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Shweta Singh

Loyola University Chicago, ssingh9@luc.edu

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VALUES GUIDING THE USE OF PUBLIC SPACES AND THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN

Shweta Singh*

Abstract: This paper articulates the concept of space and gender using illustrations from the cultural iconography of Hindu Goddesses. The boundary and control of public and private spaces leading to differences in toleration of women within them is discussed. I apply the popular conception of values outlined within Ramayana and Mahabharata texts as they impacted Goddess Sita and Princess Draupadi. I have juxtaposed this against the cultural construction of Rani from the Bollywood cinema Queen. The paper contributes to a discussion and reflection on the values that guide women's visibility and access in public and private spaces as a likely factor in violence or its absence against them.

"It is important to acknowledge that all human actions are performed somewhere, and consequently the question of space is central to many discussions of human activity." (p.168 Chiodelli and Moroni¹)

I. Public and Private Spaces

Liberalization as a process of making markets legitimate and central to socioeconomic processes affects both the physical structures and underlying value structures of public and private spaces. In discussing the concept of space and toleration, Francesco Chiodelli and Stefano Moroni create a typology of public and private spaces by boundary, claim, and control. They describe the public spaces that are for general use, such as streets, and those with specific purposes, such as parks and hospitals. Private spaces are also categorized from simple to complex by the nature of their use and access. The use of these spaces and the

*Dr. SHWETA SINGH, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Loyola University.
Email: shwetasingh.faculty@gmail.com.

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behavior within them is monitored and controlled to varying degrees, as is the claim of individuals to accessing these spaces. They distinguish between “denial of access” as a-priori and post priori, as “behavior restrictions” post access and during use of a space (Chiodelli and Moroni, 171-173). The concept of toleration, as they discuss it, becomes more relevant at this point as they develop a specific conceptualization of toleration. Toleration is based on two perspectives – one is of neutrality and the other is of recognition of individuals – and these allow access and use of public spaces to be guided by ethical and moral principles. The authors argue for a ‘substantive’ and ‘inclusive’ approach to determining toleration as a value which can accommodate the weaker and marginalized sections of the population who might not be able to fit into the rules of neutrality (Ibid. 176-177).

II. Concept of Tolerance with Reference to Women in Public and Private Spaces

Public spaces and private spaces are changing simultaneously but at a different pace. Consequently, even as women become cognizant of their increased access to a multitude of spaces, they remain unaware of the complexity in this process due to the values underlying their access and the varying degrees of “tolerance” for their presence in public and private spaces. On the other hand, women’s presence itself transforms the public spaces which they frequent and the private spaces which they inhabit. In developing countries such as India, public spaces remain largely unstructured with numerous participants, some of whose claims to privileges and control of space is not mentioned in legitimate rules governing these public spaces. The process of access and use of public spaces becomes even more complex as the traditional rules that were previously governing these spaces break down in a dynamic and unpredictable manner. Comparatively, a private space has fewer people with predefined roles and behavioral expectations, thus making it easier to navigate the private space. This is true for private spaces like the home comprising an individual woman’s household, as well as the structured private spaces that have implicit or explicit contracts for their use, such as a club or recreation spaces.

III. Inclusion and Exclusion of Women in Post Liberalization Spaces

The conversation surrounding public space and private space is now drawn out of its sociological construction and has made its way into feminist,

political, and critical studies. The earlier restricted spaces are now accessible due largely to markets, urbanization, and forms of democracy for more marginalized groups including women in South Asia. Women's enhanced access to the formal economy means women are now perceived to have a-priori rights to access work- and education-related complex public and complex private spaces. These are complex because there are some rules and contracts guiding the access and use of these spaces; thus while they are open, they might not be inclusive for other marginal groups such as urban poor or rural migrants.

My aim in this paper is to highlight the values under the grid which guide the public spaces and private spaces. I will use the depiction of values in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as they impacted Goddess Sita and Princess Draupadi, and the cultural construction of spaces around Rani from the mainstream Bollywood movie *Queen* to reflect upon the construction of violence against women in public and private spaces (Kinsley; Geen).

The exploration of public and private space interfacing with each other and consequently impacting the individual lends itself to a poststructuralist construction of reality. A poststructuralist construction entails a multi-perspective, fluid cognizance of those power processes underlying reality. Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida revolutionized social theory against orthodox interpretations of social reality. French philosophers were inspired by the colonization and disempowerment of Africa, and so they discussed power at length. Built in opposition to structuralism, poststructuralism looks at language and text beyond its inherent meaning. "The enterprise of structuralism is to discover how people make sense of the world...not to discover what the world is" (Radford and Radford, 65). While structuralism is focused on the 'discursive formation', post structuralism is focused on knowing if the pattern has a reason for why it has been so ordered. Foucault tries to "move thinking about power beyond the view of power as repression of the powerless to an examination of the way that power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions" (Mills 33). The powerlessness of an individual (or power exercised by any entity, individual, group, or artifact), which is the process by which power is executed and then impacts and generates consequential agency in those it impacts, is of interest.

My work, in its postmodern and poststructuralist leanings presumes the

overarching aegis of the powerful *Shakti* as the source of inspiration for women characters in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. I study social systems with a culturally-cognizant gender lens as an alternate perspective to the textual articulations of *Shakti* by examining the numerous identities and agentic performances undertaken by women in the cultural texts and other artifacts, such as Bollywood Cinema.

In most religious contexts women characters represent the divine feminine form, such as that of the *Adya Shakti Devi*, the supreme female power that can and does subjugate the male. The guidelines of dharma have been modified and rewritten a few times, but they remain true to one characteristic of Hinduism: the distinction in directives for agency by an individual's caste, class, and gender. Re-constructing womanhood as experienced and practiced by the women characters in *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, I examine the constructions of self, identity, and agency in personal and public spaces. Even though each space differentiates between men and women in the allocation of roles, responsibilities, and rights, the intersection of these spaces makes it difficult to understand women's unique positioning. Women in these texts are role models of womanhood. Through deconstruction, a recreation of women's identity which is built around cognizance of women's agency in skillfully maneuvering spaces with "a" and "post" priori rules prescribed through the mediums of cultures, religions, family, community, and status is possible. Similarly, it is no longer important to discuss whether Bollywood reflects global sensibilities or Indian society. According to Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, Bollywood has played a role beyond storytelling by incorporating the entire nation and her sensibilities, politically and sociologically, in its narrative (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 9-11). Conversely, Western descriptions of Bollywood usually locate it in an "urban, cosmopolitan" sensibility and draw comparisons between New York and Mumbai (Matusitz and Payano). At the same time, there are contentions that India is better depicted in Hollywood films, which show the starkness of India, full of color and vibrant but with its background of immense poverty, religiosity, complexity, and undertones of violence. Examples include movies like *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle & Loveleen Tandan, 2008) and *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy, 2010).

Amongst the many benefits of liberalization and modernity of erstwhile traditional societies is the agreement that the construction of a woman's presence in a public space is no longer debated. The advent of a civil state

and a society governed by the rule of law meant that women and their rights to their own body would no longer be questioned if women were in public space with a legitimate reason. However, taken together, these two ideas - that women can exist in public spaces but only if they have legitimate reasons and are cognizant of the post priori rules of this access - are processes that are culturally fluid. In other words, women's access to and use of private spaces is guided by principles of tolerance that are held by most members of the household. However, in a transitional society these principles vary from household to household and thus what is the norm in private space becomes subject to varying interpretations. Tolerance becomes subjective to social sanction as mediated by the cultural context of individuals and collectives.

Amanda Gilbertson, in her paper based on 12 months of fieldwork in suburban Hyderabad, explores what is considered respectable and what is considered traditionally feminine for women who belong to the middle classes. She contends that for middle-class women walking this tightrope is a struggle. "This positioning is simultaneously global and Indian is reflected in accounts that highlight the complex balancing acts performed by the Indian middle classes as they strive to find 'appropriately Indian' or 'suitably modern traditionally Indian' " (121). Her underlying question is the same as that raised by many scholars: are women continuing to now embody the representative identity of modernity just like they did some years ago of traditionality? I am proposing that even the understanding of women's representational identity - be it of modernity or traditionalism - is stagnant if the public and private spaces which women access are not deconstructed adequately, and the processes of social and interpersonal relationships within them remain under-analyzed. For instance, the complex private space of work and the interpersonal relationship of women with their male versus female colleagues should be examined to explain whether work is an empowering process and results in performance of agency and strengthening of identity. This is when the a-priori and post priori access and use is strictly controlled by rules. In the general free and simple public space, there are minimal rules and tolerance is presumed by vague moral cultural guidelines which vary by the subjectivities of individuals within it. For instance, the street cannot moderate who will enter it, nor can it moderate the value systems typing the interpersonal behavior, ethical and moral

boundaries, and understanding of rules of the public space. Thus, depending on the subjectivity of those with power and privilege, all interaction between women and men is bound by traditional and modern ethos that inform conditions of use of simple public spaces such as streets and complex public spaces like parks. For example, the call-center is a modern artifact which has its post access rules of men and women existing in close physical proximity at night, with women in modern attire, which is not a well 'tolerated' behavior in simple public spaces, like the street or a park. The cultural values underlying public spaces ensures that post priori tolerance varies. Thus, in the streets of Chicago an Indian traditional dress can be considered borderline tolerance, while in Paris the wearing of a Burqa is no longer tolerated (Giddens). In both these instances, the tolerance leans into the inclusion and exclusion parameters of tolerance.

Religious identity within Hinduism offers complexity as guided by the religious and cultural texts. Within traditional context in the Indian society the religious, class, and caste affiliations inform the values guiding behavior for all. However, post liberalization, the market has provided a key difference in pre and post access, use, and behavior of private and public spaces – the working woman and the woman in college changes public and private space for all women. Yet the same girls and women, when travelling back and forth from the work spaces and college grounds, which are complex private spaces, are subjected to the simple public space rules of behavior. Their presence in the public space is questioned after day time, their proximity to men is debated, and their modern clothing raises doubts. The tolerance of their behavior in public space is thus a struggle between the many with access and use rights to the simple public space and the underlying conflict of limited access to complex private space which remains more a function of class than of gender.

IV. SITA Goddess, Daughter of Mother Earth!

The performance of duty, or dharmic acharan, has centered on the male characters; their words and actions are interpreted as central to society. Most interrogations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are also influenced by events in the larger society, social paradigms, disciplines, or orientations instead of by characters and their speech. My paper deconstructs the speech

attributed to Sita and Draupadi in the respective texts in their Hindi and English versions to identify the commonalities of desired identity and performed actions in the pathway of duty. Goddess Sita as the wife of Lord Rama is revered and considered the embodiment of the righteous path for women within religious Hindu philosophy. Draupadi, or Panchali, because of the five Pandavas who are her husbands at the same time, remains a debated and discussed character. This examination of the contrast in the identity and agentic roles ascribed to Sita and Draupadi is enriching and relevant toward understanding women's access to and use of public and private space. "Sita lacks an identity, power, and will of her own," David Kinsley contends (Kinsley, 79). I examine this claim as a limiting construction when seen outside the processes of public and private space and pathways for exercising agentic undertakings within each. Similarly, Draupadi, constructed within private space as a legitimate entity, is considered outside the tolerance norms of Hindu womanhood in public spaces.

Sita, the wife of Rama, personifies the ideal womanhood for Hindu women. Exemplifying the three criteria of *Ideal*, *Hindu*, and *Womanhood* for women for centuries, Sita holds a place of reverence in many homes. A blessing of "be like Sita" in wedding ceremonies of course does not mean, "may someone abduct you, or may your husband throw you out," or "may you be buried in your mother – The Earth's – soul because your husband, the Lord Ram, is still unsure about taking you back." Instead, it implies that "if someone abducts you, may your pious and holy character prevent any harm from coming to you, if your husband abandons you, may you still survive even without resources to raise two brave and courageous sons like Luv and Kush, and if your husband still does not repent and apologize for his error in abandoning you in the first place, may you have the dignity to not beg but take your leave having successfully discharged your duty by your children". On the other hand, no one says, "Be like Radha," but she has a place in the temples manifesting none other than Goddess Lakshmi to Vishnu's incarnation in the form of Krishna. Again the issue is - who carries out the behavior which can be tolerated in public spaces by the rules governing its access and use. Similarly, no blessing for a girl echoes, "Be like Draupadi." A few thousand years apart from *Ramayana* and Sita, with modified behaviors in public and private spaces, the tale of *Mahabharata* has does not

dwell on Draupadi but her husband, the brave Arjun, who continues to be the namesake for many sons. Focus is on her origins from fire, on her marriage to Arjun and subsequently to his four brothers, on the attempted assault on her personhood in front of her family, on her penance travelling with the five brothers serving each in exile for twelve years, or on the loss of all her five children during the *Mahabharata* – the mighty war. Discussion of the right conduct in public and private space precludes Draupadi from not just Goddesshood, despite her mystical origins, but also from womanhood.

V. Glorious Births from Elements

Sita was born of Mother Earth in feminist postulations; King Janaka was plowing the field when Sita emerged from the Earth as a reward for the childless king, thus her name Sita – “to furrow” (Kinsley, 65). Similarly, the birth of Draupadi is from the Fire. The holy fire of the Yajya organized by her father, King Drupad, gave birth to a son and a daughter. Their birth was felicitated and the kindly kings were overjoyed. However, Sita was born an infant while Draupadi was born a full woman. Closer interpretations of the *Mahabharata* text reveals that Draupadi herself was an incarnation of Sri, as cited in the Svargarohanika Parva / Heavenly abode segments of the Mahabharata. As the pre-Vedic manifestation of the Goddess Sri Lakshmi, Sri dwells with more than one God as well as with powerful and kingly demons who attain Godlike characteristics due to her presence, including Dharma (The God of Justice), Kuber (the God of Riches), Indra, (the God of demi Gods and rain), and Prahalad (the saintly Demon) (Ibid, 25-29). Sita and Draupadi are embodiments of Lakshmi and Sri, the same celestial being whose avatars evolve over the ages into Maha Lakshmi. In her parallel life as Draupadi she seeks Krishna as a friend and a guide. In fact, she is referred to as Krishnaa herself, thus taking the form or essence of Krishna himself.

VI. Reconstructed private space for reinforcing individual identity

The unfortunate sequence of events, which in Sita’s case follows exile and in Draupadi’s case precedes exile, form a site for performance of agency and construction of identity in public and private space. Each transgression is met with varying degrees of social tolerance by the rules established by

privilege and power. Satyuga has a demon in the form of Ravana trying to avenge the insult to his sister and connives to forcefully abduct Sita, wife of the Lord of the World, Vishnu, incarnated as Rama. Draupadi is won by trickery in a game of dice by evil Duryodhana from the Lord of Justice, Dharmaraj himself in the form of Yudhishtar, the eldest of the Pandavas. Sita is abducted by the treachery of the Demon Ravana, who beguiles her to step out of the Lakshman Rekha by entreating her as a pious man begging for alms. She is carried over the mountains and skies to a different country to be held captive for a long time with no news of her husband and his welfare or knowledge of his plans to rescue her. Dushahsan, Duryodhana's brother, attempts to humiliate Draupadi by disrobing her in public as a way of laying claim to her person. Both women are then within their private spaces and expected to follow the rules therein. However there is an important difference: both Sita and Draupadi have exercised their agency in choosing the private space they now inhabit. Sita chooses Rama in a Swyamvara through a test of might, a simple test to select someone who matches her own physical strength; while Draupadi is won by Arjun in a similar feat of power and skill set by her father to find a match suitable for a celestial being. While the choice of life partners is sanctioned by the private spaces of their homes and the public spaces of the kingdoms ruled by their family, their choices after their marriage are debated in public spaces. Sita chooses to accompany her Lord Rama into exile as his partner, against the wish of all, thus selecting a private space that remains in the midst of public space. However, since it has an element of the cultural ethos of a wife supporting her husband, she stays still on the boundary of tolerance. Draupadi chooses to agree to being married to all five Pandava brothers, not just Arjuna. Thus the rule of behavior in private space for a woman crosses the limit of tolerance in public eye, comprised of other households and their norms.

VII. Encountering encroachment on private space

While thus inhabiting their private spaces, both Sita and Draupadi experience encroachment on their person and their private space. While the celestial origins of Sita and Draupadi are apparent in their not being harmed irrevocably, as neither the demon-king Ravana nor the army of Kurus can

cause physical harm to them; they are, however, taken out of their space through force. Sita is abducted by Ravana the minute she comes out of the circle of protection drawn by her brother-in-law and Draupadi is dragged through the halls of her palace to be brought out into the public hall. When in Ravana's gardens, Sita prevents harm to her personhood through the symbolic use of a blade of grass as a reminder to him of her married status and her own power. Draupadi calls upon Krishna to prevent the disrobing of her person by Dushshasan, a kuru son. Thus the public space does not protect them by its rules but by their own origins and manifestations as avatars of Sri, placing the violators and aggressors in a weak position. Their agentic manifestation in a time of stress highlights the celestial woman's coping with a distressing situations by use of psychological strength in a manner that allows her will to prevail in private and public space.

VIII. Tolerance for Sita and Draupadi in Cultural Public Space

Sita is revered as the embodiment of Mother Earth's creation and child. She contained power beyond the imaginations of a mortal man. As such, her physical strength has never been really debated. Once abducted by the evil and misguided King Ravana, by deceit and by physical force, her ability to prevent him from ever being able to touch her further reveals her as a goddess character. Within all versions of the text, Sita the goddess remains untouched. She is able to maintain her chastity and yet, for the public cultural space, she has to undergo the trial by walking through fire. So goddess Sita walks across ambers of burning coal. What remains unharmed is her cosmic strength. This is interpreted as her devotion and commitment to Lord Rama, and this is even more significant and powerful than her physical strength.

In contravention to this, the writings of *Mahabharata* frequently touch upon the women characters' personal space not remaining untouched, not once but multiple times. For social good, for family good, for some other reasons, the women characters' private space is not sacrosanct; their explicit consent is hidden under layers of complex social relationships and the sanctions accompanying them. Thus, Draupadi automatically accepts five people in the sphere of the personal and touchable space. Much like Queen

Kunti, her womanhood carries with it the antithesis of Aryan womanhood and private space of a woman in a home. This questioning of their private space ethics merges into the public one and keeps them as outliers in mainstream Hinduism, denying them the right to be a Goddess. Goddess Sita remains revered for her devotion to Lord Rama but Queen Draupadi with her five husbands, socially sanctioned, remains in a morally debated space within the public conscience. Sita, and her identity in fact, is proven to Lord Hanuman when he sees her reject Ravana, who maintains his distance but verbally threatens her with dire consequences. Sita remains undeterred and unafraid. She questions Ravana's morality. Even Ravana's mortal wife, Mandodari, a queen, a devotee of her own husband, questions his morality in encroaching upon the personal space of the Goddess Sita, wedded to another through the societal rituals and norms. In analyzing Sita's letter written to Rama, in the Javanese *Ramayana*, Willem van der Molen dwells at length on the faithfulness of Sita voiced by her and questioned by social norms (Molen, 344). What is interesting is that the tragedy which befalls Sita is a direct fallout of the violation of personal space of Ravana's sister, Srupanakha. Srupanakha is a demon princess, and her role and representation remains fragmented in the *Ramayana* text. Her decorum around acceptable behavior in public space for women is questioned. She looks at Lord Rama and falls in love with him. She insists that he marry her. When Lord Rama refuses, as he is already married, she tries to harm Goddess Sita, which is when Lakshmana, the younger brother of Lord Rama, intervenes and cuts her ears and nose. This violation is accepted in public space, as Srupanakha is the one who first encroached on Rama's private space. However, the encroachment of a male on the personal space of a woman in a public space is automatically experienced by all family members related to the woman. Thus the private and public space converge by experiences of tolerance or intolerance.

IX. Rani in Queen

The alternate example I want to use as an illustration of cultural parameters of experiencing private and public space is Rani in the movie *Queen* (2014). The movie starts with framing Rani, the protagonist, in the various spaces she inhabits. It begins with her imminent transition from her home, a simple

private space, to another simple private space, her husband's home pending her marriage. These are both depicted as simple private spaces with predefined norms of access and behavior situated in Delhi, a complex public space with the expected rules that bind behavior as depicted by class, religion, etc. Rani belongs to the middle class with limited exposure to public spaces. She meets Vijay, a family friend, in her private space, wherein following allowed behavior he falls in love with her and convinces her to reciprocate. The normative behaviors end with Vijay's refusal to marry her the day before the wedding. Apparently, Vijay's exposure to other social spaces outside India makes him rethink his choice in marrying Rani. After her initial shock and disappointment, decides she wants to experience the public spaces that were promised to her after marriage by way of a 'honeymoon' with her husband Vijay. While on her trip to Paris and Amsterdam, Rani explores the rules of behavior allowed in these public and complex private spaces. The key experience of Rani is the overlap of public and personal spaces when she is forced to endure a brief stay in a youth hostel in Amsterdam. She is forced to share a room with three men from different parts of the world. This sharing of personal space and experiencing different rules of public behavior result in Rani transforming her identity and realizing that there is more to life than simple private spaces like her home or her boyfriend's home. By going from choosing to sleep outside the room to sharing a room and physical proximity - but not intimacy - with the three men, who become her friends without being romantic partners, she understands that she has access to additional spaces, that she can use these spaces without being violated of her personal space, and that the rules governing public spaces vary.

Rani's return to Delhi and her increased access to virtual and physical spaces are symbolic of women and girls who experience the same kind of empowerment through work and college. They then envision a similar existence in public spaces like the streets. The fact that *Queen* received accolades from across the Indian diaspora underlines the relevance and social currency for a woman's right to choose the spaces and modify the rules in modern times, in contrast to traditional times. For instance, while in a public space in Amsterdam and about to attend a rock concert, Rani wears an appropriate dress yet upon returning Rani is wearing clothes similar to the ones that she had worn while leaving Delhi. Her transformation runs

deeper than her clothes, and her values can no longer be predicted by the clothes she wears. Her identity and her perception of public space is apparent in her renewed engagement on Facebook and as the number of hits on her pictures from her travels grow (Burkell et al.). The transformation of Rani to her namesake “Queen” is now complete; the audience comes away with the understanding that Rani has now found balance between the extremes of her dated traditional self and her explicitly westernized friend Vijay Lakshmi.

X. Conflicts in Spaces: Boundary, Control, and Tolerance

The complex public space is now the most contentious in urban living. The values of modernists and traditionalists and those somewhere along this continuum are at odds. The rights to allow access, use, and behavior a priori and post priori remain under defined and overlapping. The rights and privileges in democratic systems are presumed to be driven by inclusion and equity, however the corruption of democratic processes ensures that these values are not apparent. Thus, irrespective of gender, contract driven private spaces are more exclusive and accessible to only those with resources, while complex private spaces are designed to favor men irrespective of resources and class. There are additional complications driven by religion and other overt identifiers of group affiliations.

While private spaces of homes in urban areas have absorbed the key cultural ethos of productive individuality, the process by which women access work spaces and educational spaces is concretized as a value in private spaces. However, these private spaces have not yet been able to transform the public space norms, not only because of the multiple players involved but because women’s access to work and education has not resulted in the reconstruction of womanhood in other realms of private space.

These are the processes which hold the key to understanding the transformation of women’s identity and agency in public and private spaces.

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