Tracing Indian Girls' Embodied Orientations Towards Public Life

Authors

Vinnarasan Aruldoss
Visiting Research Fellow
Department of Sociology
Goldsmiths, University of London
United Kingdom
ORCiD: 0000-0001-7573-1324
Twitter: @AruldossV

Sevasti-Melissa Nolas
Senior Lecturer
Department of Sociology
Goldsmiths, University of London
United Kingdom
ORCiD: 0000-0001-6928-7001
Twitter: @smnolas

Tracing Indian girls' embodied orientations towards public life

Abstract

Contemporary figurations of the 'the Indian Woman' over recent years have been heavily influenced by national and international media coverage focused on high profile, gruesome and brutal cases of rape and sexual assault of women in public. The suffering involved in such cases notwithstanding, we argue that investment in such representations runs the risk of limiting our understanding of the varied experiences of female bodies in public life. Most significantly, the bodies of younger girls and how they relate to public life is mostly assumed rather than studied. Drawing on a sub-sample of ethnographies of younger children aged 6-8 living in the city of Hyderabad, India and employing the phenomenological concept of 'orientation' (Ahmed 2006a), the article explores young girls' everyday embodied orientation towards public life, with an intersectional framework. The paper considers three case studies from different spatial/cultural contexts and the empirical material is organised around the themes of the male gaze in a public space, orienting bodies in a schooled space, and the lived body in a domestic space.

Key words: gender, body, orientation, phenomenology, childhood, India

Introduction

In recent years, contemporary Indian experiences of female bodies have been the subject of 'shock and awe' press coverage following a number of high profile cases of sexual violence that have hit international media headlines (Bhattacharya 2015; Datta 2016; Daya 2009). Critical events such as the infamous Delhi gang rape, the sexual abuse of young women in the new year celebration at Bengaluru and the Chandigarh stalking case where a woman was chased late at night while returning home from work, to name a few, have sparked widespread public debates on women's safety and right to access public spaces against a dominant counter narrative of right wing extremism on women being self-restrained and culturally appropriate (cf. Chaudhuri and Fitzgerald 2015; Parikh 2018; Phadke 2013). The threat and scrutiny female bodies are subjugated to in public life is not new either in India or elsewhere and, feminist responses to unsolicited and threatening attention is longstanding in its attempt to register dissent, dissonance, and subversion (cf. Daya 2009; Niranjana 1999). Most recently, such counter-publics are further recognisable as part of a transnational feminist response to sexual violence manifest in online support groups and solidarity movements, especially in urban India (Phadke 2013).

Generally, public debates on gender and sexuality in India have largely focused on extreme and grotesque acts of violence against young and adult women in public (cf. Bhattacharya 2015; Datta 2016). Within such raging public debates, the bodies of younger girls, which are not impervious to everyday abuse and violence in public places such as schools and neighbourhoods, have received scant attention and, in the academic literatures little or no reference is made to ordinary girls' lived experiences of their body. In this paper, we continue the generative dialogue that is being actively pursued between feminism and childhood studies scholars by engaging with Indian girls' everyday encounters and experiences of public life, with a particular

focus on their bodies (Burman and Stacey 2010; Rosen and Twamley 2018; Thorne 1987; Walkerdine 1999). This is done at the backdrop of the current government's policy initiative on '*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*' campaign, which aims to celebrate the girl child by 'saving' her life through her education, participation, and protection in society.

We develop our analysis drawing on a sub-set of ethnographic biographies from the Connectors Study (2014-2019), a comparative, longitudinal ethnography that explores the relationship between 'childhood and public life' in three cities (Athens, Hyderabad and London). The analysis is part of a wider study which is concerned with children's emerging orientation towards public life, especially 'what moves and matters' to children and how children experience, engage and orient themselves towards public life across different cultures. As such, the analysis of the paper pays particular attention to the intersectional dynamics of gender, which seemed to be pivotal in determining the relationship between childhood and public life in the Indian context. The paper specifically considers a critical analysis framed around the strategies used by three young girls, aged 6-8 years, to orient themselves to everyday public life in Hyderabad, the capital of the newly formed state (since 2014) of Telangana. Care was taken to construct a heterogeneous sample. However, despite our best efforts to recruit a sample that was gender balanced, more girls (9) than boys (3) made up the group in Hyderabad. The gender imbalance in the sample meant that girls' experiences became a salient category for further analysis and one that we pursue in this paper. The examples discussed here are selected based on the similarities and diversities of their social background. There are some commonalities across the three girls, as they all attend quality private education (see Balagopalan 2014 on the discussions around class, labour and schooling privileges within the narratives of postcolonial modernity and 'multiple childhoods' in India), whilst their

parents are educated, middle class professionals. However, they have considerable differences too in terms of caste, ideology, and ethnicity. While Anushka's parents' have defied caste hierarchy and religious hegemony through inter-caste marriage and radical left political ideology, Parvathy's parents have contrasting life histories on social activism and differing religious views although they share a similar caste membership (a dominant forward caste). Sonali's parents sport a cosmopolitan outlook with liberal values; they have their ancestral roots in North India and they have wide international exposure gained through transnational migration before marriage.

The focus on the everyday is inspired by ethnographies of queer activism in India and beyond (e.g. Dave 2012), as well as a longstanding interest in theories of the everyday (Nolas 2014) both of which urge for an analytical focus that moves us beyond the spectacular moments of activism and social change diverting our attention instead to the everyday places and times in which politics is encountered and enacted. The everyday is, as Pink (2012) notes, 'central to human existence' in as much as the everyday is concerned with the temporalities, spatialities, fluidities and complexities of the ordinary. As such, our analysis focuses on younger girls' bodies as they moved through the spaces of their everyday lives, encountering both constraints and oppressions as well as challenging, subverting and talking back to those same social structures and norms. Such an analysis, we contend, as well as informing our understanding of the phenomenology of gendered childhood itself, also offers an opportunity to re-imagine public figurations of female bodies in India. Our ethnographic discussion highlights the ways in which the phenomenology of orientation offers up the possibility to think beyond verbal reasoning that frames much of our thinking about how public life is encountered and engaged with especially, though not exclusively, in childhood (Nolas 2015).

The body as both locus and boundary of private and public life

Feminist sociologist Barrie Thorne (1987) argued that much of social and feminist theory remains adult centred, with children often bracketed out of knowledge generation processes. This, together with her pronouncement that children's lives are 'conceptually privatised' (Thorne 1987), still hold. In response to children's exclusion from our understanding of the social world, the emergence of the 'new', at the time, sociology of childhood (James and Prout 1990), performed parallel work to that already undertaken by second and third wave feminist scholars, of (re)connecting childhood with theories of agency. The idea that childhood is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon with children as active meaning-makers is now well accepted within the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007; Tisdall and Punch 2012). Nevertheless, these intellectual endeavours of rehabilitating the adult-woman and child subject have taken place in parallel tracks. Where the twines have met it has been in adversarial terms as either friends ('women and children') or foes ('women versus children') (see Rosen and Twamley 2018). More recent social theory has attempted a more nuanced navigation of the woman/child quagmire in both theory and practice with more relational and complex lenses emerging (Burman and Stacey 2010; Nolas, Sanders-McDonagh and Neville 2018). Those within childhood studies have also called for a rapprochement between the field and larger bodies of social theory making childhood more, what might be termed as 'conceptually public' (James 2010).

One common entry point for such a rapprochement, both analytically and empirically, is the body. Social theory has long held that bodies are objectified, constrained, mediated, shaped, frightened, scrutinized and sexualized in everyday life, especially if they belong to less privileged groups (Butler 1990; Prout 2000; Valentine 1989). In particular, the bodily subordination of women and children has been a key

preoccupation of academic and activist communities. Charting the emergence of modernity, spatial arguments were developed that relied on rigid distinction between 'public' and 'private' spheres which men and women occupied respectively (Wolff 1985; Pollock 1988). These dichotomous narratives are (re)produced in women and girls' experiences of discrimination and violence instigated and perpetrated by men (Bhattacharya 2015; Phadke 2013). This is not to argue that their consequences are not unjust, real or devastating for those women and girls who experience them. It is instead to argue that the (re)production of such narratives makes the range of women's and girls' encounters with public life difficult to see and locks them into structural gender roles and narratives, which hamper nuanced analysis and the possibility for social change (cf. Nolas 2015; Haaken 2005).

The rigid boundaries of public and private life contained in the narrative of 'modernity' have been troubled in recent feminist and postcolonial literatures. As Chakrabarty (1991) argues, the notion of 'enclosed inside' (private) and 'exposed outside' (public) are not strictly spatial, rather, the boundaries are symbolically drawn. This fixed spatial assumption of 'private' and 'public' is criticised by feminist scholars for subsiding personal matters into 'private' realm that resulted in grave injustice within family lives (Mahajan 2009). Doran's and Raja's (2015) insightful analysis on open defecation in India illustrate how the notion of private and public is culturally and materially defined, and the risk women bodies entail when they attend to a private need in the so-called public space in the dark. Similar enmeshment between public and private spaces can be found in the everyday family life of married Indian women in which the boundary is mediated by the bodily practices of veiling (Abraham 2010). Therefore, the private cannot be treated strictly as 'indoors', female and safe, and the public as 'outdoors', male and dangerous. Such zones of gathering are often referred to as 'neither quite public nor quite private' (Wilson 1992), and

their essential gendering has been brought into question (D'Souza and McDonough 2006).

We extend this feminist/postcolonial argument to consider how children negotiate public life in India, with specific reference to gender and the body. For example, Chakraborty's (2009) study with Muslim girls in a Kolkata slum analyses the social construction of 'ideal' girlhood and how the girls consciously transgress such desired norms on body presentation (behaviours and interactions) and dress code (how to dress in private and public) in a different space and time (outside the slum as a 'third space'). Similarly, the study conducted by Dyson (2010) on girl children in the Himalayan region exemplifies how everyday leaf collection in the forest work as a site for gender performance, a sign of body capital and how the girls embrace the public life of their village from a distance. Huberman's (2012) work on local sales children encountering foreign tourists in the city of Banaras, offers a nuanced analysis on 'working childhood' with gender as its undercurrent. Her analysis underscores the effects of gender – how sales girls' bodily movement is being constricted by gender norms and expectations whereas boys have freedom to roam around with strangers. In contrast, Sen's (2011) work in a communally fragmented urban slum in Hyderabad demonstrates how Muslim boys, once victims of communal violence, use physical power in claiming the public space in their attempt to restore male pride of their neighbourhood. Her analysis on child squads and vigilantism illustrates the intersection between nascent masculinity, bodily performance, and micro-politics, and how these operate through the patrolling of slum borders, establishing disciplinary control, and exerting physical violence on adult female bodies that violate sexual norms. Although these studies are useful in enriching our understanding on how public life in India is gendered, they have their analytical focus on older children, whereas our paper is concerned with younger children in India's growing urban

middle class.

An intersectional reading of gender, sexuality and violence in India

Female bodies are not just an object of desire or violence, they are also loci of sexuality and agency and themselves mediating public and private spaces (Niranjana 1999). Thus, any reading of gender, sexuality, and violence should be foregrounded in the wider social, political, cultural and material contexts and their intersectionalities, in which violence takes place (Brickell and Maddrell 2016; Datta 2016; Pain and Staeheli 2014), as Doran and Raja's (2015) incisive analysis demonstrates on the rape and murder of two teenage girls in a village in Badaun district while openly defecating. Analysing the same rape incident with a different perspective, Datta (2016) highlights how the spatiality of power together with the confluence of caste, land ownership, and manipulative public institutions in rural areas, at times, naturalise sexual violence against lower caste bodies in safeguarding the interests of the high caste social order and maintaining the status quo at the local level (see also Sreenivas 2010 for similar arguments about normalising sexual violence against Dalit girls in India within the frames of purity/impurity and subaltern history).

An intersectional lens on gender, sexuality, and violence provides an understanding of the relationship between the body, space, identities, and the context (Brickell and Maddrell 2016; Pain and Staeheli 2014). Intersectionality is concerned with the combined effects of two or more social categories on human subjectivity rather than concealing the differences with a universal framework (Sreenivas 2010). In conjunction with such arguments, Valentine (2007) urges us to consider intersectionality as lived experience. Therefore, while looking at the intersectional effects on the three girls' lived bodies, what we aim to examine in this paper is how each 'axis' or 'point' of social categories intercept with each other and what level of effects they might have on their girlhood experiences in terms of power,

discrimination, marginalisation and privilege.

The phenomenology of orientation to public life

We draw on the works of Merleau-Ponty, Sara Ahmed and others in order to bring these three themes – body, gender and space and their experiences – into a single frame. Phenomenology postulates the body as the central point from where the world unfolds. For Merleau-Ponty (1964) perception, or consciousness, itself is embodied. Our bodies interact with the environment and the meanings they generate are very much shaped by its social location. To be a body is to be anchored to a certain world and shaped by the contours of that world. We come into worldly existence through a double movement of the body: an appropriation of the social world into and onto bodies and a giving life to social structures and schemas through that same body acting in and onto the world (Merleau-Ponty 1964). As such, the goal of phenomenology of perception is, as Csordas (1990, 9) notes, 'to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy'.

Sara Ahmed (2006a) approaches the act of mental transcendence with her spatial metaphor 'orientation'. She describes orientation as a starting point from where we take direction, 'the 'here' of the body and 'where' of its dwelling'. Ahmed's metaphor is useful for our analysis to understand how the girls become 'oriented' towards public life in relation to their gender and, what it means for their bodies to be lived in a specific period of time and space and, how their bodies take shape as they navigate the world by directing themselves in a certain path. For Ahmed (2006a, 2-3), 'it is not just that our bodies are moved by the orientations they have; rather, the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting the relations of proximity and distance between bodies'. As such, orientation as a concept directs our analytical gaze towards the 'lived experience, the

intentionality of consciousness, and the significance of nearness' (Ahmed 2006b, 544). It also allows us to consider how the girls' relationships to the world are arranged, established, signified, disrupted or reordered through their bodies.

The methodology

Over a three year period (2014-2017), the study followed a sample of 45 children, aged six to eight at the time of recruitment, who lived in different neighbourhoods across three cities (Athens, Hyderabad and London) to study the relationship between 'childhood and public life'. A multimodal ethnography was undertaken including, participant observation, photography, walking, mapping, biographical interviews and workshop methods. In Hyderabad, participating children were recruited through schools, professional contacts, non-government organisations, and word of mouth.

The *relationship* between childhood and public life in our study was conceptualised in broadly phenomenological terms, which situates public and private experiences in the lived body. Many critical theorists, most notably Spivak (1999), questioned the objectification of 'subaltern bodies' through epistemic privilege. In contrast, the phenomenological approach we espoused in this paper considers the lived and felt experiences of girls' bodies in its social location and interaction (see Young 2005 on existential phenomenology). This offers a chance for 'subaltern bodies' to speak for themselves, rather than becoming an object for expert interpretation, thus partially mitigating power inequalities in knowledge production (see Sprague 2005 on critical feminist methodology). Although we bracket young girls as 'subaltern' due to their age, gender, ethnicity, and social status, the epistemological and methodological approaches we adopted in this paper offer an opportunity for a more just representation of their accounts by treating the girls as 'speaking/knowing subjects' (Sprague 2005; Young 2005).

Further, the phenomenological interpretative framework we followed in the analysis explores how oppression, inequality and injustice operate in the lives of young girls in gender specific ways. The focus on the body as both experiential and analytical tool enables us to analyse the actions, articulations, and feelings of the three girls in a specific moment as they navigate different kinds of spaces. This analytical strategy also opens up a space for critical reflection on the relationship between (dominant) structures and subjective encounters of the girls in everyday life (Lugones 2003). Within the phenomenological framework, however, our analysis focuses on particular bodily interactions, as opposed to normative behaviour, for example, experiences of the male gaze (Anushka), the narratives of the 'physicality' of male bodies (Parvathy), and the performative nature of invisible inequality in body labour (Sonali).

Encountering the male gaze in a public space

Perception is central to embodied experience, and the ocular a key metaphor for phenomenological analysis. In what follows, we illustrate how a young girl child's encounters with the male gaze functioned as an 'orienting device' towards public spaces. The male gaze is a second-wave feminist concept. It draws on a political reading of psychoanalytic theory to highlight the gender dynamics of on-screen representations of women in which women become the object of patriarchal and hetero-normative practices of looking (Mulvey 1999). The concept is not unproblematic (Snow 1989; Cooper 2000), especially viewed from a contemporary vantage point. At the same time, Mulvey's essay and cinematic work paved the way for more diverse and woman-centric representation of women's experiences on screen (as opposed to a gaze that focused on men's fantasies of women alone) (see also Ahmed's (2006a, 40) critique of the male gaze of early phenomenology). At the same time, her arguments have also made their way into mainstream discourses and

argumentation about women's portrayal in the media. We have chosen to engage with the concept of the male gaze as a springboard for our analysis as it is a category that resonates most strongly with some public figurations of women in India and the experiences of some girls in our study.

Let us first turn our focus on the male gaze in a hut like teashop in one of the university campuses in Hyderabad where some of our fieldwork was carried out. Anushka is a seven-year-old girl at the time of recruitment who lives on that campus with her parents. Her father is a humanities scholar who teaches at the university; her mother is also a teacher. Anushka has a mixed background with parents who have married across extreme caste hierarchy choosing intimacy over social order. This provides a family narrative of resistance coupled with experiences of family political activism and commitment to Dalit ideologies of emancipation. Both the parents are Hindu by birth but, on account of their mutual and longstanding leftist political orientation, identify as atheist. Anushka studies in a reputed English medium school and occasionally accompanies her parents to political events such as protests, gatherings, talks and a range of other cultural activities within and outwith the campus. The campus does not have many young families so it is hardly surprising that Anushka considers her college going aunt and younger brother as 'play buddies'. During our neighbourhood walk with Anushka, when we were accompanied by her aunty the following event transpired:

> Anushka wanted to take us to the swimming pool in the university campus where she attended summer camp. While walking towards that direction her aunty whispered something in her ear. Anushka said, 'let's go to the playground instead of swimming pool'. We weren't sure why Anushka changed her mind all of a sudden, moreover, the way they behaved looked a bit odd to us. When asked why she was moving in a different direction, pointing towards the roadside hut type teashop, she said there were lots of boys/men sitting over there, hence, they took the diversion. When probed further Anushka said she doesn't like boys/men smoking and banter between them and they have seen those boys/men from outside gaze female bodies and make sexual comments when

women walk past the teashop, so, they decided it was better not to go
(First author's field notes, 25 April 2015).

Teashops in India are generally spaces where male bodies assemble to discuss matters of common concern, to hang out and to banter, as well to discuss politics and read daily newspapers (see Jeffrey 2010 on the cultural practices of 'time pass' in teashops and street corners amongst unemployed youth in North India). Teashops are those neither public, nor private zones, so prominent in the literature on modernity and public life, which form a key aspect of men's everyday geographies in India. Several literatures suggest the extent to which public spaces in India are gendered through violence, abuse, discrimination, castigation, stigmatisation, and exclusion (Abraham 2010; Bhattacharya 2015; Chakraborty 2009; Parikh 2018; Phadke 2013). From our conversations with Anushka and significant others in our fieldwork we learnt that, outsiders, after morning/evening walks and other sports/recreational activities on the campus, mostly use the hut-type teashop that she referred to. There is no restriction for entry to the campus as it is not entirely fenced, so university 'outsiders' can enter and leave as they wish. The vast campus has many dilapidated buildings scattered around in between houses and, during the same campus walk, Anushka revealed that most of the places on campus looked scary to her, especially in the 'dark' and at 'quiet' times, as the campus is surrounded by lot of overgrown bushes and trees. Anushka also tells us that she fears the 'strangers' that come onto campus.

The above encounter and the exchanges it prompted made Anushka's concerns and inhibitions of accessing public spaces on campus visible. After school, she spends most of her time in the campus and the family rarely ventures off campus for their social life. Her experiences of restricted access to public spaces on the campus on account of her gender and age prompt us to further unpack the connections

between bodies, affect, spaces, and public life in childhood. It was evident that Anushka didn't like the teashop and men/boys' practice of judging female bodies (see Osella and Osella 1998 for the analysis on sexual joke, body shaming, sexual harassment, and flirting in youth culture and everyday public life in South India). We also discovered that Anushka was not merely relying on her aunt's instruction and suggestion, and had also witnessed such harassments meted out to others. Drawing incidences from her memory and her impressions on the past experiences, she sensed the vulnerability and the possible attention a female body would attract in what she experienced as a hostile environment; perhaps, if it was not her body then it could be her aunt's, so she perceived some discomfort and threat in going towards the teashop.

Anushka's experience fits the narrative of the male gaze well. The gaze of the real and imagined teashop men literally orients Anushka's everyday wayfaring of the campus and the walking tour we took together putting Anushka momentarily 'out of place'. Her orientation is affectively mediated by fear. Studies on gender-based violence show how fear produces gendered spaces and limits mobility and women's access to public life (Bhattacharyya 2015; Pain and Staeheli 2014; Valentine 1989). Such studies also highlight the 'intersectionality of geographies of public crime' (Bhattacharyya 2015, 1342) in which women are expected either to avoid using public space or behave 'appropriately' and with respectability (Phadke 2013; Parikh 2018). For Anushka, orientation takes place through the male gaze and its body and, the fear is generated by the impression the male bodies leave on female bodies. The 'immediacy' of the threat and the felt potential risk Anushka experiences prompt her to move away from approaching the space. The affect of fear prompts them to orient their direction towards other spaces.

As Ahmed (2014) interprets fear, not all male bodies are fearsome on their own – this is a stereotype; but the affect of fear comes to surface as the result of an

encounter between the body and the gaze. In Anushka's case fear (re)orients her understanding of public life in restrictive ways and she has a feeling that she is vulnerable on two counts – being young and being a girl. The affect of fear is sustained in the body as well as being embodied. Fear shrinks the usage of space – confining bodies in a social space, restricting their movement and the opportunity to inscribe themselves on the world. Nevertheless, as Ahmed (2014, 70) notes fear and the state of vulnerability is not something inherent to female bodies; rather, 'it is an affect that works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitance in the private'; it is also a condition of resistance (Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2014).

Orienting bodies in schooled space

The foregoing account has explored one girl's orientation towards strangers in public spaces. While this experience was meaningful to the girl in question it was not the most common experience of girl's embodied orientations towards public life in our study. In this section, we would like to turn our attention on another girl's orientation towards male bodies in a schooled space. The schooled space is a kind of interstitial space between the home and the state and also a key site for the (re)production of gender relations, norms, and violence (cf. the edited collection of Prout 2000). The school is neither an autonomous private space nor a fluid public space. The state of 'in-betweeness' is etched onto schooled spaces where the conditions of possibility for orientation are determined by the contours of the everyday school activity. It is the space where the pedagogical authority has control over schooled subjects in a highly controlled environment and, at the same time, children do find their private space for their own purpose (Walkerdine 1999). Thus, like any other social space, the schooled space is not fixed at any point of time; rather

it is produced through power relations (cf. Sreenivas 2010 for the portrayal of school as an 'intimidating space' for low-caste children in India).

Let us look at the example of Parvathy and her orientation towards boys' bodies in her schooled space. Parvathy is another seven-year-old girl; she is also a single child and, compared to other children in our study, her parents often come across as overprotective. She lives in a house in a middle-class residential area in the city. Her father is an activist with a precarious employment history, and her mother has strong family ties abroad. They provide Parvathy personal material comfort at home but limited encounters with public life on her own, especially involving boys. Due to her parents contrasting political views – building a family economy as against involvement in political activism – Parvathy, unlike Anushka in the previous example, hardly resonated her father's political activism and/or her participation therein during our study encounters. As much as Parvathy wished to play outdoor games at home she seldom got the chance on account of the lack of play facility in her neighbourhood, congested and narrow local streets, and her parents' concern of negative socialisation. Instead, she told us that she spends a lot of time in the digital spaces watching cartoons, YouTube videos, taking photos and playing online games on her iPad. As such, her desire for playing outdoor games at school was expressed on multiple occasions during our conversations.

Parvathy, who attends a private English Medium school in the city, told us that there were 18 children in her class and she described herself as being close to three of her girl classmates. When we asked why she doesn't have boys as friends, she said she doesn't like boys 'because they are not nice'.

> She said boys are very physical and they hit girls hard with the ball. Thus, she doesn't like playing with them at all… the boys in school are rash and rugged and they also use foul language (First author's field notes, 04 March 2016).

Parvathy was not alone in describing male bodies focusing on their physicality as 'irritating', 'wild' and 'troublesome', other girls in our study did so too. In such narratives, the male body is posed as a powerful and dominant figure subjugating a female body. Their dislike of boys is developed by the repetitive act of boys doing gender through their bodily gestures of fighting, beating, shouting and interfering with other bodies, and that history of events has given girls a disposition and tendency to position themselves away from boys' bodies. In general, most of the girls in our study described boys' bodies as hard to deal with. In this particular case, Parvathy's orientation of boys' bodies is shaped by her experiential knowledge of school playground and the kinds of impression that play spaces leaves on girls' bodies – how girls' bodies are presented and received by boys in gendered spaces (Ahmed 2006a). In a way, Parvathy has learnt that boys in her class are very physical, they are rash and rugged, so she does not like to go near their bodies (see Leach and Humphreys 2007 for a more detailed account on discourses around gender violence in school). This corresponds with literature that talks about the likelihood of female bodies experiencing fear of violence from known men as a manifestation of gender hierarchy, social privilege and hyper masculinities (Brickell and Maddrell 2016; also see Rogers (2008) on male students indulging in a culture of 'Eve teasing' and sexually harassing female students in a South Indian college campus as a tactic to contest their subaltern masculinity).

Parvathy is limited by her own everyday encounters with boys, yet, Parvathy also recounted resisting the limitations imposed on her by boys' bodies and her own frustration with those experiences. During a conversation with the researchers she shared one particular incident when boys and girls at school had fought with each other. She said boys always bothered girls in playtime so she wanted to take revenge on them. Without the knowledge of her mother and grandmother, she took a tennis

ball to school on the pretext of playing cricket. The ball, she confided to us, has magic powers – when someone plays the ball, it bursts into flames. At school, she asked her sports teacher if she could use the ball against the boys and he agreed. So, she did. When the boys tried to hit the ball, they caught fire and ran away in tears. 'That's how I took revenge on them', she told us with a laugh. Charmed by its narration, the story appeared real to us on first hearing, it was a coup of imagination over experience (Warner 2011). What is real here is her encounter with boys' bodies at playtime and the trouble those boys' bodies pose for girls' bodies. What her imagination tells us is her desire and how she wants to reposition herself from marginality to dominance.

The episode of tennis ball also shows how Parvathy responded to the male gaze, and how she enlisted her imagination to find a place for herself in everyday life. The violent acts of the boys during playtime reinstated gender differences by keeping girls bodies 'out of place'. Boys use aggressiveness, as we infer from her narrative, with a political intent by creating fear and by controlling the space and bodies of girls. Here, the bodies of girls are constructed as 'soft' compared to boys' bodies. This perceived softness and apparent apprehension in approaching boys' bodies produced distance in cohabitating the space. With the imagination of the tennis ball, Parvathy brings proximity between bodies that is not otherwise possible in reality. In her imagination, her position moves from vulnerability to (surreal) confrontation. Ahmed (2014) demonstrates how imagination could serve as 'imagined device' for orientation in the construction of hate crimes against the 'other'. Imagination is a kind of projection; it is related to 'ontological being' and connected to affective feelings such as love, hate, pain, grief and so on. Imagination creates hope in situations of hopelessness (Ahmed 2014), and can at time re-write the story (Warner 2011). While imagination alone is inadequate for confronting gender violence, which is structural, it can provide a way

of creatively negotiating the very social space in which violence is encountered and making life therein more liveable.

The living body in a domestic space

In this third and final empirical section, we turn our gaze to a final example in which the privilege of social class and 'invisible' (gender) inequality (Lareau 2002) crisscross into a girl child's actual reconfiguration of her domestic space. To be specific, we look at the ways in which the domestic space of home, and the apartment, as Ahmed (2006a) describes, act as a 'homing device' for a child. Ahmed argues that if orientation is about 'feeling at home' then we should think of the 'homing device' – how our bodies dwell in a particular situation, the senses, the feeling, the affect and the relationality to the environment. The notion of home could be 'imaginative and metaphorical space' for its inhabitants where there is interrelatedness between spaces, materials, objects and bodies (Stevenson and Prout 2013, 136). On many occasions, in our own research, as argued in other literatures, we have seen children doing political work and constructing their own spaces on 'matters of importance' in the domestic space (for an extensive review on children's political geography see Skelton 2013). Therefore, the simplistic spatial consideration of seeing home as private is problematic because it works on a range of scales traversing the public/private boundary (see, Brickell 2012 for critical geographies of home; Sahin 2018 for home as a women only space that mediates gendered and intimate publicness among Turkish women).

In what follows, we examine the case of Sonali, aged 6 years at the time of recruitment, who lives in an apartment block with her parents and two siblings in a wealthy area of the city. Her parents are highly educated, English speaking professionals from Northern India now settled in Hyderabad for a decade. Sonali attends a reputed private school and speaks English fluently, which is a sign of high

cultural capital in the Indian context. She has, what Walkerdine (1999) has previously described, a 'full diary syndrome' and her everyday life is organised around school life and 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau 2002) through participation in several extra-curricular activities such as dance, drawing, art, and craft. Sonali, whose parents lived abroad for a few years before their marriage and who can be described as being in possession of an abundance of cultural capital, inherits wider public exposure and an international outlook from her family and her public life is also shaped by the gated community in which she lives and with which she regularly engages. She lives in an apartment where the residents celebrate and organise events for themselves around religious and secular holidays. The families in the apartment raise money for charity work and visit an orphanage home with their children once a year. Children too organise their own activities including Halloween parties and fashion events in their respective flats and perform dance, singing, and drama in the events organised by adults in the apartment. As such, Sonali's life in the apartment itself surpasses the boundaries of private/public on a number of levels.

Within our study, Sonali can be described as highly privileged in terms of the cultural capital she possesses, and the material comforts she enjoys. Generally, privilege in the literature is approached analytically either structurally and/or biographically. In particular, the individualistic account of privilege is premised on reflective individuals who 'work on oneself' within a moral/ethical register (Kruks 2005). Although Sonali is not always aware of her class privilege, her mother encourages her to act as a responsible child with everyone irrespective of their social background. Yet, as Kruks (2005) claims, the notion of privilege and the 'situated self' is always caught between the dialectic feelings of freedom and constraint. This ambiguous nature of privilege is evident when Sonali discusses her relationship with her elder brother and twin brother at home. Although she is a privileged child and

loves her family and family life very much, she doesn't feel she is a privileged *girl* amongst siblings. As the only girl, she ends up engages in 'homemaking' activities, taking responsibility for maintaining the domestic space in order, especially the bedroom that all three children share.

> 'My brothers don't ever do anything, they just keep things and go, they don't do anything. If the room is full messy, then, I will clean the room and keep a little bit of messy, because I like to keep the room a little messy (with a laugh)'. Why you want to keep a bit of mess in your room, I asked? She said 'because I can't cover all the things (do all the work?) so I keep little messy in the room (First author's filed notes, 21 May 2015)

Sonali's experiences point towards the 'invisible' nature of her gendered role and responsibilities practised in everyday life amongst siblings. She is not content about her relationship to household chores and the statement above implicates her sense of difficulty in keeping the room in order all by herself. In one of our later conversations she mutters that brothers are troublesome and perceives one of her friends to be 'so lucky' because she does not have a brother. The cosmopolitan lifestyle of the family offers enormous opportunities, resources and possibilities to Sonali to prepare herself as future 'human capital' in the neoliberal market economy. With it however, comes a certain femininity that is constructed through a gendered division of labour, one she is not happy about. The practice of patriarchal values by her brothers disrupts her shared space (making it messy) and she is obliged to exert unrecognised labour to be 'in place' in her bedroom. It is not clear, however, that how her orientation (Ahmed 2006a) towards gender norms and 'ideal girlhood' – who looks after the domestic space – emerge in the first place. Being 'in-line' (Ahmed 2006a) and 'doing gender' (Butler 1990) emerges as a complex interplay of familial and educational practice which both Sonali and her brothers encounter and which orient their bodies in time and space.

Interestingly, there is a different sort of girlhood that Sonali can draw on in the publicness outside the flat facilitated by the solidarity of other girls. Sonali's orientation of disadvantage on the grounds of gender at home, especially with her siblings, is reconfigured in the company of other girls in the apartment. Sonali knows many people of both genders and of diverse ages in the apartment but she considers four girls of her age as her best friends. She tells the researchers that she pities her twin brother who is totally dependent on their elder brother for playing and socialising, in contrast to herself. She further confided that boys in the apartment generally don't create problems for girls and they don't show physicality often while playing together possibly because the girls outnumber boys in her age group. This is an indication that her orientation of feelings about her gender and her views of her brothers are not always fixed – her positionality and judgement changes contingently depending on the situation. Her everyday experiences give a sense of how the insidious practice of gender norms amongst siblings disrupt as well as reorganise her domestic life in fluid ways. Sonali went on to explain how she and her friends organised fashion shows and games for girl children, as a girls-only homosociability space (Sahin 2018), in the individual flats in the apartment. Organising such events in the flat/apartment provides another space to be 'in place' for Sonali. Through her performance and organisation she is able to reverse her feeling of being 'out of place' and emplace her body and give value to herself once again. Sonali's account is insightful regarding the ways in which privilege and invisible inequality are contemporaneously situated and intricately pattern everyday domestic life.

Rethinking girlhood and the figurations of 'the Indian Woman'

We began this paper by drawing attention to the dominant figuration of Indian women in the contemporary public discourse and the limited focus on young girl children's embodied experiences of everyday life in academic studies in the country.

We focused on three ethnographic examples that demonstrated younger girls' bodily orientation to public life and drew conclusions from observing the actions, articulations and encounters of these girls as they navigate different kinds of space. Girls' lived experiences show that their orientations to public life are not only different to the ones available for boys, they are also different to each other, shaped as they are by individual circumstances and other structural attributes, as well as being different to dominant public narrative of women's experiences of everyday life in India. Taken together, the three ethnographic narratives illustrate the effects of intersectionality between space, gender, and body, and how the notion of gender and patriarchal norms intersect with age (Anushka), sex (Parvathy) and class (Sonali) in fluid and complex ways in everyday life.

When we speak of gender violence, we always tend to focus on physical and/or psychological violence that is severe and brutal in public. So, there is a general tendency to dismiss the forms of violence that is deemed private, ordinary, and less harmful. The spatial analysis we carried out above however suggests that the modernist spatial distinction of private/public is often problematic in the Indian context and, there is always an interaction between the private body and public life and, the violence orchestrated on female bodies in everyday mundane activities has significant effects on their access and participation in public life. In particular, we argue that cultural practices such as the 'gaze' can be experienced as violent and can constrain the movement of female bodies (Anushka) in the production of everydayness. At the same time, girls do not experience the 'gaze', and the male bodies that produce it, passively. Parvathy's magical realist tale of 'fire balls' and revenge offers an example of the ways in which the imagination is enlisted to stretch the boundaries of experience, invert power relations for retributive justice and to make a girl's everyday life more liveable. Finally, Sonali's story shows the ways in

which experiences of everyday oppression are unstable and context dependant, as well as being contradictory: oppression and sexual violence cut across age, gender, caste and class for which high socio-economic and cultural capital is not necessarily a buffer.

Everyday girlhood in India draws inspiration from dominant narratives and images of Indian womanhood in which marriage and motherhood are perceived as the highest accomplishment of women's life. As such, girl children are expected to socialise in a way to reach ideal womanhood that values the 'sanctity of the 'Indian culture' and 'family values'' (Lau 2014, 283). Even, the representation of the new Indian woman, which largely refers to middle-class, educated and urban, places emphasis on striking a balance between modernity and tradition as shown in the case of Sonali (Daya 2009). Lau (2014, 283) aptly sums up this ambivalent figuration of the Indian woman as 'educationally, technologically and even financially advantaged/privileged, but still confined (voluntarily and otherwise) within certain (oppressive) social and cultural norms and expectations'. Thus, the socialising space available for girl children, at times, gives social approval for this kind of neat separation and that eventually becomes the root cause for gender inequality, subordination, and domination in everyday life. These paradoxes are echoed across all three of the ethnographic biographies presented in this paper.

As Ahmed (2006a) describes we encounter things that come from different directions but we do not randomly orient ourselves towards the things we encounter. Instead, we travel in a direction, determined both by our habitus (Bourdieu 1990) but also shaped unexpectedly by the contingencies of history and time (Elder, Modell and Parke 1993). Concomitantly, our body as an orienting device has the capacity to affect and be affected and, as shown in these examples, inhabits certain spaces and particular directions (Ahmed 2006a). As Lugones (2003) explains the spatiality of

domination and the spatiality of oppression are always complexly intermeshed with power, history, selves, relations and possibilities, yet, the oppressed operate in a space of limen. The role of the researcher and what we have attempted to explore in this paper is therefore to explore the connection between practical syllogism and liberatory potential (Lugones 2003) in a single frame and how the frame might speak back and disrupt, even ever so slightly, our received wisdom about the world.

Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest

References

Abraham, Janaki. 2010. Veiling and the Production of Gender and Space in a Town in North India: A Critique of the Public/Private Dichotomy. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 17 (2): 191-222.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006a. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006b. Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12 (4): 543-574.

Ahmed, Sara. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd Edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Balagopalan, Sarada. 2014. *Inhabiting 'Childhood': Children, Labour and Schooling in Postcolonial India*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bhattacharya, Rituparna. 2015. Understanding the Spatialities of Sexual Assault Against Indian Women in India. *Gender, Place & Culture* 22 (9): 1340-1356.

Bluebond-Langner, Myra and Korbin, Jill. 2007. Challenges and Opportunities in the Anthropology of Childhoods: An Introduction to 'Children, Childhood and Childhood Studies'. *American Anthropologist* 109 (2): 241–246.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brickell, Katherine. 2012. 'Mapping' and 'Doing' Critical Geographies of Home. *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2): 225-244.

Brickell, Katherine and Maddrell, Avril. 2016. Geographical Frontiers of Gendered Violence. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 6 (2): 170-172.

Burman, Erica and Stacey, Jackie. 2010. The Child and Childhood in Feminist Theory. *Feminist Theory* 11 (3): 227-240. DOI: 10.1177/1464700110376288.

Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.

Butler, Judith, Gambetti, Zeynep and Sabsay, Leticia. 2014. *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1991. Open Space/Public Place: Garbage, Modernity and India. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 14 (1): 15-31.

Chakraborty, Kabita. 2009. 'The Good Muslim Girl': Conducting Qualitative Participatory Research to Understand the Lives of Young Muslim Women in the Bustees of Kolkata. *Children's Geographies* 7 (4): 421-434.

Chaudhuri, Soma and Fitzgerald, Sarah. 2015. Rape Protests in India and the Birth of a New Repertoire. *Social Movement Studies* 14 (5): 622-628. DOI: 10.1080/14742837.2015.1037261

Cooper, Brenda. 2000. "Chick Flicks" as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma & Louise*. *Women's Studies in Communication* 23 (2): 277-306.

Csordas, Thomas. 1990. Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology. *Ethos* 18 (1):

5-47.

D'Souza, Aruna and McDonough, Tom. eds. 2006. *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth Century Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Datta, Ayona. 2016. Another Rape? The Persistence of Public/Private Divides in Sexual Violence Debates in India. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 6 (2): 173-177.

Dave, Naisargi. 2012. *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Daya, Shari. 2009. Embodying Modernity: Reading Narratives of Indian Women's Sexual Autonomy and Violation. *Gender, Place & Culture* 16 (1): 97-110.

Doran, Assa and Raja, Ira. 2015. The Cultural Politics of Shit: Class, Gender and Public Space in India. *Postcolonial Studies* 18 (2): 189-207. DOI: 10.1080/13688790.2015.1065714

Dyson, Jane. 2010. Friendship in Practice: Girls' Work in the Indian Himalayas. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3): 482-498.

Snow, Edward. 1989. Theorizing the Male Gaze: Some Problems. *Representations* 25: 30-41.

Elder, Glen, Modell, John and Parke, Ross. 1993. *Children in Time and Place: Developmental and Historical Insights.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haaken, Janice. 2005. *Hard Knocks: Domestic Violence and the Psychology of Storytelling*. London: Routledge.

Huberman, Jennifer. 2012. *Ambivalent Encounters: Childhood, Tourism, and Social Change in Banaras, India*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

James, Allison and Prout, Alan. eds. 1990. *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*. London: Falmer Press.

James, Adrian. 2010. Competition or Integration? The Next Step in Childhood Studies. *Childhood* 17 (4): 485-499. DOI: 10.1177/0907568209350783

Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3): 465-481.

Kruks, Sonia. 2005. Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege. *Hypatia* 20 (1): 178-205.

Lareau, Annette. 2002. Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families. *American Sociological Review* 67 (5): 747-776.

Lau, Lisa. 2014. No Longer Good girls: Sexual Transgressions in Indian Women's Writings. *Gender, Place & Culture* 21 (3): 279-296, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.791252

Leach, Fiona and Humphreys, Sara. 2007. Gender Violence in Schools: Taking the 'Girls-as-Victims' Discourse Forward. *Gender and Development* 15 (1): 51-65.

Lugones, Maria. 2003. *Pilgrimages/Peregrinages: Theorising Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Mahajan, Gurpreet. 2009. Reconsidering the Private-Public Distinction. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12 (2): 133-143.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. *Signs*. Evanston: Northern Western University Press.

Mulvey, Laura. 1999. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.). *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. New York: Oxford UP, 833-44.

Niranjana, Seemanthini. 1999. Off the Body: Further Considerations on Women, Sexuality and Agency. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 6 (1): 1-19.

Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa. 2014. Towards a New Theory of Practice for Community Health Psychology. *Journal of Health Psychology* 19 (1): 126-136.

Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa. 2015. Children's Participation, Childhood Publics, and Social Change: A Review. *Children & Society* 29 (2): 157-167.

Nolas, Sevasti-Melissa, Sanders-McDonagh, Erin and Neville, Lucy. 2018. Gimme Shelter? Complicating responses to family violence. In Rachel Rosen and Katherine Twamley, eds. *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?* London: University College Press.

Osella, Caroline and Osella, Filippo. 1998. Friendship and Flirting: Micro-Politics in Kerala, South India. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (2): 189-206.

Pain, Rachel and Staeheli, Lynn. 2014. Introduction: Intimacy-Geopolitics and Violence. *Area* 46 (4): 344-347. DOI: 10.1111/area.12138

Parikh, Aparna. 2018. Politics of Presence: Women's Safety and Respectability at Night in Mumbai, India. *Gender, Place & Culture* 25 (5): 695-710. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2017.1400951

Phadke, Shilpa. 2013. Unfriendly Bodies, Hostile Cities: Reflections on Loitering and Gendered Public Space. *Economic and Political Weekly* XLVIII (39): 50-59.

Pink, Sarah. 2012. *Situating Everyday Life*. London: Sage.

Pollock, Griselda. 1988. Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity. In Pollock, Griselda. *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. London: Routledge.

Prout, Alan. ed. 2000. *The Body, Childhood and Society*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Rogers, Martyn. 2008. Modernity, 'Authenticity', and Ambivalence: Subaltern Masculinities on a South Indian College Campus. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14: 79-95.

Rosen, Rachel and Twamley, Katherine. eds. 2018 *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?* London: University College of London (UCL) Press.

Sahin, Oznur. 2018. From Home to City: Gender Segregation, Homosociality and Publicness in Istanbul. *Gender, Place & Culture* 25 (5): 743-757

Skelton, Tracey. 2013. Young People, Children, Politics and Space: A Decade of Youthful Political Geography Scholarship 2003-13. *Space and Polity* 17 (1): 123-136.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Sprague, Joey. 2005. *Feminist Methodologies for Critical Researchers: Bridging Differences.* Walnut Creek: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Sreenivas, Deepa. 2010. Forging New Communities: Gendered Childhood Through the Lens of Caste. *Feminist Theory* 11 (3): 267-281.

Stevenson, Olivia and Prout, Alan. 2013. Spaces for Play? *Home Cultures* 10 (2): 135-157.

Thorne, Barrie. 1987. Re-visioning Women and Social Change: Where are the Children? *Gender & Society* 1 (1): 85-109.

Tisdall, Kay and Punch, Samantha. 2012. Not so 'New'? Looking Critically at Childhood Studies. *Children's Geographies* 10 (3): 249-264.

Valentine, Gill. 1989. The Geography of Women's Fear. *Area* 21 (4): 385-390.

Valentine, Gill. 2007. Theorising and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography. *The Professional Geographer* 59 (1): 10-21.

Walkerdine, Valerie. 1999. Violent Boys and Precocious Girls: Regulating Childhood at the end of the Millennium. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 1 (1): 3-23.

Warner, Marina. 2011. *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights.* London: Chatto & Windus.

Wilson, Elizabeth. 1992. 'The Invisible Flâneur'. *New Left Review* 1/191, January-February.

Wolff, Janet. 1985. The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity. *Theory, Culture & Society* 2 (3): 37-46.

Young, Iris Marion. 2005. *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like A Girl and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.