

## **Queering Domestic Spaces: Subverting Heteronormativity in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* and Sharmila Mukherjee's *The Green Rose***

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### *Abstract*

*This paper investigates the deployment of domestic spaces in contemporary South Asian novels, specifically Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* and Sharmila Mukherjee's *The Green Rose*, as sites of resistance against prevailing heteronormative structures. Utilizing the theoretical frameworks of queer theory and spatial theory, informed by Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space, this study argues that intimate settings—such as bedrooms, gardens, and closets—are strategically reclaimed to challenge normative expectations. In *Babyji*, the protagonist Anamika navigates and subverts prescribed desires within the confines of her bedroom, employing bodily rituals to contest the patriarchal scripting of domestic respectability. *The Green Rose* utilizes the garden as a liminal space wherein lesbian identity intersects with natural imagery, thereby resisting rigid gendered divisions inherent in traditional family structures. Both novels illuminate the ways in which micro-spatial practices—including secret intimacies, symbolic landscapes, and acts of cultural negotiation—disrupt the hegemonic narrative of the “ideal” South Asian home. Ultimately, this paper highlights the significant role of literature in reimagining domesticity as a contested terrain where queer identities can emerge, resist, and redefine prevailing cultural expectations.*

**Keywords:** Queer theory; Spatial theory; South Asian fiction; Domestic spaces; Heteronormativity; Gender performativity

### **Introduction**

Contemporary South Asian literature has witnessed a proliferation of queer narratives that critically engage with and challenge deeply entrenched heteronormative frameworks that shape cultural and social norms. These narratives frequently locate resistance within the intimate confines of domestic spaces, traditionally perceived as loci where gendered power structures are both reinforced and negotiated. Domestic environments—bedrooms, kitchens, gardens, and closets—function not only as arenas for the performance of conventional heterosexist roles but also as potential sites for subversive acts that redefine notions of gender and desire.

This paper interrogates how novelists such as Abha Dawesar (*Babyji*, 2005) and Sharmila Mukherjee (*The Green Rose*, 2012) reimagine these spaces through the interdisciplinary lenses of

queer theory and spatial theory, thereby destabilizing the heteronormative scripting of domesticity. Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity—where gender is understood not as an inherent identity but as a repeated social act—and Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space, which frames private domains as repositories of subjective experience and resistance, this study examines how intimate settings become sites of queer contestation.

By analyzing how these authors use micro-spatial practices—such as secret intimacies, symbolic landscapes, and negotiations within familial structures—this research aims to reveal how South Asian fiction challenges the idealized narrative of the “heteronormative home” as a monolithic, unassailable institution. In doing so, it underscores the role of literature in exposing the ways domestic spaces, while historically instrumental in enforcing heteronormative norms, can be reclaimed as dynamic terrains where queer identities emerge, resist, and redefine cultural expectations. The study situates itself at the intersection of postcolonial queer studies and spatial politics, exploring how the subversion of domestic architectures in literary texts reflects broader societal tensions between tradition, modernity, and the evolving articulations of gender and desire in South Asia.

### **Theoretical Foundations: Queer Theory and Spatial Politics**

Queer theory, which emerges as a critical framework challenging the naturalization of heterosexuality as the normative sexual and gender order, provides essential tools for interrogating how domestic spaces function as sites of both enforcement and subversion of heteronormative scripts. Judith Butler's seminal work on gender performativity posits that gender is not an inherent biological fact but a repeated social practice, a “ritualized production of the social space” where norms are enacted and reinforced through daily acts (Butler, 1990). In the context of South Asian households, this performativity is most keenly visible in the gendered division of labor—where women are confined to caregiving roles in kitchens or private quarters, and men occupy public-facing domains—reinscribing the heteronormative family as a foundational unit of social order. Domestic spaces, in this sense, become theaters where scripts of marital heterosexuality, reproductive duty, and gendered respectability are performed and policed. Butler's critique of the heteronormative family as a cultural institution highlights how marriage, as a central domestic ritual, serves to naturalize gender hierarchies, rendering queer desires and identities as aberrations. By framing the home as a site of performative acts, queer theory allows us to examine how deviations from these scripts—such as same-sex intimacies or non-normative gender expression—disrupt the assumed coherence of the heteronormative household.

Complementing this perspective is Gaston Bachelard's spatial theory, particularly his exploration of domestic environments in *The Poetics of Space* (1964), which conceptualizes private spaces as repositories of emotional and psychological meaning. Bachelard distinguishes between closed spaces that embody societal conformism—such as the traditional marital bedroom as a site of regulated heterosexual intimacy—and “open” spaces that invite imaginative resistance, where the boundaries of normative experience are blurred. In South Asian contexts, bedrooms, closets, and gardens, often dismissed as marginal or secondary, become charged sites of queer imagination. The bedroom, for instance, is typically coded as a space of conjugal privacy, yet it can also become a “laboratory” for subversive acts, where bodies and desires that defy heteronormative scripts are negotiated away from public scrutiny. Bachelard's emphasis on the “topology of intimacy” underscores how spatial configurations—such as the partitioning of women's spaces

through *purdah* (veiling) or the segregation of male and female domains in joint families—serve as metaphors for social control. Conversely, acts of reclaiming these spaces—through secret interactions, symbolic reimagining, or bodily rituals—embody a resistance that challenges the very architecture of patriarchal domestication.

The intersection of queer and spatial theories is particularly vital for decoding how South Asian fiction engages with the tension between the idealized “home” as a haven of heteronormative virtue and its lived reality as a site of contestation. Queer theory helps unpack the ways in which domestic rituals (e.g., family dinners, religious observances, or marriage negotiations) reproduce gendered power, while spatial theory reveals the material and symbolic dimensions through which such power is embedded in physical environments. Together, these frameworks allow for an analysis that moves beyond surface-level representations to explore how the very fabric of the home—its rooms, routines, and rules—either enforces or enables resistance. By treating domestic spaces as both products of and platforms for heteronormative ideology, this study situates itself at the crossroads of cultural critique and spatial politics, arguing that their reimagining in contemporary fiction is a crucial site where queer identities can articulate themselves against the grain of societal expectation.

### **Case Study 1: Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*—The Bedroom as a Queer Laboratory**

In Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* (2005), the bedroom emerges as a pivotal site where protagonist Anamika Sharma negotiates her same-sex desires and subverts the heteronormative scripting of domesticity. The confined privacy of this space becomes a “queer laboratory,” where the performative nature of gender—as theorized by Judith Butler—is both exposed and resisted. Anamika's relationship with the maid Rani unfolds within the intimate quarters of her bedroom, a space traditionally coded as a heterosexual conjugal domain but reimagined here as a locus of queer intimacy. Their interactions, including charged physical rituals like massages and secret exchanges, challenge the “chaste heterosexual home” trope by inserting same-sex desire into the heart of the domestic sphere. Butler's concept of gender performativity is central here: Anamika's acts of intimacy reject the fixed binary of heterosexuality, instead performing a fluid identity that defies the patriarchal mandate for female obedience and marital fidelity. The bedroom's closet, a symbol of concealment in heteronormative discourse, becomes a tool of subversion—not merely a site of secrecy, but a space where societal expectations are dismantled. Anamika employs mirrors to confront and redefine her bodily presence, refusing the male gaze that polices female appearance and desire. These micro-level practices of resistance, as Gaston Bachelard might argue, transform the bedroom from a “closed” space of conformist domesticity into an “open” arena for queer imagination, where the body itself becomes a terrain of spatial and sexual rebellion.

The novel further interrogates the hypocrisy of middle-class respectability by contrasting the public facade of the “respectable” home with its private queer undercurrents. Anamika's family embodies the outward markers of bourgeois propriety—structured routines, social decorum, and the performative display of moral virtue—yet within the bedroom, these norms are disrupted. The act of engaging in same-sex intimacy with Rani exposes the tension between the home's public image and its private transgressions, highlighting how heteronormativity relies on the suppression of non-conformist desires to maintain its authority. Bachelard's notion of domestic space as a repository of cultural memory and power is inverted here: rather than reinforcing

patriarchal control, the bedroom becomes a site where Anamika asserts agency, if only in secret. By reclaiming this space through bodily rituals and intimate connections, she resists the gendered scripts that relegate women to roles of submissiveness and heteronormative compliance. Dawesar's subversion of the bedroom as a 'queer laboratory' illustrates how enclosed domestic spaces can become sites of radical intimacy. In contrast, Mukherjee's *The Green Rose* shifts focus to the garden, a liminal zone where nature's organic fluidity—embodied in the symbol of the 'green rose'—challenges the rigid gendered partitions of traditional households. While the two novels employ distinct spatial strategies (the private interior vs. the semi-public exterior), they converge in their reimagining of domesticity as a contested terrain where queer desires disrupt heteronormative scripts.

### **Case Study 2: Sharmila Mukherjee's *The Green Rose*—Negotiating Queer Identity in Familial Landscapes**

In *The Green Rose*, Mukherjee employs the garden as a liminal space that bridges the natural and the domestic, the public and the private, to articulate a lesbian identity that resists the rigid gendered divisions of traditional South Asian households. Unlike the enclosed, surveilled interiors of *Babyji*, the garden emerges as a site of fluidity and possibility, where the protagonist's desire intersects with the organic, unruly imagery of nature—blossoming flowers, shifting seasons, and the interplay of light and shadow. Bachelard's distinction between “closed” and “open” spaces finds resonance here: the garden, as an “open” domain, defies the patriarchal scripting of indoor spaces as sites of female domesticity and outdoor realms as masculine terrains of authority. Instead, it becomes a metaphor for the protagonist's evolving identity, where same-sex longing is mirrored in the natural world's rejection of binary categorization. For instance, the “green rose,” a central symbol in the novel, embodies both beauty and transgression—a flower that deviates from conventional color norms, much like the protagonist's desire that challenges heteronormative expectations. By positioning moments of queer intimacy amidst the garden's foliage, Mukherjee subverts the notion that domesticity must adhere to rigid gendered roles, suggesting that nature itself accommodates fluid identities that resist societal strictures.

Complementing the garden's symbolic power is the novel's nuanced use of the closet as a dual site of confinement and revelation. In conservative households, the closet often serves as a physical and metaphorical space where queer identities are hidden, yet Mukherjee reframes it as a locus of tension between secrecy and self-assertion. The protagonist's interactions with the closet—whether concealing love letters, wearing clothing that defies gendered norms, or using its confined space for moments of introspection—highlight the dialectical relationship between oppression and resistance. Here, the closet transcends its literal function as a storage unit, becoming a metonym for the negotiation of identity in environments that demand conformity. Butler's theory of gender performativity is crucial here: the act of occupying or reclaiming the closet becomes a performative gesture, a way of refusing the heteronormative demand to embody a fixed, legible identity. By depicting the closet as both a prison and a sanctuary, Mukherjee underscores the complexity of queer existence within spaces that simultaneously constrain and enable self-expression.

The novel further interrogates the heteronormative ideal of the joint family—a cornerstone of South Asian social structure—by situating queer desire within its hierarchical and interconnected dynamics. In joint households, where multiple generations coexist under one roof, the pressure

to uphold familial honor, arrange marriages, and reproduce heteronormative values is intense. Mukherjee's protagonist navigates this terrain through subtle acts of resistance: forming alliances with progressive elders who challenge traditional gender roles, subverting domestic rituals (such as shared meals or religious practices) to create spaces for queer intimacy, and refusing to conform to the expectation of marital obedience. The home, in this context, is not a unified site of heteronormativity but a fractured landscape where generational conflicts and alliances become arenas for negotiating queer visibility. For example, the protagonist's relationship with a female cousin or friend might unfold within the guise of “innocent” companionship, leveraging the performative nature of domestic roles to carve out subversive spaces. By depicting the joint family as a site of both oppression and potential solidarity, Mukherjee challenges the monolithic narrative of the “Indian family” as a homogeneous unit wedded to heterosexuality, revealing instead a complex ecosystem where queer desires persist despite—and sometimes through—cultural hybridity.

Taken together, the garden, closet, and joint-family structure in *The Green Rose* illustrate how spatial politics intersect with queer resistance. Mukherjee employs these settings not merely as backdrops but as active participants in the construction of identity, demonstrating that domestic spaces can be reimagined when viewed through the lens of queer possibility. By blending natural imagery with the intimate geography of the home, she argues that resistance need not occur in overtly public arenas but can emerge from the very heart of supposedly “traditional” environments, where the daily negotiation of space becomes a form of quiet, yet powerful, subversion.

### **Comparative Analysis: Shared Strategies of Subversion**

Both *Babyji* and *The Green Rose* employ a dialectical relationship between private and public spatial domains to unravel the fissures within heteronormative structures, revealing how micro-level resistances in intimate spaces can challenge macro-institutional norms. In *Babyji*, the bedroom serves as a microcosm of private rebellion against the public facade of respectability: Anamika's same-sex intimacies with Rani unfold within the walls of a space traditionally coded as a heterosexual conjugal unit, transforming it into a “queer laboratory” where gendered performances are deconstructed. The closet, a quintessential private space, becomes both a literal and metaphorical site of concealment and revelation—holding not just clothing but the secrets of desire that defy patriarchal surveillance. This contrasts sharply with the public portrayal of the middle-class home as a bastion of chastity and familial order, exposing the hypocrisy of a society that polices private lives in the name of cultural respectability. Similarly, Mukherjee's *The Green Rose* employs the garden—a liminal space that bridges the private domestic realm and the public natural world—to negotiate queer identity. The garden's fluidity, with its organic growth and lack of rigid boundaries, mirrors the protagonist's resistance to the gendered division of indoor “female” spaces and outdoor “male” domains in traditional South Asian households. Here, the garden becomes a site where desire and self-assertion bloom outside the heteronormative gaze, challenging the notion that domesticity must be confined to heterosexual reproductive roles.

The novels also share a reliance on subversive language and spatial metaphors to rewrite domestic narratives. In *Babyji*, the act of reclaiming the bedroom through bodily rituals—such as the massage scenes between Anamika and Rani—employs tactile imagery to subvert the symbolic violence of patriarchal spatial control. These scenes reject the passive “feminine”

role assigned to women, instead framing touch as an act of agency and queer spatial ownership. Mukherjee's use of the "green rose" as a symbol of forbidden desire employs natural imagery to resist the rigid categorization of sexuality within the joint-family structure. The rose, both a part of the domestic garden and a deviation from its "normal" bloom, mirrors the protagonist's identity as both embedded in and defiant of familial expectations. Similarly, the closet in both texts transcends its physical function, becoming a metaphor for the tension between the need for secrecy and the urge for self-revelation—a duality that reflects the precarious balance queer individuals navigate in conservative environments. By weaving such metaphors into their narratives, Dawesar and Mukherjee transform domestic spaces into linguistic and symbolic battlegrounds where heteronormative norms are not just challenged but reimagined.

Ultimately, the comparative analysis reveals that both novels leverage the intimate scale of domesticity to enact broader cultural critique. By focusing on private acts of resistance—whether through secret intimacies, symbolic landscapes, or hybrid cultural negotiations—they expose the ways in which heteronormativity relies on the policing of micro-spaces to maintain macro-institutional power. In doing so, they contribute to a growing corpus of South Asian queer literature that reemploys to relegate queer experiences to the margins of domestic life, instead centralizing them as sites where cultural norms can be both interrogated and rewritten. The shared strategies of spatial subversion highlight how literature can make visible the invisible—turning the private struggles of queer individuals into a collective narrative of resistance that challenges the very foundations of heteronormative domesticity.

### Conclusion

As initially posited in the introduction, this research set out to explore how contemporary South Asian fiction reconfigures domestic spaces to subvert heteronormative frameworks, thereby illuminating the complex interplay between spatial politics and queer resistance. Through an in-depth analysis of *Babyji* by Abha Dawesar and *The Green Rose* by Sharmila Mukherjee, we have witnessed a significant reimagining of domestic spaces. These are no longer simply the sites that uphold patriarchal and heteronormative values; instead, they have been transformed into dynamic arenas where queer identities can thrive and resist.

In *Babyji*, Anamika's utilization of the bedroom as a "queer laboratory" through various bodily rituals directly challenges the fixed gender roles and heteronormative expectations deeply ingrained in South Asian domesticity. This micro-spatial practice not only disrupts the traditional script of domestic respectability but also exposes the performative nature of gender within the family context, echoing Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Similarly, in *The Green Rose*, the garden serves as a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between the natural and domestic, the public and private. It becomes a powerful symbol for the protagonist's evolving lesbian identity, resisting the rigid gendered divisions of traditional South Asian households, which aligns with Gaston Bachelard's poetics of space.

This study enriches postcolonial queer studies in multiple ways. It highlights the crucial role of literature in critiquing neoliberal multiculturalism, which often marginalizes queer experiences within traditional family setups. By presenting domestic environments as contested terrains where power, gender, and desire converge, these novels offer a nuanced alternative to the monolithic ideal of the heteronormative home. The connection between spatial politics and gendered desire in these literary works underscores the potential of literature to challenge cultural conservatism

and envision more inclusive futures.

Looking towards the future, the emerging fields of digital media and transnational diasporic narratives hold great promise for further exploring the evolution of spatial resistances. These areas can provide new perspectives on how queer individuals navigate and redefine spaces across different cultural and social contexts. This would not only deepen our understanding of the subject but also reaffirm the significance of literature in facilitating dialogues about identity, space, and social change.

In conclusion, *Babyji* and *The Green Rose* serve as prime examples of how reimagining domesticity as a site of queer possibility can significantly enrich literary scholarship. They contribute to broader discussions on the fluidity of identities, the power of resistance, and the ability of narrative to reshape cultural norms, thus paving the way for a more inclusive and understanding society.

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