



Situating the ‘Everyday’ in *Jeanne Dielman, 23quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*

Rini Salam¹

Dept. of English, Bangalore University, Bangalore

ABSTRACT

This paper intends to analyze the everyday life of the woman-protagonist in the movie *Jeanne Dielman, 23quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, and her performance of various everyday practices in relation to the places where they get performed. This French movie, directed by Chantal Ackerman is inherently linked to the quotidian. The paper applies theoretical perspectives introduced by the sociologist, Sarah Pink, to access the woman protagonist’s everyday life portrayed in *Jeanne Dielman*. The paper puts forward the argument that the woman protagonist claims and controls her place and creates a space of her own through her practices and routines thereby proving her agency. As a secondary critical tool, the paper also makes use of Gaston Bachelard’s theory of Space.

Key words: gender, French cinema, agency and control

Jeanne Dielman, 23quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, directed by the Belgium filmmaker Chantal Ackerman, is a French film released in 1975. The film is noted for its realistic presentation of the quotidian and for its feminist undertones. This 3hrs20minute movie portrays three days in the life of a middle-aged widow, Jeanne Dielman, who lives in Belgium with her son and who does prostitution for a living. The movie begins showing Jeanne cooking on the first day afternoon and ends with her killing one of her customers on the third day afternoon. Through the portrayal of these three days, the film unravels the routine of Jeanne’s everyday life which includes various domestic practices and the professional afternoon sessions of prostitution. The first day, and the second day till afternoon go without any disruptions, and are thus indicative of the days Jeanne had lived so far; in the afternoon of the second day, after the act of prostitution, Jeanne’s routine seems to get disrupted and finally culminates with the murder on the third day.

The movie subverts many notions of film narration in its portrayal of the three days. It rejects all elements of drama and instead focuses on ‘drudgery’. Ackerman reduces love and sex to something that is represented through the closing and opening of a door and focuses on domestic practices like cooking, cleaning, and stacking things. Ivon Margulies situates the movie within the post-war realist cinema tradition and discusses how it is a movie of stasis. Margulies focuses on the creation of drama in the movie through the portrayal of literal time. Fitterman-Lewis reads the movie in the context of feminist theories and observes that the film disables the objectification of female sexuality. Even while agreeing with the feminist readings of the film, Patrick Kinsman argues that *Jeanne Dielman* can also be a ‘counter-cinema’. While talking about the cinematic minimalism observed in the movie, Kinsman

¹ Mail ID: rinisalam6@gmail.com

notes that in situating the film within Jeanne's flat and in the focus given to her domestic chores, "we can see two elements common in Ackerman's work- space and gesture." (218) This paper intends to take cues from Kinsman's observation and proposes to elaborate on the concept of 'space' in the movie using conceptual frames from everyday life theories.

Along with the everyday of Jeanne and the practices involved in it, the film is seen to have given enough space to the "places" where these get enacted. The title of the movie itself is the address of the protagonist and therefore immediately situates her in a 'place', in a material locality i.e. her home. Rita Felski has pointed out that home is the spatial dimension of the everyday. (22) Sarah Pink discusses this spatial dimension of the everyday in her *Situating Everyday Life* and *Home Truths* in great detail. According to her, people create and experience "a sense of place" in relation to their material localities. (43) In the course of developing a sense of place, a space of one's own gets created. When 'place' refers to an architectural construction or a concrete locality, 'space' can be interpreted as the 'sense of place' people develop combining various factors like memories, practices, sensory perceptions, etc. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard talks about how a personal world of impressions and memories grow around a vital space as someone inhabits it. (34) This personal world, or the sense of place, is created by distinct practices and routines developed and experienced by the inhabitants of the places. In *Home Truths*, Sarah Pink illustrates this. She observes how the way of doing domestic chores and even the choice of not doing them add agency to women in relation to their places. She also shows that even women, who share their abodes with others, create their own 'space' within the shared place through practices like playing a certain kind of music that does not cater to the taste of other inhabitants. Through this creation of 'spaces', these women are in fact claiming their 'places'. And it can also be found that these practices and routines enable them to claim their places and help them to have an agency or hold over their everyday life. (56) *Jeanne Dielman* is a movie that can be analyzed in the light of these observations. This paper intends to show how the woman protagonist claims and controls her place and creates a space of her own through her practices and routines thereby proving her agency. It also intends to show how losing control over place in turn affects her routines and practices. The paper proposes to consider the movie as the recording of Jeanne's attempts to retain her 'space'.

The frames used in the film are wide enough so that Jeanne is always seen as surrounded by her space. She is never shown in close-up shots but is always placed within her space or as part of her background. She is thus never 'spaceless' in the movie. The camera, which is the audience's perspective, is always held static. Jeanne herself comes to the frame and moves out of it and at the beginning of each frame, there is the place that Jeanne is about to enter. It is also noted that it is Jeanne who controls the lighting inside the domestic spaces. She almost rigorously and frugally switches off the light when she goes out of a space. And the camera can see the place only when she switches on the lights and can see it only till she switches off the lights. So it is Jeanne who decides whether the camera should see the various places inside her home and for how long, thus making these inevitably hers. Places inside home are mainly used by Jeanne and she seems to have a control over their use by others. The son is never seen to be entering the bedroom and he is seen in the kitchen only while eating his breakfast. The neighbor, who comes to drop the baby carriage for Jeanne to babysit, is never shown the interiors. Even while Jeanne makes a conversation with her, the camera can only see Jeanne holding the front door in such a way that the neighbor remains hidden.

Jeanne follows a regimental routine. Routine here can be explained as a set of repeated actions. Felski defines repetition as the temporal plane of the everyday. At the same time, routine is indicative of not only repeated actions but is also a set of timed actions. The duration within which the repeated actions are to be performed is also part of a routine. In this movie, through this temporal plane, Jeanne seems to be controlling the spatial plane. Jeanne's everyday routine takes place in various domestic and public spaces and seems to be her way of controlling the places and others' use of her space. No one escapes this routine, no other character or the camera, or even the artist who plays the role of Jeanne. It is Jeanne who decides when to have dinner, i.e. when to use the dining room. Her son's bedroom can come into existence only when the sofa in the living room gets transformed into the bed which is done by Jeanne and he can sleep on it only till she wakes him up in the morning. This illustrates that the routine her son has is what Jeanne sets for him through which she controls his use of space. Her customers are allowed to use her two spaces, namely her bedroom and her body for as long as the dinner gets cooked. They usually leave by the time her dinner gets cooked in the kitchen. It can also be seen that the camera is bound by her routine. It has to be open to those spaces where Jeanne performs her repeated actions as long as she does them. This is true of the actress too. She cannot stop combing until Jeanne's hair is ready and has to take a bath until Jeanne's body gets cleaned. It is also noted that Jeanne is never hesitant over her routine. During the first two days, while following her routine, she never thinks or stops. She possesses a clear idea of what follows what.

Jeanne's routine consists of the various actions that constitute it. In all her actions, two practices of Jeanne are visible: the practices of cleaning and of keeping things in order. Through these practices, Jeanne seems to control her place. After every process related to cooking, she cleans all the vessels and utensils and clears the place. After dinner, the dining table is immediately cleared and cleaned by Jeanne. After the act of prostitution and after the customer leaves, she opens the windows of the bedroom which can be read as a cleansing action, an attempt to eradicate the presence of another person in her space. She also takes a bath after this act which is the cleaning of another space exclusively of hers, and the same explanation applies here too. She is reclaiming her spaces through these cleaning practices. Sarah Pink observes that people impart their sense of morality to others through their cleaning practices. Jeanne also seems to be doing the same with her son when she asks him whether he has washed his hands before breakfast. It is she who decides which of his clothes are dirty and therefore it can be said that it is her 'sense of cleanliness' that rules the son too. It is Jeanne who provides him with clean clothes from her wardrobe. Clean objects indicate her authority. This can lead to the examination of how Jeanne controls various objects and people in and around the house.

A place is also constituted of different objects that are kept in it. Keeping these objects in a particular order and exercising control over them are ways of controlling the place. Jeanne obsessively follows an order in keeping things. She follows the practice of keeping things in their original places and tries to stack and put in order the 'disordered' things. Immediately after the son leaves, she converts his bed into a sofa and thereby reclaims her living room. In the kitchen, she always keeps the kitchen-table empty. Whenever objects are placed on it, she always removes them once her job with these is done. After dinner, she immediately removes the mat and plates. Only a tureen is allowed to stay on the dining table. It is only Jeanne who stacks things up to retain the order thereby controlling them. She keeps the money she gets from prostitution in the tureen and closes its lid. In spite of the presence of money in a common place like the dining-table, the son seems to be unaware of where the money is kept which becomes evident when he asks his mother for money. The son asks Jeanne whether

they can listen to the radio on the second day which shows that it is Jeanne who usually operates it. The radio too is kept in a common place, the living room. These illustrate that common places of a house like the dining and the living rooms, which are usually shared by all inhabitants alike, are also under Jeanne's control. She controls her body and her bedroom in the same manner. She combs her hair, which is an object of her body, with utmost precision and to make it remain in that order, she applies a fixing spray on it.

It is interesting that when her routine and her practices of cleaning and keeping things in order allow her to claim a control over space, the loss of control in one of her 'spaces' disrupts her everyday routine and practice. After the prostitution on the second day, Jeanne seems to be losing control over her routine and her practices. The first sign of this is seen when she forgets to close the lid of the tureen after keeping the money. As she comes back to the kitchen, we see the potatoes over-cooked which indicates that the duration of the prostitution exceeded the usual time allotted for it. Her routine gets broken as she has to go out again for buying potatoes since she has run out of them. She forgets to switch off the light as she comes out of the bathroom. When her son comes, the dinner is not ready. After dinner, she forgets to switch on the radio. As they go out for the night stroll in the city, the cover of her specs, the letter-pad and her hand-bag remain on the dining table. This clearly shows how Jeanne has deviated from her practice of keeping things in order. Her hair remains messy, and on the next day, she misses a button while putting on her gown. When her son points at her messy hair and the missed button, one may assume that with disrupted routines and practices, others' moralities have started to control her. The brush drops down from her hand while polishing her son's shoe, and she drops a spoon while wiping the cutlery; these show that her control over objects is getting affected. Jeanne is seen as no longer possessing a well planned schedule and is often seen standing not knowing what to do with the extra time she has.

Along with presenting a totally disordered everyday, Jeanne's third day also presents her attempts to reclaim her space. She is seen to indulge in some remedial actions. For example, after sitting idle for some time she suddenly gets up and starts cleaning the artifacts that are kept in the showcase behind the dining table. She takes up cleaning as a way to spend her time and to reclaim her space. The disruptions that are caused in her everyday bring a difference in the sound patterns in her space. The loud thud of the dropped brush and the sudden clang of the fallen spoon cause ripples in Jeanne's kitchen that is usually replete with mild sounds from the different domestic chores. Jeanne intentionally waits for the door-bell to ring for a second time before receiving the baby carriage, and takes out the baby again and again as she finds it crying every time she takes him; these are her attempts to challenge the new loud sound patterns that the disruptions created. It can therefore be said that, she first attempts to retain the space through her usual practices that provided her with these spaces. Failing there, she tries to challenge the disrupted space by creating her own disruptions. Her late stroll into the city just for buying a button for an old dress of her son that is anyway out of fashion can be explained as part of her attempt to challenge the imposed disruptions.

At the end of the film, the sexual act is shown for the first time. Jeanne experiences an orgasm. And after carefully putting on a shirt, she takes a pair of scissors and murders her client and keeps back the scissors on the dressing table from where it was taken. She is later seen sitting at the dining-table for the rest of the 6 minutes of the movie. She is breathing slowly and looks relaxed and stoic. We can assume that the murder was her final attempt to reclaim her space. Keeping the scissors back in place after the murder and the focus on the clean dining-table with the closed tureen can be indicative of the reclaimed 'space' of Jeanne. An involvement leading to an orgasm might have caused the turmoil in Jeanne. The orgasm is

a feeling her body experiences as a result of the influence of a client which according to Jeanne can be an encroachment upon her most intimate space. By killing the person who causes the orgasm, she is reclaiming her body from him forever. It should also be noted that, the disruptions started from the bedroom and the murder happens in the same room. She thus reclaims her bedroom also from the client.

In *Situating Everyday Life*, Sarah Pink emphasizes the importance of situating everyday practices in places where they get performed. She observes that through this process, further significance of the performance and individual differences therein can be imagined. This paper analyzed the everyday life of the woman-protagonist in the movie *Jeanne Dielman*, and her performance of various everyday practices in relation to the places where they get performed. The murder Jeanne commits at the end of the movie can be interpreted as part of her attempt to reclaim her everyday space. It can thus be concluded that Jeanne controls her space, others' use of it and even the medium which tries to capture her life through her practice. The movie consequently can be considered as a recording of Jeanne's attempts to claim space and retain it.

REFERENCES

1. Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Massachusetts : Beacon Press, 1994. Print.
2. Felski, Rita. "The Invention of Everyday Life." *New Formations* 39 (1999): 13-31. Print.
3. Flitterman-Lewis, Sandy. "What's Behind her Smile? Subjectivity and Desire in Germaine Dulac's *The Smiling Madame Beudet* and Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*." *Identity and Memory :The Films of Chantal Ackerman*. Ed. Gwendolyn Audrey. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2003. 27-40 .Print
4. *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Dir. Chantal Ackerman. Perf. Delphine Seyrig. The Criterion Collection and Janus Films, 1974. Film
5. Kinsman, Patrick. "She's Come Undone: Chantal Ackerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *Counter cinema*". *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24(2007): 217-224. Print.
6. Margulies, Ivone. *Nothing Happens: Chantal Ackerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996.
7. Pink, Sarah. *Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*. NY: Berg, 2004. Print
8. --- *Situating Everyday Life: Practices and Places*. London: Sage, 2012. Print.