

Chapter: 3

Performance of Gender and Religion in Domestic and Public Spaces

3.1. Space and Gender

The discussion of space and gender examines the spatial dichotomy of private/ public spaces, a central consideration in gender theories. Public spaces are considered areas occupied by large numbers of people where business and other interactions occur. On the other hand, private spaces are areas that involve privacy, intimacy, comfort, a sense of freedom and liberation. Public spaces such as workplaces are viewed as masculine spaces, whereas private spaces like home are considered as the feminine domain/ domestic sphere. However, strong critiques challenged the 'idealised' view of the home as a refuge (Mallet, 2004; Daoud, 2017). This dichotomy was also challenged by the feminist theory, which argues that personal is political. However, some feminists (Davis-Yuval, 2003) have fallen into the categorisation of personal vs political, associating the personal/ private with the home and family, where most women are located and public as political (Towsend, 2000). It is essential to look at the intersections and negotiations rather than focussing on the binaries of the private and public dichotomy. This chapter attempts to outline the lived experiences of Muslim women in the public and domestic spaces. The experiences also suggest that you cannot talk about the spaces in isolation; rather, one complements the other.

The dominant and popular values of society suggest women be confined in her home to reproduce patriarchal norms. The domestic life of a man (his house, wife, and children) is only a part of his larger social life. When it comes to 'women's domestic life, her life and domestic life are often used interchangeably. She is confined mostly with household, and she is herself a domestic body. Her domestic life, when talked about, has to be discussed based on the space she receives as a woman. A woman has an obligation both towards the household and her public life. Her public involvement always has been a second-class affair, after taking care of her husband, nurturing her children and other household activities concerning her in-laws. In "'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy'" Carole Pateman views that the division between public and private in liberal societies is a hierarchical division that understands the private as subordinate and public as a higher form of activities. The economic and political activities outside the household are considered more important than nurturing and taking care.

The politics of being and doing as a Muslim place woman in a dilemma. Muslim women have to enter political space as Muslims to engage with the issues of education, violence, poverty and employment. Within this space, they are confronted by the discourses of Islam and Orientalism. Although they have different sources and agendas, both reduce *Muslims* to a religious category (Khan, 1998). In *Orientalism* (1978), Said argues that Orientalism is formed by 'Europe's historical envy, fear, and hatred of the "'infidel' and supplemented by its sense of superiority over the Islamic world. Even those who romanticised the orient are often part of this "'othering' and homogenising. Orientalist models of colonialism focused on the liberation and freedom of Muslim women from religious oppression. On the other hand, in the post-colonial world, Islam is informed by the popular political movements in Muslim countries and in Muslim communities in First World. This is referred to as Islamism, which is often anti-colonial and anti-west, which exerts social and sexual control on the symbolic and chaste woman. (Moghadam, 1991; Helie-Lucas, 1994, Khan, 1998). From Orientalism to Islam, women fell trapped in Islamism, where their bodies are controlled through rigid sexist structures. The post-colonial models of National popular is again an Indian and Assamese version of Muslim women hood. Here in Assam, it is not just about Orientalism as opposed to Islamism; Muslim women in Assam have multiple structures to construct and reconstruct their self and identity. The woman often negotiates between these various structures through their agency. Agency again can be

located in multiple locations. 'It's not just social but also the physical body, physical space, and psychic state.

In Assam, women of the three Muslim categories are confronted by the religious and traditional discourses within the domestic space. Similarly, like domestic life, in public life too, the women often negotiate between these multiple structures through their agency. The interviews conducted among the three categories of Muslim women outlined a complex interactional space of public and domestic life. These interviewed women explore the perception of Muslim 'women's public life as a part of the larger social and economic processes. These women come from different linguistic backgrounds, living in different localities, and facing different financial conditions and educational backgrounds.

3.2. The Lived Experiences of Performing Gender in Domestic and Public Spaces

An Assamese Muslim woman, 61 years of age, Akhtara Khatun, married at 20 years to a government employee; her father was a cultivator and did jaggery business. She said that she is happy as a housewife with her family, but life would have been better if she had ventured out for work. She would not have been under her 'husband's command if she had a job. But her space in her house is not limited to cooking and taking care of her grandson, now as her daughter-in-law helps in household work, she can spend her time in her embroidery. She sings *biya naam*, *gajal*, earlier in marriages, latter she limited her performance to family weddings, and now she has almost forgotten many *biya naams* and *gajals*. Instead, she now prays five times a day, and now she has a better understanding of religion that it is *haram* (sinful) to sing in front of male members.

Contradictions characterise 'Akhtara's domestic space, but she finds a way out by singing only in women gatherings. Her husband does not have any problem even if she sings around men, but she said that her own self 'doesn't allow her to perform against the will of Allah because she has to return to Him after death. She said that by singing around women, she finds happiness and earns Allah's pleasure by not going against *shariah* (Islamic law). In Akhtara's case, her space changes when she receives new knowledge of her religion. Religion takes precedence over other factors in deciding the private space. The changes in public space are also influenced by an "'informed' understanding of the religious virtues. Her space is not of contradiction rather, she takes a new route and leaves her original way of performing in her home and public space without challenging the original religious

practices. At home, she prays her five daily prayers, which earlier she didn't, and in public, she performs only in family gatherings and only among women. A 'woman's space changes with the acceptance of a new knowledge. She leaves behind the old ways and adopts a new way to adjust to her space.

Dilnar Begum, in Saikia Chubri village is a schoolteacher 56 years of age. In her 'parents' house she 'didn't have any kind of restriction along with her brothers and was allowed to do whatever she liked and, after marriage, had to cover her head outside the house. Inside she was friendly with her father-in-law, and so she was allowed to do the job. In her village, she goes out of her house with her head covered, but in the same public when she goes for her job, she goes out in a sari and on a bike with her male colleague. Her husband allows her to sit on a motorcycle with another man. She said that ""My husband 'doesn't mind because our house is almost two kilometres from the highway and walking all the way to get an auto is difficult, so I sometimes go with my colleague"". Her space in her house is different since she is a working woman. She and her husband both take care of the house; she has an excuse to manage her domestic life since she helps earn her family's livelihood. Though she is a working woman outside her home, she still abides by Islamic practices like covering her head while visiting friends and relatives in the village except when going for her job. The religious virtues also inform the private interactional space for her.

Dilnar considers herself to be modern. She is making use of the flexibility of Islam in the public space. Modern ideologies and Assamese national constructions inform the flexibility of Islam. Dilnar has a space of kinship and community relation where she performs her religious practices of covering her head while visiting friends and relatives. She also has a professional space where she acts in more secular and modern ways in carrying out her activities. Her "self" oscillates between the two different binaries of traditional and modern ways. ""Modernist refers to the tendency to emphasise the flexibility of Islam in the public sphere and to use this flexibility to interpret Islam in terms congruent with, or at least in very positive dialogue with, one or more western ideologies"" (Shepard, 1987; Afsaruddin, 1999).

Farida Begum, a 55-year-old Assamese speaking woman, is a mother of two. Her husband is a government employee. She is from the same village, and her husband is from Lakhimpur. She says that she had never faced any problem regarding wearing a dress and even playing with boys. Her father never tried to dominate her regarding any matter. But

after her higher secondary exam, she was asked if she wanted to marry since her father found a good match. She willingly said yes to the proposal. After marriage, she moved to her 'husband's quarter in Guwahati, lived there for twenty-five years and moved to Saikia Chuburi. She points out to her friend sitting next to her and said that we played a lot during our childhood, and we visited each of our friends' houses every day. We knew who was sick, the foods cooked in our friend's house, and we climbed trees even as girls. But now our spaces have changed. My daughter, who is twenty-five years old, has never talked with her daughter though we have been neighbours for more than ten years. The interactions within families have almost stopped. She smiles and says, ""When we were children, during Eid we visited the whole village to see what our friends bought to wear. And now my daughter also shares and posts but only in facebook"." A woman's space is also influenced by the new technological advancement and even is reflected while she negotiates with her space. The shrinking spaces of face-to-face social interactions in the urban villages are not specific to this village. 'Farida's daughter finds new means of social networks or virtual platforms to communicate with a larger community, including the significant others in her community. The elderly generation sees it as a loss of cultural connectedness or value system. At the same time, it is a new way of social engagement for the younger ones. The meaning-making process of "'spaces' vary with age and exposure to technology.

Roshan Ara Begum, a 28 'year's old married to a driver and has five-year-old son. Her father-in-law is bed ridden. She has to take care of him round-the-clock. She cooks, cleans, washes clothes, baths him, cleans his bed pan, and gives him medicine on time. She is so occupied with her household and work that she 'can't go out of her house. She says that she is angry most of the time. Her father was sick but she could not attend to him since she was busy taking care of her father-in-law. Her husband gets a salary of fifteen thousand, and it is difficult to spend on the expenditure of the house, their 'son's fees and medication of her father-in-law. She said that the only thing that prevents her from getting exhausted is the old man's pension. Her father-in-law receives a pension of twelve thousand rupees. Those twelve thousand rupees is divided between them and her elder brother-in-law. She receives seven thousand rupees since her father-in-law is with them. So, they have a total of twenty-two thousand rupees. She has transformed her space as a caretaker where she receives a sum of seven thousand rupees for her service, and she is happy with that. She has a life which is twenty-four hours surrounded by the fencing of her house, and she has

the slightest public appearance. Her only satisfaction is that she receives the pension of her father-in-law. 'Roshan's life is too occupied by the domestic space, and the role as a caretaker of her ailing father-in-law having a stable pension stands out in the narratives. She finds meaning in doing all the household work for the amount of money 'they' receive as monthly pension. However, she is unhappy as it ties her inside the four walls.

35-year-old Momina Khatun is originally from Bihar, now living in SaikiaChubri village. She speaks Assamese. She got married to a quilt maker before attaining puberty and was brought to Assam by her husband after fifteen. She has five children and is pregnant with the sixth one. Her husband and kids surround her domestic life. They earn significantly less to provide for a family of seven. She said that she wanted to deliver her child in Assam, but the government hospitals did not allow her to admit and asked her to admit in Bihar hospital. She says, "I will go Bihar deliver the child in a hospital and come back since the prospects of earning in Assam is more. This needs to be read in connection with the NRCⁱ (National Registry of Citizen) debate in Assam. Citizenship emerged as a contentious issue during the fieldwork time. The popular discourse always had a suspicious gaze at any 'outsiders'. The stigma against the outsiders is again accentuated by the stigma against the poor working-class Muslims. For the government hospital authority, it is an issue of facilitating citizenship to an outsider within Assam. Momina has no other way to return to Bihar and deliver the baby, even though all five other children were born in Assam." "In Bihar, I have to cover my head, hands, legs and even lips. Here I find it easy to carry out my day-to-day life and can visit anywhere only by putting a scarf in my head". Her space is influenced by the place she lives in.

While she lived in Bihar, she used to perform her daily life following different cultural practices, and in Assam, she negotiates the space in many liberatory signs. These liberatory signs are taken from a respective culture mixed with tradition, religion and western symbols and signifiers of technology, language, or dress (Bhabha, 1990). Momina stays in a plot of land within the village SaikiaChuburi, with other seven families from Bihar with different thatch houses staying close to each other. She talks in Bhojpuri and Hindi language while interacting with these families. As soon as she comes out from the narrow street to the main street, she interacts with the shopkeeper and other Muslim women in Assamese. These dynamic and contradictory forms of agency draw on 'Bhabha's notion of hybridised states, where dialectic polarities demand the 'subject's allegiance

simultaneously. Thus the performance of oneself is contextual, and the varied contexts invoke different representations, be it in terms of the language, dress or how they behave. The inter-subjective agreements and intra-subjective negotiations are part of the meaning-making process of everyday life.

Manjura Ali is a 38-year-old Hindi speaking woman from Saikia Chubri village, speaks Assamese with her husband. Her father was a businessman. She is the third-generation settler in Assam from Uttar Pradesh. A convent educated first woman graduate in her family. After her graduation, she got a job in Kendriya Vidyalaya. Then she was married to a government employee. She has two kids. She said that she loves her job as it gives her an identity outside the house. But she loves being at home rather than going out and spending time with her friends. She says, "My mother always wanted to go out and create her identity but conditions at my 'mother's time were different from now. She 'wasn't allowed to go out before marriage and also after marriage... so when she sees me, she gets a sort of satisfaction that her daughter earns her own livelihood". "I love to try new fashion, even if I look odd, but I always wear a dress that doesn't have a too much skin show. Since anyone can be fashionable without revealing their skin." She does cook, but her husband does much of the cooking and cleaning part of the house. She says, "If my husband did not do this much, then I would have quit my job because it is very difficult to manage one's house, kids and job at the same time." Since she gets less time to spend with her kids, she likes to stay at home whenever there is a holiday rather than going out.

The social situations of women of different categories are different. Manjura Ali's life in school as a teacher away from her domestic life has a different story to tell. She comes from a family where women did not work outside their homes. She is the first woman graduate in her family and the first Muslim woman to work outside her home. She said that she got her appointment letter before getting married. She had already decided that she would not have married if her husband did not let her work. Doing a job and earning for herself was a dream for her and her mother, who could not complete her education and wanted her daughter to follow her wish.

Manjura, in her workplace, is only Muslim woman. She faces discrimination in her workplace verbally. Her colleagues sometimes make remarks on her community, and she is left alone to face it, to which she can't take any step fearing more discrimination. On the other hand, Dilnar did not face any discriminatory behaviour in her workplace; instead,

her male and female counterparts are more of a helping hand in her school. Women in the workplace face sexism, and Muslim women are more vulnerable to it and even communalism. Manjura cannot raise her voice against the ill-treatment she experiences as a Muslim woman in the school as her resistance may strain or damage her relationship with them. She is left to live vulnerable in the society (Khan, 1998). Manjura still finds meaning in being a teacher as it gives her more space within the family and in the community. Being a third-generation immigrant Muslim from North India and a first-generation women graduate, Manjura is negotiating with the structural constraints and creating her own space both in domestic and public spaces.

The Bhujkhuwa Chapori areas are of basically Bengali speaking women. Fatima, a woman of age 50 years, talks about her work as domestic help. She works in four houses to earn her living. She has two daughters. The elder one completed her degree and got married to a contractor man. The second daughter is still a student. She says that her primary objective when she moves out from her home is to manage time. She has to be very punctual to work in four houses. She gets out of her house early morning, around 5 am. She cannot spare time talking with others in her public space. Her public life is limited to workplace engagement or commuting from one workplace to another. Other than that, she hardly comes out of her house, and whatever time she gets, she likes to spend it at home. The only fear she has in her public life is while she ventures out of her house early morning.

The woman from Bengali Muslim category, 32 years of age, named Jahanara works as a domestic helper. She has two sons of 4 years and 2 years of age. For one year, she has been separated from her husband and lives with her mother and two sons. She has to earn to feed her mother and sons. She takes up the responsibility of a male member in a household. Considering that earning outside the household is a man's work, taking a man's responsibility does not reduce the burden of household activities of nurturing and taking care of her family members. The activity of a domestic helper is not a political affair. Still, an economic activity outside her household makes her earn a livelihood without depending on a male member. Jubeda Khatun is a 40-year-old working woman; she has three kids who go to Madrasa for their education. She is also a teacher at Azad Memorial High Madrasa. High Madrasas also teach English with religious education. She goes out to her school for her profession. Her in-laws and her husband do not object because she goes out with the *burqa* along with the *niqab* (cover for her face). She said that Allah given her

freedom to work outside the home, but one cannot flaunt her body. She likes her freedom that she can see everyone, but nobody can see her. She works both at home and also at school. She added that as she can afford it, so she has kept a domestic help who, like her, is also a Bengali speaking woman. Nurina is also a young woman in her thirties, but her husband is a poultry dealer, making her a lower-middle-class background. She does not need to work outside the house rather, if she visits her family and friends, she has to cover herself in *hijab* type of covering before appearing in front of males and cover herself in the streets.



Fig. 3.1: Assamese Muslim Woman from SaikiaChuburi Muslim Village in domestic space as housewife

3.3. Discussion

The entire women mentioned above interacting inside their private space with their in-laws and parents are different; again, a woman interacting with another Muslim woman of a different language background is different. In general, the private spaces of these women are dominated by the narratives of religion. They abide by the Islamic rules as circulated within their community. There are variations in the Assamese speaking Muslim women and that of other linguistic categories. The former has more liberal value systems in

circulation among their community. An Assamese Muslim woman dealing with her public space is different from a Hindi speaking Muslim dealing with her public space.

Performance of gender among different categories of Muslim women in village Saikia Chuburi are very fluid and complex. The fluidity is more evident among the Assamese Muslim women. The historical locations and the contemporary negotiation with varying structures available for the performance of gender, make it more fluid. Assamese Muslims often reiterate their identity as Assamese nationals. The hybridity of cultural symbols they carry is a manifestation of the same. Such representations are far from the global 'Islamism'. However, they are not free from such discourses too. Therefore, it can be argued that Dilnar performed her gender in multiple ways as a working woman.

Similarly, a housewife negotiating with her domestic space is different from a working woman negotiating in her domestic space. Dilnar and Roshan Ara are from Assamese-speaking Muslim communities, but domestic spaces are different. Dilnar only cooks when she wants, and her husband is always there for the household works, but Roshan Ara, with her bedridden father-in-law has a different story. There is an overlapping of public and private spaces. As a working woman and earning family member, Dilnar enjoys more freedom in the domestic spaces. Space creates the identity of a woman. A woman, while constructing her 'self' is on an unconscious process and unquestioned ways of being. So, a Muslim woman, through her space enact her 'self' in multiple ways. It may vary in a larger social context, linguistically, spatially, and culturally.

Jahanara, Manjura and Dilnar are women who perform their everyday life in their domestic space and outside their home to earn their living. As economically self-reliant individuals, they are supposed to be having a better agency to perform themselves in public and private spaces according to their choices. Feminism shows a desire and a call for women's agency, for a capacity for self-determination and autonomy, according to which women can be effective against their oppression. Although these terms –agency, self-determination, autonomy- are not entirely interchangeable. They all point to women's desire to control their bodies and lives. This is their desire to choose and act freely in accordance with their objectives, to have some sense of entitlement to real choices and objectives, to be able to act against their subordination and, perhaps most importantly, to have a sense that they can "be themselves" or "be true to themselves" (Bowden& Mummery, 2009).

Jahanara, Manjura and Dilnar are women from different categories who have some sense of self-determination with their respective jobs. Jahanara and Jubeda share same category of Bengali speaking Muslim women living in the same village. They term themselves as having control over lives and not under any subordination in public. Jahanara's agency, carries her duties towards her sons and mother since she has no male earning member in her house. She said that her husband married another woman and brought her home. So Jahanara left her husband's home. She did not get any compensation for her separation from her husband. The matter was not even brought to the court to ask for a divorce. Divorce could give her alimony for sustenance but her husband, to avoid giving monthly alimony, denies divorcing Jahanara. Jahanara on the other hand, having no other way to earn a livelihood, works as a domestic help to feed her children. In the case of Jahanara, her moving out from home shows a different picture. She is a woman, wants to carry out her duties at home and take care of her sons. Her desire to choose and act freely following her objectives is curtailed. But now she is a domestic help working to earn livelihood and feed her mother and sons. Her money earned is also minimal compared to the need all four of them has. Here Jahanara has two types of 'self' construction, first, is her embodied self-constructed by familial and societal forces (where she wants to stay at home being a wife and mother) and second the series of incidents that makes her submit to the identity shaping controls of others at the expense of expressing her embodied self, where she has no alternative but to work outside the home (Mairs, 1996; Haugen, 2012). Unlike Jahanara, Jubeda is a teacher in Madrasa, with a good financial support (Fig. 3.2 and 3.3), but she covers herself with a *burqa* while teaching and Jahanara being a domestic help do not cover herself as working in her public space becomes difficult in performing her body. While in Jubeda's case her body is a part of her profession as Madrasa is an educational institution that also teaches religion. Her body is a part of what she teaches to her students. Her religious radical ideology guides her performance in her everyday through her material body of burqa.



Fig. 3.2: Jubeda Khatun, a teacher in high Madrassa



Fig. 3.3: Hindi Speaking women as a housewife with Bengali speaking woman (Jahanara) as domestic help

Manjura is again the first woman in her family to work outside her home. She is the first woman graduate in her family. She got her appointment letter when her marriage was getting arranged. She did not want to leave her job to get married. In her first meeting with her would-be husband, she said that she would be allowed to do the job outside her home. Her husband's family was also orthodox and held the mentality that women should take care of her husband and children rather than go out to earn. She was determined that if her 'would be' husband did not permit her to do the job, she won't get married to that particular man. So, she got married when she was convinced that she could carry out her teaching profession even after her marriage. Manjura liked to wear different styled dresses. So, she designs it and wears it to the office. She said that she wanted to wear beautifully designed clothes inspired by Bollywood. She again said that she picks any design she likes but transforms it into a style that society accepts. She also had to wear dresses to school, so she had to maintain a certain level of decency. However, Manjura showed a self-determination and autonomy in expressing her 'self', like not getting married if she was not allowed to do her teaching job. But asking permission to express her 'self', she was not autonomous. She said that she wears whatever she likes, but her choices were shaped by the more significant identity shaping controls where she makes her dresses to fit in the already approved marks and levels of women's dresses in her public space. So, her choices are not self-determining but rather reproduce the embodied habitus.

Dilnar's husband also works; she said that her salary was a great source of income for her family to meet the needs of her children, who are students. As she was an earning source, she had the privilege to do what she thought was suitable for her family. Since she got married, she has been doing her job, and her in-laws also supported her contribution. Apart from doing her job as a teacher, she also has to perform her daily household work of cooking and cleaning. It could be seen that Dilnar's choice to act freely in accordance with the objectives is seen fulfilled to some extent compared to the other two Bengali and Hindi speaking women. Even in working place, Dilnar confronts no ill-treatments being a Muslim. On the other hand, Manjura complained of receiving some verbal abuse from her colleagues being a Muslim. Here Dilnar, being an Assamese speaking Muslim woman who wears only Mekhla chador to her school and interacts with her colleagues in Assamese. Her accent embodied in her Assamese self does not allow colleagues to think of her as an outsider or from outside of Assam. Manjura on the other hand, is born and brought up in Assam, talks in Assamese but with a Hindi accent. Her not following particular Assamese

festivals and not taking part with her fellow Hindu colleagues in festivals allows her fellow employees to think of her as a Muslim outsider.

Dilnar has no problem sitting behind a man's bike while travelling to her school. Manjura Ali on the other hand, says that she walks three kilometres before reaching the bus stand. She does not prefer taking lifts from men even if the temperature is more than 37 degrees. But if she finds an auto, she prefers going in the auto until the bus stand. So, negotiating with the space in public is different for different individuals. Manjura Ali and Momina Khatun are Hindi Speaking Muslim women, but their access to material resources, like many, plays an important part in their performance of gender. Manjura Ali is a third-generation Hindi speaking Muslim woman, while Momina has been in Assam for the past twenty years. Though they are from the same category, negotiate with their space differently.

Muslim women talked about working outside their domestic spaces; Muslim women who work in their household also have their public life. The public lives of women working in households are reflected in their dressing, their participation in the village matters, visiting friends and relatives and how often they visit markets. The Assamese speaking women in village Barika Chuburi step out of their house wearing a sari, Mekhla chador and salwar suit. While the Hindi speaking Muslim women move out of their house wearing salwar suit along with a headcover 'uroni'. These women in village Barika chuburi meet each other in family functions like weddings and events associated with the birth and death of someone. Apart from that, they have self-help groups where they meet and interact.

3.4. Public space and 'self'

""Public spaces and poor infrastructure became a clear indicator of one group's marginal status, exclusion, and alienation (Rabinowitz, 2001; Daoud, 2017). The status of the marginals can be known through their localities and infrastructure. Similarly, the villages of BarikaChuburi, SaikiaChuburi, Bhujkhuwa Chapori and Beseria village have different localities and infrastructure. The localities of these villages create different public spaces. Jahanara, a domestic help, is from Bhujkhuwa Chapori, a Bengali Muslim village. Most of the working women from Bhujkhuwa chapori work as domestic help. Fatima, from this village, is also a domestic help but managed to make her both daughters go to school and even college. Her elder daughter completed her degree and got married to a contractor in

Lakhimpur. Her younger daughter is pursuing her Higher secondary in Sonitpur college. Both the women are from same village, sharing same locality. The public spaces and infrastructure of Bhujkhuwa Chapori show the marginal status of the women residing there. Women have little space in the public affairs of the village, even though many women in the villages go out for work as wage labourer or domestic help. Their jobs are also on the lowest stratum of the occupational hierarchy, and thus their control of the resources is also marginal as most of their earnings are spent for everyday sustenance. Fatima wanted her daughters to get an education, but financially, she had to work as domestic help, which required her to get out of her house at the earliest morning.

Dilnar and Manjura are from same village, Saikia Chuburi. Both are working women and work as a primary teacher. Dilnar and Manjura, both the women share the same public life in the village (Fig. 3.4 and 3.5). Whereas in their respective schools both of their public life changes. Dilnar works in a state government school and Manjura works in a Central school. Women of these respective localities interact within the locality. Manjura used to speak Hindi with her parents but after shifting to Saikia Chuburi, she started talking in Assamese with her children and husband. Sharing the same locality makes a woman build a 'self' which she shares with her fellow Muslim woman residing in the same village. Majority of the women in this village work at different layers of the occupational hierarchy and their relative access to public spaces are better in this village.

The picture is different in the village Barika Chuburi where the Hindi-speaking Muslim population is gradually increasing to that of Assamese-speaking Muslim women. The Hindi speaking women have created their locality within the village. The settlements of the Muslim women in different localities and the public spaces of each category of women and their different specific localities contribute in the formation of their 'self'.



Fig. 3.4:Dilnar an Assamese Speaking Muslim Working Woman



Fig. 3.5:Manjura aHindi speaking Muslim Working Woman

3.5. Changing everyday experiences

College education, especially in mixed cities, has increased women's experiences, their national identities and in some cases, their feminist awareness. In some cases, these experiences pose challenges when these women go back to their closed spaces and localities; they have to abide by social norms and lose some of the freedoms they enjoyed in the big cities during their college years (Daoud, 2017). Samsa Khanam, a Hindi speaking Muslim woman, a 60-year-old woman from village Barika Chuburi, is a graduate from Bihar and got married after completing her bachelor's degree. She said: 'Before marriage, I did not take any headcover, but after marriage, I started taking on the headcover. I shifted to Assam after marriage. Whenever I go to Bihar, after marriage, I prefer wearing *Burkha*, moving out of my mother's house. There are Muslim areas in Bihar where women are asked to cover her. But here in Assam, women are not asked to follow the covering. So here, I do not cover myself entirely but only take the *uroni* (headcover). Even in the hot weather in Bihar, wearing Burkha is difficult. Here in Assam, it's easy to move out without thinking much".

Women are always obligated to fulfil the duties as a daughter, wife and mother wherever they go. And fulfilling these duties become tough when the patriarchal norms are severe. The women in that situation do not have choices and have very little freedom. The patriarchal norms followed in a particular place form the experiences embodied in constructing her 'self'. Again, shifting of places means shifting of experiences, shifting experiences means adding new experiences to the old 'self'. Though Shamsa Khanam has been in Assam for 40 years, she still loves her village and home in Bihar. She says that she carries a part of her village, her father's teaching and the love of her joint family wherever she goes. Shamsa added new experiences in her old self, but she also shifts experiences when she shifts places. The linguistic and religious registries of the studied women and their experiences can be located in terms of the following:

3.6. Age (youth/ elderly)

A woman negotiating with her space is different based on generation. The space where Manjura's mother performed was traditional and based on religious practices. Still, the space where Manjura negotiates is religious but also allows a progressive way to deal with conventional practices. She wears new fashion but in an Islamic way. Here time acts as a

different location for the two generations of women. Though Manjura's mother knew that the way to a women's independence is her own financial security. Though she could not carry her studies, she helped Manjura in all possible ways to carry out her studies in a convent school and later convinced her husband to allow their daughter to work as a teacher. Access to, Understanding of and practices in space varies with generations. The younger generation has more access, and they access new avenues of social spaces for performing themselves. As discussed earlier, Farida's daughter finds new means of social networks or virtual platforms to communicate with a larger community, including the significant others in her community. The elderly generation sees it as a loss of cultural connectedness or value system. At the same time, it is a new way of social engagement for the younger ones. The meaning-making process of 'spaces' vary with age and exposure to technology.

3.7. Intersectional and interactional social locations of class

Though Momina and Manjura are from the same village, they deal with the space differently. Also, they deal with their space differently based on socio-economic positions among the same regional culture. Momina faces hardships in delivering her child in a government hospital in Assam as she is originally from Bihar. She was eight months pregnant and, being economically poor and not belonging to the same regional location, was asked to go back to Bihar and give birth to her child. The space where a woman performs gives her an identity. Both the class and regional identity interact with each other to produce such an experience for Momina. Manjura's relatively better economic position, educational status (first women graduate), school teacher identity, etc. all together produce different experiences. However, her North-Indian identity often spills over how she speaks Assamese create hurdles for her at the workplace. Most of the families in Barika Chupori are from relatively better economic classes, but their private space still has limited space to articulate their agency independently. Thus the interactional nature of class with other factors produce different experiential contours for the people in these villages.

3.8. Geography -the physical space '

'The village of Bhujkhuwa chupori is situated in a rural area where the residents are Bengali speaking Muslims and are from poor economic conditions. The char-chaporis in Assam and the Muslims living there have a unique social experience than all other categories. As

written earlier, they are the char-chapori Miyas, who are considered illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and a potential threat to the economy and polity of the mainstream Assamese society. With the coming of right-wing politics both at the centre and state, the implementation of NRC (National Registry of Citizens), and the introduction of CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act), there is a growing sense of 'threat' and alienation experienced by the people in the village. In the initial days of research, none of the villagers talked to me as they felt that I came to collect their information and help the state 'deport' them. The char-chapori has its own unique geographical specificities as these are shifting sand beds on the banks of the river. There is every possibility of changing the boundaries or even disappearing the place with a flood. These are locations inhabited mainly by the so-called Miyas. They are poor, less hygienic, and more vulnerable to other categories of Muslim women in Assam. Even the Assamese Muslim women be it Gorias or Morias, disparage the Miyas. The women here are mostly domestic workers and housewives. Their everyday life of these women is again subjected to class differentiation. Jahanara works as a domestic help since she has her young sons and a mother to be fed. Unlike her there are women like Nurina who is a lower middle class and her husband is a poultry dealer. Nurina is a housewife, and she does not move out of the house without informing her husband. Nurina wears Burkha when moving out of house. Nurina and Jahanara are from same village following same Wahabi ideology but their class positions give them a different 'everyday life' for performing their selves. The ideology which a Bengali speaking Muslim determines how much women are allowed freedom. The Wahabi ideology does not allow women to work outside and if allowed, she has to cover her body with Burqa leaving the face or wear Hijab.

3.9. Education, Employment and Exposure

Residing in different locations and following different ideologies, the everyday lives of Muslim women differ from one another with the education they received. Manjura's mother didn't have exposure to carry out her education but Manjura's generation though belonging from an orthodox Hindi speaking Muslim family, allowed her to go to Christian Convent School. Her exposure to educational facilities later helped her to earn a teaching job. Jahanara on the other hand being economically backwards has to work as domestic help. Since she has no earning source and no male dominance in the house, she can have the independence to move out of the house without covering herself. Here in Jahanara's

case, she gets an exposure to employ herself and her employment gives her the exposure to a public life where she could communicate her space in bringing education to the lives of her kids. Education, employment and exposure are interrelated to each other in creating her experiences of everyday life.

3.10. Historicity of the community

As discussed in the second chapter, the historicity of these different linguistic groups and their assimilation with the Assamese culture is very different. Thus, the experiential space they occupy in the public spaces is different. The Assamese speaking Goria Muslims from Barika Chupori and Moria Muslims from Beseria village has a long historical legacy of integrating with the Assamese culture. They are known as Twalma Muslims or Indigenous Muslims. Their Assamese national identity is equivalent as their regional identity. The national identity is often more performative in public spaces than the religious identity. The recent immigrants from North India- the Hindi speaking Muslims have the least assimilation with the local communities. They still speak their regional language in their domestic spaces. They try to maintain their culture by importing 'brides' from north India to reproduce conventional gendering within the private spaces. Interestingly this restriction is not put on their daughters; they can marry an Assamese too. The chapori residing bengla speaking muslims are less integrated to the Assamese society's social whole, even though they had a much longer history of migration than the Hindi Muslims in Assam. This community is the prime target of the earstwhile Assam Andolan in the late 70ies and early 80ies in Assam. This has further recapitulated with the recent initiatives of NRC and CAA in the coutry. Thus the historicity of these communities shapes their experiences differently.

3.11. Religious Ideologies

The Muslim population of Assam are Sunnis following the ideologies of Ahle Sunnat (Barelvi ideology) and Wahhabism (Deobandi ideology). These ideologies came into the lives of Muslims in Assam through the Madrassas producing Maulabis who are appointed as Imams and Muajjins in the respective Masjids.

The village of BarikaChuburi, SaikiaChuburi, BhujkhuwaChapori and Beseria Muslim village follow different ideologies of *Deobandii* and *Barelvi*. The Assamese speaking

Muslim women living in the three village except BhujkhuwaChapori, share the same historical background. With time, though these villages follow different ideologies, their culture, ritual, and norms can be located in the larger Assamese nationality. Again, these ideologies followed by the Muslim population has a localised version of performing their religion.

3.12. Conclusion

Public spaces and private spaces are interactional spaces of a woman in her everyday life. The lived experiences of the linguistic categories cannot be looked into through the duality of private and public against each other. The lived experiences of the everyday lives of the linguistic categories are intertwined not in the dichotomy, but rather they work in reciprocal ways. The linguistic and religious registries of the studied women, the experiences need to be located in terms of social locations of class, sectarian ideologies (*Barelvi* and *Wahabi*); the physical space of the categories and its culture-urban/rural/suburban/ghettoised spaces; age; education, employment, exposure to the outside of home and historicity of the community.

The lived experiences of the linguistic categories of women based on religion are located in terms of financial class position of the women where they interact differently in the social structure irrespective of their habitat. The working class treated as outsiders creates stigmatised experiences in her everyday life. The ideologies followed by the villages play an important role in locating the experiences of the three different linguistic categories of women. The ideologies in the lives of these women, always has a fluidity where the *wahabi* ideology do not support women working outside but the working-class women do not have another source of earning their livelihood, if they do not venture out. The ideologies are often performed in a vernacularised setting based on the historicity of the dominant community where there are women living in the same habitat and living two different ideologies. So, the everyday life of Hindi and Assamese speaking Muslim women performs different 'selves' within the same geographical location.

The women with same linguistic category, same geographical location, same economic conditions, same historical background and same exposure negotiate with her space differently with the variation of age. The space of the elderly women negotiating religion is with traditional practices, whereas the space of younger women is with progressive ways

of the religion. The performance of ideology again in their everyday life varies with the age of the women where the elderly women are more inclined to perform the ideological teachings and younger women are found to be progressive with their thoughts. From the above discussions, it can be argued that the interactional space of public and private are not only intertwined but the social locations of class, sectarian ideologies (*Barelvi* and *Wahabi*); the physical space of the categories and its culture-urban/rural/suburban/ghettoised spaces; age; education, employment, exposure to the outside of home and historicity of the community are also interconnected with each other.

Generally, there is spatial segregation for these women within the family except for the female-headed households. They spent most of their time in the backyards and kitchen except for those who work outside home. The number of working women is relatively less in the field. The front yards are available to them when most of their men go outside or if they become the elderly in the family. Spatial segregation within the family represents the underlying power relations beyond the religious boundaries.

Most women do their domestic responsibilities diligently across all these registries with slight variations. Domestic responsibilities involve taking care of 'other' family members' needs inside the family, whether their food or health care, and maintaining the 'house'. The activities range from cooking, feeding, cleaning, and nursing the ill healthy members in the family. However, the experiences of working women suggest mostly the double burden of domestic and workplace responsibilities. The exceptions to these are available and few women in the field are able to negotiate these for their unique power derived from 'meaningful economic resources' to the family and self-determination. The private space is dominated by the patriarchal values and religious values in performing the gender.

The class position of these families often affects these gendered performances in public and domestic spaces. However, there is no simple straight forward relation with class and autonomous space that women enjoy in these realms. The affluent Bengali/Hindi speaking households control the women's freedom and mobility. Whereas the affluent Assamese households allow more autonomy to women. The women from lower economic backgrounds are forced to go out and work to sustain their family's economic needs. Rather than the autonomous agency, it's the economic pressures provide them different ways of performing gender in the public spaces.

The women having control of their income is again a complex issue in the field. The working women from the Assamese speaking women do have better control over their income. Dilnar often buy her choice of dress for herself but often contributes her income to the family expenses. She has no hesitation in interacting with other male members in the public or workplace. She often goes to her school (workplace) in his male colleague's bike. She never felt being excluded as a 'Muslim' woman in public. Whereas Manjura Ali another teacher from the SaikiaChuburi village, (the domestic language is Bhojpuri) has more limitations in her public performance of the self. Her interactions with men outside the family is very limited and she had to walk kilometers to reach the bus station to go to her workplace. She is hesitant to take help from other men. However, her determination to secure a job and continue it after marriage and her economic independence provide a lot of autonomous space. Even though she cooks, her husband does most of the cooking and cleaning in their family. In general, the Hindi-speaking Muslim women who work outside the house maintain formal behaviour with their male counterparts and are seen not to be involved in unnecessary interactions with them, including going out together. There are even cases where the Hindi-speaking women complained about harsh treatment based on religion and language and treated them as outsiders.

The working women from lower class Bengali speaking women have little economic resources to wield control over it. All of their income is spent for the daily needs of their family, little is left for her own discretion.

Further, a Bengali speaking Muslim's ideology determines how much women are allowed freedom. The Wahabi ideology does not allow women to work outside and if allowed, she has to cover her body with Burqa leaving the face or wear Hijab.

The culture and the material infrastructure of a geographic spaces expose these women differently beyond their linguistic locations. The women in only Bengali speaking family in Barika Chuburi village have more autonomous space and different ways of performing her social self in the public to that of the Bengali village. Further, the Hindi-speaking women perform their social self differently in their native land (Bihar) to that of the one in Assam. At times, they face discrimination as outsiders in Assam, depending on their economic class. A poor Bihari woman was forced to go to her native place to deliver her baby due to citizenship's politics in assam.

The Historicity of their community is also detrimental in their conception as well as performance of social self. Assamese Muslims enjoy more freedom through the idea of national popular, reproducing Assamese Nationalism through dress and culture. At the same time, the Muslim women from Bangladeshi origin have little autonomy in performing themselves.

Thus, it can be argued that there is no universal explanation for the divergent experiences of different Muslim women from different social registries in performing their self in a particular way. Rather multiple factors often intersect with each other in producing a particular gendered performance or experience. Religion is only one of the factors and not an overarching structure that universalises Muslim women's self and identity.

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