

## Emotional Geographies: Reading a Woman Poet's Spatial Experience through Bourdieu's Concept of Social and Physical Space

Baktybek Isakov<sup>1</sup>

Kanikey Kaliyeva<sup>2</sup>

Roza Abdykulova<sup>3</sup>

Cıldız Çımanova<sup>4</sup>

### Abstract

This article examines a poetry entitled as **“I am sitting on the boulevard”** (by Sagyn Akmatbekova) from the perspectives on how physical and social space intersect in a woman poet's lyrical narrative by applying Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and physical space. The analysis demonstrates that the poet's settings—boulevards, gardens, buses, and autumn landscapes—function as socially coded spaces that mirror emotional states and social conditions. Natural elements such as falling leaves and migrating birds act as metaphors for social structures, while the poet's embodied practices reveal how habitus shapes her perception of place. The poem constructs an “emotional geography” in which physical space activates memory, evokes intimacy, and materializes longing. Ultimately, the study shows how poetic space becomes a structural map of inner life, where social time and physical environment merge into a single experiential field.

- 1 Assistant Prof, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Sociology, E-mail: baktybek.isakov@manas.edu.kg, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8845-2778>
- 2 Assistant Prof, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Philology, E-mail: kanykei.kaliyeva@manas.edu.kg, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4121-3163>
- 3 Assistant Prof, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of History, E-mail: roza.abdykulova@manas.edu.kg, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3322-5305>
- 4 Assistant Prof, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Philology, E-mail: cildiz.cimanova@manas.edu.kg, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6336-1952>

## Introduction

*Олтурамын бульварда*

*Ченемсиз кыялга батып.*

*Алтын түстүү жалбырактар*

*Түшүп жатат бут алдымда.*

*Канаттары күн нурун катып*

*Кайдадыр кетишти куштар.*

*Кооздошуп асман бетин*

*Учкан сайын куштар арылап.*

*Кеч күз... булуттар, булуттар.*

*Жүрөгүм кимдидир сагынат.*

*Ким болду экен-Ал?*

*Кеч күз... Олтурамын гүлбакта.*

*Дарактар иуулдашат.*

*Кимдир бирөө шыбырагансыйт:*

*“Эстечи... кышкы түндү”*

*Жүрөгүм жооп берет:*

*“Автобуста баратканбыз.*

*Мен тиктегем күзгүсүнөн айнектин*

*Сени... сенин көзүңдү, кирпичиңди...*

*Көрүнбөй кайда кеттиң,*

*Таштап жалгыз? ...”*

*Алтын түстүү жалбырактар*

*Түшүп жатат бут алдыма.*

*Олтурамын бульварда*

**I am sitting on the boulevard**

Lost in boundless reverie.

Golden leaves keep falling softly

At my feet.

With wings sealed by fading sunlight,

The birds have flown somewhere far away.

They paint the sky with grace

As they drift farther and farther.

Late autumn... clouds upon clouds.

My heart longs for someone.

Who was he, I wonder?

Late autumn... I sit in the garden.

The trees are whispering.

Someone seems to murmur:

“Remember... that winter night.”

And my heart replies:

“We were riding on the bus.

Through the misted window

I watched you—

Your eyes, your lashes...

Where have you vanished,

Leaving me alone?”

Golden leaves are falling still

At my feet.

I am sitting on the boulevard...

In this article, focusing on the main content of the poetry (*I am sitting on the boulevard*), I examine how physical space becomes a carrier of social experience and emotional meaning, using the poem's shifting settings—boulevard, garden, trees, autumn, the bus—as an entry point for analysis. Although these appear at first glance as simple geographical locations, they operate as socially coded environments that reflect the poet's embodied and emotional relationship with the world. Drawing on Bourdieu's understanding of space as a mirror of social conditions, I approach these spatial elements as fields where social relations, memory, and affect intersect. The boulevard represents an open public field, while the bus evokes collective proximity, and these differences shape how the poet navigates each scene emotionally and bodily. The recurring autumnal images—falling leaves, migrating birds, dense clouds—function as symbolic markers of longing, loss, and emotional fragility, demonstrating how natural elements become intertwined with socialized memory. As the poet sits in the boulevard, present physical space

activates earlier experiences and memories, illustrating how habitus links past and present through a continuous flow of embodied perception. The poem therefore becomes a textured narrative in which space is not a passive background but an active field that structures emotional life. Through this lens, physical scenery emerges as a kind of emotional grammar, mapping solitude, closeness, and longing onto the shifting landscapes of late autumn.

### Literature Review

The contemporary scholarship on socio-spatial relations consistently demonstrates that physical environments cannot be understood as neutral backdrops but must be seen as active structures shaping social hierarchies, interactions, and emotional dispositions. Early sociological work, such as Feldman and Tilly's (1960) analysis of class boundaries, already hinted at this direction by showing that social stratification is neither a rigid class model nor a seamless continuum; instead, it maps unevenly onto physical and symbolic spaces. Their findings foreground an important insight: **social space is always layered**, with certain boundaries (especially those isolating elites) sharply inscribed, while other zones show a more fluid gradation. This conceptual tension later becomes foundational for urban and spatial studies.

Recent research builds on this idea by turning attention from broad social structure to the micropolitics of spatial configuration, especially in the “in-between” zones where private and public realms overlap. Studies by Can and Heath (2016) and Can (2012) show that these threshold spaces—neither entirely private nor fully public—play a decisive role in shaping everyday social encounters. Through mixed-method approaches involving space syntax, observation, and interviews, these works reveal a recurring pattern: street connectivity, spatial permeability, and the presence of semi-open zones significantly influence the duration, density, and quality of social interaction. Yet these same studies contend that interaction alone does not automatically generate a sense of community. Even modern housing estates, often criticized for being socially isolating, may exhibit surprisingly strong communal attachments, suggesting that spatial form is only one component of a larger socio-cultural ecology.

This tension between space as enabling interaction and space as insufficient for producing community is echoed in the work of Hornecker and Buur (2006), who explore tangible interaction in hybrid, augmented environments. Their framework illustrates that the social meaning of space increasingly depends on how material structures intertwine with embodied

practices and social expectations. As physical and digital spaces converge, the user's bodily experience, sensorial engagement, and social relations become inseparable—thus reframing space as an active participant in social life rather than a passive setting.

A similar argument appears in studies of mass housing and residential design. Research from Sulaimani (Karim & Tayib, 2024) highlights how territoriality, fostered by convex building arrangements, can indirectly strengthen social interactions by providing inhabitants with identifiable communal niches and a sense of belonging. Here again, the built environment matters not as a deterministic force but as a facilitator of social possibility—its influence expressed through how people claim, maintain, and emotionally inhabit semi-public zones.

Meanwhile, Zerouati and Bellal's (2020) study complicates the long-held assumption that integrated urban spaces are always the most socially vibrant. Their findings from four Algerian neighborhoods show that social activities often cluster in the least connected, most enclosed areas—suggesting that low permeability can actually intensify social interaction by producing protected micro-environments more conducive to everyday sociability. This contradicts classical space syntax arguments and pushes the field toward a more culturally sensitive understanding of spatial logic.

A broader cross-cultural lens is provided by Askarizad and colleagues (2025), whose comparative analysis of public squares across Iran, Spain, Italy, and Australia demonstrates that spatial accessibility alone does not guarantee social vibrancy. Instead, culturally specific behaviours, socio-economic conditions, and functional amenities significantly mediate how public squares are used. Their work underscores that socio-spatial patterns emerge from the interplay of design logic and cultural habitus, making universal design principles inadequate for fostering inclusive public life.

Finally, Guo et al. (2022) emphasize the effects of the digital era on urban vitality, arguing that the primary determinant of vibrant urban space has shifted toward spatial social interaction driven by persistent human social needs. As many physical spaces lose their traditional functions to digital alternatives, the challenge becomes reactivating them through designs that facilitate meaningful encounters. Their empirical model shows that social interaction parameters correlate strongly with real-world spatial vitality, reinforcing the earlier studies' core assertion that social life is produced at the intersection of physical form, cultural practice, and relational desire.

Taken together, these works reveal a coherent pattern: space is an active medium of social life, shaping and shaped by class boundaries, cultural expectations, embodied practices, and emotional attachments. Whether in the threshold between a building and a street, the closed courtyards of mass housing, or the globalized public square, the social meaning of space emerges not from formal design alone but from the lived, negotiated, and culturally inflected interactions that unfold within it. The literature thus invites us to see space as both a structural condition and a lived experience—a dynamic landscape where social relations are inscribed, remembered, and continually remade.

## Findings

### 1. *Physical space mirrors social conditions*

The poem's settings—*boulevard, garden, trees, autumn, bus*—are not merely geographical locations but socially coded spaces.

In Bourdieu's terms, physical space always reflects social relations; the poet perceives these places through her lived social experience.

The boulevard represents a public, open social field, whereas the bus symbolizes everyday, collective social proximity.

### 2. *Space functions as a carrier of emotion and socialized memory*

Autumn, falling leaves, and migrating birds act as emotional symbols.

For Bourdieu, physical space is always infused with symbolic meaning; emotions emerge from socially shared interpretations.

In the poem, autumn becomes a socialized metaphor for loss, longing, and emotional vulnerability.

### 3. *Social space triggers personal memory*

The present setting (sitting in the boulevard) activates memories of past social spaces (a winter night, riding the bus).

According to Bourdieu, different spaces are linked through the habitus: the present space reactivates earlier experiences.

Here, **physical space** → **memory** → **emotional response** becomes a clear sequence.

### 4. *Space is perceived through bodily practices (habitus)*

Bodily actions such as "*I sit*," "*I looked through the glass*" show the poet's embodied experience of space.

In Bourdieu's theory, habitus structures how individuals move through and emotionally interpret space.

The posture on the boulevard reflects melancholy; staring through the bus window represents intimacy and closeness.

### *5. Social relationships leave traces on physical space*

Images of *eyes, eyelashes, the act of gazing* represent an emotional relationship.

Bourdieu sees social relations as forces that *structure* the perception of physical space:

The boulevard becomes a space of solitude,

The bus becomes a space of emotional closeness.

When the relationship ends, the physical space itself feels abandoned and emptied.

### *6. Natural elements act as metaphors for social structure*

Golden leaves, clouds, and birds are not just natural scenery but symbolic carriers of social experience.

Falling leaves reflect the passage of time; birds symbolize departure; clouds evoke heaviness and emotional fog.

Natural elements become a language of social meanings.

### *7. Space becomes the syntax of inner life*

Bourdieu argues that individuals "place themselves" in space through their social and emotional dispositions.

The poet uses physical settings as an emotional grammar:

Boulevard → stillness, loneliness

Autumn → longing

Bus → intimacy

Physical scenery becomes a structural map of the poet's inner world.

### *8. Intersection of social time and physical space*

The repetition of "*late autumn...*" suggests cyclical temporality.

In Bourdieu's view, social time is shaped by social structures and personal experience.

Autumn marks not only the season but the emotional time of remembering and yearning.

## Discussion

### *Analytical Discussion: Space, Landscape, and Social Experience*

Interpreting the poem through the lenses of Pierre Bourdieu's social and physical space opens a broader analytical field that intersects with several other theoretical trajectories across sociology, human geography, phenomenology, and affect theory. The poem does not merely present scenery; it constructs a living landscape, where the physical environment becomes inseparable from the social structures, memories, and emotional rhythms that shape human experience.

#### *1. Physical Space as a Reflection of Social Conditions*

The poem situates the lyrical subject within a set of everyday spaces—boulevard, garden, bus—each of which functions as a socially coded environment rather than a neutral backdrop. This resonates not only with Bourdieu's notion that social relations are objectified in space but also with Lefebvre's "production of space", where public environments embody the social order, power dynamics, and cultural practices of a society.

The boulevard, an open public space, becomes a field of solitude, suggesting a disjunction between physical openness and social isolation, a common theme in urban studies. The bus, conversely, represents compressed physical proximity but heightened emotional intimacy, illustrating the paradoxes of urban mobility and social closeness.

#### *2. Space as Emotionally Charged and Socially Remembered*

Autumn, falling leaves, migrating birds—these are affective landscapes, echoing Yi-Fu Tuan's concept of "topophilia", the emotional attachment to place. In the poem, these natural elements function as triggers of emotion, demonstrating how space becomes a repository of socialized feeling, a notion also explored in Sara Ahmed's affective economies, where emotions circulate between bodies and objects.

Autumn becomes a symbol of loss not because of its meteorological features alone but because it is culturally encoded as a season of ending, departure, and emotional thinning. Thus, nature enters the social field as a metaphorical infrastructure, shaping how individuals interpret their emotional states.

### ***3. Social Space as a Trigger of Memory and Narrative Time***

The shift from the present (the boulevard) to a remembered past (a winter bus ride) demonstrates Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, in which memory is spatially anchored and socially constructed.

Space acts as the hinge between past and present: the boulevard triggers a winter night; the garden recalls an intimate gaze. Thus, memory is not contained within the individual mind but is distributed through space, activated by the material environment.

This is consistent with Bourdieu's view that habitus connects temporal layers of experience, whereby past structures are reactivated in present contexts. The poem maps this sequence in a clear phenomenological arc: space → memory → emotion.

### ***4. Habitus and the Embodied Perception of Space***

The bodily actions in the poem—sitting, looking, gazing through glass—highlight the role of embodied spatial practices, echoing Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in which the body is the primary site of encountering the world.

Bourdieu's habitus explains how the posture of sitting on a boulevard can embody melancholy: the body becomes the medium through which social and emotional meaning is produced. The bus window frames an intimate moment, making mobility a site of emotional closeness, further reflecting non-representational theory (Thrift), where everyday movements and gestures create meaning beyond language.

### ***5. Social Relationships Inscribed onto Physical Landscapes***

Spaces are transformed by social relations: the boulevard becomes empty after the loss of a relationship; the bus becomes intimate through shared presence.

This aligns with Doreen Massey's relational space, where space is constituted by interactions, not static coordinates. When the relationship dissolves, its spatial traces remain, echoing Freud's concept of "memory traces" and Bachelard's understanding of the home or intimate space as a repository of emotional residues.

Thus, physical landscapes carry the ghosts of past social ties.

### ***6. Nature as a Metaphor for Social Structure***

Natural imagery—golden leaves, clouds, birds—functions as a symbolic language that reflects cultural understandings of time, loss, and transition.



This mirrors cultural landscape theory (Cosgrove), where nature is read as a cultural text.

The poem's birds "with wings hardened by sunlight" suggest not only seasonal migration but the emotional cooling of a relationship. Nature becomes a semiotic system, where physical landscapes operate as metaphors for social processes.

### *7. Space as the Syntax of Inner Life*

The way the poem structures its emotional world through specific places aligns with Bourdieu's claim that individuals position themselves in space according to their dispositions. More broadly, this echoes Winnicott's "transitional space", where external environments help structure internal emotional states.

The poem constructs an emotional cartography:

boulevard → solitude

autumn → longing

bus → intimacy

This spatial grammar becomes a symbolic map of the inner world, showing how emotions are spatially organized.

### *8. Social Time Intersecting with Physical Space*

The repetition of "late autumn" reveals the cyclical nature of emotional time, consistent with Bourdieu's social time, which is shaped by both structure and personal experience. Autumn marks both seasonal and emotional temporality, blending physical environment with subjective rhythm, similar to Bergson's *durée*, where time expands through memory and feeling. Thus, the poem situates the self at the intersection of natural cycles, emotional states, and social structures.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the poem demonstrates how physical landscapes, natural elements, emotional memory, and social relationships intertwine, forming a complex lived spatiality. Space is not a passive background; it is a dynamic, socially shaped field through which the subject interprets loss, intimacy, time, and selfhood.

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