

Critique

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Sculpting in Space: A Study of Performance And Subversion in *Joyland*

Joyland (2022), a debut feature from Saim Sadiq, is a conflict-gestured movie in the realm of gender performance and queer identity. The Pakistani film was banned for its “objectionable material”, which challenges the conventionality attached to the religious society and norms around gender and identity. The spaces explored by Saim Sadiq are so pronounced that the audiences are instigated to derive descriptions from them, which renegotiates the mundane gender makeup and gender performances in a highly patriarchal society.

Drawing primarily on Judith Butler and her influential work, “*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*”, which builds on gender as a performance reinforced through repetitive actions. These stylised acts aim to legitimise and naturalise certain aspects of gender and make them appear universal and inherent. These roles are challenged and subverted by individuals through the disintegration of gender duality and power equations. It also draws from Deleuze’s theory of space and practices.

The intersubjective relationships and their projection in action space are used to explore and understand the power relations enabled in gender performances and the different rituals associated with the cultural understanding of Pakistan. The space occupied by each character representing a different gender spectrum foregrounds subjectivity and breaks away from the predominant male gaze. The male character is restrained from the process of completing the masculine-gendered self. The queer and female subjectivity tacitly dominates the space and asks the spectator to consider the spectacle that is created. These three identities and their complicated relations projected in the screen space material are also

explored through lighting, complimenting the overthrow of the cultural myths attached to gender.

Joyland becomes the con(text) in which these aspects of gender performance are intertwined with the space occupancy of each character in a cultural fabric.

Keywords - Gender performance, Culture, Identity, Queer, Gender Binary

Introduction

Cinema is a movement in time and space that offers artists a unique platform to create their artwork in spatial-temporal form. It is a creative way to indulge and interact with the world to rearrange and assemble perceptions. It needs space to accommodate movement. Thus, cinema is an enriching artistic endeavour that invokes a journey or itself, which is a voyage of discovery that can present illusion as a strict reality and vice versa. Cinematic space is unquestionably the essential dimension of cinema that hangs in the thread of time. It is the visual space that is contained in a frame, offering unlimited readings of the image it projects to the audience. Cinema is crucial in exploring and reflecting gender performance through its characters. The characters assert and negotiate their identities in the space they occupy in screen space, eventually leading to subversion or normalisation of their gendered roles.

Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, gender is performed through acts, gestures, and behaviours, which can be illustrated in film through characters who either conform to or defy established gender norms. For example, a character who performs stereotypically feminine traits such as nurturing or passivity reinforces traditional gender norms. In contrast, a character who exhibits traits

traditionally associated with the opposite gender, such as assertiveness in women or vulnerability in men, challenges these norms.

Deleuze often conceptualises practices as events or series of events. They are not merely actions performed in space but processes that continuously shape and reshape both the actors involved and the space in which they occur.

"*Joyland*," directed by Saim Sadiq, is a Pakistani film that explores family, identity, sexuality, and desire in contemporary Pakistan. Through the narrative of a young guy named Haider, who feels stuck in the constraints of his typical patriarchal family life and expectations as a male in the familial structure, the film explores the intricacies of societal expectations and personal longing. Mumtaz, Haider's wife, depicts a strong, passionate woman who slowly slides into the gendered role of caregiving in a domestic space, where she is forced to give up her job. The third representative from the gendered spectrum is Biba, who is a trans woman who exudes a commanding presence, both on and off stage. As the leader of a dance troupe from the erotic dance theatre, she embodies confidence and charisma, resilient towards societal prejudices and pressures on trans individuals.



(fig 1– *Banner on the moped*)

Reframing the Gendered Spaces: Visual Aesthetics

The film shifts the focus from a male-centred perspective to the experiences and inner lives of female and non-binary characters like Mumtaz and Biba. Rather than being passive objects of desire or

secondary to male narratives, these characters are given depth, agency, and emotional complexity. As the narration progresses, the audience is invited to empathize with their struggles, aspirations and conflicts.

Haider occupies spaces that are traditionally considered feminine, such as being a dancer in the erotic dance theatre. His involvement in a dance troupe, which is a domain typically reserved for women or effeminate men in their cultural context, challenges the traditional notions of masculinity. Through the character of Haider, the film destabilises the idea that certain spaces, interests and traits are inherently masculine or feminine. Haider's journey is one of the major subversions, as he navigates spaces that allow him to express a softer, more fluid version of masculinity, starkly contrasting his community's dominant, hyper-masculine and assertive ideals. Mumtaz's return to the domestic sphere, traditionally associated with women, is signified through the patriarchal home's low-key lighting and claustrophobic spaces. The transition of Mumtaz's world from an expansive, independent space into a constrained, claustrophobic space is characterised by her loosely fitted attire, which Nocchi tries to stitch to look more feminine and attractive. The discomfort and inability to fit into the cloth prescribed by Nocchi signifies the cultural and social construct of gender makeup that one is expected to wear. Mumtaz's room is portrayed in the screen space as underlit and claustrophobic and is characterised as the space of interaction between Haider and Mumtaz. The sexual intimacy between them is not widely explored, and their niece sleeps with them, further distancing the possibility of mental and physical connection. Most interactions of the couples are during the night and the low-key lighting adds to the emotional turmoil and the weakening attachment within them. In certain scenes, the characters' direct gaze or engagement with the camera challenges the traditional dynamic of the male gaze and comes in conflict with the normative gaze of the audience. This breaking of the fourth wall in some of the movie's intimate scenes disrupts the audience's typical power structure as the dominant observer.

The three major characters representing the gender spectrum are vulnerable, often succumb to the fictionalised gender makeup and resist with more agency. The entrapment of Mumtaz in the domestic space is framed by centring her in the doorways and windows, which creates a sense of frame within a frame. This indicates the confinement and the innate urge to escape the domestic space in which she barely fits. On the contrary, the dance studio, the dais and the terrace where the show, practice sessions and rehearsals occur are filmed in open, free and wide frames. Haider and Biba move freely in the space that serves liberation, self-expression and identity building. This openness contrasts with the claustrophobic framing of the home, symbolising the potential for entrapment and enforcement of gender norms.



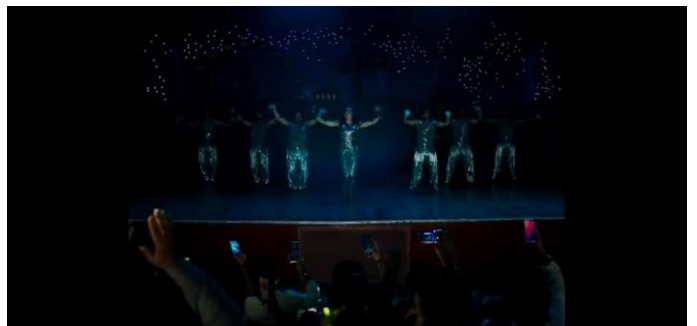
(figure 2 Mumtaz in her extra-sized attire)

The erotic dance theatre also acts as a public space where sexuality and desire are accepted without being termed as sin or shame. The private domestic space or the terms outside the theatre perceive sexuality and intimacy as shameful and borderline taboo. The scene that accommodates Haider carrying the giant banner of Biba in a moped is so profound that the screen space is dominated by the banner with her gaze fixed on the audience. The banner is placed on the rooftop, and the mid-wide shot of the banner standing tall over the neighbourhood metaphorically brings a sense of agency to the community she represents.

The vital sequences on the rooftop and Joyland—an airy release from the cramped conditions of domesticity for Nucchi and Mumtaz are framed in mid-wide shots and mid-close-up shots in high-key lighting, suggesting a revelation of their true selves. The aforementioned signification is achieved by the juxtaposition of the final dance show by Haider and Biba with Nucchi's and Mumtaz's visit to the Joyland.

Performance as Subversion: Gender, Identity, and Resistance

Biba's sexuality is a form of resistance against the rigid gender and sexual norms of her society. Her refusal to be hidden and her active pursuit of a career as a dancer are acts of defiance against the societal expectations that seek to confine her. Her open expression of her sexuality and assertion of her agency is a powerful statement against the norms. The relationship between Biba and Haider directly challenges the heteronormative standards of our society. It presents a relationship that is perceived as a misfit in society's binary understanding of gender, desire and sexuality. This subversion is a key element of the film's broader critique of how society constrains and polices gender and sexual identities. Biba's relationship with Haider is pivotal in expanding and exploring his understanding of his sexuality and masculinity. Through his interactions with Biba, Haider explores his identity, which he had previously suppressed or unexplored. Their relationship catalyses Haider's journey towards a more fluid and authentic self-expression, inevitably endangering his relationship with Mumtaz.



(fig 3 staircase fig 4 dance)

The film explores the traditional gender roles and expectations imposed on the protagonist, Haider, and his wife, Mumtaz, in a highly patriarchal family. Their relationship is characterised by a deep, albeit constrained, intersubjective connection. They share a mutual understanding of their societal pressures, yet

their relationship is strained by the expectations of Haider's family and society. He is comfortable helping his sister-in-law in the kitchen, nourishment, and other domestic chores, whereas his wife, Mumtaz, works in a salon. The film portrays a patriarchal society where power is heavily skewed in favour of men, yet this power is also fragile. Haider's perceived lack of masculinity, contrasted with his wife's desire for independence, creates a power struggle within their marriage. The film's opening scene introduces Haider playing hide and seek with his nieces, himself being covered under a veil. He lacks the courage to butcher the goat where Mumtaz wields the knife.



(fig 5 Hide and Seek)

These characters subvert their prescribed gender roles and challenge the normalised and universalised repetitive acts expected from them. These characters are subjected to judgments by the patriarch, and his decisions inevitably lead to an imbalance in the couple's equilibrium, pushing Mumtaz into a destabilized mental state. The confinement of Mumtaz after her marriage is a powerful representation of how gender roles can limit one's freedom and reconfigure one's identity, turning her once expansive world of independence into a claustrophobic and repressed one. Her eventual tragic fate underscores the devastating consequences of a society that enforces rigid gender binaries and stylised gender roles that constrain individual

freedom of expression. The tension between the public and private spheres highlights the societal resistance to change, where performance as subversion is often met with backlash and repression. The filmmaker explores the vulnerabilities and human desires of the minor characters in the film. They tend to show their vulnerable sides, such as Nucchi, who shouts at her husband for blaming Mumtaz for the act of suicide. The neighbour lady, Fayyaz, also expresses her wish to stay with Abba in his house, which is profoundly rejected by his religious son, even when Abba, a religious misogynist patriarch, projects some level of sympathy.

The final scene, which films Haider moving towards the sea, is deliberately ambiguous and is open to interpretation. This movement suggests a hopeful endeavour towards self-discovery and acceptance. It could also suggest the multifaceted aspect of identity with its inlaid complexities and challenges in a world that has rigid expectations and norms in terms of gender.

Conclusion

In *Joyland*, visual aesthetics, the use of screen space and action space are not merely a backdrop to the narrative but play an integral part in the film's exploration of gender, desire, and sexuality. By subverting the male gaze and challenging the traditional and conservative representation of gendered spaces, the film is a powerful critique of how visual culture reinforces gender norms. Through its brilliant use of colour, lighting, and composition, *Joyland* creates a cinematic space where traditional gender roles are questioned and reconfigured, inviting the audience to see beyond the confines of conventional representations and consider the possibilities of a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender, sexuality and identity.

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