



Special Article

Of Third Spaces: Understanding Gender-mainstreaming in Public Spaces

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Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' ruefully observed that "if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (Spivak, 28) Taking the cue from the word shadow, one would like to imagine the word as more of a penumbra where the existential identity of Woman gets shaded off in a half light of aporia. Years after woman started her tentative attempts at agency in myriad aspects of life, through the Feminist Movements right from the end of the nineteenth century or even before, one can accede this much today that things have begun to get noticed. Whether loved or hated, whether concurred with or otherwise, the Woman Question is definitely in the air today. Whether the ideology of equity has been internalised by a society that is innately patriarchal, is still a matter of gingerly conjecture. But one thing is for sure—it has become the vogue to proclaim gender equality in all walks of life—sometimes from the rubric of ideological iconography, and sometimes (in spite of personal reservations), because the state instructs it. And the construction of the postmodern metropolis is no exception. Urban planning takes ostensible care to bring about an air of egalitarianism as far as the public spaces are concerned. There are public places that look like they are designed with gender equality in mind. So we have woman-friendly places like those hedge-girdled cute volley ball courts and parks that one can see in places like Vienna, the amusing signage by the Metropolitan Transit Authority in New York city, asking men not to 'manspread' and thereby take up more space, the women's market held by the Thorncliffe Park Women's

Committee (TPWC) in Toronto, the Brazilian activist group called Mulheres Rodadas, which created feminist block parties during the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, thereby calling out street harassment in as Bakhtinian a way as possible, and then there are those cute little signs of a ‘woman’ dressed in a frock (and you thought dressing has reached gender-neutrality) showing as many number of washrooms and restrooms for women as there are for men.

Yet there are places where dissatisfaction, out of a sense of lack festers even in the most equal-looking spaces.

This article today will try and pan on some third spaces of life to find out where in the scale of equality and equity, women find themselves situated. Bhabha talks about the Third Space in *The Location of Culture* in terms of the liminal interstices of psycho-geographical hybridity between interacting cultures. Edward Soja, inspired by the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre, talks of Thirdspace in the 1996 book he wrote, titled *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Ray Oldenburg, the American sociologist too, talks about the Third Space in his book, *The Great Good Place*. From all that these sociologists and theoreticians have to say, the Thirds Space hangs in limbo between the First and the Second Spaces, thereby incorporating parts of both in itself, and as a fallout, influencing and impacting both as well. And thus, the Third Space is a site for microtransitions between roles as much as it is a site for the crossover of space, in connecting the first Space to the Second. It is a kind of space-of-flows and should be perceived as such, instead of taking it in the sense of sheer Borromean mathematics. The perfect management of the Third Space could go a long way in tidying up life in the First and the Second Spaces.

Now, if home or the place lived in is taken as the First Space and the place of work as Second Space, patriarchy assigns the first to women as nurturer and the second to men as provider. Thus public spaces tend to be designed by plans informed by the patriarchal allocation of gender roles. Men and women are expected to perform the roles assigned to them by the invisible societal panopticon. But women are increasingly opting to foray into the Second Space. Yet, the roles defined by society are still patriarchal—but now in surreptitious but insidious way that often are more fatal because ostensibly unperceived. Women are still expected to be homebound and thus constricted in terms of spatial opportunities, while men made for the more open, unconstricted world. Thus when women work outside home, she is perceived as stepping into a man’s domain. Hostility, mellowed down into resentment by the obligatory adherence to gender equality, looms

large as the woman tries her hand at what was designated not to be hers. She takes up the challenge as the world watches to see if she makes it or falls on her face.

Yet, resilience and self-assured but hard-earned confidence bids Woman to brave the Second Space. Thus she too, now, transitions between the First and the Second Space like her male counterpart has been doing for ages. She too, now negotiates the Third Space.

Now, what then do we understand as the Third Space? The pathway she uses to get to her public transport point, the transportation itself, the space she walks down to get to her workplace after alighting from her transportation—all would cover the Third Space she deals with—just like her male counterparts. So reason dictates that there should be equity in every step of that common Third Space. And sure enough, contemporary urban planning looks like it is magnanimous to keep gender equality in mind when it comes to planning the metropolis as the rural outskirts are still somewhat in the shadows, if not in the dark, as far as planning space is concerned. Thus, one finds an equal number of washrooms in public places, shopping malls, offices, airports, metros and train stations. Theoretically the roads and pathways belong as much to the feminine part of the world as to the male.

But the million dollar question is, is the Third Space as egalitarian as it looks or are there phantoms of patriarchy still lurking in the shadows?

As it is, there are lots of spaces that are gendered just by the masking or signing them as 'For Men' or 'For Women'. Try and remember the departmental store you last visited where the Tools section came under the "For Men" part of the room while the sewing needles and threads and merrily coloured craft things were placed in the 'For Women' part. Even when they are not segregated with signs, they are never kept next to each other, thus playing up to the secret and surreptitious understanding of the gendering of space. So Feminist Geography goes for a quiet toss.

Talking about the Second Place—workplaces like shopping malls ostensibly boast appointing men and women alike. Yet, the cosmetics section, the bath accessories section, the grocery section are mostly looked after by women shopping assistants while the electronics section, the hardware section finds men manning the assistance there to buyers. Even if there are women in the electronics section, they would be placed near what I would call the soft electronics like earphones, charging cables, hair dryers, and cute laptop sleeves. The laptops themselves would be under the charge of a man, along with what I call the other 'hard' electronics like televisions, refrigerators, sound systems,

and air conditioners. Buyers for new cars only find women—if they are there at all—at the reception desk or sending out calls for insurances. The car speculations and features would be explained by a man. Offices—whether in the government sector or the private ones, take care to appoint women in what is not nearly equal opportunity. But once the appointments are over, and jobs need allocation, women somehow find themselves as the ones taking care of desk jobs like receptions, or arranging cultural activities, hospitality to office guests just as men are preferred in jobs requiring more activity with computers, negotiating business deals and office tours. So ingrained is spatial gender segregation in the human social existence that women themselves tend to group together, while men do the same, often with a repertoire of ‘men’s jokes’ where women are silently understood to move away from—thereby creating little private zones inside the public one. All these customary actions—seemingly very innocuous—lap themselves around feminist sociological geography to silently validate the performativity of gender that Judith Butler talks of, in the process, validating it all into normativity.

Let’s now turn to the Third Space. Bhabha says:

It is the inbetween space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity...’
(Bhabha 39)

Yet the representation of the Third Space in the context of urban planning and accessibility to urban resources is fraught with behavioural polarity and contrast.

Let’s take a couple of examples. Women are seldom seen loitering in the Third Spaces as men often do. They are mostly seen going from point A to point B with an objective, braving the Male Gaze that constantly seems to follow them around wherever they are in the public space. But standing or sitting there, alone or in a group, doing nothing, is what women are almost never found doing. Even if they do so, they would be singled out as freaks and ‘bad’ women. And that in turn, would be translated as an invitation to get groped or molested or harassed—because ‘good women’ never stay out late, they dress to cover every inch of their body and stay home unless they have to go out either to work or to run important errands. They don’t ‘loiter’. In India too men are found to loiter—on the roadsides, chai stalls, dhabas—but women are seldom found doing the same. Right from childhood, women are taught to be vigilant. They walk down streets with a body language that screams diffidence and a tightly closed gait. Yet when unlit streets or crowded public transport exposes her to stalking or groping—it is always construed to be the girl’s fault. Bystanders seldom intervene in support of a woman when

she is being harassed in the Third Spaces. In fact, distressingly enough, even rape is often surreptitiously or otherwise, taken as social justice having been meted out to the 'wayward' woman who dared step out of her socially allowed parameters of time, company and attire. So women try squeezing their day to the few allowed hours. She dresses to cover as much of her body as possible, taking care to have the hemlines and necklines within 'appropriate' socio-cultural parameters. They end up taking private transport like cars and taxis—which means she is having to spend less on other things that matter to her. So this affects the economic equation of life too. The right to use the roadways is one of the very basic that all human being are supposed to enjoy. Yet women find themselves unable to do so to the proper extent. Women are denied the right to just being there.

Initiatives have been taken to install CCTV cameras in more numbers, restrict the office hours for women in some offices, reserve women's compartments in public transport, have 'She-Taxis' around. But the disconcerting thought that tugs at the mind is whether all this increases moral policing against women. Whether stipulating hours or compartments for her would validate her being violated if she dared to step outside those spatio-temporal boundaries.

Again, let us take a very basic activity of human existence—using washrooms and rest rooms. On the surface level, it looks like the urban spaces allotted for washrooms is very egalitarian because every time there is a toilet for men, there is one for women. But looking closer at this issue, one would realize that having the equal number of toilets is only a mechanical way of inducing equality. There has been no thought spent on it with understanding and empathy. Had it really been equitable, one would never find long lines in front of wash rooms for women, unlike those for men. The reasons are physiological as well as cultural. For one thing, women's bodies are made differently. Women menstruate. Women breastfeed. Women get pregnant with big bellies coming in their way. They dress differently—rather, are expected to. On top of that, women have babies. Seldom do men's bathrooms come with changing rooms or changing tables. So just the existence of the changing station in the women's bathrooms reinforces the assumption that if there is a baby in the family, changing diapers is the woman's job. A toddler will almost always be seen being led by the hand by the mother into the women's toilet. No wonder a women takes much more time in the washroom than men do. So just having the equal number of washrooms instead of a higher number of washrooms is a preposterous and hilarious claim to gender quality in designing WCs.

Let us talk about the names of roads all over the world. We will all agree that only a small percentage of the roads all over the globe are named after women. Even these little things are indicators of the position of women in public space.

The urban spaces let a woman down by not prioritizing or even understanding her needs. These gender insensitive designs in urban planning stem from stereotypical gender assumptions that men spend more time outdoors than women, and in turn reinforce those very gender stereotypes.

According to the reports of the UN World Urbanization Prospects 2018, dated 27 Sep 2021, almost 5 billion people live in and use the city:

As of 2021, 4.46 billion people live in urban areas, and 3.42 billion live in rural areas globally. The world's urban population has grown rapidly from 751 million in 1950 to 4.46 billion in 2021 and will grow to 6.68 billion by 2050, adding about 2.22 billion people to urban areas. 90% of the projected growth of the world's urban population between 2021 and 2050 will occur in Asia and Africa. The world's rural population has grown slowly since 1950 and is expected to reach its peak in 2021. The global rural population is expected to decline to 3.1 billion by 2050.(UN)

So unless we pull our social socks up as far as designing the city through careful physical infrastructure design is concerned, the future of urban life would be seriously exclusive in terms of gender, body type or sexual preferences.

There should be feminist cities that offer equal access to women to the urban resources. A feminist city would be rid of sexual violence. A feminist city would be designed by civil engineers –still predominantly men—who would be taught to be careful of how their design decisions could have social implications as far as inclusivity is concerned. Representation of women needs to be more because when we design something we tend to interpret it all through our own experiences and our own socio-cultural understanding and gender assumptions. Mindsets decide systemic implementations. So unless the number of women in the engineering and design committees increases, women would be at a severe disadvantage as far as inclusivity and accessibility irrespective of gender and body type are concerned, as far as using urban resources goes. Representation can be of two kinds: *Darstellen* and *Vertreten*. *Darstellen* connotes representation as depiction from outside, while *Vertreten* implies the rhetoric-as-persuasion from the inside. As far as planning and manning the public Space is concerned, *Darstellen* has ruled the roost so far. Men have represented the needs of

women as an outsider. But what we need is Vertreten, where women will represent themselves with the veracity of an insider. Helene Cixous in her 'The Laugh of the Medusa' exhorted women towards écriture féminine by asking woman to 'write her self' in literature:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

One feels inclined to think that public places would be more gender-sensitive and inclusive had women come forward in urban planning to 'write her self' there too. Gender-mainstreaming i.e. identifying and understanding the different needs of different citizens and addressing them equally, needs to be the conscious objective of urban planning.

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