

Negotiating space for posing selves within and beyond gender dynamics

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Abstract

This paper is about social space where contesting genders come into play with their negotiations. By *social space*, the anticipated communications are usually conceived as democratic and non-manipulative. Saying so, often there is a very thin line between what are defined as *public* and *private* spaces. The former US president Donald Trump, alongside his endless opinions that interested people across the world, once advocated extremely misogynist remarks and propositions as “locker-room” discussions. “Locker-room”, without much exception, is a Western concept that is not much familiar in many societies of the Global South. But the connotation can go beyond a national border and his assertion, as a form of male-chauvinism, actually shocked not only the women across the world, but also anyone with democratic concerns about space. Taking a clue from the term, this paper examines the creative possibilities of gender negotiations in “public” spaces. In doing so, it combines strictly defined “academic” writing with probable creative forms of social-scientific essays. The paper ends up with a case-story of an “un-academic” piece that deals with atypical gender and class interplay.

Keywords: social space, gender, public-private, locker-room, negotiation.

1. Introduction

While I am not reducing that private and public spaces are sharply distinguished in the typically defined Western societies, and not in the Southern ones, I am

of the opinion that spaces are endlessly reconfigured through conversations. Saying so, I risk again of reducing the physicality of a space of a certain condition, and adding more value over human interactions. But there are specific merits of conceptualising private and public beyond their obvious and definitive entities. For example, men using urinals in a “public” place, for say in a terminal or shopping mall, can easily start what is defined as a “private” talk, “locker room talk”, as Mr. Donald Trump dreadfully expressed. More often than not, however, white-collar males do not find enough reasons to initiate a discussion in a urinal or elevator for that matter. Keeping lips tight is an expected attribute from the “successful” middleclass men. In other situations, “strangers” may easily find a way to form a “partnership in crime”, as gang-rapes take places around the globe. Considering the nature of “private” space, some males may still opt out of a discussion that involves sexual fantasies, like what happened in my case throughout my life.

My position is not to generalise male attributes, nor to even link certain aspects of their behaviour as integral to their sexual identity. Rather contrary, my intention is to underline in the tendencies where private and public spaces are not marked with the characteristics they are strictly defined with. This paper is not an attempt to redefine public or private spaces, nor is an assertion of my gender-role. Instead, this is a modest attempt of providing a perspective into the conversational aspects of human relationship across genders. Additionally, I have another mission to put forward, i.e. to tease and test the divisive practices between “academic” and “non-academic” writing. Line between “fiction” and “non-fiction” has long been a conversed issue among the creative writers; and I can take a break for the time being.

2. Fluid private in a public space

Readers are heterogeneous for sure, but the common understanding of homogeneity and heterogeneity often is misguided, especially in the era of *cultural globalisation*, and with the advent of cyberspace communication hype lately. There always are styles of representation that conform and configure a group of people to others. Without much unlearning of what we have learned through these structural set-ups, we easily fell into series of meanings – of the South, of the North, of the Southern

women, of the Northern men and so on. Yet, I opine that a form of homogeneity is prevalent too, first through colonialism, then through cultural globalisation, like in salutation or greeting anyone across the globe. Saying so, we cannot actually be ignorant of the space-specific tendencies and practices.

In a Bangladeshi public bus, for example, approaching someone of other gender may read indecent in context. Firstly, approaching any stranger, even from the same gender, may reveal shallowness of the initiator in strictly defined middleclass white-collar mannerism. Considering the disparity in the public transport system, desired “proper” behaviour is likely to shift to a degree, but would definitely be played in accordance with taste, and in relation with the space/habitus (Bourdieu 1984). If a conversation has begun between two co-travellers, seemingly among two same-sex persons, issues that are very likely to be in queries could easily disgust someone from the North. The list may include, but not limited into: place of origin, (kind of) job, (amount of) salary, marital status, religion, number of children, reasons for not having any in case that is what is revealed by the probing person. In a more willing dialogical conversation with consent, as it is defined in the psychosexual literature, this conversation can be elaborated to the extent where stories of their respective marriages can be illustrated, or plan of how they are approaching their offsprings marriage or education. But these issues disgust quite a few local people too. This is exactly where the question of “taste” comes in.

Considering all the complex aspects and factors involved, I have long been interested in the conversations among the women in defined public spaces (and I cannot interact with them in private spaces). A sense of assurance and trust is at heart of communication among women, a fact that can be said without much generalisation. There are obviously the professional insecurities and jealousies among the white-collar professionals, but that is also far more subtle than the way the male professionals keep on among themselves. More importantly, women across spaces (private and public) hardly make significant shift in their agendas or themes. If about household management issues or child-caring, they would effortlessly surpass the boundary of private and public. When they tend to talk about “sexualities”, in most of the cases they do not bother to have a “private space” or “locker room”. That they have

to keep extraordinary cautious code of conduct in this regard, has to do with unwarranted male interventions. Not surprisingly, the binary of private and public is even more crucial for those who fantasise things undemocratically and disgorge them in the “locker room”.

3. Gender “identity” and methodological issues

That I was born as a male, have been living a defined heterosexual male life, wear costume that is associated with male, never helped my cause to get in touch with verbal world of the women. In my case the attire was not that simple, as I had started wearing a few ornaments, typically defined as “feminine”, long before male-ornaments became a global trend. Still my “performativity” (Butler 1990) at most could trouble the peer male-groups, and could not earn an open ticket for the women circles, with its gender-political insights, until some feminists, deliberately, extended their allies among the biological males. I think this is similar with the feminist movements around the globe.

Difficulties of potential solidarity still remain challenging even after an extended pursuit for allies – in conceptualising sexuality, conjugality, domestic labour and a few more. While I am cautious of not bringing issues like sexuality, I would like light on a couple of challenges that inter-gender solidarity faces. One obvious challenge lies in social class. No matter how extensive knowledge on social classes are being produced in academia, actual experiences go beyond any schematic understanding and manifest manifold sub-set tendencies among the members of an assumed class. This poses completely different problems for same-sex and cross-sex participants in a group of people – perhaps with a reworked sense of horizontality in case of the former, and lack of it in the latter. Second challenge is about narratives and their authorship. People in discussion often shuffle in using pronouns – from *we* to *I* – to claim authorship, like the politicians mostly do the adverse, to claim credibility. Posing authorship (Foucault 1969) in oral communication is tricky by nature, more so in a cross-gender setting, be it a phrase or a concept or a proposition. Weighing on meanings and readings at the recipients’ end can reveal a lot of possibilities, as once a sweet death resonated (Barthes 1977). But in gender-political-situations, death

of the author eliminates agency, the utmost important for bringing in democratic atmosphere in the “locker rooms”; let us assume a cross-gender locker-room in this case.

4. A case-story: gender and positions at play

I would finish my essay with a “story” to further my observations about the negotiations in a given situation, combining with the active agency and intent. By story, I here do not refer to the enormous contesting meanings it entails across the disciplinary practices – fiction, news feature, health history, legal proceedings, to name a few. I instead intend to relate it with the long-standing dichotomy of social scientific and fictional writing styles, and the debate of portraying reality and fictionality. Specifically in social/cultural anthropology, ethnography has long been a hype, and has produced a significant amount of discussion about how ethnographic practices should be performed. Adding to that, distinction between “academic” and “non-academic” write-ups is another point of reference for polarised opinions, often are silenced though. This piece, written in Bangla, in 2015, was part of a series where my attempt was to melt strict borderline between fiction and non-fiction, academic and “non-academic”. In other words, in this series, all the “characters” are living persons I keep on meeting around in daily lives in different social spaces (Chowdhury 2020). At the same time, I purposefully opted for denying the desired “academic” norms in organising an essay. I opine that issues like “space”, among some others across the academic disciplines, should be explored in creative and explorative ways. This piece is modestly placed as an example of exploration of space where gender and class come into play in a defined “public” sphere with tentatively “private” manner. Apart from the stylistic challenge it poses, this tiny “story” further challenges our common understandings of kinship relations, household management, monogamous morals and, more importantly, the relationship between a “researcher” and “subject” too. Space could actually be reconceptualised here in many subtle ways.

5. Kinsfolks and catering

I talk to this very thin shopkeeper regularly, which I frequently do with different roadside shops. Sometimes the words get heavier than the items I buy. Usually I find shopkeepers are okay with that. However, my forgetfulness with their names causes discomfort. I try to know the names of these neighbours and keep them in my cell-phone, something that became possible with the smartphones. This is a simple trick to keep the name with the jobs they provide. Someone fixes water line or electricity, or someone recharge phone balance – I just keep on asking names of these working class people and fill in the phone. This is how I avoid picking the wrong name when needed.

First I was a little embarrassed because of these tricks. But later I have gradually learned to console myself with countless justifications. With the method, my phone should have stored this tinny shopkeeper's name. Not only she runs a four-legged tea-cum-cigarette shop, but also she, along with some extended family members around, recharges phone balance. She claims to be a very good candidate to be registered on my phone, but somehow I do not have her name. Let's imagine her name is Ayesha.

Labelling Ayesha as "thin" won't bring any debate whatsoever. She won't pass a bar of 40 kg by any means, but will remain at the verge of 35, I guess. With her smiling face, coloured with betel leaf, and a married life, it is very difficult to determine her age. Some customers of her shop may assume her even of 22/23, and again with her sick and laborious appearance, it sometimes feel even 40. Her shop in beside this avenue of Uttara I live in. These roadside shops often get "evicted" by the city corporation. These shopkeepers keep on negotiating with some politically influential person and they start again after a short break. Sometimes it takes longer break, sometimes some have to shift to another livelihood. This is how it works. Then, someday with my habit of seeing a fixed imagery, I may ask a legal shopkeeper about their whereabouts.

Ayesha's family may invoke serious curiosity. I have seen Ayesha, her mother-in-law, a "well-to-do" uncle-in-law, and a young-looking father-in-law until he got seriously ill. All running this four-legged shop at different times. Also I have

seen two or three children wandering around occasionally. I have never seen Ayesha's husband or any brothers-in-law around this shop. At least, they never took the role of shopkeeper. For a conversation, it is not an easy pick for me between Ayesha or her mother-in-law, as both of them are very sociable. Both offer me a free cup of tea, which I defer for the next time. Sometimes both are found together in the store. Together then they talk with me, and there is no tension who is being more generous to me.

Even the uncle is a great mix. He would offer me a betel-leaf every time which I am not at all comfortable with. Every time I have to say that and he smiles. Sometimes, I see him with a white *lungi* and white *kurta* riding on someone's motorbike. Sometimes he is seen in doubly-red mouth with betel-leaf and sometimes with doubly-black moustache, beard and neatly trimmed hair. He is an enigma and draws my eyes regularly. In this group, Ayesha's father-in-law is a tough buy for any kind of conversation. Before his illness, every time I tried, it never seemed easy to have a meaningful conversation with him. His composure and indifference were always hard to crack. Then he was hospitalised for being seriously ill. They suffered serious financial disaster. After recovering, he started sitting again, but not as the shopkeeper anymore. It was more kind of spending with the family beside the street. He almost stopped talking even in his own regular serene standard.

That day, Ayesha was telling about her country house and arrangement in Dhaka. In short, it was about her pre-marriage life, her migration to Dhaka, and the post-marital household. Her parents live in a village in Mymensingh. She came to Dhaka for searching a job. Abrupt contact, love, marriage with the real owner of this shop, her husband. She didn't know about her to-be-husband's profession. Some "shit job" (*dhandamanda*) was what she knew at most. After marriage, Ayesha's groom brought her up in the "slum" where Ayesha's mother-in-law lived.

Ayesha was brought to the house, because her mother-in-law "accepted" this marriage and never accepted the "first" marriage of Ayesha's husband. Ayesha sounds indifferent in explaining that her mother-in-law is not willing to reconcile with her son's first wife. Ayesha finds two reasons on behalf of mother-in-law: one is that "wife" is not "good" (in this case, it should be read as hot-tempered), and the

other reason is that the marriage was without her (mother's-in-law) consent. That was a secret "marriage" by her husband. I was looking for words, at least to form a question about if she had known about the other marriage before she fell in love. Instead, I could formulate a question about the children of similar age. She explains, indifferently again, pointing at those two, that the second one is of her co-wife (*'Whose else? Of that lady, don't you see?'*). The children are unfazed too, busy together in eating cup-cake from this shop, staring for a second or two at me.

Ayesha lives with her mother-in-law in a single-room "slum" house. Her co-wife lives in another and her husband lives in two places as he wishes. As a compensation of non-consulted, unauthorised previous marriage, and as "son's responsibility", Ayesha's husband has taken charge of family's daily meals – of his father, mother, daughter, wife (Ayesha) and an unmarried brother. I am not yet sure if his responsibility entails expenditure only, or management too. Ayesha makes it clear. All they go to that co-wife's one-room house and have their meal. But no matter how close co-wife's daughter is with her, she won't go to her house. "Never", she confirms.

"Then how do you eat?" I had to ask. While I thought it as a tough question, Ayesha has a simple answer. "It's so close. My parents-in-laws take the tiffin-carrier with them. They have their meal and bring mine every time. Is it a big deal?"

6. References

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