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## The Dynamics of Gendered Spaces in Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies*

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### Abstract

The interactions of human agency in the totality of space creates different social structures. Feminist Geography offers a self-reflexive analysis of regimes of power that operates in everyday life. The gendered divisions in society are responsible for creating the different patterns of spatial activity, experience and behaviour. Giving insight into a traditional Islamic society, Omani writer, Jokha Alharthi's *Celestial Bodies* (2018) is a criticism against dominant ideologies and power hegemony. The paper analyses the critical relationship between gendered and spatial segmentation and challenges their supposed naturalness and validity. The unequal power relations that exist within the society produce different patterns of spatial relations with respect to access to public and private spaces. Through the theoretical framework of Feminist Geography, the paper criticises the gendered divisions of space and problematises the attempt of the enduring subjects to free themselves from the narrow space of patriarchal imagination and re-invent their lives in a space of their own. **Keywords:** Past and present, Timeless Humanities, Boethius, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Path through Life, Relevance of Literature, Philosophy.

**Keywords:** Feminist Geography, Space, Power, Gender, Hegemony.

When adherence is enforced, space becomes a complicated phenomenon. Narrated against a carefully evoked historical background, the novel *Celestial Bodies* (2018) by Jokha Alharthi places the character in a world of social relations and practices. In a world of uneasy surveillance and hegemony, the spatial realisations become mysterious and ambiguous. When space becomes a designated category, it limits the possibilities of complete mobility of a human being. The gendered space is a social construct. The biological distinction between a male and a female body, other dominant ideologies and social institutions such as patriarchy, hegemony, love and marriage results in creating gendered spaces. Tracing the characters across an Omani family of three generations, the novel offers a critique against the histories of spatial prejudices against women. The feminist geography begins with the study of human bodies. The body is marked as a site where varied patterns of power relations are contested.

The body is the touchstone of feminist theory. Within contemporary feminist theory “the body” does not have a single location or scale; rather it is a concept that disrupts naturalized dichotomies and embraces a multiplicity of material and symbolic sites, ones located at the interstices of power exercised under various guises. (Nelson and Seager, 2008, p.2)

The biological distinction between the male and the female bodies creates spatial separateness among sexes. The natural phenomenon the women are subject to, such as menstruation, pregnancy and child bearing limits the female bodies from a complete spatial experience. The stigma attached to the menstruation results in isolating women to the spaces of seclusion. The categories of existence given by biology is therefore obliterated by sociology. The categories of spatial divisions with regard to body can be understood by examining the intimate atmosphere of the female world of reproduction. In the novel, Mayya the eldest of three sisters is subject to this tradition bound social order. "Will Shaykh Masoud's daughter give birth lying down because she's too weak to stand tall and straight? For shame, girl!" (Alharthi, 2018, p.6). Within a closed and interne atmosphere of a house, the female bodies are subjected to limitations regarding the absolute mobility of bodies. The restrictions placed on the female bodies are based on the scandal and the shame associated with the act of reproduction. The physical and the psychological tribulations and the screams of pain which is natural to any reproducing body is stigmatised and is excluded from the space of social happenings. When a fundamental biological reality become cloistered, the bodies that bear the mark of difference become more secluded. Much of the story takes place within the confines of the house. Within the secluded atmosphere of the house, the female bodies are subject to constraints. Forever immersed in the sewing machine, Mayya hardly shifts position throughout the day. Her body prostrate is described as "ready for dawn prayers" and "she barely even lifted her head" (Alharthi, 2018, p.1-2).

Within the physical layout of the house, the female bodies are absent from the central spaces. The complete isolation from the central space of the house upsets the natural constitution of spaces within the house, and spaces becomes more exclusive rather than inclusive. All oppression regarding female body is played out with regard to the grounds of differences with that of a male body. The novel *Celestial Bodies* is replete with paradoxical spaces. Gillian Rose in *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* has introduced the concept of 'paradoxical space'. For Gillian Rose the paradoxical space "is a space imagined in order to articulate a troubled relation to the hegemonic discourse of masculinism". (1993, p.159)

When a dominant power exerts pressure on the subordinate category the space becomes hegemonic. The terms that mostly recur in the novel to mark out space are private, remote, narrow, detached etc which indicates the hierarchal distinction between spaces. Asma went into the big room that the girls shared. Remote from the rest of the house, it was like a growth that had attached itself to the far corner of the courtyard. When Mayya and her sisters had reached a certain age, their mother began to worry. She would feel easier if they could be kept apart from the main bulk of the house. She didn't want them to run into the male relatives who might come into the main reception room. (Alharthi, 2018, p. 33) Paradoxical space is therefore an interrelated space that exerts multiple levels of oppression upon women. All the female figures of the novel are placed within a liminal position, where all of the characters fall into a defined space or place in relation to men. The newly married Mayya is thus confined to an isolated room and is kept out of glances from the men and women that flocked to their house. The yet to be married young sisters Asma and Khawla are confined to 'girl's room' where they are kept away from the reach of men and embarrassing words relating marriage and reproduction. The liminality within a paradoxical space is that woman find themselves as both outsiders and insiders of paradoxical space. The impermeable boundaries that separated Mayya's life from the central space is that she is both married and now a mother. Marriage for woman becomes an oppressive act of confinement. She feels doubly oppressed as she is obliged to fulfil the duties as a daughter of Shaykh Masoud and now as the wife of Abdallah, the son of Merchant Sulayman. Marriage and child bearing confined her to a single room. Motherhood

for Mayya was not an act of valour but of exhaustion and terrible body pain where the only comfort was to lean her body against a strong wall that gave little relief to her pain. In an enormously spacious house, she is therefore confined to a single room. For Mayya, “sleep was her only paradise. It was her ultimate weapon against the pounding anxiety of her existence” (Alharthi, 2018, p. 55).

When identity was defined in relation to that of men, the entire act of existence becomes a complicated phenomenon. It is a state of void where women are identified as objects rather than subjects. When a dominant space fails to acknowledge women’s position the transformation from an objectified category to a subject is nevertheless possible. The life of other two characters is no different. From the architectural composition of the house, the gender segregation across space is evident. With every mention of the characters such as Asma and Khawla the importance of having a girl’s room isolated from the central space of the house is hinted at. The full emotions of the characters are played out only at such spaces that are separate from the wider and the crowded spaces of the house. Books that open up new world of wisdom for Asma is contained within a storehouse which is separate from arena of the dominant space. The poetry, the knowledge, the wisdom that each book offers Asma is also restrained within a space appropriate for the expression. Therefore, Asma feels extremely embarrassed and she awkwardly shorten certain expressions and phrases when she speaks out in any space apart from the girl’s room. The characters are seen to express their varied emotions only within certain spaces. “She ran toward the girl’s room at the other end of the courtyard and shut the door behind her” (Alharthi, 2018, p. 86). Khawla couldn’t overtly express her dislike in marrying Emigrant Issa’s son when she is positioned out of her comfort zone. The nuances of each character’s personality become evident only when they are seen in their destined spaces. Both Asma and Khawla are educated women. But the expanses of space that they are aware of, and what their books have offered is inappropriate when confronted with the social circumstances of their life. All the characters that the readers come across in this novel faces the same levels of difficulty and a sense of out of place when they are forced to enter different spaces. Azzan, the father figure for instance could not offer any help and is seen out of words when he enters girl’s room. “He left the girl’s room and returned to the sitting room. He did not stop or turn to speak to anyone, but continued on, into his own room” (Alharthi, 2018, p. 90). The transit from one space to other is extremely complicated and uncomfortable for all the characters. The dilemma of inside and outside feeling is central to paradoxical spaces.

Restrictions placed on multiple levels within their own house gives the characters a sense of non-belongingness. For women both their parental home and their martial home offers only a shelter. The freedom associated with both movement and expression is absent in any of the spaces. The mother figure in the novel, Salima exhibits an agoraphobic condition. “Agoraphobia is a disorder characterized by intense fear (panic attacks) and avoidance of social situations and spaces, and is suffered primarily by women” (Bankey, 2002,p. 44). Agoraphobia is an anxiety disorder that results in extreme discomfort and fear when exposed to unknown places which are perceived to be dangerous. When Abdallah decides to take Mayya abroad, Salima pleads with her son in law that, Abdallah, my son, she’s in your care now, and you must take care of her. But don’t take her away, don’t take her from me, away to Maskad. No one is better at the sewing machine than she is. Mayya don’t like to eat much, or to talk much, you know, Abdallah ... (Alharthi, 2018, p. 12) The emotion that dominates Salima’s words is fear. The fear of abuse and threat against female body is responsible for restraining free entry of woman across spaces. The fear stymies the possibility of progress. The fear starts from the assumption that public spaces are unsafe for woman. When conventional gender stereotypes associate with emotions, entry of women into public spaces becomes more complicated. Salima instils the same fear onto her daughters. The girls and women in the family are therefore placed within a protected sphere. Mayya was no longer a little girl when her mother began talking

about adding a special room for the sisters, one that did not open onto the other rooms and that especially remained apart from the sitting room. Their home was madhkul as her mother always said- a house people flocked to, a house that was always full of others... These girls were getting older, their womanhood was beginning to blossom, and their mother wanted to keep them invisible to her visitor's ever-curious eyes. (Alharthi, 2018, p. 96) Female body is always perceived as an object to be protected. When these false stereotypes become culturally ingrained, women are depleted of resources and performance.

Internalizing objectifications against woman causes heightened consciousness regarding their bodies in a female psyche. It is the ambivalent attitudes towards protection and security that segregates women from central spaces. All the three female characters are therefore secluded within the confines of their home. In the novel, the girl's room appears as an added extension to the far ends of the courtyard which especially remained isolated and hidden from the sitting room. The sitting room is conceived as a space which is open to discussion and where the outsiders flocked to. In a house denied of freedom, women are kept apart from the spaces that offers new line of thoughts and traits of modernity. Subsequently, Asma's books and Khawla's mirror lies hidden in the storehouse. The bounded walls of the house become an alienating place for women unable to access the social, cultural and economic opportunities of the outside world. Having a private space within a home is a method of repudiating feminine knowledge from the mainstream. Women in these cases are prone to restlessness and frustration and each of these characters adopt certain strategies to escape this dilemma. Mayya sleeps through day and night, books open up a new world for Asma and Khawla take refuge in her dreams. The architectural planning of the house remains inherently gendered and reinforce gender roles to forcefully thwart access to open spaces. Therefore, the struggle to redefine their identity is to surpass the gendered spaces of the house.

Analysing the variability within gender in the use of space, feminist geographers aim to investigate the binary distinctions of spaces as public and private spaces. The traditional model of space associate women to private and domestic spaces. Getting close to the spatial studies of Azzan's and merchant Sulayman's house, the division between the public, private or the domestic space becomes evident. Space is the repository of any social action and interaction. In the book *Making Space: Women and the Man-made Environment* the feminist designers together called as Matrix noted that "many men still perceive women's sexuality as partly defined by their location" (Matrix, 1984, p. 49). Space designated as public and private spaces reinforces the gender differences, legitimizes the hegemonic masculinity and ignores women's positive interaction across spaces. Confining women to private space are therefore an act of deprivation. In the novel *Celestial Bodies*, we see in various contexts women are denied of access to sitting room of their house. Dividing the interior spaces within the house as public and private sphere exacerbated women's condition. A house is an agglomeration of all institutions, the social, political and economic. An exclusion faced within the house fallouts in similar segregation when exposed to the public domain. The association of woman to the domestic space is a myth unconsciously reproduced by social practices. The spatial structure of the domestic space of both the houses gives the various patterns of power relations that exists between men and women.

Regarding the spatial practices of the house, women are seen constantly engaged with the domestic tasks and continue to exhibit a kind of domestic spatiality in relation to men. Mayya is seen not shifting positions throughout the day because she is forever immersed in her sewing machine. The other characters such as Salima and the slave Zarifa are either seen in the kitchen or seen involved in other domestic activities such as cleaning and decorating rooms. "Salima was always very careful with décor and adornment, except when it came to her body"

(Alharthi, 2018, p. 21). There is no instance in the novel that Salima is seen sharing space with Azzan's guests. Salima who is seen most conscious of treating and feeding their guests is suddenly seen out of place when guests arrive. This demarcation reflects both the spatial and the social control of identity in relation to space. Akin to this situation we see that the three daughters are kept apart from the main body of the house. There are constant references to asking permissions to get into various spaces. Asma is not granted permission to enter Mayya's room where topics regarding marriage and pregnancy are openly discussed and Khawla wouldn't dare go near the sitting room where her mother would catch sight of her. Khawla consciously refracts the spaces with an awareness of distinction between the private and public sphere within her own house. When entry and exit is restricted, the house resembles more of a prison where women are tied to social isolation.

Not only the physical mobility of their bodies but the free expressions of their emotions are also constrained and restricted with regard to space. The kitchen is the most gendered space. In the binary distinction of the house, public or the masculine domain is at the front of the house and the private feminine domain is confined to the rear. The constitution of space is therefore based on a power geometry. The gardens of household are usually bounded by walls to offer security, and the household tasks are organised in a manner that constantly isolates women. In the patriarchal distinction of labour, women are assigned duties mostly associated with cooking. The houses are internally structured such that kitchen is built far removed from the central space of the house that constitute sitting and drawing rooms. Cooking is a time-consuming activity and therefore, the time that women get to spend in other spaces is comparatively less in relation to men. In the promise of false haven, women become more secluded and isolated and men crosses all boundaries.

Kitchen is undeniably the site that is most responsible for the confinement of woman. Salima as young girl "grew up at the foot of the kitchen wall" and all her aspirations are "crouched at the foot of the kitchen wall" (Alharthi, 2018, p.163). Even though Salima's mother is absent from the novel, in all the scenes where Salima recollects the memories associated with her mother the recurring image that precedes the scene is that of a kitchen. And for Azzan and Zarifa, the basil plant is the image that conjure up the memories of Azzan's mother. The false idealization of places coded the female bodies with erroneous personification with nature or natural. The kitchen as a work space segregates the women from the social centre of the house. Kitchen is a site that serves to establish the gendered division of labour. Both Azzan's and Merchant Sulayman's family are slave owners. But the female slave Zarifa is seen constantly shuttling in and out of the kitchen premises. Whereas there is no reference of Habib or Sanjar the male slaves seen in or around engaged in domestic work. Men are constantly seen employed in outside work that offers them to get exposed to public and open spaces. The endless chores of household are therefore responsible for the domestication of women. The household works considered as paltry in relation to men's labour represses women to lower self-esteem.

The socialization that plays out to assign gender roles results in loss of self. In the novel, both Salima and Zarifa therefore become self-effacing partners of a successful man. The phallogocentric reality in relation to space is that, the activities in relation to female are played out in the backdrop and the hegemonic power acts in the forefront. Women are conventionally placed in spaces that reproduces power dynamics and restate gender asymmetries. They are placed in spaces in relation to body or emotional care while men represent spaces of more physical labour. When space reverberate a source of belongingness or identity, it unconsciously instils the same identity in people who occupy these spaces. In the novel, women are seen constantly engaged in tasks that reinstates this power relations. She dragged the rolled-up red Persian carpet from the storeroom, shook it hard to expel the dust, and unrolled it along the length of the reception room. In the middle room, she took the down the elegant china ... She

spread out new bedding on the floor for Mayya and the newborn. (Alharthi, 2018, p. 17) The vade mecum of domestic tasks is passed from one generation to other. These domestic manuals show a strong distinction among gendered spaces. The expanses of space become a resource of doing gender. Home adorned in feminine conventions worsens the domestication of woman and haul women to fall in the same line. When women unconsciously participate in these tasks, they accede to the same conventions being reproduced for generations. Allegedly, Asma, Khawla and Mayya are pulled along the same lines. They are fed with knowledge to adorn spaces than to claim spaces for them. The metaphor of beauty or décor indicates the supposed naturalness of their boundaries of existence. The spaces of the courtyard and the wider expanses of nature are forbidden for many of the characters. After Khawla's mental breakdown, she longs to go out into the rain. But in the constant fear of her mother catching sight of her Khawla suppresses her emotions inside the four walls of her room. In the following episode, she reminisces about childhood memories where she got to spend some time in the courtyard.

The picture that hung in Khawla's room is symbolic. The picture which was put by Mayya before she got married is a frame that "enclosed a broad pasture, the green grass extending into the distance and massed clouds overhead" (Alharthi, 2018, p. 95). But the biggest expanse of green that Khawla could possibly think of was their farm which was forbidden for her. The boundaries of home forces all the female characters to recognise with the compartments of their identity in relation to places. In relation to place, identity becomes a cultural product in lieu of their personalities. To restrain the mobility in relation to place is a deliberate act of confinement and an attempt to curtail identity. The family is the major site of woman's oppression. The unwaged domestic labour done to satisfy the needs of adults, husband and children curtails woman's social relation to outside world. Mayya is held absolutely responsible for London, Salim and Muhammad's life. Like Seamon's place-ballet the routine actions undertaken unconsciously instils in woman a topophilia in relation to spaces. Topophilia acts out with cultural identity to prove that woman belongs to where her family is. Mayya's escape to Muscat was her escape from the familial concerns. She did not want to forever remain under her mother's control. Mayya stopped sewing and entered literary classes that ought to promise new spaces for Mayya. "She laughed! Loud enough to shatter every wall in the new house. Her laughter...the children fled from it" (Alharthi, 2018, p.12). Her voice is for the first time heard when she is away from the constraints of her family. And for Asma every childbirth confirms to prove her position within Khalid's house. Therefore, Asma has to reconcile to the fact that "she was her own constellation, independent and whole, a sphere unto itself" (Alharthi, 2018, p.196). She distanced herself from the emotional investment that tend to pull her along the same line that promised no escape. Khawla has to get divorced to reinvent a space of her own. Women who stand out to mediate the link between family and earth cannot claim identity apart from the masculine figure that dominate both the poles. In the newly discovered space, the female characters are in full control of their body and emotions. Away from the familial constraints female characters transgresses all boundaries. Almost all characters in the novel longs for an escape. The city of Muscat aptly represents the fulfilment of modern ambitions. Mayya puts on an enormous feast when she shifts to Muscat. The readers for the first time see Mayya getting exposed to public spaces in Muscat. She stops her sewing and make efforts to learn and regularly jaunts book stores. Mayya naming her daughter 'London' was both an act of valour and of wish fulfilment. The name 'London' is symbolic of the freedom that Mayya longs for. And for Khawla, the green pastures, verdant plains and forests that she came across in books is to where she yearns to escape. The modern city of Muscat and the green pastures of England recur as an image that instils freedom of movement for women. Along the lines of this quest for freedom, characters such as Asma, London, Khawla and Shanna escapes from their native places to modern cities. In the novel *Celestial Bodies*, we observe that the women who are seen moving freely across spaces are either who

belong to the lowest strata of society or are deemed as bad women. Najiya for instance is a Bedouin woman whose way of living is far removed from the settled life of Al-Awafi. She is a Qamar, the moon for Azzan and a seducer of men for others. Najiya, the deemed character enjoys relatively more freedom when it comes to space. She is seen in complete control of her space. She lives in two rooms that opens onto a reception room that overlooked the courtyard. Since society has no presumptions regarding her life, she enjoys relatively much freedom in mobility than women who are subjected to the tradition bound social order. "Her home became a magnet for visitors and a refuge for those in need" (Alharthi, 2018, p. 45). The other deemed character is Shanna, Sanjar's wife. Even though she belongs to the lowest strata of society, she is an aspiring character. She desires an escape. For her, Muscat is the city that gratifies her dreams. But when she openly expresses her desire for an escape, she earns resentment. She becomes an unscrupulous woman who pay no concerns to her land and her mother. In the novel, Shanna is introduced for the first time in a chapter titled 'viper'. The patriarchal society considers her deeds to be poisonous and inflecting.

*Celestial Bodies* is the story of the history and of people of Oman. Travelling through the history of abolishment of slavery, the novel gives references to the real prison where slaves are imprisoned for various reasons and the house turned prison where women are imprisoned based on gender prejudices. Women of deviant behaviour are alleged to be mad. Shanna's mother Masouda is imprisoned for the same reason. The novel has reference to only two loud characters. Najiya the Qamar, becomes the seductress and Masouda is professed to be mad. Masouda is mad because she screams. The general attitude of patriarchal society towards woman who expresses their emotions is evident through Masouda's case. "Whenever she heard the low screech of the door, she would grip the window bars desperately and shout, I'm in here! I'm Masouda and I'm in here!" (Alharthi, 2018, p. 75). Masouda's cry is for recognition. She is mad because society ignores her real identity. She repeatedly calls out 'I'm here!' in an effort to claim her identity. The histories of mad women remain as an unwritten category. The novel has no references to the thought process of this mad woman. The only reference is that, she repeatedly calls out her name and is ordered to remain silent. The other characters are also silenced in such a way that they are only heard within the confined spaces. Masouda's life becomes an ominously abiding lesson on every woman who refuses the needs of patriarchy. They are condemned mad and silenced.

*Celestial Bodies* is a critique against the delegation of spaces. On a seat suspended between gender prejudices and patriarchal constraints, women live a life of dejected. Her life circles within the gravitational pull of man. Like a pilgrim circle, women's life is paced around the same sphere. A gendered space enforces identity and women are forced to enact what they are already been told. When life becomes a mere enactment, the true identity remains unexplored. In an attempt to redefine spaces for woman, the novel dejects the outright patriarchal connotations and celebrates the stories of narrowed lives. Reclaiming space is to reclaim identity. When house becomes a repository of gender dynamics, the three female protagonists, Mayya, Asma and Khawla attempts to create their own celestial sphere. She formed her own celestial orbit. In the end, and with a great deal of patience, self-examination, and occasional sacrifice, they learned to create enough space that each could orbit freely. (Alharthi, 2018, p.196) The characters attempt to reinvent a space that could contain their passions and desires. The social reality of woman is subjected to the abuses of the powerful. The study of space is the essential focus of feminist geography. When female identity remains confined to specific spaces, the study of space is vital to unearth the real identity of a woman. Studying the gendered constitution of Merchant Sulayman and Shaykh Muhammad's house exhume the repressed histories of the life of women.

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