

## IMAGES OF PHYSICAL SPACE – SYMBOLS OF RETREAT

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Geo criticism, cartography, graphic space, heterotopias are some of the terms that deal with space in literature. There is a need for space in every individual, and it is more so for women. This paper focuses on the 'psycho-social' aspect of space of the women characters in the selected novels.

Spaces can be differentiated as man-made space and natural space. Room and home can be considered as man-made spaces while beach can be considered as a natural space. Every woman needs a space to escape from her stereotyped life. A room or a house was considered to be the proper place for a woman in the Victorian Age but the same has turned into a constraining closet for her from the early twentieth century.

But in the women writers chosen for study both the man-made space and the natural space are presented as places of retreat and places of freedom for women. This paper studies the concept of space, and the different physical imagery of space as found in the various authors who belong to different ages - Anne Morrow Lindberg's *Gift from the Sea*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and Kristin Hannah's *Distant Shores*.

**Key words:** Women, feminism, space, money, psycho-social

### INTRODUCTION

...let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
 And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.  
 ...stand together yet not too near together:  
 For the pillars of the temple stand apart.

— Kahlil Gibran

The term 'space' may sound negative when we discuss the relationship between human beings. In fact, space is the only factor that can build a close healthy in any relationship. In the above quoted lines the philosopher tries to insist on the need for space between the couple. He also compares the couple with the pillars. The pillars of a building do not stand side by side. Instead, they stand in the required places. Likewise parents can contribute in different yet unique ways for the balanced growth of their children. This paper attempts to highlight 'the need for space' in every individual, especially, in women who tend to forget their self's once they get married. Hence, it becomes imperative that we reconsider and revisit the commonly held notions of space. This paper discusses the important of space' as a place where one can retreat to one's passion or interest without any distractions.

Woman plays a vital role in the family. Her role doubles up, rather multiplies within her family, as a wife, as a mother, as a care taker of the old and sick and a

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house keeper doing the routine chores of the house. All are important and inescapable roles, and most of the time she is unconsciously selfless. She dissolves herself in the family duties to perform her multiple roles better. In her arduousness, she loses her own identity as an individual. At the end of the road, there is a sense of emptiness and a sense of disillusionment when her whole life seems meaningless. That is why she must make a pause to rest in her space to recharge herself, and identify herself.

The physical spaces like 'room', 'beach' and 'house' are the examples discussed in this paper. A room or a house was considered to be the proper place for women in the Victorian age, and the same has become a constraining closet for women from the early twentieth century. In Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the concept of room has taken another turn. The room according to Virginia Woolf is a place of private space, a place to energize herself, a place to explore into her identity. The word 'space' is considered here both in its physical and psychological aspects. The quest for physical space for the solace of a psychological space is projected by many women writers. Women tend to and indeed need to take refuge in the Physical space to find quiet in their own Psychological space. This paper studies about authors who belong to different ages and cultures in this light - Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, and Kristin Hannah's *Distant Shores*.

### **Need for Space**

The specific situations these writers encountered may be different yet we find a common thread linking all of them. In Kristin Hannah's novel, *Distant Shores* the protagonist named Elizabeth Shores felt lost when she found that the rhythm in her married life was missing. Her husband Jackson Shores's ambition in life was entirely different from Elizabeth's. She was also a mother of two children. Though there were people around her, she felt all alone. Virginia Woolf had to deliver a lecture at Newnham College, Cambridge in the year 1928, on the topic 'Women and Fiction' which sounded ambiguous to her. She wandered in her imaginary world where she met with so many obstacles which prevented her from focusing on her idea. Lindbergh too found her life very dry and monotonous. She was unable to figure out the real meaning of relationships. She wanted to release her stress. These are the circumstances that dragged all the three to look for a 'space'.

### **Choices they made**

As already mentioned the difficult situations faced by the writers may be different but the road they all reached is one and the same. It is the idea of the need for space. But again the vehicle they chose to travel the road was different from that of each other. Kristin Hannah chose 'the house', Virginia Woolf 'the room' and Lindbergh 'the beach'. 'The house' for Elizabeth Shores was not merely a building

which was made up of bricks, sand and stones. Instead she wanted to look at her house as a real person with blood and flesh and feelings within. So she believed her house to be a real companion who wiped away her loneliness. ‘The room’ which was chosen by Virginia Woolf, offered her a sense of privacy. Her insight is unique in that the room was previously considered as a place reserved for women where they had to confine themselves. The intention was to stop women from coming out of the limited circle, mingling with people and thus gaining knowledge from them. This attitude of confinement was removed after many years struggle. But Virginia Woolf on behalf of the writers once again was demanding for a room of one’s own. Now the demand for a private room is not to confine oneself but to focus on one’s inner self and creative ideas. Lindbergh chose a space that is closest to many of our hearts, ‘the beach’. For Lindbergh the beach is a place of openness. She believed that it could open one’s mind, heart and senses.

### **Contrasts and similarities**

If we analyze the choices of physical spaces of the authors in consideration, we can find a little contrast between the choice of Hannah and Virginia. ‘The beach’ is an open space where everything is clear to everyone. A lot of things can be seen and enjoyed in the beach. But unlike the beach, a room is considered to be a closed, idle and darkened area. In spite of the differences in the nature of spaces, the ultimate benefit one can receive is to be by oneself. One can find many things in beach like bright space, vast area, beautiful shells, marvelous tides and human beings. One can even think that too much of these elements lead to distraction. But, when you surrender yourself truly to the beach, it will change all the elements to a mirror. Then any element you look at will reflect only the idea in your mind. Kristin Hannah mentioned ‘the house’ as her choice of physical space through her character Elizabeth. There is also a reference in her novel which states that the house is beside a beach. Actually it is a beach house. So we note that the choice of Elizabeth’s space is a combination of both Virginia Woolf’s and Lindbergh’s.

### **Importance of Space**

The factor that forced Lindbergh to quest for space was the family clutches. Lindbergh was a mother of five children and a dutiful wife for her lovable husband. Though she was happy with her family members and family set up, she needed something more. She needed something more for herself. The needs of Lindbergh were quite different from Virginia Woolf’s. Virginia wanted to load herself with heavy ideas, whereas, Lindbergh wanted to free her mind. Virginia wished to go deeper and deeper into the world of knowledge, but Lindbergh very much wished to come out of the thoughts of responsibilities over her family. With regard to Elizabeth, she was not able to retain her tolerance when things happened to separate her from her best companion, that is, her house. So, she decided that she would

even part from her husband but at any cost not from her house. For her, her house was more comfortable and more consoling than her husband. So we must accept that the characters have chosen the suitable physical space that fulfills their respective needs. After all, everyone wants to live a life of peace and joy.

### **Gift from the Sea**

Lindbergh in the *Gift from the Sea* does not see the 'beach' a place to read, write or think. Instead it is a place to make oneself free from thoughts. Beach is a magical space which holds precious gifts. After reading Lindbergh's essay one can understand that, many can go to the beach but not all return with the gifts from the sea. The sea chooses the one, the one who deserves, and the one who is qualified. Who can be the deserved one and what can be the qualification are the two important questions which will arise in our minds. Being relaxed and getting into the right mind set are the perfect qualifications, and the one who is ready to accept these is the deserved one to receive the gift from the sea. Lindbergh says, "The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient." (11, Lindbergh)

The sea expects more from the believer than the believer from the sea. The believer may come to the beach with lots of plan to achieve so many of the so called big things, but the first thing the beach tries to do is to relax the person with its soothing breeze, lovely scenery, and its marvelous presence. Lindbergh points out,

"...hopefully, one carries down the faded straw bag, lumpy with books, clean paper, long over-due unanswered letters, freshly sharpened pencils, lists and good intentions. The books remain unread, the pencils break their points and the pads rest smooth and unblemished as the cloudless sky. No reading, no writing, no thoughts even— at least at first." (9)

After this it starts to teach the lessons of life. But before teaching it has to warm up one's mind. It tries to make the mind carefree, open, simple, patient and hopeful. It's like formatting a computer. While formatting, you completely erase everything and start to save all newly and freshly. Once the mind arrives at that state, each and every animated and in-animated thing becomes the study material. Whatever the thing one observes or focuses on will teach umpteen lessons. The main thing the sea teaches you is to be patient and to be faithful. Lindbergh poetically says, "Patience, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith". (11). When you are the patient, and when you believe in the space of beach, it gives you gifts such as, the ability to understand life better and the cultivation of mind where you can sow the new seeds of good thoughts.

For Lindbergh, shells are the study materials given by the sea. She came across the shells like, channeled whelk, moon shell, double-sunrise, oyster bed and argonauta from which she learnt many lessons on life. At the end of her stay, she felt very comfortable, and was positively happy with the gift that she received from the sea.

### A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf has made an attempt to justify the topic 'Women and Fiction' given to her for a lecture. At first, she thought of dealing with some famous successful women writers. But, later when she kept on pondering over the same topic she came to realize that the topic contained a perspective of critical insight. After that she decided to present a multiple perspective of the topic writing about women who wrote fictions and the fictions which talked about women and why women writers chose fiction as the most preferred form to express themselves. She let her mind wander in thoughts and came out with an entirely different concept of what is really needed for a woman who wants to write fiction. She asserts, "...-a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write a fiction" (13, Woolf). She argues for financial independence of woman so that she could write her piece of work in peace. She also insists on the necessity of space if women has to focus on her ideas without any distractions.

This proved a daunting task even for Virginia Woolf. She strained her brain so much, referred to lot of books and faced 'indifferent' experiences in her real life when she was preoccupied with this topic. "I pondered it and made it work in and out of my daily life" (14) She has also brought in some imaginary places like Oxbridge university and Fernham so that the reader can get the exact tone of her experiences. She specifies how she was stopped and diverted by a 'beadle' from crossing a private path in Oxbridge university because of not being a member of that university. She was also not allowed inside the library for not having any note from the concerned official. "...they had sent my little fish into hiding. What idea it had been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing I could not now remember. The spirit of peace descended like a cloud from heaven..." (16) These personal experiences made her realize the essentiality of a 'space' for one self.

She was also upset when she started thinking about the male writers who criticized so badly women and women writers. For instance, when she tried to recall the work of a writer titled *The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex* she became highly indignant. "My heart leapt. My cheek had burnt. I had flushed with anger." (40) She also felt it was wrong that no information was available on the women who lived before 16<sup>th</sup> century. She strongly regretted that the women of the past did not take any step for improving the lot of the women folk in their times. To refer to the previous idea she used an imaginary name Mrs. Seton.

"If only Mrs. Seton and her mother and her mother before her had learnt the great art of making money and had left their money... We might have been exploring or writing; mooning about the venerable places of the earth; sitting contemplative on the steps of the Parthenon, or going at ten to an office and coming home comfortable at half past four to write a little poetry" (30)

She was so sorry for the 16<sup>th</sup> century women, who had a passion for writing but who were unable to come out because of the restrictions imposed by the male dominated society. In those days most women wrote under pseudonyms or they wrote for themselves without any intention of publishing their works. And finally, when Virginia Woolf happened to read the novel *Life's Adventure* by Mary Carmichale. She found that something was missing in it. From the text she could understand the stress, wavering of thoughts and ideas due to the lack of continuous attempt by the writer.

“...if Mary Carmichael knows how to write, and I was beginning to enjoy some quality in her style; if she has a room to herself, of which I am not quite sure; if she has five hundred a year of her own – but that remains to be proved – then I think that something of great importance has happened.” (89)

Thus she decided to deliver the lecture on the necessity of space for a writer rather than enumerating the successful stories of women writers.

### **DISTANT SHORES**

The middle aged woman Elizabeth Shores had almost lost all her hopes in her life. In fact, she was used to be the happiest person in the world with her paint and brush. She also had a lovable husband, Jackson Shores, who was a very popular football player. Their love for each other was endless. But, when he loses his job, due to his drug addiction, a shadow of distance falls between them. The passion once they had had, was only in their memories. “In the earlier days of their marriage, they had always slept nestled together, but somewhere along the way, they’d started needing space between them” (10) The expectation from life became different for both. Jack was looking forward for a chance to be a noon sports anchor. On the other hand, Elizabeth engaged herself completely with the house-hold maintenance. She used to change or alter the house now and then. For her, her house was the only solace. She assumed her house to be a living person and nurtured it. It was her house that gave her an identity then. She could not imagine even for a moment of leaving the house. “...she found herself edging toward depression. Everywhere she looked, she saw something that mattered to her, something she hated to leave behind. This house meant so much to her, more than she could quiet express or understand. The thought of leaving it made her sick to her stomach” (130) So, Elizabeth made her space in the form of a house.

When she was asked to leave the house to New York as her husband has got a job, she was almost broken. But she made a firm decision to stay back at her beach house even without her husband. The big decision that she made at the right time rescued her space. Being all alone in her space she started thinking wisely about the matters that she forgot to look upon for the last twenty-four years of her life. She started living her life as she used to earlier. The new confidence and understanding of life also brought her family back to her.

## CONCLUSION

The writers discussed have showed the ideal way to regain one's energy and spirit is to carve out a 'space' for oneself. Every woman is running a race in her life. It's not a mere journey for her. Lindbergh in the middle of her race, though not a difficult one for her, made a pause to set her things right which helped her to continue her journey comfortably again. Virginia Woolf was asked an ambiguous question which slowed down her speed in the middle of her race. She fumbled a little to come out with an answer because of the hurdles she faced. She was also afraid whether she would be able to complete the race at all. Finally, thinking through the very hurdles she faced, she was able to arrive at satisfactory answers. That enabled her to run her race to a great finish. Elizabeth was tensed every now and then, because she was not running in the right track. She stopped and meditated for a while, changed to the right track and continued with her race. 'The space', according to all the three writers, is not only the choice to be made by women but it also holds the solution to the problems faced by women. The writers convince us that enfolded by 'the space' all of us (women) can attain a better understanding of ourselves and go ahead with confidence in the journey of our dreams.

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