

The Concept of Female Space: Gender and Space

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The concept of Female Space is something that is discussed a lot in the Feminist realm. From the beginning of the feminist movement in 1960, in the name- 'Women's movements' itself, female space is something that all women rooted for. This is because a lack of space restricts the freedom of self expression of a human being, regardless of gender. In case of the male gender, every culture provides them an inherent space and there by freedom. It is in the case of women that the concept of space become complex. The term 'space' could be read in varies ways depending upon the context we connect it to. Space is something that has primarily a physical aspect connected to it. As Patricia McFadden the African radical Feminist argues;

Addressing the concept of space is rather elusive; it carries in itself a physical aspect to it which cannot be denied. There are spaces which are barb wired and as "no- go" areas for women. Thus, space is primarily materialistic in nature. (4)

While locating the notion of space within a political narrative, then the space becomes the manifestation of the struggle put forward by women in patriarchal gendered societies. This is a politicized version of space put forward by radical Feminists like McFadden. When we apply this same concept in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) of Mary Wollstonecraft, it's meaning changes to a space which provides education for women. Again the meaning of space metamorphoses to a 'private space for creativity' when we read it along Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) portrays the intrusion of men into these spaces of women to an extent of 'misrepresentation' of it at various levels like in the novels of D.H Lawrence. Virginia Woolf through her essay *A Room of One's own* has given the literary field, a glimpse of what spaces mean for women. Woolf's description of space was equally stressed in a physical and ideological level. According to her, women lack a space in this patriarchal society, this is because of the gender she has born into. Gender acts as a controlling force restricting and curtailing her freedom. For writers like Woolf this controlling force restricts their creativity. So

Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* says: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (2).

For a female writer, her space is the one she needs to express herself. This expression is none other than her writings. The anonymity that these writers keep by their acceptance of pseudonyms shows their own internal conflict and unconscious inferiority about their own gender. Thus even in these private spaces, they cannot completely be what they really are. Thus, gender masks a woman's creativity by producing an unwanted shame for her own being in her psyche. So they hide in anonymity. Virginia Woolf quotes in her essay: "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman". (9)

Gender Performativity is another factor that restricts female space. Judith Butler is a post-structuralist feminist and queer theorist. Her work, *Gender Trouble* (1990) deals with the issue of this gender performativity. According to Butler gender is something that is performed. Gender is usually "prescribed" and performed as a part of reinforcement in Butler's words: "Nobody is born to one gender or the other, we act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman" (23).

Gender is often seen as something that is natural because it is always explained as a biological difference. Because of this, women are usually pushed to remain within the limits of her gender which are very narrow by nature. This strict performativity of gender limits female space. Because once we are born into this gender, it is a given that a private space is something that is not possible. Female performativity is always relied upon the continuous intrusion of her space by men. This happens at all spheres of female life. Performativity is basically a set of rules, codes and regulations that we unconsciously and sometimes consciously follow in order 'fit in' a particular gender. In case of feminine gender, these rules are all the more subjugating and restricting. "A slightest crossing of these margins in female gender earns one the title of 'loose or dangerous' women which are synonyms for bold, self asserting women in our society" (Chowdhry 123). These are the primary steps to the reclaiming of one's feminine space in McFadden's view also.

Sometimes, we have to break the walls created by our gender and embark on many 'masculine acts', that is, certain acts that are labeled as masculine which are of neutral gender in reality. These usually make the women outcasts from their own gender and thereby are open for ridicule and abuse from the society. These are results of trying to claim a female space according to McFadden. The female characters in the novels chose for this study refuse to stick on to their female performativity to a certain extent. This break away from the gender performativity should be seen in a different light. All the female characters are depicted as women trying to find a way of existence in India during 1970's. The novels take place at a time when India was its worse in all sectors of

society. This includes socially, politically, religiously and even culturally. Omar Imtiaz in his work *Emergency Power and Courts of India* explains:

...Socially, the society was under a lot of pressure from the recent Emergency declaration. Culturally, India being famous for its heterogenic culture, found it difficult to form a united culture. The differences often led to riots. Religiously, the wrong interpretation of the holy Vedas led to preposterous misogynous customs such as Sati. (324)

All these affected the female psyche in a dangerous manner. As a result of this the female characters revolted against all these. This revolt indirectly was also a part of unconsciously rejecting the gender performativity the Indian society afflicted on women. This act made them outcasts from the society. As Clara Joseph argues in her work: “Women who were not ready to submit before the societal rules and include men into their private space are often titled as ‘dangerous, rampant women’ who must be stopped” (87).

This is a shrewd way of the society to deprive women of these private spaces.

Shame is another relevant feminist concept. Shame is an important aspect in Feminism. “It is this fear of shame retrieves her from the main stream of society” (Diprose 122). The concept of shame is related to the concept of ‘laughter’ discussed by Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics*. Laughter is a tool for the men; it is used as a way to arouse shame in women that would make her feel bad about being born into female gender. Shame acts as a moralizing agency in our society. Shame should be treated as something that is equally applicable for men and women in a society but usually society add an exaggerated importance to the word when it is associated with women. So women usually never register a complaint even if they are sexually assaulted. It is the shame they are more afraid of, rather than the injustice committed to them. In the midst of a recent talk in TEDxEuston, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie pointed out an important argument about female space and its relation with shame. It says:

We teach girls shame. Close your legs cover yourself. We make them feel as if being born a female; they are already guilty of something. And so girls grow up to be women who cannot say what they desire. They become subservient, dependent and get reduced to art form like pretence. These women turn out to be the biggest threat for the female gender because they will never claim their female spaces as they never know that something of that sort does exist, and it is just sad, beyond it frustrating...

This frustration that stems from this injustice is something all the female characters in *Rich like Us* and *A Fine Balance* have experienced. In the work *Class, Caste, Gender* it’s mentioned that “A Sexual Revolution begins with the emancipation of women who are the chief victims of patriarchy.” (Mohanty, 32) This sexual revolution Mohanty

talks about will only be possible in a world where gender disparity will be nullified. This is not easy because world is set in its ways and a sudden change is often impossible.

Kate Millet in her *Sexual politics* mentions ways in which society suppresses female gender. Patricia McFadden in her essays particularly discusses one of these aspects as another tool. According to Millet, “society enslaves the feminine gender through ‘conditioning’. Conditioning through “consent” is the best way in this” (3). Conditioning or socialization is the process through which a girl is conditioned into the ways of the society. This ensures that, she will never break the invisible yet strong chains of society on her. Conditioning can be done through many ways; this includes institutional laws, familial norms, and even force. Even the factor ‘Shame’ that we discussed earlier, comes under the process of conditioning. But the best and the most unnoticed method of this is conditioning through consent. Conditioning through consent takes place when a girl voluntarily submits to a conditioning process without rebelling. This is achieved through naturalization process.

Naturalizing is the process through which an unnaturally unjustifiable notion is made normal and natural by the society, so that women will never feel as if an injustice is being done to them and there by rules out the possibilities of a revolt. Sati is the best example for this. One of the important characters in the novel, Sonali’s life story holds an instance related to Sati. Sati is a bizarre masochistic custom that every sane person knows is outside the borders of human sensibility. But, Sonali’s mother, an educated, well- groomed upper middle class woman commits sati out of her own will in the novel. It was the first time that Sonali felt her mother as stupid Indian women. The fact that she was educated made it much worse, since Sonali saw how easily superstitions and customs could overrule the influence of education. This is how naturalization which helps in conditioning through consent works. Sati was naturalized which made it feel a woman as her responsibility to commit in order to be a ‘faithful wife’ in the Indian society. This also unconsciously reinforces the notion that women have no independent existence outside matrimony and it is better to end one’s life soon after her better half passes away. This in nutshell means that, women have no private female space. Her space was always connected with men’s. It was her father’s and brother’s during childhood, it is her husband’s after marriage and it will be her son’s during old age. There is no scope for independent existence here. According to McFadden in her essay, “Gender Issues in Africa”: “A woman’s space was always related to her female counterpart. It was a space that he could access now and then so that he could make sure that there were no ‘hidden mysteries’ in it. While men happily clinged on to their masculine spaces women never had one that was free from intrusion.” (3).

This theory of Female Space put forward by Patricia McFadden is very important in recent times also. According to McFadden, across human time, those spaces which are considered as feminine were also considered the least important. This

is worst than denouncing them. This is similar to the notion that Millet has pointed out in *Sexual Politics*. The patriarchal society has a nature of reducing the importance to jobs done by females as v something trivial and menial. “Even the notion ‘family’ which is seen as the major ‘working ground’ of most traditional women remains fundamentally a masculine space.” (Manohar 33). The society tries to mask this fact in order to make the women feel the “queen” of household. A woman cannot create a “real” family without a male member in it. Such feminized households easily become stigmatized as ‘Other’. McFadden in her essay Why Women’s Space are Critical in Female autonomy says;

Those families which function as Female-headed/single headed/women headed immediately become a taboo space because a controlling and “moralizing” male presence is absent. This opens this household to any ridicule, assault even home invasions. It’s seen as a natural phenomenon as single women managing a family are loose women in society’s eyes and are needed ‘to be taught a lesson’. This is how female space gets crumbed and attacked in society and fear of such attack makes women with even independent spirit step back from creating an individual existence. (7)

Female autonomy is very much related to female space. Without autonomy it is impossible for women to attain her space. ‘Female autonomy’ is a paradoxical term in this society. Modern society outwardly agrees on the fact that women should have freedom, but their definition of female freedom is rather hypocritical. A woman is allowed to have freedom as long as she is under the watch, protection of a man. Likewise, a woman is allowed to have her space as long as her male counterpart is allowed free access to it. Is this what freedom is? All these rules are completely irrelevant, when it comes to male autonomy.

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