



WRITTEN INTO THE CITY / WRITING THE CITY

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In February 2012, I was part of an event called 'Writing the Feminist Future' organised by Zubaan Books and the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. Scholars, teachers, writers, poets, activists all spoke passionately on a variety of concerns including the body, cities, journeys and peace. The conversations were among the most exciting I have been part of in a while.

This piece is from my short presentation at the February event which speaks of the possibilities and ambiguities fostered by the act of writing. I reflect on the process of writing about the city specifically from my own experience of researching and writing on women's right to loiter in the city.

A FEMINIST WRITES THE CITY

Since I can remember I was aware that being a girl meant I was different. I wrote my first proto-feminist published piece when I was 12 years old. It was only decades later, however, as an adult, that I came to the question of inhabiting my city in a female body, albeit a very privileged female body via a vacation that a woman friend and I took in the north of India travelling through Agra, Gwalior, Jhansi, Orchha and Datia. For those two weeks we planned every move carefully so as to make sure we were safe. Back home in Mumbai I realized how much I actually strategized even in my own city in order to be able to access public space.

What does it mean to write the city as a feminist? What is the politics of dissent in which I must be embedded? What are the politics of inclusion that I must take into account when I write? What are the groups that will claim me and for what reasons?

The journey of writing gender into my city began in that moment of realization. As I wrote preliminary ideas and talked to women I commuted with on the local trains I realized that this writing meant asking some difficult questions:

A MIDDLE-CLASS, UPPER CASTE, HETEROSEXUAL, HINDU WOMAN IS WRITTEN INTO THE CITY

As a person with a particular set of intersecting identities I cannot but know the city both desires my presence and fears it. I am desirable because I am a potential consumer-citizen, I often look right and speak right and even am sometimes found in the right places – malls, coffee-shops and multiplexes where the global aspirational city wants me to be, fuelling the economy with retail therapy. I am feared because I also have free will and agency and as a feminist, I might not be satisfied with the malls but demand the streets and parks as well.

How does one respond to a city that sees you as a member of a new reconstituted middle class and invites

you into its privatised pleasures, suggesting implicitly that public space is for the birds?

What are the choices I am offered? What are the pleasures? Can I own a politics that acknowledges the pleasures of such neo-liberal global aspirational spaces even as I critique them and am hyper aware of their limitations? May I enjoy the malls but still want the streets and parks with a visceral sense of longing? Is it possible to have discussions on the antithetical nature of global cities which discourage people from loitering in public space in an upmarket coffee-shop? What then, are all the contradictions I live with in this context?

AN ASPIRING LOITERER WRITES THE CITY

When we began to talk about safety to people – there was a kind of complicity – everyone assumed they knew just what we meant – this was not an idea that threatened anyone at any level. As we engaged with this idea it became increasingly clear that safety was not going to take us anywhere radical. Attending a workshop on risk in the very edgy city of Johannesburg in 2004 was deeply transformative in offering a prism to engage with city space in a new and less constricting way. Risk provided the radical edge that safety could never have. When we began to

talk of women's right to risk as opposed to petitions for safety – it put us in a completely different terrain – that of rights rather than protectionism.

Loitering was the next leap of analysis and yes, faith. From the right to risk we moved to the idea that the only way women could access streets unconditionally was if all other marginal citizens could as well. That only if Dalits, lower classes, Muslims, hawkers, bar dancers, sex workers and other loiterers of different hues can loiter will a politics of loitering be meaningful.

'Why Loiter?' is the title of the book I have co-written with Sameera Khan and Shilpa Ranade. Different people including other feminists often asked us, "but why loiter?" in tones of bewilderment, their contention being that loitering is debased kind of activity that offered little hope of liberation.

Subsequently in conversations with feminist activists particularly those who work with young women we've been challenged several times on the grounds that everyone loitering includes even those 'others' (often young men) who

intimidate young women and inhibit their access thus in fact restricting the access of young women.

How does one think through this without dismissing these concerns and yet without once again returning to the unworkable politics of selective exclusion.

I've begun to think through this dilemma through the prism of unfriendly bodies asking what would it mean to conceive of the city as a hostile space and still want to access it.

THIS CITY THAT IS NOT ONE

That Mumbai is a heterogeneous city is not news. The question is can we reflect on the city as a space of difference, even of unfriendly spaces and bodies that need to be negotiated? This idea is not really so radical, for one might say with awful truth, that many women are horribly unsafe at home, a space often of unfriendly bodies and speech and yet we don't stop women from being there – in fact we urge them to be in that very space. What if we were to cast the presence of unfriendly bodies in the city in this same light? That is, what is the real risk posed by unfriendly bodies in public space – perhaps that there will be cat calls, verbal harassment, maybe stalking, and perhaps even physical harassment. Can we choose, if we choose, to negotiate these? Is it possible

for us to think of unfriendly bodies as being a hazard of public space rather than a deterrent?

When one talks to young women about the fears of sexual harassment in public space they articulate less of a fear of physical harm and more the anxiety that by continuing to access these spaces where they are sexually harassed, they are in fact courting a risk to their reputations. That their presence on streets where sexual harassment is certain reflects a certain kind of unbecoming "boldness" which indicates their unsuitability for an arranged marriage. They fear partly the young men but also the "community" who will "talk" thus cementing their reputations or more accurately lack thereof.

If we were to construct public space as more generally unfriendly, a space to be negotiated rather than be smoothly welcomed into, would competing claims to public space look different? If we give up our warm and fuzzy notions of the public would young women's access to public space be built on different assumptions?

For one we would be compelled to acknowledge that the utopia where everybody in public space likes everybody does not exist. It is unlikely to ever exist. Can we work within these limitations, even embrace them? I would like to suggest that diverse spaces

populated by diverse peoples are not a law and order problem, they are very possibly part of the solution.

Loitering is not unambiguously inclusive. It needs both careful reflection and a certain irreverent attitude towards order. It needs a commitment to a certain messiness of streets and a willingness to embrace serendipity, and a belief that pleasure in the city is an important component of citizenship.

THIS CITY THAT IS NEVERTHELESS MINE

Writing about Bombay for me is a little like writing about myself – it is in many ways a profoundly narcissistic act. In fact much of my research and writing engages my own lifeworlds and so I am both participant and participant observer, roles that give me an exciting insider-outsider position that I sometimes methodologically struggle with.

Bombay/ Bambai/ Mumbai – if I must belong to a place I belong to this city. Even as I write this, I am profoundly aware that it is a deep privilege to choose to belong to my city rather than the nation. Its fractured, hierarchical, iniquitous ways shame me. Its edginess, its streets, its sheer velocity seduces me. What does it mean to write this city of

mine not with the certainty of a flaneur but with the tentativeness of a loiterer? Not as a detached observer but as someone who seeks to belong, perhaps even to stake claim. Not in solitude but as part of a disparate crowd whom I may not know and who might even make me anxious. What does it mean to inhabit a writing practice of hope?

As I write I seek to articulate a practice of a politics of justice for the most number or people and populations in my city. I write not to make statements but to ask questions. I write in the hope of sharing this journey with other feminists /loiterers/ writers. I write for the sheer pleasure of being part of conversations about the city.