

Navigating Spaces, Transforming Places: A Masseyan Analysis of Gender Empowerment in *Kamali*

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Abstract

Discrimination against men and women is largely made possible by the gendered division of space. It is normal for men to occupy public spaces, whereas women are restricted to domestic spaces like kitchen. As Indian society is patriarchal, it resonates with the mainstream discourse of spatial gender division. Women's access to sports is limited by this gendered spatial setup as sporting activities are performed in so-called public spaces; traditionally, sports have been considered a "male preserve." (Theberge, 1985) Adventure sports like skydiving, surfing, skating, mountain climbing, and mountaineering are traditionally performed by men. Hence, the mere participation of women in these activities challenges the masculine hegemony and gendered division of space that these activities entail. This paper critically examines the documentary titled, "Kamali" (2019) directed by Sasha Rainbow, which tells the inspiring story of Kamali Moorthy, a young skateboarder challenging societal norms in a small fishing village in Tamil Nadu, India. By employing Doreen Massey's space, place, and gender theory, the paper seeks to examine how the film explores the intersections of space, place, and gender within the cultural context. Doreen Massey's theoretical framework emphasizes the fluidity and relational nature of space and place, challenging fixed and essentialist perspectives.

Keywords: Skating, Woman in Sport, Indian Society, Spatiality of Inequality, Cultural Barriers

Sport culture is an important area of research and comprehension for gender studies. Participating in athletics offers a unique perspective on how society creates the social bodies of men and women and how we attribute femininity and masculinity to those bodies (Hardin and Whiteside, 2009). Since about 1980, gender study has focused on sports as a male-dominated system that continuously reconstructs hegemonic masculinity through symbolic presentation (Evert and Cynthia, 2007). Spectator think that it is the right time to be a girl or a woman in sport due to significant changes occurring in the world of sport as women started gaining equal representation, media attention and equal pay like their male peers. Contrastingly, even after bridging the afore-mentioned gaps, women are not encouraged to take up sport as their career due to several socio-cultural barriers. This shows that sport, even today, is considered as a 'male space.' The most straightforward way to investigate sporting space is to look at the gendered boundaries that exist within it. Massey (1994), when examining gender and spatial inequality, asserts that women have historically been restricted to private spaces like their houses, while males are free to roam around public spaces without restriction. As sporting activities are performed mostly in public spaces, women are restricted from participating in sports to maintain so-called gender assigned roles and spaces eventually. "Woman. Sport. These two words rest curiously next to each other like unrelated, detached strangers." (Boutilier and San Giovanni, 1983, 93) Along with the above mentioned spatial and gender inequality, individuals also encounter disparity due to the geographical place they belong. Women from first world countries are encouraged to participate in sports, whilst women from other parts of the world are restricted from doing so. This demonstrates that sports women along with all the other disparity also experience geographical inequality. "Space, place and gender are interrelated, in their very construction as culturally specific ideas." (2)

Incorporating personal narratives and case studies from female adventure sports enthusiasts add depth to the analysis. These real-life stories illuminate the lived experiences of women who navigate a masculine hegemonic space and challenge traditional gender norms. “Kamali” (2019) by Sasha Rainbow provides a unique perspective on the transformative power of skateboarding in challenging gender norms. This paper delves into the documentary's narrative, exploring how Kamali Moorthy's journey disrupts traditional expectations in her community and contributes to broader conversations about gender empowerment. Doreen Massey was a British geographer and social scientist. Among other things, her areas of expertise were Marxist geography, feminist geography, and cultural geography. Her theory on geography of gender is used for the analyses to assess the intersection of space, place and gender within the cultural contexts. As a geographer, Massey added the social grouping dimension to the theoretical framework of describing spatial “values” in modern society by examining the influence of place and space on gendered experiences. This added dimension clarifies when justice is equitable and accessible in both space and place. She expanded on the ideas of gender-shaped spaces that Bowlby and others had previously discussed.

“Kamali” is a documentary directed by Sasha Rainbow; produced by Rosaline Croad and Sasha Rainbow. The duration of the film is 00:24:06. Within this limited time scape, Sasha magnificently brings out the cultural aspect of skateboarding in India. The film has six “Lessons” titled: get out the way, dream on, push forward, you’re on your own, broken woman, and a whole new world. The narrative revolves around Kamali, a seven-year-old girl, who is the only female skateboarder in a village in Tamil Nadu. The analysis begins by providing a contextual background of the small fishing village in Tamil Nadu where Kamali's story unfolds. This includes an exploration of the cultural norms, expectations, and challenges faced by girls in such communities. Suganthi, Kamali’s mother, is the narrator who comprehensibly explains the transition that is taking place in the society by comparing her childhood days to her

daughter's days. "But localities...they are about the intersection of social activities and social relations and, crucially, activities and relations which are necessarily, by definition, dynamic, changing." (136) In Suganthi's own words, "In my time girls weren't allowed out to play. I can't blame my mother and father. They just followed the usual customs. My girl mustn't grow up like that." This exhibit that a place (locality) cannot be studied in isolation rather with other relations. In addition to this, it is evident from the lines that certain customs contribute to the formulation of a place but those customs are always under revision. According to Massey, "places are shared spaces" (137) and it is absolutely not static but places are processes. The particular fishing village has changed due to change in social activities. Suganthi can be called as a new Indian woman. New Indian women are defined as individuals who can effectively strike "the balance between (deep) tradition and (surface) modernity" and who "practise in the ways of the West, while at the same time retain their Indian values" (Munshi, 2001, 90). The new women never stop trying to find that delicate balance between their life at home in India and their lives abroad as professionals.

The most significant part of the documentary is the narration of how a girl is treated in the village once she hits puberty. The particular girl is taken for a ride in a chariot with elders pouring turmeric water at her while the whole village gaze. It symbolises the place of women in the society by showing how a girl is under scrutiny by elders and men, "it feels very odd to make a child go through this ceremony. All these people stare at you and you don't know why." Suganthi narrates her personal experience here: "After that my mother wouldn't let me leave the house. Because of that I never knew of the outside world. I couldn't talk to people. I couldn't interact. Their only girl they locked inside like a caged bird."

As Massey continues, "women's mobility... is restricted - in a thousand different ways, from physical violence to being ogled at or made to feel quite simply 'out of place' - not by "capital," but by men." (148) Women are also bound to and connected with this fixed area.

According to Massey, women are among the groups that are “effectively imprisoned” by “differentiated mobility” because of barriers that keep them from starting “flows and movement.” (149) Several academics have noted that women in India are expected to use public areas for purposes other than pleasure-seeking (Paul, 2011; Phadke, 2005; Ranade, 2007). Suganthi reassures this, “[I]f my marriage had gone well, I would have kept Kamali locked away at home like I was. She would have been locked, locked in the house and raised and I would have married her away around seventeen.” Private productive spaces like the sphere of reproduction, are seen as the domain of women, the women's space, or the feminine sphere, whilst public spaces like the space of transcendence, production, politics, and power are considered the domain of men or the masculine sphere. (Siwach, 2020) According to Massey, space is not a static entity but a dynamic and constantly changing phenomenon. It is shaped by multiple social, cultural, and economic forces. The documentary captures the fluidity of space within the fishing village as Kamali navigates various physical and social spaces. Skateboarding becomes a transformative tool that reshapes the traditional spaces assigned to girls in the community.

Girls are constantly advised to take low risk sports to avoid injuries. A girl obtaining injury is not at all accepted in society as it could affect her reproductive abilities. In a patriarchal society like India, a girl's life is perpetually associated with marriage, right from the day she is born. Hence, women are allowed to take certain aesthetic and low risk sports like gymnastics, tennis, volley ball. Adventure sports, often celebrated for their adrenaline-pumping nature, embody a space where traditional notions of masculinity are glorified. Sports contribute to the establishment and maintenance of this masculine hegemonic order, where men hold positions of power and masculinity is valued more than femininity in society. (Dworkin & Messner, 2002) On the other hand, Kamali took skating without any knowledge of this social constructions but her mother with all the knowledge of the society supports her daughter to

pursue skateboarding. When her husband deserted her, Suganthi become a single-mother of two kids named Kamali and Harish. This forced her to live with her parents along with her brother. “I don’t like living with my mother and father at all. But I have to for Kamali and Harrish (my children).” This portrays the condition of woman in India, as children are always seen as a mother’s responsibility not a father’s responsibility.

The lack of infrastructure, social stigma, and cultural standards are some of the many difficulties faced by Indian women skaters yet they are given the opportunity to follow their passion and shatter stereotypes by a strong and encouraging community. “Lots of people look at Kamali skateboarding and say, ‘Why is a girl skateboarding?’ ‘Who will marry her if she breaks?’ I (mother) tell them there are many people on TV without arms and legs who achieve great things. Our girl’s hands and legs are good.” According to Massey, space is not fixed rather it’s a dynamic and relational concept. This applies to gender relations as well, suggesting that gender roles and norms are not static but are influenced by the ever-changing nature of space. Likewise, the gender roles and norms are changing in the village over the course of time. This again proves that neither space nor time are static. While temporality and spatiality are obviously distinct from one another, none can be understood in isolation from the other. (264) In India, a female skateboarder is a symbol of going against the grain and taking ownership of one’s life. Kamali’s passion for skateboarding becomes a catalyst for breaking gender barriers.

Another contributing factor to Kamali participating in skateboarding is her village where a skate ramp happened to be built outside her house. Places are socially produced and altered by historical legacies, power dynamics, and cultural factors; they are not static, independent things. The film explores how the cultural norms and expectations within the fishing village shape the “place” where Kamali lives. The skateboard, introduced into this cultural place, becomes a tool that challenges and transforms the social expectations associated with gender roles. Massey points out this “geography matters to the construction of gender.”

(2) Massey emphasizes the intersectional nature of space and place, and how gender is not isolated but intersects with other social categories. The idea is to understand how space is socially produced through various intersecting factors, including gender. Massey's theory encourages an intersectional understanding of place, considering how multiple social categories intersect to shape individuals' experiences. Kamali's experience is not solely defined by her gender but intersects with other aspects of her identity, such as class and caste. The documentary highlights how these intersections influence her place within the community and her ability to challenge gender norms.

Spaces are imbued with narratives that contribute to cultural change. The stories told within a space shape its identity and potential for transformation. The film served as a spatial narrative that contribute to cultural change within the fishing village. Kamali's story challenged the existing narratives surrounding gender roles, reshaping the cultural identity of the place. This intersectional analysis contributed to a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities Kamali faces. Drawing on spatiality of gender perspectives, the paper examines the documentary's portrayal of Kamali's relationship with her mother, Suganthi, and the intergenerational dynamics at play. It explores how the film navigates the complexities of feminism within the cultural and familial context. In addition to this, the paper also explored the role of skateboarding as a tool of empowerment, both for Kamali individually and for girls in the community and how the act of skateboarding challenges conventional gender roles and fosters a sense of agency.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of all authors, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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