

Lived Spaces, Liberated Selves: Edward Soja's Thirdspace in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* and Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

NIKHILESH DHAR
DEEP NASKAR

Abstract. Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* and Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* are two prominent works of contemporary Japanese literature that have been acclaimed by readers globally. The paper explores the application of Edward Soja's Thirdspace Theory in the context of these two fictional works. By employing Soja's theoretical framework, the study observes how these contemporary novels define spaces that transcend physical dimensions and assist in the metamorphosis of the characters. In *Convenience Store Woman*, the convenience store becomes a catalyst for Keiko's identity construction, challenging societal norms and forming a collective identity within the space. Similarly, in *Kitchen*, the kitchen transforms into a sanctuary, providing solace and serving as a vessel for the growth of the protagonist, Mikage. The paper explores the ubiquitous theme of discovering meaning in certain spaces, signifying the pivotal role of these Thirdspaces in shaping characters' journeys of self-discovery within the complex contemporary socio-cultural fabric.

Keywords : Thirdspace; metamorphosis; societal norms; collective identity; self-discovery.

In order to analyse the alienated human beings in the social complexities and urban environments as narrated in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* and Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, one may find Edward Soja's theory of "Thirdspace" indispensable as the characters in their respective novels interact with the spaces around them and use them to construct their own identities. Furthermore, they utilise it to fight against the strictly homogeneous socio-cultural paradigm. Thus, the primary goal of this study is to explore the underlying connection between the characters and spaces around them. The study also aims to observe the common theme of alienation that is relevant in both of these works.

Spatial theories have a significant impact on the evolution of socio-political and cultural landscapes. Edward Soja's theory of spaces

is one of the most prominent among these postmodern discourses. It sheds light on how spaces shape human experience, ideology, hegemony, and identity. Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* is considered a pioneering work in this field. He categorises space into three types: Perceived, Conceived and Lived spaces. Lefebvre emphasises that space is actively shaped by interacting with people and social practices. Referring to Lefebvre's work, Soja comments that our social existence and social relations become real only when they are "spatially inscribed." Without spatiality, social processes cease to exist, even as pure abstraction, ideology, and representation. The spatial dimension remains hidden and pervasive, as "There is no unspatialized social reality" (Soja 46).

Meskel-Brocken comments, "Soja's own theorisation of the idea of 'Thirdspace' moves through a process in the book by which he interrogates Lefebvre's work, interprets it and reinterprets it, making for a challenging concept to make sense of" (242). Soja proposes a novel and fluid understanding of spatial dynamics as he visualises a transformative space that transcends binary distinctions, and new narratives and identities emerge within this new proposed space. This has been explored profoundly in Soja's *Thirdspace : Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, in which he proposes a triad of spaces, namely: Firstspace (relating to Spatial Practice), Secondspace (relating to Representations of Space) and the Thirdspace (relating to Spaces of Representation).

Soja defines Firstspace as the material landscape that marks the interaction of people with that space. Firstspace encapsulates the tangibility of our environment. It also deals with the production and reproduction of spaces. As Soja sums it up, "Spatial practice, as the process of producing the material form of social spatiality, is thus presented as both medium and outcome of human activity, behaviour, and experience" (66).

Secondspace or the Representation of space, according to Soja, introduces a more comprehensive dimension where the subjective and qualitative aspects of space take centre stage. Here, social dynamics, relationships, and lived experiences within physical environments come into focus. It is how the space is observed by those who interact with it. Soja points out, "This Secondspace, as I term it, is also the primary space of utopian thought and vision, of the semiotician or decoder, and of the purely creative imagination of some artists and poets" (67).

Then there is Thirdspace or the Spaces of representation. Relating it to Lefebvre's concept, Soja remarks that while this space is different from the other two, at the same time it encompasses them. It embodies complex symbolism and is linked to the secretive or underground aspects of social life. Soja writes, "Here then is space as directly *lived*, with all its intractability intact, a space that stretches across the images and symbols that accompany it, the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (67). Meskell-Brocken explains :

This suggests that within Thirdspace lies the potential not only for reimaginings of existing structures but a more radical movement within the process of 'thirling' towards spaces and conceptions of spaces that recognise and attempt to break with existing power structures and dynamics (244).

This process of "thirling" becomes more relevant in the context of these two novels discussed in this paper, as it provides a unique space for the heterogeneous protagonists to utilise the Thirdspace in order to escape the social exclusion.

Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* depicts Keiko Fukahara, a 36-year-old woman who has been working in the same convenience store for 18 years. This could be considered extremely unusual according to the societal norms in Japan, where jobs such as this as a primary means of living are considered rather shameful. The novel notes how the *Convenience Store Woman* transforms into a fundamental space that shapes Keiko's existence and identity. Hence, the narrative transcends the tangible setting of the convenience store. On the other hand, in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, the protagonist Mikage experiences love, loss, life, and death, as kitchens play an integral part in her experience. The physical dimension of the kitchen bears a metaphorical significance for personal growth and rediscovery. Mikage's evolving identity remains consistent with the transforming potential of the "Thirdspace."

This transformative aspect of the space is also very vividly noted in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*, as she upholds the convenience store as the very space of Keiko's symbolical reincarnation. Keiko remarks, "The time before I was reborn as a convenience store

worker is somewhat unclear in my memory. I was born into a normal family and lovingly brought up in a normal suburban residential area. But everyone thought I was a rather strange child” (Murata 9). Keiko’s construction of identity and gradual metamorphosis are integral to the space of the store. It provides an alternative space for her expression and freedom.

The transformative aspect of this space could also be distinctively noted when Keiko comments that all kinds of people, from university students to job-hoppers, housewives, etc., don the uniform and turn into convenience store workers, irrespective of where they belong. Here we may witness the transformative power of this space to generate a collective identity that transcends beyond social roles. It also signifies the convergence of various identities into one whole that occurs within this space. In a way, the space functions as a medium for individuals to dismantle societal structure and dynamics, just as Meskell- Brocken comments on the characteristics of the Thirdspace.

One may further note the regenerative power of this space when Keiko states, “At that moment, for the first time ever, I felt I’d become a part in the machine of society. I’ve been reborn, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society” (17). Hence, Keiko further utilises the Thirdspace of the store to integrate into the complex mechanisms of society that, in other cases, deny fringe elements like her. This also marks a profound transformation for Keiko through her pivotal shift from individuality to collectivity. This notion of rebirth further points to the potential of the Thirdspace, where individuals undergo a redefinition of self. In this case, the convenience store functions as a catalyst and defines the impact of physical and symbolic space in the construction and growth of individual identity.

One may witness how the store becomes an integral part of her identity and her sole medium of connection with the larger society when Keiko says, “When morning comes, once again I’m a convenience store worker, a cog in society. This is the only way I can be a normal person” (Murata 18). This emphasises her core identity that the space of the convenience store helps to concretize. This regular cycle of her becoming a convenience store worker also signifies the constant negotiation of her identity that occurs between the space of the store and the larger society. It is quite evident that despite the “othering” of Keiko, the convenience

store provides her with a safe passage to integrate into the fabric of society and letting her achieve a sense of normalcy. In the context of the Thirdspace, we may assert that the recurring act of becoming a store worker every morning could be considered a ritualised reaffirmation of identity that occurs within this space. Hence, the space not only serves as a physical workplace on the surface level but also plays a crucial role in constructing the narrator's sense of self. Utilising the space to disguise herself as a "normal" person illustrates the significance of the space on Keiko's self-perception.

Murata takes extreme measures in elaborating on the significance of this space, as she notes that the store not only defines Keiko's identity but serves as the foundation of her very existence as well. When Keiko remarks, "When I think that my body is entirely made up of food from this store, I feel like I'm as much a part of the store as the magazine racks or the coffee machine" (18-19). It blurs the boundary between the individual and the space. In fact, here we may note the bizarre connection between Keiko's physicality and the space hinted through the consumption of food, which quite accurately defines the multifaceted characteristics of the Thirdspace. When Keiko remarks that she feels like being a part of the store, equivalent to the racks or the coffee machine, it denotes that her very sense of belonging is rooted in the space. In a way, the space becomes an extension of her being.

Keiko's identity and self not only merge with the store, but they also create a collective identity, assimilating the identities of her colleagues. Keiko says :

My present self is formed almost completely of the people around me. I am currently made up of 30 percent Mrs. Izumi, 30 percent Sugawara, 20 percent the manager, and the rest absorbed from past colleagues such as Sasaki, who left six months ago, and Okasaki, who was our supervisor until a year ago (20).

This depicts the formation of her personal identity affected by her interaction with the immediate social sphere. Interestingly, we may assert that the space of the store works as a repository of collective experience through the mentions of past colleagues who are no longer

present. The space transitions into a temporal dimension of identity formation that, in an evolving manner, continues to shape Keiko's identity. The convenience store functions as a dynamic social ecosystem rather than merely a physical place. The absorption of qualities from diverse people implies a continuous negotiation of identity within the store's community setting.

Not just in terms of personality, but the space lets her adapt her speech as well. She says, "My speech is especially infected by everyone around me..." (20). We may say that Keiko embodies the essence of the space itself, where different people come together and their various characteristics leave an imprint on Keiko's personality. The collective identity that the space induces could further be affirmed when Keiko remarks, "And I probably infect others with the way I speak too. Infecting each other like this is how we maintain ourselves as human is what I think" (20). It reinforces the reciprocal nature of identity construction within the convenience store, where individuals actively contribute to the communal performance of identity.

This collective identity that the space produces can further be evidenced through the dismantling of gender roles within the confines of the store. Keiko replies to Shiraha, "Shiraha, we're in the twenty-first century! Here in the convenience store we're not men and women. We're all store workers" (35). Here, in the Thirdspace, conventional boundaries are transcended, and new, hybrid identities emerge. This statement challenges the societal norms and expectations associated with gender roles.

We notice a similar utilisation of the Thirdspace in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* as well. The characters in these novels explore the complications of modern society. They seek refuge and identity in certain spaces, such as the kitchen. In fact, the kitchen is never perceived for its typical role through the eyes of Mikage, rather, it becomes a place for return and comfort, where Mikage confronts herself, and redefines her identity. In a sense, Yoshimoto depicts the kitchen as a sacred temple that aids the protagonist in her spiritual journey. This is quite distinctively captured when Mikage says at the beginning of the book :

Now only the kitchen and I are left. It's
just a little nicer than being all alone.
When I'm dead worn out, in a reverie, I

often think that when it comes time to
die, I want to breathe my last in a kitchen.
Whether it's cold and I'm all alone, or
somebody's there and it's warm, I'll stare
death fearlessly in the eye. If it's a
kitchen, I'll think, 'How good'.

(*Kitchen* 5).

This suggests that while she witnesses the deaths of her near and dear ones, the kitchen is the only thing that remains constant in her life. The kitchen becomes a sanctuary, a place where she can retreat from the conflicts of the external world. The kitchen, typically associated with nourishment and sustenance, becomes an atypical space where Mikage desires to confront the inevitability of death.

As with the convenience store in Sayaka Murata's novel, the kitchen in Yoshimoto's work serves as more than a backdrop. The thematic similarities of these two novels highlight the universality of finding meaning in ordinary spaces and the profound impact such spaces can have on shaping individual identity. For instance, in *Kitchen*, we notice how Mikage, after the demise of her grandmother, seeks solace in the space of her kitchen. She states:

Three days after the funeral I was still in
a daze. Steeped in a sadness so great I
could barely cry, shuffling softly in
gentle drowsiness, I pulled my futon into
the deathly silent, gleaming kitchen.
Wrapped in a blanket, like Linus, I slept.
The hum of the refrigerator kept me from
thinking of my loneliness. There, the
long night came on in perfect peace, and
morning came. (6)

The kitchen here transcends its assigned role and becomes a space for warmth and solace. It could also be seen as a bridge between Mikage's internal emotional turmoil and the external world. The cathartic element of the kitchen is again noted when Mikage continues to cry as she washes dishes.

We may further note the healing ambience of the kitchen, as it heals Mikage spiritually from loss and grief in a very similar manner

after the death of Eriko. As she continues to clean the kitchen, she feels an ethereal catharsis induced by the space. Mikage remarks :

Why do I love everything that has to do
with kitchens so much? It's strange.
Perhaps because to me a kitchen
represents some distant longing
engraved on my soul. As I stood there, I
seemed to be making a new start;
something was coming back (62).

Mikage's realisation of becoming calmer within the kitchen space suggests that the kitchen serves as a grounding force, a source of solace and stability in the face of emotional challenges.

The multifaceted aspect of this special space could be further noted through the words of Mikage :

"I was not afraid of burns or scars; I
didn't suffer from sleepless nights. Every
day I thrilled with pleasure at the
challenges tomorrow would bring.
Memorizing the recipe, I would make
carrot cakes that included a bit of my
soul. At the supermarket I would stare
at a bright red tomato, loving it for dear
life. Having known such joy, there was
no going back" (65).

This notes the existential realization and the joy of living that the kitchen space evokes in her, as she enrolls in a summer cooking class.

Mikage epitomises the indispensability of the kitchen space in her existence as she remarks:

Dream kitchens. I will have countless
ones, in my heart or in reality. Or in my
travels. Alone, with a crowd of people,
with one other person—in all the many
places I will live. I know that there will
be so many more (49).

Through countless 'dream kitchens', Mikage signifies the transcendental nature of these spaces. These dream kitchens appear to be metaphorical

representations of personal desires, aspirations, and a search for a sense of belonging. The idea of dream kitchens existing both in solitude and in the company of others suggests the evolution of Mikage's identity from individual to collective. Whether alone or surrounded by people, the kitchen remains a pivotal element in redefining her existence in a world of struggle.

Hence, we assert that the kitchen itself serves as a transformative Thirdspace, offering the protagonist a refuge from the harsh realities of life and a platform for constructing her identity. This simple, everyday space transforms into a sanctuary of a sort. It provides a spatial and emotional distance from the catastrophic grief Mikage experiences. By integrating herself into the space, she escapes her emotional distress. Her identity is also viscerally connected to the space. Even the mere chore associated with the kitchen brings about deep philosophical and spiritual enlightenment. The space functions as a blank canvas that brings out Mikage's expression, individuality, and desire. The longing to escape is not a denial of the larger society, but the adaptability of life as she transcends her limitations as a grief-stricken soul. Hence, the kitchen becomes Mikage's space for self-discovery and empowerment.

As a result, we infer that Sayaka Murata's novel *Convenience Store Woman* and Banana Yoshimoto's novel *Kitchen*, both explore Soja's Thirdspace Theory and show settings that transcend their physical features, becoming transformative domains for the protagonists. In Murata's story, the convenience store acts as a catalyst for Keiko's identity construction, questioning societal standards and building a sense of community among store employees. Similarly, in Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, the kitchen becomes a refuge, offering consolation while also serving as a vehicle for personal and community identity building. These areas transform into deep Thirdspaces, allowing actors to traverse societal issues, question conventions, and express their individual and communal identities. This research adds to a more sophisticated view of spatial dynamics in literature by emphasising the critical function of spaces in shaping characters' journeys of self-discovery within a homogeneous society. It emphasises the universal topic of finding significance in commonplace locations, as well as the tremendous influence such spaces may have on creating individual and community identities in the complex fabric of modern life.

Nikhilesh Dhar

Assistant Professor
Department of English
Onda Thana Mahavidyalaya
Bankura, West Bengal
&

Deep Naskar

Baruipur, South 24 Pargana, West Bengal

Works Cited

- Meskeil- Brocken, Steph. "First, Second and Third: Exploring Soja's Thirdspace Theory in Relation to Everyday Arts and Culture for Young People." *Developing a Sense of Place: The Role of the Arts in Regenerating Communities*. UCL Press, 2020.
- Murata, Sayaka. *Convenience Store Woman*. Translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori, E-book ed. Grove Press, 2018.
- Soja, Edward W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Blackwell, 1996.
- Yoshimoto, Banana. *Kitchen*. Translated by Megan Backus, E-book ed. Grove Press, 2015.