

We Cannot Cross Our Limits: Sexuality and Desire in Urban Pakistani Youth's Gendered Performance

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Abstract : Keeping in view the segregation of space(s) experienced by young women and men at puberty in Pakistan and the socially constructed and performative aspect of gender identity by Western theorists of gender and self, this paper will explore Pakistani youth's differential, gendered performances. Specifically focused on Pakistani youth's perceptions and experiences of sexuality, extramarital and same-sex relationships in constructing and performing gendered identities as manifested through their talk, the research will also draw upon recent theories of space in cultural studies and postcolonial discourses. The data cited has been culled from two different studies conducted at universities in the city of Multan. Informal, unstructured group discussions of women and men aged between twenty and twenty nine years of age were recorded separately among groups of friends and cohorts studying at two different universities. The findings clearly show both young women and men doing the boundary work in identity construction in private and public spaces: talking of sexuality, sexual desire and sexual relationships, women tend to safely couch their articulations in euphemisms: distance themselves from the Western concepts of sexual liberation ; while young men's exhibitionism in boasting of their sexual prowess and sexual encounters as well as the use of sexually explicit and tabooed words frequently in their intimate conversations shows a clear departure from and a contestation of the normative public discourses. Further the findings illustrate that young men conform to the patriarchal ideologies by constructing heterosexual identities whereas young women initiate discourse on same-sex relationships. The data also reveals that the private identities of these young Pakistanis are different from their public identities, as it is in their intimate conversations and private (or safe) spaces that they talk about their pre-marital sexual activities and love affairs. These intimate and safe spaces thus emerge as subversion and contestation of their public identity, as sex and sexuality are tabooed subjects in public discourses.

Keywords : sexuality, gender, identity, performance

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