



On the Role of Space and Relationships on Roof: A Critical Study of Geethanjali Shree's *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*

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Abstract

The research paper investigates the significance of spaces in determining the manner in which unconventional relationships unfold away from the public gaze. The notion of spaces becomes integral in demarcating the private and the public spheres of life and paradoxically, problematizing the aforementioned distinctions. The paper employs the Nancy Duncan's postulations on how the public-private dichotomy regulates sexuality. It also relies on Gillian Rose's theorization on the influence of power in determining 'real' and 'non-real' spaces. Through the textual analysis of *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* by Geethanjali Shree, the paper weaves a connection between spaces and identities. *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* was originally published in Hindi as *Tirohit* and translated to English by Rahul Soni in 2013. The novel explores the roof as a space which allows expressions of women, hidden from the watchful eyes of the society that refuses to tolerate their companionship. The characters Lalna and Chachcho, through the ambiguity of their relationship, effectively destabilize societal norms. The interpersonal interactions between the two has undertones of intimate relations. The space of the roof assumes multiple meanings by facilitating the performance of what is otherwise 'forbidden'. The translation of Shree's narrative allows a space for mapping the modes of protest and resistance. It also enables one to trace the intersections of space, gender, sexuality and class. The novel thus contributes to the research to interpret the function of spaces, the mutability of spatial borders and their impact on relationships.

Keywords: space, sexuality, privacy, freedom, forbidden

Introduction

The spatial turn in humanities necessitates the consideration of space through an interdisciplinary approach. It brings to academia a view that space occupies a quintessential part in understanding human affairs and that geography actively plays a role in the construction of social relations (Warf and Arias 1). According to researcher, Robert T. Tally, spatial literary studies delves into the representation of space and place in the “real world, in imaginary universes or in those hybrid zones where fiction meets reality” (2). One of the authors for whom space functions as a source of identity and denotes the play between freedom and rebellion, is Geethanjali Shree. She is a novelist and short story writer who writes predominantly in Hindi. She rose to prominence internationally when her translated novel *The Tomb of Sand* won the International Booker Prize in 2022. Her novels include *Mai* (2000), *Hamara Shahar Us Baras* (1998), *Tirohit* (2007), *Khali Jagah* (2006) and *Ret Samadhi* (2018). The paper limits itself to the discussion of the English translation of the novel *Tirohit*, originally published in Hindi. Translated by Rahul Soni, *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* was published in 2013. During a conversation with Rahul Soni, Geethanjali Shree says that the idea of a roof and the aspect of “forbidden love affairs on it” excited her. The notion of play that Geethanjali Shree highlights thus becomes a characteristic of the space that she creates in her novel.

The play orchestrated within the confines of a roof is enhanced by the play of words and meanings. Geethanjali Shree equates language with the story and claims that “language is not just the craft, language is itself the story, the statement, the action.” On the challenges of translating *Tirohit*, Rahul Soni remarks that the “playfulness”, “wordplay”, “allusions and echoes”, “rapid switching between registers” and the “things that are hinted rather than spelled out” are factors that he had to grapple with (Bengani). Having suggested the title for the translation, Geethanjali Shree admits that translations have the potential to initiate dialogue and bring to light new aspects of her own works. The translation by becoming accessible to a wide range of audience enables readers to decode the multiplicity of meanings explicitly and implicitly present in *The Roof Beneath Their Feet*.

The novel follows the lives of two women namely Lalna and Chachcho and the ways in which their companionship extends beyond the boundaries of friendship. Set in the Laburnum House, the story unfolds on the roof that is shared by the neighbourhood of about a hundred houses. Chachcho is married to Om Babu who takes frequent trips to Hong Kong. As the obedient wife of a man with a respectable social standing, Chachcho lived up to the expectations of the ideal wife. Lalna, on the other hand, is introduced as a woman whose presence in the Laburnum House is unsettling. She is treated as a servant by the people of the House but becomes a confidante of Chachcho. Bitwa who is initially introduced as Chachcho’s nephew is later revealed as the son of Lalna.

The Roof Beneath Their Feet begins with the death of Chachcho and then delves into the particularities of the relationship between Chachcho and other characters in the novel. The narrative shuffles between the past and the present to understand the bond between Chachcho and Lalna through the embers of memory and nostalgia. Om Babu and Bitwa suspect the relationship the two women share. However, they are rendered incapable of severing the bond and their deliberate ignorance validates the very existence of the

unconventional companionship. Bitwa is sometimes included in the secret rendezvous of the women on the roof but is dismissed as a passive audience. The roof becomes a space where Lalna and Chachcho could escape the social duties assigned to them. Although Lalna addresses Chachcho as “Behen-ji”, their relationship exceeded the limits of sisterhood, depended on maternal instincts of the two women and precariously included the passion of lovers.

The roof, by the virtue of its indomitable presence in the novel, serves as another character. The roof offers a space for Lalna and Chachcho to explore and redefine their identities. The women meet on the roof as invisible beings and exchange secret glances which develop into more seductive gestures as the days progress. The roof becomes a space where the two deliberate on various issues ranging from the clutches of patriarchy to the issues of class. By shedding their façade, they embrace their vulnerabilities and become empathetic to each other. The roof grants the women freedom by functioning as a source of solace, escape and perhaps, a dream with multiple possibilities. The centrality of the roof cannot be evaded as the novel develops on the happenings on the roof and their repercussions in the lives of all the characters, especially Lalna and Chachcho.

The paper relies on the distinctions between real and non-real spaces as formulated by philosopher, Gillian Rose in the essay, “As If The Mirrors Had Bled: Masculine dwelling, masculinist theory and feminist masquerade.” It also employs the postulations on the notions associated with private and public spaces as stated in “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces” written by Nancy Duncan, the theorist. The ways in which space is subjected to a multiplicity of meanings are intertwined with the theorizations on gender and sexuality. It can be said that the performance of gender and sexuality determines the demarcation of space within the binaries of real or non-real and private or public. Moreover, the distinctions are not devoid of the threat of becoming unstable. In other words, these borders are shifting and lack in rigidity.

Roof as a Site of Resistance

According to Gillian Rose, “The real is simultaneously concrete and dynamic, yet both these qualities signify the masculine; the non-real is simultaneously fluid and imprisoning, but always engendered as feminine” (60). The roof denotes a non-real space in the novel. It acts as a fluid space because it facilitates the entry and exit of all bodies, irrespective of the identities they dawn. Conversely, it is imprisoning as the performance of certain acts allowed on the roof cannot be entertained elsewhere. The roof in the novel is an ambiguous space where, “...anything and everything goes. Low or high, without distinction or discrimination, her husband or his wife, everything goes. Meaning, anything could happen!” (Shree 31). Although the roof does not monitor the entries and exits of people, it attaches negative connotations to those who seek comfort in the space. These connotations stem from the perceptions of the inhabitants and are closely linked to the stereotypes generated on the basis of class and gender.

The absence of regulations on the roof attributes to the space a touch of secrecy and stealth. Lalna’s interest in the roof where Chachcho used to meet her in private is described as the “sign of an unruly heart”

(Shree 32). It is only on the roof where Lalna and Chachcho can feed each other while hiding among the “dancing shadows of the roof” (Shree 37). The women embrace each other tightly lest they should fall down from “an overdose of happiness in the free kingdom of theirs” (Shree 38). The imprisoning quality of the roof is evident when on the women admits that they talk of the things only girls discuss on the roof and that the conversations on such topics can only occur on the roof (Shree 55). The identities of the women are unfurled without reservations on the roof. Their relationship which is concealed or rather tamed in the space of the house or the neighbourhood is allowed to be showcased on the roof. In this space, their relationship escapes the confines of labels. In the article, “Communal Expectancy and the Authentic Self of Men and Transgenders - Arms and the Man by George Bernard Shaw and Birthday by Meredith Russo” the author Suganya et al. shares the insights on transgender’s space in the society as, “Transgender individuals face significant discrimination and marginalization, including lack of legal recognition and access to appropriate healthcare, harassment and violence” (Suganya et al. 882).

According to Nancy Duncan, certain spaces can have “socially progressive results in terms of providing a safe base (site of resistance) from which previously disempowered groups may become empowered” (129). The ‘disempowered group’ in this case is the duo Lalna and Chachcho who contest the social codes on the roof by becoming invisible to people of the Laburnum House but visible to each other. The invisibility of Lalna is accentuated by the ignorance of the inhabitants and her disrepute owing to her status as a maid and a lower-class woman. Chachcho is described as a “good woman” who could be “nowhere but in her house at night, certainly not among those who were seen in the debauched darkness” (Shree 38). The very association of Chachcho with Lalna, makes her inconspicuous as the latter says, “I’m invisible, and any friend of mine is invisible too” (Shree 80). It is evident that Lalna’s existence is hidden in plain sight while Chachcho’s presence on the roof at night is unfathomable by people. The invisibility prompts them to wholeheartedly embrace their feelings towards each other and act upon their impulses. Even in the article, “Gender Performance on the Reinvigoration via Food”, the author Suganya et al. describes the role of women who act upon their impulses in relation to the reinvigoration of men's lives. The article focuses on the ways in which the act of women in relation to food offering, and consumption through empathic emotion regulation by women reinvigorates into an optimistic multicultural environment (Suganya et al. 883).

Transgression of Boundaries

The invisibility granted to Lalna and Chachcho on the roof, gives them the freedom to express themselves as women and intimate partners. In one instance, the women remove their blouses and drape a sheer, sequined muslin shawl, sing and dance as the notes swirl “lustily” on the roof which acts as both “their stage and their audience” (Shree 53). The frequent escapades to the roof culminate in Lalna confessing that their friendship “deepened” on the roof and that their songs and conversations were becoming “seductive” as the days progressed (Shree 85, 102). Gillian Rose states that the non-real space does not signify fixity but total dissolution (60). On the roof there is a dissolution of Lalna’s identity as an “insignificant woman” and Chachcho’s identity as Om Babu’s wife (Shree 103). There is also a dissipation of all boundaries of class, caste and gender. When the boundaries dissolve, there is a flow of unmitigated desire which breaks free from

heteronormative codes. Besides transgressing the socially demarcated boundaries, Lalna's and Chachcho's shoes, clothes and hair-clips move from one body to another, thereby blurring the bodily boundaries (Shree 97).

It is imperative to note that the lack of fixity on the roof is enhanced by the invisibility of the two women. Nancy Duncan in her essay writes that the manifold expressions of sexuality are rendered "virtually invisible" to the straight population (137). The lack of visibility arises from the inhabitants of Laburnum House failing to acknowledge the relationship between Lalna and Chachcho. Although Geethanjali Shree does not explicitly portray the friendship of Lalna and Chachcho as homosexual, the undertones of such a relationship are unavoidable. After Chachcho's death, Lalna recounts the necessity to go to the roof. Lalna remembers how nothing could stop "two friends" or "erase" them as they chased the flame that in her words was, "dancing in front of us" and "bobbing like a balloon" (Shree 100). They are viewed as two girls who remained together as children and adults and yet people never knew that they were together (Shree 114). Despite their togetherness, Geethanjali Shree describes their relationship as the "love of girls", "love of women" and a love that always remains "incomplete, unspoken, un-lived..." (134). Lalna and Chachcho's relationship is as tragic as it is liberating. On one hand, they explore the limits of their friendship amidst the darkness and din of the roof. On the other hand, they are aware of the fact that their experiences can in no way be endorsed in the houses below the roof.

Disintegration of Dichotomies

The roof becomes a space which while serving as the ground for the exercise of freedom and birth of unconventional friendship, makes Chachcho and Lalna decipher the existence of the 'real' space underneath the roof. The space ensures a play between visibility and invisibility, real and the non-real while generating numerous possibilities for interpretation. The play between such categories is enabled by the transgression of boundaries both physical and symbolic. In the quasi-private space, Lalna and Chachcho unentangle themselves from the social mandates of conforming to their respective roles assigned to them on the basis of their gender and class. As a result, the roof transforms into a space for resistance against the ideals imposed on them. The ambiguity in defining the relationship between the two women is transferred to the space of the roof which then offers a tantalizing foray into the lives of Lalna and Chachcho. Even after Chachcho's death, the roof evokes the feelings of love, nostalgia and reminds Lalna of the relationship that ended without closure.

Conclusion

The roof therefore, allows the expression of unaltered identities and offers solace from the heteronormative tendencies of a male-dominated society. *The Roof Beneath Their Feet* is as much a novel about spaces and their inextricable connections with freedom, expression and identity as it is about love affairs that are forbidden, imagined and repressed. The scope for further research lies in analyzing how in-group and out-group mechanism can potentially affect gender performativity in non-real spaces. In the Indian context, the research on collective housing spaces can be undertaken to reveal how social norms affect family

dynamics. Through the lens of spatial humanities, the manner in which space redefines or challenges the cultural codes and contributes to the existence of liminal spaces can also be analysed.

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