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Gendered Geographies: Marriage, Mobility, and Female Agency in Wife, Desirable Daughters, and The Unaccustomed Earth

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Abstract

This study examines the intersection of marriage and geographic migration as forms of spatial technologies that discipline the subjectivity of women in South Asian diasporic fiction. It considers Bharati Mukherjee's Wife (1975), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Desirable Daughters (2002), and Jhumpa Lahiri's The Unaccustomed Earth (2008) to illustrate the experiences of immigrant women moving through domestic enclosures created by transnational patriarchy. The immigrant home, which has been the subject of his writing for three decades, becomes a microcosm of cultural reproduction and gendered oppression, a reflection of subcontinental power relations in American cities. This study examines how marriage as a spatial governance mechanism is negotiated by women's agency in various ways of transiting: physical relocation, psychological disconnection, narrative self-authorship, and strategic domestic decisions. Together, these three violent ruptures, retrospective redraftings of family histories, and spatial (re)calibrations of women's professional and romantic aspirations demonstrate how women assert spatial autonomy in structurally constrained spaces. Theoretically conceptualising the narrative form as a feminist cartographic practice, this article explores how these texts engage with the theoretical work of Doreen Massey and Henri Lefebvre and address the material immobility brought about by the narrative form through internal sovereignty. Located at different stages of South Asian American migration, the works trace a continuum of diasporic feminism that reclaims agency as a continual, sometimes contested, process of redeploying gendered borders.

Keywords: Feminist Geography, Female Agency, Domestic Space, Transnational Marriage, Spatial Mobility, Narrative Cartography, Immigrant Subjectivity, Gendered Enclosure.

Since its inception, the immigrant woman's body has been an area of conflict in South Asian diasporic fiction, a space where the nation, the patriarch, and the individual meet. Daughter of the Empire and The Names, Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri's works are both produced within a common tradition of South Asian American fiction that raises questions about the limits and constructions of female subjectivity in the context of marriage and geographical dislocation. In Wife (1975), Mukherjee follows the psychological breakdown of a Bengali woman, Dimple Dasgupta, who emigrates to New York, where the experience turns into a prison instead of a freedom. Desirable Daughters (2002) is Chitra Banerjee Divakarami's story of how Tara Bhattacharjee learns to be herself after her natal development is stunted by marriage. Lahiri's collection of stories, The Unaccustomed Earth (2008), involves several women balancing family obligations, affection for a loved one, and career aspirations in cities and continents. This

study reads these texts together through the feminist geography lens, finding marriage as a spatial technology of gender oppression, but also a place of negotiation and ultimately resistance that is enacted as reconfigurations of the domestic, socia,l and imaginative space of women. In all three texts, it is mobility, whether physical, psychological, or narrative, that is the main measure of female agency.

According to feminist geographers, space is never neutral; it is produced by social relations and produces gendered subjects. Doreen Massey, in her discussion of space, place and gender, claims that "the spatial is socially constructed and is always already gendered" (3). The domestic space of the immigrant household is a condensation of multiple aspects of power: race, class, nationality, and gender. The home is where the culture is reproduced and transmitted from one generation to another, and the place where patriarchal norms are reproduced and transmitted, notwithstanding the opposition of the host culture, for South Asian women migrants. In Mukherjee's, Divakarami's and Lahiri's women, the space between domestic enclosure and social mobility is the defining space, an arena that charts the psychic toll of living on a gendered geography.

Wife is a conceptual novel about a woman, Dimple Dasgupta, whose identity is structured around the possibility of marriage. Dimple's mind is already filled with stories of Bengali femininity: the social scripts of marriage, in which she daydreams about "a brilliant and fair and rich" husband, as marriage is the resolution of her destiny and self-fulfilment (Mukherjee 3). The irony Mukherjee sets up is structural: Dimple wants what will kill her. On emigrating to New York with her husband, Amit, the physical geography of America does not free her but mirrors and deepens the domestic enclosures she had lived in in Calcutta. The Queens apartment is a sort of psychological cage, and each wall is a limitation on the world she can be in. The escalating violence in Dimple's life – her dreams of killing, the murder of Amit – is the most extreme response possible to what are the only routes left open for a woman who has no other ways out? Mukherjee is not interested in romanticising this resistance; it's pathology, just as it is a protest. However, violence is a boundary condition; it is the moment when enforced immobility comes alive as explosive mobility.

Immigration is an inseparable part of the gendering of domestic space in Wife. Some of Mukherjee's pre-migration fiction has been criticised for its grim view of assimilation, wherein South Asian women are doubly marginalised: by the racism of the Americans and by the patriarchy of South Asia. Vijay Mishra's term "diasporic imaginary" is pertinent: Immigration is a "little India" that sustains the hierarchical social structures while they are being torn down in the subcontinent itself (426). Dimple's apartment in Queens is just like an enclave of Bengali domesticity in which the husband controls his Wife's movements, friendships, and aspirations largely unchallenged. In contrast, the American street is a space of racial and sexual threat, a space whose enclosure further legitimises Dimple's enclosure. Mukherjee's spatial politics are thus double-edged: America provides an ideological vision of female freedom which is systematically denied to the immigrant's material life.

The space and marriage dynamics are the same in Divakarami's Desirable Daughters, but the terms are more optimistic, albeit never without tension. The narrator, Tara Bhattacharjee, breaks free from an unhappy marriage to Somen Chatterjee and makes her own way in the San Francisco Bay Area. The novel's temporal structure is important: it is structured around Tara's "hindsight" later in the novel; this is a formal choice that embodies the agency thematised by the novel. To tell one's own story is to take on some kind of spatial authority; that is, to occupy the centre of one's geography, rather than the edges. However, Divakarami ensures that Tara's liberation is not absolute and unconditional. She feels strongly connected to her family's expectations of her, her obligations to the larger community, and the power of

her former husband. The Bay Area, as in Mukherjee's Queens, is a place of ambivalence, a place where Tara is partially liberated, but at the same time it is so full of the social pressures of the Bengali immigrant community.

A central theme in Desirable Daughters is the image of the tree-bride, Tara Lata, the originator of the heroine's family.One of the recurring images in Desirable Daughters is that of the tree-bride, Tara Lata, who is the progenitor of the heroine's family, as retold and identified by Tara Bhattacharjee. Tara Lata, who was dressed as a bride before being immolated as a child widow in the nineteenth century, symbolizes the other way to reduce female subjectivity to the patriarchal spatial logic; because she is literally absorbed in the landscape, her body is literally dissolved in the earth which is the confinement for all women who violate the norm of femininity. Reading Tara's fascination with this ancestry is a feminist archaeology: to recover and reanimate the agency denied to earlier generations of Bengali women. By taking part in Tara Lata's identity, the narrator is not just lamenting a historic failure; she is also calling it into being as a tool for her current struggle with patriarchy's geography. In the novel, one might say a genealogy of female resistance is played out – a pathway of agency from the colonial past to the diasporic present.

Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth is a more formal and stylistically neutral examination of the gendering of space, though not as analytical. Ruma, a lawyer who gave up her career to raise her young son after moving to Seattle with her husband Adam, is the subject of the title story in this collection. The spatial dynamics of Ruma's situation reflect those of Dimple and Tara: a relocation to a new city has exacerbated Ruma's enclosure at home, turning her into a house Wife from a professional woman. Ruma is not destroyed by this confinement; rather, she is diminished by it. She knows that she desires something greater than what she has. Lahiri brings this awareness into the characters of Ruma's widowed father, whose visits to Seattle are suffused with the unspoken question, what kind of life is worthwhile? The father, who is on a quest for a secret love and travels across Europe, is a mobility that Ruma has renounced with success. His freedom brings her cage to the forefront of the story, and the story ends with a sense of conflict between the domestic responsibilities she has taken on and the greater world she has been prepared to live in.

The Unaccustomed Earth is divided into two parts: the first focuses on Kaushik, and the second on Hema and Kaushik, whose relationship, which is not continuous but rather occurs at different moments and locations, spans decades and multiple continents. This relationship is the subject of Lahiri's longest exploration of mobility, loss, and gender. The conflict between romantic love and social obligation is a driving force in Hema's life, as she decides to marry a man from her very different Bengali background, in part out of a sense of duty and in part because Kaushik's romantic devotion has proven elusive. The first impression of the choice is that it is a capitulation to patriarchy's geography, a retreat from the logic of marriage as arranged by patriarchy, which is also called into play by Ruma's story in the novel. However, Lahiri is too cautious a writer to stand still. Hema's choice is offered as an act of agency, albeit an incomplete o,ne but she chooses the life that she believes can be m be as habitable is posse it, not a perfect one, as the narrative suggests that she may wait until she gets to that. For Lahiri, female agency is not the transcendence of social constraints but the way it is navigated.

In all three texts, the city, whether Calcutta or New York or San Francisco or Rome, is a "representational space" a lived geography that is material and at the same time symbolic, in which social relations are reproduced and contested (39). Females are always situated in complex and at times antagonistic intersections between the urban and themselves: they are drawn to the urban space it appears to offer, threatened by the racial and sexual dangers it poses, and trapped by the domestic architectures it creates. The domestic interior is the spatial form where the most effective restriction on female mobility occurs

through patriarchal marriage. The Queens apartment that Mukherjee lived in, the Bay Area home of Lahiri, and the Seattle home of Devakarami are all domestic spaces that have been moved from one geography to another, without any loss of their basic definition as enclosures. Together, these texts imply that the immigrant woman brings her domestic enclosure when she crosses the sea.

However, all three authors also find the potential for resistance in and through these domestic spaces. Whatever the nature of the act, murderous or otherwise, Dimple's act is a spatial transgression: a forced wandering from a geography of confinement. By retroactively telling her own story, Tara Bhattacharjee's performance is a remapping of her domestic history, which decentring the husband from the epicentre of its spatial landscape. The fact that Ruma's father's freedom is never explained further sows a seed of dissatisfaction in the text that is never resolved, to the point that the upward mobility of her father remains unfulfilled in the story. The conscious decision of an arranged marriage in Hema's case redefines compulsion as choice, and her effort to reclaim a little spatial autonomy, even within a very limited range of choices, is noteworthy. These gestures of liberation are not victory movements; they are a series of steps that are sometimes painful and always incomplete. However, they form a unified history of feminist spatial practice in 30 years of South Asian diasporic fiction.

The problem of language and voice in the narrative is always linked to these spatial dynamics. In all three works, narration is a spatial practice, a means of occupying and claiming territory, and the narration of the work is primarily from the perspective of female protagonists. Wife is written in free indirect discourse, a form that gives the distorted perceptions of Dimple's authority thatthey are denied in the social world of the novel; the form of the narrative establishes an interior sovereignty that balances out their social powerlessness at the level of representation. What makes Desirable Daughters intriguing is that the first-person perspective allows the reader to see themselves as the writer of their own story, rather than the story being written about them. In Lahiri's linked stories, the third-person voice is always ironic with respect to the interior world of the male characters, and always gives the interiority of female characters a richer and fuller representation. In other words, narrative geography meets and sometimes supersedes the material geography of the women's confinement, providing a space of self-authorship denied by the social world.

The historical trajectory of these three texts should also be mentioned. When Mukherjee's Wife was first published in 1975, the first wave of post-1965 South Asian immigration to the United States was beginning to coalesce. The novel's pessimistic portrayal of the female migrant experience is a snapshot of social realities at the time: a community that, in many ways, was still relatively new, largely middle-class, culturally cut off, and extremely concerned with preserving the social structure of the subcontinent as a shield against assimilation by the Americans. The second-generation South Asian American community, as seen in Desirable Daughters, is more economically stable, culturally aware, and ready to critically examine their own male-dominated perspectives. Lahiri's 2008 novel The Unaccustomed Earth, on the contrary, is a novel of the third cultural moment: an immigrant generation of South Asians who are fully Americanized into the profession, but are still marked by the emotional debris of immigrant life. These writings thus contain historically specific and structurally recurring spatial politics of gender.

These three texts created through dialogical reading provide a feminist cartography of the sustained and evolving South Asian diasporic experience. In all three pieces, marriage is not only a personal relationship but also a spatial configuration: a government of female bodies in space, a control of female movement that survives geographical movements. This immigration house is the main technology of governance, where cultural preservation, patriarchal power, and gender normativity are concentrated into one

architectural form. In this enclosed geography, Mukherjee, Divakarami and Lahiri trace the different paths along which their female characters attempt, albeit unsuccessfully in some cases, to extend their geographical horizons: by means of violence, by means of the story, by means of professional activity, by means of romantic love, and by means of the difficult and questionable choices by which the agency of women is exercised within the limits of patriarchy. Together, these texts are not just a literature of migration or a literature of gender, but a literature of gendered geography, consistent and continuous questioning of the spaces afforded women in society and the spaces they claim for themselves.

Finally, Wife, Desirable Daughters, and The Unaccustomed Earth show a dynamic and complex history of feminist spatial thinking in South Asian American fiction. In all three, marriage is a kind of spatial governance which disciplines female mobility, and female agency is found in the ability to remap, in part, the geographies of constraint in which their characters inhabit. How do the three narrators differ in their attitude to this remapping, in how hopeful they are about it Mukherjee is tragically hopeful, Divakarami is more optimistically resigned, and Lahiri is the characteristically ambivalent one who is part of the resigned and the hopeful? Together, they provide a strong and subtle description of what it means to be a woman who is a South Asian citizen, whose domestic geography is carried over the sea, and who lives her life negotiating boundaries.

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