movement of women outside their home, but also forced them to internalize the patriarchal codes of correct behavior. The repeated telecast of images and reports of sexual violence against women might embolden the women from the urban spaces in challenging the prevalent condition, but these create terror in the minds of women from semi-urban places. This sense of terror is linked with the sense of helplessness, emanating from the prevalent social system that witnesses perfunctory punishment meted out to the offenders. Since the violence on women is generally sexual in nature, women are forced to 'accept' the socially permissible codes sanctioned by the patriarchy. It is not for nothing therefore that the guardians themselves seek to prescribe the correct behavior for women. Since sexual violence presupposes loss of honour presumably for women in a male-dominated society, the cases of sexual violence implant formidable fear in them. Such fear seriously impedes the development of women and girls who need to engage with the outside world for their material, intellectual development.

While the incidents of sexual outrage against women terrorize them and force them to make use of their freedom judiciously, the inordinate delay in the legal proceedings initiated against the culprits smashes the confidence in women. In most cases the wrongdoers remain scot-free and the lack of strict punitive measures against the offenders further compels women to conform to the social codes. It is often seen that despite the hue and cry raised against the heinous crime of sexual violence, this kind of incident fails to maintain sustainable attention from the public. Understandably people begin to look upon the incidents of violence as something normal, if not acceptable and thus women are advised to be cautious in their movement outside their household. In fact the incidents of rape, molestation and the lack of adequate legal action against the perpetrators have added to the sense of insecurity and extreme fear in women.

(En) Gendering the (public) space:

Women's fear of public space is informed by the patriarchal codes and structure. In fact space has always been a site of power, control and dominance. The patriarchal society

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bifurcates space to designate the inner, domestic domain ('ghar'/home) as space for women, while the outer world ('bahir'/world) is allotted for male activity. Therefore movement of women outside their 'home' is highly restricted, and poses severe surveillance as well as moral stricture. The access of public space therefore is regulated by the prevalent patriarchal culture and ethos which determine nature of the usage of that space. Since the patriarchy prescribes certain disciplinary norms upon women, especially in their use of the space, a specific public space may not always be accessed by women. This is because women's participation in outward activity is highly controlled by the social norms. In other words a woman may frequent park, restaurant, shopping mall, or night club, but her movement is always conditional. She must either be accompanied by a man or she should walk in these areas only when its 'legitimate' time for her. Understandably the occupation of the space may sometimes be taken as the indirect reason, if not justification, for the possible sexual violence unleashed on women. The common (social) perception of a woman loitering in a shopping mall is that she is wayward or morally fallible person. The same is however not applicable in the case of a man who is deemed to be rather smart in his lone use of the space. The issue of legitimacy becomes all the more vital and crucial in the case of women frequenting in the night club when she remains unaccompanied by a male friend. The insinuation obviously is that a woman transgresses the social norms and decorum when she steps into this space at night. The recent case of rape of a so-called 'escort' is sometimes justified on the pretext of her visit to the night club at Park Street in Kolkata². The society is so structured that the rape or assault of a woman for her so-called transgression of social and moral codes is vindicated. It is not difficult to understand why even the administration which is entrusted with the task of ensuring safety and security for people, issues certain directives in the form of "do's and don't's" to women who are asked to conform³. One of the inevitable prescriptions served to women is that they should wear decent costume, and they must not remain outside their household after evening. The administration and the police therefore function like the moral agency of the patriarchal society which looks upon women's entry into the public space as

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destabilizing force. Since space is socially constructed, spaces are designated for different categories of people. Understandably parks, shopping malls, restaurants may be considered as spaces for women, but in a particular period of time. Women visit parks only when they take their children with them. Such gendering of space restricts their access to and use of the space retarding the intellectual growth, minimizing the job opportunities for women.

Spatial Fear:

Women's perception of potential threat and danger inherent in a particular space is governed by their exposure to different kinds of space and its association with crime. Different research focused on the interrelation between space and women's fear. The majority of research shows that women fear particular kind of physical environment which is considered to be potentially dangerous⁴. The residents of large building will hardly use the space adjacent to their apartment and therefore this space becomes potentially threatening. In other words the space that is less frequented by people, subways, etc. becomes the areas for possible violence inflicted on women. It is because of their experience, direct or vicarious that women construct mental images of possible dangers. While women are afraid of 'dangerous' men (people like drunkards, etc.) the dissemination of information regarding various sexual violence prompts them to consider certain space as dangerous. In other words they calculate the nature of the space that may be dangerous, and they try to avoid that space. The recent incident of the brutal rape of a young girl in the capital of India in a thinly crowded bus perhaps crystallizes the public transport during night as extremely dangerous. Women therefore become susceptible to their use of public space. It is because of the association of certain kinds of space with danger and threat that women become afraid of using that space. In most cases it is seen that women become the victims of sexual harassment or violence in secluded place, thinly crowded public transport, lone parks etc. Different research reveals that women anticipate possible violence or harassment in multi-storey car parks, deserted roads, public transport (bus or train) etc. Urban women therefore constantly suffer from sense of insecurity and are afraid of possible sexual harassment in their

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use of the public space. It has been generally seen that women develop fear psychosis in visiting certain places that smack of possible danger like places adjacent to automobile shops (where male customers crowd), cinema halls of ill repute etc. In other words, spatial fear originates from the images and ideas repeatedly disseminated in different media. The incidents of brutality upon women in places like deserted places, lone bus stop, parks, multi-storey car parks, woods, alleys etc. create a sense of helplessness and insecurity in women who develop these fear psychosis and thus refrain from moving out. The wide circulation of these images of violence in media forces women to assume forms of veritable violence in them. Therefore it is seen that the physical environment turns into real threat because of certain conditions. The location of liquor shops for example ordinarily turns that place into a danger zone for women, because many a cases of molestation and violence take place near wine shops. It is also seen that sexual harassment and rape are also committed in deserted places.

Clearing the Space

There has been considerable surveys and analysis undertaken to chalk out the possible strategies for addressing the issues of unsafe public space. It may be presumed that the multi-dimensional nature of the problematic associated with space and spatial fear forecloses any unitary solution for the problem. We need to adopt multiple strategies to combat the increasing violence and crime on women. The 'Safety Audit' undertaken by Jagori⁵ conducts various surveys in the city of Delhi to address the issue and also to evolve the possible mechanism to make public space safe for women. Since public space is accessed by a variety of people, adequate security measures need to be arranged to bolster women of the necessary confidence to go out. The administrative arrangements like patrolling by the police, the deployment of female security personnel, adequate lighting, and other infrastructural facilities that might create a sense of security need to be made. It has been seen that littered areas, places lacking in light and other such places create haunting sense of helplessness in women. Therefore street lighting, removal of litter and filth should be

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undertaken to make the environment friendly and less threatening for women. It is observed that the perception about a space and its other associations is controlled to a large extent by the specific time in which the space is approached. Thus the litter-filled and shabby place may not be as threatening to women during the daytime as it happens in the evening or the night. During daytime the presence of people who use public space for their work is not perceived to be threatening, because they wear work clothes or their behavior may be a bit predictable. On the other hand women perceive greater degree of danger during night when they become unsure of the behavioural pattern of men. Another area of concern is the lack of sufficient toilets for women in public places. Women generally become victim of sexual atrocity during their use of toilet. In fact the lack of sufficient toilets for women makes them vulnerable to various sexual exploitation and violence. It is against this background increasing demand for the participation of women in urban planning is on the rise. The sense of insecurity associated with a particular space is to be located within the framework of the urbanization. The inputs of women working on the safety of women in public spaces must be incorporated in the construction and adoption for possible strategies and planning for urbanization.

Since the space is not neutral and produced by the gendering controlled by the prevalent patriarchal ideology, attempts to make public space safer for women must be undertaken at the ideological and material level. The ideological underpinnings like the compartmentalization of space for women and men etc, must go a long way to promote gender sensitization and the necessary changes in the perception. The proactive administration, cooperative society, promotion of gender equity and sensitization will help to end violence against women. The stricter laws and their enforcement, speedy trials of culprits will also help in creating sense of security in women. The infrastructural development, constant surveillance in different forms, and proper urban planning backed by the perspectives of women's security will eventually create confidence in women in coming out of the closet.

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1. The brutal rape and murder of a medical student in a bus in 2012 Delhi rocked the country with spontaneous outrage and anger ventilated by one and all. The incident has been extensively reported both in national and international press. ('Nirbhaya' Case). A 'controversial documentary called 'India's Daughter was made by the UK filmmaker Leslee Udwin and the Govt of India imposed ban on its telecast. For more information see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Delhi_gang_rape (accessed on 01.04.2015)
2. It has been allegedly reported that there was no specific investigation in the gang rape of a woman reported to be an escort in a car in Park Street, Kolkata in 2011.
3. It has been reported in newspaper that the Bidhannagar Police Commissionerate issued directives to women for 'decent dressing', 'proper behaviour' and the avoidance of late nights. See The Telegraph, Kolkata, September 10, 2014.
(http://www.telegraphindia.com/1140910/jsp/calcutta/story_18817574.jsp#.VSOtRIJG96o)
4. There has been considerable research works undertaken to link the fear of women and the physical environment. For a critical understanding of the issue see Valentine, Gill. *Women's Fear and the Public Space*. Built Environment. Vol 16, No. 4, 1990, pp. 288-303., and Pain Rachel H. *Social Geographies of Women's Fear of Crime*. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers. Vol 22, No. 2, 1997, pp. 231-244.
5. Jagori. *Is This My City? Women's Safety in Public Spaces in Delhi*. Jagori/ New Delhi: 2007. In addition to the study, Jagori has over the past few years carried out a Safe Delhi Campaign which targets different sets of people in the city to take responsibility to address the issue of safety for women. The activities have included a media campaign, public outreach, awareness sessions with young men and women across classes, and working with the police and authorities. For more information visit <http://safedelhi.jagori.org>

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