

## Rethinking Gendered Spaces: From the Zenanas to the Transgenders

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### Abstract:

Public and private spaces and how an individual interacts with them, within them or negotiates with them is a whole area that needs dialogue. The ideas of behaviour in public and private domains, particularly in public domains are a construct. Fear of being out on the in public spaces alone, after dark, is ingrained in a woman's psyche and has been reinforced through social constructs.

The world has been demarcated between the two genders. Washrooms are for men and women. There is a ladies compartment in trains. There are seats in public transport modes such as buses, which are reserved for women. Now we have even thought of introducing 'pink autos' in some Indian cities i.e. autos driven by women for women. In Tokyo there is a restaurant where only women are allowed, the waiters are women as well and the visitors are treated like princesses.

This idea of a separate space or a gendered space is not new. History gives us many instances. The harems in Islamic culture were spaces for women. The 'zenanas' also were similar spaces for segregating men and women. The segregation is meant to keep women from the male gaze and maintain their sanctity.

Homes have been traditionally seen as safe private spaces for women, with the worldly tasks being assigned to the menfolk. Television commercials often showcase women in home spaces worrying about the health of their children or their achievements or their food choices. The happiness of the woman is in her effacement for her home.

The present paper attempts to explore some facets of urban gendered spaces and the need to re-think on some aspects, such as the need to accommodate transgenders/transsexuals, and people with different sexual orientations, especially in the context of the power shift and economic dynamics of our times.

**Keywords:** space, gender, identity, power, polarity, transgenders, transsexuals, gender neutrality, gender fluidity.

To begin with it is important to state the stand from which the present paper has been written, that of gender neutrality, and acceptance of a wide range of sexual preferences and of gender fluidity. The premise is that the terms masculine and feminine maybe a bit conservative for the world we live in today. The paper attempts to explore some facets of urban gendered spaces and the need to re-think on some aspects, such as the need to accommodate transgenders / transsexuals, gays and lesbians especially in the context of the power shift and economic dynamics of our times. Other categories include people who consider

themselves gender -nonconforming, multi-gendered, androgynous, third gender, and two-spirit people. All these terms when defined are inexact and vary from person to person, yet each of them includes a sense of blending or alternating the binary concepts of masculinity and femininity.

The distinction between "sex" and "gender" has been challenged, however, by postmodern theorists and by biological confirmation that "sex" itself is not a singular entity. The term "gender" is now the most common anchor term, since it avoids binary assumptions about bodily identities and recognizes transgender and "gender-queer" possibilities.

It seems the polarisation of this world into the masculine and feminine has been the status quo. But it doesn't encompass the wide ranging interpretations and orientations of sex and gender. We have moved ahead of the XX and XY chromosomes. Except that we may not feel comfortable talking about such realities. But turning a blind eye doesn't mean these don't exist. And because they do, we cannot brush them under the carpet any longer. There are terms like 'homophobia' associated with sexual orientations. We come across stories in newspapers and television channels. Society needs a more inclusive mind set towards the many gender entities and the interpretations of spaces as assigned to genders, spaces where comfort and acceptability go hand in hand.

The tug of war for women in order to claim spaces for themselves is still on. It would be apt to quote a few prominent news items from two national English dailies namely the *Hindustan Times* dated November 29, 2016 and the *Times of India* dated December 15, 2016, since they have special significance and relevance when read from the standpoint of the thrust area of the present paper.

The *Hindustan Times* read that a group of 50 to 60 women and social activists from different parts of the city finally entered the inner sanctum of the Haji Ali shrine on Friday. The shrine is located in the commercial capital of the world's largest democracy and for years women have been denied entry into the sanctum of the shrine on account of their being women, a space sequestered for men- the patriarchal privilege. It is the intervention of the Apex court of the country that finally paved the way for the entry of women. Noorjahan Safia Niaz, co-convener of Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), along with other group members, who had come in a bus, visited the shrine of the 14th-century saint, Sayed Peer Haji Ali Shah Bukhari. The BMMA filed public interest litigation (PIL) in the Bombay high court (HC) in August 2014 against the "blatant discrimination on the ground of gender alone" and asked the state to ensure that access to the inner sanctum was restored.

In August 2016, the HC allowed women to enter into the sanctum of the shrine and said that the shrine trust has no power to alter or modify the mode or manner of religious practices of any individual or any group.

However, on October 3, the Trust moved the Supreme Court challenging the Bombay HC verdict. On October 24, 2016, the Supreme Court ruled that women should be allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine. This is a breakthrough, when it comes to public spaces being demarcated for a specific gender

The Times of India reported that actress Kelly Mantle has been nominated for an Academy Award in the Best Supporting Actor and Best Supporting Actress categories this year. The recent announcement by the Actors Branch of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is historic. The branch has confirmed the announcement. Mantle, born a male, identifies as male or female, shot into fame as part of the reality show 'RuPaul's Drag Queens' and has been nominated for the role of a transgender prostitute named Ginger in the comedy 'Confessions of a Womaniser'.

On a similar note James Charles, the 17 year old make-up artist and beauty vlogger, has gone on to represent a renowned make-up brand in October this year. The spokesperson of the company has stated that the "company's brand ambassadors are role models and boundary breakers, fearlessly expressing themselves, standing up for what they believe, and redefining what it means to be beautiful." Celebrities are seen supporting gender neutral outfits, Ruby Rose, Jaden Smith and Ranveer Singh being a few, all standing up for gender fluidity. These instances are a clear statement of society's changing norms on gender parity.

On a similar note, the Oxford University has chosen to go gender neutral by addressing students as 'ze' instead of 'he' and 'she'. The Oxford University students' union has asked its students to refer to one another with the pronoun 'ze' so as not to offend transgenders and discriminate against them. In India the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgement to uphold the rights of transgenders to decide their self-identified gender.

Following the judgement, in 2015, Savitribai Phule, Pune University decided to include a column for transgender students, which includes all applications, forms, academic testimonials processed by the university under the gender category. In India the University Grants Commission (UGC) came out with its regulations on sexual harassment prevention and prohibition in June 2016 with an addition which makes sexual harassment a gender neutral affair, thus allowing male students and those of the third gender to lodge complaints against sexual harassment faced by him. According to the UGC, it is the responsibility of higher educational institutions to act decisively against all gender based violence perpetrated against employees and students of all sexes, since women, male students and students of the third gender are all vulnerable to many forms of sexual harassment, humiliation and exploitation.

These are momentous events indeed for they make a statement- the world is moving towards gender neutrality. And they bring to the forefront, yet again, the issue of gender polarity and rights, more so in the post-modern world of virtual reality that has gone beyond the three dimensions already. And yet the gendered space [mentioned above] is an issue that has sought resolution through the court for it amounted to denial of rights on the grounds of gender.

The world has been divided into polarities between the two genders. Usually we describe the world in binary terms of masculine and feminine, be it in terms of sex or gender, although sex is a matter of birth while gender of the mind. The term gender has been defined, redefined and interpreted in many ways. Judith

Butler talks of gender being a performance, a repetition of certain acts done so habitually so the one becomes that. It is a persistent impersonation that passes for real. Gender is a given, a construct and is tenuously constructed in time and is fluid. So when we talk of a gendered space, are we to take into account only the two categories of male and female?

This idea of a separate space or a gendered space is not new. History gives us many instances. The 'harems' in Islamic culture were spaces for women. The 'zenanas' also are similar spaces for segregating men and women. To go by definition, a zenana is, in the East, especially in Muslim and Hindu homes, part of a house reserved for the women and girls of a household. The segregation is meant to keep women from the male gaze and maintain their sanctity. According to Ellison Banks Findly, author of the book *NurJahan: Empress of Mughal India*, during the reign of Mughal rulers Jahangir and Akbar for instance, the harems had become elaborate affairs with there being 'darogahs' to keep tab over the dutifulness of women, and 'mahaldars' who acted like female spies and had to be careful not to disturb the delicate balance of the zenanas while reporting activities of the young princes.

The dialogic of gender and space is complex and how we negotiate these in our times will also affect future power equations. Identity and space too are closely related. The relationship between gender and space creates power in society. Boardrooms, for example, have typically been associated with male hegemony, while women with kitchenrooms. The post-modern scenario has seen the rise of women in boardrooms to a certain extent, though the scenario varies in different societies. Despite the laborious activities women perform on farms and fields, these are spaces traditionally associated with men as Tennyson had said men are for the fields and women for the hearth and this Victorian notion of segregated gendered spaces continues in many patriarchal set-ups.

When Lucy in J.M. Coetzee's 'Disgrace' challenges Petrarch's control over land (her position as a landowner and farmer is a straight challenge to his patriarchal hegemony) she is attacked and raped. And then the land, the farm, goes under Petrarch's control, with Lucy carrying the baby born out of the rape and Petrarch confirming to take Lucy under his wings. In jobs that are traditionally associated with men, women's entry is a challenge and threat to entire set-ups and this is again culture specific.

Women have for long had interstitial identities. They live in interstices, which maybe taken a step further in case of hyphenated identities, when identities are dual, ethno-cultural, evoking questions of which side of the hyphen the person belongs (as usually is the case with immigrants).

The Eurocentric western theories are not feasible for nations that are culturally, geographically, and ethnically different. "To better understand how the value of pigeonholes is transmuted into the devalued space of holes, one must understand the normative grid placed upon society by the expectations of a dominant group... When a person chooses to act differently, s/he can expect disapproval and rejection. Thus when a woman fails to act in accordance with the roles prescribed and categorized for her by her society and culture, she becomes not only

unconventional but also marginal... If the woman accepts this ostracism, she lives within the cracks of the system, the interstices, the devalued spaces - and is herself devalued. However, the woman who redefines her life... Rises above the lost space of the interstices... The interstices - the place between the compartments defined by the culture - ceases to be marginal space..." (p. 40)

Gender is a rock pillar in people's lives and is often limited to a conservative interpretation. However, earlier this year, Facebook created a stir when it added 50 gender options for its billions of users. Collectively, the terms reveal the company's recognition of a diversity of possible gender identities and gender presentations, transgenders, transsexuals, cross-dressers and other such categories.

Transsexuals are people who transit from one sex to another using surgical procedures or hormonal therapy. However they cannot transform their genetics and hence cannot acquire reproductive abilities of the sex they transit to. Transgender is a more complex term, since the term gender itself is complex as it encompasses culture, class and race. Transgenders are people who do not conform to the behaviour associated with the sex they are born into. "A significant shift occurred late in 2012, when the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (or the DSM-5) officially changed the term "gender identity disorder" to "gender dysphoria," to describe the emotional distress that can result from "a marked incongruence between one's experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender." In 1973, homosexuality was similarly declassified as a mental disorder. The current change suggests an evolution of thought on the matter of gender that may influence not only how many people see themselves, but also how they are perceived by others."

Though we now talk about gender transformation, communities, transactivists, transgenders are not safe as is also discussed in the film 'Boys Don't Cry'. A programme on History TV 18 showed Scott Turner, originally Katy, is not afraid to talk about what it means to be masculine by embracing his transidentity. Scott is a performance artist, a transactivist, a transgender and transsexual, who has transformed from female to male, and has a girlfriend. Katy felt odd about her body very early, her gender confusion at puberty intensified, plunging her into depression, and she even attempted suicide twice. She visited a psychologist for a year and with a certificate from him went to a doctor for hormonal therapy. She also went to court for a name change and gender change.

Having transformed herself, she has overcome her identity confusion. She now wants to reach out to other transgenders through performances and talks of gender issues. Every week Scott injects testosterone into his body, which has helped in his mental and spiritual transformation and has undergone training for a male voice modulation.

Added to this is the category of those who are born anatomically different. English playwright Mahesh Dattani, for instance, in his play *Seven Steps around the Fire* deals with the subject in a poignant and sensitive portrayal of love of the protagonist. In the autobiography *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*, Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, recounts her life as Laxmi, the hijra to the world { though he has not gone through castration}, and Laxmi Narayan, the son to his parents at home. "In the

formulation LGBT, ours is the only category that refers to gender. All the other categories-lesbian,gay,and bisexual-refer to sexuality...I have heard of feminists who are against transgender people. They argue that although we feel we are women, there is a huge difference between feeling that one is a woman and actually being a woman." (p. 180-81)

In the afterword to the book R.RajaRao writes, "Many effeminate men from upper-class society deliberately flaunt their effeminacy in order to be 'camp' or 'metrosexual'. Such men may regard themselves as transgenders, which is a broader term than hijra... Transgendered men may become transsexuals by opting for sex realignment surgery and might choose to describe themselves as trans-woman."

The world has changed. The term gender now needs to be much more broadly interpreted. The new terms being used for sexual orientations, with homophobia being one, point at how this subject is being discussed across platforms. It is thus time now that we cease to demarcate and polarise public and private spaces in our social set up by our parochial outlook towards gender and our understanding of the term. There is need to broaden the scope of the word so that it encompasses within its fold the diversity of gender presentations.

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