



Spatiality and the Cultural Dynamics: A Reading of Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts*

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Abstract

The present study attempts to relate formulations of spatiality with women's literature in India endeavouring to map the extent to which colonial conceptions of modernity tend to inform creative writings geared towards the ideal of female independence. The intention is to understand whether such demarcations constructed/consolidated within the colonial past of the country find expressions in women's writing in the contemporary era and whether they relate to existing feminist discourses of independence. Possibilities for a reworking of gendered spaces and roles and modes of subversion that are organised around an ideological oppositionality would be explored in the context of thematic preoccupations woven into the textual framework of Shobhaa De's novel *Second Thoughts*. The analysis would focus on the ways in which spatial divisions pertaining to the female gets contested and how they impact upon the cultural implications for the gendered status of the woman. The study would aim at garnering valuable inputs regarding existing conceptions of normality and acceptability and the textual attempts to define modernity in relation to the woman.

Keywords: space, woman, gender, tradition, modernity

Postcolonial feminism specifically engages itself with the task of examining the wide array of discourses that complicate the positioning of the woman in terms of undeniable historical and cultural differences that include, most importantly, the legacy of colonialism and divergences based on caste, class, religion, ethnicity and sexuality. In India, the varying socio-cultural contexts and structures of oppression have given rise to conceptions of freedom and empowerment that are markedly different from the West. The various struggles by women in India,

conveniently described under the larger rubric of the Women's movement, have over the years added new concerns and perceptions with regard to the cause of the woman. The discourse of female independence came to be articulated through a series of attempts for the recognition and fulfillment of women, carried out over different periods of history. However, one of the earliest instances of the struggle for female independence and autonomy, which may be discerned in the nationalist movement, was largely initiated by male social reformers and was understood as an endeavour to free women from oppressive structures and practices. This period has also been viewed as the first wave of Indian feminism by theorists who regard the pre-independence period as one that laid the ground for an organised representation of the female voice in India.

Nivedita Menon, for instance, looks at the history of the women's movement in India in terms of three waves. She identifies the first wave as coinciding with the mass mobilisation of women during the nationalist movement, the second wave as beginning with the latter half of the twentieth century and the third wave as being initiated in the 1970s and having a definite feminist ideology. She considers the second wave as significant for being more organised and for involving more participation from women, while, during the third wave, she observes that there could be seen a perceptible increase in the amount of autonomous women's groups and women's resource centres. ("Introduction"18-21).

In fact, the question of female independence was already raised during the colonialist era when Britishers took upon themselves the civilising mission of 'culturing' the mass of colonised people. This intention was powerfully expressed through a discourse of female emancipation that mainly drew attention to the barbaric customs and practices that were being imposed upon Indian women. The new class of social reformers who were Western educated felt the same need to free women from meaningless social customs and practices and actively supported the cause. They were apparently inspired by the progressive views offered by their education and belonged mostly to the upper class. The focus was on some of the most visible atrocities existing in society at that time, especially sati, child marriage, prohibition of widow re-marriage and the like. There was a strong realisation that these inhuman beliefs reflected patriarchal prejudices and beliefs that had to be eliminated to ensure the conditions of women's freedom and the establishment of a modern society. Forbes remarks that there was a significant change in "what women could do-often characterized as a movement from the private to the public sphere...The shift was

neither abrupt nor permanent and many women, who briefly attended a school or emerged from purdah to attend a ‘mixed’ function, returned to the household where they continued to live in the more traditional fashion” (29).

Thus the empowerment of women was envisioned in terms of a better social existence that paved the way for women’s freedom from oppressive power structures. However, it is also pertinent to remember that the woman’s social position was informed by the cultural demarcation of space in terms of the ‘private’ and the ‘public’. “Indigenous customs urged male family members to protect women from their own tendencies toward sexual promiscuity and decreed the restriction of women to the confines of a home’s inner spaces [purdah]. Women were forbidden to learn to read but urged to become *pativratas* [wives devoted through vows to their husbands]” (Walsh 36). The interrelationship between national identity and the woman consolidated accepted notions of gendered existence by favouring certain attributes as characteristically female as a result of which the binary oppositionality of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ was constructed. Such equations of spatiality created a discourse of cultural purity and sanctity that was invariably associated with the woman. Thus, attempts made to transgress the accepted markers of spatiality were looked upon as violations of a conventional existence. So the representation of modernity evolved to have strong connections with status of the woman and the idea of female independence got intertwined with the conception of spatiality. Accordingly, gendered roles and meanings began to be associated with divisions based on the private/public and this also seemed to govern the limits and possibilities of the Indian woman’s existence. A subversion of such narratives emerging from the dynamics of space have, therefore, been viewed as signaling the dimensions of female independence as well.

Such thematic preoccupations can also be discerned in the field of a wide variety of literature that concentrates on women’s experiences and societal compulsions. Writers have quite often tried to probe the intricate workings of space and gender while attempting to determine the nature and significance of women’s independence. Indian women’s writing exists as a major pointer in this regard as many of these works have tried to understand the myriad ways in which ideals of femininity tend to be conditioned by patriarchal formulations of space. Women have been depicted as being subjugated by artificial constraints based on space the concerted attempts made to challenge such preconceived notions in search for emancipation have been the focus of such creative pursuits.

In the sphere of Indian English popular fiction, Shobhaa De holds a special place with regard to her active interest in portraying the vicissitudes of women's lives and also in her attempts to challenge the institutions of patriarchal power. She occupies a highly influential position as one of "India's top best selling authors" (Shukla, *Women on Women* 112) whose works stand out for their insightful content, their art of storytelling and their use of language (114). Her immense popularity largely owes itself to a penetrating understanding of women's problems and needs, especially their conflicts with the pressures of orthodoxy and conventionality and their resultant urge to come out of the shackles of societal existence. Though her works focus predominantly on urban, upper class women and are mainly based in a metropolitan locale, they attempt to renegotiate stereotypical spaces of culture and also to fashion a new world that acknowledges the woman's independent existence as an individual.

Most of her novels explore the consequences of the cultural subordination and oppression of women by hegemonic forces of patriarchy and also present powerful images of women grappling with the values of tradition that are institutionalised through family and marriage. Her female protagonists endeavour to think beyond the bounds of domesticity and marriage and try to assert their identity (Jain, "Depiction of Liberated" 1) and therefore her works are often described as indicating the emergence of the 'new woman' who is willing to revolt against the moral customs and attitudes of the male-dominated social system. The women she represents thus become emblems of the new emergent voice of Indian womanhood by being committed to the goal of liberation in all walks of life and also in their determination to evolve as self-reliant, free-thinking and progressive individuals (3). De is also particularly keen on presenting the travails of urban Indian women who are eager to assert themselves and are "enterprising, bold, innovative and ever ready to accept challenges" (Myles 86).

The novel *Second Thoughts*, for instance, offers a sensitive portrayal of a young woman who endures a dull, insipid existence in an alien city and is filled with an urge to move out of an uninspiring domestic life following her own inner voice. The work offers a criticism of patriarchal norms and values of culture that implicate the woman in a system of perpetual bondage and servility through an ingenious manipulation of the cultural values pertaining to the institution of marriage. The protagonist of the novel Maya is trapped in a hopeless marriage to Ranjan who is insensitive and inconsiderate to her longings and desires and believes in the societal dictum that the woman's legitimate place is always the home. Owing to his deeply conservative views and traditional outlook, despite being

Western educated, Maya is forced to comply with the regulations laid out for appropriate wifely behavior and in the process painfully realises the complete erasure of her own individuality and self-worth. For her, marriage becomes a tragedy that “mutilates her” and also dooms her “to repetition and routine” (Beauvoir 478).

As a newly married young woman from Bengal she had high hopes about leading a free and joyful life in the dreamland Bombay and had looked forward to it immensely but the contrary experiences of her life confine her to a world of loneliness and dejection leaving her with an insatiable thirst for the pleasures of a new life. The outer world of Bombay is for her a medium through which she can express herself freely and also find some meaning in life. This wish is expressed in the following words: “...I wanted the city to seep into me slowly. I wanted to absorb it, digest it, make it a part of my system. I wanted desperately to become a Bombaywali. I wanted to belong. But I said nothing at all” (De 38). This is exactly what is denied to her as her husband uses the same space that she cherishes as a mechanism for controlling her because the outer, public space of Bombay is described to her as a dangerous external world that is scary and threatening especially for the woman. She is thus confined within the four walls of the home and is led to believe that true satisfaction for a married woman is to be sought in the world of domesticity. Therefore she laments: “I’d only see the closed door of my house and the iron bars on the windows...I wanted to flirt with the ‘other Bombay’...” (122).

Even the prospect of her finding fulfillment in a job is denied by her husband as a rather unrealistic ambition for an ordinary girl like her, thus reducing her education, a degree in textile designing, to something worthless and insignificant. This situation reminds one of Simone de Beauvoir’s statement in *The Second Sex* that while the husband is free to find “concrete self-realization in work and action”, for the wife such a “liberty has only a negative aspect...” (480). Maya is also repeatedly warned against venturing out alone and is also prohibited from talking to her neighbours or maintaining any contacts with outsiders. When she is thus stifled within the space of domesticity, unable to seek any avenue for self-fulfillment, she finds solace in a new friendship that she develops with a young college going neighbor Nikhil who is portrayed as dynamic, active and fun-loving. She secretly acknowledges her deep liking for him and cherishes his lively presence. When he invites her for a ride, offering to provide her a slice of the life outside she is caught between the contradictory pulls of her feelings of loyalty to conventional strictures and her uncontrollable desire to cross the boundaries of the suffocating inner world of the home.

The dilemma within her indeed reflects the norms and standards of morality that she has assimilated over the years and these norms also tend to caution her about the dangers of overstepping the limits of acceptability and respectability for the woman. The situation depicted perfectly connects to the following remark: “In the socio-spatial schema of gender, boundaries of permissible behaviour are strictly delineated. Any transgression of boundaries spatially is deemed as a challenge to the status-quo and liable to be punished” (Ranade 1523). However, she gives in to her inner desire and takes the bold step of reaching after what she desires the most- the simple joy of being in the outer world, freely experiencing her favourite city. Her dilemma and consequent resolution are expressed in the following manner:

And yet, there was the other pull tugging me in the opposite direction. With just a little encouragement from him, I was ready to jump on Nikhil’s motorbike and say ‘goodbye’ to my uninspiring life without the slightest regret. The choice was frighteningly mine...I was determined to get out of the house anyway and find out if I was still in love with Bombay, or if even that had died within me. (De 241)

When she experiences the sights and sounds outside she does not feel “weighed down with guilt” and also does not want to “think about the consequences” as she is overjoyed by the very fact of being out of her house and locality (247) at least for a short period of time.

Though the text presents her as occasionally trying to question her servile existence as she desperately tries to make herself visible as a human being and aspires for a legitimate space within the marital relationship, the realisation soon hits upon her that despite her desperate efforts for recognition she can never expect a fair and just treatment from her husband who is indifferent and also incapable of offering her emotional and physical satisfaction. Eventually, her intimacy with Nikhil develops further and culminates in her experience of sexual fulfillment with him. She thereby violates not just the prescribed strictures of marital fidelity but also the accepted codes of sexual morality for the woman. For her, such defiance also involves liberation from a meaningless and lifeless reality which she has been forced to embrace through marriage. It also represents her transformation from a passive non-entity to a determined individual who is actively aware of her innermost wishes and desires.

The incident of her bike journey is in fact used by the narrative as a metaphorical expression of the woman's pressing urge to be free of the rigid spaces of confinement that are conventionally regarded as ideal for the woman. Maya's irresistible desire for freedom is very well captured in the following words which express her pent-up feelings and her dreams about a carefree life:

I pictured myself running in the sand alongside the colourful pony-carts filled with excited children. I wanted to get wet in the waves like those curvaceous heroines in Hindi films; I wanted to laugh as I shot all the coloured balloons with an air rifle and the audience cheered. I wanted my insides to perform a wild dance while a mangy camel sauntered down the beach carrying me atop. I wanted my fortune told by parakeets... [original ellipsis] oh God, I don't know what I wanted. Maybe just to be free and alive and reckless and mad (105).

Her expression of sexual freedom also emanates from a desire to disengage herself from an inhuman existence that has only suppressed her soul beyond the limits of tolerance and denied her rights as an individual. The novel represents the character of the woman as experiencing an assured change in terms of a realisation of the oppressive nature of marriage and henceforth attempting to manoeuvre alternate means for fulfilling the aspirations of her life. In a broader context, the freedom that she displays may be viewed as emerging from a strong feeling of discontentment with the hypocritical pretensions of patriarchal society and its sexist practices and assumptions. By prioritising her individual self she also concomitantly expresses her ability to think freely about her life and also about the need to overcome the hegemonising influence of convention. Therefore the representation of her independent will in the novel is also a pointer to her simultaneous attempt to move out of an inner space marked by exploitation to a much more liberal and accommodating space outside the home, as for her the home is nothing more than a restrictive space that signals finality and a total extinction of her own personality.

However, it must also be added that Maya believes in the sanctity of marital bonds and only steps out of the acknowledged boundaries of the space destined for a married woman when it suffocates her and destroys the very meaning and purpose of her being. De thus represents the image of the woman as resilient and powerful enough to assert her own voice and seek a life of her own encountering the despairing situations and cultural expectations of societal existence. What is of prime importance therefore is the initiative on the part of women to recognise their

own value and pride. Such a perspective is embodied in the observation that Beauvoir makes while examining the predicament of married women who have only limited avenues for escape: “A woman determined, in spite of her condition, to go on living in a clear-sighted and genuine manner may have no other resort than a stoic pride. Being in every material way dependent, she can know only an inner, abstract freedom; she refuses to accept ready-made principles and values, she uses her judgement, she questions, and thus she escapes conjugal slavery...” (476). When the woman embarks on such a journey of defiance deriving strength from a process of self-introspection, she would also be necessarily implicated in a conscious remapping of those spatial boundaries which tends to fix certain spaces within the family as well as the society as privileged spaces of the male.

Women’s literature assumes added relevance owing to such endeavours that aim at a restructuring of spatial patterns that are hierarchical and oriented towards biased patriarchal conceptions. In other words, such works exist as counter-narratives that are transformative and exploratory with regard to the woman’s aspirations for independence. What deserves mention is the attention given to documenting the complicated interactions that women have with their surroundings and the different ways in which they grapple with modes of passivity and confinement. Meanings associated with spatial binaries, thus, provide new insights regarding the ideological workings of hegemonic power systems and also highlight the ingenious ways in which certain gendered attributes become normalised and forceful. In such a light, it is to be asserted that writings that are geared towards reconceptualising the spatial positioning of the woman could also play a significant role in strengthening the feminist interventions carried out in this direction. Though the meanings associated with such portrayals might vary with regard to different socio-cultural contexts and parameters, spatial reformulation would continue to remain as a significant mode for deciphering the woman’s agency, will and freedom.

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