

From Alienation to Autonomy: Su-Jen's Negotiation with Spatial Injustice and Search for Self in *Midnight at the Dragon Café* by Judy Fong Bates

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Abstract

Midnight at the Dragon Café (2004), a novel by the Chinese-Canadian author Judy Fong Bates, recounts the intergenerational experiences of a Chinese immigrant family in Canada, as narrated by the young protagonist, Su-Jen. While previous scholarship has largely concentrated on themes of cultural identity and subjectivity formation within the confines of the domestic space, this study examines the protagonist's dynamic process of identity formation on how she negotiates spatial limitations and injustices, gradually transforming her sense of alienation into a state of autonomy by resisting the constraints imposed by the social norms and cultural traditions. Thus, the concepts of spatial triad by Henri Lefebvre and alienation by Erich Fromm will be used as the conceptual framework to explore how Su-Jen navigates her identity in response to the spatial injustice and emotional estrangement. Based on a textual analysis of the protagonist's struggle with being neither constrained by norms and traditions nor restricted within the domestic space, her estrangement serves as a space of reflection and potential, allowing her to critically reassess her identity and assert her agency beyond the domestic sphere. Accordingly, this analysis reveals that Su-Jen's encounters with alienation and spatial injustice become transformative experiences that enable the formation of an autonomous identity, shedding light on the broader struggles of diasporic individuals to construct identity and meaning within exclusionary socio-cultural and spatial landscapes.

Keywords

Alienation, Identity, Judy Fong Bates, *Midnight at the Dragon Café*,

1. Introduction

The historical trajectory of Chinese Canadian literature is intimately shaped by a legacy of institutional discrimination and cultural marginalisation. Early Chinese immigrants to Canada endured systemic exclusion through racially targeted legislation, most notably the Chinese Head Tax (1885-1923) and the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923-1947), which severely restricted immigration and reinforced social segregation (Li, 1998). These historical injustices left lasting psychological and social scars, producing conditions of alienation and displacement that continue to reverberate in contemporary Chinese Canadian narratives. It was not until the late 20th century that Chinese Canadian writers began to reclaim these silenced histories through literary production. Writing became a vital means of cultural expression and resistance, an avenue through which authors could assert their voices, memorialise ancestral struggles, and address the complexities of diasporic identity formation. As Chao (1997) notes, this literary turn sought to confront both historical and ongoing racism, while offering space to explore personal and collective memories.

A central preoccupation in Chinese Canadian literature, as in Chinese American literature, is the interrogation of identity, which often unfolds through the interweaving of private memory and public history (Shamsuddin & Bahar, 2020; Shamsuddin et al., 2021). Lee (1995) observes that such narratives consistently return to the question of identity as a means of revisiting and rewriting the past. Van Horne (2010) similarly argues that diasporic Chinese Canadian authors engage in an active re-inscription of national and cultural history, challenging mainstream erasures and asserting alternative genealogies of belonging. Identity, in this context, emerges at the intersection of cultural heritage and contemporary social pressures, shaped by both familial expectations and broader acculturative dynamics. The intersectionality fosters layered processes of ethnic identification, often accompanied by psychological tension and resilience (Costigan et al., 2009).

Scholars have also debated the conceptual framing of “Chineseness” within Chinese Canadian diasporic literature. Lee (1999) critiques essentialist understandings of ethnic identity, theorising Chineseness not as an innate essence but as a strategic formation, a collective affiliation mobilised to contest cultural marginalisation and assert political agency. In this sense, Chineseness operates as both a site of solidarity and a mechanism of resistance. While strong ethnic communities across Canada may reinforce such identification (Tsang et al., 2003), others argue for a more fluid and contingent understanding. Chineseness is continually reconfigured in response to diasporic conditions, resisting static or nationalist definitions in favour of a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and transformation (Kuehn et al., 2013).

Within this broader discourse, the author Judy Fong Bates (1949) emerges as a significant voice in Chinese Canadian literature, particularly for her in-depth exploration of the issues of displacement, gender, and diasporic subjectivity. Her novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Café* (2004), foregrounds the affective and spatial dimensions of immigrant experience in small-town Ontario. Rather than relying on stereotypical depictions of Chinatown, Bates situates her narratives within rural, predominantly white communities, where racism, silence, and cultural repression subtly shape the lives of Chinese Canadian families (Jessop, 2012). Bates' novel challenges reductive identity binaries; as Andrews (1994) notes, she “destabilises the rigid binaries of Chineseness versus Canadianness”, depicting identity as fluid, situational, and continually negotiated. Ty (2011) similarly emphasises Bates' engagement with “hybridity in diaspora”, arguing that her characters occupy liminal spaces between cultural retention and assimilation, navigating the complexities of belonging across generations.

Midnight at the Dragon Café centres on the coming-of-age of the protagonist, Su-Jen, a young Chinese Canadian girl whose experiences of alienation and enforced silence reflect broader structures of spatial and emotional marginalisation. As the narrative unfolds, Su Jen navigates overlapping landscapes of exclusion, including the racialised public sphere of the school, the gendered labour space of the café, and the emotionally fraught domestic realm of the home. These spaces, far from being neutral backdrops, serve as ideologically charged sites that shape and constrain her sense of self.

Through Su-Jen's embodied encounters with these spatial contexts, the novel foregrounds the intersections of race, gender, and migration as lived conditions of injustice. As Goellnicht (2005) observes, Chinese Canadian literature frequently expresses “a dual consciousness rooted in both loss and reinvention” (p. 180), a dynamic that is especially evident in Su-Jen's struggle to negotiate belonging within conflicting cultural and spatial domains. Ultimately, her emotional estrangement functions not only as a symptom of marginalisation but also as a catalyst for her to claim agency and begin articulating a space of her own, integral to her emerging identity. With these arguments in view, our study applies the concepts of spatial triad by Henri Lefebvre and alienation by Erich Fromm in order to explore how Su Jen's identity is shaped and ultimately redefined through her interaction with physical and psychological spaces. Through a process of resistance, reflection and narrative reclamation, Su Jen transforms her alienation into autonomy, offering insight into the broader struggles of diasporic subjectivity under spatial injustice.

2. Literature Review

Bates' *Midnight at the Dragon Café* has attracted critical attention across a range of interdisciplinary discourses, including diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, cultural memory, and spatial analysis. The existing scholarship underscores the novel's multifaceted engagement with themes, such as cultural hybridity, immigrant subjectivity, spatial entrapment, intergenerational trauma, and resistance, through

domestic and culinary practices. This review synthesises relevant academic contributions under four thematic categories: spatial constraint and diasporic stasis (August, 2022; Lau, 2016; Leduc, 2017); identity formation and hybridity (Nicolaescu, 2021; Schölzke, 2014); memory and intergenerational transmission (Sen, 2019); and culinary domesticity as a site of resistance (Mehta, 2019). These readings collectively establish the novel as a significant site for examining the entanglements of Chinese Canadian identity, mobility, and belonging.

Several scholars have foregrounded the spatial dimensions of diasporic life in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, with particular attention to the restaurant as both a material and symbolic site of constraint. August (2022), in his study *Diasporic Still Life*, offers a compelling reinterpretation of “stasis” as a narrative and structural device in diasporic literature. The novel’s depiction of the Chinese restaurant is argued as an illustration of how immigrant subjects are confined by socio-economic institutions that enforce visibility, repetition, and symbolic immobility. The collapse of public and private spheres within the restaurant space renders the immigrant family perpetually “on display”, thereby exacerbating feelings of stagnation and alienation, particularly among the older generation.

Leduc (2017) builds upon this spatial reading by conceptualising the Dragon Café as a heterotopic enclave, simultaneously isolated and connected, where ethnic essentialism and psychological entrapment prevail. The restaurant is described as functioning as a site of both containment and transformation. While the older characters remain immobilised by trauma and cultural expectation, the younger generation, particularly the protagonist, demonstrates a capacity for subverting rigid identity frameworks. The heterotopia thus becomes a paradoxical space in which cultural reproduction and resistance coalesce.

The negotiation of diasporic identity within the novel has also been extensively explored through the lens of postcolonial subjectivity. Lau (2016), drawing on Stuart Hall’s theorisation of cultural identity as fluid and constructed, contends that the Chinatown depicted in the novel serves as a liminal space for negotiating Chinese Canadian identity. *Midnight at the Dragon Café* is emphasised as presenting cultural identity not as a static inheritance but as a dynamic process marked by conflict, displacement, and rearticulation, particularly for female protagonists navigating patriarchal and racialised constraints. Nicolaescu (2021) similarly addresses the protagonist’s identity development as emblematic of cultural hybridity. The narrative is described as tracing a movement from ethnic essentialism toward a hybrid subjectivity formed through resilience, misrecognition, and intercultural navigation. For Nicolaescu, the novel transcends the conventional immigrant narrative by engaging broader socio-political questions related to cultural translation, systemic marginalisation, and the complexities of self-identification within multicultural Canada. Schölzke (2014), in her comparative study of Chinese Canadian migration narratives, further elucidates the inevitability of hybridity in diasporic subject formation. Examining works by Fong Bates, Sky Lee, and Denise Chong among others, Schölzke argues that immigrant families, despite efforts to retain cultural

purity, cannot escape the encroachment of dominant Canadian cultural paradigms. Identity, in her reading, is not merely contested but continually reshaped by the interplay of tradition, assimilation, and resistance.

The theme of memory as both a narrative technique and a constitutive element of diasporic consciousness is centrally addressed by Sen (2019). Her study positions memory as a fundamental mechanism through which *Midnight at the Dragon Café* articulates immigrant trauma and cultural dislocation. Employing a narratological approach, Sen demonstrates how the novel utilises flashbacks and recollections to foreground the psychological and emotional burdens borne by immigrant characters. Memory, in this context, functions dually: it preserves cultural continuity while simultaneously reinforcing alienation and fragmentation. Sen further applies Sunera Thobani's theorisation of national belonging to argue that immigrant memory is often imbued with inferiority and exclusion, thereby complicating processes of identity construction. The diverging relationships to memory exhibited by Su-Jen's parents, her mother's nostalgic attachment to the past and her father's willful repression of it, produce a generational and emotional dissonance that shapes Su-Jen's own subjectivity. Memory thus emerges as a site of both intra-familial tension and potential transformation.

The intersection of culinary practice, gendered agency, and cultural resistance is addressed in Mehta's (2019) analysis of *Midnight at the Dragon Café* and other works by Bates. Mehta interprets food not simply as a symbol of ethnic identity but as an instrument of resistance against both patriarchal structures and assimilationist pressures. Characters, such as Lai-Jing, reclaim agency by asserting traditional foodways, resisting English-language acquisition, and refusing to accommodate Western expectations. Moreover, Mehta critiques the selective appropriation of Chinese cuisine by White Canadian society, suggesting that food becomes a medium through which orientalist fantasies are consumed while authentic cultural experiences are marginalised. In this reading, the domestic space is recast as a politically charged arena in which resistance is enacted through everyday practices, particularly by diasporic women.

While *Midnight at the Dragon Café* has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry across disciplines, such as diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and spatial criticism, a significant gap persists in theorising Su Jen's identity formation through an integrated lens that connects spatial production with psychological alienation. Previous studies have provided valuable insights into the novel's spatial dynamics. August (2022), for instance, interprets the Chinese restaurant as a site of symbolic stasis, arguing that immigrant subjects are rendered hyper-visible yet immobilised within the constraints of institutionalised labour. Similarly, Leduc (2017) conceptualises the Dragon Café as a heterotopic space wherein ethnic performance and psychological confinement operate in paradoxical tension. While these readings acknowledge spatial constraints, they often remain metaphorical or descriptive, lacking sustained engagement with Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad, spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces as a critical

analytic tool. Simultaneously, scholars, such as Lau (2016), Sen (2019) and Nicolaescu (2021), have foregrounded the issues of hybridity, intergenerational trauma, and memory in shaping diasporic subjectivity, yet few have drawn upon Fromm's concept of alienation, which conceptualises estrangement as a condition of disconnection from self, others, and society. Therefore, in order to address this gap, we propose a conceptual synthesis of Lefebvre's spatial triad and Fromm's concept of alienation to examine how spatial injustice and emotional estrangement mutually inform Su Jen's evolving subjectivity. By examining space not merely as backdrop but as a structuring force, and alienation not merely as emotional state but as socio-psychological condition, this study repositions diasporic marginality as a site of both constraint and potential transformation within the narrative. In addition, Su-Jen's struggles with space and belonging in *Midnight at the Dragon Café* are similar to the challenges faced by characters in SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*; as Calder (2000) shows, in *Disappearing Moon Café*, the diasporic characters are shaped by family histories and the legacies of colonial and racial pasts. In *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, Su-Jen similarly faces constraints, but her story emphasises how space and social environment interact with personal estrangement. This represents how Chinese Canadian literature explores the issue of how people balance identity, community and personal freedom, making Su-Jen's story an important example of finding agency and connection.

3. Methodology

Based on the textual analysis of the protagonist Su-Jen, who serves as a focal point for exploring the interplay between alienation and space as she struggles to define herself in the face of inherited traditions, patriarchal norms and spatial marginalisation, in *Midnight at the Dragon Café* by Bates, we have integrated two key concepts, namely Fromm's concept of alienation and Lefebvre's spatial triad, as our conceptual framework in order to examine this complexity, which offers an in-depth understanding of how internal emotional fragmentation and external spatial forces converge to shape the subject's experience of dislocation and identity crisis.

Fromm, in his book *The Sane Society* (Fromm, 1955), conceptualises alienation as a condition that extends beyond mere psychological detachment; it encompasses a systemic estrangement of individuals from their essence, their creative potential, and their social relationships. Alienation is explained as a condition where individuals feel powerless, isolated, and disengaged, often operating in societies that prioritise conformity, productivity, and obedience over autonomy and authentic self-expression (Fromm, 1955: pp. 120-125). In the context of Su-Jen, this alienation can be seen in her silent compliance with familial expectations, her suppressed emotions, and her inability to voice inner desires. It is hypothesised that her alienation is not a product of personal failure but is rooted in the structural limitations placed upon her as a racialised and gendered subject navigating both familial and social worlds.

Fromm further delineates alienation into distinct but interrelated forms. Self-alienation arises when the individual loses touch with their inner life, feelings, desires, and critical agency, rendering them emotionally numb or dependent on externally imposed identities (Fromm, 1955: p. 126). Social alienation, which is another form, refers to estrangement from community and meaningful human connection, often exacerbated by rigid social roles or exclusionary norms. Fromm's concept thus becomes vital not only in diagnosing Su-Jen's fractured sense of self but also in offering a framework to understand how these fractures emerge from broader societal forces that discourage genuine selfhood and intersubjective engagement.

To complement this psychological and social framework, *The Production of Space* (1974) by Lefebvre offers a spatial-materialist perspective that foregrounds the ways in which space itself is socially produced, contested and lived. Lefebvre's spatial triad, practical space, representations of space and representational space, responsively as the perceived space, the conceived space, and the lived space, dissects space into three dialectically related categories.

The practical space, as the perceived space, refers to the tangible, physical environment as experienced through daily routines and bodily interactions (Lefebvre, 1991: pp. 38-39). In the novel, this includes the concrete settings in which life unfolds: the family kitchen, the school, and the café. For Su-Jen, these physical sites are embedded with power dynamics and restrictions. It is hypothesised that her limited movement within the domestic and public spheres mirrors her constrained agency and reinforces the marginal status imposed upon her both as a girl and as an immigrant child. Meanwhile, the representations of space, as the conceived space, the second component of Lefebvre's triad, refers to the mental and ideological construction of space, how institutions, planners, and dominant discourses organise and interpret spatial meaning (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 39). In the novel, it is useful to examine how cultural norms, state ideologies, and patriarchal hierarchies dictate the roles available to Su-Jen and her family. Finally, the representational space, as the lived space pertains to the emotional, symbolic, and imaginative dimensions of space (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 42), which captures how individuals internalise, contest, or reimagine the spaces they inhabit. In Su-Jen's case, the lived space is proposed to be evident in her acts of quiet rebellion. These interior acts may appear minor, but we argue that they constitute significant forms of spatial resistance. Lefebvre's triad thus allows us to trace how Su-Jen's subjectivity is not only confined by spatial structures but is also formed through her embodied and imaginative engagement with them.

Together, Fromm and Lefebvre offer a clear conceptual framework for understanding Su-Jen's alienation and identity formation in the face of spatial injustice. As Soja (2009) articulates, spatial justice involves "the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them". It refers to the unequal and inequitable distribution of resources, opportunities, and social goods across geographic spaces, resulting in disparities in access and quality of life

among different communities (Soja, 2009). When examined alongside Lefebvre's concept of socially produced space, comprising perceived, conceived, and lived dimension, and Fromm's concept of alienation, spatial injustice provides a critical lens to analyze how structural and spatial factors contribute to both social and emotional estrangement. Thus, the analysis begins through an examination of the spatial injustices in *Midnight at the Dragon Café* through Lefebvre's spatial triad. We focus firstly on the concepts of the perceived space and the conceived space in order to demonstrate how Su-Jen's surroundings restrict her movement, role and voice. Building upon this finding, the analysis then moves on to Fromm's concept of alienation, exploring how Su-Jen is cut off from herself, from close relationships, and from the wider community, which helps explain the emotional and psychological effects of her experience as a young girl in a diasporic family. Finally, by synthesising the concepts of the lived space and alienation, the analysis explores how the protagonist navigates her identity across conflicting spatial and emotional terrains. The combined conceptual framework will reveal how experiences of spatial injustice and emotional estrangement are not merely conditions of marginality, but also function as catalysts for resistance and negotiation, and eventually shape the protagonists' evolving sense of self.

4. Discussion

4.1. Spatial Injustice and the Architecture of Exclusion

The first analytical layer of this study employs the concept of spatial triad by Lefebvre, especially the concepts of the perceived space and the conceived space, in order to examine the spatial injustices endured by Chinese immigrants, focusing on Su-Jen, in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*. At the forefront is the concept of the perceived space, the material and habitual use of space through which ideology becomes naturalised and social order is reproduced (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 33). In the novel, the physical layout of the café and its living quarters foregrounds the spatial compression and sensory saturation that structure the family's daily existence, which leads to a sense of isolation and alienation. The environment is not neutral; it reflects and reinforces the socio-economic marginality of immigrant labourers within a racialised capitalist order. The Dragon Café, where Su-Jen's family labours and resides, exemplifies a space of sensory saturation and spatial compression:

In the middle of the room is a square work station with a giant wooden chopping block at one corner. Built above the work area were open shelves with neat rows of stacked dishes. Along the wall, closest to the dining room, was a line of deep stainless-steel sinks attached to a long draining board with a garbage bucket tucked underneath. A steep wooden staircase started abruptly inside the door. It was dark and narrow. Each step served as a shelf for buckets and jars. My mother and I had to stand to the side with our backs pressed against the wall while my father squeezed our suitcases past us. (Bates, 2004: pp. 16-17)

As seen above, the precision of the spatial arrangement—stacked dishes, stainless-steel surfaces, and open shelving—signals a rigid utilitarianism, where every inch is optimised for labour. The lack of decorative detail, softness, or leisure-oriented space suggests the erasure of comfort, emotion, and rest from this environment. The café is not merely a site of work but a spatial regime that disciplines bodies into routines of labour and silence. The spatial constraints continue into the living quarters, where the domestic is overlaid with industrial function. The narrow, steep staircase, all have their own functions, “each step served as a shelf for buckets and jars” (Bates, 2004: p. 17), which illustrates how even vertical movement is colonised by utility. The bodies of Su-Jen and her mother are forced to “stand to the side with our backs pressed against the wall”, physically enacting their own spatial marginalisation and passivity. As the physical environment of the café imposes long hours of labour and constant surveillance from both family and community, Su-Jen’s everyday practices reflect both the physical and emotional constraints. These tangible conditions foster alienation by separating her from the carefree social life of her peers, leaving her physically present but emotionally estranged within the space she inhabits.

These spatial dynamics correspond closely to Lefebvre’s spatial practice, which refers to the lived, routinised arrangements of space that seem natural but are, in fact, socially constructed to reflect dominant power structures (p. 33). In this case, the routine and constriction of the café domesticates spatial inequality, turning the immigrant family’s marginal status into an everyday spatial norm. Moreover, as August (2022) argues, the restaurant functions as a site of enforced visibility and narrative stasis. The constant exposure to customers, the repetition of labour, and the cramped quarters produce a static rhythm where change, privacy, and development are suspended. The kitchen and its adjacent living quarters compress work and life into a singular, inescapable domain. In this sense, the café becomes a spatial metaphor for the immigrant condition: confined, overdetermined, and emotionally stagnant.

Despite the family’s active economic participation through operating the Dragon Café, their social isolation remains pronounced, reflecting a persistent pattern of structural marginalisation. As the narrator reflects:

At the time, I didn’t realise that my father’s business was typical of so many Chinese restaurants in small towns across Canada, often known as the local greasy spoon, every one of them a lonely family business isolated from the community it served. (Bates, 2004: p. 5)

The extract above reveals the paradox of immigrant visibility without inclusion. The labour of Chinese Canadians is not only present but normalised through cultural stereotypes, such as the ubiquitous “greasy spoon”, yet the labourers themselves remain peripheral, both socially and spatially. This condition exemplifies what Lefebvre would describe as the contradiction between the perceived and the conceived spaces. On the one hand, the restaurant appears as a productive and

accepted feature of the town's everyday life, a practical space engaged in routine service work. On the other hand, its conceived space, shaped by planners, consumers, and dominant cultural narratives, is one of racialised containment. The Dragon Café is tolerated as an economic entity but not embraced as a cultural or communal one. For Su-Jen and her family, the physical proximity to the town centre does not translate into a sense of belonging but intensifies a sense of estrangement with limited access to rights and resources. Their lives are circumscribed within the walls of the café, which, while open to the public, acts more like a boundary than a bridge. The architecture of the space, a compressed work station, dark stairwells, and dual-function rooms, mirrors the architecture of exclusion that defines their diasporic condition: one of proximity without presence, participation without reciprocity, and labour without visibility.

Spatial injustice in the novel is further entrenched in institutional settings, particularly within the school environment, where mechanisms of discipline, surveillance, and normalisation contribute to Su-Jen's internalisation of racial and cultural inferiorities. The school, as a site of conceived space (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 38), reflects dominant ideological structures that impose normative values on immigrant subjects. Su-Jen's perception of her Canadian school as inherently superior to her mother's former school in China, described as having been "built by lo fons" (Bates, 2004: p. 27), a term embedded with racialised connotations, reveals an early internalisation of a colonial hierarchy that privileges Whiteness and Western modernity. The school, as an institution structured around dominant Canadian values, prescribes an identity for Su-Jen that marginalises her Chinese heritage and reinforces her sense of difference. This spatial ordering, like the café, produces a sense of alienation by forcing her to internalise conflicting demands.

Su-Jen's vow "to obey all the rules" and "keep [her] hands clean" (Bates, 2004: p. 30) illustrates not only a desire for social acceptance but also a deeper submission to the spatial logic of control, where bodily regulation becomes a means of navigating and surviving within a dominant cultural framework. The teacher's patronising comments about hygiene, coupled with the humiliating public enforcement of cleanliness, "my cheeks felt hot...everyone was giggling" (Bates, 2004: p. 31), function as technologies of surveillance and symbolic violence. Such practices enact cultural othering by marking the immigrant child as deviant, uncivilised, or unclean, thereby inscribing racial and class-based difference onto the body in a spatially regulated manner. This intersection of space, power, and corporeality demonstrates how spatial injustice is not confined to material exclusion but extends into the embodied experiences of immigrant children within institutional environments. Through these spatialised rituals of shaming and conformity, the school becomes a microcosm of larger systemic inequities, reinforcing socio-cultural hierarchies that marginalise and discipline racialised subjects under the guise of care and education.

Moving beyond the analysis of material and lived environments, the notion of the conceived space, where space is ideologically constructed, abstracted, and sys-

temically codified by dominant institutions (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 38), is further manifested in the spatial organisation of both family life and labour within *Midnight at the Dragon Café*. The Dragon Café functions not merely as a site of economic activity but as an ideologically charged space where cultural expectations, gender hierarchies, and familial roles are spatially and temporally enforced. The daily routines of the restaurant exemplify this codified spatiality. Mealtimes, for instance, follow a rigid schedule wherein the family is permitted to eat only after all customers have been served:

In order to go to the funeral home with Charlotte, I would have to convince my mother to let me eat before the rest of my family. Supper hour was busy in the restaurant, meaning that we ate after the customers left, rarely before seven-thirty. Today would be no different. My mother would not be pleased that I was missing our family supper, a proper Chinese meal. (Bates, 2004: p. 129)

As seen above, this practice does more than indicate economic necessity, which serves as a symbolic reinforcement of filial duty and hierarchical order, in which the family's needs are persistently subordinated to the demands of labour and public service. The deferment of nourishment reflects not only the prioritisation of capitalist function but also the internalised values of self-sacrifice, discipline, and deference to authority, values often imposed on diasporic subjects navigating the dual imperatives of survival and cultural preservation. Moreover, the restaurant becomes a gendered space in which the labour of women and children is both expected and normalised. Thus, it demonstrates her parents' economic ambitions and cultural expectations, prescribing Su-Jen's role as a dutiful daughter and worker. This imposed identity produces self-alienation as her personal desires and individual agency are subordinated to the spatial logic of family duty and community survival.

Under Lefebvre's schema, it is the concept of the conceived space that encodes both economic exploitation and cultural continuity, demanding emotional restraint and physical endurance from those who inhabit it. Thus, the Dragon Café embodies the rigid order of family duty and survival. It is designed by her parents as an economic site, prescribing Su-Jen's role as a worker rather than an autonomous child. The spatial arrangement forces her to internalise an identity imposed by her family, leaving her little space to pursue her own desires. Similarly, the school operates as another conceived space, structured by dominant cultural norms and racial hierarchies. Within it, Su-Jen is engineered to become disciplined so as to conform to Canadian values while simultaneously being marked as different, reinforcing her marginal position.

4.2. Emotional Estrangement: Silence, Suppression, and Disconnection

The second layer of analysis applies Fromm's concept of alienation in order to explore the psychological, emotional and interpersonal dimensions of Su-Jen's subjectivity in *Midnight at the Dragon Café*. Fromm conceptualises alienation not

merely as a psychological affliction but as a pervasive condition of modern life, in which individuals become estranged from their own sense of self, their emotional authenticity, and their capacity to form meaningful, reciprocal relationships. In *The Sane Society*, Fromm defines alienation as “a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien”, disconnected from both his inner life and the social world around him (p. 120). Importantly, Fromm does not treat alienation as a purely individual or pathological issue; rather, he insists that it is a historically and socially constituted phenomenon, shaped by larger structural forces, such as capitalist exploitation, authoritarian familial dynamics, and cultural repression (pp. 120-122). Within this framework, Su-Jen’s emotional development and interpersonal struggles can be read as symptomatic of a broader structural alienation that characterises the diasporic condition. Her experience is marked by her inability to express grief openly, her discomfort in forming trusting relationships, and her constant negotiation between loyalty to family and desire for autonomy. Racialised marginality further compounds her sense of estrangement as she navigates a world in which her cultural identity is devalued and misunderstood. Simultaneously, patriarchal expectations reinforced through both the family and the community position her in a subordinate role. Diasporic dislocation adds yet another layer, as Su-Jen is caught between conflicting cultural values and expectations, rendering her increasingly uncertain about who she is and where she belongs.

Su-Jen’s estrangement from herself is manifested through patterns of emotional withdrawal, affective confusion, and a growing inability to respond authentically to her inner emotional life. Drawing on Fromm’s concept of alienation, her detachment reflects a deeper psychosocial condition in which the individual becomes disconnected from their own emotions, spontaneity and capacity for intimacy. As Fromm argues in *The Sane Society*, such alienation emerges when individuals are forced to suppress their authentic feelings under the pressure of social norms, power structures, or fear of reprisal (pp. 120-121). In this light, Su-Jen’s alienation from the self is not a result of personal pathology but rather the internalisation of systemic constraints, racialised marginality, patriarchal silence, and the affective dissonance of diasporic displacement. Her recollection can be seen here:

Without intending to, I began to withdraw slowly from my family, pushing away my mother’s sporadic hugs and spending less time listening to my father tell his stories. (Bates, 2004: p. 112)

The above example then reveals not merely physical distance but a deepening emotional disengagement. This distancing marks a turning point in her internal life, where affection and familial connection become sources of discomfort rather than comfort. Her inability to express emotional intuition or act upon it grows more pronounced as the narrative unfolds. Moments of potential emotional reckoning, such as her discovery of her mother’s affair, are met not with confrontation

or inquiry but with internalised shame and muteness:

In the dark corners of our hearts, we now shared the same secret and understood it was something never to be given voice. (Bates, 2004: p. 215)

This silence, as exemplified above, functions not as discretion but as affective paralysis, a key indicator of what Fromm identifies as the suppression of emotional vitality in response to oppressive familial and cultural expectations. Trapped in a space where emotional articulation is neither modelled nor permitted, Su-Jen's inner life becomes increasingly fragmented. She oscillates between recognition and repression, knowing more than she is allowed or able to say, yet unable to find the language or courage to claim that knowledge openly. Her silence, then, is both a symptom and a defence: a way to endure emotional turbulence in an environment where vulnerability may lead to isolation or punishment. In Frommian terms, this marks the alienation of the self from one's emotional core, a condition that results not only in psychic numbness but also in the erosion of authentic selfhood. Su-Jen becomes emotionally split, her subjectivity fractured by the dissonance between what she perceives and what she is permitted to express.

Su-Jen's alienation from others, most acutely from her parents, is intensified by persistent emotional mis-attunement and intergenerational dissonance, both of which serve to fracture familial intimacy and deepen her sense of isolation. Within Fromm's framework, alienation is not merely an internal rupture but a relational one; it severs the individual's capacity for genuine connection and mutual emotional recognition. Fromm emphasises that alienated individuals often lose the ability to engage in authentic love and empathy, becoming emotionally passive or reactive rather than attuned and present (pp. 121-122). In *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, these dynamics play out within the fractured emotional landscape of the immigrant family, where displacement and cultural dissonance impair intersubjective understanding. As Sen (2019) argues, the novel's use of narrative flashbacks evokes the lingering trauma of geographic and emotional displacements, illustrating how memory mediates both diasporic identity and the fraught dynamics of familial relationships.

Early in the narrative, Su-Jen likens herself to "a wall in the middle of the double bed" (Bates, 2004: p. 20), a simile that symbolically casts her not as a link between her estranged parents but as a passive barrier, physically and emotionally dividing them. This image encapsulates her liminal role within the family: ever-present, yet incapable of bridging the emotional void between her mother's despair and her father's silence. Her mother's breakdown is described here:

My mother sat on the bed and looked around the room, her face pale. She let out a deep sigh and muttered under her breath, "This town is so quiet you can hear the dead". Covering her mouth with her hands, she started to weep, her shoulders shaking. I stared at her; the lump that had been sitting at the back of my throat since we left Hong Kong swelled until I began to cry too. (Bates, 2004: p. 18)

We can see here how the breakdown is emblematic of this dysfunction. Rather than fostering emotional connection or mutual consolation, their shared weeping becomes an expression of mirrored helplessness, reinforcing Fromm's insight that alienation inhibits not only genuine intimacy but also the capacity for mutual emotional responsiveness.

Moreover, Su-Jen's attempts to navigate cultural hybridity often result in further estrangement. The resulting tension illustrates what Fromm describes as a social pathology in which individuals, shaped by conflicting values, lose the ability to maintain coherence in their emotional and cultural identities. As Su-Jen notes, "both my parents expected me to become a high-class person, a professional, someone with a university degree" (Bates, 2004: p. 229); here, her aspirations are framed within the logic of upward mobility, a logic conditioned by Western ideals of meritocracy and individual achievement. However, this pursuit is inextricably tied to the sacrifices of her parents, particularly her mother, whose unfulfilled life becomes the invisible foundation upon which Su-Jen's future rests. Ultimately, Su-Jen is suspended between two incompatible cultural worlds, one defined by filial obligation and inherited tradition, the other by individualism and rational modernity. The emotional toll of this in-between space manifests as an increasing inability to sustain meaningful connections with either cultural framework or parental figure.

Su-Jen's alienation from the broader social sphere is equally profound and multifaceted, shaped by routine encounters with racial hostility, symbolic erasure and public shaming. These experiences construct her not only as an outsider within dominant social structures but also as a subject whose body and identity are continually marked by difference. Within Fromm's framework, such social alienation is not merely a feeling of exclusion but a condition that severs individuals from their "spontaneous self"—the core of one's creativity, emotional expressiveness, and capacity for autonomous agency (Fromm, 1955: p. 304). In this sense, Su-Jen's estrangement is not only interpersonal or familial but systemic and embodied, reflecting how diasporic individuals are rendered psychologically fragmented by the cumulative weight of exclusionary practices.

At school, Su-Jen confronts both overt racial aggression and insidious institutionalised microaggressions that compound her sense of non-belonging. She is directly targeted with racial slurs, "out of my way, chink" (Bates, 2004: p. 42), which violently reinforces her status as a racialised other, unworthy of social inclusion or respect. These verbal assaults are not isolated incidents but expressions of a broader socio-cultural discourse that delegitimises her presence and identity. Simultaneously, subtler yet equally damaging forms of racialisation occur through institutional practices masquerading as care or correction. Her teacher's patronising remarks about dental hygiene, followed by the public enforcement of tooth-brushing, are exemplified as follows:

My cheeks felt hot and my eyes began to brim with tears. Everyone was giggling and whispering. I wanted to run away. No one else had teeth like mine.

All the lo-fon children had been to the teeth doctor and I felt ashamed that I had never seen one. (Bates, 2004: p. 31)

These humiliations transform her body into a spectacle of difference, subject to disciplinary scrutiny and ridicule. In this moment, Su-Jen becomes both the object of surveillance and a symbol of cultural deviance, reinforcing what Fromm understands as the alienation from one's spontaneous self. The psychological effects of these moments extend beyond momentary embarrassment; they contribute to a cumulative erosion of self-worth, spontaneity, and emotional vitality. Su-Jen learns to modulate her behaviour, suppress emotional responses, and monitor her own difference in order to navigate a social order that repeatedly renders her hyper-visible and simultaneously invisible. This paradox, of being seen too much yet not truly recognised, produces what Fromm identifies as a profound existential estrangement, in which the subject loses connection not only with others but with their own sense of selfhood and possibility.

Accordingly, Su-Jen gradually comes to understand her invisibility within the dominant White Canadian society not as a protective camouflage or a site of empowerment but rather as a form of negation and erasure. Her observation is demonstrated here:

To the people in Irvine, we must have seemed the perfect immigrant family. We were polite, hard-working, unthreatening, and we kept to ourselves. As far as the townsfolk were concerned, there was nothing about us that would upset the moral and social order that presided over them. Even when things started to go wrong, we blended so seamlessly into their everyday life, we remained invisible. (Bates, 2004: p. 112)

The above example reveals the paradoxical nature of this invisibility. Far from conferring agency or acceptance, the seamless blending functions as a conditional acceptance predicated on the suppression of difference and the erasure of distinct cultural identities. In this context, invisibility is a spatial and social mechanism of exclusion, whereby recognition is granted only insofar as minority subjects conform to hegemonic norms and avoid disrupting the dominant narrative. Su-Jen's invisibility thus operates as a form of symbolic annihilation, where the refusal to acknowledge her presence and difference works to maintain the hegemony of Whiteness and cultural homogeneity.

Within Fromm's framework of alienation, this invisibility intensifies Su-Jen's sense of disconnection on multiple levels. She becomes estranged not only from her inner voice, her authentic desires, emotions, and self-expression but also from meaningful emotional relationships, which are mediated by the spatial and cultural conditions of her environment. Furthermore, her social illegibility within the broader national imaginary renders her marginalised both symbolically and materially. The dominant culture's refusal to see her as a fully realised individual compounds her isolation, reinforcing patterns of invisibility that silence and suppress minority voices.

4.3. Reconciliation and Resistance: Su Jen's Reclamation of Space and Self

While *Midnight at the Dragon Café* is fundamentally structured around the pervasive experiences of spatial injustice and emotional estrangement that mark Su-Jen's diasporic existence, the novel's narrative trajectory ultimately gestures toward a subtle yet profound process of transformation and self-redefinition. Unlike conventional narratives of emancipation that privilege dramatic rupture or overt rebellion, Su-Jen's journey unfolds as a gradual and often ambivalent reconfiguration of meaning. This delicate transformation reflects the complexity of diasporic identity formation, where belonging and alienation coexist in dynamic tension. By synthesising Fromm's conceptualisation of alienation as a socially produced disconnection from self and society together with Lefebvre's spatial triad, with its tripartite distinction between the concepts of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived spaces, the novel reveals the multiplicity of spatial and affective registers through which identity is both constrained and enabled. Su-Jen's alienation, rather than functioning as a fixed or terminal state, emerges as a productive site of critical reflection. The condition of estrangement fosters a heightened awareness of the structural forces shaping her experience and simultaneously opens the possibility for subtle forms of resistance and agency within these constraints. Within Lefebvre's spatial triad, autonomy can be understood as the ability to navigate and appropriate, thereby transforming experiences of alienation into empowered engagement with both social and physical environments. Thus, her evolving subjectivity can thus be read as grounded in a dialectic of resistance and reconciliation, where moments of withdrawal and silence coexist with acts of assertion and imaginative re-engagement with her environment.

One of the most significant dimensions of Su-Jen's transformation is her evolving and increasingly complex relationship to the concept of lived space, as articulated in Lefebvre's spatial triad. At the outset of the narrative, Su-Jen's embodied experience is primarily circumscribed by rigid, racialised, and labour-intensive environments, most notably the Dragon Café. This space, emblematic of spatial injustice and economic necessity, is governed by routine, surveillance, and the suppression of individual agency. However, as the narrative unfolds, Su-Jen begins to reappropriate and reinterpret these spaces through the lens of emotional subjectivity and imaginative projections, marking a critical transition from passive occupation to the active re-inscription of spatial meaning. In contrast to the disciplinary functions of conceived and perceived spaces that regulate her daily life, moments of affective resistance and subjective freedom emerge within what Lefebvre terms lived space, the symbolic, experiential, and emotionally saturated realm of spatial practice. Unlike abstract representations of space, the lived space is shaped by the individual's imaginative and affective engagements, allowing for the personal reinterpretation of otherwise oppressive environments (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 39). For Su-Jen, these moments within the lived space offer brief but meaningful ruptures from the constraints of racialised labour, filial obligation, and institutional author-

ity that define her diasporic condition.

Within the spatial and cultural confines of the novel, older generations remain bound to traditional cultural scripts, reinforcing normative structures of identity and belonging. In contrast, younger characters, such as Su-Jen, engage in quiet, embodied forms of resistance that manifest through lived, affective experiences. These moments disrupt the fixity of cultural and spatial norms by enabling liminal encounters wherein alternative subjectivities can begin to take shape. Several key spaces in the narrative, including Dooley's Bakery, with its "mouth-watering, sugary, comforting" aroma (Bates, 2004: p. 37), and the imaginative stimulation Su-Jen experiences during science lessons (Bates, 2004: p. 116), serve as affective and mnemonic sites of possibility. Unlike the highly codified and disciplinary spaces of the restaurant or school, these environments activate sensory and emotional dimensions that allow Su-Jen to temporarily disengage from the spatial injustices and cultural constraints that define her social world. Within these lived spaces, she is no longer a passive subject but rather an active participant in the production of alternative meanings, identities, and desires.

Su-Jen's small acts of resistance within these oppressive spatial frameworks serve as crucial assertions of autonomy and selfhood. For example, her decision to eat dinner earlier than usual, "[i]n order to go to the funeral home with Charlotte, I would have to convince my mother to let me eat before the rest of my family" (Bates, 2004: p. 129) is a deliberate subversion of the café's tightly controlled temporal and spatial regimes. Similarly, her declaration of intent to choose her own spouse (Bates, 2004: p. 149) challenges the patriarchal and cultural prescriptions imposed upon her, signalling a redefinition of her personal and social identities. Though these actions may appear minor on the surface, they represent a profound reorientation of her engagement with space, from passive compliance to active negotiation. This marks a turning point in Su-Jen's journey, wherein the lived space becomes a site of individual intention, emotional expression, and subjective meaning-making.

Moreover, Su-Jen's retreat into natural environments, particularly her solitary moments in the woods, offers an important counterpoint to the suffocating, structured confines of the café. The forest, described with sensory detail, can be seen below:

It would be a long time before I would go there again, but for the rest of my life, I would find comfort and solace in walking through woods. The air that day smelled of damp soil and decaying leaves from the previous autumn. The forest floor was carpeted with white trilliums. When I reached the cliff face, I lowered myself into the crevice and edged along to our cave, sitting finally on the ledge outside it, where I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. (Bates, 2004: p. 309)

As seen above, the phrases, "the forest floor was carpeted with white trilliums... I felt the warmth of the sun on my face" (Bates, 2004: p. 309), function as spatial

and affective refuges, a lived terrain where emotional coherence, healing, and embodied presence are momentarily attainable. Nature, here, emerges as an alternative lived space characterised by openness, sensory richness, and temporal fluidity, contrasting starkly with the geometric discipline and symbolic confinement of her working environment. Through these interactions with both the built and natural environment, Su-Jen's spatial experience becomes increasingly layered and complex. Her imaginative and affective engagements with space enable a negotiation between imposed constraints and personal agency, fostering the emergence of a subjectivity that is neither wholly determined by structural oppression nor naively emancipated. In Lefebvre's terms, this is the transformative potential of lived space, a dimension of spatiality where social structures intersect with individual creativity, memory, and desire, allowing for the possibility of resistance, redefinition, and healing even within contexts of marginalisation.

Importantly, Su Jen's reconciliation is accompanied by an act of narrative reclamation. In the novel's final reflection, she declares as follows:

My past has become a distant place. I sometimes choose to go there, turning the pages of a young girl's book of drawings or the pages of the books my mother brought with her from China. But the journeys are usually unexpected. The smell of burning leaves, a particular line from a poem, a certain look about a girl on a streetcar... I feel a vague twinge in my heart and once again, I am back in Irvine. I am twelve years old. I am with my friend Charlotte on the ice in the middle of the lake under a bright winter sky. We are sliding, falling and laughing. The air is crisp and cold, the ice underneath is thick. We are safe. (Bates, 2004: p. 315)

As demonstrated above, space becomes deeply lived and affectively charged. Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of lived space, a realm shaped by personal memory, emotional resonance, and symbolic meaning, Su-Jen reclaims her past not as trauma to be forgotten but as a repository of identity and continuity. The safety she finds on the ice with her friend Charlotte, under a "bright winter sky", contrasts sharply with the spatial confinement of the Dragon Café. This remembered space becomes a counter-site of belonging, imagination, and self-affirmation. The reconciliation depicted in the novel is not one of resolution but of reorientation. Rather than fleeing the spaces that once confined her, Su Jen learns to inhabit them differently, overlaying trauma with reflection, and constraint with meaning. Her declaration that "my past has become a distant place" (Bates, 2004: p. 315) signals not denial but integration, a recognition that identity is forged through, rather than in spite of, suffering. The contradictions of her upbringing, between Chinese heritage and Canadian socialisation, between filial duty and emotional autonomy, do not dissolve. Instead, she learns to navigate them, to mediate between silence and expression, and to locate agency in endurance rather than escape.

This spatial reorientation parallels a profound emotional and ethical transformation in Su-Jen's interpersonal relationships, particularly with her mother. Their

relationship, initially characterised by resentment, silence, and a painful accumulation of unmet expectations, evolves into a tentative space of empathy and subtle understanding. Rather than achieving a conventional or complete reconciliation, Su-Jen's journey toward emotional maturity involves a growing recognition of her mother as a complex figure shaped by her own histories of trauma, migration, betrayal, and gendered repression, which allows Su-Jen to move beyond simplistic judgments or binary oppositions of love and anger, enabling her to engage with her mother's humanity and vulnerability, gradually realising her sense of autonomy. As Fromm posits, autonomy refers to an individual's capacity for self-determination, authentic expression, and agency within social and spatial contexts, enabling one to act in accordance with personal values rather than external pressures or structural constraints.

Reflecting on her family's past, Su Jen begins to understand the intergenerational weight of loss and guilt:

I now understood why my mother was so obsessed with my water curse... I thought about my father, how he carried the responsibility of the death of my mother's son. All these things he suffered silently inside him. (Bates, 2004: p. 240)

The extract above illustrates Su Jen's emerging ability to perceive her parents not merely as authority figures but as emotionally wounded individuals, shaped by personal and diasporic traumas. From Fromm's perspective, such recognition marks a partial transformation of alienation, an emotional awakening that reconnects the self to human relationality through compassion rather than repression or resistance alone. Rather than rejecting her mother's worldview, Su Jen repositions it within a broader context of gendered diaspora, where silence and rigidity may be understood as survival strategies rather than mere oppression. By cultivating this form of empathetic self-awareness, Su-Jen begins to reclaim control over her emotional life, no longer wholly defined by inherited patterns of repression or silence. The ethical dimension of this transformation lies in the shift from reactive alienation toward reflective engagement, where emotional complexity is acknowledged rather than denied, which enables Su-Jen to navigate the ambivalences of family loyalty and individual selfhood, carving out a space where she can feel authentically without the necessity of resolving every contradiction.

In sum, through the character of Su Jen and her evolving engagements with both physical spaces and affective terrains, the narrative illustrates how alienation functions paradoxically. On one hand, it manifests as a source of disconnection, fragmenting the self, estranging the individual from family, community, and society at large. On the other hand, the very condition of estrangement opens a space for consciousness-raising and resistance. The experience of being marginalised, surveilled, or silenced compels Su Jen to critically examine the social, cultural, and familial forces that shape her identity and sense of place. The critical self-awareness fosters a form of agency that is not necessarily revolutionary in the traditional sense but is nonetheless transformative, grounded in

subtle acts of negotiation and reinterpretation.

5. Conclusion

In *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, Lefebvre's spatial triad offers a complementary lens for examining Su-Jen's evolving relationship with her environment. At the start of the novel, the concept of the perceived space, the tangible, physical realm of the home, café, and school, imposes clear spatial boundaries. These environments are tightly controlled and gendered, reinforcing Su-Jen's subordinate role. She performs domestic labour, follows strict routines, and exists within spaces that afford little privacy or freedom. Simultaneously, the concept of the conceived space, the institutional and ideological constructions of space, further limit her. Cultural norms and patriarchal expectations assign meaning to these spaces that reinforce her marginality. The café is not just a place of work but a symbol of cultural entrapment; the school becomes a site of racial and linguistic exclusion.

However, Lefebvre's third spatial dimension, the concept of the lived space, becomes key to Su-Jen's transformation. As she begins to go out of the Café and reimagine her surroundings, small moments of agency emerge. Reading books in secret, dreaming of escape, and interpreting the silence around her become ways of reclaiming meaning. These lived spaces allow her to invest symbolic value into mundane settings, creating emotional depth within otherwise oppressive environments. Rather than fleeing her circumstances, Su-Jen slowly redefines them. Her imaginative engagement with space disrupts its fixed meanings and opens the possibility for new narratives of self. In this way, Lefebvre's framework reveals how subjectivity is not only constrained by space but also shaped through active spatial reinterpretation.

On the other hand, Su-Jen's journey from alienation to autonomy unfolds within the complex interplay of spatial restriction and emotional estrangement. Her early experiences reflect what Fromm describes as alienation: a loss of self, disconnection from others, and a lack of rootedness in the world. As a child caught between cultures, Su-Jen internalises a sense of estrangement shaped by both silence and observation. Fromm's concept of self-alienation is clearly reflected in Su-Jen's emotional withdrawal and her inability to express her thoughts or resist imposed expectations. Her identity becomes a reflection of what others demand as an obedient daughter, racialised student, invisible girl, rather than what she desires or imagines. In this sense, her alienation is not passive but enforced, revealing the cost of existing within structures that suppress autonomy and emotional authenticity.

Furthermore, Fromm's notion of social alienation helps illuminate Su-Jen's fractured relationships within her family and community. The lack of open dialogue with her mother, the mysterious silence surrounding her father's heart, and the burden of unspoken cultural expectations create an environment of isolation. These emotional voids deepen Su-Jen's sense of being out of place not only in Canadian society but also within her own home. However, Fromm suggests that

alienation can be challenged through self-awareness and critical reflection. This is evident as Su-Jen gradually develops an internal voice. Her emotional growth is marked by moments of resistance, questioning her mother's past, refusing to accept silence as resolution, and imagining a future shaped by her own choices. These acts, while subtle, reflect a growing capacity for autonomy within alienating conditions.

By synthesising Lefebvre's spatial triad with Fromm's concept of alienation, this study reveals how diasporic identity is shaped through the intertwined dynamics of social space and emotional experience. Unlike the previous studies that have examined either spatial structures or psychological processes in isolation, this integrated framework demonstrates how the physical, ideological and emotional spaces interact with personal estrangement and agency, particularly in regard to spatial injustice and emotional estrangement as forces for self-realisation, offering a more holistic understanding of the complexities of cultural displacement and self-reconstruction in diasporic contexts. Combining the concepts of alienation by Fromm with spatial triad by Lefebvre, Su-Jen's path toward autonomy is forged through her simultaneous emotional and spatial negotiations. Alienation is not a static condition but a dynamic process. Fromm shows how emotional estrangement limits selfhood, while Lefebvre demonstrates how space structures identity and possibility. Yet, in Su-Jen's case, these limitations also serve as the grounds for resistance. Her ability to endure contradiction, reinterpret space, and reflect on her inner life leads to a kind of autonomy rooted in presence, not absence. She does not escape her alienation but learns to work within it, to find agency not in freedom from conditions but in the capacity to assign new meaning to them. Ultimately, Su-Jen achieves a full sense of autonomy, having reconciled her personal agency with the social and spatial constraints that once contributed to her alienation. This resolution illustrates not only her self-determination but also her ability to navigate and transform the spaces and relationships that previously limited her, marking a definitive endpoint in her journey from estrangement to empowerment.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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