

Gendering Space and Spacing Gender: Plurality of Meanings in Piku and Gandharvi

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Edward W. Soja refers to Foucault as one of the first critical thinkers to question the traditional prioritization of time over space, what Foucault calls “the great obsession of the nineteenth” with history. According to him the present is the epoch of space; this is the epoch of simultaneity and juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side by side, of the dispersed (10). And if it is so it is bound to interact with one of the most deciding categories of human identity—the category of gender. The fluidity and the ever changing status of the concepts of space and gender have coupled them in such a way that challenges the limits and boundaries of the world as we know it. A place becomes a space only when it is used and given a specific temporal meaning by its users; in the same way sex can only refer to gender when it is performed in a particular way to live up to certain pre-conceived expectations. As concepts started to be re-conceptualized and definitions began to be re-defined there was a gendered (re)making of the urban public space which revised the ideas of comfort, belonging and commitment in the city. The cultural construction of space has inherent in its symbolism the legitimacy to exclude women and any non-normative gender identity from power and position. The issue of public toilet is an important denominator of the gendered nature of the urban space management. But the aim of the paper is different; what happens in life must be placed against what happens in art because art is not a mirror of life in any normal sense. Art represents life according to its own terms, to meet its own end sometimes to show what should have happened in life and sometimes to remind what could have never happened in real life. The paper shall talk about two literary texts, very distinct in genre and distant in time, but in a way correspond to each other in their very complex handling of the narrative of gendered urban space. One is a Bengali novel *Gandharvi* (1993) by Bani Basu and the other is a Hindi movie *Piku* (2015). Both are women centric texts; while the former is a story of singer, the latter has an architect in the lead role. Both share a somewhat similar cultural setting. *Piku* though a Hindi movie revolves around a Bengali family. *Gandharvi* is set totally in Kolkata or the then Calcutta; *Piku* shuffles between Delhi and Kolkata. Both the texts negotiate with the issue of the changing facets of gender identity and for that they must have to deal with the discourse of space and spatial segregation. The very notion of female independence or empowerment constitutes the crux of the narratives; and the different approaches that the two texts take towards the issue points out the journey that India has decided in a span of around one and a half decades negotiating between tradition and modernity.

While Apala, the protagonist of Basu’s text must sacrifice her singing career in order to marry, *Piku* can afford to remain unmarried during the whole of the movie. Apala’s struggle is mapped through her oscillation between the space of

the stage (being a singer she must perform) and the space of the home. The city of Calcutta not simply provides the background to the events of the text but plays an important role in the structuring of the text. Talking about two different texts Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar* and Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani*, texts that find their respective meanings only through a complex negotiation with the city of Calcutta, Mary N. Woods points out how "The visual and aural specificity of place heightens the reality (of the texts) ...making its twists and turns of plot and character all the more unexpected" (97). Any "city is a gender regime that ideologically and concretely manifests a distinctive relationship among its political, economic, and familial systems. This gender regime is patriarchal: it reflects the social relations of power in any given society in which the values and behaviors of men are presumed normative and thus embedded in urban institutions and structures to privilege male control and ensure female subordination. This gender regime has also striven to keep women invisible - literally and figuratively, as much as possible - within the city" (Flanagan, Valiulis, xiv). The book opens with a powerful attempt to map the complex interaction of urbanity and gender politics. It locates seminal spatial metaphors that are to become crucial in the text in the very first line. "When she was hurrying out of the gate of Rabindrasadan a huge reddish black cloud could be seen over the fairy at the top of Victoria Memorial [my translation]" (9). The author does a lot of things at once in this sentence. The two places mentioned are not only two of the most iconic markers of Calcutta or today's Kolkata but these are also subtle indicators of the larger politics of the text. Rabindrasadan, a famous auditorium is a symbol of the cultural richness of the city. This is where big musical concerts take place and this stands for Apala's world of ambition, passion and professional aspirations. The way the first sentence captures her haphazard movement out of it, in a way, anticipates the systematic exclusion from this world that she is to be subjected to in the due course of the novel. On the other hand Victoria Memorial, the magnanimous presence of which reminds one of the colonial historical heritages of the city, speaks of a curious negotiation between the nation's past and its present. But more important is the reference to the fairy on the top of the dome. Popularly known as the 'Angel of Victory' the fairy is an integral part of the architectural and historical heritage of the building. But in the above mentioned sentence it functions in a very different and complex way. Visibly a gendered image of feminine grace and beauty the fairy is overshadowed by an approaching cloud. Its iconicity amounts to its being an object of visual consumption. Interestingly it used to revolve when it was first created and installed over the dome. Nobody really knows when the mechanism moving the angel stopped functioning; the defect was only noticed in 1978. Its passivity seems almost symptomatic of the imprisonment of a fairy in the mundane world of human beings from which she has no escape. Apala is also identified as a 'Gandharvi' in the text, the musical goddess who resides in Gondhorvolok, the heavenly world of music referred in Indian mythology. She must have lost her way and come to this world. Therefore she has to struggle continually to find her way out.

The gendered representation of space is subtly indicated early in the text when Apala complains in vain for not having 'a room of her own' in the entire house;

despite the limited resources the family manages to allot a room, literally the room on the roof to her brother (16). Apala's mother tries to justify the situation by saying it's only natural that an adult son, a medical student would need a separate space, conditions which do not apply on the daughter who too is both an adult and an aspiring singer. How space and gender interact to impart a certain meaning to our sense of reality is all the more clarified when the text identifies the room on the roof as a quintessentially male space; its transitional location between the outer and the inner worlds makes it an inappropriate space to be inherited by the female. Still Apala's silent revolts to claim this space, to demand a share of it from her brother and finally to utilize it as the space for her daily musical *rewaj* mark the text as one which resists any simplistic identification or co-relation between gender and space. The real challenge of Apala's life comes when Apala gets a chance to go to Lucknow to get further training for her singing from the renowned classical singer Nazneen Begum. She is of course not allowed to go, instead is quickly being married off. The text projects the world of the *gharana* of Hindustani Classical music of Lucknow as a dangerous other to the world of Bengali middle class values; this is because of the association of Hindustani Classical music with the discourse of the courtesan and her *kothi*- an alternative space that allows female empowerment at the cost of subverting the dominant Hindu patriarchal structure of India. The text thrashes at the middleclass hypocrisy that allows music on the stages of respectable elite Kolkata auditoriums and disowns the same music when practiced within the four walls of the palace of the Begum. Moreover the conditions that force Apala to refuse the opportunity approve the same for Soham, a competing male singer who finally goes to Lucknow. But the danger remains the same; there is a brief moment in the text when Soham is warned against immoral reputation of the female singers of Lucknow; he is told that he will learn a lot of musical lessons from them but he needs to be careful of their illicit advances.

The space of the stage is continually juxtaposed with that of the home; one remarkable instance is when Apala's mother-in-law blames her for not taking proper care of her children and holds her responsible for her son's suicide attempt. She says, 'What better can happen to the boy whose mother does *mujro* late into the night wearing a *gajra* in her hair?' (170). The use of the two Urdu words is not only uncommon in a Bengali middle household but it is most unlikely to be used by an aged Bengali woman. But the author consciously introduces the two words in the context to signal how in the popular middle class Bengali imagination Hindusthani classical musical world is a symbol of an alien culture the intrusion of which threatens the sanctity of the home. Though Apala has never taken part in any so-called *mujro* the word has the specific function of recalling the Lucknow based singer Naazneen Begum, mentioned early in the text, debatably a courtesan/*tawaif*, a professional entertainer. Interestingly the Lucknow episode is never made part of the main narrative of the text which uses a third-person omniscient narrative mode; it is included as a first-person account of one of the characters, the boy who goes to Lucknow in the place of Apala. The space of the *Kothi* is therefore pushed to the margins; but the margin often unsettles the centre. Despite the best efforts of the author to portray Apala as the ideal

female character, the text betrays the project cunningly. For example the incident of Apala's close picture with her singer friend/brother Soham being taken and published with a sexual overtone in one of the Page-three magazines not only infuriates the husband and the in-laws but also speaks of a culture's collective unconscious that still doubts the moral efficacy of the outside world, especially when it is the stage, the world of entertainment (147, 168). While the home conceals the stage exposes. Rosemary Jackson uses Freud's idea of the uncanny or *das unheimlich* to discuss the idea of the 'home' as a paradigm of the conventional idea of normalcy or reality. She says-

Das Heimlich, the un-negated version (of the *unheimlich*), is ambivalent. On the first level of meaning, it signifies that which is homely, familiar, friendly, cheerful, comfortable, intimate. It gives a sense of being 'at home' in the world, and its negation therefore summons up the unfamiliar, uncomfortable, strange, alien ...A second level of meaning begins to explain the uncanny's disturbing powers. *Das Heimlich* also means that which is concealed from others: all that is hidden, secreted, obscured. Its negation *das Unheimlich*, then functions to discover, reveal, expose areas *normally* (my emphasis) kept out of sight...It uncovers what is hidden and, by doing so, effects a disturbing transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar (65).

So the task of literature is not so much to introduce any kind of novelty but to question all those things that make the world comfortable, known and familiar to us, the bring us out of the complacency of home and expose us to the world outside. *Gandharvi* reminds us that what we call home is always predicated upon the exclusion of all those things that seem not so homely to us. This strong tug-of-war between Apala's professional and personal lives, her love for singing and her obligations to her family is finally dramatized in her falling a victim to throat cancer and the subsequent loss of her voice. But the novel was written much ahead of its time. Though lacking in the frankness of *Piku* and avoiding to be labeled an overtly feminist text it manages to ensure the victory of Apala's creative self by taking recourse to the alternative domain of painting. And at this point of the text the interrelations between space and gender become all the more pronounced; to paint is to consciously engage with the sense of space and spacing and dimensions. When this act of painting finally gives Apala her due recognition, brings her children back to her who had never acknowledged her presence as a singer, her identity transcends the normative categories of just being a mother, or a wife or just a woman.

To talk about *Piku*, one cannot deny the fact that space is the ultimate determining factor of the movie. The importance of specific geographical locations in the film cannot be overlooked as the opening scene of the film highlights the billboard C.R.Park, the place in Delhi where *Piku*'s house is located. The scene achieves its full implication when the film completes a circular movement and ends exactly where it has started. The ending scene where *Piku* and Rana play badminton in the garden of the C.R Park house completes the narrative of *Piku*'s self-negotiation. The film works through a narrative of displacement in primarily three phases- the opening Delhi episode is remarkable for *Piku*'s

shuffling between the space of her office, symbolic of her personal aspirations and her home, a constant reminder of her familial responsibilities. The in between space, the road from the home to the office and the car that takes her are equally important. The way she struggles to find a car everyday and is always short of time to reach the office, coaxing the driver to drive at an unbelievable speed through the busy morning traffic of Delhi perhaps signals the fact how apparently distinct worlds are actually inseparable and arbitrary distinctions between the home and the world, the private and the public add up to confusion. The point is literalized when the message of Piku's father describing the recent developments of having constipation and gas is read aloud in the middle of an official meeting. This phase witnesses a reversal of the normative gender roles- the unmarried daughter is the matriarch of the house, the old father a rather childish character, extremely dependent on the daughter. The theme of the gender role reversal reaches its climactic point when Piku's aunt Chhobi defines the weird and odd behaviors of her father as being marked by the menopausal anxiety. The scene following the opening scene features the interior of the house; the humdrum domesticity of the household is suggested by the entry of the washer man. But the immediate conversation between Piku and her father, with Piku insisting her father to go and try to excrete and her father refusing on account of not feeling the adequate 'pressure' at once hints at extraordinariness of this ordinary-looking family. Amidst the scene the location of the bathroom emerges as an important locale and becomes a constant point of reference for the rest of the film. The text simply refuses to acknowledge the bathroom as a private space. The bathroom is an uncanny presence in the homely space of the house; a space that is witness to one's lower bodily functions, dark desires, and things that one cannot do outside it.

The third phase in Kolkata is the reverse of the first where the old family mansion, named after Piku's grandmother temporarily brings back a lost era of patriarchal rule where the father seems to feel independent and is suddenly active and takes his own decisions of cycling and eating *kachauris*. This phase is predicated upon a nostalgic longing for the past, a bygone time when family-relations were more closely knit, theatres were not replaced by multiplexes in shopping malls and family mansions were not proposed to be sold to promoters. This phase also anticipates the future as Piku and Rana become close, spend more time with each other. As the camera takes long shots mapping the streets of Kolkata, its tram-lines and Ganga-ghat, Piku matures into a more and more introspective woman. As she negotiates with her past, a past that houses the memories of her dead mother and the pre-retirement life of her father she comes to make more sense of her present life, the culmination of which is her decision of not selling the family mansion. The maturity and control with which she even accepts the death of her father gives the story its full meaning.

And the in between second phase of the long drive from Delhi to Kolkata and the night halt at Varanasi best documents the gendered nature of spatiality and is the rite de passage to a new meaning of human identity. The very idea of travel or journey is traditionally thought to be a male domain. The comfort and ease with which Piku enjoys it makes a strong point on women empowerment. During

the entire course of the journey the father takes frequent halts to excrete at public toilets; also at times he uses his portable wooden commode. At the Varanasi hotel bathroom he experiments with how the western-style commode can be used for an Indian style toilet. This association of the father with the space of the bathroom suggests a number of things. First it compels us to recognize the fact that the privacy of the bathroom is disrupted. Secondly the woman present in the journey is not once shown to be struggling with any kind of problems related to answering her nature's call or using public toilets or people looking at her as the quintessential object of desire- a silent revolt of the text against normative gender stereotypes.

The parallel depiction of the household of Rana Chaudhury with his married sister who is on the verge of a divorce and his cranky mother acts as a foil to that of Piku's narrative. Both Rana and Piku are lonely individuals nearing their thirties with no hope for marriage or affair and are overburdened with familial responsibilities. One important point of absence is any representation of the family life of Sayed, the colleague and friend of Piku who seems to be interested in her. But the ending of the film which features Piku with Rana and not Sayed insists that Sayed, a man with constipation cannot be a choice for Piku because it shall be nothing different from being with father, who is now dead. Marrying Sayed Piku will not get a husband or a man but just another 'kid' once again who only needs to be pampered. Instead her meeting sessions with Rana are more fulfilling because somehow they are not demanding and do not try to burden her with any kind of expectation. Perhaps that's why the film ends without clarifying whether the two shall ever get married or not. The ease with which they share a room at Varanasi anticipates their relationship.

Both the texts critically engage with the discourse of the independence of women. The discourse at the dinner table on the occasion of Piku's mother's birthday is worth noting. The conviction with which Piku's father claims that only women with 'low IQ' marry and that too because they want to 'please' men signals towards the ideological underpinnings of the text. The next important statement comes from Rana who says, "Driving liberates women." Piku's initial reluctance and eventual decision to drive whether actually adds up to her liberation or just sarcastically hints at the major loopholes of the discourse of feminism in Third World countries where gestures like driving, smoking or kissing in public are only taken to be notable markers of a liberated woman is an issue open to debate. *Gandharvi* is remarkable for representing the alternative possibilities of gender identity through its subplots. The narrative of Apala's guruji, her music teacher, and his elopement with his teacher's wife; the narrative of Mitasree overcoming the stigma of an illegitimate birth and living life on her own terms without getting married, of Gitali marrying the husband of her sister after her death-are all alternative subject-positions, emerging choices that the text offers in redefining the limits of the world we live in. But because of the time the book was written and published it could not incorporate these into the main narrative. By the time *Piku* is released the virginity of the girl is no longer a requisite to get married. But what leads me to discuss the two texts at one stretch is the way both the texts explore the liminal possibilities that exist outside the dominant

discourses of the time and envision an alternative gendered space where the self could be reclaimed for Apala in her world of painting and for Piku in being able to find trust and friendship, getting rid of her twin obsessions of constipation and marriage.

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