

**Feminism: Concepts and Theories**  
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**Key Concepts: Space and Place**

Rinse and repeat, Feminism Concepts and Theories: Lecture 13. I am kidding, we are not rinsing and repeating, we are on to a brand new concept. As promised, we are going to investigate Gender and Space.

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Here we are looking at key concepts, Place and Space. And I am reading Linda McDowell from *Place and Space* in *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*, page 11 onwards. Here we are interested in the mapping of place or location onto gender identities. And this is a pretty radical proposition that has been very familiar to feminist geography for a while; that what we call as Place is very different than Space, which is not imbued with social meanings.

We make Places out of Spaces; and the ways in which place is made, or the ways in which places are destined to be made are extremely gendered. And we will try and understand the gendered implications of such place-making. Here, keep in mind that space and place are so interesting because they allow us opportunities to be able to investigate complex phenomena and complex figures.

We already saw in the previous lecture, our engagement with the cyborg, similarly, with place-making, we are trying to understand how gendered formations of space render certain places as women's places. We could push this understanding further, and then look at the multiple ways in which place making functions. For example, in global modernity, we look at places that seem ubiquitous, like the airport, police stations, things that inspire very particular forms of feeling and look the same everywhere. In globalization, for example, it is been called the McDonaldization of the world, and then becomes the new norm through which we understand worlds themselves as place making projects.

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**CURRENT NARRATIVES OF SPACE**

- Restless labour and capital
- Space of flows rather than a space of places
- Hybridized and nomadic traveling subjects

VERSUS

- The choice of travel or mobility is still a privilege
- Attachment to places persists

The slide features a yellow background with a black wavy border on the left. A speaker, a woman with dark hair in a bun wearing a pink and orange patterned top, is visible in the bottom right corner. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. Several terms on the slide are circled in red: 'Space of flows', 'Attachment', and 'privilege'.

In order to do this, we first have to locate our analysis within current narratives of Space, which more or less are focused on forms of restless labour and capital. Now, since the advent of the post Fordist economy or late capitalism, we have seen a growing mobility of people and different forms of place making, thanks to technology, thanks to communications, thanks to advanced forms of travel.

And in such a world, the narrative is increasingly about the restlessness of labour and capital and therefore, Space is characterized by flows rather than actual located places: and the story goes that all of us are bound to become hybridized and nomadic traveling subjects; that the norm is that each of us is free to travel whenever we want and in this narrative, travel always appears as liberation, flows always appear in many ways as the condition of all of our lives.

In a feminist understanding of Place and Space, instead, we argue that the choice of travel or mobility is still a privilege; it is not available to everybody uniformly and, even as flow is the

hegemonic form of desire suggested, people continue to be attached to particular places, and these attachments and desires are organized in a gendered fashion. So, let us dive into it without further ado.

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**PLACE AND GENDERED IDENTITIES**

- Men = Place of Work; Women = Place of domestic calm
- Men = Public; Women = Private
- Feminist approaches to the gendered divisions of space
  - Time, travel and progress = masculinity
  - Space, place, location and geography = femininity

The slide features a speaker on the right side. Red handwritten circles and lines highlight the text on the left, specifically around the bullet points and the terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

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In our understanding, therefore of place and its location, vis-a-vis gender, let us try a few possible pointers. It is fairly well understood that men equals place of work, women equals place of domestic calm. We investigated this in the lecture on Care as well, as to how women were considered to be custodians of home, even after they became working women and in such an understanding, we are now moving our analysis to Place. If Work is a Place, and that is identifiable mostly with men, Home is a Place that is identifiable mostly with women.

Public equals men, private equals women -- and in this understanding, and this is where we are applying a feminist approach to the gender divisions of space, time, travel, progress -- in other words, this narrative of Place becomes connected with masculinity. And as a counter, Space becoming Place, location geography are very much about femininity, things that do not transcend themselves, things that have no option but to be set in one place that cannot escape, that do not have these liberatory possibilities of progress are femine.

Between these two slides, there are two things that we are suggesting: one, that this is the dominant narrative, and this narrative is therefore masculine; and two, this narrative itself might not necessarily be true, this might not apply even to men beyond a point; we're being taught in many ways discursively that travel and mobility are aspirations that all of us must attach ourselves to. Let us move then from this to investigating one aspect of these propositions, namely Home.

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The slide is titled "HOME" in large, bold, black letters. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with a red and white star-like pattern and the text "NPTEL" below it. The slide contains three bullet points, each with a red checkmark to its left:

- All space is imbued with the idea of home
  - Calm repose, comfort, private reprieve from worldly troubles
- Women have written about the home as the site of social relations structured by power and inequality
  - Surveillance, captivity, abuse and entrapment
- Feminist understandings of home
  - Minnie Bruce Pratt, bell hooks, and Sharon Marcus

In the bottom right corner, there is a video inset showing a woman with dark hair tied in a bun, wearing a pink and orange top, speaking and gesturing with her hands.

All Space, feminists geographers argue is imbued with the idea of home; we all need a home, we all want a home, is the understanding that no matter what, something to go back to, to escape from, to be able to hold us in safety is always the home that provides calm, repose, comfort and private reprieve from worldly troubles. So in many ways, it almost upends the idea that travel and mobility are the only things that one needs in the world. It suggests that a home is a necessary counter to a problematic world. And women have written over many decades about the home as the site of social relations, structured by power and inequality. If home is something that provides safety for women, home has also been the place that has imprisoned them, that has held them within routines of cyclical work, that has caged them to

certain kinds of responsibilities and duties, which is also considered their natural habitat, while at the same time not allowing them enough leeway to escape from home.

Hence, home has also been the site in the writings of many women and in multiple feminist writings as the site of surveillance one is watched all the time within the limited confines of home. Captivity, you are held there and not allowed to escape, often abuse from domestic partners and other family members and entrapment. I do not even think I need to go into examples for you all to see what is it that such feminist writing is suggesting? Therefore, a feminist understanding of home has broadly been about trying to comprehend that home can be many things; and it is only in the dominant order that home becomes a space of calm repose. In order to expand upon this further, we look at the writings of three different feminist authors: Mini Bruce Pratt, bell hooks, and Sharon Marcus.

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**IDENTITY: SKIN BLOOD HEART**

HOME - X

- Minnie Bruce Pratt
- Moves from the comfort of a homogenous, protected home to an open, divided, heterogeneous world
- The home, for Pratt is a space of ignorance, as the child of a privileged, Jewish middle-class family
- A move away from home, signifies a 'coming to knowledge', a new inhabitation of a political identity necessary for resistance


NPTEL

In Minnie Bruce Pratts work *Identity: Skin Blood Heart*, she chronicles her movement from a homogenous protected home to an open divided heterogeneous world. Bruce Pratt had a very sheltered childhood as a child of a privileged Jewish middle class family, and she theorizes it as a space of ignorance, not just as a space of protection and safety where she was taken care of, thanks to privilege, but also a space that prevents her from knowing the world. In other words, it prevents her from having a feminist standpoint because she does not know what a world outside of privilege looks like, and to her, this is a space of insularity and ignorance. For her the moving away from home signifies a coming to knowledge, a new inhabitation of a political identity necessary for resistance.

And this ties in so well with our discussion on feminist standpoint, where mere experience is not enough; that Bruce Pratt moved from home to somewhere that was far more diverse and less protected, was not enough for her to come to a political identity, she also had to **recognize** that this was a move from a homogenous home to an open divided heterogeneous world and **appreciate** the kind of politicization that she was subject to as a result of that, and be able to inhabit it.

In this understanding, home is not great! Home protects you, but also home renders you unintelligent, uninformed, unempathetic. Many theorists have suggested that in order to have a true understanding of society, one has to engage not just with the narratives of the oppressed, but also the narratives of the privileged ones, in order to try and understand how exclusion is brought about, and Bruce Pratt provides a similar kind of story.

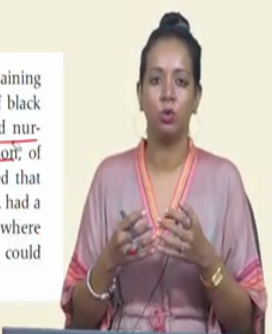
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## YEARNING

- bell hooks' collection of essays
- Argues for home as a site of political resistance for African-American women dealing with the consequences of a deeply segregated public space

Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and maintaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination. Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous . . . had a radical political dimension . . . [The] homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. (1991: 42)



**HOME**

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The slide features a video inset of a woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a pink top, speaking at a podium. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. Red handwritten annotations are present: a circle around the first bullet point, a line through the second bullet point, and a circle around the third bullet point.

Let us move from Bruce Pratt to bell hooks' collection of essays called "Yearning." You are already familiar with bell hooks from our first week, so think about this as an extension of the things that she writes about. bell hooks takes the opposite tack in understanding home; she speaks about home very much in the mode of a space of comfort, however for vastly different reasons than the hegemonic narrative.

For bell hooks home is a site of political resistance for African-American women dealing with the consequences of a deeply segregated public space. Here, hooks is speaking very-very specifically to the intersections of race and gender. Saying that "African-American women understood and comprehended public space very much as a space of danger, thanks to their racialization along with a double whammy of gender."


She writes, "Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and maintaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality, of racist oppression, of sexist domination." Home therefore is a site of protection not just from racism but also from sexism, since African-American women experienced both.

"Historically, African-American people believe that the construction of a home place, however fragile and tenuous, had a radical political dimension. The home place was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist." Now this is remarkably poignant, because she is reading this creation of home, as not merely a personal project that gives one safety, she is reading it as political resistance of a certain kind.



She is suggesting that coming to politics need not always be in the public space, the place of the home itself can be the site of gendered political resistance, where you secure for yourself, the possibility of claiming humanity that is otherwise denied to you by a structure largely built upon racism and sexism. And that battle is hard! You can fight it, yes, but you also need frequent breaks, where you can comprehend the experience of being human.

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## APARTMENT STORIES

- Sharon Marcus
- The urban apartment house as the intersection of the public and the private

Unlike the isolated single family house and the barely liveable tenement, which opposed the city to the home, apartment buildings linked the city and its residences in real and imagined ways, and nineteenth century discourses about apartment buildings registered the connections and coincidences between urban and domestic spaces, values, and activities. For their inhabitants and observers, apartment buildings were miniature cities whose multiplication of individual dwellings both magnified domesticity and perturbed its customary boundaries. (1999: 2)



Different than both of these are *Apartment Stories* by Sharon Marcus, where she investigates the urban apartment at, what she claims is the intersection of the public and the private. So not home in Minnie Bruce Pratt, as something that has to be left behind, not home the ways bell hooks speaks about it, as something that one has to come back to, but home as the urban apartment, a very particular form of place-making that is both private and public, and that provides new possibilities for identity-making.

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And an apartment building or a large community of people dwelling in homes has the advantage of being both a space that creates domestic places, but also a space of floors where



people float in between houses, doors are open, there is an intermingling of people and habits and rituals and food and daily habits itself. And such a construction, Marcus argues to be in miniature cities. For anybody who has lived in an urban apartment building, this is a very familiar narrative.

What does it have to do with gender? The connection here has to be made in relation to the ways in which the urban apartment allows for connection between families in different houses, or individuals in different houses to form spontaneous ongoing contingent units, thereby breaking up the kind of division between inside and outside, between who is responsible for what. Having a shared space where there may be possibilities of gender hierarchies breaking down on the one hand, but also replicating them in the same way that a city operates on the other. Think then of *Apartment Stories* as providing possibilities that may or may not be achieved. However, the place-making that we are talking about here, is very different than the other two stories that we referenced.

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**FEMINIST GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME AND THE CITY**

- Ask questions about the 'rightful' place of women
- Pay attention to the ways in which women make meanings of those spaces
- Are specific about the connections between various accounts of feminist geographies

The slide features a woman in a pink and orange sari speaking in a video inset on the right. The NPTEL logo is in the top right corner. Red handwritten annotations include a bracket under the first two bullet points and a circle around the second bullet point.

And in trying to comprehend stories such as these, through oral narratives, through women's own experiences, we are also trying to draw feminist geographies of home and city. What does a feminist standpoint of places such as home or the city look like? What are the ways in which women who inhabit these spaces experience them?

Here we are asking questions about the rightful place of women. What kind of homes do women find their place in? What kind of homes do they not find their place in? And asks us to pay attention to the ways in which women make meanings of those spaces. The meanings

of spaces are not given. It is the ways in which women make places that allows us insights into meaning making. So a home could be both, a space of repose, or a space of entrapment, neither, sometimes one, sometimes the other.

And here, we are trying to make connections between various accounts of feminist geographies, much the same way that concepts are formed. So, for example, our concept here is not about home as being one or the other, our concept is “feminist geography” itself. And now that we have (invest..), and now that we have investigated home and city, let us turn to the connection between a different kind of geographical formation and gender, namely, the “nation state.”

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**NATION-STATE AND GENDER**

- The space of the nation-state vis-à-vis idealized womanhood
- Images of the female form signifying truth, virtue, justice and liberty
  - Paradoxical allegories
- Men die as war heroes and are commemorated through statues and memorials whereas women are only seen to die in large numbers as civilians in the duty of the nation

Now, the space of the nation state has always been a really easy kind of possibility for idealized womanhood. The nation is always associated with particular kinds of womanhood that are supposed to typify the greatness of the nation. Think for example of images of the female form signifying truth, virtue, justice, liberty.

In many ways, these are paradoxical allegories, because sometimes what these figures signify is that which is denied most to actual living real women. Men die as war heroes and are commemorated through statues and memorials in the service of the nation, whereas women are only seen to die in large numbers as civilians in the duty of the nation.

These are populations who ought to be protected because they take care of home, whereas the men are on the outside, dying in the service of the nation, and deserve to be named as war

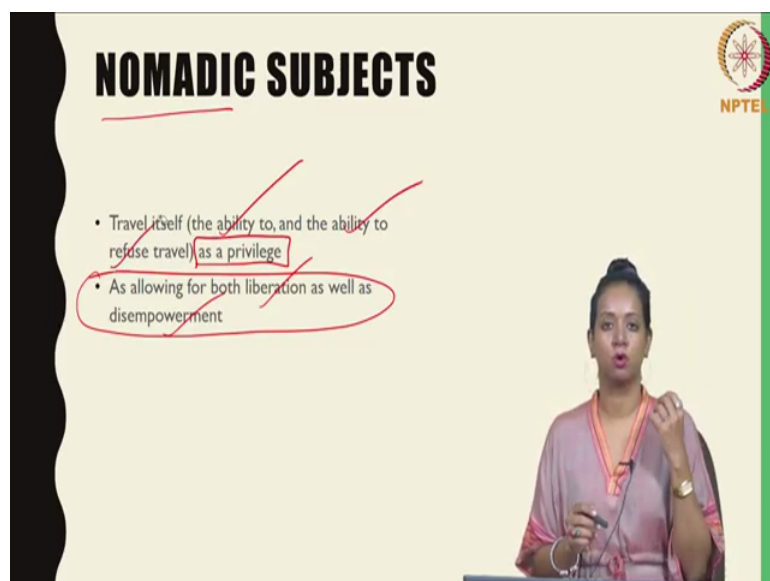
heroes and commemorated. Here, think about the difference between the two. Here you have the abstract female form that is celebrated, here you have real women who are not even named, because they are considered to play a non-essential part in the destiny of the nation state.

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Here are a few examples of such figurations. Law and Justice, the Statue of Liberty, Mother India, take a few moments to be able to try and analyse each of these as figurations and what are the ways in which they structure the gendered imagination of the space of the nation state and whether they have any kind of correlation to what we otherwise understand of precisely these notions of justice, of liberty, of the Indian nation state.

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The other set of figures that I would like to investigate in relation to gender and space are “nomadic subjects,” precisely those that typify what we began with. Worlds characterized by flow and spaces of flows rather than static ones, which is why nomadic subjects or those who actually travel, those who have the capacity to do so, form particular kinds of subjects in the modern world.

Even as feminists, geographers, and social theorists will argue that such nomadism does not necessarily automatically signify either liberation or disempowerment: think, for example, of the ways in which gypsies are nomadic subjects that are tremendously disempowered, think of upper middle class subjects for who travel or constant living in different places, is a sign of liberation. And therefore, travel, the ability to, and the ability to refuse it, is also a privilege available to only certain kinds of subject positions.

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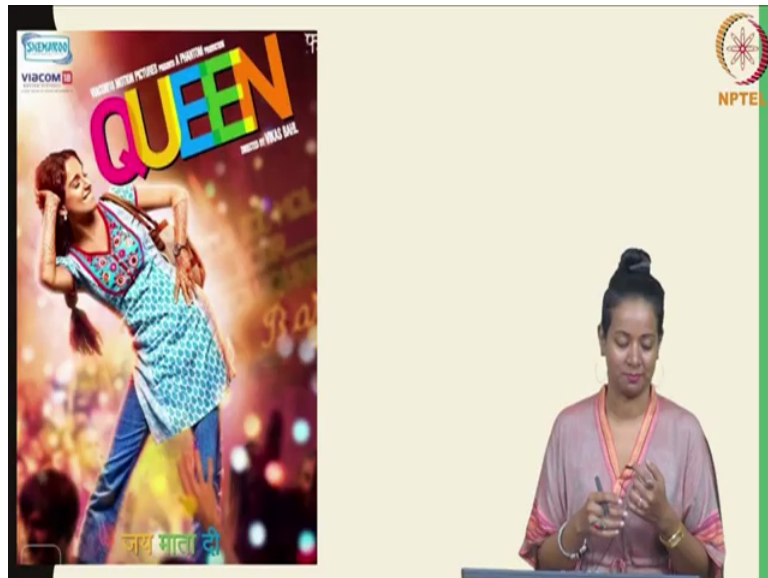


There are a number of fantastic works of fiction dealing with this experience of mobility, travel, nomadism. In recent times Amitav Ghosh’s *Gun Island*, speaking about the connections between various nomadic subjects, various diasporic subjects. Chigozie Obioma’s, *An Orchestra of Minorities* that testifies to the tremendous difficulty of such a form of travel.

And Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s, *Americanah*, which is a fabulously fun, interesting, poignant book about the experiences of an African woman in America. These are merely suggestions for your extra reading and fiction in many ways, allows us a more incisive

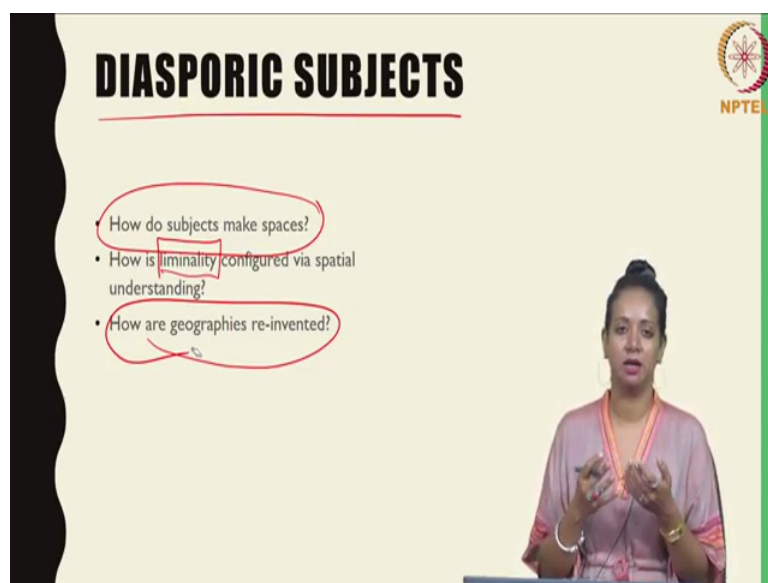
understanding, without having to go through structural analysis. It gives you direct access to possible imaginations otherwise not available to you through your experiences.

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Another great example of this kind of discursive rendition of travel itself is the movie *Queen*, where the protagonist allows for liberation through the experience of travel. This has become quite a popular narrative in current day popular culture as something that has been almost promoted that if one must be free, one must travel without taking into account the tremendous physical and material costs of such an endeavour. This does not mean I think it is a bad movie, I just think that it allows for us to understand the functioning of discourse.

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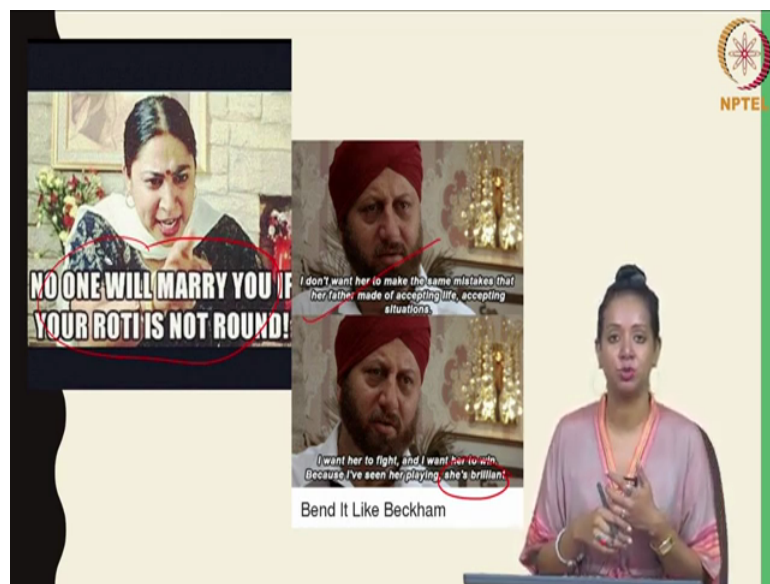


From nomadic subjects, let us also move on to diasporic subjects: those that occupy different geographies, while coming from other geographies. In the previous lecture, we looked at a case study by Shain about young women in Britain who belong to diasporic families, those that emigrated from other parts of the global south, and what is it that we understand about their life choices as being structured by different kinds of discourses?

In this lecture, let us look at how diasporic subjects relate to Spaces and Places and ask how do they make Spaces? Also, how is it that their liminality is configured via spatial understanding? Liminality is the state of being in between: that you belong neither here nor there, that you are always somewhere in between in relation to the ways in which you comprehend or had imagination of spaces and places.

It could be accumulative, it could be reductive, it could be both nations that you come from and occupy, or it could be neither, or it could be something absolutely new. And, feminist theory is asking a very important question about the reinvention of geographies themselves in diasporic understanding.

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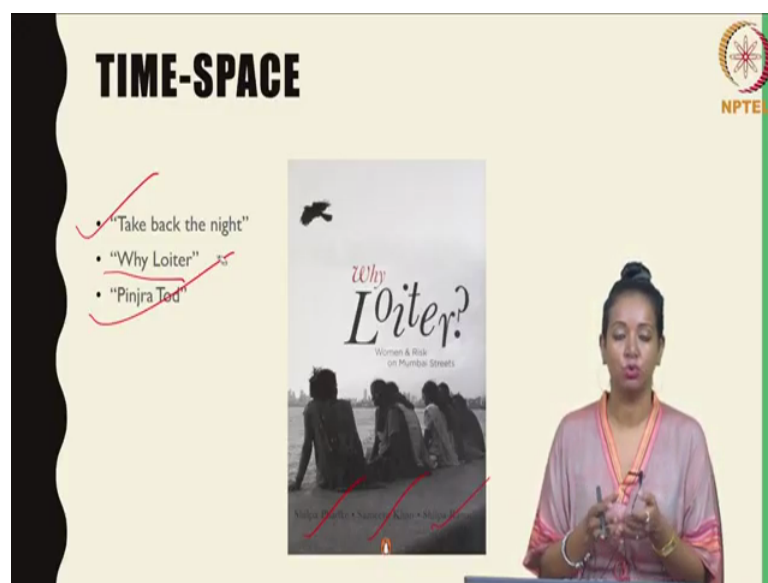
Think for example of the fantastically fun film Bend It Like Beckham, where the father allows for the daughter to play football because he says, “I do not want her to make the same mistakes that her father made of accepting life, accepting situations of being a frightened diasporic subject. I want her to fight, I want her to win, because I have seen her playing, she is brilliant.”



Now, this is quite interesting for a variety of reasons. In many ways the father is speaking about overcoming racialization in a new place, overcoming the markers of tradition, according to which he is identified in the new geography, overcoming the ways in which he only imagines his new country as a space of racialization and allowing for his daughter to be able to do so, because she is brilliant at football. What are the ways in which she is equipped to reinvent the geography?

The mother on the contrary, tells her that no one will marry you if your *rotis* are not round. Here, she is harking back to a different imagination of space and place, which is the place of home, which must be preserved in a traditional understanding, must keep customs and rituals and food intact in order for her to have any kind of identity. Watch the film and perhaps you will understand a little bit more of what I mean.

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Now such a notion of space, as will be obvious to anybody who identifies as women, is also very much about time, there are ways in which women are often confined to certain spaces and places at particular times, so together they form a really tight bond. Think for example, of how common-sensical it is for women to be told, do not go out at night, the spaces around you are not safe. You have this concatenation of time and space that becomes common-sensical understanding in relation to safety and danger.

I want to point you to a couple of movements and projects in relation to this, which I would encourage you to go on and look up. One is a popular movement called, Take Back the Night, where women are invited collectively to occupy spaces at night that are traditionally not



available to them and to be able to find proper approval for it, where their characters are not questioned because they are out at night, where they have the same freedom as male bodies to be out and about at any time that they please, in any space and place that they please.

I would also encourage you to look at this volume by Shilpa Phadke, Samira Khan and Shilpa Ranade called “Why Loiter?” which investigates why the practice of loitering or simply hanging out doing nothing is such a masculine kind of endeavour. And why is it that women do not loiter? Why are they always moving from public places? Why is it that they are always moving from public space into the safety promised by the private place? Why are they always moving from public to private in search of safety? And why do they not simply hang out?

Lastly, also look up movements such as “*Pinjra Tod*,” which is something that has been collectively fought for by young women who occupied dormitories or hostels where they are fighting against the imposition of curfew on female bodies as opposed to male bodies.

And these are only a few examples, I am sure you will find many more if you look, but then they also teach you, what are the ways in which time and space work together. I will leave you with this set of examples and congratulate you on successfully finishing week 4. Next week, we will take up a different set of ideas and try and see how these concepts can be understood better in different contexts. Until then...