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Lived Spaces, Identity and Gender: A Spatial Study of the Women's Courtyard

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Abstract

Women in society are always confined to some limited space. These limits can be symbolised as domestic spaces. A domestic space is not just a physical setting of a household, but can be seen as a hierarchy of control. These domestic spaces hold many incidents and memories in women's lives. Place, as explained by Robert Tally, is a set of narratives, memories or experiences that has some deep meaning and connection. But sometimes places become boundaries in the life of a person. This can be seen in Khadija Mastoor's novel *Aangan* translated by Daisy Rockwell as *The Women's Courtyard* (2018). This novel is set against the backdrop of pre-partition India and centres around the domestic lives of women. It is said that women are naturally tied to home, but this is not true. It is social expectations that limit their opportunities. Women going to jobs or cities has always been seen as a threat to the patriarchy. This paper explores the lives of different women whose personal desires are met or confined inside the limited world of the courtyard. The courtyard in *The Women's Courtyard* is a place that holds so many memories, but also symbolises a boundary or limit to women's lives. The paper reflects the spatial symbolism to portray confinement and also the resistance of the protagonist, Aliya, in establishing and shaping her identity within the patriarchal system.

Keywords: Domestic Space, Hierarchy, Social Expectations, Courtyard, Resistance

Introduction

Human life is always lived within spaces. These spaces shape the behaviour of people, how they interact and behave in society. But these spaces are deeply influenced by gender. Men and women's roles repeated over centuries based on social, cultural and historical practices. Doreen Massey also reflects that women's place in the home does not reflect natural rootedness, but it reflects societal expectations that confine them within patriarchal structures: "because gender is associated with status in cultural beliefs, it becomes a principle for organising social relations in terms of not only difference but also of hierarchy and inequality" (Ridgeway and Bourq qtd. in Kapoor and Jha 61). These roles made society believe that men belong to certain spaces and women to certain. The spaces fixed for men are public and powerful, whereas those for women are private and domestic. As Bhoomika Kapoor and Sunil Kumar Jha note, "Social life of people takes place in spaces that are inherently gendered and locate men and women in them according to the roles that they perform" (59). These social, cultural and historical practices also fixed how men and women should act in society. These practices divided space into masculine and feminine. For example, politics, workplaces are seen as masculine spaces and on the other hand, the kitchen and, courtyard are seen as feminine. This can be seen in Khadija Mastoor's novel *Aangan* translated as *The Women's Courtyard* by Daisy Rockwell. The novel mainly centres around gender and power. The courtyard is "a central open space where women gather to cook, prepare paan, talk, garden, sew and often live out their entire lives" (Mastoor 22). It is a place surrounded by a veranda on its three sides, and the fourth side has a male sitting room having its door. The novel shows that male members can enter the courtyard, but female members cannot enter the sitting room. This shows the spatial organisation of the house, which is divided according to the rules set by patriarchy. "Space is neither a thing nor a container, but a product and means of production" (Lefebvre qtd. in Kapoor and Jha 61). So, space is a product of patriarchy. Space is a physical location, but in actuality, it is a complex phenomenon as explained by Robert Tally.

He describes that there is a place, different from space, which can be understood as the set of narratives, memories and identities. The courtyard here is not just a physical space, but a place embedded with different memories, desires, and experiences of women. Narratives in the novel symbolise the confinement of women within the emotional ties of domestic spaces. Aliya reflects: "Her past was all she'd inherited. Her past, from which she'd learnt so much. How could she wrench herself away from it now?" (Mastoor 12). Therefore, along with the memories rooted, the courtyard is also a site of confinement. The courtyard is a place that defines the roles set by patriarchal norms. Women are not allowed to work outside; so, they are confined to domestic spaces like the courtyard. This restricts the freedom of women. The novel shows that the protagonist, Aliya, is against this restriction. She wants to escape these boundaries and find her identity. Butler argues that "gender is performative: it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (33). There is a struggle between her emotional attachment to the place, which is filled with memories, and her desire to escape from boundaries. She wants to find her identity outside the role of a wife and a mother.

Women in *The Women's Courtyard*

Amma, the mother of the protagonist Aliya, has a very different role. Even though a woman, a victim of patriarchy, she enforces rules on other women living in the house. She always restricts her daughters not to talking to men. She insults Kusum for singing in public. "She's disgracing herself in front of everyone, singing like a nautch girl" (Mastoor 47). She condemns lower-status people. She always argues with her husband about having a dislike for the British. She is very proud of her brother and English sister-in-law. Amma maintains the boundaries of the courtyard, ensuring women by restricting them. She does not allow her daughters to step out of the courtyard and live their lives freely. As Spain notes, "spatial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over others" (qtd. in Kapoor and Jha 61).

Chammi is the cousin of Aliya. She is the youngest in the house and is very bold. She brings kids together in the courtyard and holds a Muslim League Rally. "Chammi gathered all the children and made them shout: 'Long Live the Muslim League!'" (Mastoor 108). She puts on her burqa and strolls in the street to get news from neighbours. She doesn't like that her uncle is a supporter of Hindus. She is very brave and rebellious. She always says, "I do what I want" (Mastoor 112). Butler's theory of performativity explains Chammi's rebellion: "The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed" (Gender Trouble xiv). She loves her cousin Jameel and wants to marry him. She even stopped talking to Aliya when she found out that Jameel likes Aliya.

Tehmina is the elder sister of Aliya and is very different from her. She is very quiet and obedient. She always does household chores and follows Amma's rules. Aliya once finds out that she and Safdar love each other. "Tehmina's huge eyes downcast...she stood still, silently tearing the leaves of the henna plant" (Mastoor 93). But she is not that courageous to express her love in front of Amma. So, she reluctantly agrees to marry her cousin Jameel, but commits

suicide before her wedding as she is unable to live without Safdar.

Najma Aunty is Aliya's aunt and her Abba's sister. She does not follow purdah, cuts her hair short, and goes to Aligarh College to get her master's done in English. "Najma Aunty loathed Amma, and whenever Amma thought of her, the snake of her hatred hissed loudly" (Mastoor 72). She is posted to Lahore as a teacher. She starts teaching Chammi English and is very practical in life. "I'll begin teaching Chammi," she said. "None of the girls have been educated" (Mastoor 85). She makes her own decision. She only wants to marry that man who has also done a master's in English. She argues that it is only education that helps women to find identity. As Kapoor and Jha state, "status beliefs frame the awareness of individuals about their personal identity and position in society relative to that of others" (60).

Khadija Mastoor's novel *The Women's Courtyard* tells the story of different women, but it mainly centres around the protagonist Aliya. From her lens, we see how women live, suffer and are controlled by patriarchy. Her life is shaped by the courtyard where she lives, struggles and resists to find her identity. She always wants to get an education and freedom. She struggles between the emotional family ties and her desire to break bonds and get free. "Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 191). Aliya shows how a woman can challenge patriarchal norms while living inside them. She is deeply attached to her childhood memories and her old home. She struggles with sleep in the new house and remembers her past. "Her past was all she'd inherited, her past from which she had learnt so much. How could she wrench herself away from it now?" (Mastoor 12). Education becomes her path to independence. "Once enrolled in school, her world becomes broader" (Mastoor 31). She can resist, escape from confinement through education only. Kapoor and Jha explain, "Social life of people takes place in spaces that are inherently gendered and locate men and women in them according to the roles that they perform" (59). In the novel, the role of the women is in confined place of the courtyard, but Aliya changes that role through education. She thinks that marriage can limit her boundaries, so she chooses to never marry and retains her identity as Aliya, not anyone's daughter, wife, mother or sister. "I am Aliya. Please go away... Or I'll scream so loudly that..." (Mastoor 220).

Khadija Mastoor's *The Women's Courtyard* is not only a novel about family life, but it is a novel that deeply reflects the status, role and resistance of women under the control of patriarchy. In it, the Courtyard symbolises the experiences and memories of women. As Robert Tally explains, a place is more than just a physical setting; it is layered with "narratives, memories, and identities" that give it meaning (Tally qtd. in Kapoor and Jha 59). In the novel, the courtyard itself is a place in which different women struggle, suffer in their lives by holding so many memories. The domestic spaces are always naturalised to women, but they are created by social structures. Doreen Massey clarifies that "the delineation of women's place in the home does not reflect natural rootedness, but rather societal expectations" (Massey 179). Women are not bound to the household; instead, it is imposed on them by patriarchy. We can see how, in the novel, Amma's character is patriarchal;

she never allows her daughters to talk to Safdar to make their own decisions. She is in favour of that patriarchal structure, which is imposed on her too. A courtyard can also be seen as a place of rebellion. Chammi, Aliya's cousin, is an example of how women can challenge fixed boundaries. Her slogans, boldness, and participation in the Muslim League show that women are not passive. Chammi produces a new meaning to the courtyard that is of rebellion, other than confinement. Aliya, on the other hand, despite all the limits, seeks education and freedom. Her education gives her knowledge and confidence.

Thus, The Women's Courtyard is not only the story of the suffering and struggle of women but also of resistance. The novel shows how, despite norms and limits set by society on women, women can be able to choose their path for independence. Women like Chammi and Najma Aunty refuse to obey authority, and defiance, while character like Aliya reflects a more thoughtful path to independence. Also, Mastoor's novel reflects that space is never neutral. It is always constructed by power. It reflects gender inequality as well as class discrimination. The courtyard is a place that reflects this inequality, but also a place of resistance. As McDowell summarizes, "the power relations that confine women are also the ground on which they resist" (12). Aliya's journey, therefore, is not just personal but symbolic of all women who try to find their identities beyond the roles society forces on them.

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