LITERATURE

The Female Experience in Phallocentric Space: A Study on Nalini Jameela's *The Autobiography of a sex worker*

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Abstract

The exploration of space and its interplay with society constitutes a crucial domain of scholarly inquiry. Space operates as the primary arena for social interactions, shaping the dynamics of human engagement and impacting the formation of societal constructs. This study aims to critically examine the experiences of women within defined spatial parameters and the intricate mechanisms of reciprocal influence therein. Nalini Jameela's autobiographical work 'The Autobiography of a Sex Worker', serves as a primary source for elucidating these themes. This study adopts methodologies from socio-cultural and gender studies to investigate the social construction of space.

Keywords: Space, Phallo-centrism, gendered space, ideology, patriarchy.

Spaces in everyday life are socially segmented. To comprehend various social groups, it's necessary to contemplate their interactions within the broader social

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space. The most profound division concerning the spatial relations is rooted in gender identities. In Kerala, spaces are gendered space. Spaces are constructed based on human needs and engagements, thereby reflecting the preferences and priorities of individuals. It is only by problematising the phallocentric tendencies inherent in spaces, such as ours, that it becomes possible to construct social spaces. *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by Nalini Jameela serves as a lens through which to examine the phallocentric nature of space.

When exploring the etymology of the English word 'space'(wiktionary.org.n.d), it can be traced back to the Latin word 'Spatium', which means 'to stretch' or 'to pull'. As Proto-Indo-European word, in languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit the term 'sphota' has been used, with meanings such as 'bursting' or 'opening', and is still in use today. In India, 'sphota' (wisdomlib.org.) has been used across various disciplines, including philosophy and grammar, associating it with various concepts. One significant concept is that of the 'world', where it represents the idea of an individual's space or world, encompassing the interactions and relationships with other entities in daily life, essentially shaping and defining one's existence. In the English-Latin etymology, the term 'space', take various meanings, including 'room' and 'time' (as in 'space of time'). Henri Lefebvre emerges as a pivotal figure among social thinkers whose studies are intricately linked with the concept of social hegemony and its spatial dimensions. In *The Production of Space,* Lefebvre presents a detailed exposition on the production of space and the social construction of the sociality within that production. He states, "Representional space is socially constructed by the lived experience of the people who interact it"(12). Through his work, Lefebvre documents and analyses the historical and democratic aspects of sociality. This aims to reconstruct social discourse in an ethical sense. Lefebvre brings to the forefront the overlooked and crucial elements in current social analyses, redirecting the focus of social analysis towards these components. Through this lens, he problematises the concept of space and simultaneously engages in the reconstruction of objects and bodies within that space. Lefebvre discusses the interplay between space and body, emphasising the mutual determinations between them. He comments:

> Can the body, with its capacity for action, and its various energies, be said to create space ? Assuredly, but not in the sense that occupation might be said to 'manufacture' spatiality; rather, there is an immediate relationship between the body and Its space, between the body's deployment in space and its occupation of space (170).

In the study "The Spatial Imperative of Subjectivity", Elspeth Probyn delves deeply into how space intricately shapes cultural identity. He elucidates on how gender is reflected in the cultural identity of space. He declares, "Subjectivity is not a given but rather a process and a production. It is also undeniable that the sites and spaces of it production are central. In other words, the spaces and place we inhabit produces"(294). In social structures, women experience the most discrimination-laden subjectivity. In any space, discrimination against women is deeply rooted and pervasive. In her autobiography, Jameela presents a rich portrayal of the complexities of female subjectivity in the 1970s Kerala. In the status of being a woman, her home emerges as the place where she confronted with the greatest insecurity. The autobiography vividly portrays the ideologies that shape the nature of female subjectivity within the home, illustrating the entrenched nature of such ideologies.

The house as a phallocentric space

When delving into the ideologies surrounding the home, it's often perceived as a safest haven. However, for women, the home can also be a site of physical and psychological strain, exposing vulnerabilities. In Mona Domosh's exploration within "Architecture and Planning", she delves into the gendered nature of homes, "The very idea of home already resonates with gender in most cultures and throughout much of human history, home has been associated with women and with feminine identities. In many cultures, the physical form of the house is gendered" (475). Here, She highlights that the concept of home inherently carries gender connotations across various cultures and throughout history. In Kerala, homes were embodiments of sovereignty. Ethical values, particularly regarding women and children, often fell short. Jameela's autobiography delves how women and children were integrated into household dynamics. She recounts various episodes from her childhood concerning the manner in which women and children were introduced to domestic life. She recounts:

> We used to be really happy if Father wasn't at home; we couldn't wait till he went off somewhere or the other. It was then that my older and younger brothers and I played tag and climbed the mango tree. We were very happy when Father was hospitalised for quite a few days because of asthma.(6)

The portrayal of home as a hub of male dominance, consistently echoed throughout the narrative, underscores a significant aspect regarding the subjectivity of girls within the household. Subjectivity within the home differs between boys and

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girls. Jameela specifically explores the concept of home through her childhood lens, accentuating the patriarchal power exercised by her father within their home. While both boys and girls bear the brunt of this phallocentric environment, boys tend to outgrow its constraints as they mature. That is to say, in their adulthood, boys adopt greater exertions of power and regulations. However, its impact disproportionately weighs on girls, subjecting them to heightened levels of control and authority. As they transition into adulthood, these girls often face increased imposition of power dynamics and regulations. Consequently, they find themselves ensnared within the confines of this patriarchal framework and lifelong imposition, which essentially becomes synonymous with the concept of home. Jameela's choice to leave her home stems from enduring both physical and psychological forms of phallocentric violence within the household, and her desire to break away from it. She articulates her departure in the following manner:

> He would never go to work. However, he tried to control me, tell me how to spend my money, the same way he used to do with Mother. Things began to turn really nasty between us. The fact that I supported my brother's marriage also became a big issue. That alliance had shaken our world. Chettan married a woman three-and-a-half years older than him- the older sister of a friend of mine. I had to face Father's blows for having helped him register the marriage. With these two major rows, I was ordered out of the house. I had no place to go. It's not easy for an eighteen-year-old girl to find shelter.(20)

Jameela's departure was prompted by a series of ongoing physical and psychological confrontations with her father at home, escalating into significant conflict. The entrenched power dynamics within the patriarchal structure of the household fuelled these confrontations. Beyond merely enabling physical violence, the household offered a sheltered space for paternal authority to reign unchecked. Jameela's ordeal isn't an isolated one; it echoes the collective experiences of women who have either faced similar or lesser degrees of violence within the patriarchal confines of their homes.

The dominance of phallocentric ideals within space is a result of numerous interconnected social factors. In underdeveloped nations, women and children frequently face dire conditions, with their rights often inadequately safeguarded. Tovi Fenster's studies shed light on this disparity. "Fear of violence makes men, and women avoid certain space"(472).

The phallocentric nature of spaces in the underdeveloped countries can be

attributed to various societal institutions such as family, religion, tradition, and government. Those spaces manifest pronounced misogyny. Jameela asserts that the inner space of all homes is misogynistic. She recalls her first husband's house:

> No one, however, could question any of his dealings. No advice was acceptable. But he was keen to lay down in exact terms what we could and could not do. I suffered unimaginable levels of virulent squabbling in that house at the hands of his mother and sister. The mother-in-law was quick to catch hold of any words that fell out of his mouth and blow them up into a major fracas. It was living hell. She even broke my head once, having clobbered me with a heavy coconut-scraper [...] I was convinced that life is a great struggle: in order to live, one must fight, fight incessantly (17).

Here, Jameela elucidates her decision to depart from her husband's residence. The household stands as the epi-center where religion, traditions, paternalistic expectations, and various cultural norms are most meticulously upheld and enforced. It is within this domain that women confront these profound expressions. Understanding the roots of this phallocentric tendency within households necessitates an exploration of historical narratives and societal power structures inherent in patriarchy.

In her note on the politics of family, J. Devika discusses the nature of male violence within the home. She emphasises that it is a characteristic of the phallocentric space of the household in many respects. she says that, they perceive the husband's and father's authority as the cornerstone of family stability. Consequently, women are expected to comply with the "duty" of enduring any violence these figures may inflict. These authorities believe they are beyond reproach, regardless of their actions. They see women's obedience as central to family obligations. They understand that suppressing women in the family ensures ownership of property and family name, consistent with male-centric traditions. (115)

At the age of thirteen, Jameela experienced sexual harassment by her brother's tutor, within the confines of her home (12). As long as institutions such as religion, family and governance continue to uphold patriarchal values, women will remain vulnerable within their homes. In this context, a woman's social class plays a role in reinforcing her vulnerabilities within the household. Moreover, the transformation of the home into a phallocentric space, which intensifies and deepens patriarchal dominance, is also contingent upon the economic agency and exchange capabilities of women within the home. It is noteworthy that within the context of the term

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"living organism", social bodies themselves represent a confluence of diverse ideologies. The concept of phallo-centrism operates within the framework of a patriarchal accumulation of ideas. Henri Lefebvre writes, "From a dynamic standpoint, the living organism may be defined as an apparatus which, by a variety of means, captures energies active in its vicinity. It absorbs heat, perform respiration, nourishes itself, and so on"(176).

The visibility of countless men and women, as flag bearers of phallocentric ideologies, is influenced by Henri Lefebvre's analysis of India's socio-cultural context. The extensive list of phallocentric principles that can be employed to invalidate women's rights underscores a pervasive issue. In such instances, the household, as a phallocentric space, traditionally served as a site where women's freedoms were curtailed with impunity. This observation is articulated by J. Devika.

Regarding Women's Space

When attempting to follow the fundamental question of where women's spaces are located, one inevitably encounters images of the political biases inherent within those spaces. In reality, the issue isn't the absence of space but rather the domination of space by proponents of phallocentric ideologies. Jameel's autobiography suggests that she has spent a significant amount of time living in the streets, than in her home. This was largely due to the lack of space within her home, which compelled her to seek refuge on the streets. When asked whether the street is a space distinct from the home, there are various responses. This raises the questions about whether the street offered a more liberated space compared to her home. One possible answer lies in the fact that the street, unlike her home, was not entirely undemocratic, which may have drawn her to it. Jameela repeatedly emphasises that she sought refuge in places like Attingara and Yervadi mosques only when she had nowhere else to turn. Here, the term "home" transcends its literal meaning and encompasses the spatial organisation of patriarchal values. Jameel's decision to choose Attingara and Yervadi mosques as spaces for dwelling is influenced by multiple factors. One of these factors is her experiential testimony of being unable to survive as a women and a sex worker within the phallocentric spaces of Kerala. The reality is that a single parent lacking economic stability and a woman who exercises autonomy over her own body were unacceptable entities within the conventional Kerala societal framework. It is crucial to acknowledge that in 1980s, Kerala's societal framework was historically been inadequate in addressing the intricacies of sex work. This must be understood within a historical context. In Kerala, women

engaged in sex work were forced to exist in a state of spacelessness, without a sense of belonging or security, both within their homes and in their native environment. The experience of vulnerability and insecurity under patriarchal dominance drove her to move beyond Kerala borders. The issue of spacelessness is not limited to Jameela's story alone, but also extends to her daughter's experience. This is not merely a problem faced by a woman and her daughter, but rather a reflection of the societal spaces in Kerala. In other words, it highlights how these spaces are confined within the walls of patriarchal norms. The spatial reality depicted in this narrative is not limited to the experiences of a single individual. rather it represents a fundamental issue affecting half of the population that has been marginalised and excluded from various domains, including politics, religion, caste and economy. Jameela recounts:

> I asked the relative at Thiruvananthapuram whether she could give my girl shelter if I paid her three hundred a month. She refused. 'A young girl. No, it won't work out.'
>
> I then turned to the daughter-in-law there, I'll find a small job at Thrissur. Can you do something for Zeenu?'
>
> She said, 'Auntie, I cannot bear to live here. This woman-my mother-in-law-and my three sisters-in-law fight with me all the time.'
>
> I told her, 'If you have the guts, you should move out. Take care of my girl.'
>
> So it was arranged to rent the small house next door. When my husband heard that I was ready to pay six hundred a month, he was ready to play the protector. 'You shouldn't let her stay with a daughter-in-law. I'll put her up with my sisters.'
>
> 'All right,' I agreed. 'Do something. Ask your sisters; let's see who agrees.'
>
> He set off at once to ask, but all of them were reluctant. What if she fell in love with one of their sons? What if she eloped? So in the end, he had to return disappointed.(80)

This is an illustration of where women's roles in social space are situated. Both Atttingara and Yervadi Mosques, being institutions with Muslim identity, serve as focal points of security. The absence of such spaces in Kerala is why Jameela seeks space outside Kerala. She says:

> A few rooms had been built adjacent to the mosque, to be used as cooking spaces and rest rooms. There would be no place to sleep at night. Five and

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> six families would crowd into each room. We had to lie down in the middle of the cooking hearth, the pots and other things.
>
> I cannot even think of how I raised my girl during those days. I had to take her along with me even when I went for a bath. When I went to the toilet she had to be entrusted to someone. Many who were mentally ill were kept in chains there.
>
> People like me eked out a living through helping to bathe them and through begging. (63)

The fact that even spaces like this are not accessible for people like them to live in reveals the harsh reality of Kerala as a strongly conservative and phallocentric society. The relevant question here is: to what extent can a space become a gendered space? Space is a fundamental precondition for all cultural discourses. Elspeth Probyn comments:

> Thinking about subjectivity in terms of space of necessity reworks any conception that subjectivity is hidden away in private receses..... feminists have argued that the body provides us with key Knowledge about the working of our subjectivites. The body then become a site for production of knowledge, feelings, emotions and history, all of which are central to subjectivity.(290)

Each social space presents distinct gendered experiences for women and men. This is because every space is constructed through different socio- economic, religious, and gender-based hierarchies and relations. As someone who has undergone long journeys and lived through diverse experiences, Jameela's spatial knowledge must be examined from a woman-centered perspective. In other words, it is only by analysing Kerala's social spaces using feminist values and ethical frameworks that we can understand the true nature of the dominant phallocentric spatiality. The spatial qualities and narrative orientation in Jameela's autobiography are different from those found in the autobiographies of women from other spheres in Kerala. This difference itself represents a form of resistance to phallocentric spatiality.

Jameela recounts Guruvayur as the space where she encountered the most traumatic experiences. It is not coincidental that the experiences related to space are part of a continuum of experiences inherited from societal traditions. Several organisations in Guruvayur, inextricably linked to space, perpetuate the narratives that devalue women's lives, disregarding their physical autonomy. Jameela's

experiences shed light on the soil of societal biases, fraught with ideas of patriarchal domination, calamity, and violent inclinations towards women's bodies. Jamila writes about the gangs of men in Guruvayur area who came to brutally harass her. she was taken into an empty building and was used by many men and she recounts the instance as, "but all the time he tortured me mentally with questions like, 'Can you bring young girls?" 'Can you let me have your daughters?' (94). She heard that a young woman was murdered at the same spot a week later. She was brutally raped by eight men (95). Jameela also shares another significant experience associated with Guruvayur, which further illuminates the nature of the space. "I was trapped by an auto rikshaw driver called Chandran who used to drive an auto called 'Pulari' in Guruvayur without realising who he really was. I'd heard from friends that there was a fellow who snared sex workers into places where gangs of ten and twenty would use them."(96-97) Jameela here shares her experience of escaping without being caught, by Chandran and his seventeen associates. What happens in a particular space is not merely a reflection of the ideologies of those who committed murder or perpetrated violence against women there.

Jameela identifies Guruvayur as a space where the murders of several women failed to provoke any significant response. This, she suggests, is a reflection of the dominant ideologies that govern the local population. In traditional narratives, the space of Guruvayur is often represented through the lens of distinctive religious devotion. However, drawing from her personal experiences, Jameela presents a contrasting perspective. She portrays Guruvayur as a deeply misogynistic space. This representation stands in stark contrast to the dominant public perception of Guruvayur, portraying it as a space distinct from the prevailing societal norms.

Udayakumar, in his discussion about autobiographies, highlights the profound wisdom inherent in the diverse experiences that deviate from the conventional historical narratives. He notes that small personal anecdotes play a significant role in shaping counter-histories, offering alternative perspectives in the structured realm of historical narratives. (233)

In conclusion, Nalini Jameela subverts and challenges the traditionally phallocentric space in Kerala, rendering it susceptible to critique. By shedding light on hidden signs and markers that perpetuate gender inequalities within these spaces, she contributes to a broader discourse that challenges and deconstructs such norms. Thus it transforms into a distinctively different space, akin to what Udayakumar refers to as an alternate space.

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