



Autoethnographic Literary Fiction & Poetry: A Woman in a Public Space

Description

A woman alone doesn't belong to any male power or protection sphere. She can be kidnapped into fears and dreams.

A Woman in a Public Space 1: An Experiment

No stars can be seen. The city lights are faintly mirrored in the clouds. The nights of dry heat have turned into a sweaty wait of typhoons. There is a party in one of the established corners of the constantly swelling labyrinth of Manila. The inner yard of the cultural center is full of people and music echoes from the red walls. Two young men meet in the midst.

"Hey Erik, I know now who I want. That one. Talking with Rio and that German guy."

"I see her. Nice. You're sure?"

"Yeah, positive."

"Remember. Not directly. We'll just blend in normally and get slowly closer to her. You do nothing. I'll approach her through the others."

Some hours later the main yard is empty. The ones remaining stand and sit talking on the brick pillared terrace. The DJ has gone. The radio is on. Ray and Eric separate themselves from the laughing group.

"It's going well. I heard she'll be in the Star bar in the Greenbelt mall this Friday. You know, the place where the Europeans and Scandinavians hang around."

"That place for snobs? Yeah, I know. I hate that place. Should I make some moves on her already?"

"No! I'll just introduce you casually. Don't show any of that kind of interest. She has to get the impression that we only want to be friends with her. That's the key. Do you still want to stick to our plan?"

"Yeah, of course."

Friday. The mall walls close the traffic noise outside and give room for a serene world apart with plants,

restaurants and money. The air is cool and breathable. There is a feeling of space and of well behaving people. The intimate Star bar is packed by midnight and the two men find it easy to befriend the woman.

“If you are going to work here, you need to see the real life and meet the real people. This is not the place for it. Have you visited any other districts in Manila, other than Makati City and the administrative areas?”

“No, I haven’t had the time. The work has taken most of it. But of course, I want to see more and live a normal life.”

“Tomorrow we are going with some friends to a spa that is near a beautiful church from the Spanish era. Come with us. You’ll love it. You’ll see the real Manila.”

Saturday. “There she is. In the doorway of the church looking inside.”

Yellow soft light coming through the door is the only strong enough light for eyes to see not only shapes but people with faces. The round square in front of the church is on the move in the dark.

“Oh, there you are. Hi! Are we going to wait for the others?”

“It’s just me and Erik. Lupe was supposed to come but she canceled. Come! The spa is just next to here.”

“Here you see the real Filipino life. Makati City is only for busyness and is full of concrete and glass. It has nothing substantial.”

“We even share a flat close by. This area truly has flavor.”

The spa’s small pool area has a wooden floor and bamboo walls. There are no other customers to be seen. The three are sitting in a tiny Jacuzzi, legs curled in. When talking with Ray the woman is oblivious of Erik’s inquisitive and calculative look. An enjoyment glitters in his face.

“And then we’ll return to Visayas.”

She’ll be having fun. What’s wrong with that? And besides, we’ll make sure that she can’t be sure what happened. She’ll be confused thinking she drank too much, that’s all.

“I thought there hasn’t been strong or destructive typhoons lately.”

“No, but we are still assisting the people after the last big one. Tens of thousands of people still live in the tents we provided. The Philippine government does nothing and everything is left to the international organizations. It’s just crazy.”

“Actually, it’s better this way. The international aid is best left to be used by the independent organizations since the governmental corruption exists in all levels.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“No more shop talk! You know, I feel like doing some serious dancing before returning to Visayas. How about going to a nightclub next week?”

“I’m in! Let’s go to that small place not far from here. They play the best music.”

“Great idea! You must come too!”

“Oh, I don’t know...”

“Of course you’ll come!”

Ray and Erik look at each other over the bowls of noodles. The trees in the Vietnamese outdoor restaurant prevent the street lamps from exposing the customers. Their plastic table wobbles slightly. The ground is rugged and the chairs stand unevenly. Someone smokes at the next table. In the kitchen the cook is shouting over the music. Ray and Eric know that no one can hear them.

“It’s all set then for Friday.”

“What if she goes to the police?”

“Why would she do that? She’ll be having fun. What’s wrong with that? And besides, we’ll make sure that she can’t be sure what happened. She’ll be confused thinking she drank too much, that’s all.”

“What did the man who sold you the drug say, exactly? I mean, I don’t want her to lose consciousness. Or die.”

“Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. I even checked it on the internet just to be sure. Leave it all to me and just have fun with her.”

“Yeah. And why would the police believe her any way. We are the good guys. The Philippines needs us.”

Friday. Eric is coming down the stairs holding two classes. The strobe light beams frantically. He is smiling. Ray is smiling. The woman is smiling. The dance floor is shaking and one has to either shout or mimic.

“This is for you! Ray never drinks!”

“Thanks!”

Some moments later, Erik is sitting on a barstool near the chaos of dancers. He is gazing intently at the woman, amazed by how fast the drug has begun to work. On the dance floor the woman has started to move her body loosely. She is jumping, funnily waving hands and head. Ray is laughing, touching her. She is eagerly responding to his touches. Soon she is kissing him uncontrollably and Ray rubs himself on her. Then he takes her hand and shows her to the exit. Her steps are erratic but they manage to leave the nightclub. After a moment or two Erik stands up, excited. It’s working just as they planned it.

The next morning is silent but for the eternal noise of traffic. The woman comes out of Ray’s room. Her greeting and smile are tense. Erik looks quietly when she finds her way across the room and out of the door. Soon after, Ray appears in the kitchen.

“Well?”

“Well, what? Are you asking me did I rape her?! Fuck you.”

Their mouths are suddenly dry and grainy. Ray’s face is dark in mixed intensity. Erik’s eyes are elusive. Sun mitigated by clouds reveals the street sand on the window and the gold in the air appears in its true grey. The used furniture stands colorless and dull.





Photo by [Omotayo Tajudeen](#) from [Pexels](#)

A Woman in a Public Space 2: A Look

Halfway up the escalator it struck me. It began in the stomach, then moved to the lungs. It was heavy and cold. Then it was born as a taste of radiating panic on my tongue with the stinging realization in my brain: I had looked him in the eyes! Completely absentmindedly! I had even smiled vaguely at him. Automatically, I had behaved politely since he had given me the way. Anger rushed at me. I hadn't been fast enough to take care. Fast enough to be back from my mind travels.

I was in Africa. In the French speaking West Africa to be precise. I was strolling through a marketplace; my steps were light and my hips swayed, hands swept gently on the fruits, vegetables, seeds. The smells and the colors were speaking to me: "Can you see us? Will you taste us?" With abundance of joy, I let myself linger on their beauty and on the excess of their juice as I advanced in the crowd. The women around me were round as the sun and the men like slender trees on the desert's red steps. All was well.

Then those pale dead fish eyes had hit me and torn me back to the weary mall. The emergency senses were now working on their full power. My back felt him following me. My cheeks shrank with every breath he was taking. Be ready to hide! A stalker.

I hurried out to the street and stopped by the bookshop window. I needed to see if he truly was following me. And yes, I saw him some meters away staring at me. Still in his dark sweater waiting for my move. I rushed into the bookshop. In my mind I was yelling: you careless fool! I forced myself to focus on the shops' items. So many Harry Potters, yet still. New covers. Are they hopeful believers or greedy realists? Knitting instructions. The knitting boom is on. Yesterday, Anna was wearing her freshly knit Icelandic sweater. Is he still there? Has he no shame looking at me like that through the window? Not even pretending to be interested in the books on display. He could have been chopped out of an iceberg so imminent and alarming he was. There, the birthday cards, I don't remember any birthdays coming up. Wrapping paper. What will I do?! How will I be able to go home? He will follow me and my life will turn into a nightmare.

I can't go downstairs because then he would come inside to prevent the chain of his gaze from being broken. The inside of the bookshop is my safe place for now. I must maintain it. Oh, there's a travel guide to Senegal. It's a country known for its music.

I must go to Africa. Away from the dirt and darkness of Finnish winter. Away from the ice and the dead fish eyes. I will live in a small yellow house with a banana tree in the garden away from the main street. The sea will not be far away, just some bright morning leaps from the door. My neighbors will have chickens and their kids will run in the alleyways. The dustbins will smell of course and I'll have to move them further apart and consequently, cause a row with the garbage men. My neighbors will rally my cause as well as the stray dogs. The ever-present sand will travel inside the house but instead, I'll manage to keep the overwhelming, gorgeous sun outside by closing the sky-blue shades. I will drink coffee under the banana tree on a red chair. So shall it be.

From behind the bookshelves, I threw a quick glance at his way. He was still there, looking paralyzed. He probably had no thoughts; he was nothing but his gaze. My shirt was wet under the armpits and in

the back. The scarf felt like a rough robe. I needed to be free of it before it would choke me to death. I had already taken my hat off. My mind was buzzing feverishly. I can't go downstairs because then he would come inside to prevent the chain of his gaze from being broken. The inside of the bookshop is my safe place for now. I must maintain it. Oh, there's a travel guide to Senegal. It's a country known for its music.

In the evenings when the sea is bathing in orange and the sun is closing its scarlet eyelids, I will join the other women of the neighborhood in dance. The heat of the day has made us drowsy but the drums will slowly, invitingly start to remind our bodies of the sparkling excitement of the dance. In the dark blue warmth, even my stiff Finnish limbs will find ways to become one with the music and the others. We will all be full of laughter and happiness. So shall it be every night.

Then I remembered it. The insignificant back door. The remarkable back door! How did I forget it?! I've used it once or twice. Is it still available for the customers? Yes, there are the antitheft detectors. I began my way towards it calmly pretending not be scared or hopeful. I walked through the door and started to run. Quickly to another shop, then to a small mall, up the stairs and out to a street. After having hurried along for some seconds more, breathless heart beating I stopped and turned around to throw a keen eye on the street and the surroundings. I surveilled. Minutes passed. Passersby watched me curiously. The relief came surging for there was no sight of him. I had defeated him! With my African dream dance, I had vanquished the pale dead fish eyes.

The AutoEthnographer



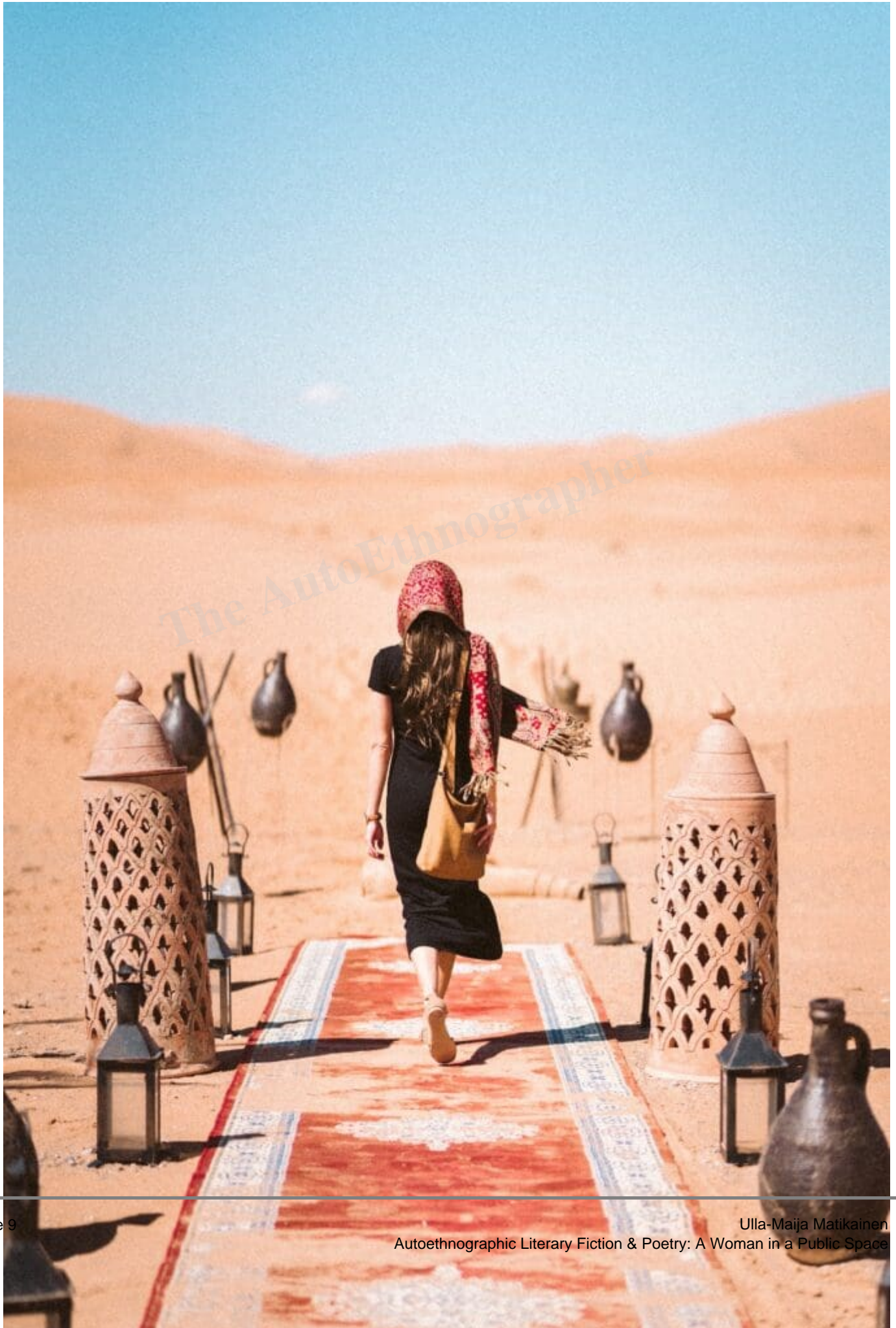


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A Woman in a Public Space 3:

a cup of coffee and a woman alone
out and branded under the sun of Maghreb
the terrace café shivers in its fever as if the sea was to blame, not
the apparition of a woman alone

the gazes burst and swim on me, the outbreaths of the call for prayer
drench my hands and I start to drip water from a turquoise pool in which,
like in a rose-colored dream, I dove with my golden-haired lover,
around me the mist of desires arises and the mouths twitch

Melik arrives and the steams depart
the sheltering fences' explanatory signs rise up to form an alibi
he could be my brother and yet no-one assumes it to be so, as
long as the image of a woman alone falls apart

AUTHOR'S MEMO

In my two short stories and poem, I am exploring my own experiences of being a woman in a public space that has until relatively recently been uniquely the domain of men. The change is still in its baby steps, even in the countries that are considered to be well ahead in the equality matters. In the two short stories, I am bringing forth the fact how vulnerable women are in public spaces. Women are often yet still seen as objects for men to conquer and as prey. The laws are mainly helpless and women are frequently left solely dependent either on the volatile benevolence of men, or on their own wits and on being alert and quick to react. In the poem, I portray more delicately the way a woman doesn't actually stand for herself as a person in the public space. She is being attached with an abundance of meanings and issues: sexuality issues, questions of control and the loss of control etc. This is highlighted when a woman appears alone in a public space. A woman alone doesn't belong to any male power or protection sphere. She can be kidnapped into fears and dreams.

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