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The Idea of Spatiality in *Adele*: A Feminist Geography Approach

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Abstract. Feminism is a multidisciplinary field that addresses women's issues and interests. The field has extended its focus to cover major aspects of women's lives rising from society, economy, culture, and politics to geography. Feminist geography examines women's status, interaction, and significance in a place and space. Leila Slimani's *Adele* (2019) is a masterpiece that presents a genuine mode of spatiality where the interconnectedness and interplay between the physical and the digital space navigates gender-related issues. This present article addresses the idea of spatiality in Adele, and how the interconnectedness between the physical, and the digital spaces provides a holistic feminist geographical lens to discuss gender roles, inequality, and social discrimination. The study portrays how the protagonist navigates between the two realms effortlessly while exploring how places and spaces are social and gendered constructions. Initially, the digital place helped Adele to escape from the domestics, the family, and the public space, but digital escapism collapsed as it gave more intricate and complexity to the multithemed feminist issues and mode of spatiality in the narrative.

Keywords. *Domestic place, digital space, feminist geography, gender roles, interconnectedness, interplay, mode of spatiality, space.*

1. Introduction

Space acquires and requires a significant part in the narrative process and writing, because of its 'interconnectedness' and intersectionality with other crucial technical devices such as characters, themes, and the plot. Leila Slimani's *Adele* (2019) is an example of a writing which links spatiality to different modes which enrich the discussion and exploration of various themes such as gender roles, patriarchy, female identity, social inequality, and power dynamics. The story of Adele who is a talented French journalist married to doctor Richard Robinson, her complicated and conflictual life is due to her sex addiction and adventure. The idea of sex

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addiction is represented as an impulsive yet destructive factor that haunts Adele's journey in the narrative. This hidden and double life that Adele played in the story is reflected in different aspects of spatiality starting from her personal space of her apartment, Paris, hotels, bars, streets, alleys, and countryside, and her body as a symbolic space to different digital space examples such as mobiles phones, chatrooms, websites and laptops. This blend between physical and digital spaces intersects with the protagonist's character, development, psychological conflicts, and the themes she is involved in. The diversity of spatiality has given another dimension and opportunity to address certain issues in the narratives. Still the feminist geography approach will add much depth and scrutiny to the notion of female identity, space, gender roles, motherhood, discrimination, inequality, the female body when they are read "geographically". Thus, this present paper aims to explore the modes of spatiality in *Adele* and how the idea of the digital place provides a unique perspective to navigate different themes that are related to feminism. In short, this combination between the physical and the digital space which Slimani uses in the narrative has complicated Adele's individual experience and identity, because there are occasions where the digital space has created much more comfort and interaction than the physical space that the protagonist is involved in.

Literature review

1.1Feminist geography.

The major idea of feminist geography is presented in Doreen Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994). There are three important arguments and parts which Massey has developed in her book which have inspired feminist geography. The first part is how social relations and space determine our understanding of space. Besides, the idea of space is a "social construct, a product of interrelation, and it's always being made and remade" (Massey, 1994, p. 15). The second important idea in the book and for this study is the attempt to understand "the complex interrelations between space, place, and gender, and challenging spatial inequalities that result from these relations" (Massey, 1994, p.117). Delving into the nature of these interrelations which are characterized by what Massey calls "uneven development" that can be resulted also in a gendered space where economic and social favoritism and inequality dominate the sphere. Although Massey's second part of the book targets economic and enterprising localities, spaces, and places in our modern "capitalist" world, their unique mechanisms are significant in the construction our social understanding of spaces and places. Importantly, this intersectionality of our social construction of space, gender, and individual identity constitutes the gist of understanding how space and place can be gendered. Thus, questions about social inequality, discrimination, and power dynamics predominate in the feminist geography arena. Another contribution to this literature review is made by Java Singh's *Feminist Literary and Cultural Criticism: An Analytical Approach to Space* (2022). The chapter "The Poetics of Spatial Patriarchy" which analyses the symbolic meanings of space and places generates gendered messages" (Singh, 2022, p.27). In fact, this chapter is a continuation and follow-up argument of Massey's part three Space, Place, and Gender which addresses the affinity between

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words, meanings, and symbols which constitute the first mechanism and construction of gendered space and establish the "patriarchal domination" and institutionalized inequality. The title "The Poetics of Spatial Patriarchy" is the gateway through which "the poetics" and the aesthetics construction of space and spatiality are analyzed in the novel *Adele.* In other words, though much of Massey's contribution has generalized and focused on geographical and economic aspects that targeted gendered spaces, but still Singh's study "The Poetics of Spatial Patriarchy" narrows the gap between economy, geography, politics, and literary works such as narratives. Thus, much of the pursuit of this feminist geography approach will target this aesthetics and poetics discussion of spatiality, both physical and digital modes, in Slimani's novel *Adele*. As L. Herbert puts it "space is therefore a physical, semiotic, and cognitive construction" (Herbert, 2022, p.55).

3.Digital space.

The rise of digital culture and space has dominated our interaction and communication recently. It is highly important to draw our attention to the influence and impact of this genre of space in our interactions, perceptions, readings, and writings as well. Thus, the construction of place and space in the novel or any literary form is always influenced by and compared to the digital space that exists out there. This kind of interaction between the actual and the digital is always fascinating and perplexing as Grigar and O'Sullivan agree that "the interaction of the individual with a digital space needs smooth and precise, and attentive for its construction, mediation, flow, information and sense" (D. Grigar, J. O'Sullivan,2021, p.297). As a matter of fact, this kind of interaction of the individual with the digital space is all-pervading in *Adele* where the protagonist navigates between these two realms with a kind of complication and complexity.

After all, there is an important intersectionality between three essential elements in this literature review which are social, geographical, and psychological inclination to place and space. The nature of these three elements would make the cluster of the upcoming analysis and discussion of space in *Adele*. In the first element, social, we have culture, interaction, gender, identity, and power dynamics. The second element is geography which deals with place and space that we have constructed and re-constructed through our interactions, readings, perceptions, and writings. The last element is psychology which is about our inner states, feelings, emotions, and interpretations of space and its culture as well.

Methods

Feminism as an approach to address gender roles, social patriarchy, inequality, and power dynamics is an attuned method for such issues. However, the addition of geography to feminism will add much depth to delve into the dynamics of spatiality. "Space" and "gender" have been always two complex and entangled entities. Moreover, the widespread digitality has exposed another interconnectedness between all these elements: space, gender, and digital identity. The present critique is mainly an inductive one with its exploratory mission to target the textual analysis research methodology. Hence, when the main data is a text, passage, an extract "the close reading" method is the best to be applied to the present narrative *Adele*

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(2019). For this purpose, David Greenham's Close Reading (The Basics 2018) is the major guideline for this analysis. Since close reading tolerates interpretation, critiquing, and evaluating space "complexities the context allows for more than one meaning for any given word to be at work within a literary text. (Greenham, 2018, p.6). This work examines the idea of spatiality and its potential connections to digital space. Moreover, it tries to display how these different modes of spatiality help understanding and uncover multiple themes such as gender roles, social inequality, alienation, conflicts, and character's belonging.

Results

Space has always occupied a substantial segment in Leila Slimani's writings. In her interview entitled "We Are All Monsters" with Bookanista, Slimani has stressed that "when you are a journalist and a writer, you need to be careful about every detail in the street", how people take a cup of coffee, how they sit and talk" (Slimani, 2019b, 06:25-06:42). In this context, Slimani negotiates the position of her characters, especially female characters, as the case of Adele which has navigated different modes of spatiality which tangled with aspects of digital ones so as to explore unusual themes, highlight the character's development and enrich the plot in the narrative.

Adele is a character with a unique conflictual disturbance and exceptional sex addiction which need precise spatial modes to explore Adele's individual, experience, character, and the themes she is involved in such as sex addiction motherhood gender roles, social inequality, and others. From the beginning of the novel, Adele seems to display a kind of conflictual relation with her place and space especially when she is in her apartment, bedroom, hotel(s), sea, office, and anywhere else. It is important to go through each mode of spatiality to display its connotation and symbolic meaning without forgetting the potential existence of digital space in Adele's experience.

1 The domestic space.

The idea of domestic space is exceptionally vivid and an entangled part of the protagonist's life and experience in the narrative. The apartment and precisely the bedroom have occupied much description and portray in the novel. Initially, "the apartment is silent and empty" space (Slimani, 2019, p.1). These strong adjectives portray Adele's instant reflection on and relation to her domestic space. "Silent and empty" are the equivalent echoes for the apartment although her husband Richard and her son Lucien are there, but still they do not seem to fulfill that place. In addition to this, the bedroom is another important space in the narrative which is portrayed as a symbol of loneliness, emptiness, and remoteness from Richard. Though they sleep in the same bed, "she undressed in her bedside" and "a vast silence" (Slimani, 2019, p.33) dominated their bedroom. The apartment and the bedroom are considered intimate spaces where Adele and Richard are supposed to have intimate connections and relations with each other, but the previous examples have displayed how Adele is detached and alienated from her domestic place and her husband as well. Her unease and conflictual state in her domestic space suggests that Adele is irritated by such constructed and domestic space (Massey, 1994) which is also a

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gendered place as a female, a wife, and a mother. The protagonist may seem to be burdened and unsatisfied with such domestic space.

2 The public space, Paris and Streets

The public space is another mode of spatiality which add diversity to the narrative. The city of Paris is the place where many of the events took place. It is "the city of light" and beauty, but Adele has a quiet version which makes her feel alienated, "anonymous", and like an "intruder":

> Paris is orange and deserted … the city offers Adele an ideal place for daydreaming. She feels almost like an intruder… the city appears infinite, she feels anonymous. It's hard to believe that she is connected with anyone, that anyone is waiting for her, expecting anything of her (Slimani, 2019, p. 99).

Adele's feelings are crystal clear in the above quote. Paris is a vast space where she is lost, anonymous, and deserted. The narrator focuses much on her feelings and reflections on Paris which draws our attention to the instant link between space, feelings, and psychology. Adele's unstable psychology seems to dominate the above description of Paris as a space. As an individual, Adele perceives Paris as deserted, anonymous and she lost connections with anyone despite having family, friends, and colleagues at the office. There are other passages which link the description of the space to Adele's feelings and conflictual state. In the streets of Paris Adele feels that they "are grey and cold". Two simple adjectives, but they are associated with gloom and sadness which Adele experiences and lives in the narrative. Thus, psychology, feelings, and space appear to be of strong relation when Adele reflects on Paris and its infinite streets. The feeling of being de-socialized and detached from her public space (Paris and its streets) is going to extend to her family space.

3. The Family as a space.

The notion of family as a space has different meanings and weights to Richard and Adele in the novel. For Richard, family is a resting and comforting space and place to belong to. The symbol of the family is meaningful because whatever he does his family members are at the center of his actions and deeds. Thus, every Christmas is spent with his parents and in-laws, because for Richard "family is an important" space:

Every year they spend Christmas in Caen with the Robinson family and the New Year with Adele's parents. It has been a tradition, as Richard likes to repeat. She has tried to convince him it is pointless to all the way to Boulogne-sur-Mer to see her parent… but Richard insists for Lucien, "because he needs to know his grandparents," and for her too, "because family important. (Slimani, 2019, p.59)

Richard does his best to belong to his family and maintain connections with the space so that Lucien and Adele could strengthen their bounds to this "comforting zone". However, Adele seems to care less about her family space. For Adele, family is a pointless space which makes feel more about constraints rather than ties and bounds. In the same context, during the Christmas dinner Adele felt dislocated and disconnected from this constructed family space, and she wished to be somewhere else. She always seeks excuses and finds pretexts to avoid

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family reunions, because "she does not feel any desire to impress them. It is killing her to have to sit here and listen to them" (Slimani,2019, p. 50). In general, Adele is suffocating by her family space and social events, she wants to escape from this socially constructed tie and space and be somewhere.

In short, Richard and Adele are two different characters when it comes to their reflections on family as a space. Richard is constantly longing to belong to his family, because it is important for him and Lucien. On the contrary, Adele is irritated by her family space and she always experiences conflictual and disturbing feelings when she is around her family and social events. The social dimension is very present in this context of family as a space because it is analyzed in the thread of social relation and it is not a static one (Massey, 1994, p. 2).

4. The Body as a space and a territory

Slimani has explored the notion of sexuality and body clinically and aesthetically. Space as a body and body as a space sound intricate and intertwining in the narrative. The body has different meanings for the protagonist and the reader. For Adele, the body as a physical space is not meant to fulfill her lascivious obsessions and sexual adventures, but it provides her an opportunity to get out and escape her domestic and family space as well (Slimani, 2019, p.30). Though her body provides a temporary escape space, but Adele is trapped in this dilemma. In other words, her body as a space is always affected by her domestic space, the apartment, the family, the office, and emotions and feelings of shame, self-disrespect, and treachery. Eventually, Adele experiences an agonizing and conflictual maze in all these spaces. The complexity of the body as a space relies on the fact that Adele's body which is supposed to make connections with her domestic and family space is the very body which remains distant, remote, untouched, and alienated (Slimani, 2019, pp. 31, 32). Moreover, the same body which tries to find comfort and intimacy through sexual pursuits is the same body (space) which lingers detached, disconnected, and alienated. This is an intricate and nuanced representation of the body as a space in the novel which uncovers the intersectionality and interconnectedness of the physical, the domestic, the social, the family, the psychology, and the feeling of Adele's unique character. As a matter of fact, there are immense occasions where Adele's body as a space is intricate. And nuanced, even Richard, who is a doctor and an expert in diagnosing patients' bodies, stood speechless and dumbstruck by his wife's condition (Slimani, 2019, p.162).

5. The Digital space

Adele as an experienced and talented journalist has an elusive relationship with digital culture and space in the novel. As a matter of fact, digital technology and space are considered the professional tools in her profession and career as a journalist. However, Adele's resort and escape to the digital space has multiple reasons. The most crucial reason is that the digital space and platform are used by Adele to pursue her sexual adventures in online dating and apps so as to escape her miserable and suffocating domestic space. Adele finds the digital space as a medium for her secrecy, pleasure, and virtual shelter and escape. Most if not all her sexual

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adventures are generated from her digital space. Her white phone and secret laptop, that she hides from Richard, are the digital gadgets that she used to chat, date, blog, and interact with her online lovers. The narrative is full of extracts where the digital is preferred and adoptable by Adele as in the case when she wants to escape an art gallery party (Slimani, 2019, p. 7) and the Christmas dinner (Slimani, 2019, p.50) so as to be alone in her digital and virtual space with her lovers. Adam, Mehdi, Xavier, and others are Adele's lovers whom she met and interacted with them in the digital space because she believes that the digital space would offer her much comfort and sanctuary from her domestic space. On the contrary, this virtual and digital space that Adele has created as a "refuge" from the domestic space is going to fall when Richard accidentally finds the white phone (Slimani,2019, pp. 140.141). Richard went through all the dating websites, chatting, photos, and messages that Adele used in her secretive space. Suddenly, Adele feels that the digital space is fading away and collapsing.

This mode of spatiality (the digital space) interconnects and interplays with other modes such as domestic, the family, the body, and the city at many levels. The protagonist tries to escape her domestic, family as space is not enough and important for her, and even the public space, Paris, and its streets are suffocating and considered social shackles. Besides, her body as a space is connected to the digital space via photos, videos, dating apps, and social media.

Discussion and Conclusion

Slimani's choice of these different mode of spatiality and how they interplay and intersect with each other is emblematic and harmonious with the multihemes, character's development, and experience. In her domestic space, Adele is tortured by this constructed and gendered space where she feels alienated and marginalized as a female, a wife, and a mother by her husband Richard. Besides, at the office, the protagonist is irritated by Cyril's patriarchal dominance and space that is why she always hides behind the screen of her laptop (digital refuge) scrolling up and down dating websites and chatrooms.

Furthermore, Paris and its streets are described according to Adele's psychological tendencies and de-socialized interactions. For Adele, Paris is "grey", "and deserted, and she is anonymous. As a woman, Adele appears to be troubled by" this notion of the public-private space when navigates through them and raising questions about gender and space. In addition to this, the family as a place has proved to cause irritated and conflictual feelings, and the protagonist expressed her disturbance and discontent in the previous example of family reunions and events. All these constructed and gendered spaces are distant, remote, and restless. However, the digital space which Adele has created and lived in may seem the alternative escape to her in the narrative. According to Adele, the digital space "has given her" a sense of belonging and the opportunity to connect with others.

The narrative has portrayed that Adele has more connections in her digital space than in her actual space and physical space. Although these digital connections with her loves are absent from real conversations when they meet in physical spaces such as hotels, studios, rented rooms, bars, and streets. The meeting is more about sexual relations not about socializing and having intimate conversations. Essentially, this diversity in modes of spatiality in Adele are

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pathways to address issues and themes in the novel. Adele as a female, a wife, and a mother has experienced different aspects of gender inequality and discrimination in these spaces by her husband in the apartment, by Cyril at the office, and by men in the streets and bars (Slimani, 2019, p. 164). Richard was unable to understand the female body, addiction, and symptoms. Adele has experienced how space is a "gendered construction" especially when she is with her family and how male dominance and patriarchy are obvious in their conversations, and disputes.

In short, *Adele*'s modes of spatiality are presented in a sort of interplay and interconnectedness to address different feminist issues which rise from gender roles/spaces, motherhood, discrimination, and social inequality. Besides, these multifaceted and multidimensional modes of spatiality delve into the characters' psychology, identity, and personal experience. This thin line between the physical and the digital has uncovered many issues that feminist geography prioritizes such as the instant and inevitable link between place, space, and gender. However, there are important questions which can be raised here for example can the digital space be an alternative or an escape from the physical one? Is the digital space free from biased gender inequalities for Adele and women in general? These kinds of questions keep resonant in Adele's journey, because she is in a constant quest for a comfortable space that is not gendered and biased. Adele as a conflictual, nuanced, and blurred character helps us to understand this complexity and complication between the digital and the physical space in the novel while applying the feminist geography approach. *Adele* is a masterpiece that delves into many feminist issues by focusing on the interplay between the digital and the physical space while keeping in mind that space and gender are socially and culturally constructed.

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