

Plural Spaces of Gender and Identity in Bhutan: A Study on Select Women's Narratives

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Abstract: *The paper explores the plural configurations of gendered space and identity in Bhutan through a feminist theoretical framework that integrates a spatial analysis of gender and identity. Drawing on select literary and autobiographical narratives by Kunzang Choden, Lisa Napoli, and Jamie Zeppa, the study examines how women's identities are produced, constrained, and reconfigured across domestic, institutional, and cultural spaces shaped by both tradition and modernity. The Bhutanese experiences of belonging, embodiment, and affect, as well as to the gendered division of labour and spatial exclusion are examined. The paper argues that while patriarchal spatial orders continue to regulate women's mobility, labour, and self-representation, women's everyday practices and narrative articulations enact subtle forms of resistance. These narratives reveal Bhutan as a dynamic socio-spatial landscape in which gendered subjectivities are continually negotiated rather than fixed.*

Keywords: *gendered space, identity formation, feminist spatial theory, doubly disprivileged, interpellation.*

“Gender” is frequently mobilized as a conceptual category intertwined with sexuality and is understood as foundational to individual identity formation and subjective self-perception. Gender and sexual identity thus function as critical axes through which belonging is negotiated, shaping one's inclusion within national, ethnic, and political collectivities, as well as access to and experience of both private and public spaces (Chettri 3).

As Rosario Arias and Martyna Bryla argue, women's spatial separation, whether enacted through coercion or internalized as choice, emerges from environments “institutionalized to reflect a common orientation,” thereby legitimizing mechanisms of exclusion directed toward those marked as different (Puyal 14). Such spatial practices are underpinned by discourses of otherness which, as Rosa Braidotti contends, are driven by fear and the impulse toward self-consolidation. Within this logic, women are positioned as the “other par excellence,” their subjectivity perpetually mediated through the male gaze and subjected to a “continuous process of metaphorization as ‘other-than’” (*Nomadic Subjects* 83).

Within the binary logic structuring masculinity/femininity and mind/body dualisms, women's bodies have historically been constituted as contested sites of

both regulation and potential subversion. Simultaneously, institutional domains such as the workplace, governance, and the academy have developed through exclusionary practices that systematically marginalize female participation. Women who challenge or transgress these normative orientations become, as Shanon Bell observes, “doubly disprivileged” (*Reading, Writing, and Rewriting 2*), positioned within derivative and internally contradictory classificatory regimes—good/bad, pure/impure, wife/prostitute—that function to fragment the female body and destabilize coherent female subjectivity (Bell 40).

The gendered spatial order of Bhutan operates at the intersection of geography, culture, and power, producing women’s lived experiences through a dialectic of constraint and negotiated agency. Feminist theoretical interventions have consistently demonstrated that female sexuality has been discursively marginalized that are constructed as trivial, opaque, or aberrant, within patriarchal epistemologies that define the female body, desire, and subjectivity through a masculinist gaze. Such representations function not merely as cultural narratives but as ideological mechanisms that regulate women’s spatial and social mobility.

As Juliet Mitchell argues, women are systematically objectified within structures of social exchange, where their bodies and identities circulate as symbolic capital rather than autonomous subjectivities (*Psychoanalysis and Feminism xvi*). This process portrays woman as a subject constituted through lack, a psychoanalytic absence that destabilizes female identity and engenders a condition of persistent anxiety. Gender difference emerges not as a biological inevitability but as a socio-symbolic construct reproduced through familial and institutional practices, with femininity being internalized “in the head as well as in the home” (Mitchell xvi).

Within this framework, women’s sexuality, desire, and self-representation are regulated by normative structures authored and sustained by male-dominated power relations (Nayar *Feminisms* 99). These regulatory regimes confine women to essentialized roles, most notably those of the self-effacing mother and the sexually disciplined wife, thereby limiting the range of available female subject positions. In contrast to the relative fluidity afforded to male subjectivity,

women’s identities are frequently constituted through ideological “interpellation,” rendering their social positions pre-scripted and naturalized, as theorized by Louis

Althusser (qtd. in *Feminisms* 101).

Kunzang Choden's *Tales in Colour and Other Stories* is a collection of short fiction that offers nuanced and intimate portrayals of everyday life in Bhutan, engaging critically with the tensions between tradition and modernity. The present study analyses the story from "My Name, My Identity", from the anthology which foregrounds women's lived experiences within shifting social and cultural landscapes. Through evocative, culturally situated narratives, Choden interrogates gendered inequalities, normative social expectations, and the reconfiguration of cultural identity in the context of Bhutan's rapid socio-economic transformation.

Lisa Napoli's memoir *Radio Shangri-La: What I Discovered on My Accidental Journey to the Happiest Kingdom on Earth* documents her experiences as a radio jockey at Bhutan's Kuzoo FM, using the medium of radio as a site of cultural encounter and self-reflection. The narrative explores themes of cross-cultural exchange, personal reinvention, and the pursuit of happiness, situating Napoli's individual journey against the broader socio-cultural landscape of Bhutan.

By juxtaposing her fast-paced, consumer-oriented life in Los Angeles with Bhutan's ethos of simplicity and communal living often encapsulated in its global image as the happiest kingdom on earth, Napoli interrogates dominant paradigms of modernity and well-being. Through sustained interactions with Bhutanese communities, Napoli reflects on the nation's internal tensions, particularly its negotiation between tradition and modernization, including the political transition from monarchy to democracy. Viewed through an outsider's perspective, the memoir offers a nuanced account of Bhutan's evolving national identity, foregrounding the complexities and contradictions that accompany its engagement with global modernity.

Jamie Zeppa's memoir *Beyond the Sky and the Earth* is a richly evocative and introspective account of her experiences as a Canadian educator living and working in Bhutan. The narrative engages with themes of cultural immersion, self-transformation, and the negotiation between modernity and tradition within a distinctly Bhutanese context. Initially, Zeppa confronts a profound sense of isolation and cultural dislocation, as she grapples with the challenges of geographic remoteness and unfamiliar social norms.

Over time, however, her perceptions shift toward a deep appreciation of Bhutan's cultural values, spiritual practices, and alternative modes of living. Central to this transformation are the relationships she cultivates with local communities and her sustained engagement with Bhutan's natural landscapes, both of which unsettle her prior assumptions and foster an embodied sense of belonging. Through this gradual process of relational and spatial attunement, the memoir offers insight into how immersion within Bhutanese lifeworlds enables a reconfiguration of identity and understanding.

In contemporary critical theory, spatial analysis has emerged as a central analytic through which identity, subjectivity, and power are interrogated, particularly within feminist discourse. Feminist scholarship has persistently examined the gendered production of space, foregrounding how regimes of confinement, surveillance, and mobility structure women's access to and negotiation of both material and symbolic terrains. Early feminist critiques, informed by Virginia Woolf's foundational intervention in *A Room of One's Own*, challenged patriarchal spatial

economies by asserting women's claims to intellectual, creative, and economic autonomy within a male-dominated cultural and literary canon (*Feminisms* 87).

The theoretical turn marked by third-wave feminism in the 1980s and 1990s further radicalized spatial inquiry by privileging fluid, relational, and liminal metaphors—thresholds, borders, and liquid or open spaces—thereby destabilizing the fixity of binary oppositions that had historically organized gendered experience (87). The narratives examined in this chapter are situated within this critical trajectory, engaging institutions such as marriage and medicine, as well as embodied experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, to interrogate the contested formations of female selfhood and identity among women in Bhutan.

Identity, as articulated by Daphna Oyserman et al. in "Self, Self-Concept, and Identity," constitutes a multifaceted assemblage of traits, attributes, social roles, relational positions, and group affiliations through which individuals apprehend and organize their sense of self (2). These identity formations are temporally oriented, encompassing retrospective identifications with past selves, engagements with present subjectivities, and prospective projections toward

desired, obligated, or feared future selves. Functioning as interpretive and orienting frameworks, identities mediate perception and experience by directing attention toward particular environmental cues while simultaneously marginalizing others.

Extending beyond cognitive self-concept, selfhood comprises self-images and self-feelings, that emerge from embodied and sensory awareness of how individuals perceive their appearance, movement, voice, and affective states. While such embodied dimensions of subjectivity were acknowledged within early psychological paradigms, they have remained comparatively under-theorized and empirically underexplored. Nonetheless, individuals typically experience a strong sense of self-coherence and self-knowledge, sustained through the continuity of lived experience and the accumulation of autobiographical memory, which together anchor identity across time (Oyserman 2).

Napoli's initial ambivalence gradually gives way to a sense of acceptance, inner calm, and openness to future possibilities as she undertakes the ascent to Takshang Monastery, a moment that functions symbolically as well as experientially. Prior to her journey to Bhutan, Napoli had engaged with therapeutic practices and classical psychological frameworks in Los Angeles, a period she retrospectively identifies as the beginning of a gradual clearing of personal disorientation (*RSL* xx). Her sense of vulnerability was shaped by earlier trauma, which profoundly affected her relationship to fear, solitude, and everyday life in the months that followed in Bhutan.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler foregrounds the critical problem of whether and how the materiality of the body may be analytically linked to the performativity of gender (xi). Extending this inquiry, Bruce W. Derr emphasizes the conceptual utility of liminality in theorizing the female body as a site of perpetual transition, marked by mutability and defined through threshold states such as pregnancy (644–45). Miriam Borham-Puyal further complicates this perspective by arguing that such transitions cannot be reduced to biological processes alone; rather, they are discursively produced within moral regimes and Western mind-body dualisms that have historically objectified, disciplined, and regulated the female body (14). This formulation resonates with A. Mangai's assertion that the gendered body "bears the inscription of both knowledge systems and social practices" (*Acting Up-Gender* 13), thereby materializing social expectations, familial obligations, and

culturally sanctioned roles (Chettri et al. 4). Consequently, the liminality experienced by women at the level of individual embodiment or collective social positioning, emerges not as an inherent condition but as an effect of structural arrangements that situate women within hierarchical regimes of exclusion.

In *Beyond the Sky and the Earth*, while in the staff room, Jamie Zeppa feels that the parts of her that did not seem to belong, stood out sharply. She was too casual, too direct, and no one laughed at her jokes. She finds herself speaking more slowly and formally, answering incomplete sentences, standing almost at attention. A constant fear of making a mistake, of saying the wrong thing or giving offense, lingers within her. She cannot understand why it all felt so difficult, and there was no one she could speak to in her own language, with her own rhythms and inflections (*BTSE* 49). She describes her feeling thus,

I look out at the verdant confusion of the Pema Gatsel valley. It makes my head hurt, looking down the green steepness, looking up at the empty sky. There are long moments when I cannot remember where I am. I feel completely unfamiliar to myself, almost unreal, as if parts of me have dissolved, are dissolving. The Buddhist view that there is no real self seems completely accurate. I have crossed a threshold of exhaustion and a strangeness and am suspended in a new inner place (45).

Zeppa hates the whole experience in the beginning, but does not have the courage to be sent back, and yearns for a divine intervention to be sent back home (50). Having made up her mind to leave, her chance encounter with Jane, a British teacher in Tsebar makes her realize that her home in Tshelingkoris far too luxurious when compared to Jane's (65). She feels that though she has been trying to get out of Bhutan, she gets the idea that "Bhutan never ends" surprising her (60).

Zeppa understands that she is fortunate to be in Bhutan, and eventually her dreams about home back in Toronto are replaced by dreams about her future in Bhutan (67). Julie Rattray, in "Affective Dimensions of Liminality" asserts that, "Threshold transformations foster ontological shifts that are associated with both cognitive and affective changes in the individual. They cause the individual to view and experience the world differently in terms, not just of the intellectual understanding of an idea but also in the way they feel about, or experience, the world"

(67).

Daphne Spain argues that in predominantly non-industrial societies, the division of labour is “simultaneously spatial and gendered,” with social roles mapped onto distinct physical locations (*Gendered Spaces* 13). Within such social formations, men and women are typically assigned stereotypical tasks like “men hunt, and women cook and care for children” (Murdock and Provost qtd. in *Gendered Spaces* 14) that are spatially differentiated. Hunting, conventionally masculinized, occurs at a distance from the domestic sphere, whereas cooking and childrearing are situated in close proximity to the home. These spatial arrangements institutionalize the gendered division of labour, producing durable patterns of spatial differentiation that contribute to gender stratification (14).

Friedl observes that men’s labour is generally accorded greater social and economic value because it often involves the circulation of surplus resources, such as the distribution of game, beyond the household, thereby reinforcing male authority within wider social networks. In contrast, women’s labour, particularly food preparation and caregiving, remains largely confined to the domestic sphere and is consequently devalued. Women’s exclusion from activities such as hunting, initially justified by restricted mobility associated with childcare responsibilities, becomes naturalized over time. As a result, the original material conditions that produced spatial separation recede from view, even as spatial segregation continues to limit women’s access to skill acquisition and social power (14).

Comparable dynamics persist within industrial and post-industrial societies, where workplaces remain deeply gendered. Historically, occupations such as domestic service and teaching were socially sanctioned as appropriate for women, while factory and clerical work was viewed with moral suspicion due to women’s proximity to male coworkers. Even in contemporary contexts, women’s participation in male-dominated professions is frequently associated with higher wages and enhanced social status relative to employment in feminized sectors, underscoring the enduring relationship between spatial organization, labour valuation, and gendered inequality (*Gendered Spaces* 14).

In “My Name, My Identity,” Choden foregrounds the complex processes through which Bhutanese women negotiate their identities within a traditionally

structured social order, balancing individual aspirations against communal expectations. The narrative draws attention to a rapidly transforming Bhutanese society shaped by Western influence, examining how women contest and renegotiate spaces of intersectionality within shifting cultural, economic, and spatial frameworks. The accelerated transition from rural livelihoods to urban life has generated profound changes, propelling women into unfamiliar social and domestic configurations. As Choden observes, women who were economically autonomous within rural settings often become financially dependent on their husbands' incomes within the nuclear urban family structure (*TCOS 5*).

While urbanization and modernization have ostensibly alleviated the physical burdens of women's labour, these changes have simultaneously undermined women's economic agency and sense of self-worth. The uncritical adoption of the prefix "Mrs" symbolically subsumes women's identities under those of their husbands, rendering female subjectivity relational rather than autonomous. Choden further suggests that women are increasingly disadvantaged within the emergent social order, marked by a pervasive "culture of silence" surrounding domestic violence, sexual harassment, and workplace abuse.

Choden resists narratives that frame gender-based discrimination as historically entrenched in Bhutanese society, instead emphasizing the legacy of strong and independent female archetypes. She urges Bhutanese women to retain and draw strength from these traditional identities, cautioning against the uncritical internalization of external cultural influences. In asserting that women must sustain their inner resilience amid shifting social environments, Choden articulates a call for feminist self-definition rooted in cultural continuity rather than erasure (*TCOS 5*).

In the Eastern Himalayan context, Mona Chettri et al. observe that "place, space, identity, and belonging" exist in a condition of continual transformation, situated "midway through a process of becoming" ("Experiencing, Expressing, and Performing Gender" 1). Within such a landscape, belonging emerges as a deeply problematic and elusive concept, resisting stable categorization as it operates simultaneously as an affective state and an embodied lived experience.

Chettri accordingly raises the critical question of how belonging may be identified or recognized, particularly when its markers are liminal and indeterminate.

The task of delineating belonging becomes especially complex in contexts where boundaries are fluid, permeable, and constantly shifting. Yet, as Chettri et al. suggest, enduring “archaic values, ideas, and ways of being and seeing the world” may paradoxically stabilize these conditions of flux, producing what can be understood as a state of “fixed fluidity” (2), wherein processes of change coexist with deeply sedimented cultural frameworks.

In *Radio Shangri-La*, it is her midlife crisis that makes Napoli decide to “visit a mysterious kingdom in Asia few have visited” (xiii) with questions that she pondered over like “Why had I failed to have a family with a man I loved? Why had I squandered my youth so haphazardly? Why had I stuck with a profession that infuriated me so intensely? What could I do with the second half of my life to make it more meaningful than the first? How was I going to grow old gracefully?” (xiv). The hours of endless travel to Bhutan makes Napoli feel apprehensive initially and she wonders,

. . . Instead of being elated about this adventure, I had succumbed to the perilous trap of feeling sorry for myself as I tracked around the globe alone. What was I doing? Where was I going? Why was I headed to this strange little country most people hadn’t heard of and couldn’t find on a map? Shouldn’t a woman in her early forties be doing something normal, like taking her kids to Disneyland? Or enlisting the grandparents to babysit, so she could steal away on romantic trips with her husband? Or, if the husband and kids had been around for a while, plotting spa getaways with her similarly beleaguered girlfriends? This grand adventure seemed, all of a sudden, pathetic and sad and a bit rootless. (19).

Within the Bhutanese landscape, Napoli experiences a restorative sense of peace and emotional grounding, leading to a deep affective attachment to the country (*RSL* 95). This shift may be read through an anthropological and psychological lens as a rite of passage, wherein spatial movement and cultural immersion facilitate a transition from fractured selfhood toward a reconstituted sense of identity. The journey thus marks not merely a geographical relocation but a transformative process through which Napoli negotiates loss, healing, and self-renewal.

Transformation within the spatial thresholds in the narratives constitutes an

affective process through which subjectivity is reoriented and renegotiated. In the Bhutanese context, these thresholds converge to form a complex carrefour of women's spatial experiences, shaped simultaneously by constraint and creative agency, wherein dominant discourses of gendered space are continually re-inscribed and contested. Within both rural and urban Bhutan, everyday practices such as gathering, trading, storytelling, and caregiving operate as modes of spatial intervention, enabling women to transform restrictive environments into lived sites of negotiation, resilience, and cultural continuity.

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