Research Article

Exploring Intersections Of Gender And Urbanicity In Life In A Metro

Saim Raza[1]*

Abstract

This paper attempts to study the effect and counter-effect of urbanicity on gender and sexuality on the cityscapes, especially how the metropolitan spaces contribute in making, highlighting or challenging the popular notions of gender in Hindi Cinema. The paper relies for this study primarily on Anurag Basu's *Life in a Metro,* which depicts the lives of nine individuals in Mumbai and the place. The characters strive throughout the movie to balance their sexuality with the reality of life, presented through the urban space of the metropolitan. Rahul's flat signifies a free space where guilt-free interactions take place but the liberty of the space is diluted through the presence of a married person (Shikha's husband). Similarly, the space of Shikha's home is a feminine space which depicts loyalty and faith, which seems to grow hostile with Shikha's increasing interactions with Aakash and makes her daughter sick. Likewise different settings of space and characters are studied closely to portray that certain metropolitan spaces act as a character working marital relations and supports pre-marital and extra-marital affairs. Metropolitan spaces, including time and destiny, are therefore often gendered, working against or in support of a particular gender or sexuality. The paper will be divided into three parts; first dealing with the effect of cityscapes on gender, second dealing with the counter-effect of sexuality on urban space and the third dealing with the nature of compromise that occurs between these spaces. This paper will aid in understanding the relation of cityscapes with gender and cinematic presentations of pleasure and its intersections with gender.

Keywords- Indian Cinema, cityscapes, gendered space, spacing gender, performative gender

Introduction

The fact that in narratives, spaces have their own power is not unknown to readers and critiques of literature. Right from the Edgon Heath in Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native* to the modern day where Gotham City rules over the elements in the *Batman* series. In the case of Hardy's works, D.H. Lawrence has noted, "This is a constant revelation in Hardy's novels: that there exists a great background, vital and vivid, which matters more than the people who move upon it. Against the background ... is drawn the lesser scheme of lives." (419, as cited in Beards 212) Similar view can be traced in Dickens' *American notes* where he described the New York City and Foucault's comments on French cityscapes in *Discipline and Punish.* Reckner notes with regards to Gotham, 'The hanging constellation of meanings associated with New York's other nickname, Gotham, serves as a touchstone for contemplating the emergence of a distinctly urban, bourgeois rhetoric of the relationship between poverty, race, and criminality in the nineteenth century.' (98) These are some very visible examples of not just narrative, but even reality being controlled by the space in which developments occur. This power which the space, the stage or the background holds, has a multidimensional and a multidiscursive identity. The discourse that is significant to us is the discourse on gender that the space attempts to create.

Panayiotou has clearly observed, "Space is not gender neutral; on the contrary, it can be said that *all* spaces are gendered spaces." (427) Now, when we look at cinematic narrations, the transparency of the background is decreased and it becomes more opaque and thus exercises more power. In this sense, the

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[1]Student, Aligarh Muslim University, Email - saim.raza.sr@gmail.com

characters also are more affected and in turn do interact with the spaces in a more conscious manner. In context of gender, the relationship is two sided. The space dictates the performance of the individual within it, making the identity within a space a performative identity. Drawing from Butler's *Gender Trouble,* where she has popularly noted that, "The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed." (187) This implies that the gender is significantly challenged and distorted by spaces which impose a certain performance on a person. This is what we mean when we say 'spacing of gender'.

However, as asserted earlier, space is not the dominant force in the powerplay against the participants in the space. An individual or a collective group also lends its identity to the space. As has been noted by Siwach (2020) that "space itself is gendered rather than neutral and both implicate each other in the spatial underpinnings of gender roles, performances, and portrayals." (34) The difference is clearly observed in the classification of spaces as public (male), private (female) and professional (usually assumed to be neutral but often tending towards male). The idea that public space is a male dominated space or a *male* space is found on the basis of participation and performance. The way males act in the public is what gives the space its male identity. The way a female interacts in the private space is what gives the space its female identity.

Spacing of Gender and Gendering of Space in *Life in a Metro*
When looking at the Indian Cinema, the turn that came in 1990s, coincidental with the rise of Globalisation, shifted the centre of focus to the metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, etc. Earlier though the focus was on the migrant who had successfully made it to the city but did not know how to fit himself in. Ranjani Mazumdar noted this shift in the introduction to his seminal work *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City,* "The new landscape of urban spaces resulting from the expansion of industrial capitalism not only shaped the transition to a modern way of being in the world but was also impacted by the culture of the moderns." (xix) The modern culture primarily meant the culture of the office-going middle class people and their dependents. This group of people is represented by the movie *Life in a Metro* directed by Anurag Basu.

The significant spaces that are present in the movie are the old-age home, Rahul's flat, the call centre, Monty's office, Ranjit's house, railway station and the road. There is clearly private and public distinction in these spaces. Railway stations are entitled to be public spaces while flat, house and old-age home is meant to be private. Monty's office and the call centre can be called as professional spaces with small private niches. The movie begins with a café scene coupled with the reading out of a letter by Shikha to Shivani with regards to Amol. Both the scenes, placed side by side, refer to the rise of industrial capitalism in India, especially in Mumbai. Monty and Shruti meet in a café for the first time and Amol is an America-return. The café seems to challenge Shruti's traditional outlook with regards to a good man as well as it mocks Monty's simplistic, to some extent, rustic approach to life. The café being a representative of the American café or a French café, seems to challenge their Indian values. This reminds one of Max Weber's prediction that the culture which Indian society seems to follow is actually anti-capitalist in nature. (Mishra & Kamal 228) Since, the space affects Shruti directly, making her abhor her presence there because of how Monty behaves in that space, it can be said that the café is a masculine space, but it is first world masculine, not supportive of Monty's rural way of living either.

Followed by the beginning, the scene shifts from the café and the old-age home to Rahul's flat which has an important interplay of gender and space. Rahul's flat is essentially a heterosexual space, meant only for men and women, male and female, performing their parts. The space imposes heterosexuality on its entrants by the virtue of its rented privacy And since all the renters of the space are males, the space essentially implies to be a male space which exploits females. The comfort and power that Ranjit acquires in Rahul's flat is available to him at no other place. His comfort stems from being in a masculine space. While at the same time, for Neha the plays becomes overtly toxic and suffocating, culminating in her attempt to kill herself. The space becomes a murderer for the female.

Ranjit's own house though extracts revenge on him. Shikha is a sufferer too of Ranjit's toxic masculinity but her space is essentially feminine. The house, even though it belongs to Ranjit, acts as a partner of Shikha. When Ranjit is not in the house, the space is occupied by Shikha and her daughter

making the gender of the space feminine for most of the time. Ranjit's frustration in the house also rises from the fact that he feels powerless in his own house. Shikha feels secure and empowered in her house, able to confront Ranjit, until she finds herself betraying the space by getting engaged with Akash. This feminine betrayal is against the space but unlike forcing Shikha to hurt herself, the space brings Shikha back to her responsibilities in a very subtle manner, through her daughter who falls sick and has to be taken to the doctor. The power of feminine space is such that it makes Ranjit confess his crime to Shikha and to eventually return back to his family. Therefore, house turns out to be a feminine space, powerful and moulding, also morally charged. It stands against Rahul's flat or Akash's house, which are spaces of female trauma.

The old-age home is largely featureless, except for the furniture and a kitchen that is almost within the room. On a close reading we also see a mixer pitched right beside the window to make the space feminine. Shivani's room is also provided with a window opening onto the road. Despite these feminine additions to the space, it cannot be constructed as truly a romantic space. As often believed that for elderly people, "the ability to remain sexually active is a major concern in their lives." (Kalra et al.) The tag of 'old-age home' carries with it these beliefs therefore, Amol has to shift to a separate space where he can hang photographs of Shivani's youth on the wall. The red colour behind the bed and the soft lights above the bed make it appear as a truly matrimonial space. Being representative of romance, the place is constructed as more feminine than even Neha and Shruti's flat. Neha and Shruti being professional workers, the flat seems to represent almost similar features as Rahul's flat with the mere increment of a few posters, which are not typically feminine. The old-age home therefore, motivates and fulfils the sexual demands of both Shivani and Amol but the flat of Shruti and Neha is a site for mourning. Neha mourns in the flat after realizing that she has been used by Ranjit and Shruti mourns after finding her boyfriend to be a gay.

The last space is the public space i.e. the road and the railway station. The road and the railway station essentially appear as the solution to all problems. It is on the road that Shivani's last dream of dying with Amol is fulfilled. Shruti also confesses her love on the road and Neha also leaves Ranjit at a traffic signal. Ranjit also gets punished for leaving the house, while Monty begins his chase of Shruti on his horse, leaving behind his marriage. The railway station is the complete happy ending, as Aakash is rejected by Shikha in respect of her marriage, Neha is successful in stopping Rahul and Monty finally is able to gain Shruti. The public space appears as an equalizer and stands for social justice.

Conclusion

The whole interplay of space and gender seems to be affected by the urban setting of the metropolis. The flats of working ladies being featureless and added on with a library is representative of the life of the metropolis, the purpose of which is occupation and earning. Even the house in which Shikha and Ranjit live, they had to purchase on EMI, as Shikha tells Aakash in one of their meetings. The stress of having worked during the prime of their youth to repay the EMI makes them act like business partners rather than life partners. The sexual element in their marriage throughout the movie seems deeply suppressed and dialogues like 'Love left us' (Basu 47:33) seem to dominate the marriage. The central concern in their issue also arises from the metropolitan setting where the husband has to work and the wife has to stay back because of the baby.

Neha and Rahul's relationship remains distraught and unattainable largely because of the corporate working structure. The office does give them promotion but snatches their sexual aspirations from them and it is only after detaching themselves from the official setting (Rahul's resignation) (1:54:41) and its owner (Neha leaves Ranjit) (1:57:58) that their aspirations can be fulfilled. However, that also does imply that both of them have become unemployed and are destined to search for a job at other place. The office also forces Shruti's boyfriend and boss to hide their real sexual orientations.

The urban space therefore intervenes in sexual aspirations of the participants, forces them to alter and fit in the majorly patriarchal framework, as most offices are headed by the males. But these patriarchal males appear vulnerable in the private spaces like houses which act as feminine spaces, or even in case of Shruti's boss, as sexual spaces. The public space acts as the intermediary between the feminine and

the masculine spaces, settling the issues born out of masculine settings and gradually pushing the characters towards the feminine space.

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