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Reclaiming the City: Advancing Women's Mobility in Priya Guns's *Your Driver is Waiting* Aporwa Siwali¹ and Dr. Chetana Pokhriyal²

Abstract

The research paper aims to study the pattern of experience that differs for women and men in urban spaces, predominantly exploring women's mobility beyond domestic confines and into the public realm of the city through the critical analysis of the novel *Your Driver is Waiting* by Priya Guns. The protagonist in Priya Guns's debut novel is a mythic archetype constructing the predetermined narrative functions to pursue career paths within urban areas, making it essential to identify cities conducive to their needs and fostering their independence. In the neo-liberal globalized world, it becomes imperative to study the concept of marginalized and self-employed women breaking the stereotypical image of women, negotiating their spaces, eroding the regulatory framework through their struggles, navigating their path from being branded as incapable cab drivers to making bold choices in the cities and redefining urban space socially rather than as a merely physical entity. The paper, through textual analysis, will investigate how women reclaim the city through the central character of Damini by using the theoretical understanding provided by Leslie Kern in her book *Feminist City*. The study will analyze women's visibility and navigation in the city, along with the challenges and repercussions faced by women drivers in the urban transportation industry. The paper aims to delve into the risks, fears, and anxieties inherent in driving in a city as well as other challenges such as limited wages and benefits within the transportation sector.

Keywords: Urban women, gender-inclusive cities, women's mobility, transportation.

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Reclaiming the City: Advancing Women's Mobility in Priya Guns's *Your Driver is Waiting*

Urban spaces are significantly determined by how people use and traverse them, predominantly, how women have been exposed to the urban public sphere, and how their issues remain under-addressed. Women undergo a multiplicity of differences, including social, cultural, political, and economic barriers, and constant conditional access to public space. By their reiterative negotiations to navigate the cities, they have constantly outgrown their limitations. With rapid development and globalization, cities are becoming the centers of occupational growth, where job opportunities remain limited for women in comparison to men. Despite the universality of the concept, the rise in theories in feminism and social science, and the development of rural spaces into peri-urban and urban spaces, women hardly occupy the 'centrality' of spaces as men do and struggle to claim it. Leslie Kern in her book *Feminist City* emphasizes that "the primary decision-makers in cities, who are still mostly men, are making choices about everything from urban economic policy to housing design, school placement to bus seating, policing to snow removal with no knowledge, let alone concern for, how these decisions affect women" (16). Women have been burdened with household and familial obligations, low literacy levels, and a political culture that constrains them to operate outside the traditional mandated roles. This forces a few of them to break from existing social controls to enter a nonfemale-domain profession, challenging the possibilities, contributing to diverse sectors despite their limited involvement, and becoming increasingly integrated into operating within a public realm. One such sector is transportation, where women have always been present as beneficiaries of the ease of locomotion, but now women perceive themselves as capable of accepting the transportation sector as a profession. In this way, women defy societal expectations in a male-dominated sector, identify themselves as being independent, and perceive themselves as an active part of society, transcending their position of being 'vulnerable' or 'domestic' to build an inclusive society.

As we reflect on the present situation of some countries in Europe and Central Asia, we see that gender gaps exist in both employment and access to transportation. On average, 77% of all those employed in transportation in the region are men, compared to just 23% for women" (The World Bank). This opens up a wide spectrum for debating women's engagement and visibility in such occupations as cab drivers, bus drivers or conductors, auto-rickshaw drivers, etc. Women have constantly been restricted from advancing in the transportation sector, resulting in the creation of a wide gap in their access to related opportunities and job profiles. According to the Road Transport Yearbook (2019-20), issued by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways of India, the number of professional valid driver's licenses issued to drive public service vehicles, in various states and union territories of India, varies approximately from six lakh men to only eleven thousand women. Such statistics intensify the need to question urban society, which states equal opportunities for all and raises the need for extensive awareness among women to contest their place in this uniquely created public space in the city.

Women's independent mobility in the city has been riddled with hurdles due to various historical, social, cultural factors which perceive that "It's an uncomfortable combination in a society where, traditionally, women are thought to bring shame to their family and culture if they do something that could be perceived as promiscuous" (Dehnert). Various economic factors also contribute to restricting women's mobility. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey – Annual Report [July, 2023 – June, 2024], men's Labour Force Participation Rate in urban areas is 75.6%, and women's is only 28% (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation vi). Women's mobility comes with conventional delimitations such as safety and security measures, as women are at real or perceived risk of harassment, violence, and

assault, particularly in underdeveloped urban surroundings or at particular times of the day, such as after dusk. This has led to women's dependence on male members of society for essential travel and transportation. Women have to rely on their brothers, fathers, husbands, or sons to travel any further than their homes, tilting the power dynamics in the men's favour. The persistence of gendered economic inequalities, women's rate of participation in the labour force, and the gender income gap have disempowered women from the public sphere.

Additionally, there are concerns regarding the male-biased design of the city and public infrastructure, which is inadequate or unfavourable for women. One of the recent reports on "Women and girls bear brunt of water and sanitation crisis" by the United Nations Children's Fund in association with the World Health Organization "shows a stark reality: 1.4 million lives are lost each year due to inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene" (World Health Organization). This showcases serious sanitation and hygiene concerns because of inadequate or non-existent toilets in several areas. In such a context, transportation as an employment opportunity is out of the question, and therefore, the transport sector has been unexplored by women for the longest time. To incentivize women's engagement towards taking up a profession in the transportation sector, we will have to create a gender-inclusive society by addressing and resolving such issues. One of the tools for addressing the crucial issues mentioned above, educating and mobilizing women and inspiring them to overcome patriarchal constraints, is literature. Narratives of women navigating challenges with strength and resilience and achieving their goals and aspirations, leading empowered and active lives, can inspire other women to follow in their footsteps.

Literature before the advent of 20th century, being dominated by men, has frequently depicted women as pure, devotional, charitable, gentle, and delicate, associating such characteristics with womanhood to show them incapable of being out in the world and to further confine them to domestic spaces, where they become submissive, dependent on menfolk and are restricted to domestic responsibilities. In the city, this means being restricted to a severely limited space. Priya Guns's novel *Your Driver is Waiting* breaks these stereotypical conventions and challenges the existing norms by creating realistic, independent, and contemporary women. Damini, the protagonist, is a cab driver for a ride-hailing service, 'RideShare,' where she not only takes up the responsibilities of being the bread earner of the family but also comes across as a resilient and empowered woman. In the world of patriarchal dominance, she withstands all kinds of men in proximity. Despite her courage, society still causes her anxiety about her safety while driving around in the city. She says, "All the drivers I've ever met say it's crucial to drive prepared. Go ahead and ask one. If they tell you there's not even one weapon hidden in their car, they're lying. As a driver, you have to protect yourself. Out there in the city, we're on our own" (Guns 10). It is vital to note that most urban spaces pose similar security challenges for women, irrespective of the cities referred to. Thus, regarding the location, Guns carefully employs ambiguity in the novel; she keeps the city unnamed as most cities offer similar circumstances to women. This strategy helps to universalize women's situations across geographies. Guns writes, "a city is a place, is a space, is the same everywhere minus the design of buildings, the demographics, and the weather. Cities have all been structured the same" (26). This implies that the development of urban spaces is not done while keeping in mind gender-specific differences. Since urban planners and those in charge of city administration have historically been men, little effort has been made to understand the surroundings from women's perspective. In the paper titled "Changing Lanes: Commuters' Perspectives on Women Cab Drivers," Dr. Bindu Dogra and Sonia Kumari discuss how inequality persists in society:

The findings reveal a lower preference for female cab drivers on long trips, a trend likely shaped by traditional gender roles that associate long-distance driving with male drivers.

This bias appears to be influenced by deeply ingrained stereotypes regarding women's physical endurance and perceived vulnerability, which not only misrepresent women's capabilities but also contribute to their marginalization in more demanding professions (11).

Guns challenges these perceived notions by centering her story around Damini, who is not just a person navigating the city all by herself but an impactful character breaking certain norms of society by situating herself in a male-dominated profession. The novel places Damini's character in a precarious state in contrast to a stereotypically ordinary life. Her movement is dictated by the necessity of looking after her ailing mother and other household responsibilities. Guns develops Damini with the attribute of responsibility while breaking through her vulnerability by giving her the power of decision-making, enabling her to empower herself. This questions the idea of women naturally opting for vulnerability and softness by making the protagonist choose the most challenging profession for herself. To further highlight Damini's character, Guns contrasts her with Jolene, a woman belonging to the privileged section of the society, with whom Damini has a romantic relationship. In addition to class differences, there is a racial difference between them as well. The novel develops around the idea of intersectionality, incorporating narratives of a woman who has a multifaceted identity. Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasizes that "Intersectionality looks beyond a single-axis framework to acknowledge that intersectional experience is more than the sum of racism and sexism" (qtd. in Dutton et al. 3). While Damini carries the racial identity of being a Tamil woman, Jolene is the white girl with blond hair that she encounters. Despite this, they both have queer gender identity. This enables them to meet despite their class and racial differences. L.C. Angeles and J. Robertson have claimed "Additionally, it has been acknowledged that feminist discourses must evolve and be informed by diverse identities and sexualities of queer-identified people in urban planning, geography, and public safety" (qtd. in Dutton et al. 3). Through the social, economic and racial stratification and contrasting but intersecting lives of women belonging to different classes, the readers' understanding of women's navigation and day-to-day experiences within the city is deepened. In the novel, Damini and Jolene not only share a relationship of mutual affection but also one where the former is the driver and the latter the passenger, to make a great emphasis on women navigating the same city. Damini belongs to the working class and is always subordinated and undervalued in her profession. She cannot direct the journey despite being behind the wheel, which gives the freedom to Jolene to decide the course of her journey. This draws a hierarchy between the two that enables them to have varied experiences despite sharing a common gender identity. This implies that freedom can have different meanings for both.

The paradoxical intersections of varied identities in various aspects of life call for an intersectional approach towards addressing women's issues in the city. In the research paper titled "Feminist Planning and Urbanism: Understanding the Past for an Inclusive Future," Jenna Dutton and others emphasize that "women are not a homogenous population; therefore, it is critical to consider intersecting identities in urban responses, including racial and ethnic diversity, sexuality, age, ability, income, and life stage" (4). The complexities of race, class, and gender can be seen as layered interlocking categories of Damini's diverse experiences within the city. Whether it is her queer identity or her relationship, these experiences appear salient, meaningful and overlapping, producing cumulative influence on her role as a cab driver leading to her candid observation that the city is "Driven by the phallus, all for the phallus, worshiping the phallus, or at least worshiping themselves. Driving through this area I wore my shades" (Guns 139). It is interesting to note the metaphor of the city being a vehicle that's being driven by men, the phallus being the most indiscreet representation of masculinity. Thus, even though Damini has gained control of one vehicle in the city, the city itself is still in the hands of men. Damini's is an act of rebellion, but it is overshadowed by patriarchy. The contrast

highlights the need for more and more women to join in the struggle for space and agency. Therefore, Kern suggests that “any policies, practices, and design changes meant to increase safety must take a hard look at how different members of society will be affected. It may be impossible to find a one-size-fits-all solution, but we still have to take an intersectional approach whenever possible” (133).

Kern calls for the urgency of repurposing urban spaces so that they have diverse possibilities for each individual. The design and infrastructure need to accommodate not only men or women but a whole host of identities. She states that “Although the nature of the places available has been deeply altered, lesbians and other queer women, trans and non-binary folks continue to find ways to make life-saving friendships and to create new kinds of creative and inclusive spaces as part of their urban survival toolkit” (71). In the chapter “The City of Fear”, Kern refers to how “socialization is so powerful and so deep that ‘female fear’ itself has been assumed to be an innate trait of girls and women” (120). In her discussion, she highlights how the city has opened new avenues, but in contrast, it has also become a site of danger. The novel illuminates how women who choose to work in the transportation sector as women drivers struggle with fear and anxiety. This limits their economic prospects and confines their access to space. Damini only seems to have passengers driven within the city and not beyond. Kern, in creating her understanding about fear, reflects that “Study after study produced similar patterns: women identified cities, night-time, and strangers as primary sources of threat” (120). Different working hours have different working experiences; as Damini says, “Getting ready for driving nights involves a precise routine. Strengthen the body, strengthen the mind, meditate” (Guns 46). This emphasizes how women’s safety is compromised during work due to unfavorable conditions. Kern underlines that “these fears have real material outcomes. A better paying night shift or job in a seemingly dangerous area might have to be declined. Night classes that would lead to more training and higher paying jobs might have to be avoided. Affordable housing might be inaccessible if it’s in an unsafe area” (125).

Fear of violence always shapes women's behaviour and movement. “Women develop individual mental maps of places where they fear assault as a product of their past experience of space and secondary information” (Valentine 3). Damini states that “I am always safest in my car before a passenger climbs in” (Guns 49). This implies that the car becomes a site of a controlled and fearless environment, whereas any interference from the outside world will bring harm to the female driver. This presents the situation of being in a silo, powerless in a male-dominated world, a feeling innumerable woman in the city may easily relate with. All these factors contribute to women’s restriction, which, according to Kern, “limits our use of public spaces, shapes our choices about work and other economic opportunities, and keeps us, in what is perhaps an actual paradox, dependent on men as protectors” (122). Kern states that everything comes at a cost, and fear regulates women's freedom and reinforces the idea that the city belongs to men. She emphasizes women nonetheless functioning in the city, as she says that “a woman will still cross the street at night if a stranger is walking behind her” (17).

The other problem faced by the women drivers is the number of passengers to be driven. “Since many women customers feel unsafe while commuting, female drivers offer ride-hailing and taxi services to help make these journeys safer for women” (Dogra and Kumari 3). Even though this is an advantage in terms of safety because the idea of women-only passengers extends access to women's safety and mobility, subsidizing the risk of harassment or assault and making it more appealing for women drivers to have women-only passengers, it also creates a sense of dependency for both drivers and passengers. In the novel, Mrs. Patrice becomes dependent on Damini. During peak work time, it is difficult to find passengers as women themselves are under restrictions of time and area. Kern observes that “women engage in all kinds of self-policing in order to avoid unwanted attention and hostile surveillance of their

bodies and behaviours. It's still incredibly difficult for women alone to actually take up space" (84). This contributes to social limitations and expectations for the women drivers, giving them various attributes over male drivers, such as caregiver and nurturer. Still holding back stereotypes of being vulnerable and needing protection, this takes away their agency to make their choice of passengers, further segregating them under the division of men and women. "By adopting such defensive tactics women are pressurised into a restricted use and occupation of public space" (Valentine 3). Women's participation in the transport profession increases their opportunities. Since women drivers might prefer women passengers and vice versa, this participation might become exclusive and isolating in its ways. This also delimits women drivers' access to the other half of passengers, i.e., men, which makes their sustainability and livelihood difficult.

Women in the profession also grow anxious regarding work efficiency as they are constantly battling in the male-centric profession where performance becomes a key challenge. The idea of being rated well by the passengers to various other factors which Guns observes may have contributed in creating anxiety while working, which Damini herself experiences. She says, "I slowed down when there were other cars, unless the drivers were young men who drove as if the only real meaning they had in their lives was when they pretended to be drag racers, driving aimlessly up and down the same street to prove they've got testicles" (67). This highlights the diverse ways of restricting women's mobility and limiting their access to public spaces, making various gendered boundaries. Kern observes that all these patterns are designed to "keep women 'in their place'" (18). This reinforces the need for conducive work environments where women feel included instead of discriminated against.

In the chapter titled "City of Protest" in the book *Feminist City*, Kern explores cities as a site for protesters. According to her, we need to have the right to the city; therefore, we need visibility in such feminist protests. Kern says that "participating in protests brought my sense of belonging in the city alive and confirmed my righteous indignation at the widespread injustices that affected not just my life, but the lives of millions of others" (100). Similarly, Guns uses the idea of protests, which seems prevalent in the novel, to bring out the precarious state of women cab drivers and their demands for "Workers' Rights for ALL Workers! Drivers Are Tired of Waiting" (Guns 149). Kern implies that being at the site of protest will ensure visibility to women where they will get heard and will give a sense of solidarity and belongingness. It also emphasizes how the site for protest is a way of expressing and articulating oneself to reclaim the city. Kern states how, irrespective of our participation in activism, it will still shape our lives along with our experiences in being a feminist city. Jane Darke, who posited that the city is "patriarchy written in stone," goes on to say that women are made to feel like "guests" at best in the city, knowing that they're effectively in men's territory and could be seen as trespassing if they do not "comport themselves in particular ways" (qtd. in Kern 85). Guns, as well as Kern, strongly suggest that women shake off the feeling of being a guest in their own home spaces and reclaim their right to the city as rightful residents.

In understanding the present society, it is necessary to address where, as a country, we can situate ourselves in our pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) advanced by the United Nations. SDG 5 aims to promote gender equality and empowerment worldwide, and SDG 8 emphasizes decent work and economic growth. For their achievement, creating a sustainable environment for all becomes necessary. Contemporary literary studies lay the ground for recognizing women's experiences to address the multiplicities of problems faced by women. Guns critically places Damini amidst the tension of economic disparities. She focuses on how "There's a huge disparity between what drivers make and what the shareholders make" (174), thus questioning the wage gap between the genders for the same amount of work. Women have always contested their spaces in the cities, yet their presence has been neglected,

resulting in the persistence of the same underprivileged status. Unless the marginalization of women is overcome, making progress towards sustainability is an uphill task. For the achievement of the SDGs, women must be given equal opportunities, rights, participation, and representation as men.

In the research paper titled “Feminist Planning and Urbanism: Understanding the Past for an Inclusive Future,” Jenna Dutton and others suggest that “Although there have been attempts at integrating feminist concepts in urbanist practices over the past 20 years, a full integration into policy has been lacking” (7). Examining the cities has been crucial to all the sociologists, geographers, government agencies, non-profit organizations, and architects, along with urban planners, who have constantly been involved in understanding the cities and contributing to have informed urban policies. Though various research and data analysis are shaping the policies, we cannot ignore the contribution of literature as it provides a unique perspective in examining the cities and urban policies. Various stories, poems, and essays provide an insight into diverse human experiences, which comes along with understanding our surrounding, social, and cultural dynamics, which will help in generating policies. It has been observed that “authors have paid a great deal of attention to illuminating, in considerable detail, the ways in which the gendered dimensions of power, agency, identity and subjectivity relate to mobility” (Hanson 6). Literature plays a pivotal role in giving context to the complexities and challenges faced by urban communities, which largely include men, women, marginalized groups, and immigrants, which will help in an effective implementation of urban policies. It has been observed by feminist urbanism practitioners that women have been underrepresented in policy making, which excludes women from their rightful participation in decision making about urban issues. Therefore, Priya Guns’s novel offers a multidimensional and intersectional approach towards building a policy framework. In focusing on urban spaces, it has been observed that various factors contribute to the current state of women in city as “Conditions that render women vulnerable to different forms of exclusions and violence in the city are exacerbated by gender-insensitive urban infrastructure that is neither designed for women’s bodies nor is responsive to their needs” (Visakha 14). For an inclusive city, we need to develop a proper infrastructure for working women with proper urban design and planning. Through the emergence of new ways of mobility like cabs and self-driven vehicles, it becomes necessary to have new ways of planning cities for women to address the needs of urban working women. Priya Guns’s novel highlights the importance and effectiveness of impactful narratives that shed light upon contemporary society’s biased perception of women’s mobility and access to urban spaces. Society still imposes the ideology of the dominant culture, which is advanced by men, and women become passive victims in navigating their cities. The subjugation of women in the cities has taken new forms in regulating their movement. Therefore, the idea of reclaiming the city becomes a crucial pursuit for shaping an egalitarian society. This must be done on an individual-to-individual basis to achieve a comprehensive and varied sense of accessibility. The narrative of Damini reaffirms the patriarchal structure of the cities through her participation as a cab driver. The character is employed to critique the society and its oppressive ways, which she navigates with resilience and resistance, contesting her space through the city. The novel therefore highlights Damini’s intersecting identities governed by gender expectations, economic disparities, racial identity and queer desire, not as an obstacle but as means to overcoming their marginalization. One solution that the novel suggests is women’s reclamation of the urban space by their taking up professions like that of a cab driver. To have a better understanding of women’s issues in the city, it is necessary to discuss theorists like Kern, whose perspectives give multifaceted insights regarding women’s fears and anxieties and advocate for the urgency to reclaim the city. By foregrounding the narratives of women

struggling towards and claiming their right to access the city, we inspire advancement towards more empowered women, inclusive cities, and egalitarian societies.

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