

Feminist Literary and Cultural Criticism

Java Singh

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An Analytical Approach to Space

 Springer

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For
Ravi,
My mother, Neelam
and
My grandmothers, Lakshmi and Lalmani

Foreword

The book's theoretical imperative, vast scope, and transnational orientation ensure its relevance to a wide audience. It is to the author's great credit that she manages an ambitious interdisciplinary project with great command and fluidity. The author reviews the works of an excellent selection of theorists from the fields of anthropology, geography, psychology, and literary criticism to inform her argument. It works to the book's great advantage that the selection is not confined to Anglophone theorists. Many of the ideas discussed are drawn from books and articles in Spanish that have not yet been translated into English. The book greatly benefits from the author's ability to reference complex works available only in Spanish. The historical depth of the literature reviewed is a great strength of the book. The bibliography goes as far back as the seventeenth century and saves the book from falling prey to *hyper-presentism*. Multiple strands of theories, texts, concepts, regions, time-horizons, genres, and forms are held together in an easy grip of feminism. The steady feminist tone of the book also takes many minoritarian concerns into consideration, especially accentuating the unfair treatment of persons suffering from mental disorders, earth others, native Americans, transgender persons, and slum-dwellers.

Dr. Singh sustains methodological control through systematic delivery, deepening discussion, bringing together threads of analysis, and applying them carefully and insistently in the close reading of the texts. While closely detailing the theoretical trajectory of the analysis, the author always has the texts in sight, and the theoretical framework is consistently informed by a core understanding of the texts. Theoretical deliberations are deftly interwoven with discussions of real-life instances, bridging the gaps that separate theory, text, and the world.

The book is neatly structured into two parts—the first is primarily concerned with theory and the second with the selected texts. The conceptual framework developed in the book focusses on 'space' instead of 'place,' thus breaking through geographic limitations. Although the original location of the writer, director, scriptwriter, or cartoonist is seen as a crucial influence on their creative output, the work acquires transnational relevance when readers recognize its capacity to raise issues that resonate beyond their own originating locations. Additionally, the analytical

approach of the book frees itself from local referentiality to highlight space as a cross-cultural construct and extends its applicability beyond any national frontiers.

The selected writers come from five different countries, India, Argentina, the USA, Uruguay, and Spain. Their work has a transnational reach because it provides referential frameworks that are accessible the world over. Sumukhi Suresh's OTT series raises concerns about body shaming and mental health. Ecological concerns and gender inequality are key themes in Manjula Padmanabhan's science fiction. Lucrecia Martel, the Argentine filmmaker, uses a provincial setting for her films to expose the decadence of inherited privilege, successfully de-provincializing her cinematic narrative. Carol Lay's work delves into the devastating impact of the relentless exploitation of natural resources to meet the needs of increasingly consumerist societies. Cristina Peri Rossi is an iconic figure in exile literature. Persecuted by the military dictatorship in her native Uruguay, she escaped to Spain in the 1970s. Her experiences as a gay woman who came out in the 1960s, an anti-establishment activist, and an immigrant filter into her writing. The selected creative artists speak to a global audience.

The approach to analyzing space developed in the book is unique. "The Spatial Gynocritics Model" is effective in creating a critical approach that opens up meanings rather than imposing meanings from theory. The text always has primacy over theory in this book. In each chapter of Part II, the author discusses various aspects of the narratives before centring her attention on the spatial analysis. The critical strategy of the model works on the idea of taking a binocular view of the Oedipal triangle, denying legitimacy to any single perspective. The author displays great confidence in her model by testing it repeatedly and effectively on different genres and narrative forms. The model generates cross-over vocabulary and grammar that may be utilized to frame coherent readings even of texts not included in the book. The spatial gynocritic model and close-readings advanced in Part II introduce a way of thinking about texts that does not essentialize and prescribe, enabling and encouraging the reader to be intellectually nomadic. The use of diagrams, rarely found in critical analyses of texts, is ideally suited to spatial analysis. These pictorial depictions create a modular arrangement that relieves the model of any rigidity, inviting a bricolage rearrangement of its tools and devices. The diagrams also serve as mind maps that aid quick recall of the intricacies of the model developed in the book.

Feminist Literary and Cultural Criticism: An Analytic Approach to Space makes an important and original contribution to diffusing the boundaries among ways of reading different forms of creative representations. The book straddles several disciplines of comparative literature, comparative theory, film criticism, cartoon criticism, comedy criticism, feminist literary criticism, science fiction criticism, and spatial criticism, making it useful for scholars in all these fields. The author's meticulous close reading—of Lucrecia Martel's films, Sumukhi Suresh's OTT series, Cristina Peri Rossi's stories, Manjula Padmanabhan's novels, and Carol Lay's cartoon

comics makes the book stimulating for anyone interested in developing a careful understanding of the works of these extraordinarily gifted women.

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Preface

The preface to a book is both an introduction to what the reader may expect to find in it and the author's reflection on all the strands she has braided into a discernible design. It is an instantiation of "proleptic analepsis," a flashback that contains fractals that will actualize their possibilities in the future.¹

The title of the book, *Feminist Literary and Cultural Criticism: An Analytic Approach to Space*, identifies it as an attempt at spatial criticism of literary and cultural narratives that is informed by a feminist consciousness. In addition to its commitment to feminism, the endeavour is also persuaded by the analytic lines pursued in structuralist poetics. In the preface to the 2002 edition of *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler defends structuralist approaches, which focus on the "how works produce the effects [such as meanings] they have for readers" against advocates of hermeneutics, who concentrate on explicating *what* those 'effects' or 'meanings' may be. By bringing up the dialectics between poetics and hermeneutics, Culler revives the age-old discussion on the relative primacy of the realms of *logos* and *lexis*, *res* and *verba*, ideas and expression, meaning and rhetoric or, simply put, between the 'what' and the 'how' that is crucial in assembling any critical view of literary and cultural representations.

This book does not view the categories of poetics and hermeneutics as separate critical methods; instead, they are viewed as distinct tones that should constitute any in-depth commentary on texts. As both modes of reading merit attention, the book strives to understand the feminist 'meanings' and 'effects' that are evoked by the selected texts; on the other, it explicates the *spatial* tools, tactics, and devices that are used to convey those meanings to the reader. Without structuralist tools, such as those associated with space, the text cannot be adequately pried open for analysis, and without a hermeneutic objective, the analytic project risks becoming futile. A profound engagement with structuralist analysis is not opposed to developing an ideological commitment; in fact, structuralist approaches may equip the critic to

¹ Bruce Robbins used the term in his keynote address at the XXIst conference of the Forum on Contemporary Theory, in 2018 in Puri, Odisha. The speech was titled "Diasporas and Atrocities: Cosmopolitanism Now." Unfortunately, it has not been published, hence a citation is not possible.

reveal hitherto obscure ideological aspects of texts. Walter Mignolo, a leading voice in postcolonial theory, started out as a structuralist. In *Elements for a Theory of the Literary Text* (1978), Mignolo's articulation of various productive concepts such as axiality, figuration, and connectedness is directly derived from the fundamentals of structuralism.

According to Culler, poetics "could be thought of [...] as the attempt to understand what a poet or novelist must know implicitly to be able to construct the literary work." Culler's expectation of 'implicit' knowledge on the part of the novelist is key to this book. Many of the theorists, writers, and artists studied in the book demonstrate explicitly feminist stances in their works, but they also make implicit discursive connections with a diverse range of concerns such as mental health, nation formation, state-induced precarity, linguistic prejudice, and consumerism. The critic's task is to make explicit the implicit awareness that resides in the text. In order to read the implicit discursivities, the book posits space as an essential element of 'literary competence.' A deep understanding of the spatial logic of literary and cultural narratives provides new ways of reading these texts, enabling 'performativities' that would otherwise remain unactualized.

The book approaches its objectives through two distinct trajectories—building a model and applying the model—each becoming a guiding thread for the two parts of the book. Part I, comprised of five chapters, outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the book, and relying on them, proposes a model for spatial criticism. Part II, also comprised of five chapters, applies the spatial gynocritics model proposed in Part I to carry out innovative readings of selected literary and cultural narratives created by five women—Cristina Peri Rossi, Manjula Padmanabhan, Lucrecia Martel, Sumukhi Suresh, and Carol Lay.

Serendipity was certainly at play in assembling this cast of creators. Cristina Peri Rossi was the first woman who made her way through the analytical sieve used in this book. She is featured on the syllabi of literature courses in various universities as a leading voice of postmodernist, post-boom Latin American, and gay literature. Peri Rossi writes in many genres, including science fiction. Research on her science fiction led this study into the field of women's science fiction, where Manjula Padmanabhan emerged as an iconic figure from India. A talk by the cultural attaché at the Argentinian embassy in New Delhi, titled 'Discover Argentina through its Cinema,' occasioned an introduction to the work of Lucrecia Martel. She stood out as the only woman director in the list of ten emblematic films that was passed around during the talk. A keynote address at a conference on the fantastic in Barcelona mentioned Carol Lay's unique blend of reality and fantasy as a forceful tool for social critique, provoking a deeper exploration of her work. The study of Lay's cartoons involved developing an understanding of the functioning of humour. The early days of the research on humour for the present project coincided with the visible success of young female comics on OTT platforms in India. Among them, Sumukhi Suresh stood out as a path-breaking artist.

The serendipitous selection may be seen as 'el azar electivo,' or a series of objective chance encounters that take place in the zone lying between deterministic impositions and complete free will. The five creative women studied in Part II of the book were not

selected to comply with a pre-determined theoretical design, nor was their selection an outcome of pure chance. Their work came through on three broadly conceived criteria for text selection. Firstly, the selected group should have crafted diverse literary and cultural genres so that the model developed in Part I could be tested cross-generically; secondly, they should be representative of the Indo-American–Latin and North–contact zone that shapes the work of Indian Hispanists; and thirdly, that their work runs against the grain of the popular market sentiment of their times. Peri Rossi rejected magic realism as a literary register, refusing to ride the wave of commercial success that had been set in motion by the huge popularity of writers like Gabriel García Márquez and Isabelle Allende. Padmanabhan grounded her stories on Earth, avoiding inter-planetary explorations that were the staple of best-selling science fiction literature and high-grossing films. Martel avoided exoticizing her local settings to attract international attention. She also did not rely heavily on the recent history of national trauma inflicted on her country by the military junta that held power during the 1970s and 80s—a subject matter that ensured ready recognition for Argentinian films by the market and film festivals alike. Sumukhi Suresh created an unapologetically desirous woman without offering any excuses for her obsessions. She portrayed the large-bodied female lead of her series with a level empathy and confidence unprecedented in Indian cinema. Carol Lay created female characters that flouted the graphic conventions instituted by best-selling superhero comics on the 1970s and 80s.

The women featured in Part II span three generations. Peri Rossi was born in 1942, Lay and Padmanabhan in 1952 and 1953, respectively. Lucrecia Martel in 1966 and Sumukhi Suresh in 1987. Each one brings their experiences of masculine mechanisms of control to their work—politically sanctioned human rights abuses of a military dictatorship (Peri Rossi), socially endorsed female foeticide and infanticide (Padmanabhan), culturally accepted invisibility of middle-aged and old women (Martel), market induced body regimes that foment self-hate (Suresh), and masculine appropriation of natural resources and traditional ecological knowledge systems (Lay). The use of a gendered lens by women of different generations reveals the continuity of a misogynistic element that sustains a political-social-cultural-economic sensibility that mitigates against the emancipation of women from patriarchal control. Moreover, the group of women featured in Part II displays a spatial consciousness that resonates powerfully with the theoretical foci of the book.

In Part I, the theoretical levers of the book are organized into four ‘vectors’ based on their provenance from the fields of anthropology, geography, psychology, and feminist literary criticism. Real-life instances and examples from literature and cinema are used to elucidate key concepts that form part of the analytic lexicon of the book. The inter-disciplinary approach is fundamental in deriving the conceptual tools that constitute the spatial gynocritics model delineated in Part I.

Chapter 1, titled ‘The Anthropology Vector,’ focusses on Victor Turner’s extrapolation of anthropological concepts to the realm of literary and cultural criticism. This chapter considers the exploration of spatial liminality by Victor Turner as foundational to developing a deeper understanding of the processes of social change. Turner’s articulations of the Social Drama, rituals, and pilgrimage, especially, are

extrapolated to analyze the importance of spatial locations in public manifestations of a shared sense of injustice. Some such instances that are read through a *Turnerian* lens are the Indian Anti-dowry Movement, protests against the ban on Jallikattu, Argentina's *Madres de la Plaza* movement, and the Chilean *Social Outbreak*. By using different public spaces—the college campus, main streets of prominent cities, the premises around the presidential residence, and metro stations, respectively—the dissenting groups were able to gather sufficient momentum to get the authorities to redress their grievances to some extent. The locations for these expressions of dissent show that even everyday places are imbued with liminal, transformative energies. The sites of dissent function as liminal zones in which all participants, devoid of markers of status, are able to enjoy greater degrees of autonomy than in the pre-liminal and post-liminal stages. The chapter also examines the role of cultural performances and literary representations in supporting and instigating such social changes. The applicability of Turner's conceptualization of ritual, liminality, and pilgrimage as tools for literary and cultural criticism has been demonstrated through brief commentaries on selected short stories, films, and T.V. shows. The chapter attempts to establish connections between the literary, cultural, and physical liminal spaces through the anthropological vector.

Chapter 2 titled 'The Geography Vector,' examines the assertions of feminist geographers who have argued that modes of spatial control of women serve as mechanisms of patriarchal control. A poetics of spatial patriarchy emerges from the schema outlined by Doreen Massey and Linda McDowell, and Daphne Spain's historic sociological study of segregated spaces for women. The elements of these poetics are utilized to articulate the topographical view of space adopted in the study. In this view, the cultural valence of a space depends on the full inventory of the compositional elements of the place where it is located. For example, an uninhabited strip of sand may appear abandoned in a superficial view, but when examined closely, it may be replete with many forms of animal life and reminders of life forms that once thrived there. This chapter explicates the topographical view as a 'liminal' view that stretches the studied space to reveal the significance of the interstices contained in any spatiality. Thus, space, as a building block of the narrative structure, is construed as pronominal and deictic, its significance being determined by the perspective from which it is viewed. The topographical approach is used to read Teresa de la Parra's iconic work of feminist literature, *Ifigenia*, and Cristina Peri Rossi's short story 'The Annunciation.' Informed by the geography vector, the spatial analysis of these narratives reveals links between territorial dispossession and emotional exploitation and the actant potency of space as an autonomous literary device.

Chapter 3 forges the eponymous psychology vector from three flagstone texts of twentieth-century feminist scholarship in the field of psychology, namely, Karen Horney's *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939), Juliet Mitchell's 'Women the Longest Revolution' (1966), and Kate Millett's *The Loony Bin Trip* (1990). The mirroring of women's familial and social positions in these works is highlighted in this chapter. Some of the critical concepts articulated by these theorists are used to study real-life instances of oppression of even exceptionally gifted women to demonstrate the

power of patriarchal tendencies. The notions of undertow, recoil, and afterwardness are explicated to understand the slow change in women's position in society vis-à-vis men. The neurosis-inducing effect of insalubrious dependencies is examined to demonstrate that individual masochistic and narcissistic dependencies have generated a pathological social condition that is detrimental to changing patriarchal attitudes towards women. The psychological vector developed in this chapter is used to analyze the portrayal of the domestic space in selected short stories. The notion of the 'Jocasta complex' is developed as contrapuntal to the Oedipal complex to describe the psychological response of women to their confinement in domestic spaces. The adopted approaches generate a binocular view of the domestic space as depicted in the stories, whereby it emerges as a masochistic space. The psychological vector exposes the oppressive underbelly of superficial stances of protectiveness towards the woman and reverence towards the mother-figure.

Chapter 4, 'The Literary Vector,' presents a brief survey of the field of feminist literary criticism before proceeding to tease out the spatial implications suggested by the conceptual schemes of selected critics. The conceptual schema of Jean Franco, Josefina Ludmer, Sara Castro-Klaren, Nattie Golubov, Rachel Falconer, and Joy Ladin are examined in detail to extricate the spatial premises that emerge from their critical articulations. The literary vector thus crafted is used to explore Antigone's unique location in kinship structures, de-differentiated and de-sedimented views of unified solidities, visualization of localized speaking spaces, the notion of the female nomadic reader, and chrontopic extensions discernible in centrifugal narratives. The chapter explains the derivation process for the analytic devices of 'Antigonal spatial archetypes,' 'liminal chronotopy,' 'spatial de-differentiations,' 'localizing the limen,' 'spatial de-sedimenting,' and 'speculative materiality of the limen.'

Chapter 5 brings together the exploratory probes and analytic formulations of the first four chapters to suggest an arrangement for the conceptual tools derived in Chap. 4 of the book. The mode of combining the tools is informed by a consciousness of Debra Castillo's six-pronged strategy for feminist literary criticism. Castillo urges a critical reading of women's texts that scrutinizes the play of six literary, tactical elements, namely: silencing, appropriation, surfacing, marginality, negation, and the subjunctive mood. The spatial gynocritics model that emerges from the interplay between these tactical elements and the conceptual tools for spatial analysis is a trifurcated entity whose tines are named 'de-canonizing derivatives,' 'de-bordering derivatives,' and 'de-settling derivatives.' The suggested arrangement of these perspectival tools for understanding portrayals of spaces in literary and cultural narratives is by no means meant to be prescriptive; instead, the intent in proposing a modular formation is to demonstrate possible inter-relationships among the various conceptual schemes from which the tools are derived.

While taking up different genres and forms of literary and cultural narratives for discussion in Part II, it is assumed that no reader will have in-depth knowledge of the relevant critical tools and the background information for each one. Therefore, apart from undertaking the spatial analysis of the selected narrative, each chapter presents a critical overview of the selected writer or artist and, where required, explains the terminology that is specific to that form.

Chapter 6, the opening chapter of Part II, is concerned with Cristina Peri Rossi's postmodernist short stories. Peri Rossi is considered part of the 'Generation of 1972,' which includes other writers who were forced to flee out of fear of persecution at the hands of the military juntas in their native countries. Over the course of almost sixty years, she has received several awards, including the highest literary award in the Spanish language, the 2021 Miguel de Cervantes Prize, for her impressive oeuvre consisting of novels, short stories, newspaper columns, and poems. This chapter provides a background of the political scenario that pushed Peri Rossi into voluntary exile and locates her writing within the postmodernist literary turn in Latin American literature. The chapter explains why the theme of exile—literal and metaphoric—in her work has attracted extensive critical attention. In order to open up her short narratives to new readings, the portrayal of three spaces, each of which comes up in multiple stories by Peri Rossi, is examined through the spatial gynecritic model. The de-settling, de-bordering, and de-settling derivatives are used to examine the topographies of the psychiatrist's clinic, road, and racetrack. When viewed through the model, these spaces become subversive representations, challenging normative notions of 'madness/sanity,' the 'saviour/victim complex,' and 'sportsmanship/avariciousness,' respectively.

Chapter 7 discusses the works of Manjula Padmanabhan, a pioneer in English-language science fiction (sf) written by Indian women. Perhaps because she had no female predecessors, Padmanabhan's work has more in common with American sf writers than with those from her own country. Delineating the common themes that have been featured in women's sf, the chapter provides a recent history of women's sf in the U.S. and sf writing by women in India. The chapter discusses the basics of myth criticism as the genre of sf relies extensively on traditional mythologies, reinterpreting and renovating them to create new myths. Having set the background for discussing Padmanabhan's sf, the chapter provides a critical overview of the 'Meiji Saga,' comprised of *Escape* (2008) and *The Island of Lost Girls* (2015). Subsequently, these novels are taken up for detailed spatial analysis. The spatial gynecritic model reveals that the novels de-canonize 'junctions' as neutral places meant for transitions, reinterpreting them as sites for resistance. They also de-border the modern battlefield and the ancient Roman gladiatorial arena, demonstrating the continuance of commercial interests that turn war into a type of reality entertainment. Additionally, the literary analysis in Chap. 7 focuses on the futuristic vehicles and portable habitats depicted in the novels, probing the de-settling of any notions of the permanent home as a safe space.

Chapter 8 examines the evolution of Argentinian cinema in the second half of the twentieth century and locates Lucrecia Martel among the filmmakers who gave it a new direction at the turn of the twenty-first. The characteristics of 'New Argentine Cinema,' which includes Martel's cinema, are delineated to show the changes in the cinematic themes and stylistic approaches since the years of the Dirty War—a traumatic period in the country's recent history. Martel's oeuvre is sparse, but she has received national and international accolades for every film that she has made. The chapter concentrates on her Salta trilogy, providing justifications for viewing it as a transnational, collective bildungsroman. In addition, the chapter selects the pool

for spatial analysis as it is featured prominently in all three films of the trilogy. When the pool is viewed through the spatial gynocritic models, it emerges as a de-settling element that unravels racial and familial hierarchies in *The Swamp*; in *The Holy Girl*, Martel uses the pool to present a de-canonized view of the home-nation; and in *The Headless Woman*, the liquid space becomes a site for de-bordering the perceived safety of the city and the threat of violence presented by neighbouring slums.

Chapter 9 examines the coming-of-age of women comedians in India in the twenty-first century, concluding that they have successfully overcome the marginalization of women in comedy. The focus of the chapter is on the work of Sumukhi Suresh, who is the first stand-up comedian to secure a two-season deal with a major OTT platform, without succumbing to stereotypical representations of women, especially the large-bodied woman. The chapter carries out an in-depth study of the innovative re-interpretation of the feminist trope of ‘madwoman’ in her series *Push-pavalli*. Another mythological archetype that has been used as an analytic tool for the series is that of the trickster. Based on the analysis, the chapter posits that the series portrays a strong link between body image concerns and mental health that is especially prevalent among women. The series is viewed as a Juvenalian satire that uses dark humour to represent grave social problems such as misogyny, language-based discrimination, and marginalization of experiential knowledge systems. The spatial analysis looks at six different settings featured prominently in the series—the PG accommodation, tea stall, library, conference centre, packhouse, and the godman’s ashram—through the de-bordering, de-settling, and de-canonizing derivatives of the spatial gynocritics model.

Chapter 10 discusses the fundamental tools used in the analysis of the genre of comics. It explores the outlook of four key theorists of the genre, namely Román Gubern, Will Eisner, Thierry Groensteen, and Scott McCloud, to develop an understanding of the comic as a distinctive art form. The chapter also examines the history of twentieth-century women comic artists, from North and South America, placing Carol Lay’s work among the ‘daughters of the underground.’ Over the course of forty years, Carol Lay’s depiction of female characters has undergone significant shifts. Based on the changes in the visual language and character traits as the primary criteria, the chapter classifies her extensive oeuvre into three phases—agential, capacitated, and emancipated. In the last section, the chapter carries out a spatial analysis of places of work and play, the jungle and city, and the garbage heap to unveil the hidden layers of significance in Lay’s graphic narratives.

Parts I and II complement each other as theory and practice, but they can also be read separately. Every chapter, except the fifth one, attempts a substantive argument that can be accessed independently of the other chapters. Chapter 5, in which the spatial gynocritics model is assembled, makes for a coherent reading if it is read after the preceding ones. The reader is invited to read all the other chapters in any order.

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