# 3. An ‘Obscene’ Calling Emotionality in/of Marginalized Spaces: A Listening of/into ‘Abusive’ Women in Govindpuri

## The Calling

And thus does Zizek expound on the ‘traumatic dimension of voice’ by focusing on *The Exorcist* in *The Perverts’ Guide to Cinema*:

Voice is not an organic part of the human body. It is coming from some-

where in between your body. Whenever we talk to another person there

is always this minimum of ventriloquist affect, as if some foreign power

took possession. Remember [speaking over the clip from the film, The

Exorcist, where the girl is possessed] that at the beginning of the film this

was a beautiful, young girl. How did she become a monster [emphasis

added] that we see? By being possessed, but who possessed her? A voice.

*A voice in its obscene dimensions*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is an obscene essay. It deals with obscenity as a particular and peculiar ‘traumatic dimension of voice’ performed by women onto other women in the traumatized space of the Govindpuri slums. However, it is not only its subject matter that lends this essay its character. It is also in the liberties it takes to obscenely identify in these performances the potential to displace patriarchal-spatial hierarchies; an exhibitionist display of emotionality; and a well-articulated desire for love, not only as an esoteric experience but also a condensed social, sexual reality. Since at the core of every trauma lies (unfolds) a violent social, moral, physical event, the ruminations in this chapter constantly concern themselves with identifying these sites of violence the obscene performances not only claim, but also create, on its self and on the others.

Women spewing sexually explicit and violent abuses (in this context, in Hindi), toward the female body, which are traditionally reckoned to be the classic masculine expression to reiterate the hierarchy, as the particular instance of obscene ‘traumatic dimension of voice’, is the focus of this essay. Whilst the chapter acknowledges the broader materiality of gendered obscene-sonic exchange in the slums, this essay focuses on the particular and peculiar economy of this exchange when the obscenities are not only claimed by but are also exclusively directed at women by other women. By implicating themselves in the violence directed toward the ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ body of the self (and thus taking charge of that violence, at least rhetorically), the women create a disruptive and volatile space where gendered spaces, roles, and identities necessitate reframing. The evocation of these abuses, I argue, is a strategic act of subversion and circumvention of the patriarchal hierarchies. The landscape of patriarchal hierarchies is not an exclusive domain of masculine presence(s) and reiterations; and more often than not, it is the performance of masculinities—by both men and women—which accord it its particular characteristic. In that sense, while this essay acknowledges that the cartographic, emotional and social imaginations of the patriarchal landscapes are devised by the dominant sensibilities, women often assume a masculine persona to institute these imaginations, especially when the exchange does not involve gendered interactions but unfolds in an apparently gender ‘neutral’ setting exclusively between women.

It is within this framing that the evocations—obscenities by women directed at women—are affectively employed toward several agendas: social, cultural, spatial and political. However, in this chapter I explore the evocation of these abuses to map the cartographic and cathartic experience and experiencing of love in, and within, the slums of Govindpuri (hereafter ‘GP’). The essay then dwells upon the agency and extent of strategy available to the marginalized—here, women in an essentially patriarchal setting, and slums within the broader materiality of the city—to affect the designed subversion and circumvention to complicate the reckoning of the self deflected through the prism of sonic performances, emotions, identity and violence. In that, this essay, even though romantically inclined, refuses to romanticize violence by engaging with its perverse everydayness. In the discussions that follow, it is a matter of deliberation to not highlight the particular social and political considerations and consequences of voice and sonic performativity as agency in the given context. The intent is not to collapse these distinct categories. Instead it aims to unfold these obscene evocations as a complex and nuanced negotiation between the two to highlight the ruptures, continuations and displacements between different kinds of sonic permissibility available to a certain group and the resounding impact it can have.

Baby and Bitiya, two formidable women in GP, who not only allowed me to experience their experiencing of love within this schematic, but who also agreed to have their narratives exploited for broader extrapolations, are the punctuations—not as objectified entities, but as necessary instruments (in all their sensuousness)—carrying these explorations further. I, as a bearer of the feminine form, and an interlocutor-in-charge, insert myself in the text, not with a self-indulgent agenda, but to highlight the anxieties of the encounter of the obscene sorts, across myriad considerations, especially of class distinctions.

## Obscenely, Yours

Beginning at the basics: the self, before I venture into the self of the other. I grew up in a setting reeking of colonial and real hangovers. Both my parents were in the Indian army; my father was part of the elite, combative commando forces and my mother a dentist in its medical forces. Over the weekends we had croquet games, long-drawn bridge games and lots of gin. We, the children, did not partake in the latter though. We grew up with smatterings of grammatically incorrect English, and our parents—mostly, fathers—exclaiming, *bloody hell*, *God damn you*, and *bastard*. That was the extent of obscene exclamations I grew up with. I never heard them swear in Hindi, but as I grew older, I got to know of abuses in Hindi: *maader-chod* (mother-fucker), *behen-chod* (sister-fucker), *chutiya* (cunt). However, it was only when I had left the security of parental nesting, acquired half-baked degrees, romanced with revolutionary ideas, drank enough dark rum and reckoned myself to be truly liberal that I started using these expletives as punctuations as the men around us did. I was not alone. I was part of a cohort who had grown up with socialist realities and leftist ambitions while assuming neo-liberal sensibilities. We, of course, like them (the men) did not mean them literally; the violence was truly displaced, or so we thought. The beginning was hesitant though, but once realizing the currency the utterance of these expletives carried in sustaining a moral and social shock, it was incorporated as part of everyday emotional and intellectual expression.

Men who found it deplorable did not see us beyond the main door. The exchange—social, intellectual and sexual—was thus mediated by a highly sexualized, violent vocabulary. This exchange, in all its liberal pretensions, not only displaced the body and site of the violence, but violence itself. However, all said and done, we never lost our moral-virginal hymens. The liminal space we had managed to carve out through these obscene performances allowed us to transgress across conflicting social-moral landscapes. I had reckoned that I was thus truly liberated from middle-class sexual mores and moral prejudices. However, when entering yet another liminal space, I was compelled to renegotiate the social-sexual-moral economies I was convinced I had claimed.

In 2004, I was appointed to assist Dr. Jo Tacchi in a Department for International Development (DFID) funded research on ‘Role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Poverty Alleviation’. The slums of Govindpuri were one of the identified research sites. Until then, even though I had lived in Delhi for almost a decade, my experience of and exposure to the slums in Delhi was through a primarily middle-class, educated, urban lens. This implied that, while I was aware of the rhetoric of displacement and resettlement vis-à-vis the slums in popular mainstream media and academic discourse, I had never experienced the space first hand. Though conscious of the discursive practices that othered the slums and slum-dwellers, I was still reluctant and hesitant when it came to setting my terms of engagement, primarily because of my limited knowledge of the space. The narratives highlighting the everyday violence, displacement and marginalization of the slums also—often, subconsciously and insidiously (as fine subtext)—included testimonies of the social, moral and sexual conducts in these spaces. These, the narratives emphasized, were different, and this difference lay in the distance from the middle-class-ness of these practices.

And thus I ventured into the slums of GP, hesitant and reclaiming the middle-class-ness I had spent years to shed off. Or at least I reckoned. At the most fundamental level, this was obvious in the deliberation of attire I chose to present myself in the slums. It was not the Westernized appearance I usually donned—T-shirt and jeans—but a more staid one reflective of the ‘indigenous’ culture—*salwaar-kurtas[[2]](#footnote-2)*—with, of course, a perfectly draped *dupatta.[[3]](#footnote-3)* However the deception went deeper and further: a heavy smoker, I did not dare light up in GP; a drinker of some merit, I refused to claim this indulgence; romantically and sexually adventurous, I definitely did not acknowledge these encounters, or even their possibilities. However, pertinent to the context of this essay, the most dramatic shift was in the presentation and performance of my sonic self in the space of the slums. The language of communication and conversation in GP was Hindi—that in itself was a shift, as I inhabited spaces where Indian-English was the de facto language. Moreover, the iteration of Hindi I chose as my sonic identity within the materiality of GP was chaste and definitely devoid of the obscenities, which otherwise were part of my everyday vocabulary.

It has been ten years since those early days of hesitant, deceptive encounters in GP. Following the DFID research project, I undertook to pursue my doctoral research focusing on politics of production and articulation of sound as an interface to interrogate the everyday interactions between the residents of the GP and their middle-class neighbors. The anxiety of leading an almost schizophrenic identity as a researcher overwhelmed me, and I invested in intellectual and methodological inquisitions to resolve the sites from where these split-sonic performances emanated. Not without its distressing emotional, intellectual and theoretical reckonings, I came upon the realization that central to the assumed sonic performance in GP was the internalization of the logic the testimonies (insidiously in academic texts and overtly in mainstream media) sustained: the otherness of the slums, and its residents, and this difference arising out of the distance from middle-class sensibilities. The pathology of assuming the deceptive, chaste sonic identity was premised not in witnessing the transgressive spaces women claimed in the slums (as we—the middle-class counterparts—aspired for in our contexts) by obscene utterances, but in the danger imagined in the identification of the self with that of the others. The self of the others was thus not only systematically absented from the discursive space(s), but it was also strategically demonized by affecting a distance through assumed sonic identities to assert an embryonic distance.

Once arrived at these deliberations, I agreed to put myself into as much scrutiny and observation as I took the liberties of the self of the others. Thus we—the women and I in GP—smoke, drink, discuss our affairs and political positions (with liberal smatterings of obscenities, which we anyway employ as punctuations) with truthfulness, which does not necessarily obliterate the class distinctions, but it surely does not deliberately perpetuate or deflect it. However, most significantly, we collectively acknowledge the currency of sonic-obscene performances in claiming spaces, though not without their violence, in our specific contexts, even though we necessarily do not perform them together.

## Shutting Anyone’s Speakers

Bitiya is a feisty young woman. By her own admission, she has done it all: got married at the age of 16 to her lover against her parents’ will; had a daughter by 18; left her abusive, alcoholic husband at 19; had a raging affair with a neighbor’s relative; supported her family, including getting her two sisters married off, by taking up sex trade; had a live-in lover for seven years; and presently is readying to bring up his child after they had a volatile and violent breakup. She is a force to reckon with: ‘I have done things on my own terms and I have borne the consequences as well. No one in the locality can say anything to me. I can shut anyone’s speakers.’

It was not long before I witnessed her *shutting the speakers*. She was in the middle of a heated argument with one of her neighbours—a young woman—when I arrived. The context or the cause of the altercation was lost to me, and I did not dare interrupt the exchange. Even though this exchange was liberally doused with obscene expletives, they were restricted to the normalized *behen-chod, maadar-chod* variety, but soon the argument picked up momentum, and so did the nature of the obscenities.*[[4]](#footnote-4)* They became increasingly violent and sexual. By now Bitiya was dominating this sonic exchange. The choice of her expletives insinuated violence onto the feminine body, which included, but was not limited to, ‘shoving things in her cunt; getting the neighbour raped by her uncles; her [the neighbour's] incestuous sexual encounters with her brother, father and any stranger who would have her; and the ultimate evocation of the sexualized violence of the neighbour's enjoying being raped’.

The young woman was thus silenced, and she agreed to take down the garland of worn-out shoes she had hung facing Bitiya’s house as an insult to the latter’s family.

I was not unaffected by this highly violent and sexualized exchange of obscenities between the two women, even though I had witnessed similar exchanges earlier. Noticing my unease, Bitiya offered the following explanation. ‘Here, the only way to shut people up is by spewing more gannd [filth] than they can. That is the only way anyone’s speakers can be silenced’. The explanation offered by Bitiya was not without its Zizek-ian evocations. By identifying the sonic performativities of another in terms of a technological-mediated object—the speakers—Bitiya in fact arrived at a proposition similar to that of Zizek’s that the voice in fact can be ‘coming from somewhere in between your body’. Also in this evocation, the metaphor of speakers, which can be turned off, is particularly telling, as it poignantly sums up the spaces of dominance—social and cultural spaces—the obscene-sonic performances permit. Thus in this specific performance the sonic space is dominated by the one who can silence or shut the speakers.

However, silence—both performed (being silent) and imposed (being silenced)—is not a static category of sonic being and cannot be contained within the singularity of a listening position within a specific context. Being silent and being silenced can rupture, intersect and interlude the soundscapes in a context in similar manifestations. But the resounding impact of the particular performances more often than not emanates from the spatial, social and political positionality the performer occupies. In the Indian context, the negotiations between being silent and being silenced is strongly situated within its historical, religious and political epistemologies. And these manifest themselves thus: the silence demanded of the lower-caste/classes vis-à-vis the upper-caste/classes both in their everyday, immediate encounters but also as agents of knowledge production; the deliberate silencing of the subaltern as a political category, and the exalted ‘silence’ of the men of cloth.

## Vocal Digressions: The Cartography of Abusing and Loving

The narratives of Baby and Bitiya I discuss in this essay concern themselves with some of these negotiations: sonic dominance, silencing and displacement of spatial-patriarchal hierarchies. But they also venture into the geographies of emotionality of the self of the other as articulated through the experiencing love. GP is a highly gendered space, where the mobility of women comes under close scrutiny by both the immediate family and the extended social network. Here, it is the feminine body on which the otherness is doubly inscribed, both of the structural and everyday violence. This otherness is inscribed by limiting the performances the feminine ‘self’ is capable of—bodily, sonically, sexually and emotionally. The being and becoming of the feminine self is situated within a hetero-normative narrative with subservience and compliance as its core ethos; digressions from this normative narrative are closely monitored—mostly by the older women—and invite social and cultural disapproval; and in extreme cases ostracization often also resulting in physical violence.

In this section I will emphasize the manner in which instances where sonic and emotional digressions by the feminine self disrupt and displace the registered hetero-normative narratives, though not without its violences and violations—to the self and others.

Both Bitiya and Baby are single parents. However, that is not the only thing the two have in common. They both left their marital homes to escape abusive husbands and since then have been the arbiters of their respective families. On different occasions and in varying circumstances, both of them have earned a decent living through sex work. Over the years both of them had several ‘love’ affairs outside of both their Muslim and slum community. Most of them have been clandestine, but in both their cases one love affair stands out as the ultimate experience: relationship with Dimpy in the case of Bitiya, and Baby’s affair with Chand. They conducted these respective relationships openly, challenged the communal order, and had live-in relationships. Here it might be worthwhile to highlight (especially as regards responding to the issue of the encounter of the researcher’s self with that of researched) that these confidences by both Bitiya and Baby were not revealed in a research encounter but were shared over a period of few years during which I, as a researcher, was in turns an object of inquisition and research to which I responded with as much truthful integrity as I expected from the researched. Over the years we transcended the sonic distance and displaced sonic performances of identities to arrive at sonic intersections whilst acknowledging the class distance, allowed us—I shared this relationship with most of the residents of GP, especially women—to share collective sonicities. The shared collective sonicities across class and spatial considerations within the broader materiality and imagination of the city are not without their negotiations, and often lend themselves to varying practices of silencing.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Bitiya and Baby’s romantic undertakings allow situating the intersection of these two digressions—sonic and emotional—within the specific materiality of GP, whilst complicating the position of slums in the broader imagination of the city as spaces capable of emotionality. Bitiya’s relationship with Dimpy and Baby’s with Chand came to stormy endings. The deliberation toward the final closure of the respective relationships involved public fights, loud obscene and abusive exchanges and physical violence. During and after the end of the relationships, Bitiya and Baby, casual acquaintances until then, found in each other unusual allies. Their open defiance of social-moral-sexual norms meant that when the said relationships ended, they could not seek out the social support networks available to, for instance, a recently widowed or a married woman abandoned by her husband, or one who returned to her parental home on account of consistent abuse, predominantly physical. Even though in the case of both Bitiya and Baby, abuse—both physical and emotional—along with abandonment were central to their narrative and experience of an essentially patriarchal relationship, they were not extended the concessions on account of the arrogant identification of ‘love’ as the determining rationale for the said relationships.

Herein unfolds the intersections of the sonic, sexual and romantic digressions. Bitiya and Baby were incensed by their partners’ new romantic involvements, but also for not being able to receive any social and cultural validation for their experience of love. They both agreed upon a retaliatory strategy. The anger they felt on account of the displacement was, however, not directed at their former partners, but their present lovers. And thus they decided to ‘teach’ them a lesson by publicly shaming them, by shutting their speakers. The negotiations for arriving at this confrontation are uncannily similar in both the instances. Both Bitiya and Baby set out to establish the everyday routines about the other woman in question, they gathered as many details about their histories and present preoccupations and the geographies of ‘love’ they were claiming with their ex-lovers.

One afternoon Baby was informed that her ex-lover, Chand, and his present romantic interest were spotted at a public park not very far from GP. The moment seemed opportune, and the two allies—Bitiya and Baby—set out to shut the speakers. Once the two of them were spotted in the park, Baby took to abusing the romantic interest in question, whilst completely ignoring the ex-lover, in highly sexualized and violent obscenities. The obscenities in themselves demand an intellectual inquisition to locate the violence—real and imagined—articulated by them; however, the concern of this essay is in the very performance of these obscenities rather than the cultural modalities of their production. These obscenities were marked by two prominent sets of rhetoric: first, to establish her prowess as a sexual subject by claiming the very real and imagined violation of and violence toward the feminine body inherent to these obscenities. These included evocations to the effect, ‘my cunt can hold as many cocks as I want, if you had the same capacity you would not steal my boyfriend’; ‘I can accommodate different cocks in different orifices at the same time’; and ‘it is my cunt, what I do with it is my business’. But the effectiveness of the obscene performance as a retaliatory strategy lay in disenfranchising the other—Chand’s present romantic interest—of exactly the same sexual subjectivity and control over it as Baby claimed for herself. These included calling her a randi (a whore), and projecting on to her feminine body violence of a highly sexualized nature, ‘you will be gang raped’ and ‘hope you are fucked by your whole clan, but even that won’t satisfy you’, and ‘obviously you are insatiable, that is why after being fucked by everyone in your neighbourhood and family, you use your cunt to attract other men’.

The woman in question—Chand’s romantic interest—was taken aback, especially since Baby had Bitiya to reiterate, almost perform the function of an echo, in this obscene performance just extending the space and scope of sonic colonization. Soon a group of onlookers gathered about. Some men, including Chand, tried to intervene. However, at that moment Baby started tearing off her clothes and threatening that if anyone interfered she would file a suit of section 376 against them. Under Indian Penal Code, 1860, Section 376 is reserved to report and charge the accused for attempting or having committed rape. If reported, the police have to take action against the accused, and it remains as a recorded criminal case against the identified perpetrator until proven innocent. If Baby’s retaliatory strategy relied upon making a distinct demarcation between sexual subjectivities as claimed by the sonic performances, Bitiya’s strategic intervention to encounter the other collapsed these demarcations by sustaining a narrative in which the other’s corporeality was held as vulnerable to the real sexual and physical violence she had encountered in her relationship. Indeed this was also a publicly performed obscene sonic moment. She, along with Baby, made an unannounced visit to Dimpy’s present lover’s house. Bitiya then proceeded to narrate in some detail the sexual violence—both real and rhetorical—she had endured. She evoked her body as a piece of meat that Dimpy devoured as and when he wanted; he treated her like a *randi*, often physically and verbally abusing her. She made a plea to the other to reject Dimpy on account of the shared violation of the feminine body. The climactic moment of this obscene sonic performance was inscribing the script of an imagined violence onto the other’s body: ‘he will fuck you as he wants; if you don’t agree to what he desires, he will not shy away from raping you and talking filth about you to his friends’.Her ultimate threat to disrupt the romantic adventures was to file a complaint against Dimpy under Section 376, especially as by then she was carrying his child.

## Silencing the Lover’s Speakers: Muting the Self of the Other

If indeed ‘voice’ is to be considered as something ‘coming from somewhere in between your body’, then it is also laden with the potentiality of occupying other *in-between-nesses*: spatially, socially, politically and culturally. Voice as a simple act of speech and its rhetorical capacity to evoke a collective reaction (for instance, political and religious congregations, among others) is at once grounded and displaced. Voice emanates from a time-space continuum, but it reverberates across multitudinous, intersecting temporal and spatial realities resonating a reiteration of the voice, intended or otherwise. This potentiality of voice to literally, metaphorically and rhetorically extend one’s domain of being is well acknowledged in GP. And thus the women are required to perform silence of sorts: don’t talk too loudly; don’t talk to strangers; don’t retaliate; don’t talk back. The women however continually perform the sonic digressions. They challenge, subvert and circumvent these hierarchies by claiming the sonic space, by performing obscenities of the nature discussed in the earlier section. However, at this juncture it is pertinent to establish that not all sexualized obscenities are registered as digressions. Some of them like *maader-chod* (mother fucker), *behen-chod* (sister fucker), *chutiya* (cunt) are normalized in the given context, and are used by both men and women as interjections and punctuations, both jocularly and in slight altercations. These obscenities are not absent of the imagined sexualized violence. However the site of the violence—the body of a mother or a sister—is still claimed (or in fact un-claimed) in its abstractions, steadfastly located within the familial and social order wherein the figures of the mother and the daughter are revered and respected, and thus beyond the realm of the ‘real’ violence these imaginations contain.

The sexual and social freedoms claimed and exercised by Bitiya and Baby are in no way singular instances of challenging the hetero-normative, masculine cartographies in GP. However what sets aside the narrative of these two women are the significant overlaps in their experiences—social, cultural and romantic; but also the particular manner in which both of them assumed a certain masculinity in claiming these spaces. The instance of Bitiya ‘shutting anyone’s speaker’ is but an assertion of it. They are both constantly approached by neighbours, relatives and friends to deal and negotiate situations, especially involving local cops, goons and matters of fights in their respective streets; one of the reasons why both women enjoy this privileged position is on account of their ability to spew filth and shut anyone’s speakers. As mentioned earlier, GP is a highly gendered space where the mobilities and performances of women—social, sexual and sonic—are highly restricted. The ‘obscene’ sonic performances of Bitiya and Baby disrupt the established hierarchies. The men—often amused—find it disconcerting because of its emasculating potential to displace them from their claimed space. The women—especially those at whom these obscenities are directed—are further disenfranchised by the peculiar encounter of gendered violence (however rhetorical and free of real violence) by other women. However, Bitiya and Baby, though performing this violence and claiming the masculine space, are not subtracted from the rhetorical and violence onto the feminine self inflicted by these sonic-obscenities. The only recourse available to them to claim the masculine spaces, as women who are *besharam* [shameless] enough to spew the obscenities, is to expose their own cartographic, emotional, sexual and sonic selves to the very violence they intend to inflict, and thus displace.

If women spewing sexualized, violent abuses are the ultimate sonic digression, the declaration of love—as an experience and desire—by them is its emotional equivalent. Love and its declaration threaten to disrupt the precariously sustained order of normative social, moral and sexual values, especially in regard to containing and controlling the feminine self. The obscenities performed by women, which do indeed register as sonic digressions and affectively disrupt the spatial-patriarchal-sonic hierarchies, are the ones in which the women directly implicate themselves and other women in the violence directed toward the real and imagined feminine self.

## The Danger of the Other’s Love

Love is dangerous. It resounds with social, sexual and moral possibilities and digressions. However, the pathological dread of declaration of love— especially by women—is the exhibitionist display of the self vis-à-vis an identified other. In the concluding discussion to this essay, I will situate this pathological dread of love as a peculiar instance of perverse masculinities in a marginalized setting of the slums. I shall also highlight the manner in which this perversity, and thus its depravity, of slums often evoked by the state, middle-class retort, and in cultural representation of slums is a justification to maintain a distance from these spaces and displace them. A paternalistic disciplining agenda is inherent to these narratives, which is symptomatic of the broader anxiety of the dominant structures and narratives to allow for an emotionality, and thus an identification of a well-defined and claimed a sense of self to the marginalized spaces and communities.

As discussed in the previous section, Bitiya and Baby found solace in each other to articulate their experience, anxiety and trauma of love within these negotiated cartographies. It was only within the shared experience of displaced selves that the two of them could rehabilitate their individual self, especially since they lacked any other narrative spaces to claim it. The end of their respective relationships was articulated by both of them (in collective and independent conversations where I was inadvertently present)—in different terms—as a significant moment of rupture to the projected and imagined sense of self, as within weeks of the break-up both Dimpy and Chand had assumed new romantic relationships. Socially, culturally, sonically and sexually lacking the space to locate the love as a valid category of experience within the real materiality of GP, the displacement from an imagined site—however displaced—where this experience was validated by the presence of a responsive other; both Bitiya and Baby encountered the ultimate displacement of being absented from this collective, fantastical realm by the insertion of an another—sexually active and sonically performative self. The voice of the other (Dimpy’s and Chand’s newly acquired romantic interests), muting their own, compelled them into undertaking matters, into shutting the other’s speakers—even whilst sharing an intimate, immediate and violent identification with the other as always occupying the space of the Other within the hegemonic, masculine performativities and spaces.

## Emotionality in Marginalized Spaces: The Self of the Other

Slums are heterotopic spaces in the city. They are both dreaded and desired, the former for its potential to disrupt the fundamental core of social-moral values owing to the imaginations it evokes on account of its density, dirt and digressions—social, cultural and moral. Within this dreaded potentiality for digressions lies its perverse desire. However, this desire rarely translates into a direct engagement with the space, but manifests itself in the hyperbolic interest in situating the position of the slums in the present of the city. This tension was especially exaggerated in a city like Delhi, with its ambitions to transform itself into a ‘*world-class, clean, green’ city.* Moreover this transformation, essentially structural, also relies on the readily available, cheap manual labour from these marginalized spaces and communities. This ambition draws inspiration from following the Singaporean model, which prides itself in transforming itself into a ‘world-class city’ under Lee Kuwan Yew in a very short period of time. In fact, Sheila Dixit, Delhi’s chief minister in her third term, got a special mention in LKY Cities in Transformation Award4 for her efforts to improve the city’s environmental, civic and urban planning.[[6]](#footnote-6)

With ‘Delhi as Singapore’, Sheila Dixit extended to the burgeoning middle-class in Delhi a model that immensely appealed to their aspirational ambitions of what Slavoj Zizek identifies as ‘capitalism with *Asian values’.*[[7]](#footnote-7)The scope of this text does not allow to engage at length with the problematic and politics of employing ‘Delhi as Singapore’ model as strategic rhetorical tool, which was affectively employed to justify violence—by the way of demolitions, displacement and resettlement—on marginalized spaces and communities (namely, slum-dwellers, homeless people and migrant labour) in the city. However, it allows to explore the particular reckoning of the self as a modern, disciplined and self-governing individuated entity which has insidiously found its way into urban planning discourse as well mainstream, cultural representations. It is within this particular notionality of the self that I complicate the position of slums in the broader imagination of urban materiality by focusing on its emotionality with love as a key concern in GP.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines emotions (n.) as ‘a strong feeling deriving from one’s circumstances, mood, or relationships with others’, and ‘emotional’ and ‘emotionality’ are defined as the states that express this ‘strong feeling’. Central to this definition of emotions extending to its performance, emotionality, is a strong sense of self and the relationship of this self with an identified other. Slums are strategically denied a self as it allows to accommodate the anxiety about their otherness across political, intellectual, social, cultural and indeed, emotional manifestations. In its most fundamental aspect, it completely disenfranchises slums of any identity and thus its assertion. It systematically limits their right to the city. This fundamental disenfranchisement further extends into denying the slums and its residents the possibility to imagine an (or any) other. The denial of the self of the slums in discursive spaces, middle-class imagination and mainstream representation is then logically extended to acknowledging any emotional capacity or its performance, emotionality.

This double denial, first of the self of the slums and then the possibility of othering by the other, translates not only in immediate disenfranchisement, but also significantly allows for the displacement of the marginalized both in the historical and futuristic imagination of the urban. The peculiarity of the suspended displacement in the imagination of the state is not incidental but strategic. Owing to this suspension, the demolition, displacement or violence inflicted on the slums finds justification as it is understood that they neither have any historicity nor any future claims to the memory and culture of the space they inhabit—that until re-settled by the state, they exist in a void. And thus the ruthlessness of the violence inflicted is often masked within the rhetoric of benevolence; in that they are in fact being extended legitimate claims to history, memory and culture. The lack of acknowledgement to their emotionality is yet another strategy (though seemingly insidious and instinctive) to perpetuate their violence. For, if the residents of the slums were indeed identified as ‘emotionally’ capable, they would have to be acknowledged to have capabilities of individual expression, which would then extend to acknowledging their collective identities as well.

However, this denial of emotionality does not imply that their performance or expression of self in the public, or for that matter in their private spaces is not unacknowledged. In fact the performance is constantly scrutinized; however it is not engaged within the framework of expression of self but as a gross deviance from the modern, disciplined and self-governed self that is acquiring a currency within the cultures of urban transformation in Delhi. And this imagination of the self, drawing from the Singaporean model, has been affectively consolidated in the popular, middle-class aspirations, which then find resonance in urban planning projects, several of which—including the Bhagidhari system[[8]](#footnote-8)—were recognized as exemplary efforts by Sheila Dixit in the special mention she received in LKY’s Cities in Transformation Awards.

## Love in the Times of Othering: Muting the Self of the Other

At the outset this chapter announced its obscene intent. And here, in the conclusion, wherein the narrative structure demands a closure and neatly folded resolutions, the essay performs its hyperbolic obscenity by its refusal to succumb to these compulsions in that it does not arrive at a logical culmination of the conversations initiated, but aims to leave with provocations both for the author and its reader. The deliberation to listen into the obscene sonic performances of women in GP, the identification of self, emotionality and moments of disruption of sonic-spatial and patriarchal negotiations was not a cheap attempt toward sensationalization. Instead by undertaking these listenings—not without their violence, both real and imagined—it was to precisely highlight the perversity of the available moments of encounters between the mainstream and the marginalized to recognize these pathologies: of the self of the other.

Women spewing the highly sexualized and violent abuses in GP are a perverse titillation to the dominant agents (here, men) and narratives in its real encounter with this body but also in situating these bodies as sexual subjects within the broader cartographic imagination of self and emotions. If the women are indeed articulate and claim these violence(s), it is because they desire them. But also the vocalization of this desire—a performance of the self, so to say—necessitates the imperative to discipline them. And thus the space and scope available to women to express themselves is limited to obscene performances and encounters, which are fundamentally recognized as offensive or disgusting by accepted standards of morality and decency. Even love, an otherwise exalted and celebrated emotion of being within the mainstream hegemonic discourse, is only allowed to be actualized and articulated within the discussed obscene performances of and by the women in GP. Thus love as an expression of self and emotionality is denied legitimacy to the women in GP, operable only in its hyperbolic manifestations. This particular predicament of women in GP is not only representative of the sustained marginalization they encounter as the other within its dominant, patriarchal context but also symptomatic of the othering slums (as a space) encounter within the broader urban imagination. Essential to sustain the othering—inscribed on the women in the localized context of GP, and slums as a space in its generalized projection—is then to deny them a well-articulated sense of self by dismissing their emotionality.

However, emotions indeed do abound in marginalized spaces. But making this seemingly commonsensical assertion demands qualification, and more importantly, quantification. Within the very tapestry of this necessity to qualify are woven the questions which have preoccupied philosophers, scholars across disciplines and artists: the construction of the self, the position of the individual and the intimate relationship between the self and the state, which then raises further issues of citizenship and the spaces available to different and diverse selves to enact it in its complete capacity. However significant these questions are, here it is important to attempt to unveil not only whether emotions abound in marginalized spaces (in fact I begin with that assertion), but to further understand the politics of denial of emotionality in these spaces. The recognition of the emotional of the other is also plagued with a fundamental methodological and philosophical paradox. Indeed, here lies an inherent dilemma because in recognizing the emotional of the other, one also acknowledges the ‘self’ of the other (and in fact engages with it).

## And Thus, the Savage Is a Savage, and Remains a Savage

Perhaps we need to take a step back, and before pondering on the denial of emotionality and its politics, perhaps it is pertinent to wonder why the denial in the first place. Of course, there is the entire contestation of the self-other as discussed in the earlier section, and indeed inherent to this denial is a strategic disciplining agenda. However, we, as human beings, are instinctively and intuitively aware of emotions; we know they are important and that they shape our lives in ways sometimes even beyond our imagination. We all have succumbed to them: love, jealousy, loneliness, betrayal, anger, angst, hurt. This landscape abounds in its wilderness. And only while taking a walk amid this wilderness of emotional possibilities, especially while reflecting on the self-other constitutions in this landscape, does it becomes evident that the other after all is not denied all emotionality. The emotions associated with the other, which find credence, and even sympathy, are of anger, rage and betrayal (though only if it is against the system). There is sometimes even space for the performance of these emotions by the others; though it is only recognized in its collective manifestations justified, celebrated, sympathized or dreaded within the rhetoric of the subaltern, finally rising in the long-awaited revolution.

In *Don’t Ask Me for That Love Again*, one of the greatest poets from South Asia and a committed communist, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, while celebrating his lover’s beauty, evokes most poignant imagery to justify his forsaking the love for a cause thus: ‘There are other sorrows in this world/comforts other than love/ Don’t ask me, my love, for that love again’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Here, the sorrows are not of a personal nature, but a response to the plight of the poor in society whose ‘[…] bodies [are] plastered with ash, bathed in blood’ to serve the rich who have ‘cast their spell on history’. Romantic love is not for the revolutionary, perhaps an impediment to the Revolution itself? But why is love an anathema to revolution? And if the revolutionary herself cannot claim love, what about those—the others—for whom the revolutionary renounces her love? The cathartic moment in the compulsion to choose or renounce love in one’s commitment to the self or the other lies in the very individuated and involved articulation of love as an experience, process and practice.

Love as a concern for philosophers, scholars, mainstream media and popular culture remains the epitome of the celebration of the self: in the surrendering, suffering, exhilaration and complete indulgence it demands. It is indeed almost a narcissistic indulgence. It has capacity to completely obliterate the other. When the poet, in the throes of his melancholia, announces to his lover that romantic love is not an indulgence he can afford, the loved—the other—is completely absented. The pathos and the pain of the loved are irrelevant, and it is the lover’s discourse that dominates. It is this dread of the other as an individuated entity with the capacity to not only experience but also articulate a plethora of intense emotions with the potential to absent and obliterate the other of the other that propels the hegemonic imagination into catatonic paralysis to acknowledge love as a valid category of emotionality of the marginalized. And thus only spaces available to the self of the other to claim sonic and emotional territories is through either an obscene or a hysterical performance. This hyperbolic rhetoric is then strategically evoked to deny an acknowledgement of their self within broader, structural discursive spaces.

1. *Slavoj Zizek’s The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema* (dir. Sophie Fiennes, 2006). Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A type of suit with loose trousers and long shirt. It is a common, everyday attire for most young women in Asia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A long scarf worn with the salwaar-kurtas; in most instances it is considered essential, and not wearing it is often seen as a sign of indecency. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Literally translated as sister-fucker and mother-fucker, respectively, these abuses are used in the everyday, common exchange without the direct implications and violence suggested. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tripta Chandola, ‘Listening into Others: Moralising the Soundscapes in Delhi’, *International Development Planning Review* (34 (4), 2012), pp 391–408. 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. # Special Mention - Sheila Dikshit, https://www.leekuanyewworldcityprize.com.sg/laureates/2010/special-mentions/sheila-dikshit/

   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Poonam Chandra Pandey, ‘Sheila Dixit: Architect of Modern Delhi, Wanted to Develop it like Singapore’, https://morningindia.in/sheila-dikshit architect-of-modern-delhi-wanted-to-develop-it-like-singapore/’. Slavoj Zizek, ‘Capitalism with Asian values’, *Al Jazeera*, 13 November 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2011/10/2011102813360731764.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The premise of the Bhagidari System (literally translated as ‘participatory system’) is to involve ‘citizens’ in the processes of governance so as to make it effective, transparent and collaborative. However, the only citizen groups that are presently involved in the Bhagidari System are the Resident Welfare Association (RWAs) of middle-class, often gated settlements and market traders’associations (MTAs). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, ‘Don't Ask Me for That Love Again’, trans. Agha Shahid Ali, in *The Rebel’s Silhouette: Selected Poems* of *Faiz Ahmed Faiz,* *Amherst: Massachusetts UP, 1995,* 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)