

Across (B)order and Back: The Everyday Reality of Kolkata's "Flyings"

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City-Body-Text

The lush green swathe of the Kolkata Maidan, encircled by roads on all sides, is sprinkled with a few dark spots in the evening. When one approaches near, they turn out to be small clusters of young and not-so-young women. As dusk falls they recede like ghosts, taking up positions at a distance from one another. Swiftly they change from sari-clad suburban housewives to 'sexy' cosmopolitan women in gaudy make-up, junk jewellery and revealing outfits. Then they wait in silence until total darkness, anticipating the arrival of their customers. Men arrive in ones and twos, and negotiate a price. Darkness canopies their furtive carnality.

She is the "flying",¹ as she calls herself: one of a community whose numbers are escalating in the city today. She is no more the stereotypical streetwalker to be seen waiting for a client under a lamppost at night. She can be seen anywhere, anytime, in the metropolis – around cinema halls, below flyovers, near railway stations, at busy crossroads, in secluded residential areas. She is not a permanent city-dweller, but keeps plying from her rural home to the urban workplace in alternate turns. All places are workplaces for her, and any time is work time.

In the local Bangla dialect she is known as the "*half-gerasta*" – a hybrid term to denote her precarious condition. The term literally translates as "less than domestic", the English word "half" added to the colloquial form of *grihasta* (householder) to convey a social scorn for the besmirched sanctity of a virtuous housewife.

She, however, rejects this and *chooses* to refer to herself as the "flying" – an objective term that bestows neutrality upon the description of her work and categorically ignores the stigma associated with her position. A hitherto unknown English word that denotes unfettered movement becomes a repository for her identity. Framed within the self-conferred appellation, she thus stays discernable to herself *on her own terms*.

Consequently, housewives withdraw to a safe distance from her as she is a blemish on the tradition of chaste domesticity; and prostitutes reject her for not being audacious enough to disregard the norms of family. She is a housewife engaged in part-time

prostitution under economic compulsion, and also a sex worker who has a family to tend and a house to keep. Instead of loyally subscribing to a specific identity assigned to a prostitute or a housewife, she inhabits a volatile space that involves quick flights from one position to another. Her work is stigmatised for commercialising affective sex – which is to be performed monogamously, at home, naturally and out of love.

(Con)Fusion of Roles

A flying woman shuttles between the roles of prostitute-at-work and housewife-at-home. She is both, one and the other at the same time. Occupying the hazy terrain of this undefined overlap, she belongs to neither the household nor the brothel. Plying between the home and the street, she walks a tightrope across the borders of social sanction and moral offence. Surprisingly, she manoeuvres this slide from productive to reproductive role smoothly and efficiently, without a hitch, day in and day out.

As a housewife situated within the bonds of marriage and family, she performs the domestic chores of cleaning, cooking and looking after children. This daily running of the household is managed single-handedly, with little or no help from her spouse. Her sexuality is related to procreation; and as per the family code of conduct, the role of a wife and mother is prioritised as her 'natural' place.

Her productive role begins as soon as she takes to the streets for a living. When her male partner, the usual breadwinner of the family, is rejected by the job market as inefficient or when he is incapable of earning enough, the flying woman steps into the street in order that the family may be fed. Other than those required for home-making, she has no special skills – so she has no choice but to use her body for sex work. Her work-shifts closely follow her home-shifts.

Cityspace, Workplace

In the past, the flying woman could be located around the brothels, waiting for customers in the tropical midday sun while the line girls dozed off after a busy night and a lousy morning. In the evenings she could be spotted at urban arcades of the city that line girls would not prefer to visit, performing at a price they would hate to accept.

The central part of the city had its own landmarks where flyings were seen. Nocturnal soliciting continued in and around the Park Street junction of Jawaharlal Nehru Road and near the numerous bars, restaurants and opera houses located in the area. From early evening onwards, flyings from the Maidan and Park Street areas would rent rooms for short periods in order to service clients. The other preserve of the flyings was the Babughat area. The shadowy nooks in the gardens or taxi rides through the heart of the city were the usual places where these women served their more moneyed clients.

To these familiar spots more sites are being added almost everyday. Along with the changing skyline, the increase in shopping malls and high-rises, bridges and flyovers, came

demographic transformation as well. Perhaps a change in patterns of 'public' sex, a preference for 'quick' satisfactions, can be deduced from the increased presence of the flyings all over the city.

The new zones where flyings operate are not identified by old landmarks. These new locales are not isolated social spaces; and they transgress the *moral* borders that existed previously. The city's immensely crowded central spots, usually chosen for political meetings or public demonstrations, become the most active place for solicitation, specially during peak hours.² The traditional place of worship in the city, the Kalighat temple that already had a brothel from very early days, becomes a profitable zone for the flyings, who extend their activities well into residential areas and those areas surrounding metro rail entrances, the by-lanes along the western side of the canal, and in the relatively secluded road towards the National Library.³

What is remarkable with respect to the flying is that she has emerged as an important phenomenon of the metropolis in recent years. She is not a clandestine extension of the brothels any more but is to be seen at every familiar and not-so-familiar corner of the city, in remote and crowded, public and private places, during odd and regular working hours alike. No man seeking sex can escape her. She cannot afford to let one.

Sites/Counter-Sites

This robust flying activity is destabilising the once-sharp divide between public and private, with intimate acts unfolding routinely in commonly traversed areas. Normative civic zones are being redefined as nodes where affective scenarios can be performed with ease. These sites render illusory the neat partitioning of human life.

The flyings have not only altered the contours of having sex in public, they have caused the times and hours set aside for personal pleasure to change as well. The wholesomeness of purpose preserved in the performance of civic functions designated for each public place becomes contested. Family and social space, cultural and useful space, leisure and work – all juxtapose with one another in the context of the flying. Sexual satisfaction is now readily available, as and when desired. Moreover, flying activity does not secretly bypass the civic codes but overtly violates them. The work-leisure binary is destabilised too. Leisure is no longer separate from work. Possibilities of sexual pleasure emerge amidst work hours and at the work place. And the proportion of such events is not to be dismissed as inconsequential.

The sites where flyings ply are often marked by instantaneous temporality, as in a cab or a boat rented for a fleeting sexual encounter. These mobile spaces are not places: they are *heterotopias*, each a "floating piece of space that exists by itself yet is the reserve of footloose fantasies"⁴, as Foucault puts it – providing the aspect of a room without being a room, a makeshift enclosure that also hides sex-acts from the public gaze, and leaves no traces. Similarly, the seats of cinema halls and booths of small restaurants are sometimes

converted to tenuous corners of physical intimacy. The theatre's chiaroscuro, the fiction being projected to the real audience, provides a charged setting and atmosphere. Curtains create a precarious privacy for cubicles within dingy hotel eateries. The pleasure spots of hotels or resorts a few hours from the city, shelter the illicitness of purchased sex and offer a freedom not found elsewhere. These spaces are not a new discovery, but the flyings have lent new meanings to the usage; the sexual transgressions alter the norms for entry to restricted realms, and force the spaces open.

The gender-inscribed territoriality of work in the city is altered as well. The flying can infringe on both sides of social space equivocally marked as dangerous or safe for respectable women to traverse. Her very being also disorders the concept of working hours considered 'proper' for women. When work for a woman is constituted by sexual defiance and autonomy, the fear and risks of violating the norms of decency no longer prevail. The categories of moral/immoral, procreation/pleasure, private/public, do not play against each other; rather, they lose their edges and lean into mutual dissolves as the flying traverses each site/counter-site.

The Economics of Abundance

Why is the city suddenly flooded with women from the suburbs participating in these public sexual transactions? One reason is the peripheral economy where many flyings have their roots. The closure of factories, dismissal of labour, rampant unemployment and the rendering casual of permanent jobs have forced working-class housewives to stake a claim in the urban labour market. For the first time in the city's history, large numbers of married women are crossing the thresholds of their homes in order to earn a living from sexual activity in public.

Flying women are not the young girls who top the demand list of male clients. Nor are they brothel entertainers accomplished in the erotic arts. They are usually between 25 and 35 years old, the daughters-in-law of traditional households; most of them have at least two children. They are from rustic backgrounds and lack urban exposure. Yet they are able to satisfy urban men. The supply of willing female bodies brings down the price, only to be matched by clients' purchasing power. The flyings' need for quick money corresponds to their clients' need for quick sex.

Sex work is perhaps the only economic option for this group. Independent participation in the labour market is socially prohibited for housewives of the rural hinterland. Domestic service is often the first option, but in the immediate neighbourhood these jobs are few and the wages low. Without specialised skills, training or contacts, the struggling housewife is rejected outright in a competitive world where even skilled male workers are frequently laid off. She can survive only as a flying.

The line (and thus the definition of morality) etched between work and sex work gets further blurred, as those women who cannot enter the labour market try to make a living

through petty trade (selling vegetables, rice, etc. on the pavement), in addition to selling sex. The younger women who manage to get jobs on construction sites or as casual labour in informal manufacturing discover that giving sexual favours to employers is the tacit clause for getting work. They are paid less, and assigned less strenuous work; they try to augment their earnings through sex work at any odd hour. Single women with children and women deserted by their husbands are forced to sexually oblige contractors or senior skilled workers on demand.

Vulnerability Explored

The position of the flying is not that of an 'in-between' possessing the characteristics of both the stigmatised whore and the sanctified mother. The intersecting meanings mesh into an elusive, susceptible identity. For women in conventional careers who also perform domestic chores at home, one role does not negate the other. The role of the mother and wife is sacrosanct and her participation in productive activity is praiseworthy. A prostitute is marked by a precise libidinal identity, but in spite of her morals being condemned, she is recognised as a professional. In the case of the flying, her wages are accepted but her work is *unrecognised* within family and community.

Moreover, the flying woman's position is *doubly* precarious. Her family tries to keep secret the fact that they live off earnings that come through a socially 'immoral' act, while the community wants to discipline the element of promiscuity that violates the prescribed purity of family norms. The social denial of her work and earning power compels her exclusion even from the category of marginal worker.

These erasures render her imperceptible to the civic administration; thus, she has to function within an *undetectable space* and remain *unacknowledged* as a worker in the public domain. The law-making/imposing authority and the law-abiding citizenry take advantage of this dubious position. The law does not consider her a subject that citizens should be protected from; nor considers that she should be compensated for the sexual violence she may experience at the hands of citizens. Her abusers can escape charges of violence on the grounds that prostitution is illegal, hence it is *she* who is breaking the law. Thus, it is *she* who has to pay for violating civic/moral codes and soliciting in public. In addition, the fear of losing money and the anxiety of not finding a customer are also *her* burdens.

Her economic struggle epitomises a complex labour process.⁵ Neither classified as sex worker nor working woman, she is an *invisible* worker, a worker without a working status; and ironically, the onus is on *her* to prove that she is *not* doing a job that she actually *is*. This ambivalent rendering of her job as simultaneously an absence and a presence erases her own image as a worker to herself.

The flying becomes the manifestation of several paradoxically convergent yet incommensurable positions. Her gendered identity of housewife contradicts her class identity as a worker; her class identity of a non-professional providing sexual service

clashes with that of the prostitute; and her identity as a member of the extended community of sex workers stands in contrast to her identity of a woman of the family. She is excluded from the solidarity shared by the working class across race, gender and caste. She continually walks along a narrow edge with bits and pieces of common ground to share with different communities, most of whom are at odds with her stigmatised self.

Victim-Rebel and Elusive Other

Straddling two realms that continuously support yet negate each other, does the flying woman find herself the victim of the economic and cultural order? Or is she a symbol of subversion, realigning the matrix of male domination in her role as breadwinner?

On the street she learns how to speak out, use her body to her advantage, deal with the police, constantly cope with the public gaze. The amenable image of the demure housewife disappears in her tough handling of unknown aggressive clients least concerned about her well-being. She soon learns the rules of the market. She names her price, sets the terms of the transaction and learns to level the obstacles over payment. Aware that hers is a service to an anonymous client, she even learns to violate the terms of contract as and when possible, and becomes competent to rob, cheat, deceive and betray.

At home, the notion of the passive and dutiful housewife undergoes changes as well. The division of labour with respect to household chores remains largely the same. But personal relations between the flying woman and her husband acquire a new intensity, rooted in her street experiences that redefine the prescribed conjugal norms she had assimilated as a housewife.

The intersection of space and power is reconstituted with respect to her work. The contours of the social space change radically too. It is through her work that the peripheral economy comes in direct interaction with the centre. Plying from the suburban home to the metropolis, the flying connects the regional and the urban, the domestic and the civic, the core and the margin. She is at once at the inside and the outside of these discursive boundaries, and yet elsewhere. This fact of spaces being both connected and separate helps to acknowledge the power of transgression and the possibility of resistance woven together. This alignment along an axis that is simultaneously inside, outside and *elsewhere* is marked by "radical openness"⁶. The structured norms of power and patriarchy fail to appropriate this unique position of *victim-rebel* in absolute terms, thus continually opening up possibilities of subversion.

The links that she manipulates between social space, sexuality and power are both oppressive and enabling for the flying. She is subjected *by* her work, yet emerges *as* a subject *through* her work. Her work produces her as a social being even as she produces her work as a social act.

Belonging, in her case, is always deferred. Pulverising rigid boundaries, fulfilling both her legitimate and illegitimate roles in discrete succession, she represents an elusive otherness within the category 'woman'.

The “flying”... is an inimitable position, a spatial body-writing beyond the familiar and the settled, a mode *en-passant*. Living on the border and also outside, she offers herself as an embodiment of discontinuity, uninterrupted and always.

Notes

1. I do not propose the term “flying” as a name, attribute or translation. The part-time prostitutes of Kolkata refer to themselves through this naming. The current NGO variant on the term is “floating prostitutes”, to differentiate these women from those based in brothels. I prefer the term “flying” and use it in my study of the community. Genealogical differences in the terminology – ‘prostitute’, ‘sex worker’, ‘flying’ – have not been taken into account in this essay.
2. Areas noticeable for flying activity include the Dharamtala crossing from afternoon onwards, the Dharamtala mosque junction, all along the tram tracks near Fort William, and the vicinity near Chitpur Road crossing.
3. Recently, increased flying activity has been observed at the crowded Ultadanga Mor, Rajabazar crossing, residential and shopping areas of Rash Behari Avenue, the congested end of Tollygunge Metro station, and bus stops on the Eastern Metropolitan bypass.
4. Michel Foucault. *Of Other Times*. Trans. Jay Miskowiec. In *Diacritics* 16 (1), pp. 23.
5. For a Marxist-feminist perspective on the complex labour processes of flying women, see my analysis in *Hecate*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2003).
6. I invoke the idea of marginality as a space of repression and resistance. See bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”, in *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (South End Press, 1990, Boston).