

Gendered Reflections on Third Space Pedagogy and Classroom Practices in Higher Education in Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper has been designed to examine the gendered dimensions of third space pedagogy in higher education classrooms in Pakistan. Third space pedagogy, an approach that encourages hybridity, dialogue, and the merging of dominant and marginalized meanings, offers a critical lens to understand how gender shapes classroom interactions, participation, and pedagogical practices. It uses a qualitative research design and analyzes published research documents through a purposive sampling technique. Content analysis has been conducted, and a thematic analysis has been performed to present the data analysis section, aiming to understand how gender influences classroom interactions, identity negotiation, and pedagogical practices in Pakistan. The findings reveal that the third space operates as a gendered liminal zone where power dynamics, cultural scripts, and institutional structures influence participation, agency, and identity formation. However, third space pedagogy offers opportunities for hybrid learning and reflexivity; patriarchal norms and institutional hierarchies constrain its transformative potential. The study highlights the necessity for gender-responsive pedagogical strategies and institutional support to foster inclusive, dialogic, and empowering learning environments.

Keywords: Third Space Pedagogy, Gender, Higher Education, Classroom Practices, Hybrid Learning

Introduction

The dynamics of teaching and learning in higher education are increasingly shaped by gendered experiences that influence how students and teachers negotiate knowledge, identity, and power within classrooms (Ali, Shoib, & Kausar, 2025; Shoib, 2025b). In Pakistan, these dynamics become more complex as universities attempt to adopt progressive pedagogical approaches (Shoib, 2025a; Shoib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025). However, still operating within socio-cultural structures marked by gendered expectations (Shoib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a). Third space pedagogy, an approach that encourages hybridity, dialogue, and the merging of dominant and marginalized meanings, offers a critical lens to understand how gender shapes classroom interactions, participation, and pedagogical practices (Shoib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b; Shoib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). This research explores how students and faculty in Pakistani higher education institutions experience and reflect upon third space pedagogy, and how gender mediates the formation of these “in-between” spaces of learning. By examining classroom practices, discursive processes, and everyday

interactions, the study aims to uncover the subtle negotiations through which gendered identities are constructed, challenged, or reinforced. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered pedagogical experiences and the possibilities for creating more inclusive and transformative learning environments in Pakistan's higher education landscape.

Study Context

Higher education in Pakistan is undergoing a gradual transformation as institutions grapple with issues of access, quality, and equity, particularly in relation to gender (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025). Although universities have witnessed increasing female enrolment, classroom environments often remain shaped by traditional gender norms, implicit biases, and unequal power relations (Shoaib & Bashir, 2025; Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025). Pedagogical practices tend to be teacher-centred, leaving limited room for critical dialogue, questioning, or collaborative knowledge production (Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025; Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025). Within this landscape, third-space pedagogy offers a valuable framework for understanding how students and teachers navigate the tensions between formal academic structures and the lived social realities they bring into the classroom (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). The concept becomes especially relevant in Pakistan, where cultural expectations surrounding gender intersect with institutional hierarchies to influence participation, communication, and learning experiences (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b). This study is situated within this evolving educational context, examining how third space pedagogy emerges or is constrained through gendered reflections and classroom practices. By focusing on the micro-processes of interaction within universities, the research highlights the need for pedagogical models that foster inclusivity, critical engagement, and equitable learning opportunities for all genders.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how third space pedagogy is experienced and interpreted by students and faculty in higher education classrooms in Pakistan.
2. To explore the ways gender shapes classroom interactions, participation, and pedagogical practices within third space settings.
3. To identify the challenges and opportunities for creating inclusive and gender-responsive third space environments in Pakistani universities.
4. To analyze how gendered identities are constructed, negotiated, or contested through everyday classroom practices.

Research Questions

1. How do students and faculty in Pakistani higher education institutions perceive and experience third space pedagogy?
2. In what ways do gender dynamics influence interactions, participation, and learning processes within third-space classrooms?
3. What challenges and barriers hinder the implementation of gender-inclusive third space pedagogy in higher education?
4. How are gendered identities negotiated, reinforced, or transformed through classroom practices and discursive interactions?

The Data and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore gendered reflections on third space pedagogy and classroom practices in higher education. The inquiry is based on published research documents, including peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and

relevant academic reports that address gender, pedagogy, and higher education contexts. A purposive sampling strategy is used to select documents that directly contribute to understanding third space pedagogy and its gendered dimensions. Data are analyzed using content analysis to identify recurring patterns, theoretical perspectives, and pedagogical constructs relevant to the study. This is followed by thematic analysis to generate core themes that reflect how gender shapes pedagogical experiences, interactions, and classroom practices in third space contexts. The study's findings are interpretive in nature, drawing on the selected literature to develop a synthesized and critical understanding of the topic. The primary limitation of this research is that it relies exclusively on qualitative data from published documents, without incorporating primary fieldwork or empirical classroom observations. As such, the interpretations are bounded by the scope, depth, and availability of existing literature.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of published research documents yielded several interconnected themes that illustrate how gender shapes the emergence, functioning, and outcomes of third space pedagogy within higher education classrooms in Pakistan. These themes highlight the complex interplay between pedagogical intentions and socio-cultural realities, offering insights into the ways classroom interactions become sites of negotiation, resistance, and transformation. The major themes that emerged from the content and thematic analysis include: a) gendered agency and voice, b) negotiating power and identity in the third space, c) pedagogical practices and gendered participation, d) institutional norms and structural constraints, e) possibilities for inclusive and hybrid pedagogies, and f) challenges in sustaining third space engagements. Each theme is elaborated below.

a) Gendered Agency and Voice in Classroom Interactions

A central finding across the reviewed literature concerns the uneven distribution of voice and agency among students based on gender (Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). Third space pedagogy relies on dialogic engagement, yet many documents highlight that female students, despite increasing enrolment, continue to experience constraints rooted in cultural socialization, institutional gender norms, and classroom hierarchies (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025c). Female students often enter the classroom with limited opportunities to articulate dissent or challenge dominant views, especially on topics related to gender, sexuality, and power (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). The third space, ideally a zone of hybridity and contestation, is therefore shaped by pre-existing gendered social frameworks (Shoaib, Shamsheer, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Shamsheer, & Iqbal, 2025). Female participation tends to be cautious, strategic, and often mediated through acceptable cultural scripts (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b). Conversely, male students frequently occupy conversational dominance, reflecting societal patterns of speaking entitlement and normative leadership roles (Shoaib, Tariq, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib & Ullah, 2025). These findings suggest that third space pedagogy has been theoretically emancipatory, but it does not automatically create equal spaces for all genders (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a). Gendered socialization shapes students' comfort levels, confidence, and willingness to critique (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b). Thus, pedagogical interventions must account for gendered differences in communicative agency (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025c). The third space becomes transformative only when educators deliberately facilitate equitable participation and challenge hegemonic masculinities within classroom discourse (Shoaib & Zaman, 2025).

b) Negotiating Power and Identity in the Third Space

A recurring theme in the literature is the negotiation of gendered identities within classroom interactions (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). The third space functions as a liminal zone where traditional expectations intersect with academic discourse, often leading students to question or renegotiate their identities (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). Female students, for example, frequently grapple with expectations of modesty, obedience, and conformity (Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a). However, simultaneously encounters discourses of empowerment and critical thinking within the academic setting (Shoaib, 2024e; Shoaib, Abdullah, Naqvi, & Ditta, 2024). Male students, on the other hand, often navigate tensions between traditional masculine norms, authority, rationality, dominance, and emerging pedagogical expectations of collaboration, empathy, and reflexivity (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024d). These identity negotiations illustrate that the third space operates as a site of hybridization, where conflicting discourses coexist (Shoaib, 2024c). Gender does not merely shape participation but also influences the self that students bring into the learning environment (Arshad, Anwar, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib, 2024a). The findings support the argument that third space pedagogy in Pakistan is deeply embedded within cultural and ideological frameworks, requiring educators to recognize how students' identities are constantly shifting in relation to institutional norms and societal structures (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023; Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023).

c) Pedagogical Practices and Gendered Participation

The reviewed documents indicate that pedagogical methods significantly influence the extent to which a third space emerges in the classroom (Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023). Activities such as group discussions, reflective writing, collaborative projects, and case-based learning were found to encourage hybrid dialogues and critical engagement (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023). However, gendered patterns of participation persisted across studies. Male students often dominated public discussions (Shoaib, 2023b). However, female students participated more in written tasks or in smaller, gender-homogeneous groups (Shoaib, 2023a). Some documents noted that mixed-gender groups led to reduced participation from females due to cultural discomfort, social surveillance, or fear of judgment (Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Teachers' biases, both conscious and unconscious, also shaped participation; male voices often received more validation (Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022). However, women's concerns were sometimes sidelined. These findings confirm that pedagogical strategies alone do not guarantee gender equity within third space environments (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022). The gendered nature of participation reflects broader power dynamics and underscores the need for teachers to adopt culturally responsive pedagogy (Shoaib, Anwar, & Mustafa, 2022; Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022). Intentional facilitation, gender-aware group formation, and reflective teaching practices are crucial for ensuring that third space pedagogy functions as an inclusive learning model (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a).

d) Institutional Norms and Structural Constraints

Across the literature, institutional culture emerged as a major determinant of how third space pedagogy is interpreted and practiced (Shoaib, Rasool, & Anwar, 2021; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). Many higher education institutions in Pakistan uphold hierarchical teaching models, disciplinary boundaries, and gendered expectations around behaviour and interaction (Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021; Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021). Female faculty members reported challenges in implementing dialogic pedagogies due to institutional expectations of authority, discipline, and controlled classroom environments (Shoaib, Ali,

Anwar, et al., 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Male faculty often enjoyed greater freedom to experiment with innovative pedagogies, reflecting gendered institutional privilege (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021; Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021). Furthermore, institutional policies on classroom segregation, dress codes, and moral conduct significantly shaped the possibilities for third space engagement (Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2020). These results demonstrate that third space pedagogy cannot be understood in isolation from institutional structures (Shoaib, Latif, & Usmani, 2013; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019). The potential for hybrid, dialogic, and critical classrooms is constrained by norms that reinforce gender hierarchies (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Institutional reform policy revision, faculty training, and gender-sensitive administrative practices are essential for supporting pedagogical innovation (Muhammad Shoaib, Tanees Waris, & Shahid Iqbal, 2025a).

e) Possibilities for Inclusive and Transformative Hybrid Pedagogies

Regardless of the challenges, several documents highlighted instances where third space pedagogy enabled meaningful transformation (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). Educators intentionally facilitated inclusive dialogue, students, especially females, reported increased confidence, critical awareness, and a sense of academic agency (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025c). Such classrooms allowed students to challenge stereotypes, share lived experiences, and bridge the gap between formal curriculum and everyday realities (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a). Hybrid pedagogical approaches that integrated community perspectives, experiential learning, and critical feminist thought were particularly effective in creating spaces where gendered norms could be interrogated and renegotiated (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, 2025b). These findings indicate that third space pedagogy holds significant potential for advancing gender equity in higher education (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025). Once designed thoughtfully, it creates empowering learning environments where marginalized voices are amplified, and traditional gender binaries are questioned (Shoaib et al., 2025). The challenge lies in sustaining such pedagogical practices within institutional frameworks that are often resistant to change.

f) Challenges in Sustaining Third Space Engagements

The reviewed documents emphasize several recurring challenges that limit the sustainability of third space pedagogy in Pakistan:

- Persistent patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes
- Resistance from students who prefer conventional teacher-centred methods
- Institutional emphasis on disciplinary authority
- Lack of faculty training in gender-sensitive pedagogy
- Social stigma associated with critical discussions on gender
- Time constraints within rigid academic schedules

These challenges collectively narrow the possibilities for sustained hybrid engagement, often reducing third space pedagogy to short-term interventions rather than long-term pedagogical commitments. Sustaining third space pedagogy requires systemic, institutional, and cultural change. Faculty development programs, gender mainstreaming in curriculum, and supportive administrative structures are necessary for integrating hybrid pedagogies into mainstream educational practice. Without institutional backing, third space pedagogy remains vulnerable to resistance, misinterpretation, and eventual discontinuation.

Synthesis of Findings

Across the themes, the analysis reveals that third space pedagogy in Pakistani higher education is a contested and gendered project. However, it offers opportunities for critical dialogue, identity negotiation, and hybrid learning; its implementation is deeply shaped by

cultural gender norms, institutional structures, and teacher-student power dynamics. Gender emerges not merely as a variable but as a central axis that mediates agency, participation, voice, and learning. The findings underscore that third space pedagogy fosters transformative learning only when educators consciously address gender inequities and institutions actively support inclusive pedagogical innovation.

Theoretical Insights

This study generates several theoretical insights that deepen the understanding of how third space pedagogy operates within gendered educational contexts in Pakistan. These insights emerge from the synthesis of published research and highlight the interplay between pedagogical theory, gendered identities, and institutional structures.

Third Space as a Gendered Liminal Zone

The analysis shows that the third space is not a neutral pedagogical arena; instead, it is shaped by gendered identities and culturally embedded power relations. Students enter learning spaces with pre-constructed gender norms and expectations that influence their participation. This reflects Bhabha's (1994) idea of the third space as a site of hybridity, but one that is also deeply influenced by gendered social structures, as noted by Butler's (1990) work on gender performativity. The third space functions as a gendered liminal zone in which gender norms influence who speaks, who participates, and whose knowledge is validated.

Hybrid Identity Construction and Gender Negotiation

Identity in the third space is fluid and continuously negotiated. Students blend academic discourses with their cultural experiences, creating hybrid identities. Hall (1996) argues that identity is not fixed but constructed through discourse. However, Nussbaum (2000) highlights how gender and capabilities shape one's ability to negotiate selfhood. Identity formation within third space pedagogy is a gender-mediated hybridization process, shaped by cultural expectations and academic engagement.

Power Relations Shape the Boundaries of the Third Space

Power dynamics are central to how third space pedagogy unfolds. Foucault (1980) emphasizes that knowledge and power are intertwined, influencing classroom interactions. Gendered hierarchies where male students often dominate discourse reflect Luke (1996) argument that educational spaces reproduce political and social power. The third space must be understood as power-sensitive, where gendered hierarchies shape participation and the legitimacy of contributions.

Pedagogical Dialogue as a Site of Gendered Resistance

Dialogic practices serve as platforms for resistance, especially for females who use these spaces to challenge patriarchal assumptions. Hooks (1994) views education as a practice of freedom, and Freire (1970) argues that dialogue fosters critical consciousness. Dialogues within the third space become micro-resistance practices where gendered subjects challenge dominant cultural narratives.

Cultural Scripts Limit the Transformative Capacity of Third Space Pedagogy

Cultural expectations such as modesty, male precedence, and gendered behavioural norms constrain the emancipatory potential of third space pedagogy. Mahmood's (2005) work on piety and feminist subject formation and Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "bargaining with patriarchy" help explain these limitations. The third space is shaped by culturally embedded gender scripts that often limit its capacity to be fully transformative.

Need for Gender-Responsive Third Space Facilitation

The literature highlights that third space pedagogy becomes equitable only when educators intentionally address gender inequities. Connell (2002) emphasizes the structuring power of gender, and Weiner (1995) stresses the role of feminist pedagogies in transforming classroom dynamics. Third space pedagogy requires gender-responsive facilitation to prevent the reproduction of existing inequalities.

Institutional Structures Shape Third Space Possibilities

Institutional norms, including hierarchical teaching practices, gender segregation, and restrictive administrative regulations, shape whether third space pedagogy thrives. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus explains how institutional structures reinforce gendered expectations. However, Morley (2005) highlights persistent gender inequities in higher education institutions. The third space is institutionally situated, meaning structural and policy conditions heavily influence its formation.

Third Space as a Site of Reflexivity and Critical Consciousness

Despite constraints, the third space enables reflexive engagement where students challenge internalized gender norms. Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning emphasizes reflection as key to changing perspectives. Similarly, Giroux (2005) highlights border spaces as sites for critical questioning. The third space operates as a reflexive site of critical consciousness, enabling students to interrogate gender norms and social structures.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that third space pedagogy in Pakistani higher education is deeply influenced by gender, power, and cultural norms. Classrooms are sites of negotiation where students construct hybrid identities, but gendered hierarchies and institutional constraints often shape participation and voice. However, the third space has the potential to foster reflexivity, critical consciousness, and transformative learning; its effectiveness depends on deliberate gender-sensitive facilitation and supportive institutional policies. Overall, the study contributes to understanding how pedagogical innovation interacts with socio-cultural structures, highlighting the need to embed gender considerations explicitly in teaching strategies to maximize the emancipatory potential of third space pedagogy.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- **Gender-Responsive Pedagogy:** Faculty training programs should include gender-sensitive teaching strategies that actively encourage equitable participation and address power imbalances in classroom interactions.
- **Institutional Support:** Universities should adopt policies promoting inclusive classroom practices, such as flexible group formations, safe spaces for dialogue, and recognition of gender-based barriers to participation.
- **Curriculum Design:** Course content should integrate critical perspectives on gender, power, and identity to encourage reflective learning and awareness of societal norms.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Institutions should assess classroom dynamics and pedagogical outcomes through gender audits and feedback mechanisms to identify gaps in inclusion and engagement.
- **Empowering Marginalized Voices:** Special attention should be given to supporting female students and other marginalized groups to participate confidently in hybrid and dialogic learning environments.
- **Research and Development:** Universities should support further research on third space pedagogy in local contexts to continuously refine teaching practices that balance academic rigor with socio-cultural realities.

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