



# DECODING SPACE IN SHAHIR'S PARAVA: INTERPRETING PSYCHOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** Soubin Shahir's debut directorial masterpiece titled *Parava* is a poignant tale about two soul companions who embark on a journey to discover the nuances of life and to learn to negotiate with it in their search for happiness. The film unfolds in the rustic and squalid corners of the old town of Mattancherry with its cramped houses and narrow by lanes. This article, titled "Decoding Space in Shahir's *Parava*: Interpreting Psychology" aims to interpret the film *Parava* as an astute manifestation of the innate interlinking of an individual's expression of his/her inclinations and aspirations with the complexion of the space they occupy. Here, the theoretical framework of space psychology becomes aptly congruent to synthesise the portrayed transactions between the characters and their built and natural physical settings. Colours, configurations, and scales of the inhabited space are revealed to unconsciously mould and influence the senses and desires of its occupants. That is, the manner of utilizing a space and engaging in activities may be observed as responses to the identification of the structure of their environment which acts as the stimulus. The lyricism and melancholy that unfurls in every frame of *Parava* also get vividly reflected in this space where the action unfurls.

**INDEX TERMS:** *Parava*, space, psychology, unconscious, expression, stimuli, response

## I. INTRODUCTION

*Parava*, a much-acclaimed 2017 Malayalam film which marks the directorial debut of the screen alchemist Soubin Shahir, can lucidly be condensed as an enigmatic capturing of the poignance of life that unfolds in the vibrant and bustling locale of Mattancherry in Kochi – an exuberant melting pot that amalgamates myriad arts, cultures and tastes into a coherent whole. The film exudes the transparent simplicity of this exclusive space while unveiling the tale of bosom companions, Haseeb and Irshad, two teenagers struggling to survive blossoming hormones and academic challenges, and whose sole passion lies in the relatively uncharted terrain of pigeon racing. *Parava* is intricately designed like a jacquard fabric and is striking in its originality. The incisive film is copious in its layers and identifies beauty in the remarkable finesse of ordinary life.

Shahir's experimental venture, *Parava*, is realistic in tone and traverses through the comparatively unexplored horizons and aesthetics of pigeon flying, a prevalent sport in the rustic borough of Mattancherry. It is a swarming small town in Kochi renowned earlier for spices and comprises of settlers from numerous corners of the country and abroad. The film grants a bird's-eye-view of the culture of Mattancherry and flaunts the intimate interlacing of the life of its people with the ethos of the space. Here, pigeon flying and kite running are significant games conducted with zest, and are indispensable and germane to the coterie. In formally held tournaments, pairs of pigeons representing the contestants compete to fly for the longest span. The Malayalam word 'parava' translates as 'bird', and the novel film narrates the life of aspiring contestants who strive to emerge victorious in one such tournament.

The film presents events, situations and emotions, both tender and poignant, through the gaze of two zealous boys who keep it mesmerising and buoyant. Through them, we get acquainted with a group of five men, headed by Imran who gets killed in a gang rivalry, in turn shattering their close friendship. The multi-layered tale weaves around two interlinked segments, that make up its elaborate course. Through two groups, their families and rivals, the film divulges the setting, interests and culture of the portrayed region. In the film, social concerns of gender segregation and education of girl children are also touched upon with no trace of misogyny. The placing of believable and well-rounded characters in realistically crafted predicaments adds to the radiance of the film.

This paper, titled “Decoding Space in Shahir’s *Parava*: Interpreting Psychology” attempts to analyse how *Parava* serves to astutely reveal how the expression of one’s inclinations, affinities, aspirations and desires are unconsciously reigned by the complexion of the space they inhabit. Here, the concept of space psychology emerges as an apt theoretical framework for analysing and understanding the depicted interactions among the characters and the spaces they occupy. Proportions, colours, scales, configurations, and acoustics of their space are revealed to address and influence the manifestation of their deeds, enjoyments and senses, thus, generating a specific spectrum of interests, practices and feelings in them. That is, the manner of utilizing space and engaging in activities may be observed to take shape from the innate structure of their given environment.

## II. PARAVA: AN OVERVIEW

*Parava* transpires in the narrow by lanes and cramped indoors of the residential area of Mattancherry. The 2017 Malayalam drama film is the debut directorial venture of the accomplished actor, Soubin Shahir. The exhilarating film is co-scripted by Muneer Ali and Shahir (*firstpost.com*). The screenplay of the film is also written by Shahir in a non-linear style with flashbacks and other fascinating cinematic devices. The film has a stellar cast comprising of Govind V. Pai, Amal Shah, Siddique, Shane Nigam and Arjun Ashokan (*behindwoods.com*). The highlight of the film includes an extended cameo appearance by the renowned actor Dulquer Salmaan. Sreenath Bhasi and Shahir appear on screen as antagonists, essaying their roles to perfection.

Shyju Unni and Anwar Rasheed have co-produced the compelling film under the production houses of *The Movie Club* and *Anwar Rasheed Entertainment*. The music director of *Parava* is Rex Vijayan and cinematography is done by Little Swayamp (*thehindu.com*). At moments their works combine to grant an unpredictable and surreal effect to the film.

Each and every scene in *Parava* is assiduously shot and scripted. The film artfully captures the essence of Mattancherry through the use of costumes, accent, tone and body language of the characters. The characters of Haseeb and Irshad are rich in the nuances of subtle characterisation which enhance the cohesive nature of the narrative. Also, the scenes of pigeon flying and kite running offer interesting imageries and lend visual novelty to the film. They also give the cinematographer a wider scope to explore different camera techniques and angles. According to the crew, the pigeons portrayed in the film were groomed for almost a year and were trained in a closed setup in the terrace of a house in the film location (*onmanorama.com*).

## III. PSYCHOLOGY OF SPACE: REVIEW CONCEPT

‘Space Psychology’ or ‘Psychology of space’ can coherently be defined as “the study of human relations and behaviours within the context of the built and natural environments” (*archdaily.com*). Dave Alan Kopec, a spatial psychologist and professor of Design and Architecture based in San Diego, conspicuously explicates the direct and profound impact of the geometry and structure of an individual’s living space on his/her subconscious, which make salient contributions to the moulding and alignment of their perceptions, aspirations and emotions by influencing those special parts of the brain attuned to such dimensions.

The theoretical framework of psychology of Space revolves around decoding the transactions that take place between people and their environment. The influence of such transactions on individuals in terms of their experiences and behaviour are analysed here. In space psychology, “space” is indicative of both built and natural settings, including houses, public spaces, workplaces, neighbourhood and wilderness. When a person or a cluster of people are expected to spend a long period of their lives in a particular environment, the configuration, design, proclivities and idiosyncrasies of that space hold high

feasibility to mould the psychological dispositions of its occupants. The intermingling and mutual influence of space on people and vice versa, thus, structure the foundation for the emergence of the literary as well as architectural theory of space psychology or environmental psychology. The concept lays heavy focus on the range of practices and feelings which space generates in its inhabitants depending on proportions, colours, scales and so on that distinctly characterise a particular area.

Most psychologists of space attempts to understand the links between spatial stimuli and the consequential human responses. An individual's range of awareness, adaptation, and selectiveness regarding his/her special setting are observed to reach generalizations. The interaction with social spaces, that is, the determination and grasping of the concepts of personal space, privacy and crowding, that affects every day behaviour as well as the processes of learning, working and living in a specific residence while belonging to a community are also studied by space psychologists. Environmental psychology, therefore, could essentially be explained as a kind of behavioural science which aims to investigate, with an intention toward improving the interrelationships that exists between human behaviour and physical environment.

Although space psychology is a comparatively novel branch of multidisciplinary research - recognized as a proper field of study since the 1960s - some of its basic tenets have been integral parts of studies involving psychology. The roots of its modern form can be traced to the 20th century, with the researchers as Egon Brunswik and Kurt Lewin. Brunswik pointed out the necessity in focus on the environment of an organism to the same extend as focusing on the very organism. Lewin also emphasized on the essentiality in understanding environment to determine behavioural patterns of individuals. (*annualreview.com*) The 1940s as well as the 1950s witnessed a steady increase in the importance placed on researches regarding psychological processes based on interactions with the physical surroundings. The earlier studies were largely focused on human relations with their built spaces, and were primarily categorized as studies in the subject of architectural psychology. The 1960s, however, was indeed a time of growth in societal awareness. It was during when people started to become more interested and concerned with human psychology in relation to living spaces. Emotional connection and related aspects of the natural settings attracted attention. The result was the scientific revelation of the environmental influences on individuals, both developmentally and microgenetically, through the information that gets generated based on that specific environment and in turn transmitted to the minds of its inhabitants (*decoholic.org*).

Thus, space, beyond being a mere silent backdrop to human actions, proves to be an integral part of the life of its occupants. Also, considering the huge investments made by the society towards bettering the physical environment and the enormous negative impact on nature due to misuse of natural resources, the theory of psychology of space plays a pivotal role in enhancing both environmental and human welfare. However, because of its multiple facets and relatively recent emergence, space psychology continues to evolve. Therefore, the plurality of definitions of the concept is a vivid reflection of its vastness and expanding nature, as well as its potential for creative application relating to the identification of the reciprocal relationship between spaces and mankind.

#### **IV. EXPLORING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SPACE IN SHAHIR'S *PARAVA***

The essence of Soubin Shahir's *Parava* is deeply concentrated in the depiction of the spaces in Mattancherry defined by its congested, confining and closely packed houses, alleys and pathways. It is this insular space that the director mostly sets as the backdrop for the unfurling of the characters and events manifested in the film. Mattancherry is a land placed on a distinctive pedestal for its own idiosyncratic sense of reality, culture, customs, ideas and even dialect. Here, life is closely woven around the community and its unique ideology; life usually gains sagacity and takes shape, outside the restrictive spaces of houses and classrooms, in the open and unconfining playfields. In this exclusive space of Mattancherry, the members rarely hope and desire to migrate or move out of the closely knit dynamics of the society.

It is in this context that the theoretical framework of space psychology gains prominence in deciphering the ideology behind the dichotomic portrayal of space in *Parava*. As a multidisciplinary subfield of behavioural science, space psychology attempts to decode the systematic interaction and

relationship between behavioural modifications depending on physical spaces. The spaces, cramped and narrow or wide and boundless, act as stimuli which fetch contrasting responses from individuals.

In *Parava*, the viewers tend to witness the uncoiling of distressing, agonizing, bitter and excruciating events and action sequences mostly within the confines of incarcerating spaces. The limitations and restrictions that cause pain according to the psyche of the characters get mirrored in the enclosed and trapping spaces they are pictured in. This is evident in the scenes where the character of Shane turns psychotic due to his helplessness and inability to avenge his patron and confidante, Imran, and isolates himself in his cramped room with no interactions with family and friends. Shane's father's profound pain over his son's plaintive and miserable state is also revealed only inside the four walls of his home. Similarly, Surumi's haplessness and woeful condition in being a child bride is also portrayed while she is restrained within the crowded room of her husband's house.

But, away from the cramped and impeding indoors and the slim by lanes, the protagonists, Haseeb and Irshad, turn the happiest and contented under the vastness of the sky while immersing themselves in pigeon flying and kite running in their house terraces. It is in these open spaces that the duo discovers their passions and interests. Choreographer Swayamp's camera navigates over the terraces, emulating the pigeons, taking the viewers with it. It captures the delight expressed by the characters while being outside the restricting insides of buildings. Consciously or unconsciously, the director exposes the underlying psychology of space that impacts the human mind through the shift in the general mood of the characters while occupying starkly different spaces – the cramped and limiting rooms juxtaposed against the expanse of the boundless sky.

It may rightfully be argued that it is the innate desire of human mind to escape the bleak, colourless and narrow spaces that inadvertently suffocate and fetter one's unconscious by desisting the acceptance of openness and positivity that gets unknowingly evinced through the film. Kite running and pigeon flying are activities prescribed for vast open areas which enable one to let loose and explore life. The affinity of the characters in the film towards such games may thus be external manifestations of their profound need and aspiration to escape the restraining space into the wide and bright vastness of the sky which metaphorically represent freedom and limitlessness. This idea is reiterated in the film through the close friendship and awesome dynamics that foster the intimacy between the gang of Imran and Shane whose time were mostly spent in the playgrounds engaging in sprightly sports and adventurous pastimes outside the constraining spaces of closed buildings.

Also, it is worth noting how the dichotomy in the emotions and aspirations aroused by contrasting spaces - open and closed - gets metaphorically articulated through the changed behaviour of Shane throughout the course of the film. He is portrayed as disconsolate and dejected in the start of the film when he has confined himself to the closed space. However, it is revealed as to how he used to be a spirited boy and an immensely talented cricket player while he was in a pleasant state of mind and enjoyed wandering with friends and spent time on playgrounds. Again, towards the close of the film when he regains his vigour and buoyance, Shane unshackles himself from the confined of his congested room to appreciate and savour the abounding vastness of the world.

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