

Scars from Home

Social Geography, Familial Relations, and Patriarchy

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Abstract:

In this narrative, Fatima examines the interplay of critical consciousness, relational dynamics, and patriarchy within social-geographical spaces. Drawing on personal experiences, the chapter explores how patriarchal norms, internalized and perpetuated within intimate relationships and community networks, shape gendered expectations and limit agency from childhood through adulthood. While acknowledging the harms inflicted by these norms, it highlights the dual role of these spaces in fostering both oppression and connection. The essay looks at why simplistic solutions like geographic escape ignore the interdependence and cultural norms intrinsic to relational spaces. Instead, it advocates for a nuanced understanding of the challenges and complexities of addressing patriarchy within these contexts. Ultimately, Fatima emphasizes that the feminist struggle lies not in abandoning these spaces but in fostering critical consciousness and collective efforts to undo patriarchal systems while paying attention to the nuances of social-geographical spaces.

We are all heavily impacted by our social geographic space; it can be an escape ... but also serve as our prison. By social geographical space, I just mean space we communally share,

that we live in, form relationships in, feel safe in, call our homes and often the very spaces we are abused in. We saw one manifestation of this during COVID-19 pandemic, when cases of domestic abuse went up as people could not just leave their living situations (Smith-Clapham et al. 2023, Evans et al. 2020). This chapter does not center on that important crisis of social confinement. Rather it is about one part of my story, in particular, it is about proximity, living with my family, and what I deemed acceptable levels of abuse. This is a personal reflection of how patriarchy functioned in my life via social geographical space.

Sometimes we think that people don't realize the severity of things that are happening in their lives because they are not educated in certain (academic) concepts or they don't have language to articulate it. They haven't had what is called 'critical consciousness' (Freire 1970). And that is certainly true for me maybe when I was very young. I didn't realize that when ammi would tell me to sit with my legs together or would get upset at me for playing with boys out of her eyesight, that it was actually connected to internalization of sexist notions of how young girls are expected to perform femininity and purity from a young age. But even then, both my mother and I understood the injustice of patriarchy, she of course far more than I. She would say to my brother, 'If you don't study, you will be selling vegetables on the streets!' and to me, she would say, 'If you don't study, you will end up getting married.' We both knew that marriage was a bad bargain for women and understood the oppressive nature of the institution of marriage without being fluent in the jargon of feminist theory.

When I didn't have language to verbalize - even within my own head - what was happening, I, of course, relied on what *was* familiar. And what was familiar were the relationships we were immersed in, not because those were the relationships we chose to be close to, but because those were the relations we lived with and/or that lived around us. And there were so many people who then became part of our social geographic space. Even after we stopped living in a joint-family system, my father bought the ancestral home from his mother in Karachi, which meant a mandatory stopover by many. There were all the *chachas* and *chachijaans*, and their *shahee* sons that their moms thought were gods, *phopees*... And of course, the *phopas* get a pass because of patriarchy - why be invested in your wife's nieces and nephews, you have your own domain of exertion. And that was just the dad's side of the

family. There was the mom's side, the neighborhood folks, and lots of random connections that would pass through our home.

We got tied into all these relationships as children with little to no agency, where ammi also felt beholden to raising 'good' kids who don't talk back. What it means to be a good mother is to raise kids who are *tameezdar*/well-mannered. And well-mannered kids don't talk ill of elders, even if the elders are misguided, sexist, abusive,evil. And my dad, abbu loved his siblings and their children beyond reason and would often accuse ammi of alienating us from his relatives. So, the fact that I did not have the language to talk about what was happening was then compounded by the fact that saying anything about frequent visitors of our spaces would reflect badly on our parents for raising a child who doesn't respect her elders.

And there was nowhere to go. Nowhere for my father to reset his thinking, for my mom to stop thinking about being 'good,' and certainly not for me, a child. Home is where you live, and home is where you are bound. It is where your siblings and your parents live, and your pedophiles and your abusers live. You exist in the same space as them, not openly loathing those that hurt you, but actively burying everything, your memories, your feelings, pretending as if nothing ever happened. In fact, you may even go out of your way to convince yourself of your imagination by being overly 'normal.' bell hooks talks about the *privilege* of associating feminism with alternative lifestyle, as it is often only possible for people who 'are from middle class backgrounds, unmarried, college educated, often students who are without many of the social and economic responsibilities that working class and poor women who are laborers, parents, homemakers, and wives confront daily' (hooks 1984). I will come back to the 'privilege' of escaping in a bit.

So yes, for some parts of my life I had no vocabulary to speak about what was happening to me. But in other, more grown-up parts of life, surprisingly, I did not recognize the patterns of what was happening as it was happening. When I got married, I had just started grad school. I had taken numerous feminist-leaning courses in undergrad and a couple in grad school as well. I had been politically active. I not only recognized shitty behavior of boys and men for what it was, I would tell my friends to be cautious of false promises and

wary of stalker and insistent behavior as love – I had seen one of my most vibrant aunts get married to a guy who wouldn't leave her alone because he claimed to be so smitten by her and he controlled her thereafter. I would even ruin rom-coms with my commentary. I was a feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017).

All of this assured me that I wouldn't fall in the traps of patriarchy - I really truly used to believe that I would always have my guards up. But you see, love is so complicated and asks such different things from all of us. Ultimately, the social and geographical relationships I became embedded in became like binding ropes all over my soul – or at least I felt bound by them.

Back to geography.

Two years into my marriage, I had my baby girl. In those two years before her birth, my husband and I were both in grad school, hundreds of miles apart. But his mom and her hundred and fifty relatives were only three hours away in New York City. I want to say, I was expected to visit her regularly. But also, I was desperate to be a daughter-in-law who had good relations with my partner's mom. And I think that was the start of me not recognizing patterns in my own life despite knowing them for other women's lives, partly stemming from my desire to be 'good' and to have loving relations with those that live around me.

Eventually, it made sense that in order to protect our daughter from the burdens of patriarchy, we must move out of NYC, away from my in-laws. Very early on, we knew – and of course I knew sooner than my husband - that our daughter was a tool in the eyes of other people. A tool for other people's selfish egos. On the other hand, his separation from his family was a big sacrifice for him, a sacrifice he was probably unwilling to even consider for his wife but one that inevitably had to happen for his daughter.

It seemed like the ultimate betrayal of our values as Pakistanis, as South Asians, as Muslims. Incessantly, we are told that bad women drag their husbands away from their parents and make it impossible for husbands to provide care in old age. I was explicitly told by folks in his family that I would be *that* wife in his family (I was an outsider to his culture).

So, I was trying so hard not to be that wife ... too hard ...until, quite honestly, the breaking point came for my husband because he could see the discrepancy in treatment of his daughter.

And that's probably how ammi was stuck within that social geography when we were kids. My mother was trapped both by circumstances of not having anywhere to go to survive and trapped by the mindset that cutting off from in-laws and extended families would signal to everyone that she was a bad wife. It would lead to *bud-na-mee*/ruining of our family name. In fact, she'd be a bad mother as well because she would be teaching her daughters through example to be selfish. She'd be teaching them 'bad' values - ironically the very values that adversely impacted mostly girls and women. And of course, the breaking point never arrived for my abbu.

It's all an inverted world and it makes complete sense when you live inside of it.

I want to note something here though. My mother is and was very feminist in her outlook. She made sure her daughters were not burdened by household chores or social engagements in ways that would eat up their studying time. She knew and made us understand that education was paramount. I say this because despite being as strong as she was in the face of everything she encountered, the impact of the social geographical space was overwhelming and inescapable.

Well-intentioned folks may say to me: well, why didn't you just leave New York City? Why live in a home where the passers-by are not very nice to you? Or just say no to meeting those people when they pass through.

But this is a simplistic solution that perhaps stems from that privilege that bell hooks references. We exist within relations. It is difficult – sometimes impossible – to cherry pick the non-toxic ones. The social geographic space comes with relations and vice versa. This sort of advice of leaving one's geographic space stems from a place of privilege where you can outsource all sorts of emotional and physical labor that our village often provides and from an incomprehensibility of the fundamental norms of relational spaces of the worlds I inhabit. These norms are also joyful, providing connectivity and love. The geographic spaces

are where we gather for *milads* and *majalis*, for *dawats* and birthdays. Our mothers and sisters and aunts – and even our fathers and brothers and uncles and such – can save us from the pervasive patriarchy, xenophobia, anti-Shia sentiment of the outer world precisely because we all exist in that space together. All the while, being unaware, oblivious, turning away, willfully ignoring, gleefully participating in patriarchy within our homes. These norms continue into our adulthoods where the same folks that may have harmed us, serve as part of the support systems that care for our aging parents, show up to our family funerals, help find *rishtas* for marriage. And it's not a cost benefit analysis. It is a relationship, just like the ones that exist with our spouses, or our children, the 'nuclear' family unit within a euro-western context, except in this case, the domain of relations is significantly more expansive, precisely because of culture and social geographical proximity.

The lens of escaping perhaps does not fit here, because it is not often the aim in my worlds. The concern is to acknowledge the complexity of existing within the social geographical spaces we occupy. And what does that complexity look like in real time? It looks bad. It looks like being screamed out by your mom because she found you in the same vicinity as your creepy uncle. It looks like brothers and fathers exerting control over our movements. It looks like losing your childhood. It looks like parents fearing that you may be seen as a woman in those spaces.

And as a child you don't realize that the burden and punishment are not your own, but a misguided and harmful attempt at protection from the abuses of patriarchy.

Attempts at healing are futile if we keep existing with the same structures that shape our social geographical spaces. And it is easy to suggest but impossible for us to discard and abandon places we call our homes. It is much more difficult to ask us to 'fix' and undo patriarchal structures in our social geographic spaces, but that is what is needed. And that is where the more realistic struggle of feminism lies.

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