

## **Spaces of Her Own: Agency in Cinematic Narratives of Urban Women**

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### **Abstract**

A cultural shift in the Hindi film industry is particularly signified through the progression that is witnessed in the nature of the female roles in mainstream cinema as well as independent cinema. Narratives forwarded by female voice and perspective are continuously being produced, that indeed presents a positive way forward in representing their hopes and desires. But the critical junctures of access, provision, rights, and desires are still fraught with inequalities which reflect the aspect of gender hierarchy in domestic, professional, and public spaces. In this paper, positionality of the women characters is read through the spaces they inhabit in Hindi films such as *Wake Up Sid* (2009), *Ship of Theseus* (2013), *Piku* (2015), and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017). In these films, urban environment and its structures intersect with female spatiality as the characters jettison certain ideologies and responsibilities to foster a feminine will to find happiness and comfort. The narratives here cede everyday victories to the female characters as they attempt to shape the space that resonates their subjectivity. The paper explores a certain facet of representation that deals with women in love with their space

over the narratives of struggle, tension, and violence, that generally define female oriented films.

**Keywords:** *Spatiality, Love, Modern Woman, City, Situatedness, Habitus, Spots of Time*

### **Introduction**

“No account of our capacity to express ourselves symbolically can avoid addressing the multiple ways in which spatiality informs our relationships with others” (Richardson 2). Space as an entity is an active agent in shaping the meaning of our lives and gain an adequate sense of our positionality in social and cultural contexts. Spatiality is a human aspect of understanding space; socially and culturally contextualised spatial realities inform subjective experiences and vice versa that is foundational to the very existence of practices, systems, and institutions.

Incorporation of body within the discourse of space allows a rooted understanding of how we inhabit, traverse, and construct space. The perceptual and experiential aspects of the embodied subject emphasise the thresholds that designate spaces and the performance expected therein. Division of spaces into private and public highlights the particular ways in which the society organizes itself for sustaining certain hierarchies and power mechanisms. Body within space charges it with the dynamics of creation, appropriation, and transformation. To apprehend space is to also apprehend body and how it is precisely situated and expressed. Experience of space then is directly relational to the presence and expression of body within it.

The development discourse of a city is connected to multifaceted construction and organization of space to encapsulate different groups of society. The dynamics of urban culture is meticulously shaped to ensure what it visibilizes and what it occludes in terms of access, power, affordability, and desirability. The city represents both positive and negative attributes: growth, opportunity, and freedom on the one hand and isolation, struggle, and chaos on the other. Sounds, smells, and places within cities reflect the lives and livelihoods of those living. The inhabited parts of a city are thus sites for social interaction, everyday negotiations, and dynamic experiences. The question of assimilation then is of one's involvement in the public space; access, affordability, ownership, and utility, are the conditions that determine the extent as well as limits of engagement with public space. Along

with tense negotiations with the social space for survival, there are certain personal connections that are built as we live and feel some spaces as our own. Focussing the premise to address feminist positionality, the paper attempts to study the representation of love with one's space through identity creation and assimilation in the urban space in select Hindi films. Films like *Wake Up Sid* (2009), *Ship of Theseus* (2013), *Piku* (2015), *Tumhari Sulu* (2017), among others have introduced new reflections on the space inhabited by a woman which privileges female protagonist's agency, authority, love, and comfort over struggle and dissociation.

### **Gender and Space**

The notion of gendered spaces is associated with the structures of opportunities available to women and the systems that permit or prohibit them from perusing certain pursuits of work and leisure. Leslie Kern in the book *Feminist City* states that, "women still experience the city through a set of barriers-physical, social, economic, and symbolic-that shape their daily lives in ways that are deeply (although not only) gendered" (12). Feelings of independence and fear conjoin the experience of women both in professional and everyday social space. The embodied experience of gender is an imminent agent in traversing through spaces; it is on body the experiences imprint themselves as it centres the lived experience. The purpose here is to examine the nature of women's experience in spaces and places and to show how these differences themselves are part of the social constitution of gender.

Gendered discourse on city spaces provides critical interventions on social change. Socio-cultural transitions imagined and experimented within cinematic space present a novel image of relation building, identity construction, and challenge to dominant power structures. The concept of gendered spaces, then, refers not only to presence and absence...[it] is connected with the use of space, with power relations and with meaning. (Joos, Horn, and Ostendorf 215)

Women narratives contextualised in the city space present both fondness and struggle with their world; deliberation upon their place in city can allow a radical outlook of the city's structure and its functioning. Varied narratives focussed on women are representative of dissonance, the challenges women face in their daily negotiations in the city, but a focus on how they are piece-by-piece able to build their life and find a harmony with their surroundings is also a way of confronting the patriarchal contours around them. Pinning this thought, the paper will concentrate on new reflections on feminist space within Hindi cinema that emphasises on harmony with material and ideological aspects of their life.

### **Imagery of Gender in Hindi Cinema**

“Women’s position within society, whether measured as power, prestige, economic position, or social rank, is related to spatial segregation insofar as existing physical arrangements facilitate or inhibit the exchange of knowledge between those with greater and those with lesser status” (Spain 137). Representation of gender in Hindi Cinema has been mostly flawed in showcasing limited role of women in the public space. Exemplars of positive interrelations between the female subject and the socio-cultural context in these films (*Wake up Sid*, *Ship of Theseus*, *Piku*, *Tumhari Sulu*) are limited to presenting their work and vocation as an inconsequential appendage to the dominant male narrative.<sup>1</sup>

Male dominant cinematic representations have resulted in institutionalisation of spatial arrangements as women are far from producing, accessing, and processing socially and culturally valid knowledge. New Indian cinema (or parallel cinema), from the 1950s, initiated a change in portrayal of women from mainstream cinema through substantial roles in films like *Bazaar*, *Maya Darpan*, *Sparsh*, *Mandi*, *Masoom*, *Arth*, among others. These films focussed on curating a space for women’s voices and identities. They represented their struggle with domesticity, social order, as well as the political systems that continued to oppress them. Even today, the representations savoured by most of the women oriented films is of struggle against the persisting conventions. The intent towards showcasing one’s relative harmony with the space is still sparsely evident, maybe just in scenes, and not in the entirety of the characters’ arc.

Intersection between domesticity and economy often produces a structure that distances women from public space, relegating them to responsibilities of sustaining and perpetuating rituals and practices that are not of their making. Hindi films of the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century curated a shift from such portrayal with bold films like *Chandni Bar*, *Chameli*, *Chak De! India*, *Kahaani*, *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, among the multitude.<sup>2</sup> But the concern that was still underrepresented was women’s efforts in curating and living in spaces that

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<sup>1</sup> Women as psychologists, doctors, in films just for the sake of it without any narrative contribution

<sup>2</sup> Liberalisation introduced a distinct identity and sustained role and presence for the Hindi Film heroine. This identity did not limit to the glam or submissive heroine characters supporting the hero-villain conflict leading dominance but have a power to portray the heroine in every shade a women possess - fearless, independent, ambitious, strong, adventurous, fashionista, sassy, serious, funny, emotional and much more thus allowing to take a fresh look at the protagonist characters played by women and introspect the type cast of films perpetuated earlier (Sail 57).

identify with their happiness. Coming to terms with one's agency in ensuring comfort and belongingness is akin to creating an empowered feminist space.

### **Loving One's Space**

Space and place are "basic components of the lived world" (Tuan 3). An individual's efforts towards personalising a space turns it into a place; this journey from space to place involves giving meaning to the lived reality through a certain significance accorded to surrounding environment. To have a place of one's own, very similar to Woolf's idea of "a room of one's own," is to construct a point in space that reflects symbolic and emotional value. A place gains its identity through the agent fashioning it. Introducing a new perspective to the imaginary of the modern, the films undertaken showcase a distinct cinematic agency for female protagonists to radically transform their space.

There are only a handful representations of a happy woman with self-assertion of her joy. Songs like "Aaj fir Jeene ki Tamanna hai," "Hawa Hawaii," "Aaj Main Upar," "Awaara Bhawre," "Patakha Guddi," among few others, embody the fun and freedom felt by the female entity. But majority productions still foreground the struggle and pain that is fundamental to their experience of the social and domestic world. So, "it is not untrue that even after decades of struggle, women cannot claim the right to fun" (Phadke 17). All the films considered in the paper offer a different tangent to the common visuality of the denouement of women who attempt to challenge the limits.

Multiple tangents interact with each other in building one's space; from an active perception of the space, owning the material resources, to enjoying an inward oneness with the place. The films undertaken have a common trope of professional women whose work is not tangential to the storyline but is rather central to how and why they move outside the domestic sphere. The development of narrative explores the image of modern woman, traversing through public and private space with an informed as well as authoritative stature. In *Wake Up Sid*, the female protagonist Aisha is a content writer who has migrated from Kolkata to Mumbai to make it on her own. She buys her own house, decorates it according to her taste, enjoys doing her household chores, and has a passion for reading and writing that translates in her job profile too. The scenes particularly focusing on Aisha fashioning her space highlight her resilience and joy in her new space within a challenging socio-economic climate. Clare Rishbeth's Introduction to the *Companion to Public Space* is resonant of Aisha's positionality in the new city of Mumbai where she states, "new neighborhood is not known: it holds no memories and is uncertain in its affordances. Belonging and un-belonging is personal and embodied, experienced in the efforts of new learning, in sensory confusion, in the difficulty of

anticipating ways to fit in” (27). In one of the scenes Aisha asks Sid (played by Ranbir Kapoor) “Tumhe kabhi laga hai ki apna ghar ho, apna khana khud banao, apne paise khud kamao or udao, sab kuch apna banaya hua ho? Independence, you know what I mean.” The film indeed doesn’t ignore the fears of residing alone in a metropolitan city, but profoundly pronounces the importance of a liberal space for a woman.

In *Ship of Theseus*, Aaliya is a blind Egyptian photographer who is shown clicking around the city in her introductory scenes. She perceives the spaces through smells, sounds, and textures, interacting with people from different social groups to gain knowledge of the inhabited spaces; it is through her camera “informal practices of living in Indian urban spaces are visualised” with a nuanced sensitivity (Devasundaram 72). Vocation of the female photographer Aaliya is at the centre of the narrative who is exploring the city not from the position of an outsider but somebody who is attempting to understand the life as it is lived by different social sections. The protagonist belongs to an economically stable strata and is not inhibited by her blindness in following her passion for her work. She is seemingly protected from the sexual gaze of the crowd by her foreign facial features, western clothes, and expensive camera, who are shown to be more curious about her movement and work. The introspective ethos of the film is manifested through the space of articulation and expression of her ideas with her boyfriend/husband as well as the journalist who interviews her during the exhibition of her work. Her manoeuvrings around the city concentrate on the role of space in conditioning the possibilities of her artistic endeavours, the exhibition has her artistic impression and experience with blindness, and her home is the comfort zone where she finds love and a comfortable space to connect with herself. Whether it is outside or inside her personal space, Aaliya has the freedom to express herself. Spatial configurations then are not just backdrop to the main plot line rather they are fundamental to shaping the stories she desires to curate. Director Kiran Rao has empowered the character with an agency over her aesthetic and lifestyle choices, which represents her inclusion in the city, carrying the responsibility for herself.

From within the interstices of major Bollywood productions come certain cinematic ventures that put effort to continually discover new configurations and meanings of spaces and intervene in cultural production with a difference. While mainstream cinema generally negates alternate worldviews and representations, certain films like *Ship of Theseus* orient the discourse towards the reimagination of socio-cultural contexts. Films like *Piku* and *Tumhari*

*Sulu* have women characters closely bound to domestic sphere. But the triumph of such films lies in women's "transformation from homebound behenjais to new women of the world developing a diverse set of intellectual and emotional experiences in public spaces/spheres." (Anwer and Arora 150) Piku, the titular character, single handedly manages the household and her father's health issues, which ultimately disrupts her social life. The alternate imagery of a single, working, modern woman, as against the club hopping, party girl trope, is well-established in the film as Piku runs an architecture firm, travels alone through cabs, goes on dates with men, and has had self-proclaimed consensual sexual relations. The film's narrative is delved into the idea of control over space. Her house is managed through her efforts and she has an agency in taking decisions about her ancestral home too. In different conversations with Rana (played by Irfan Khan) she claims to be relaxed and unapologetically owes up to her annoying and weird demeanour. The domestic and the city space represents work and struggle, but always with a feeling of love and belongingness. She drinks wine and dances, she takes breaks from work and loiters in the mall, her home is where the emotions of love and care resonate, and the city (her birthplace Kolkata) is where she finds her childhood. In a similar vein, Sulochana (played by Vidya Balan) in *Tumhari Sulu* also has home as her situated spatiality. But the development of the narrative transforms this situatedness into exciting possibilities for expanding one's horizon without having to give up the essential locatedness of Being. Aspiring by nature, she is fascinated by her air hostesses neighbours and wishes to be a working woman but she is also shown to be happily engaged in her chores during afternoons. Her job, as a radio jockey for an erotic night show, becomes a pivot to bring to focus a certain perspective on sexuality and modernity that is not centred around body. Her work along with her locatedness in her home is important to the film to highlight the contentment and joy she feels in a stable household. As an instance, in the first scene of the film she is shown to be balancing the lemon on spoon in a lemon and spoon race. While the other participants are shown to be in a hurry to win, she focusses on maintaining a balance. Her approach to life is resonant in this scene as this foregrounds her pleasure in maintains a stability in life for winning.

The spatiality of these characters is not situated but is rather 'becoming' with the circumstances. Spaces in the films discussed above define the worlds in which the female characters find joy. The space become an extension of their gestures and intentions instead of being objective landscapes to their narrative, which cedes them significant victories.

### **Modalities of Entity through Movement**

Cinematic imagining has often centred home as a gendered space in which women function and flout. But, the operatives of public spaces and the subjective sensibility to assimilate in them is often dissociated from the female subject. “Tangled up sense of excitement and danger, freedom and fear, opportunity no threat, contours so much feminist thinking and writing about cities” (Kern 18). In this parlance, limited access of the female subject to the social spaces is often considered a personal limitation or incapacity to handle the pressures of the public life. But contrarily, it is the society’s inability to provide opportunities and avenues of incorporation to the socially marginalized. The filmic instances of men holding women’s hand to cross the road, protecting them in crowded places, safeguarding them from teasers, holding their shopping bags, has aggrandised the narrative of masculine control over the public space. As a challenge to such renditions, the narratives in these films locate agency of women protagonists in exploring and inhabiting spaces. The motif of self-discovery and finding one’s happiness is routed through making their way across the city.

In films like *Wake Up Sid*, *Ship of Theseus*, *Piku*, and *Tumhari Sulu*, spatiality represents a syncretic nature of space. The public space is relational and acts as a domain of performativity of their acumen for relation building and professional growth. Female protagonists in these films feel the effect of space on their physical and psychological state. Their everyday habitus is configured through an engagement with spatial practices like travelling, shopping, eating out, and working. The dynamics of emancipation are shaped through the scope of action within the space. Aisha balances her life around a demanding job, even when it is much beneath her knowledge base. The vibrant energy of her office and the city of Mumbai keeps her motivated to find her voice. The spaces curated in the film have almost no sexist underpinnings, which allows the audience too to focus on the harmony Aisha is trying to develop with the city she has just moved to instead of being disappointed by the general deeply gendered nature of city spaces.

“[...] different bodies have different needs and experience the same space differently, depending on their gender, class, age, sexuality and physical ability” (Phadke 133). Space is also fundamentally correlated to behavioural and attitudinal orientation. The emotionality attached to spaces is a testimony of one’s sense of belongingness. As an instance, Sulu, a spirited housewife, finds a syncretic connection between her personality and her work as a radio jockey. Even while hosting her show, she chops vegetables and does other chores.

Thereby, the image of urban work environment and typical “saree wali bhabhi” coalesce in the plot delineating a new avatar of Indian middle-class femininity. The non-sexual representation of Sulu in her workspace, distanced from the manicured suited up image of professional women, reflects her comfort in a space that is ostensibly beyond her access. Fitting in might be difficult but her everyday confidence is pivotal to understanding her own position on both the fronts of home and work.

The motif of self-discovery and a desire to explore the city are central to the narrative of Aaliya in *Ship of Theseus*. As a blind photographer, she is unusually confident while moving through the chaotic city of Mumbai. She interacts with people, learns about places through different sense experiences, records her experiences, and interprets the energy of a particular space through her photographs. Her photographs are interweaved with narratives as she captures the urban space in its rawness. Her work is an indispensably solitary endeavour which breaks the dominance of visual perception. As the film progresses, her sight is revived but the insight with which she used to capture the essence of spaces is apparently lost. Her blindness afforded a personal journey of the city, dissociated from the interventions of visible surfaces. *Piku* is slightly different in its context as the film uses the trope of travel to emphasise the need for change and refreshment in the daily course of life. Majority of her movement around the city is for work but amidst the rush she enjoys lazy intervals, roaming around malls alone. Shopping malls or work spaces are generally seen as public spaces where women have access to the public sphere, it is where they express their freedom and independence, in addition to the capacity for consumption; “women’s body language in malls demonstrates a sense of belonging that is not really visible in other kinds of public spaces” (Why Loiter? 64). For *Piku*, it is also a reprieve from the work and domestic schedule that binds her. Experiential dynamics of travel and the effect of the aura of the cities on people is the major plot tangent that conjoins romantic feelings and thoughts of both *Piku* and Rana. In one of the scenes, while driving around the city Rana reminds *Piku* the necessity of holding on to places, “Maybe this is the way forward, issi ko log development bolte hain. But apni roots, agar unko ukhaad do, toh kya bachega.” This scene is an important reminder to construct and sustain spaces that resonate identity and memory.

## Conclusion

Through poetic “Spots of Time” Wordsworth “recalls various places that affected him in time past and still strongly modify his consciousness” (Hartman 145). The tendency of humanising spaces is a process of acknowledging the interconnectedness that undergirds them. Private and public are connected through a consciousness of personalising the spaces.

The dynamics of this personalisation involves appreciating the spaces for both stasis and change that they represent. The renovating spirit that a particular space evokes is embraced by all the women characters in the films traced in this paper. City experience can stand for both crisis and abundance. The lens used to study these characters highlights city to be an equivalent of freedom and agency available to women to develop their own positionality within the vastness of the landscape. Mutating their position in the social-economic and cultural matrix of the city is thus an attempt at loving one's space and reciprocating a certain generosity towards the city that has opened itself up to create bonds.

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