

GENDER, SPACE, AND FANTASY: WOMEN'S HETEROTOPIC IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE AND IRANIAN FICTION

Moussa Pourya Asl

School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia

moussa.pourya@usm.my

ABSTRACT

The growing body of studies on heterotopic cartographies and literary works have drawn attention to the profound importance of cultural and political resistance as well as to women's own agency in reconfigurations of spatial arrangements. Drawing upon Foucault's theorization of heterotopia, this comparative study aims to examine the Japanese writer Hiroko Oyamada's *The Hole* (2014) and the Iranian novelist Shokoofeh Azar's *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* (2017) as case studies of what I label heterotopic aesthetics: a creatively different [magical] array of emplacements and embodiments (recreation of other spaces and bodies) whereby the mainstream prescriptions of gender relations are dismantled and a new order of beings is recreated at the same time. The novels chronicle the stories of two female characters (a Japanese woman called Asahi and an Iranian female character named Bahar) in the spatially and socially peripheral settings of a Japanese countryside and a North Iran rural area called Razan. I argue that both novels reflect and contest dominant discourses on space, gender and identity through a range of phenomena that are demonstrators of heterotopia: discordant universes, non-linear time, defamiliarized worlds, and volatile subjectivities. The study concludes that both novels derive from and undermine male-dominated discourses of utopianism and social realism.

Keywords: Iran, Japan, women, magic realism, heterotopia, space

INTRODUCTION

Japan and Iran share considerable social and cultural resemblances. Both countries have traditionally been male-dominated societies, treating the two genders unequally in the social, economic and political spheres. The workings of unequal gender relations and men's socio-cultural hegemony have historically normalized women's subordination to their male guardians. In the wake of globalism, both countries have similarly been subjected to Orientalist stereotypes by the dominant discourses of representation mainly organized by Western knowledge producers. Over the past few decades, the culture and identity of both nations have been characterized as misogynistic, static, irrational, exotic and essentially patriarchal. The achievement of a gender-equal society has thus been a top-priority task for both governments in determining the socio-

political framework of the present century to attain the Millennium Development Goals. The scope of improvements in women's empowerment, however, is concentrated on expansion of their political, educational, economic, and health status with the political hope of boosting the countries' economy by attracting them to join the workforce. Although each of these areas of advancements are significantly important for the empowerment of women, their achievement is explicitly and implicitly contingent on equal utilization and distribution of a more vital and often neglected element namely space and place.

According to Michel Foucault (1986), "space is fundamental in any exercise of power," because the way space is constructed, experienced and utilized directly affects the ways individual identities are formulated and social relations are orchestrated. This means that space is not only a gendered site but itself can serve as a gendering force (Foucault, 1997; Johnson, 2006). Previous studies on Japanese and Iranian societies have employed a variety of research methods—public opinion surveys, in-depth interviews, a life history, and participant observation—to examine women's values and their lived experiences at home and workplaces (Asl, 2022). Their research, however, only reaffirms the existence of high spatial inequality as a structural problem in both countries. More importantly, these studies tend to give priority to women's oppression and passivity that legitimize masculine hegemony (Hadi & Asl, 2022), but the attention given to their active participation, hiding subtler power relations, is still scarce.

The premise of this project is that, by analyzing fictional representation of space in the analysis of gender identity, one might gain a more nuanced understanding of how gender and power are mutually constructive. To fully unpack the politics of space, as the present study argues, the focus should not be limited to the exposure of macro-grids such as politics and economics, but also critique micro-spaces that are produced by the prevailing male-dominated system and experienced and challenged by women at the same time. Based on this premise, gendered spaces should be thought of "less as a geography imposed by patriarchal structures and more as a social process of symbolic encoding and decoding" that creates homologous spatial, symbolic and social orders (Blunt & Rose 1994, p. 3). In pursuing this aim, the study seeks to counter the prevailing Orientalist discourses by underlining how Japanese and Iranian women, albeit in different geographical locations, articulate their subjectivity in similar ways by formulating alternative spatial practices and normalizing and diffusing patriarchal rationalities. Drawing upon Foucault's theorization of heterotopia, this comparative study aims to examine the Japanese writer Hiroko Oyamada's *The Hole* (2014) and the Iranian novelist Shokoofeh Azar's *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* (2017) as case studies of what I label heterotopic aesthetics: a creatively different [magical] array of emplacements and embodiments (recreation of other spaces and bodies) whereby the mainstream prescriptions of gender relations are dismantled and a new order of beings is recreated at the same time. The novels recommend themselves for such a study as they are characteristic examples of the decoding and recoding of gendered spaces.

The overall aim of this project is to explore the politics of space and gender in Japanese and Iranian women's literary works in English in which women's utilization of space in managing gender identity rises to the fore. To achieve this focal aim, two pivotal objectives are to be pursued: a) To identify the specific networks of power that shape spaces in Japanese and Iranian women's literary works; b) To examine how the portrayed female subjects re-construct, re-experience and re-utilize different spaces to re-invent new identities and galvanize alternative ways of life.

The proposed study is significant because it shatters the stereotypical assumptions about Asian women in general, and Japanese and Iranian women in particular, and highlights the accomplishments of powerful female voices in the countries' past and present. This is achieved by problematizing the twofold assumption that underpins the general view of Japanese and Iranian women, namely: they are passive and powerless victims subject to annihilating patriarchal practices and structures, and that their literary writings are equally homogenizing and annihilating. Both assumptions homogenize and systematize the experiences of different groups of women in these countries and in so doing erase all the subtle nuances of women's resistant experiences (Asl, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022). Hence the increasing significance of the present study in developing a twofold argument: First, women in Japan and Iran have never been utterly silent nor purely passive but have struggled constantly to maximize their rights and negotiate their power and space; second, Japanese and Iranian women's sense of self as portrayed in their writings is not static, but a developing process of reconfiguring individual and collective forms of selfhood, of transformation and of improvement.

The study is also equally important as the combination of literary, gender and spatial studies inspire fresh and exciting readings of space and gender, and help articulate new insights for the twenty-first century policy makers and legislators of the two countries. It offers a vision of hope for change and empowering alternatives to dominant patriarchal discourses, and reveals the crucial role of space in providing counter-hegemonic forms of knowledge. The proposed reading of space as multiple, fluctuating, heterogeneous, and adaptive resists the dominant spatial and gender script and, in turn, offers alternative spatial practices. This is crucially important because the study's particular attention to the critique of spaces in Japanese and Iranian writings acts as a strategic essentialism to interrogate and problematize the dominant Orientalist narratives about women in the two countries that are mainly produced in the West.

LITERATURE REVIEW RELATED TO TOPIC

Previous studies on the examination of spatial representations, perceptions and distribution of gender relations in Japan can be classified into two major groups. Drawing on empirical evidence and demographic data, the first group have underlined specific asymmetrical constructions that reaffirm the country's low performance measures in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index (in which Japan ranked 121 of the 153 countries on the 2020 index). Each of these studies (for example: Nakamura, 2014; Osawa, 2019; Pavloska, 2019; Steel, 2019) have disclosed one aspect of women's under-representation and invisibility in public and private spheres and

have concluded that the male-as-norm ideology is the principal form of gender inequality in the country.

The second group, however, have mainly employed theoretical analysis to expose gender biases in different forms. Much of this research (e.g., Frankson, 2015) underline different kinds of gender-based stereotypes that traditionally privilege masculinity over femininity. These studies reveal that women in Japan and Iran are widely understood and depicted as home-oriented and passive, while men are portrayed as work-oriented and are often granted with more spatial authority and advantage. In like manner, feminist studies have underlined the ways in which patriarchal power is distributed temporally and spatially in both countries. According to them (e.g., Germer & Ogawa, 2019; Villa, 2019) within the hierarchies of space and freedom of movement, the higher value in the society is usually placed on masculine mobility which is often positioned hierarchically against the greater confinement and lack of movement of women.

Individually, the existing body of scholarship on gender relations in the two countries offer unique insights on the varied ways in which gender issues manifest throughout Japanese and Iranian history, culture, society, art, law and politics. Nonetheless, when examining the causes, most studies reiterate negative generalizations and reductionist notions of the countries' androcentric culture and society. The triple focal points of this study—space, gender and identity—intend to offer a more nuanced and intercultural understanding of women's spatial experiences in Japan and Iran. Hence, the study adds to the understanding of how gender and identity intersect as well as to how space, seen as both gendered and gendering, is implicated in the processes involved. That said, the most distinctive feature of this project is its particular emphasis on the possibilities of women's agency in subverting the dominant patriarchal power structure which is achieved by examining the various strategies women employ to challenge, contest and reconstruct dominant space-gender determinism through the analysis of their literary productions.

METHODOLOGY

Foucault's (1986, 1997) theories of 'other spaces' are used to contextualize the literary works, and examine the micro-physics of power that shape the spatial mechanisms within the narratives to produce favoured and framed knowledge(s) (Johnson, 2006). Foucault's spatio-temporal theories are relevant when related to Asian writers' approach to the representation of an 'other' society in remaking of current or distant memories of their countries of birth and the lingering dynamics of a repressive political consciousness. This theoretical approach provides the means to read the narratives by Japanese and Iranian women in relation to a utopian/dystopian axis, and interpret them within a heterotopian, either hypertopian or hypotopian, context. In other words, this approach As a theoretical approach, this study builds on two major contributions to the literature. Michel allows us to explore the functionings of the existing narrative discourses as they are elaborated at particular temporal and spatial locations. This framework will allow the researcher to investigate the intrinsically spatial and political nature of gender constructs as Foucault's notion suggests a

link between gender and physical environment (Massey, 1994, 2005; McDowell, 1999). Specifically, this theoretical approach unpacks the ways space itself can become a form of governmentality, of limitation of women's mobility—but also a locus of women's actualization, of breaking out of gender constraints, and of achieving power.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Both novels depict, challenge, and subvert prevailing discourses on space, gender, and identity by means of a variety of phenomena that are indicators of heterotopia: inharmonious universes, non-linear time, defamiliarized worlds, and fluid and shifting subjectivities. The narratives relate the stories of two female characters (a Japanese woman called Asahi and an Iranian female character named Bahar) in the spatially and socially marginalized settings of a Japanese countryside and a North Iran rural area called Razan. As the female protagonists' capacity for resistance and freedom are celebrated within these 'liminal' settings, where the conflicting elements of the magical and the real are blended, identity-making occurs at the level of both character and aesthetic—in particular via the incorporation of supernatural and metaphorical features that are combined with ambiguous dystopias/utopias.

Both novels arise from and subvert phallogocentric discourses of Japanese and Iranian utopianism. Oyamada's *The Hole* (2014) allegorically censures the "post-bubble Japan" with its inflexible gender hierarchies and prejudiced views on female citizens within the context of domestic sphere and public domain. Azar's *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* (2017) chronicles the misfortunes of an Iranian family suffocated with the insanities and cruelties of post-revolutionary disorder and brutality of an oppressive political regime. In both social and spatial settings, women are depicted as living through a multiple variety of gender inequalities and injustices at social, economic and spatial levels. Notwithstanding the homogeneity of the lives, the two feminist dystopias portray the magnitude of gender discrimination in the two fictional societies in different degrees. In spite of such differences, the will to contest, dismantle, and recreate this dystopian reality through a multiplicity of alternative fantastic interventions that combine ambiguous dystopias/utopias with supernatural elements formulates that backbone of both works. Like Asahi, the female protagonist of *The Hole*, Bahar and her mother Roza of *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* float away from the real world, which is poisoned with constraining social powers, to liminal spheres where they contest phallogocentric standards and formulate alternative female identities. Both narratives are rooted in enigmatic, dream-like Wonderlands which function as fitting locations to disrupt the utopian/dystopian of their social and political context. It is the incorporation of the magical into reality that differentiates both novelists from realistic writers, whose exclusive concentration on reality precludes the possibility of change and emancipation.

CONCLUSION

The triple focal points of this study—space, gender and identity—has provided a more nuanced and intercultural understanding of women's spatial experiences in Japan and Iran. The study adds

to the understanding of how gender and identity intersect as well as to how space, seen as both gendered and gendering, is implicated in the processes involved. That most distinctive contribution of this research is its particular emphasis on the possibilities of women's agency in subverting the dominant patriarchal power structure which is achieved by examining the various strategies women employ to challenge, contest and reconstruct dominant space-gender determinism through the analysis of their literary productions.

As two essentially traditional countries, both Japan and Iran have similarly been subjected to Orientalist stereotypes and ideologies by the dominant discourses of representation mainly organized by Western knowledge producers. On one level, the culture and identity of both nations have been characterized as misogynistic, static, irrational, exotic and essentially patriarchal. And on another, the Japanese and Iranian women have been depicted as passive and powerless victims who are unable to change the status quo. This study countered the prevailing discourses by underlining how Japanese and Iranian women, albeit in different geographical locations, articulate their subjectivity in similar ways by formulating alternative spatial practices and normalizing and diffusing patriarchal rationalities. It aimed at exploring the politics of space and gender as portrayed in two of Japanese and Iranian women's literary works in English, namely Hiroko Oyamada's *The Hole* (2014) and the Iranian novelist Shokoofeh Azar's *The Enlightenment of the Greengage Tree* (2017). Michel Foucault's theories of 'other spaces' were employed to examine the various ways space becomes both a form of governmentality, of limitation of women's mobility—and simultaneously a locus of women's actualization, of breaking out of gender constraints, and of achieving power. The study focused on both narratives produced within the present century to fully investigate the spirit of the age and the multiplicity of women's spatial experiences. It is hoped that the findings of the study shatter the stereotypical assumptions about Japanese and Iranian women, and help articulate new insights for the twenty-first century policy makers and legislators of the two countries.

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