Asiya Islam   April 25th, 2025

The implications of splitting ourselves into different versions for work and life

In the fictional TV series Severance, a chip inserted into workers' brains enables a company to split employees' work and life selves. As they enter the lift at the corporate office, people transform into and out of their work selves. **Asiya Islam** *uses this extreme example to reflect on her research with women workers in India, considering the dynamics and implications of transforming the self for work.*

In the sci-fi series *Severance*, Helly R, an employee at the company Lumon, is in love with her colleague Mark S. Outside of work, though, Helly and Mark do not know each other. This is because they have been fitted with a chip that separates their work selves ("innies") from their outside-of-work selves ("outies"). This extreme version of work-life balance is something that they have voluntarily chosen presumably because, at first glance, it seems to be an ideal scenario. After all, the desire to forget all about work when you are home is very relatable. But as the show progresses, we see the dark side of it – severance is effected by their employer, a big corporate called Lumon that does mysterious work, to their advantage. Even as the "innies" build towards a revolt, recognising the unfairness of their situation, the outies remain unaware of the exploitation and keep returning to the office every day.

One of the most astute shows that I have watched in a while, *Severance* offers critical commentary on work in late capitalism. Because of its use of speculative technology in the form of a chip inserted into the brain, *Severance* seems closer to science fiction than reality. But if we take the chip away, there is very little that we don't already see in the world of work – alienation as workers complete individual tasks without sight of and control over the whole, the concentration of power in terms of the ownership of means of production in the hands of big corporates, the vacuous wellness and reward schemes offered to placate workers, etc. Perhaps what seems most

extraordinary is how workers transform into and out of their work selves as they enter the lift at the company's offices, but this too is all too real for many workers.

In my ethnographic research with young women workers in Delhi, India, I observed their transformations into different selves at work, home and leisure. Comprising the generation that has grown up in post-liberalisation India, these young women, following completion of secondary schooling, entered cafes, shopping malls, call centres, and small offices for work. This is work that has emerged in urban India only in the last three decades or so, following the adoption of the IMF and World Bank-mandated "New Economic Policy" of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. As women entered this relatively new work, they undertook employability skills training to make themselves into professional service workers, distinct from their parents who had mostly worked in the informal economy in a range of jobs, including domestic and construction work, and in factories. This meant learning how to use computers, speak English, interact with customers/clients, and dress "professionally". The training of these workers, who come from low to lower middle class backgrounds, fills in the need for a cheap and flexible labour force to meet the service demands of the globalising Indian economy, and specifically the consumption cultures of middle and upper classes.

New service work requires workers to be malleable; in other words, to transform themselves. While they study at Hindi-medium government schools, they are required to learn English to work in global environs. However, as they learn English later in life and specifically for work, they speak it selectively and strategically at work, rejecting it in other social interactions. As such, I saw their "innies" greet customers in English with phrases like "Good morning, ma'am", "How can I help you?", "Eat in or take away?", but I interacted in Hindi with their "outies".

Similarly, they adopted "modern" or "Western" clothing to enter the world of professional work, discarding "traditional" or "Indian" clothing, but had to mould their behaviour to maintain "respect" at various sites. It was not uncommon for them to wear Indian clothes at home and on the way to work, changing into Western clothing in the toilets at work, staying in those clothes for hanging out in malls or parks with their peers, and then changing back into Indian clothes to return to work. These behavioural transformations were gendered, as women were under the constant surveillance of family members and the general public, as well as work managers and peers. Wearing the "wrong" kind of clothing could lead to social and familial reprimand, and potentially even to violence.

Their capability to transform themselves might suggest that these transformations are effected at a surface level. But, much like the *Severance* workers, these women had to present a convincing self at each site for the transformation to be successful. Where these workers differed from those on the "severed" floor of Lumon was in the spillover from their "innie" to "outie" lives, and vice versa. Even as they experienced the requirement to speak English and wear Western clothes at work as a form of labour discipline, they also saw these as generative of social and individual change,

particularly as leading to more choices for women. Another important difference was their capability to reflect on their multiple selves. This is not to suggest that there was a coherent self that brought their multiple selves together, rather that they recognised that they have to exist in malleable forms to participate in the contemporary world of work.

Severance raises important questions about work-life balance, but placed in the context of the emergence of service work in many areas of the Global South, it also invites us to consider the dynamics and implications of transforming the self for work, but not being able to transport the work self, at least not fully, to other arenas of life. While the entry of young people in new spaces of service work may be posed as a success story for adoption of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation, a closer look at the workers' transformations highlights the inequalities between them and those who access these spaces as consumers.

Further, social derision particularly of women's transformations shows that while it is increasingly desirable for women to enter work to mitigate precarious conditions of work and life in globalising India, there is resistance to women's assertion of their agency. But the workers' severed lives and, importantly, their critical reflection on them, creates scope for recognition of inequalities and exploitation. It is unlikely to lead to a *Severance*-style workers' revolt, but resistance comes in many forms.

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