Shopping Malls, Globalization and the Dynamics of Power

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> Unknown in India until the late 1990s, the appearance of the shopping mall was both sudden and surprising. More than 22 malls were built between 2000 and 2003, and another 240 have been built since then. . . . The emergence of the shopping malls has transformed urban family life. (Kasbekar 276)

The subject of this paper is the shopping malls[1] – a fairly recent phenomenon that is changing the urban landscape of India at a good pace. While the first part of the paper focuses on locating the emergence of shopping malls within the larger context of globalization, the second part explores the dynamics of power at the level of the capitalist and the individual consumer.

I

Enjoying his cup of Italian Cappuccino and observing a group of Chinese maidens performing a classical dance, the familiar "global clown" of McDonald's advertising a new product, marketing strategies of various shops, Indian couples, groups of European and American men and women, an Afro-American disc jockey playing music in a shopping mall in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Ziauddin Sardar felt that he could, "almost, be anywhere" ("Pendulum" 122). He concludes the essay "When the Pendulum Comes to Rest"[2] by stating:

> The global capitalism of which this shopping mall is a concrete manifestation does not really care whether I am Muslim, Christian, secularist, Pakistani, male, black or whatever: it simply demands that I buy. Here, in this cultural desert, in this plurality of indifference, both my being and my identity are a function of the very act of buying. I shop, therefore I am. (125)

First, the sense of being almost anywhere or nowhere for that matter, of being outside one's immediate surroundings, of being a part of a global culture, of partaking of a global experience is what is recounted here. The homogenizing influence and the de-contextualizing impact of globalization makes every mall look like any other to Sardar. The force of globalization aims to homogenize, produce identical copies in order to facilitate the reproduction of the image of

globalization. What is sold and purchased is the image of globality, physically manifested through global standards of products and services in shopping malls.

Second, the plurality that Sardar experiences in a mall, where commodities from various parts of the world are assembled under one roof, leads to a "total absence of meaning and depth" and an erasure of contexts ("Pendulum" 122). Within a single mall, one can buy products from different parts of the world, consuming the world in a capsule. So it really does not matter if one is in a mall in Malaysia or India because (well, almost) the same products are available for consumption. Also, one can find a range of products from luxury products[3] like expensive party wear, shoes, bags, gift items, jewellery, perfumes to basic necessities like underclothes, grocery, bread, butter etc. to food and entertainment, integrating all aspects of life and making it a town unto itself – self contained and self sufficient. This variety further adds to the plurality of the experience.

Third, the only activity that foregrounds identity in such a scenario is the activity of buying or consumption. In the same essay, Sardar further states that, "My identity is shaped by the image that I purchase: designer clothes, the right car, the right briefcase, the appropriate watch – I am buying a sign system, the brand gives me my identity" ("Pendulum" 125). In a world where patterns of consumption determine social standing and class, commodities are loaded with meaning, they become social signifiers. They are consumed as much for what they stand for – their meanings, their identities, other connotations attached to them – as they are for their material functions. A pair of Levi's jeans or Adidas shoes, a Rolex watch and a Gucci sun glasses – all come with a whole range of meanings attached to them like class, taste, style, the image of the brand ambassador/s, lifestyle and so on. John Fiske also states the same point:

> The function of commodities, then, is not just to meet individual needs, but also to relate the individual to the social order. Consumption is not just the end-point of the economic chain that began with production, but a system of exchange, a language in which commodities are goods to think with in a semiotic system that precedes the individual, as does any language. ("Shopping" 30)

Therefore, commodities constitute a sign system that gives the individual consumer a sense of self and defines the relationship of the self to society at large.

II

Fiske also suggests that just as language as a system can be modified or appropriated, the commodity system can also be used by the consumer to empower himself/herself.

> The values of commodities can be transformed by the practices of their users, as can those of language, for as language can have no fixed reference point in a universal reality, neither can commodities have final values fixed in their materiality. The practices of the users of a system not only can exploit its potential, but can modify the system itself. In the practices of consumption the commodity system is exposed to the power of the consumer, for the power of the system is not just top-down, or centre-outward, but also two-way, always a flux of conflicting powers and resistances. ("Shopping" 31)

As is the nature of power, it is never located at one individual/institution but is dispersed as in a network. It circulates as in a "capillary" (borrowing Foucault's term) network. It shifts from one point to another. Since it is not concentrated at one point, the gaps and fissures can become the site of resistance. In the case of shopping malls as well, consumers are not totally bereft of power. There are gaps through which shoppers have the option to resist buying[4] that may not be completely voluntary. The capitalist can only persuade/seduce the consumer to buy products at the shopping mall but he/she cannot force the consumer to do so. The choice ultimately lies with the consumer. The moment of choice is a moment of power, according to Fiske. He goes on to equate buying with power.

> The consumer's moment of choice is an empowered moment. If money is power in capitalism, then buying, if the act is voluntary, is an empowering moment for those whom the economic system otherwise subordinates. And any one single act of buying necessarily involves multiple acts of rejection – many commodities are rejected for every one chosen. ("Shopping" 26)

Therefore, according to Fiske, from the consumer's point of view, shopping or buying can also be an enabling experience. However, according to me, at one level, buying/consuming may give one a sense of fulfillment and empowerment but at another level, this may also be frustrating if one does not have the means to buy what one wants. Also, if the act is voluntary, it can be seen as empowering but if it is involuntary, it can be disempowering. Exploring the question of power vis-à-vis consumerism further, one wonders who is empowered in the process of shopping ultimately – the capitalist who is able to extract money from the consumer or the consumer who

is able to derive fulfillment from the product or both or none? Also, how does the power equation change when there is no real purchase but only window-shopping?

In the process of window shopping, the shopper consumes images and not necessarily the products. While Fiske links window shopping with "the power of looking" ("Shopping" 34), other theoreticians like Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss, Chris Jenks and Tiago Neves (an analysis of their respective positions follows), compare this kind of relaxed strolling to flanerie, the progress of the voyeuristic dandy who strolled the streets and arcades of Paris in the nineteenth century. According to Benjamin[5], "the department store is [the flaneur's] last haunt" (*Passagen-Werk* 562) [6], "the sandwichman is the last incarnation of the flaneur" (*Passagen-Werk* 565), and the female flaneur risked being seen as whores as the term "street-walker" or "tramp" applied to women makes clear. In her essay "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman, and the Whore", Morss exposes the politics of this close connection between "the debasement of women sexually and their presence in public space, the fact that it functioned to deny women power . . ." (151). She explains how sexual difference complicates the politics of loitering and a woman flaneuse came to be branded as a prostitute.

So the question of power, window shopping, flanerie, gets further complicated with the introduction of the flaneuse in this paradigm. On the one hand, shopping malls offered a relatively protected space for women to shop and stroll unescorted, on the other hand women risked being branded as prostitutes. But at the same time, one also needs to keep in mind that both Benjamin and Morss are talking about nineteenth century France. In today's context such an association does not hold ground. In fact, "67 percent of shopping center users are female"[7] and the association of flaneuse with prostitute would at best be considered, ridiculous. Still, one cannot underplay the importance of the history of this term for women.

In their essay, "A Walk on The Wild Side", Chris Jenks and Tiago Neves react against the depreciatory strain in most literature on the flaneur. They draw parallels between flaneur and an urban ethnographer, see the figure of flaneur as "a way of reading the city, its population, its special configurations whilst also a way of reading and producing texts. . . . a way of organizing the city" ("Walk" 170,171). They explain how the flaneur is not just an observer of city life but also an author of texts about it and therefore it is "a difficult political ground to be walked, not idly and carelessly strolled, by the flaneur. Now, as then-Paris in the nineteenth century-it is not easy to be a flaneur" ("Walk" 184). Therefore, Jenks and Neves foreground the identity of the

flaneur as an urban ethnographer, as an author, as an intellectual in order to legitimize him/her as a figure of importance and power. As their analysis suggests, the flaneur continues to live as each of these figures.

In the context of flaneur as mall goer, the question whether the flaneur is alive today and comes back home after the shopping expedition without buying anything but only after consuming images, or he is dead and therefore, most mall goers end up buying commodities – is a matter of intense debate. No amount of statistical premises can prove the point either way. That is why cultural studies represent a domain of uncertainties and ambivalences. Comparing the ratio of footfalls to actual buying would prove the former. While looking at the same ratio on weekends alone, the profits made per purchase, the survival rate of malls and the growth rate of malls across the globe would prove the latter. In this paper I support the latter position.

While the comparison between the erstwhile flaneur and today's window shopper, the extension of the metaphor to the woman as flaneur or flaneuse and the idea of flaneur as author are common in such discourses[8], one needs to see how the commercialization in the context of the shopping mall has radically altered meaning and what one witnesses, is not a simple continuation or recovery of flanerie, but a nostalgia for its form which only marks its effective absence. Shopping centers would not function if shoppers were not asked to validate their presence by purchases, in questions posed both in environmental clues and, if necessary, by the security personnel in case of unbecoming behavior. The contemporary flaneur cannot escape the imperative to consume unless determined to do so. Those without shopping bags and other suspicious individuals may draw the attention of security, who may use the charge of loitering as grounds of eviction. In the Indian context however, one need not always go to that extent as the parking fees itself acts as one of the effective filters of such undesirable elements at the site of the malls. In fact, malls such as City Walk (located in Saket, New Delhi) do not even allow two wheelers to enter the premise and charge as high as Rs 100 (for other vehicles) on weekends as parking charges for a span of three to five hours. Moreover, shoppers do not independently pick their way like the leisurely flaneur, but follow the meticulously contrived plan which has plotted paths, set lures, and planted decoys for its purpose. There is little chance of taking a route or occupying a position unforeseen by this plan.

Another question that needs to be analyzed is: does a shopping mall empower all and sundry or is access denied to those who cannot participate in that culture? On the surface of it, a

mall is open for all but when one probes deeper, one realizes that it is an extremely restrictive space, providing restricted access only to potential buyers and ensuring the same through a meticulously planned system of surveillance. So, whereas theoretically everyone is invited, practically the exorbitant parking fees, security guards, cameras etc. regulate the traffic inside the mall. There is an attempt to control everything right from who comes in, what he/she does to how long he/she stays within the premises. (But this is not to suggest that the attempt to control or the intention of the capitalist always succeeds.) Apparently benign design features such as the escalators that alternate to facilitate movement between floors, almost hidden restrooms etc. aim at giving maximum exposure to shop fronts by controlling the pace of the shopper's movement. Benches, neither too comfortable nor otherwise, are located at strategic positions to enable the shopper to rest only enough to continue the task of shopping with renewed energy. Windows are decorated to tempt and seduce the consumer to buy. Glass walls themselves perform the function of advertising "live" consumers. Flea markets, which are projected as cheap markets in order to attract consumers, might not necessarily be so. Discounts are offered to encourage people to shop and indulge in impulse buying, all the time, while feeling that they are saving money by doing so. Food courts further help prolong stay at the shopping mall as the general belief goes that the longer they stay, the more they consume/purchase.

> Our surveys show [that] the amount of spending is related directly to the amount of money spent at centers….Anything that can prolong shoppers' visits are [sic] in our best interests overall (a senior vice-president of leasing and marketing cited in Reynolds 1990b, 52, emphasis added). (qtd. in Goss 22)

Thus, the shopping mall is a highly contrived and controlled space. All signifiers push/ persuade/coax the shopper to buy. As far as the design strategies are concerned, they aim at generating profits, whether the consumer buys into that logic or decides to resist that logic entirely depends upon him/ her. But the consumer may not always need to resist buying per se.[9]

Besides indulging in window shopping or flanerie, other modes of resisting the primary logic of consumption include appropriating the shopping mall as a meeting point, coming there to use wash-rooms, using parking lots for illegal activities and so on. But while there are strategies to resist the economic and spatial logic of the shopping center, there is always a danger of co-optation and suppression through equally strong attempts to contain such acts of subversion. There are limitations upon such a resistance but at the same time there is no

possibility of a critique from outside the dominant representational discourse/culture because there isn't any position that is not implicated in its object code.

[1]**NOTES**

While Wikipedia conflates the terms shopping mall and shopping center and describes it as follows: "A shopping mall, shopping center, or shopping centre is a building or set of buildings which contain retail units, with interconnecting walkways enabling visitors to easily walk from unit to unit.", another site called wikianswers.com distinguishes between the two terms: "The difference between a shopping center and a shopping mall is that one gives you access to all the stores through one entrance while the other makes you exit one store in order to enter another store. In a shopping mall there are several entrances into the mall. Once you get into the mall you can now go to any store in that mall without ever going back outside. In a shopping center there are only one or two entrances to each store and in order to go to another store you have to go outside to enter another store." For the sake of consistency I have used the term shopping mall throughout the paper, subscribing to the second definition of the same.

[2] In this essay, Sardar primarily aims at critiquing postmodernism but since that is outside the scope of the paper, I have not mentioned it. But at the same time, it is imperative to mention the basic focus of Sardar's essay here so that the reader who is familiar with Sardar's essay is not left wondering at such an omission and the one who is interested to trace the relationship between shopping mall, globalization and postmodernism can explore it further.

[3] I do not intend to generalize "luxury" or "basic" products as what may be basic for an upper class consumer may be luxury for a middle class one. I only want to stress the range and variety of products available at a shopping mall by categorizing commodities in this fashion.

[4] Here one could draw a distinction between voluntary acts of consumption and involuntary acts of consumption. While there is no need to resist voluntary buying, one might feel the necessity to devise strategies to resist involuntary buying.

[5] To further explore the idea of the flaneur, one could start with Benjamin's analysis of the same in *Passagen-Werk,* which is vol. V of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhauser.

[6] As quoted in Susan Buck-Morss's essay "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman, and the Whore" in *Culture: Critical Concepts in Sociology, Vol IV*, edited by Chris Jenks. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 136-169

[7] As quoted on page 19 of "The 'Magic of the Mall': An Analysis of Form, function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment" by Jon Goss in *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* Vol. 83, No. 1 (Mar 1993). 18-47.

[8] That is, in discourses dealing with the analysis of the figure of the flaneur. In this paper I have referred to three essay: by Benjamin, by Morss, and by Jenks and Neves, which form a part of the larger discourse around the same.

[9] Refer to note 4.

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