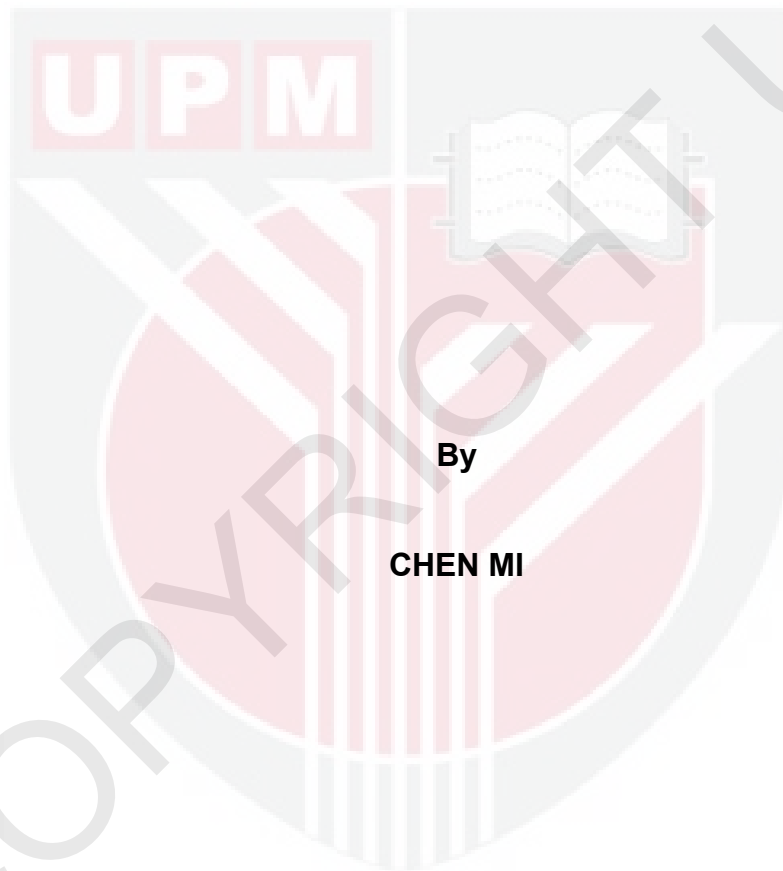




**FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND SPATIAL DISPLACEMENT IN SELECTED
COMING-OF-AGE NOVELS BY JOYCE CAROL OATES**



By

CHEN MI

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

August 2024

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fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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CHEN MI

August 2024

Chairman : Associate Professor Noritah binti Omar, PhD
Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

The exploration of female subjectivity within the framework of spatial displacement presents significant challenges in literary studies, especially when analyzing the coming-of-age novels of American author Joyce Carol Oates. The research in this field is relatively insufficient, so further academic attention is needed. As one of the most prolific contemporary American writers, Joyce Carol Oates's work spans over half a century, offering profound insights into identity issues in complex environments. This study conducts a textual analysis of four selected coming-of-age novels by Oates—*Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, *I'll Take You There*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, and *Mudwoman*—to investigate the challenges faced by female characters in their environments and how they navigate these challenges through spatial interactions. The primary challenges these women face include social oppression, gender inequality, identity crises, and the struggle to find self-definition within multiple spaces. Their journeys of growth and self-discovery are often accompanied by spatial displacement and conflicts with societal

norms as they contend with external pressures and internal conflicts. These female characters ultimately overcome these challenges through interactions within physical, social, and mental spaces, gradually establishing their subjectivity and identity. The study has three objectives: first, to examine how changes in physical space trigger crises and influence the development of female subjectivity; second, to investigate how interactions within expanded social spaces, particularly heterotopias, affect women's confrontation with and resistance to societal discipline; and third, to analyze how epiphanies and psychological development within mental spaces contribute to the construction and expression of female subjectivity. This research constructs a theoretical framework by synthesizing spatial theories from Lefebvre, with his triadic conceptualization of space, and Foucault, with his insights into heterotopia and power. This framework informs the analysis of the interconnection between spatial displacement and female subjectivity, highlighting female protagonists' challenges and how these spatial experiences influence their growth and self-discovery. The significance of this study lies in its comprehensive approach to dissecting the spatial elements within Oates's coming-of-age novels, a perspective that previous research has often overlooked. The findings reveal that spatial displacement is a critical element in subjectivity construction, influencing the development of female subjectivity and challenging traditional constructions of female identity. The findings of this study not only have far-reaching implications for literary analysis and provide new perspectives for multidisciplinary dialogue on space, gender, and subjectivity. This research method can be widely applied to other academic contexts, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how

space influences identity formation and subjectivity development, thus fostering a more diverse and enriched interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: Female Subjectivity, Space, Coming of Age, Joyce Carol Oates

SDG: GOAL 4: Quality Education, GOAL 5: Gender Equality, GOAL 10: Reduced Inequalities



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**SUBJEKTIVITI WANITA DAN PERALIHAN RUANG DALAM NOVEL
PEMBENTUKAN JATI DIRI TERPILIH KARYA JOYCE CAROL OATES**

Oleh

CHEN MI

Ogos 2024

Pengerusi : Profesor Madya Noritah binti Omar, PhD
Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi

Eksplorasi subjektiviti wanita dalam kerangka peralihan ruang memberikan cabaran yang ketara dalam kajian sastera, terutamanya apabila menganalisis novel pembentukan jati diri karya penulis Amerika, Joyce Carol Oates. Penyelidikan dalam bidang ini agak kurang mencukupi, justeru perhatian akademik yang lebih lanjut diperlukan. Sebagai salah seorang penulis Amerika kontemporari yang paling prolifik, karya Joyce Carol Oates merangkumi lebih setengah abad, menawarkan pandangan mendalam mengenai isu identiti dalam persekitaran yang kompleks. Kajian ini melakukan analisis teks terhadap empat novel pembentukan jati diri karya Oates—*Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, *I'll Take You There*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, dan *Mudwoman*—untuk menyelidik cabaran yang dihadapi oleh watak-watak wanita dalam persekitaran mereka dan bagaimana mereka mengatasi cabaran ini melalui interaksi ruang. Cabaran utama yang dihadapi oleh wanita-wanita ini termasuk penindasan sosial, ketidaksamaan jantina, krisis identiti, dan perjuangan untuk mencari definisi diri dalam pelbagai ruang. Perjalanan

mereka menuju kematangan dan penemuan diri sering disertai dengan peralihan ruang dan konflik dengan norma masyarakat kerana mereka menghadapi tekanan luar dan konflik dalaman. Watak-watak wanita ini akhirnya mengatasi cabaran ini melalui interaksi dalam ruang fizikal, sosial, dan mental, secara beransur-ansur membina subjektiviti dan identiti mereka. Kajian ini mempunyai tiga objektif: pertama, untuk mengkaji bagaimana perubahan dalam ruang fizikal mencetuskan krisis dan mempengaruhi perkembangan subjektiviti wanita; kedua, untuk menyelidik bagaimana interaksi dalam ruang sosial yang diperluaskan, terutamanya heterotopia, mempengaruhi konfrontasi wanita terhadap dan penentangan terhadap disiplin sosial; dan ketiga, untuk menganalisis bagaimana epifani dan perkembangan psikologi dalam ruang mental menyumbang kepada pembinaan dan ekspresi subjektiviti wanita. Penyelidikan ini membina kerangka teori dengan mensintesis teori ruang Lefebvre, dengan konsep triadik ruangnya, dan Foucault, dengan wawasannya tentang heterotopia dan kuasa. Kerangka ini memandu analisis tentang kaitan antara peralihan ruang dan subjektiviti wanita, menyoroti cabaran yang dihadapi oleh protagonis wanita dan bagaimana pengalaman ruang ini mempengaruhi pertumbuhan dan penemuan diri mereka. Kepentingan kajian ini terletak pada pendekatannya yang komprehensif untuk mengupas elemen ruang dalam novel pembentukan jati diri karya Oates, satu perspektif yang sering diabaikan oleh kajian terdahulu. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa peralihan ruang adalah elemen penting dalam pembentukan subjektiviti, yang mempengaruhi perkembangan subjektiviti wanita dan mencabar konstruk identiti wanita yang tradisional. Penemuan kajian ini bukan sahaja mempunyai implikasi yang

meluas untuk analisis sastera tetapi juga memberikan perspektif baharu untuk dialog multidisiplin mengenai ruang, jantina, dan subjektiviti. Kaedah penyelidikan ini boleh digunakan secara meluas dalam konteks akademik lain, menawarkan pemahaman yang lebih menyeluruh tentang bagaimana ruang mempengaruhi pembentukan identiti dan perkembangan subjektiviti, dengan itu memperkayakan dan mempelbagaikan kajian antara disiplin.

Kata Kunci: Subjektiviti Perempuan, ruang, Kemunculan Usia, Joyce Carol Oates

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Noritah binti Omar, PhD

Associate Professor
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Chairman)

Zainor Izat binti Zainal, PhD

Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

Mohammad Ewan bin Awang, PhD

Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
(Member)

ZALILAH MOHD SHARIFF, PhD

Professor and Dean
School of Graduate Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date: 13 January 2025

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Oates	Joyce Carol Oates
Lefebvre	Henry Lefebvre
Foucault	Michael Foucault
Foxfire	Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I like writing in the adolescent voice. I find it such a fascinating time in a girl's life. That was a time of solitude and thinking and adventure for me. I feel very close to it. I think I'm still that age, to tell the truth.

-----Meet the author: Joyce Carol Oates (*Consiglio*, 1998, p. 7)

Assigned to the feminine sphere were immediate experience, the reproduction of life, pleasure and pain, the earth, and the abyss below. Patriarchal power was inevitably accompanied by the imposition of a law of signs upon nature through writing, through inscriptions - through stone. The shift from a maternal principle to the rule of paternity implied the establishment of a specific mental and social space.

-----*The Production of Space*(Lefebvre, 1991, p. 243)

1.1 Background of the Study

Joyce Carol Oates is one of the most prolific contemporary American women writers whose work covers a wide range of subjects, including the important issues of space and growing up. Oates's childhood and adolescence were profoundly influenced by her family, community, and city environment, which is often reflected in her work. Her novels often explore the dynamics of small-town life, family relationships, and city communities, all of which were spaces she experienced firsthand while growing up. As Oates entered college and pursued a degree in literature, she began to make a name for herself in the literary field. The interplay between her upbringing and the academic space is also reflected in her work. Her intellectual pursuits and literary endeavours become important elements of female subjectivity and autonomy in her novels,

and these elements further reflect her growth and development in different spaces.

Oates's literary career spans multiple periods, from the 1960s to the 21st century. In the process, her work has evolved from exploring survival issues in social and individual spaces to profound themes of female subjectivity and resistance. Oates's work reflects her upbringing and sensitivity to different spaces and environments. Joyce Carol Oates's literary work is not merely an observation of contemporary American society and the status of women but a coming-of-age journey full of depth and complexity. Through her novels, she explores the impact of space, family, school, and work environments on individual and female subjectivity, presenting readers with a rich and multidimensional coming-of-age novel.

A writer with Balzacian ambitions, Oates has been prolific in dissecting and illuminating the complex interplay between space and female subjectivity. Her coming-of-age novels are more than narratives; they are profound studies of the metamorphoses her female characters undergo in brutal environments. These environments, or spaces, are multifaceted - from the physical to the psychological - and help shape her characters' identities and consciousness. In Oates's literary world, space is not a passive backdrop but a dynamic and active force intricately woven into the fabric of her narratives. It is a vessel that carries cultural, social, and historical narratives that directly affect the lives of her characters. Oates's meticulous descriptions of space reflect her deep understanding of its critical role in shaping human behaviour and social norms.

American geography has always been an important background for Oates's work. According to Frank, "successful spatial form fiction must create its meaning from the techniques of the novel and make the structural factors assume that obligation" (Frank, 1945, p. 62). The complex spatial form has allowed critics to detect the influence of various authors in Oates's American landscape paintings: the setting of her early auctions in upstate New York often parallels Faulkner's Yoknapata County (Creighton, 1979, p. 17); her descriptions of inner-city working-class life have often been compared to Dreiser (Farrant, 1992, p. 128); her approach to the spirit of place as a spiritual landscape has been compared to DH Lawrence (Waller, 1979, p. 29). Oates emphasizes the differences in the spread and influence of spatial ideas in different geographical locations in the United States. Her work has always featured space and place, which "tends to describe the North and often writes about urban areas." (Oates, 1980, p. 14). Oates expressed her concerns about regional issues in an interview:

I want to highlight the differences between different geographical regions of the United States. American society is that one must be careful because there are significant differences between different parts of the United States. We are a big country, not correct to Boston, New York, Montana, Detroit, or Louisiana. However, I write about the north and often write about urban areas. I am very interested in the relationship between individuals and society, how social trends affect individuals, how they affect their private lives, their religious family life, etc. (Oates, 1982, p. 13)

The spatial dimensions of Oates's work reflect her deep-seated preoccupation with the social fabric of American society. Her detailed depictions of various

geographical locations across the United States—from the rural landscapes of upstate New York to the bustling streets of urban centres—serve as more than mere backdrops; they are rich portraits of the American experience, capturing its inherent contradictions and complexities. These spaces are full of cultural, historical, and social significance, each adding a different level of meaning to her writing and the lives of her characters. Just as London in literature is to Dickens, Paris to Balzac, and Dublin to Joyce, space in Oates's work—whether they are rural towns in upstate New York or the city's bustling streets—are more than places where stories take place. They are living entities intimately connected to the characters' fate, psychological state, and social interactions. In Oates's work, space becomes a medium for cultural expression, revealing individual states of mind and exploring social relationships.

Oates's American society is a heterotopia. It is a restless, turbulent “wonderland” full of conflicting social and economic forces, ideological contradictions, and elusive and often violent vitality. The work of Oates covers many modern and contemporary American spaces: cities, families, apartments, graves, hospitals, schools, and cars. In a sense, these spaces deviate from their original function and become heterotopia. These distorted or abused powers in a particular space often relate to religion, family relations, and gender.

In the 1960s, when Oates experienced a major upheaval in American society, she was not merely describing social upheaval but exploring the impact of space on the individual and society. Her work is a profound exploration of

space, especially in terms of the condition of women in American society. Oates has presented women's experiences in different spaces throughout her writing career. She paints a diverse picture of women's existence, in which the female character gradually shifts from empty escapism to an active struggle against fate and circumstance. This transformation is a reflection of social upheaval and the shaping of individual character and behaviour by space. In addition to revealing the harm suffered by women in a patriarchal society, Oates also analyses the weaknesses and limitations of the female group in different spaces. Through her works, she intends to contribute to awakening women's subjectivity so that they can better understand their roles and values in specific spaces. Oates's work became an important part of women's literary exploration of space and self-knowledge, continuing a tradition that began with Virginia Woolf. During this period, although Oates shifted from consciously writing predominantly about men to predominantly about women's roles, her works also explored different spaces, showing women's struggles and growth in these spaces. Her literary works become a unique space that reflects the interaction between society and the individual in a particular moment and place. Through her work, we can gain a deeper understanding of the impact of space on individuals and society and how women show resistance and epiphany in different spaces.

In the 1970s, Oates's writing underwent an important transitional period, also known as exploring space. She began to question the norms of mainstream literature and attempted to break out of these constraints, which can be seen as a search for innovation in literary space. Her collection of short stories,

Marriage and Infidelity (1972), can be seen as an expression of her approval of and opposition to mainstream literature. In the novels of this period, the female characters, though still subjected to different degrees of blows, are no longer at the mercy of others. They are unwilling to sink into the marriage and begin to come out of the closed space with a positive attitude towards life to become awakened women. The novels of this period are optimistic, suggesting that they are beginning to remove the constraints of gender roles, which can also be seen as an exploration of the quest for freedom and equality in social space. Despite Oates's reservations about feminism, the momentum of her writing undoubtedly gave her the spiritual impetus to recognize and position herself. The female characters in her works are no longer submissive, letting go, but pursuing a more active life, reflecting women's search for freedom in different spaces. By scrutinizing Oates's masterpieces of this period, *Wonderland* (1970) and *Do With Me What You Will* (1973), we can also see the change process in her thinking and her exploration of literary space. By analyzing *Childwold* (1976), we can find the changes in Oates's style, which also manifests her feminist sensitivity, showing that she is constantly thinking and innovating on the spatial and emotional level. Oates's works injected new vigour and thought into the literary space during this period and reflected the evolving and awakening role of women in different spaces.

During the 1980s, Oates's feminist consciousness developed rapidly, and her increased contact with feminists such as Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert made her aware of the dangers of sexism. Not only did Oates publicly state her feminist stance, but she also actively opposed sexist speech by joining

rewriting teams and aligning herself with feminist literature. Her works such as *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982), *Solstice* (1985), *Maria: A Life* (1986), and *You Must Remember This* (1987)–reflect her concern with the issue of sexism in different spaces as well as her desire to express women’s awakening and resistance through the literary space.

In the 1990s, Oates explored the theme of female subjectivity and resistance more deeply, such as *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993). She angrily exposed the social reality of discrimination against women and, at the same time, depicted women’s tenacious resistance. Oates’s works of this period can be regarded as a profound reflection on women’s status and self-perception in the social space and an exploration of women’s self-expression and resistance in different social environments. By studying Oates’s novels after the 1990s, we can more accurately reflect contemporary American women’s feminist consciousness and self-consciousness. These women are independent, self-confident, enterprising, and have strong autonomy, and their personalities are fully expressed. Oates’s works in this period reflect the maturity of modern women in the social space and the growth of their self-awareness, as well as their struggle to realize their rights and goals. It also profoundly explores gender relations and female subjectivity in social and individual space.

In the 21st century, Oates’s novels began to gradually reflect the theme of female independence and progress, which can also be seen as an exploration of space. Her works such as *I’ll Take You There* (2002), *Missing Mom* (2005),

The Gravedigger's Daughter (2007), *Little Bird of Heaven* (2009) and *Mudwoman* (2012) all deeply reflect women's awakening and autonomy. In this period, female characters are portrayed as modern individuals who show independence, confidence, initiative and autonomy. This individuality was fully expressed, primarily through intellectual pursuits transcending their limitations and active participation in art creation. It is worth mentioning that Oates does not completely portray women as perfect characters. Still, she focuses on women's shortcomings and flaws, revealing the confusion and problems modern women face. As a female writer, Oates paid special attention to American women, especially young girls. Many of her novels are semi-autobiographical, using herself, her mother and her grandmother as prototypes. She vividly depicts the female characters' feelings and reactions, presenting a complex and rich space where women shape their way of being and self-perception. This reflects the evolution of gender relations and the continuous exploration of female subjectivity in different spaces.

After the 1990s, Oates's works reflect her long-term literary exploration and intellectual maturity. Her views and themes became more profound, and her understanding of female subjectivity became clearer. Oates's works in this period show her deep insight into women and her concern for women's awakening. The female characters in this period are portrayed as representatives of modern women who are independent, self-confident, active and autonomous. These female characters transcend their limitations through intellectual pursuit and social participation, and this image accurately reflects the self-consciousness of contemporary American women. Oates not only

depicts a physical space but also constructs a complex space closely related to the psychological and social status of the female characters. In her coming-of-age novels, space is the backdrop and core of female subjectivity and identity. This paves the way for my research questions and enables me to explore the following aspects in greater depth:

In Oates's works, physical spaces are not only where the stories take place; they symbolize the transformation of the female characters' living environment, social status and inner world. Displacements in physical space, such as from a repressive domestic environment to an open one, are often accompanied by changes in the female characters' perceptions, sometimes emancipatory, sometimes reflective of deeper dilemmas and conflicts. Oates's female characters are often expanding and shifting space.

My study focuses on how they find themselves amid space displacements and how these changes affect their behaviours and inner worlds. Oates's detailed portrayal of the female psyche makes me delve deeper into their inner worlds - their fears, hopes, conflicts and dreams. These mental spaces are key to understanding the motivations for their behaviour and developing their subjectivity. How female subjectivity is constructed and expressed in the mental spaces in Oates's coming-of-age novel is particularly important. Oates reveals how the three dimensions of the physical, social, and mental space are intertwined to influence the self-perceptions and behavioural patterns of the female characters and how these interactions form the core of female subjectivity.

In exploring female subjectivity, Oates draws not only on physical space to show the dilemmas and struggles of her female characters but also on the social and mental dimensions of these spaces to provide insight into the inner world of women. In her coming-of-age novels, space is no longer a static background but a dynamic, living thing that participates in the storytelling, influences the characters' actions and decisions, and shapes their personalities and destinies. Oates's multidimensional portrayal of space enriches the narrative techniques of literature and provides us with a complex framework to understand female subjectivity, social status, and cultural identity. Therefore, Oates's work allows us to understand the importance of space in shaping female subjectivity and how women find, construct, and express their subjectivity in spatial displacement.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Previous research on Joyce Carol Oates's literature has predominantly concentrated on themes such as gender, identity, and social dynamics, frequently emphasising the temporal dimensions of her narratives. Some scholars argue that Oates's works are rich in their depictions of women marginalised within patriarchal societies, particularly in the context of violence and trauma (Cologne-Brookes, 2005). Other studies focus on how Oates constructs her characters' inner psychology and social identity through temporal cues, thereby revealing the intricate relationship between female identity and traumatic memory (Chatterjee, 2009). However, these analyses tend to focus on the growth, transformation, and awakening of female

characters from a temporal perspective, overlooking the significant role that space may play in these processes.

However, space in Oates's novels is not merely a passive backdrop but a dynamic and vital force that interacts with the plot, character development, and social relationships. Throughout literary history, the temporal dimension has received considerable attention, while the spatial dimension is often overlooked. As Foucault noted, "Space is perceived as dead, fixed, non-dialectical, and still, whereas time is rich, productive, alive, and dialectical" (Foucault, 1980b, p. 70). This temporal bias has led to a prevailing academic perspective that regards space as a static background that passively participates in narrative construction. Yet in Oates's works, particularly in her coming-of-age novels, space is not simply a passive element; it actively shapes and influences the characters' growth through interaction with them.

Research has shown that space plays a critical role in growth; however, in traditional coming-of-age novels, spatial "adventures" often serve merely as formal requirements, ultimately becoming subordinate to time. In modern American coming-of-age novels, this spatial adventure evolves into a conscious expression of content (Ning & Lv, 2012, p. 60). The "drifting" through external space symbolizes the exploration of one's inner self, while the "wandering" through external spaces reflects the psychological journey encountered during adolescence. This rich spatial representation symbolizes the various confusions and crises faced during growth. The transformations and uncertainties of space infuse modern American narratives of "growing up"

with ambiguity and the unknown, simultaneously providing broader interpretative possibilities for discussions of growth.

Nevertheless, existing studies have predominantly concentrated on the temporal dimension within coming-of-age novels (Millard, 2007; Quintana-Vallejo, 2020; Šnircová, 2018), neglecting the crucial role of space. The manifestation of growth is not solely limited to changes in age but also involves the dynamic processes individuals exhibit through spatial practices and representations. This spatial activity intimately connects the individual's growth process with their living environment, ultimately marking their subjectivity through the surrounding world. Through spatial displacement, protagonists in coming-of-age stories enact their psychological growth within open social contexts, particularly in how space interacts with the construction of subjectivity, identity formation, and the psychological and emotional changes throughout the growth process. This knowledge gap indicates that an in-depth analysis of space's role in coming-of-age novels can reveal the complexities of the growth process and provide new insights into understanding space's functions in identity formation and self-discovery.

Bakhtin once said: "Space is not a static background and a stereotyped entity once and for all, but a growing whole, an initiation event." (Holquist, 2003). It can be argued that human origins are closely related to space. The application of spatial theory has fundamentally altered previous research methodologies, shifting the focus toward studying space in literature and the cultural, identity, power, and spiritual implications represented through spatial metaphors.

Space is regarded as a confluence of various social factors, transitioning from scientific inquiries to social space studies. It emphasizes social interpretations of space and highlights the fusion of space and society due to modernity. In literature work, space plays an essential role, manifesting not only the external metaphors of social environments but also the characters' inner worlds. Oates's novels centre on the relentless struggles of characters against external environments, utilizing space as a domain to unveil the survival of women in distress and their resistance against fate. The characters' destinies are closely intertwined with space development, forming an implicit understanding.

Some scholars have previously examined Oates's works through the lens of spatial theory (Araújo, 2006; Bryla, 2017; Rastogi & Chatterjee, 2020; Wang, 2008). While these studies explore the spatial dimensions of Oates's works from various perspectives, they predominantly focus on violence, conflict, marginal geography, and familial relationships, examining the connections between space and violence, social structures, families, or geography. However, existing research lacks a systematic analysis of how space interacts with female subjectivity and identity formation in Oates's coming-of-age novels. The deficiency in this area suggests that space in Oates's works is not merely a site of violence and conflict; it plays a crucial role in shaping women's growth. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the interaction between space and female growth, particularly represented in coming-of-age novels, is an important direction to address this gap.

Other scholars have primarily approached Joyce Carol Oates's works from feminist, ecological, violence-related, and biographical perspectives (Agu & Aillaud, 2024; Anand & Chatterjee, 2022; Barrow, 2022; Bryla, 2022), but few examining her works from the perspective of coming-of-age. Although Oates's novels can be interpreted on multiple levels, her depictions of character growth, especially that of women, also warrant thorough investigation. Since the 1980s, Oates has recognized her responsibility as a female writer to voice women's experiences. Many of her 1990s and early 2000s novels focus on suffering women (Cologne-Brookes, 2005, p. 184). She excels at portraying women's everyday lives and subtle psychological states, illustrating their journeys as they explore and resist. Many of Oates's novels carry semi-autobiographical elements, with characters often based on her own experiences and those of her mother and grandmother (Creighton, 1992, p. 54). These characters reflect the growth journeys of women throughout their lives. Therefore, investigating female subjectivity in Oates's coming-of-age novels holds significant importance. This topic is novel and challenging and provides a rich research space for a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the formation of female identity.

While existing research has deeply explored the gender narratives in Oates's works, it has not sufficiently excavated the core role of space in constructing female subjectivity. This study fills a crucial gap in Oates's scholarship by introducing spatial theory. It provides new perspectives for understanding the complexities of female character growth, particularly how space shapes identity and facilitates self-discovery. This research inspires spatial literary

analysis and provides deeper insights into Oates's four coming-of-age novels: *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, *I'll Take You There*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, and *Mudwoman*.

Existing studies on *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* have explored the novel from diverse perspectives, including identity formation, community dynamics, feminist transgression, and psychological fragmentation. Some research analyzes the turbulent journey of adolescent identity within the narrative (Ghodake, 2016), while others emphasize the empowering potential and risks of all-girl communities (Aldrich, 2016). Another study offers insights into women's relationship with urban spaces, framing the gang's practices as challenging traditional norms of femininity and consumer culture (Persellin, 1998). Research also interprets the narrative as a critique of systemic oppression through the lens of feminist revenge (Wiggins, 2012), while another analysis examines nostalgia's role in reconstructing personal and familial identity (Hillsburg, 2014). Psychological studies have delved into the fragmented identities of the characters, interpreting them as responses to trauma through mechanisms of mental adaptation and defence (Brett, 2000).

Although these studies offer valuable insights into themes of gender, trauma, community, and psychological development, they remain primarily focused on temporal aspects and social dynamics. While space has been touched upon, especially regarding marginality, urban environments, and community spaces, the novel's interaction between space and female subjectivity has not been

systematically explored. This leaves a gap in understanding how spatial dynamics influence the characters' identity formation and growth.

Previous studies of *I'll Take You There* have explored key aspects of identity formation, adolescence, and the protagonist's navigation through societal constraints. One sociological analysis emphasizes the protagonist's journey through diverse social roles, shedding light on the oppressive structures of misogyny, racism, and classism in 1960s America. This interdisciplinary approach reveals the influence of social reproduction on individual identity formation, although it lacks a thorough engagement with specific sociological frameworks (Zawadzka, 2016). Addressing this gap, my research incorporates Foucault and Lefebvre's theories of power and space to analyze how social forces discipline women's identities and contribute to the construction of female subjectivity.

Another study highlights adolescence as a pivotal period of self-construction, with the protagonist's identity shaped by geographical and social displacement. This work underscores the unpredictable and externally influenced nature of identity development during adolescence, emphasizing the protagonist's movement across various spaces as integral to this process (McLennan, 2008). Building on these insights, my study aims to explore further how spatial displacement functions as a metaphor for adolescence and as a critical mechanism in shaping female subjectivity throughout the protagonist's coming-of-age journey.

Previous studies on *The Gravedigger's Daughter* reveal the novel's complex engagement with identity, trauma, and survival themes through personal transformation and spatial relations. Interpretations highlight the semi-autobiographical connections between protagonist Rebecca Schwart and Oates's grandmother, illustrating Rebecca's shift from oppression to openness (Tatko-Peterson, 2007). The novel also critiques social inequities faced by marginalized Jewish immigrant communities in post-World War II America, where space reflects systemic barriers (Chatterjee, 2009). Furthermore, the oppressive atmosphere of the Schwart family home shapes their identities, emphasizing Rebecca's resilience amidst trauma, which continues to affect her adulthood (Garrido, 2012).

These studies underscore the novel's deep engagement with space as both a literal and metaphorical framework for understanding identity, resilience, and psychological transformation. While these interpretations shed light on significant themes, the spatial dimensions concerning female subjectivity remain underexplored. This leaves room for further investigation into how space influences Rebecca's evolving sense of self and her journey toward liberation.

The critics surrounding *Mudwoman* highlight its intricate engagement with themes of gender dynamics, power, and identity, showcasing the novel's complexity and depth. Reviewers from prominent publications recognize Oates's ability to create "richly layered characters" and offer profound insights into the human psyche, emphasizing the novel's exploration of women's

experiences in traditionally male-dominated spheres (Russo, 2012). The detailed portrayal of the protagonist's struggles for power and identity is also acknowledged, with some critiques noting the novel's "complex and subtle" exploration of these themes alongside its occasionally self-conscious prose (Nance, 2012).

While the focus on gender dynamics and identity is prominent in the literature, the relationship between space and these themes remains an implicit yet vital component of *Mudwoman*. Spaces inhabited by M.R. serve as a critical backdrop for her struggles, framing the broader societal constraints she directs. This spatial dimension enriches the understanding of power dynamic and identity formation within the novel, reflecting the complexities of the characters' experiences.

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in the scholarship concerning the explicit analysis of how spatial relationships shape the characters' development and experiences throughout the novel. Previous studies have primarily concentrated on thematic elements without thoroughly investigating the spatial implications of the characters' journeys, particularly how their interactions with various spaces influence their identities and power.

Further examination by scholars such as Miceli reveals an intertextual relationship between *Mudwoman* and Oates's earlier work, *Black Water*, highlighting common motifs of survival and storytelling. Miceli argues that the novel transitions from a narrative of loss to resilience, where water is a

significant motif symbolizing trauma, survival, and transformation (Miceli, 2020). This interpretation positions space as not just a physical setting but a transformative element that encapsulates the protagonist's struggles and potential for rebirth.

While *Mudwoman* is celebrated for its thematic richness and character development, the critical dialogue around it points to an underlying complexity tied to the spaces within which M.R. operates. Though not always explicitly addressed in critiques, the spatial dimensions play a crucial role in framing this novel's exploration, reinforcing the necessity for spatial analysis in understanding the detailed layers of Oates's work.

In this study, I aim to offer a new understanding of female growth in the selected texts. To achieve this, I employ the concepts of spatial theory from Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault to examine the characters from different perspectives. This research focuses on spatiality and female subjectivity, particularly how these dimensions intersect and influence the characters' experiences. The theoretical frameworks of Lefebvre and Foucault provide a unique platform to identify the intricate connections between space and identity formation. By doing so, this study illuminates how spatial displacements shape female characters' developmental arcs, revealing their environments' profound impact on their growth and transformation.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives are as follows:

1. To examine the impact of shifting physical spaces on the crisis of female subjectivity in Joyce Carol Oates's selected coming-of-age novels. This objective focuses on understanding how changes in physical environments correlate with pivotal moments in the protagonists' lives and influence their identity crises.
2. To explore the role of expanded social spaces, including heterotopias, in shaping the processes of confrontation and discipline for female characters in Oates's selected coming-of-age novels. This objective aims to analyze how broader social contexts influence the development of female subjectivity and personal growth.
3. To investigate the construction of female subjectivity within the mental spaces of Oates's female protagonists, emphasizing the role of epiphanies and psychological development. This objective seeks to understand how internal mental processes and revelations contribute to forming the characters' identities.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the above four research objectives, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do changes in physical space in Joyce Carol Oates's selected coming-of-age novels influence and reflect the crisis of female subjectivity and identity formation?
2. How do expanding social spaces, including heterotopias, impact the confrontation, discipline, and development of female subjectivity in Oates's coming-of-age novels?

3. How do epiphanies and the psychological development within the mental spaces of Joyce Carol Oates's female protagonists contribute to and express their evolving subjectivity?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study in the context of literary research is multifaceted and substantial, particularly in its innovative approach to analysing space within Joyce Carol Oates's coming-of-age novels. By integrating the spatial theories of Lefebvre and Foucault, this research moves beyond traditional conceptions of space as merely a mathematical or passive container. Instead, it positions space as an active, deeply interwoven construct with the processes of social reorganization, power construction, and identity formation. The key contributions of this study are:

Firstly, this research defines space within literary studies, arguing for its crucial role as an entity that shapes social relations, cultural norms, and power structures. Secondly, by focusing on Oates's coming-of-age novels, this study illuminates the detailed ways space influences and reflects the growth and development of female characters. It breaks through traditional gender dichotomies and hierarchical structures, revealing the complexities of female experience in male-dominated spaces. Thirdly, this study represents a significant interdisciplinary endeavour, merging spatial theory with literary analysis to offer a richer, more detailed understanding of space and its implications for character development and thematic exploration. It emphasizes the nature of space as a site of social practice, contestation, and

psychological transformation, challenging static or monolithic interpretations of spatial settings in literature. Fourthly, this research underscores the importance of Foucault's concept of heterotopia in understanding literary spaces, demonstrating how spaces of otherness and contradiction can serve as powerful catalysts for character growth and self-realization. In essence, by offering a comprehensive study that integrates Lefebvre's spatial theory with the analysis of coming-of-age novels, this research addresses a critical gap in literary scholarship, advocating for a more spatially aware approach to understanding growth and character development.

The significance of this study on Joyce Carol Oates's texts lies in its focused examination of the intricate relationship between space and female subjectivity within her coming-of-age novels. The study offers a detailed exploration of female subjectivity in Oates's works, shedding light on how her characters navigate and shape their identities within complex spatial contexts. This adds depth to the understanding of female consciousness development in literature. By incorporating spatial theories into the literary analysis of Oates's novels, the study opens up new dimensions in interpreting her novels, offering fresh insights into how space functions not just as a backdrop but as an active force influencing the characters' journeys. Despite Oates's prolific output and significance in American literature, there's a comparative lack of scholarship focusing on the interplay between space and character development in her coming-of-age novels. This study addresses this gap, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of her literary oeuvre. This study's findings are significant for Oates's scholarship and offer broader insights into the genre of

coming-of-age novels, particularly in terms of how space contributes to the psychological maturation of characters.

1.6 Research Methodology

This study employs textual analysis as its primary research methodology, focusing on dissecting the portrayal of female subjectivity within Joyce Carol Oates's coming-of-age novels. By conducting an in-depth examination of four pivotal works—*Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*, *I'll Take You There*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, and *Mudwoman*—this analysis delves into narrative strategies, character evolution and thematic exploration that illuminate the complex interplay between female subjectivity and spatial displacements. The methodology of this research hinges on close readings that scrutinize how Oates crafts her novels to reflect the multifaceted experiences of her female protagonists as they navigate the terrains of physical, social, and psychological spaces. Through this analytical perspective, the study aims to uncover the meaning embedded within Oates's texts, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the role of space in shaping female identity within the literary context of coming-of-age novels.

This research is based on the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, providing a theoretical framework for interpreting Joyce Carol Oates's coming-of-age novels. This theoretical perspective is crucial for analyzing how Oates depicts physical, social, and mental spaces and their influence on the protagonists' development and self-identity. The study draws upon data sources, including the primary texts of Oates's novels and a wide

range of secondary materials, such as critical essays, scholarly articles, and theoretical works. This primary and secondary data integration facilitates a detailed analysis that connects the novels with broader socio-cultural themes. This research aims to illuminate how space shapes and reflects the characters' journeys towards self-awareness and subjectivity within the literary area.

This study's interpretations are grounded in evidence from the selected novels, ensuring the research's validity and reliability. While acknowledging the subjective nature of literary analysis, this study carefully limits its scope to a focused examination of Joyce Carol Oates's selected novels, recognizing that it does not cover her entire literary output. Despite these limitations, this research aims to contribute significantly to the existing literature by shedding light on the relationship between spatial displacements and the development of female subjectivity within Oates's coming-of-age novels. Through this approach, this study offers insights into how space, in its various forms, plays a pivotal role in shaping the characters' journeys towards self-discovery, thereby enriching our understanding of Oates's literary exploration of female growth and subjectivity.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

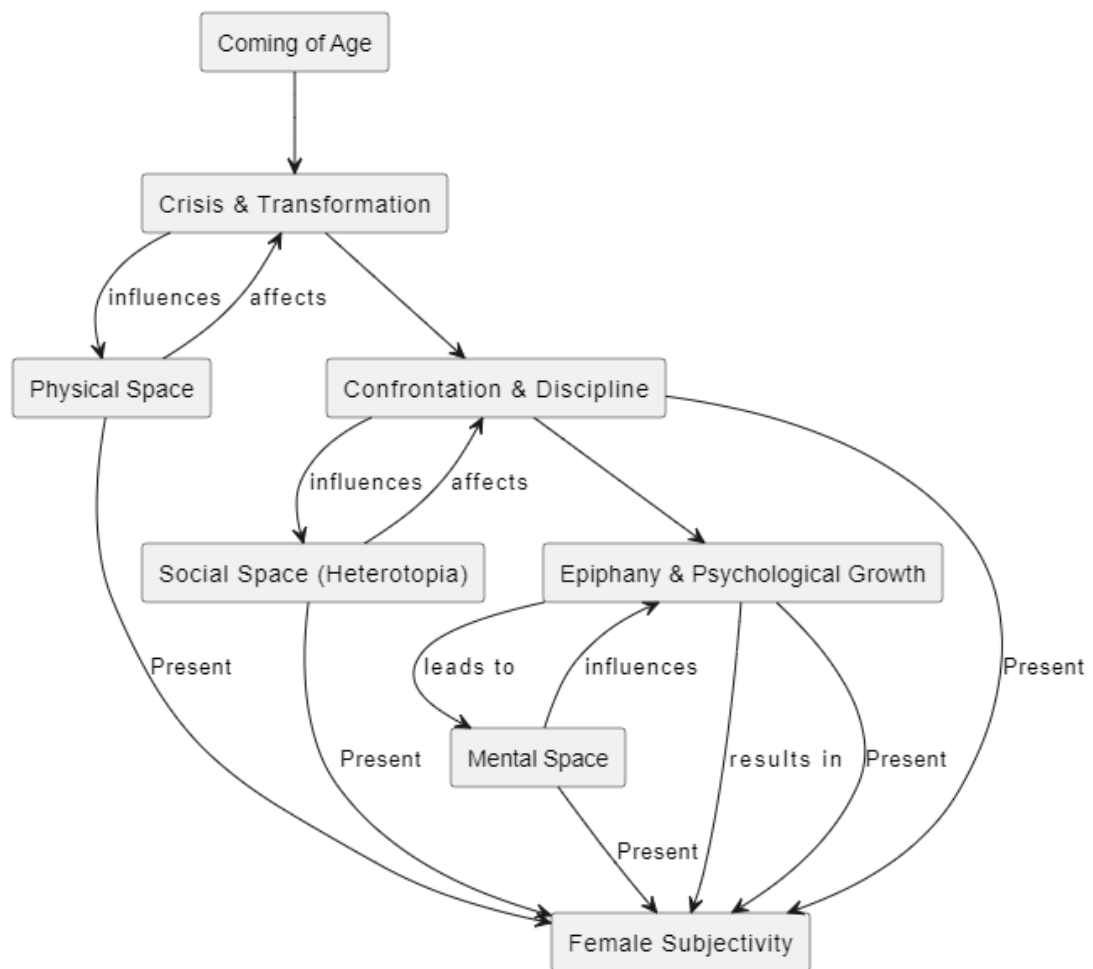


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

The diagram illustrates a conceptual model for understanding the development of female subjectivity in the context of Joyce Carol Oates's coming-of-age novels. It posits that the journey of female protagonists is shaped by their experiences within various spatial dimensions—physical, social, and mental—that Oates meticulously portrays. Physical spaces in Oates's novels often catalyze crises that push the characters towards growth. These spaces, whether oppressive or liberating, necessitate a confrontation with personal and external challenges that define the characters' journeys.

Social spaces, particularly those marked as heterotopias, allow the characters to confront societal norms and exercise self-discipline. These spaces are separate from the normative social order, offering alternative viewpoints and experiences that contribute to the protagonists' understanding of their space and their roles' redefinition. Mental spaces, where characters undergo epiphanies, are crucial for psychological development and self-realisation. The characters' most profound transformations occur in these internal landscapes, often leading to a reconstituted sense of identity. The relationships between these spaces and the development of the female protagonists in Oates's coming-of-age novels suggest a complex network where spatial experiences directly impact the formation of female subjectivity. The characters' growth journey through physical crises, social confrontations/discipline, and mental epiphanies are not linear but interconnected, each influencing and reinforcing the other, culminating in the shaping of female subjectivity.

1.8 Scope and Limitations of the Study

The concern of female subjectivity and spatial displacement is traced in the context of the coming-of-age novels of Joyce Carol Oates. The following four selected literary texts will be the subject of focus: *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), *I'll Take You There* (2002), *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007), and *Mudwoman* (2012). The study focuses on the main female characters and their growth and identity formation in the novels.

Female subjectivity in the selected texts is examined through spatial theory. Lefebvre's spatial triad and Foucault's heterotopia are the concepts that I aim to determine in the novels. Applying the concepts of Lefebvre's physical, social, and mental spaces and Foucault's power and space will offer an in-depth understanding of how space influences female identity formation and self-discovery and shed light on the interplay between space and personal growth.

These readings of Lefebvre and Foucault constitute the conceptual framework of the study. Coming-of-age has been studied largely from a temporal and psychological perspective, whereas my research is carried out from a spatial approach. The research is limited to the context of Oates's novels between 1993 and 2012. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine other works by Oates or other authors. The research is also limited to female characters' experiences and their spatial displacements.

1.9 Justification of Text Selection

The selection of Joyce Carol Oates's novels for this study has been a deliberate and strategic choice to examine the evolution of female subjectivity within various spatial contexts. Specifically, *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), *I'll Take You There* (2002), *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007), and *Mudwoman* (2012) stand out as representative works that offer rich insights into the survival and growth of female protagonists across different spaces. These novels penned over nearly two decades, represent a significant phase in Oates's literary career — a period marked by her exploration of female growth. Before this phase, Oates's writing predominantly centred

around male characters navigating the complexities of social existence. However, with the advent of feminism influencing literary landscapes, Oates pivoted, placing female characters at the forefront of her storytelling.

Oates's status as a social commentator is evident in her portrayal of her characters' spaces amidst societal turmoil. By concentrating on her works from this timeframe, this study seeks to examine the literal and figurative spaces that shape the trajectories of her female protagonists. This focus not only aligns with the feminist wave that redefined the literary canon but also encapsulates Oates's profound engagement with the themes of growth and conflict that are central to the coming-of-age genre. Through this lens, the selected texts will be scrutinized to uncover the depths of Oates's literary contributions to portraying female coming-of-age experiences.

Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang, Joyce Carol Oates's poignant exploration of adolescence in the 1990s, is a study cornerstone for this novel. It narrates the tumultuous journey of Maddy and her companions as they navigate the transition from innocence to aggression and, ultimately, reintegration into society. While previous analyses have delved into themes of female violence, gender, and the intricacies of gang life, there remains an unexplored avenue: a systematic examination of the novel's portrayal of female maturation through the lens of spatial theory. This research aims to fill that gap by dissecting the female protagonists' evolution within the space construct. From their initial defensive stances to stages of assertive revolt and eventual surrender to societal norms, this study traces their trajectory through the spatial

displacements that shape their experiences. Employing Lefebvre's spatial production and Foucault's concept of heterotopia, I investigate how spatial displacements influence the growth of female adolescents.

I'll Take You There stands as a bildungsroman in Joyce Carol Oates's exploration of collegiate life and female growth at the turn of the 21st century. This novel, imbued with autobiographical elements, captures the experiences of a schoolgirl's evolution amidst 1960s New York. Oates crafts a tale of academic endeavours, budding romance, and familial reconciliation, delving deep into the protagonist, Anellia's quest for belonging and identity (Egan, 2002, p. 7). Chosen for this study due to its reflective portrayal of a university setting—a milieu Oates herself is intimately familiar with—the novel presents an invaluable lens through which to examine the intricate social and psychological landscapes navigated by young women. The character of Anellia, a reflection of the working-class female youth, embodies the struggles and disillusionments faced in the pursuit of connection and affection within the social space of campus life. Her transformation from an isolated individual to an enlightened writer—triggered by revisiting her past and confronting paternal relationships—illustrates the profound impact of mental space on personal growth. The intricacies of Anellia's awakening serve as a compelling case for investigating the spatial dimensions of coming-of-age novels, underscoring the significance of space in the development of female subjectivity.

The Gravedigger's Daughter's profound description of a Jewish immigrant woman's tribulations and triumphs is a pivotal text for examining the interplay

of space and identity in Joyce Carol Oates' canon. The novel's portrayal of Rebecca, the protagonist, is a powerful lens through which the struggles and resilience of a new generation of Jewish immigrant women are vividly brought to life. Rebecca's journey — from her birth on a ship bound for America to her ultimate self-actualization — is marked by a series of spatial displacements that mirror her quest for selfhood against racial and gender adversity. She grows through distorted familial spaces, escapes from domestic abuse, and eventually settlement into a nurturing environment reflecting a continuous spatial expansion. This novel is a testament to Rebecca's character development and illuminates the broader themes of displacement and belonging. By integrating *The Gravedigger's Daughter* into this research, the study aims to dissect how Oates uses space to chart the evolution of female subjectivity, thereby justifying its selection for a comprehensive understanding of spatial influence on personal growth.

Mudwoman stands out as Joyce Carol Oates' intricate exploration of female ascendance within the echelons of society, making it an exemplary choice for this study. The novel's protagonist, Meredith Ruth (M.R.) Neukirchen's life trajectory from an abandoned child to a university president encapsulates the fluctuating spaces that shape her identity. This novel unfolds across varied spaces: from the black snake river, where she was thrown away as a baby, through the contrasting environments of her adoptive homes, to the halls of academia, where she grapples with gender discrimination and personal crises. Each spatial shift in *Mudwoman* symbolizes a new chapter in M.R.'s life, presenting unique challenges and revelations contributing to her complex

character development. Her journey culminates in a profound epiphany, where acceptance of her origins and reconciliation with her past facilitate a return to a sense of self.

The selection of these four coming-of-age novels by Joyce Carol Oates provides a comprehensive view of her female protagonists' growth journeys. Each novel traces the evolution of its central characters from their tumultuous beginnings marked by naivety and vulnerability through a series of spatial transitions that challenge and redefine them. Despite their initially tragic circumstances, these women exhibit resilience as they navigate the complexities of an expanding social milieu and attain psychological maturity. This progression from confusion to clarity, from timidity to assertiveness, exemplifies the successful construction of female subjectivity. The common thread of overcoming adversity and reaching self-actualization in these descriptions underscores the pertinence of these texts to the study.

1.10 Definition of Terms

1.10.1 Space

Space is a "product" produced by social progress and human intervention in different fields. It is also something like "power," which will influence, guide, and limit the possibility of human behaviour and ways of life." (p. 216).

1.10.2 Spatial Theory

Spatial theory refers to an interdisciplinary approach that emerged in the 20th century, marking a significant shift in Western thought by bringing attention to space. It encompasses philosophy, history, cultural geography, sociology, and literary studies. In the context of literary criticism, spatial theory analyzes how space is constructed and represented through language, symbolism, and imagination in literary texts. Rather than being a mere backdrop, space in literature is seen as a cultural entity that reflects social and historical processes, ideologies, and power relations. It serves as a medium through which various ideologies and cultural forces interact and contest. Spatial theory thus investigates how authors construct space within texts, exploring the cultural and symbolic meanings embedded in these literary spaces and their broader socio-political implications. (Wang, 2018, p. 11)

1.10.3 Heterotopia

Heterotopia is a social space put forward by Foucault in his thesis *Of Other Spaces*. He believes we live in spatial relationships linked to all other spaces but conflict with them. He explained that there was a real space and an imaginary one. All other spaces that can be found inner the culture will be presented. Heterotopia exists in all kinds of societies and civilizations; it is a real space, is the reproduction of the actual space in a particular society and culture, and competition or reversal is the realization of utopia. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24)

1.10.4 Female Subjectivity

In recent criticism, the word *subject* is frequently used in place of *self*. *Self* is felt to connote an old-fashioned humanist ideal of authentic identity, whereas *subject* implies that identity is positioned or constructed by social and ideological pressures. *Subjectivity* is the realm of individual consciousness, feeling, and behaviour that is affected and determined, at least in part, by social forces and wayward desires that cannot easily be explained (Mikics, 2010, pp. 289-290). Simone de Beauvoir emphasises that the construction of female subjectivity deconstructs women's entrenched "otherness" by subverting patriarchal structures and constructing women as essential individuals with the free will to act in the world and become who they want to be (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 17). Female subjectivity encompasses various dimensions, including self-awareness, social roles, bodily autonomy, and social participation. Its construction requires continuous self-awareness, resistance, and active engagement in societal production and activities.

1.10.5 Epiphany

Epiphany was originally a term used in Christian theology to refer to the manifestation of God in this world. In an early version of his novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce used it to denote secular revelation in the everyday world. James Joyce defined an epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation" (Baldick, 2000, p. 72) in which an ordinary object or gesture appears to the observer to be radiant. Joyce introduced it into literature, advocating that the details of life should be processed through

art to bring out the divinity of ordinary things and trigger the spiritual enlightenment of the protagonist, which in turn will sublimate the reader's spiritual world and produce the effect of enlightenment.

1.10.6 Coming-of-Age Novel

Coming-of-age novels also named bildungsroman, it is a literary genre. According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a bildungsroman is "a novel whose primary subject is the moral, mental and intellectual advancement of a normally younger main character." (Abel 16). It focuses on the protagonist's body, social identity, and mental development from youth to adulthood. The genre generally involves the central conflict between the character and society (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 21). The theme of a coming-of-age novel is the development of the protagonist's mind and character in the passage from childhood through varied experiences---and often through a spiritual crisis---into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world (Abrams & Harpham, 2014, p. 193).

1.11 Conclusion

This chapter begins with the background of the study and introduces the main issues explored in this study. Simultaneously, the existing related studies are summarized, and the problem statement is presented to demonstrate the research gaps filled by this study. This chapter also presents relevant research objectives and questions to guide the direction of the ensuing research. The significance of this study and its positioning in the relevant research area are

also detailed. In addition, the scope and limitations of the study are presented, and the rationale for selecting the selected texts is explained. Lastly is an interpretation of terms. An in-depth analysis of the relevant research methodology and conceptual framework will be presented in Chapter 3. Overall, this chapter lays the foundation for the study and the groundwork for the following textual analysis.



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