SPATIAL MOBILITY: A GENDERED PHENOMENON

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Abstract

As Edward Soja has rightly mentioned, it is very important to understand how "space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the 'apparently innocent spatiality of social life' and how human geographies often become filled with politics and ideology." (Soja, 1996) There have been several studies that point towards the inevitable inequality inherent in the usage of places and spaces. Be it class, gender, caste, religion, disability or any other parameter, spaces always come to embody dimensions of power based on these parameters. Thus one can say that the 'social structures' are always evidently or in a subtle form visible through the 'spatial structures.' To quote Lefebvre (1991), "space is produced by those who use it every day; to the extent that spaces reflect social norms." (Spain, 2014: 582) Hence, through this theoretical essay, I aim to bring to the fore, the latent spatiality of gender and how such spatiality tends to sustain the unequal gender relations.

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1. Introduction

"To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men." (Berger, 1972: 46)

The conventional understandings of gender disparity have focused on various aspects that lead to persistence of inequalities across societies. However, "mapping" gender inequality and considering the organization and use of space as embodying gender relations, points to a definitive departure from these conventional understandings. Analyzing gender inequity through the lens of space forces us to recognize how ubiquitous gender inequality is. It also brings to light the performative aspects of gender, moving beyond the binary considerations. We can safely say that the way we move or roam around the cities, i.e. our mobilities shape and are shaped by gendered practices. Mobility, however, should also include the element of motility i.e. the lived experience of potential for undertaking movements. (Uteng & Cresswell, 2008) To quote from Uteng and Cresswell, "Understanding mobility thus means understanding observable physical movement, the meanings that such movements are encoded with, the experience of practicing these movements and the potential for undertaking these movements. Each of these aspects of mobility – movement, meaning, practice, and potential – has histories and geographies of gendered difference." (Uteng & Cresswell, 2008: 2) Hence how, where, and when people move is evidently gendered and it continues to sustain the power hierarchies.

In light of this, the essay will first try to locate the various ways in which space and time come to be controlled and regulated, specifically by men, along with society at large that hamper the spatial mobility of women. Secondly, the psycho-social fear (real or perceived) that such a control engraves on the women's mind forcing them to make several contestations, negotiations and adaptations will be dealt with in detail. And lastly, the possible resolution of such "spatial expression of patriarchy" will be briefly touched upon. Throughout the essay, however, several contradictions and paradoxes will be brought to light that will show how "gendered spaces" continue to be demarcated even today.

2. Materials and Methods

This essay is purely based on a reading of secondary materials along with a degree of non-participant observation. The gendered spatiality and its several dynamics have been observed in different cities including Delhi, Mumbai, Assam etc and my essay tries to bring forth the various observances and experiences I have had in these different cities. Adopting such a methodology, I believe, has helped me observe the various situations in their natural settings in an unobtrusive manner. Observing these myriad operations has aided me in deriving certain patterns of spatial dynamics as well.

3. Historical Background

Feminists have commented on gendered spaces since time immemorial. The struggle over the strict demarcation of public and private spaces and the role of gender in it is not unknown for. However, over the past ten years, the concepts of 'gender' and 'space' have emerged with a greater significance than ever before. Today, the two concepts are seen as relational and as products of attribution and arrangement. In other words, both 'gender' and 'space' are seen to form and reproduce social structures, and in turn get "socially constructed." The spaces/places may thus transmit symbolic gendered messages or even straightforward violence, and when they do so, they themselves get gendered. Such symbolic transmissions reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. Shilpa Phadke defined "gendered spaces" as "socially constructed geographical and architectural arrangements around space which regulate and restrict women's access, those spaces which are connected to the production of power and privilege in any given context." (Phadke, 2012: 2) It is important to note that "this limitation on mobility in space or even the attempted confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation on identity on the other, has been crucially related." (Massey, 1994: 179) Thus, 'spatial control, whether enforced through the power of convention or symbolism, or through the straightforward threat of violence, can be a fundamental element in the constitution of gender in its (highly varied) forms.' (ibid: 180)

In the West, such joint control of 'spatiality' and 'identity' has been related to the culturally specific distinction between 'public' and 'private'. The attempt to confine women in the domestic sphere could be seen as both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social

control on identity. (Massey, 1994) Control over mobility or even motility will ultimately control or suppress the possibility of assertion of any form of identity. Several disability theorists, for instance, has written about how the inaccessibility to varied spaces results in a kind of omission of the very existence of the dis-abled subjects. Similarly, women too have to face inaccessibility of particular kinds (this is not to say that the experiences of women and disabled are similar), that hamper their overall development. It mostly came to light during the 19th and 20th century, when western cities, capitalist industrialization, suburbanization and cult of domesticity resulted in the development of the 'divided city' (bifurcated on gender lines) such that the suburb was seen as the 'private sphere' or the "domain of women", characterized by "non-work" and the city centre was identified as 'public sphere' or the "domain of men" characterized by "productive work." (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 273) Gender roles attributed to men the authority to occupy and manage public space; women, on the other hand, were confined to the domestic sphere. This subordinate status of women in public space is in fact enacted or constituted daily in public streets through "girl watching" and sexual remarks that rob women of their anonymity and invades the 'self-other' binary rendering them powerless. (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 273) Performances of such kind affect the lived experience of women living in the cities. As Berger has rightly commented, because of the presence of 'male gaze' the "social presence of women becomes different in kind from that of men." (Berger, 1972: 45) The woman's restricted access to public space is also connected to the notion of 'defilability'-of both spaces and women themselves. (Phadke, 2012: 2) Such a notion of defiability is not just attached to women alone but to members of the low caste and those not recognizing with the gender binary categories as well. Such categories of people also find their spaces intruded by people from the privileged backgrounds.

In the Indian context, the distinction between 'private' and 'public' got articulated during the colonial times when the public sphere became the area for contestation, with the bourgeois leadership seeking to establish equality with the colonial masters, while the private sphere was seen as the 'inner domain' where they considered themselves sovereign which then allowed them to justify practices discriminatory to women. (Chatterjee, 1997) Such an inner/outer dichotomy limited women's access to public life, restricting their scope of movement and activities.

Apart from this private/public dichotomy, gender disparity in the spatial structure can also be highlighted through women's restricted participation in sports and urban outdoors, which limits their "recreational choices." Interestingly, sport is an institution through which hegemonic masculinity is maintained, which shows that masculinizing and feminizing practices are closely associated with the body, further corroborating the fact that gender identity is a social construction. (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004: 646)

4. Entangled Gender, Class Hierarchies?

The intersection of class and gender hierarchies also restricts women's access to public spaces. The picture of lower class men as perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault is engendered on the women's minds which further restrict their spatial mobility. Thus, Phadke has argued that "women's restricted mobility in public is often rationalized in relation to the presence of 'dangerous' 'other' (poor and Muslim men)," which points out that the discourse of safety, legitimacy and illegitimacy in public space gets circumscribed within the oppositional figures of lower-class men and middle-class women. (Phadke et al, 2009: 188)

In other words, the role of a woman in public becomes that of a trespasser – her presence is unusual, unwarranted and unaccounted for. Such ideas get reinforced through everyday languages like "Why is she here?" – a question that latently implies - "she does not belong here." Such ideologies get compounded with 'public blame of victims' for being in an inappropriate place at the time of attack (Valentine, 1989: 385). Within such a context, further fear of abandonment from "self-styled protectors," compels women to consider independence as self-endangering. "Imagined violence" (loneliness due to abandonment) reinforces their "duty to be safe" which carries an unacknowledged or concealed threat. (Hengehold, 2011: 49)

5. How are our cities built?

It's not just the attitude to women in public that restrict their movement, but also literally, the availability and lack of public space, affected by the infrastructure and design of the city that posed some places as 'safe' and some as 'dangerous.' In the 1980s, feminists were outraged by the gender inequalities perpetuated by urban spatial designs and sought to challenge and make visible, the "invisible" infrastructure that reinforced gender disparity. (Spain, 2014: 587) For

instance, Shilpa Phadke in her case study of Mumbai city found that public infrastructure like public toilets, public transport, lighting etc are designed by an "exclusionary impulse" that limit women's right to access public spaces as equal citizens. (Phadke, 2012: 11) 'In relation to concerns of safety and security, risk, both real and imagined, determines fears and anxieties around public space and the resultant strategies, calculations and negotiations.' (ibid: 3) Different streets in these cities have been observed to garner threats, due to the exclusive monopoly of certain groups of men in them. The dim lighting, narrow lanes and lack of security mechanism enhance the factors of risk and fear.

6. 'Geographies of fear'

"Gendered spaces" compel many women to perceive and even experience their environment differently from men. (Valentine, 1989: 387) While both men and women are fearful of crime, women experience greater levels of fear of crime which is qualitatively different from that of men. (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 274) This is because, the most pervasive form of subordination that women experience in their consciousness, across societies, as highlighted through different empirical studies done in Reading, Singapore, Mumbai, Britain etc is the threat of rape or sexual violence. Gill Valentine first highlighted the "spatiality" of women's fear of violent crime i.e. 'geography of fear' and linked this to gender inequality in her study of women in Reading. In her words, 'association of male violence with particular environmental contexts has a profound effect on many women's use of space.' (Valentine, 1989: 385) In other words, women assume that the location of male violence is unevenly distributed through space and time. This "fear" is distinctly connected to being in a 'public space', as the behavior of any stranger encountered in public is unpredictable and uncontrollable which generates the fear of 'male strangers' in public places. (Valentine, 1989: 386) Likewise Brenda S. A. Yeoh and Pei Lin Yeow in their study at the city of Singapore, a city ranked safest in the World Competitiveness Report, also found that the women's 'landscapes of fear' are space and time specific in the sense that private and activity-filled spaces were seen as safer as compared to sparsely populated spaces or spaces where the presence of others were transient. And generally the time between 11 am and 7 pm was considered the most dangerous while daytime was considered relatively safe. (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 279)

Thus, socio-gendered division of spaces accentuates the social construction of the "fear of violence." But along with such macro-mapping approaches, that seek to 'design out' crime and fear by emphasizing 'who fears what, where?' the question of 'why?' must also be located. Rachel H. Pain in her study in Edinburgh has shown that fear of violent crime closely follows lines of disadvantage in society. She found that "those who feel a lack of integration into their neighborhoods, isolation or a lack of social acceptance, those who have little control over resources and those who are marginalized and experience a sense of powerlessness within society are most likely to fear crime." (Pain, 1997: 233) An important corollary of this is that, fear is never uniform and differs according to ethnicity, class, caste, religion, sexuality, age, lifestyle, disabilities, marital status, experience of motherhood etc. (Valentine, 1989; Pain, 1997; Phadke et al, 2009; Spain 2014; Wesely & Gaarder, 2004; Yeoh & Yeow, 1997) For instance, the "apparent visibility" of women in public streets of Mumbai, conceals the fact that only a particular bracket i.e. the urban, young, middle-class, able-bodied, Hindu, upper-caste, heterosexual, married or marriageable woman has access (conditional) to public places. (Phadke et al, 2009: 187) Hence, the question of who can access the "public" must also be dealt with.

This 'geography of fear' is further facilitated by certain 'images of danger' on the basis of 'fear information.' (Valentine, 1992: 22) Valentine outlines four major 'fear information' that shapes women's 'mental maps' of danger. Taking from Valentine, these four sources have been reiterated by various other feminists.

6.1 Ideology of family and socialization in the family context:

The ideology of the nuclear family operating within the spatial framework of masculinity and femininity still prevails (the idea of heteronormative couple where the husband works in the public sphere and wife stays at home). Along with such ideologies, children are socialized into the meanings and uses of space according to gender. The girls are "taught" to feel safe at home consisting of known people and fear the public spaces. Family and gender roles were thus strongly connected to "fear for others," usually family members. This fear, addressed only to family members rather than the general public, does not, however, result in change in the fearful person's own behavior. Such 'vicarious fear' can be associated with the ideas of women's chastity and perception of their weaker physique and vulnerability to sexual assaults. (Hengehold, 2011: 50) This fear symbolizes a 'latent political state' that poses the 'male

stranger' as potentially aggressive and powerful, while the 'male partner' as not only the family provider but also as one's protector. (Valentine, 1992: 24) This "protector/predator paradox" leads to a continuation of the spatial control of women in public as well as private spaces.

6.2 Personal victimization experience:

Victimization can have detrimental effects on one's sense of security. Physical assaults, verbal harassment etc does not occur in vacuum but are grounded in space and time which influences the construction of 'mental maps.' Valentine found that 75% of women in Reading, under 65, experienced at least one frightening experience. (ibid: 25) Stéphanie Condon, Marylène Lieber and Florence Maillochon in their study in France showed the importance of personal victimization experience. They criticized those studies that consider women's fear as "natural" and hence unrealistic (which pose them as "victims"). Instead, they argued that fear is constantly fueled by possible experience of victimization. (Condon, Lieber & Maillochon, 2007: 102-103)

6.3 The mass media:

Both newspapers and television tend to exaggerate certain crimes like rape and murder. Such "selective portrayal" tends to leave out news on domestic violence and crime within the private space resulting in a biased image of the vulnerability in public spaces. Media generates images about the spatial and temporal context of the reported attack which further restrict women's mobility. To quote from Valentine, "When a woman is attacked or raped in a quiet public place away from the protection of others, both the police and the media often imply that she was to a certain degree responsible for her own fate by putting herself at risk, and warn other women to avoid similar places where they are vulnerable." (Valentine, 1992: 26) As a channel of fear information, it is able to create "commonalities in perceptions" among individuals.

6.4 Informal communication through social contact:

Interpersonal communication like gossip and rumors also play an important role in leaving an imprint regarding the spatial and temporal as well as victim and offender characteristics. "Explicit victimizations spread crime stories in a 'ripple or shockwave effect' through the community." (ibid: 27) Such conversations provide the arena for interpreting who was

responsible for the victim's fate which reaffirms women's "moral order" governing their spatial and social behavior which in turn compounds their images of fear. (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 279)

Such psycho-social fear, therefore, can be seen as developing majorly due to two reasons. Firstly, women's self-perception as "physically incompetent" reinstates their belief in personal vulnerability and secondly, danger cues embedded in the social and physical environment (social incivilities) make women conscious of 'fear images.' (ibid: 280) From analyzing these above sources, one can say that the society engenders such "ideas of fear and safety" that mobilities of certain sections of people are constricted.

7. 'Geography of fear' Versus 'Geography of Violence'

It was Gill Valentine who first drew attention to a mismatch between the 'geography of violence' and the 'geography of fear' or between the "actual" and "perceived" spatial distribution of violence against women. (Valentine, 1992: 22) So a space free of crime may not be free of fear whatsoever. This is because fear exists independent of the physical and social environment. It is not only based on an objective reality "out there" but personalized by women who see themselves as the vulnerable sex, both physically, emotionally and sexually.' (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 274) For instance in India itself, the number of sexual assaults at home and other private spaces are much more than in any other public space. So, despite crime statistics which show that women are more at risk at home and from men they know, their frequent economic dependence on men and social taboos coerce them to maintain a "conspiracy of silence" on violence in private, and consequently are socialized to view the home as "safe haven", resulting in a "displacement of fear" from private to public spaces. (Valentine, 1992: 26) Thus, this "paradox of fear" leads to a persistence of male violence in all spaces.

8. Negotiations and Coping Strategies

Women try to cope with these different fears through various forms of subtle arrangements and maneuvers. For instance, the "taken for granted" choices of routes and destinations are a result of this. (Valentine, 1989: 386) Broadly, women engage in either 'avoidance strategies' that involves removing oneself or distancing from the "dangerous places" i.e. a passive retreat or 'risk management strategies' i.e. active manipulation of the environment for protection of one's self. (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 282) A study in South Mountain Park, the largest urban outdoor park in

the United States, shows that 'women's negotiations affect the ways they consider, engage, or reject various forms of surveillance, social control, and technology.' (Wesely & Gaarder, 2004: 646)

From the case study on Mumbai, Shilpa Phadke illustrates that despite the visibility and desirability of "certain" women in public (as professionals or consumers), greater rights to public space for women is a far-sighted dream. (Phadke et al, 2009: 186) They only have 'conditional access' to public spaces and this conditionality is reflected in the fact that women are compelled to "produce safety" for themselves by demonstrating 'purpose.' For example, women's demeanor in public must always carry a sense of purpose (carrying large bags, parcels, babies, using cell phone etc). This 'tyranny of purpose' is concomitantly linked to 'manufacturing of respectability' associated with appropriate clothing, symbolic markers of matrimony, bulky accessories, contained body language etc. (Phadke, 2012: 5) Such symbolism highlights their connection to private spaces and render them "invisible" or "unapproachable." (Phadke et al, 2009: 189) Thus "public spaces continue to be circumscribed by the performance of normative femininity." (Phadke et al, 2009: 190)

Valentine argued that the attachment of fear to public spaces and the precautions which women take as a result, constitute a 'spatial expression of patriarchy', that reproduces traditional notions about women's roles and the places deemed appropriate for them to use (Valentine, 1989: 389). Thus gendered division of spaces reinforces unequal gender relations that had shaped sexual asymmetry at the first place (Yeoh & Yeow, 1997: 274). The spatial structure and the social structure are hence mutually constitutive.

'Gendered space' is thus a constant process of becoming in the sense that it is constantly brought into being through the everyday contestations and actions of men and women in space. Because of the absence of any 'external totalitarian forces' that dictate "women's place", it is possible to envisage a rightful place for women in the city. Shilpa Phadke has talked of the 'loitering female body,' as a political tool, that presents one such challenge to the hegemonic discourse of gendered public space. For her, loitering as an act in itself dismantles the everyday performances of "normative respectable femininity" and hence encompasses a 'politics of visibility' (as the

loiterer demands identification). (Phadke et al, 2009: 193-195) 'Right to public space' is seen as 'right to loiter' without purpose and meaning. (ibid: 198) Loitering in other words 'represents the possibility of redefining the terms of women's access to public space, not as clients seeking protection but as citizens claiming their rights.' (ibid: 193) However one must be wary in using "loitering" as a tool of resistance, as loitering itself is a very casteist/classist idea. The question we must pose is 'Who gains the privilege to even loiter?' Instead of looking at women as passive subjects who "needs" to loiter, we must locate the active negotiations women involve in their day-to-day practices and movements. Such an understanding will allow us to look at women not as "victims", but as active managers of their lives.

8. Concluding Remarks

Hence as Foucault has described, the space in which we live is not a void inside of which we can place individuals and things. Instead, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites, which are irreducible to one another. Foucault contrasts these 'real places' with the 'fundamentally unreal spaces' of utopias which present society in a 'perfected form.' Showing the linkages between space, knowledge and power, he argues that space is fundamental in any form of communal life and in any exercise of power. (Soja, 1996)

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