



Spatial Analysis of the Kitchen in Asako Yuzuki's *Butter*

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Abstract:

Published in Japan in 2017, Asako Yuzuki's *Butter* problematises the conventional kitchen, a space traditionally occupied by women to fulfil the socially scripted gender roles. The protagonist, Rika's spatial and somatic transformation is analysed through the intersecting theoretical frameworks of Edward W. Soja's Spatial Trialectics and Bertrand Westphal's 'polysensoriality'. This transformation is an act of feminist resistance against the rigid Japanese cultural norms. Her sterile Firstspace kitchen after an interaction with Manako Kajii becomes a symbolic arena of defiance and desire. The visceral consumption of butter and subsequent rich food alters not just the space that Rika occupies but also remaps her body. The paper ultimately highlights how Yuzuki's depiction of simple culinary acts functions as a form of resistance in a culture where appetite for both food and identity is restricted and policed.

Keywords: Thirdspace, identity, feminist resistance, Japanese literature, Geocriticism.

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Introduction

Henri Lefebvre defines “representational spaces” as those “directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols” (39). The kitchen as a ‘lived’ space, thus, has been traditionally associated with women and domesticity. It has been both a site of patriarchal dominance and of nourishment. Over the course of years, across various studies the representation of kitchen has been negotiated making it a cultural space where identity and power are reclaimed. In Asako Yuzuki’s *Butter*, published originally in Japanese in 2017 and its English translation in 2024, the kitchen, a room that only exists as part of the house’s geography, is presented as a transformative place that bends the socio-cultural expectations placed on women reclaiming agency over not just the space but also one’s body. The text unfolds, primarily through the interactions between Manako Kajii, a gourmet cook convicted of serial murders and the protagonist Rika Machida, a journalist writing her story. It is through these interactions that Yuzuki focuses on deconstructing the rigid and at times suffocating beauty standards that women are held to in contemporary Japanese society. Rika’s cultural, social and physical transformation at the end of the novel is Yuzuki’s attempt to critique these expected norms of femininity.

This paper will argue that it is not just Rika’s cultural mindset that undergoes a change, The transformation is also physical, wherein her body itself is remapped. Analysed using Edward W. Soja’s *Trialectics of Spatiality* and Bertrand Westphal’s *Sensory cartography*, *Butter* subverts the notions of gender and body expectations. In his work *Thirdspace*, Edward W. Soja rejects the tendency to classify space into binary terms: the Firstspace, which is the physical, material, lived world as opposed to the Secondspace, which is the conceived, abstract representation of ideologies that govern the lived spaces. Soja’s introduction of ‘Thirdspace’ proposes a space of ‘radical openness’ where social boundaries are deconstructed and negotiated (Soja 13). Similarly,

Geocriticism, as theorized by Bertrand Westphal, focuses on the multifocality of space in literature and emphasizes on the spatial dimension offered in literature, examining how geographic spaces are represented, imagined, and experienced in texts.

In *Butter*, Rika's kitchen is initially designed to create a body policed by Japanese cultural norms. However, it shifts from its assigned 'conceived' rules becoming a space of resistance. Rika's sterile 'Firstspace' kitchen, after the interactions with Manako Kajii becomes a symbolic arena of resistance and desire. This space that had till now only existed for Rika in the periphery. Resistance and desire thus stem from the gendered expectation of a woman that requires an internationalised policing of the female body. Manako Kajii is conspicuous in her refusal to adhere to these strict social codes. Kajii's unapologetic consumption of food for pleasure, rather than sustenance and spatial occupation of those spaces where women are meant to shrink themselves, shape the trajectory of the novel. These interactions, then become a catalyst instigating a change long before the Échiré butter makes an appearance in Rika's kitchen. Though accused of violent crimes, Kajii causes a stir because she "was neither young nor beautiful" and "weighed over 70 kilos" (Yuzuki 13). A sense of maliciousness in the press and public emerges because "even more than Kajii's lack of beauty, was the fact that she was not thin" (Yuzuki 23). Before Rika's physical expansion to defiantly create and occupy a feminist space, Kajii unwittingly becomes the narrative's original spatial disruptor, who undermines the Firstspace that idealises a thin body, subverts the hegemonic Secondspace of a culture that aims to dictate a woman's body, and finally establishes a Thirdspace where the body is a site of liberation. It is ironic to note that Kajii's personal ideology is anything but feminist as she exclaims, "there are two things that I simply cannot tolerate: feminists and margarine" (Yuzuki 29). Nonetheless, as Miller & Fuller note, it is "Kajii's pursuit for indulgence, authenticity, and (sexual) appetite is what instigates Rika's emancipation from patriarchy" (10).

Consequently, the visceral consumption of butter and subsequent rich food alters not just the space that Rika occupies but also remaps her body. In this Thirdspace, societal rules of appearance and obedience are dismantled as Rika engages in spatial disruption, reclaiming not just the sovereignty of place but also of her own self. The paper ultimately highlights how Yuzuki's depiction of simple culinary acts functions as a form of resistance in a culture where appetite for both food and identity is restricted and policed.

Kitchen as a site of identity reclamation

Right from the start of the novel, Rika's kitchen is governed by the strict Secondspace of Japanese diet culture. The nature of sterility starts with her apartment, which is described as "cold" (Yuzuki 8). Her kitchen even lacks an essential item found in a typical Japanese kitchen, a rice cooker (Yuzuki 9). Her fridge, a sterile place, holds "fruit and vegetable juice, some sports drinks, and some margarine" (Yuzuki 29). The kitchen thus is not a place of nourishment but of surveillance. This Panopticon gaze extends to her body when Rika's best friend Reiko exclaims, "You look like you've lost weight again" (Yuzuki 8). Thus, the physical space is dominated by the mental rule that women must shrink themselves to meet societal expectations subconsciously. Though Rika does not eat less, her habits mirror the trend that is followed in contemporary Japanese society, where "the average calorie consumption of Japanese women...is lower than the levels recorded right after the Second World War" (Yuzuki 8). Though Rika is physically in the kitchen, mentally, she is trapped in a prison of calorie counting. She takes pride when her "slim physique ensured that, despite not being a remarkable beauty, she would still be complimented" (Yuzuki 9). So deeply entrenched is the expectation that success is linked to body image. Being a journalist,

“maintaining [her] appearance tended to be rewarded with professional success” (Yuzuki 10). She is performing what Lefebvre calls a “spatial practice” of restriction (38).

The disruption of the kitchen’s ‘Secondspace’ comes in the form of a simple, tangible yet powerful object, the Échiré butter. This butter is equated with luxury when Rika is handed a bag with “a pretty, romantic design [complete with] a sachet of refrigerant to make sure the butter didn’t melt” (Yuzuki 32). The butter, an alien object, transforms the erstwhile sterile kitchen into what Westphal describes as a “sensory landscape”, and the kitchen becomes a “space to be seen from a new angle...that resituates” the expectations associated with a heavily policed body (Westphal 133). The disruption starts as soon as “the rice cooker [begins] to emit a sweet smell” (Yuzuki 33). As she finds herself “entranced by the sight of [the rice’s] translucent gleam”, Rika confronts the butter’s “smooth buttercup-hued surface” (Yuzuki 33). However, the sensory reaction supersedes the visual as the “cool butter clash[es] against her teeth...It [is] a taste that could only be described as golden...with an astounding depth of flavour and a faint yet full and rounded aroma” (Yuzuki 33). This sensory experience becomes a catalyst in disrupting the rigid expectations Japanese society has for women. The act of buying a rice cooker, the consumption of butter not margarine and the consequent enjoyment of that simple meal disrupt the hierarchy of the conceived abstract rules of dieting. Westphal’s ‘polysensoriality’ becomes the mechanism of this shift, and the kitchen is transformed into a site that negotiates cultural norms and societal expectations (Westphal 122). Westphal theorises that “multifocalization is the chief characteristic of geocriticism”, arguing that perspective shift uncovers the “sensory perception, or sensual perception, that the authors have of space” (122). In *Butter*, Rika’s changing perspective is this very shift in focalisation. The kitchen and its association with food were viewed through the lens of societal expectation. As Rika continues to explore Kajii’s lived experience that has sat on the margins of these societal norms,

she engages in “polysensoriality” (Westphal 122). Westphal associates “polysensoriality” with “a quality of all human spaces” (122). As a result, Rika’s kitchen is now the site of sensory reclamation. Her act of cooking is driven with an increased focus consuming food with a sensory awareness. Thus, Rika’s relationship with food and subsequently the kitchen begins to change. Her first symbolic act in the process of transformation is “throw[ing] out her packet of margarine...with the burnable rubbish” (Yuzuki 35) and replacing it with an expensive brand of butter stocked in a supermarket known to be visited by affluent housewives. As a result, with her consciously choosing to discard margarine, an object “lower in calories than butter”, she rejects the semiotic markers of patriarchy designed to discipline the body (Yuzuki 29). The reclamation of the kitchen as a space of hedonist pleasure and creation begins as “she no longer [feels] an aversion towards using” it (Yuzuki 37). The domestic space becomes a site of gratification and Rika can “picture...the objects of her desire”, creating dishes that “stimulat[e] her appetite” to finally “experience a sense of satisfaction of a kind she’d not had before” (Yuzuki 38).

Rika’s changing relationship with food activates the sensory cartography, moving beyond as Westphal observes the “triumph of the visual” and the “supremacy of the gaze” (131). Her action of closing her eyes when savouring real buttercream-laden cake, “the heady aroma” (Yuzuki 75) of butter that rises up her nose as the butter melts over the mochi, the sizzle of soy sauce as it dances a tango over the hotplate, “challenge[s] the hierarchy that places visual perception at the top” (Westphal 134). The act of cooking and eating food is no longer a static and monotonous action but it is replete with “sensory vibrations” (Westphal 122). For Rika, the kitchen becomes a space for exploration and offers an “infinite variety for sensory perception” (Westphal 134). On one hand, “sensoriality” aims to conform an individual. But now, Rika’s understanding of the kitchen as a structured and definitive space, one that was previously defined by deprivation is

disrupted and awakens Rika not just from societal but also from her carceral stupor (Westphal 133).

The kitchen in *Butter* becomes a sensory laboratory actively engaging with the sensory landscape of taste, smell and touch. Westphal claims that “space is subject to the infinite variety of sensory perception” (134). As a result, when the “cold”, “cool” and “melted” butter meets “the roof of [Rika’s] mouth” or “clashe[s] against her teeth” or begins “to surge through the individual grains of rice”, Rika’s relationship with the space changes (Yuzuki 33). The kitchen transforms from a domestic space to a site that explores personal desires. This stands in direct opposition to her understanding of the word domestic as she can only “picture her mother, cowed and fearful around her late father breaking down in tears” (Yuzuki 44). The presentation of the kitchen space is the “Secondspace...entirely ideational, made up of projections into the empirical world” in which the focus on a woman’s seeking pleasure is second to fulfilling her role as a provider (Soja 79). However, for Rika, the kitchen becomes a space not of confinement and oppression but that of a sensual and liberating sanctuary, as she redefines it from a site of obligation and domesticity.

The final act that confirms the transformative power of the kitchen is when Rika buys the new house with the location of the kitchen and size of the oven given preference over everything else. Once again, as the aroma of the sizzling butter permeates the new place, the kitchen is no longer a functional space meant to define either domesticity or body sizes. As Rika slows down, almost taking three days to cook the turkey to perfection, she creates a temporal pocket that moves away from the efficiency of readymade bento boxes, instant miso or ramen packs reclaiming not just space but also time. The turkey, like butter, also acts as a spatial disruptor. An object inherently alien and grotesquely large in a Japanese kitchen “disrupts [and] disorders” the rules associated with this secondspace (Soja 31). This transformative power of the Thirdspace changes Rika’s

outlook and forges new relationships as she moves from a marginalised, solitary individual to one who navigates this marginal space with confidence. Quoting from Bhabha, Soja writes that marginal spaces can transform into an “expanded and excentric site of experience and empowerment” (143). Thus, the final scene of the housewarming party breaks the stronghold of the society’s judgemental views as Rika invites her guests to share *her* ‘Thirdspace’, which is replete with *her* pleasure and in doing so takes agency to establish her identity.

Reclaiming bodily autonomy through food

As the domestic space of the kitchen in the *Butter* transforms, this reconfiguration can no longer be limited to the confines of Rika’s apartment. The act of ‘Thirling’ of her kitchen, which has now transformed from a place of depriving oneself to a place to savour and give in to desires, takes over the corporeal space of Rika herself. When the kitchen represents the ‘macrocosm’ of resistance and desire, Rika’s body in turn becomes the ‘microcosm’ where the political acts of resistance and desire are played out. The butter that sizzles and melts and permeates the air of the kitchen does not just invade Rika’s senses but also makes space within her body. When she gains weight, she begins to reject the surveillance of societal expectations. Rika’s physical transformation is thus an architectural extension of the kitchen itself. Through the simple act of eating a meal that is forbidden and restricted, Yuzuki constructs Rika’s body itself as a ‘Thirdspace’ body. In this Thirdspace, societal rules of appearance and obedience are dismantled as Rika engages in spatial disruption, reclaiming not just the sovereignty of place but also of her own self.

In *Butter*, Yuzuki demonstrates the stifling Japanese obsession with thin, female bodies through the vitriolic hate directed towards Manako Kajii. The misogynistic attitude towards her stems not

from her role in the death of three men but rather because she “weighed over 70 kilos” (Yuzuki 13). Rika’s daily food intake subconsciously adheres to the unwritten rules of food associated with women. She treats her hunger as a biological requirement and the meal she eats does not satisfy the senses. The convenience store bought onigiri washed down with bottled green tea is neither a meal to savour nor to linger over. She takes “care that her weight never exceed[s] 50 kilos” and while entertaining clients “she only touch[es] vegetables and soup” (Yuzuki 9). She is governed by the diet culture that dominates the perceived rules of the Secondspace. Rika’s visits to the convenience store culminate in buying “healthy foods like yoghurt, salad and harusame noodles” (Yuzuki 9). Her actions are maintained through Lefebvre’s ‘spatial practice’ of denial, where the lived space is governed by the rules “that govern the body... by rigorous self-monitoring and training” (Miller 8). Her body is an object that is ruled by punishing work culture, and one that seamlessly blends into the wider landscape of “contemporary Japanese society reinforc[ing] patriarchal stereotypes of Japanese femininity and male power” (Miller 8). Though Rika is conscious of these expectations, she is still an embodiment of the stereotypes as she notes, “in Japan, it’s thought that it’s beautiful to be thin. It’s better for your health, and clothes look more flattering on you that way” (Yuzuki 89). The “interest in the body [is] the most intimate of personal-and-political spaces” and consequently, Rika’s body becomes a symbolic space that represents the societal expectations of Japanese culture. (Soja 112).

Rika’s subsequent weight gain then disrupts the space much like the way butter did in her kitchen. Initially, this dismantling of the expected social codes is accompanied by extreme anxiety. She steps “on and off the scales repeatedly” (Yuzuki 82) as she is mockingly questioned about her weight gain. The exacting double standards regarding body are revealed fully when Rika’s boyfriend Makoto exclaims that “Men putting on weight is different from women” (Yuzuki 83).

But in the same breath he also acknowledges that her curvaceous body is alluring. Yuzuki calls out this prejudice when Rika points out that “Japanese women are required to be self-denying, hard-working and ascetic, and in the same breath, to be feminine, soft and caring towards men” (125). This spatial paradox disregards the sense of self as women are forced to choose between two opposing perspectives. However, Rika’s act of accepting the body becomes a political one. After initial displeasure at her weight gain wears off, Rika’s accepts and even admires the way her body glistens and gleams. Her focus shifts from how it appears to the society to how she feels about her body, comfortable and confident. When she equates taste with freedom “- the kind of freedom that could only be savoured alone”, she articulates the experience of being free in her own skin (Yuzuki 151). The “[h]egemonic power”, which according to Soja, “actively *produces and reproduces difference* as a key strategy to create and maintain modes of social and spatial division”, is subverted when Rika refuses to ‘reproduce’ and confine herself to the laws of the society (87). By embracing ‘taste’ as freedom, she commits a transgressive act of rejecting the social expectations of a thin body in turn rejecting the rules of the conceived Secondspace.

As her growing body no longer matches “the tantalizing ideal of a well-managed self”, Rika faces the same vitriol that was directed towards Kajii evidenced when a client berates her as she stands her ground against his unwanted attention (Bordo 201). However, instead of shrinking and disappearing, Rika holds “his icy, mocking gaze” and receives an apology the next morning in a “fearful-sounding text” (Yuzuki 119). With a newfound confidence, Rika rejects her older, small and docile body. She shifts from being an object of the male gaze to one who reclaims her worth through her growing appetite. Her act of taking up space becomes a means of discomfort for those around her as she observes that “people’s reactions were critical, even fearful” (Yuzuki 128). Her body literally expands the acceptable boundaries of the hegemonic Japanese society. As she

disregards the need for social acceptance, Rika engages in occupying “the spaces on the margins”, her body becoming a site of resistance where she deliberately forces the society around her to include rather than exclude, freeing her from the punishing lens of the Secondspace (Soja 99).

Rika’s marker of ultimate disruption of her ‘lived space’ is when “[s]he put her hand to her stomach, and tried to listen calmly to her own desires, to what her body wanted” (Yuzuki 447). As bell hooks claims, this action of Rika’s marks the beginning of “the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice [that pushes] against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination”, making the actual cooking and occupying the most domestic of spaces “a defiant political gesture” (as qtd in Soja 85). Through the chaotic, lived experiences that dominate “olfactory, tactile, or auditory” senses, Rika fractures the dominance of the ideological secondspace wherein she reclaims not her kitchen with confidence but also challenges the expected beauty standards (Westphal 122). Her weight gain is not only literal but also symbolic as she fills herself with power denied to women. As “her body [sinks] comfortably into the bed”, the kitchen becomes a site to reclaim bodily identity and establish personal autonomy, which is no longer governed by the societal gaze (Yuzuki 452).

Conclusion

Thus, Asako Yuzuki’s *Butter* moves away from merely being a crime novel to a critique of contemporary Japanese society and the standards it holds for women. Soja contends, “*Everything* comes together in the Thirdspace:...the real and the imagined, the knowable and the imaginable...mind and body...”(56). As Rika journeys from her sterile and calorie defined kitchen to a space of sensory abundance, she dismantles the patriarchal Panopticon gaze that police the female body and sees “appetite as transgressive” (Miller and Fuller 2). When Rika actively engages

in ‘polysensorial’ rituals of cooking, it changes her relationship with food, thirding not just her kitchen but also her body. Through her weight gain, she subverts the notions of gender and body expectations, defying the expected norms of femininity. Through the novel, Yuzuki proves that in a society that actively forces women to shrink literally, the most radical act can be to sit down and eat.

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