

Reviewing Gender Specific Spatial Construction from the Women's Perspective: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine the domestic space in Indian women's gendered spaces in the domestic and the public arena. It is an attempt to understand the dynamics of strength and control in a non-gendered political space through which women's agency in terms of mobility, utterance, desire, and identity is directed tangibly and intangibly. In this century there is much that will challenge the conventional view of the domestic space in Indian women's perspective. It will redefine the views of space where the women stereotypes have been found to be belonging. The objective of the paper is to highlight and argue for a topography of domesticity in Indian and the developing world architecture through the thresholds and confinement experienced in traditionally ordained domestic spaces. This essay will use feminist spatial theory to examine how the subjectivity of women is mediated through spatial confinement. The author argues that the domestic space for Indian women is a location that marks both physical confinement and the interiorization of psychology through surveillance. The politics of space is intertwined with the politics of gender, and it is through geographics of homes in India that patriarchy sustains itself unspoken and yet a heavy silence.

Keywords: Domestic space, Women's spaces, Patriarchy, Surveillance, Respectability, Indian women's fiction.

Introduction

Most cultural discourses have perceived the "home" to connote protection and security. Within the Indian social framework, the home is the repository of the moral core of tradition itself. However, in contrast to the accepted and ordained thoughts of home as a haven of solace and protection, for women this same idealization of home as a protected site has often been conceived as the site of patriarchal domination. The implications of home as a source of shelter as well as gendered architecture is amply represented in the domestic spaces apparent in Indian architectural edifices.

The relationship between gender and space has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within feminist geography, architecture, sociology, urban studies, and cultural studies. Space is no longer viewed merely as a physical entity but as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by power relations, cultural norms, and gendered experiences. Women's experiences within domestic, public, and institutional spaces often differ significantly from those of men due to historical patterns of exclusion, patriarchy, and social expectations. Consequently, the study of gender-specific spatial construction examines how built environments are designed, occupied, perceived, and transformed through women's lived experiences.

The concept of gendered space suggests that spatial arrangements are neither neutral nor universal. Rather, they reflect and reinforce social relations, including gender hierarchies. Feminist scholars argue that architectural and urban forms frequently embody masculine values while marginalizing women's needs related to safety, accessibility, mobility, care work, and social participation. Contemporary research therefore focuses on creating inclusive and gender-responsive spaces that recognize diverse experiences of women.

It can be exemplified from these sites how the body politic regulates the mobility, voices, desires, and work sphere of women. The home, is promoted as a disciplinary space, which maintains control over

women. It is the transcribing of emotions like control, moral surveillance, and emotional labor and several such subtle practices. Thus, it is not merely a question of where women reside, but also what manner of space they inhabit. It is a sum total of whether they enjoy a right to privacy, what mechanisms of boundary negotiation and exit from such confines are available and sanctioned. Resistance by women appears less through acts of escape and more through silence, withdrawal, appropriation of interior spaces, or a traversal of thresholds never intended to be crossed. Through the theoretical formulation of home as an architecture of control, the parameters of empowerment relocate the concept of resistance in the spatial negotiation of patriarchy.

Theoretical Concepts

The domestic realm has been an area of intense study because over the centuries Indian women's lives have encompassed marriage, domestic work, and womanly duties that provided the basic frameworks of women's lives. Several researchers have viewed domesticity as cultural reproduction wherein women are caretakers of tradition, respectability, and morality. Here, the domestic space transcends from being merely private to an important political institution, as patriarchy is made more sustainable and domestic. Domestic space, therefore, needs to be decoded as a structured environment. The organization of space in terms of who owns a particular space like a room, who holds keys, who can move unnoticed, remains closely tied with gendered authority. In Indian circumstances, this might get further conditioned by class and caste hegemonies, determining how women occupy both domestic as well as public spaces.

Domestic space is articulated according to the power relations of gender, which frame movement, privacy, authority, and access. In the predominantly patriarchal society, the home can be seen as an institution of containment, of regulating, and of making woman accountable to cultural narratives of female virtue. The practice of feminist narrative ethics stresses the importance of complexity with regard to ethics as well as agency that is restricted. In other words, while the domestic lives of women might be interpreted from dual parameters of resistance and surrender, the ethics of survival under limitation becomes more important from the stand point of feminist ethics. Space is never experienced in a homogeneous way. The factors of caste, class, community, and regional cultures demarcate and mark the unbalanced provision of privacy and freedom. Movement and visibility in space get defined by the markers of morality, in the sense that the woman's movement and visibility in space provide. These frameworks together enable the domestic space to be interpreted not simply as a location but an actor in feminist discourse. The domestic space becomes a location that intersects the architectural structures to inscribe patriarchy into space itself, in the form of doors, kitchens, bedrooms, and borders. Resistance becomes feminist space, which is therefore the negotiation of the location of feminism in domestic space, homes that are not shelters but territories.

The domestic space is where women are controlled not only through confinement but also through surveillance. In most Indian households, a woman's presence is constantly obligated to answer: in which place? What activity? At what time? How does one speak? How does one move? This surveillance happens through observance, moralizing, and community chatter. The domestic space becomes a place where women are educated in the projected risks of visibility and the conditional nature of privacy. The house itself is also an apparatus of discipline. Kitchens, bedrooms, and courtyards are fixated as gendered spaces, there are spaces for women, for labor, for caring, but very rarely for leisure or freedom. Women's space movements are frequently meaningful and disciplined: to serve, to clean, to fulfil their various ascribed and expected duties.

The control of space, therefore, at some juncture becomes the control of women's lives in ways that are subtle, constant, and seemingly non-violent. Control appears most clearly at the threshold—the door, corridor, balcony, gate, or window between inside and outside. The threshold is the symbol of the boundaries of women's freedom. This marks the point where the freedom of movement becomes the object of moral judgment and where the freedom of women's movement becomes the subject of social interpretation. Going out necessitates a reason, a sense of duty, necessity, or permission. Even the act of walking out of one's house becomes an ethical event. Women encounter mobility as negotiation

rather than as a right. Education and employment become only restricted forms of mobility— within the boundaries of respectability.

Review of Literature

Early feminist scholarship challenged the assumption that spatial organization was gender-neutral. McDowell (1983) argued that urban studies traditionally ignored gender as a significant structuring element of social and spatial relations. Her work emphasized the interconnectedness of production and reproduction, highlighting how women's domestic responsibilities influenced their access to urban opportunities and public spaces.

Building upon feminist geography, Staeheli and Martin (2000) examined how gender influences the social construction of space and place. Their work emphasized that spaces are shaped through social interactions and power relations, making gender a central factor in understanding spatial organization. They argued that feminist geography shifted attention from merely studying women in space to understanding how gender itself constructs spatial experiences.

Bondi and Rose (2003) further contributed by reviewing Anglo-American feminist urban geography. Their analysis demonstrated how urban environments are produced through gendered social relations and how feminist perspectives challenge conventional urban theories that overlook women's experiences. They emphasized the need to analyze cities as gendered landscapes where social identities and spatial practices are continuously negotiated.

Feminist perspectives on spatial construction

Feminist scholars have consistently argued that spatial arrangements reflect patriarchal social structures. The home, workplace, streets, educational institutions, and recreational areas often embody assumptions regarding gender roles. Women's movements have therefore advocated for spatial designs that support equality, participation, and autonomy.

Bryant and Livholts (2007) explored the gendering of space through memory work, demonstrating how women's personal experiences reveal the symbolic and material dimensions of spatial exclusion. Their study highlighted themes such as restricted movement, sexualization of public spaces, bodily experiences, and spatial surveillance. The authors argued that space is experienced through emotions, memories, and social power relations, making women's narratives essential for understanding spatial inequalities.

Feminist scholars have also emphasized that women's spatial experiences are shaped by intersectional factors such as class, race, ethnicity, age, and culture. Consequently, gender-specific spatial construction cannot be understood through a universal model of womanhood but must consider diverse social contexts.

Gender and the built environment

Research on the built environment demonstrates that architectural design frequently reproduces gender norms. Traditional housing designs often reinforce domestic roles by associating women with caregiving and household responsibilities. Feminist architects challenge these assumptions by advocating flexible and inclusive spatial arrangements.

Xu et al. (2024) traced the genealogy of feminist architecture and argued that feminist interventions have transformed architectural discourse by emphasizing inclusivity, accessibility, emotional experience, and gender-sensitive design. Their study identified three major dimensions of gendered spatial analysis:

1. The relationship between space and gender identity.
2. Emotional experiences and expression within space.
3. Power relations embedded in architectural environments.

The authors further noted that feminist architecture has evolved from advocating women's participation in architectural practice to promoting gender-neutral and inclusive urban environments. Research within architectural studies has increasingly recognized that women experience spaces differently due to caregiving responsibilities, mobility constraints, and concerns regarding personal safety. Consequently, gender-responsive architecture seeks to integrate women's perspectives into design processes.

Women's experiences in public space

Public spaces have long been analyzed as sites where gender inequalities become visible. Women's access to streets, transportation systems, parks, marketplaces, and workplaces is often mediated by perceptions of safety and social control.

Bryant and Livholts (2007) highlighted how women frequently negotiate unfamiliar environments through strategies of caution and self-surveillance due to fears of harassment and violence. Their findings revealed that public spaces often operate as gendered environments where women's mobility is restricted through both explicit and implicit mechanisms.

Recent studies on women's geographies of spatial encounters have expanded this perspective by examining everyday experiences within urban environments. Amini, Faizi, and Khakzand (2023) found that women's spatial experiences are influenced by environmental conditions, social interactions, urban design, and cultural norms. Their review emphasized that safety, accessibility, and social inclusion remain central concerns within gender-sensitive planning.

Gender, mobility, and urban space

Mobility is a critical dimension of gendered spatial construction. Women's travel patterns frequently differ from men's due to caregiving duties, employment structures, and safety concerns. Macedo et al. (2021) demonstrated that gender significantly influences urban mobility patterns. Their study revealed systematic differences in travel diversity and access to opportunities among men and women. The researchers found that socioeconomic inequalities often intensify gender-based mobility constraints, thereby limiting women's participation in economic and social activities.

Contemporary urban planning increasingly recognizes that transportation systems designed primarily around male commuting patterns may fail to accommodate women's multidestination travel behaviours associated with childcare, household responsibilities, and part-time employment.

Feminist urbanism and spatial justice

The emergence of feminist urbanism has shifted attention toward creating cities that accommodate diverse gendered experiences. Feminist urban planners advocate participatory design processes that include women in decision-making and prioritize safety, accessibility, and care infrastructure. Recent research highlights the transformative role of women in shaping inclusive urban environments. Gender-sensitive planning has been associated with improved mobility, enhanced safety, and greater participation in public life. Scholars argue that feminist urbanism contributes to spatial justice by challenging exclusionary planning practices and promoting equitable access to urban resources.

The concept of spatial justice further emphasizes that equitable cities require not only equal physical access but also recognition of diverse experiences and needs. Feminist approaches therefore advocate for integrating gender perspectives into policy-making, architecture, transportation, and urban governance.

Research Gaps in Existing Literature

Although substantial progress has been made in understanding gendered spaces, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature originates from Western contexts, creating a need for more studies focusing on South Asian and Indian socio-cultural environments. Second, limited research examines the intersection of gender with caste, class, religion, and regional identity in shaping spatial experiences. Third, empirical studies exploring women's perceptions of specific architectural environments such as educational institutions, commercial complexes, and public transport hubs remain insufficient.

Furthermore, while feminist architecture has generated theoretical frameworks, practical implementation within urban planning and architectural practice remains uneven. There is also a need for qualitative studies that foreground women's voices and lived experiences in evaluating spatial environments. The reviewed literature establishes that space is a socially constructed and gendered phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, power relations, and everyday practices. Feminist geographers, architects, and urban scholars have demonstrated that women's experiences of space

differ significantly from men's due to issues of safety, mobility, representation, and access. Contemporary scholarship increasingly advocates gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches to architectural design and urban planning.

The literature indicates that understanding women's perspectives is essential for developing equitable spatial environments. However, contextual studies examining gender-specific spatial construction within diverse cultural settings remain limited. Therefore, further analytical research is required to investigate how women perceive, negotiate, and transform spatial environments in contemporary society.

The power nexus in gendered spaces

The power-delivery in domestic architecture is based on the structure or the enclosed space which may be any room. For example, the kitchen is ideal and has been idealized to represent the realm of sustenance, but in terms of labor extraction, it is the main place where gender roles are extracted. The role involves women's bodies being organized in terms of preparation, serving, and cleaning. It is a place where one is made to work, and the work is presented in the form of righteousness. The bedroom is also a politicized space. The bedroom is more than a private domain, it is an area in which marriages are enforced, desire is negotiated, and consent can, in fact, be seen to be multi-faceted. The privacy of women, in relation to the bedroom, can get constructed in terms of emotional mandates, reproductive burdens, or again surveillance. Sleeping can also become conditional. "Other spaces, the courtyard, living room, and so on, the prayer room, are imbued with ethical connotations." In other spaces, such as the courtyard, living room, or prayer room, there are ethical implications of women's access to these spaces as regulated by elder members or hierarchical roles along gender lines in the family. Thus, space becomes a structure that judges legitimacy. Women's agency also manifests as a form of space claiming and not merely as space-sharing.

The domestic space typically teaches women to speak softly, to speak only select words, or to speak not at all. Speaking is censored, contradiction is punished, and speaking out is equated with disobedience. Silence, on the other hand, sustains belonging. Thus, the home can appropriately be described as a factory of silence, a space in which women learn to spatially inscribe silence into their survival. "The domestic silence is also bound up with respectability. "The respectable woman is one who does not argue, complain, or manifest injustice outside." Silence secures domestic reputation, concealing the conflict from public view."

Home becomes a space where patriarchy gets reproduced through moral narratives. Home is not merely personal—home is institutional. Home is the site of the construction of gender roles, of silence and of disciplinary space that controls the talk, desire, movement, and identity of the woman. Patriarchy is not only an ideology but is incorporated in space, in terms of space and rhythm, and is translated into the woman's confinement as virtue and silence as propriety. Domestic architecture helps to maintain this patriarchy subtly, constantly, and persistently. Domestic spaces, which could be shared by all people, become private by virtue of domestic architecture.

Significance of the Indian home and its architectural significance

Homes are more than walls and windows — they are the silent witnesses of the inherent traditions, expectations, and personal identity. In most Indian homes, togetherness is celebrated with joint families in open courtyards and multi-purpose verandas where all gather, celebrate and rejoice. These spaces nurture families and generations within the home but most often they tend to overlook one key ingredient which is a woman's personal space. Architecture, when designed intentionally, can create spaces of autonomy, reflection, and purpose for women — whether she's working from home, caring for others, or simply trying to find a moment of her own.

The unspoken traditions in architecture

In Indian households, especially those built around multigenerational living, the spatial hierarchy often pushes women into roles defined by utility.

In the light of enormous and rapid shifts in theoretical, historical and critical debates, particularly with respect to feminism, understanding architecture in relation to gender demands an urgent contextualisation. A major change in thinking about gender, feminism, space and architecture has

occurred in the last five or so years and it has become vital to place current discussions within an intellectual history, enabling some understanding to be gained of the basis and development of these contemporary ideas.

The built environment is a cultural artifact. It is shaped by human intention and intervention, a living archaeology through which we can extract the priorities and beliefs of the decision-makers in our society. Both the process through which we build and the forms themselves embody cultural values and imply standards of behaviour which affect all. From early childhood women have been taught to assume the role of 'homemaker', 'housekeeper', and 'housewife'.

The home, long considered women's special domain, reinforces sex role stereotypes and subtly perpetuates traditional views of family. From the master bedroom to the head of the table, the 'man of the house/breadwinner' is afforded places of authority, privacy (his own study), and leisure (a hobby shop, a special lounge chair). A homemaker has no inviolable space of her own. She is attached to spaces of service. She is a hostess in the living room, a cook in the kitchen, a mother in the children's room, a lover in the bedroom, a chauffeur in the garage. The house is a spatial and temporal metaphor for conventional role playing. The acceptance and expression of these traditional cultural roles and attitudes still persist in the design, if not the use, of almost all domestic architecture. In being exclusively identified with the home, women are associated with traits of nurturance, cooperation, subjectivity, emotionalism, and fantasy, while 'man's world'—the public world of events and 'meaningful' work—is associated with objectivity, impersonalization, competition, and rationality. This fragmentation, this segregation of the public and private spheres according to sex roles reinforces an emotionally monolithic stereotype of women and men. find a new architectural language in which the 'words', 'grammar', and 'syntax' synthesize work and play, intellect and feeling, action and compassion.

Women's lives are profoundly affected by the design and use of public spaces and buildings, transportation systems, neighbourhoods, and housing. Discriminatory laws, governmental regulations, cultural attitudes, informal practices, and lack of awareness by professionals have created conditions which reflect and reinforce women's second-class status. Women are perceived as having very little to do with public space. In public buildings and spaces both physical and cultural barriers exclude women with children. A woman with a child in a stroller, trying to get through a revolving door or a subway turnstile, is a 'handicapped' person. Public places rarely provide space where infants can be breast-fed or have their diapers changed—the implication being that mothers and children should be at home where they belong. Public transportation is used by those with the least access to automobiles, namely the young, the aged, minorities, and low-income workers. While men also fall into these categories, almost twice as many women as men rely on public transportation to get to their jobs in the 12 largest metropolitan areas of the country. The built environment is largely the creation of white, masculine subjectivity. It is neither value-free nor inclusively human. Feminism implies that we fully recognize this environmental inadequacy and proceed to think and act out of that recognition.

One of the most important tasks of the women's movement is to make visible the full meaning of our experiences and to reinterpret and restructure the built environment in those terms. We will not create fully supportive, life-enhancing environments until our society values those aspects of human experience that have been devalued through the oppression of women, and we must work with each other to achieve this. These are feminist concerns which have critical dimensions that are both societal and spatial. They will require feminist activism as well as architectural expertise to insure a solution. A number of academic disciplines—in particular, anthropology, cultural and visual studies, geography, history and philosophy—have now developed extensive and sophisticated methodologies informed by gender concerns and feminist politics. Furthermore, they have embarked on a series of interdisciplinary exchanges, thus not only creating developments in gender within existing disciplines, but also irrevocably changing the nature of gender discourse.

Conclusions

Since discussions about the gendering of space as public and private emerged in relation to the term 'built environment' rather than 'architecture' as it is traditionally defined, as the work of well-known architects, this section focuses on spaces which are not usually considered architectural.

Most recently, architectural criticism has recognised that architecture continues after the moment of its design and construction. The experience, perception, use, appropriation and occupation of architecture need to be considered in two ways: first, as the temporal activity which takes place after the 'completion' of the building, and which fundamentally alters the meaning of architecture, displacing it away from the architect and builder towards the active user; second, as the re-conceptualisation of architectural production, such that different activities reproduce different architectures over time and space. By recognising that architecture is constituted through its occupation, and that experiential aspects of the occupation of architecture are important in the construction of identity, such work intersects with feminist concerns with aspects of 'the personal', the subject and subjectivity.

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