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Cultural Silence and Social Anxiety: Lesbian Desire in Urban India in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*

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ABSTRACT

Abha Dawesar's Babyji presents a nuanced exploration of lesbian desire within an urban Indian setting where social modernity coexists with entrenched cultural discomfort toward female sexuality. This paper examines how lesbian desire in the novel is shaped by silence, concealment, and unspoken social pressures rather than overt prohibition. Through close textual analysis, the study investigates the ways in which urban space offers limited freedom while simultaneously reinforcing heteronormative expectations that compel same-sex desire to remain private. The narrative reveals how social anxiety surrounding lesbian relationships manifests through moral surveillance, secrecy, and the regulation of female bodies and choices. The protagonist's negotiation of desire highlights the conflict between personal agency and the need for social acceptance, underscoring the emotional and psychological cost of living outside normative sexual frameworks. Drawing on feminist and queer critical perspectives, this paper argues that Babyji exposes the contradictions within urban Indian culture, where progressiveness is often superficial and conditional. By foregrounding marginalized lesbian experiences, the novel challenges dominant constructions of sexuality and contributes significantly to contemporary discussions on queer representation in Indian English fiction.

***Keywords**: Lesbian Desire, Cultural Silence, Urban Indian Fiction, Queer Representation.*

Introduction

In Indian English fiction, lesbian experience has traditionally occupied a marginal position, reflecting a broader cultural hesitation to acknowledge female sexuality outside heterosexual frameworks. When same-sex desire does appear, it is often filtered through silence, implication, or moral discomfort, reinforcing the idea that women's sexual agency remains socially regulated. Such representation mirrors a society where deviation from prescribed norms invites scrutiny rather than understanding. Literary texts therefore become significant spaces for examining how marginalized desires find expression under conditions of restraint. In *Babyji*, Abha Dawesar departs from this pattern by presenting lesbian desire as an integral aspect of lived experience rather than a symbolic or sensational element. The narrative foregrounds desire in its immediacy and complexity, resisting attempts to render it invisible or deviant within dominant cultural discourse (Dawesar 7).

The urban setting of *Babyji* initially appears to promise intellectual openness and personal freedom; however, the novel gradually reveals the limitations of such assumptions. Urban modernity in the text coexists with entrenched expectations of female propriety, creating a space where non-normative desire is tolerated only through discretion. Lesbian desire is not met with direct condemnation but is constrained through silence and the unspoken need for secrecy. This atmosphere produces a persistent

social anxiety, as the characters remain conscious of the consequences of visibility. Dawesar illustrates how the regulation of sexuality operates subtly through social observation rather than explicit prohibition, compelling desire to remain private in order to avoid social disruption. In exposing these contradictions, the novel critiques the conditional nature of acceptance within urban Indian society, where conformity continues to outweigh individual freedom (Dawesar 15).

The regulation of lesbian desire in *Babyji* can be productively understood through queer theoretical discussions of heteronormativity and social control. Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" explains how heterosexuality is enforced not merely through law but through cultural expectations that define it as natural and inevitable (Rich 637). In *Babyji*, lesbian desire does not exist outside society but within its structures, constantly negotiating visibility and concealment. The absence of open hostility toward same-sex desire does not indicate acceptance; rather, it reflects a system that manages difference through silence. Such silence functions as a disciplinary mechanism, ensuring that non-normative desire does not challenge social norms publicly. Dawesar's narrative demonstrates how lesbian relationships remain viable only when they do not threaten the appearance of heterosexual normalcy, reinforcing Rich's argument that women's desire is shaped by social conditioning rather than free choice (638).

Michel Foucault's analysis of sexuality further illuminates the subtle forms of power operating within the novel. Foucault argues that modern societies do not repress sexuality outright but instead regulate it through discourse, surveillance, and normalization (Foucault 92). This framework is particularly relevant to *Babyji*, where social control manifests through observation, gossip, and the internalization of restraint rather than overt punishment. The characters' awareness of being watched by family, peers, or society at large, creates an atmosphere in which desire must be carefully managed. Lesbian intimacy is thus confined to private spaces, reinforcing the division between acceptable public behaviour and forbidden private longing. By portraying this internalized surveillance, Dawesar reflects Foucault's claim that power operates most effectively when individuals regulate themselves. The novel exposes how social anxiety surrounding lesbian desire is sustained not through force but through the quiet pressure to conform (Foucault 95).

The protagonist of *Babyji* negotiates her lesbian desire within the layered constraints of family expectations, educational institutions, and social norms, illustrating the complex interplay between private longing and public conformity. In the novel, her relationships with women are shaped not only by attraction but also by the need to navigate secrecy in order to avoid social censure. For instance, she reflects on the consequences of her actions, noting that even subtle displays of intimacy could invite speculation or judgment (Dawesar 42). This internalized awareness reflects Adrienne Rich's argument that heterosexuality is imposed as a compulsory social norm, shaping how women perceive and express their desire (Rich 637). The protagonist's desire exists within a tightly regulated cultural context where deviation from heterosexual expectation is neither openly punished nor wholly accepted, producing an anxiety that permeates her private interactions. Dawesar portrays the duality of urban modernity. While the city offers spaces for exploration, it simultaneously enforces invisibility. By highlighting the tension between private desire and social expectation, the narrative underscores the emotional labor required to maintain autonomy while negotiating cultural silence. The protagonist's strategies, such as careful planning, selective disclosure, and the cultivation of intimate spaces, reveal how non-normative desire must constantly be negotiated to coexist with the expectations of a heteronormative society. In this sense, the novel demonstrates that desire is not purely an individual impulse but a social act, constrained and shaped by the surrounding structures of power (Rich 638).

Foucault's insights on the subtle operations of power provide a useful lens to understand how surveillance and social anxiety structure the protagonist's experiences. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that power functions most effectively when individuals internalize societal expectations, regulating themselves in anticipation of scrutiny (Foucault 92–93). In the novel, the protagonist's awareness of potential observation from family members, peers, and authority figures creates a constant tension between freedom and restraint. Even in moments of intimate encounter, she exhibits self-consciousness, reflecting on how exposure could jeopardize her position within her family and social circles (Dawesar 55). This self-surveillance mirrors Foucault's notion that power does not only operate through explicit coercion but also through the internalization of norms that condition behaviour. Dawesar's depiction of the protagonist's calculated engagement with desire illustrates the pervasive effects of cultural surveillance. While urban modernity provides physical spaces for interaction, the

psychological pressure of conformity remains inescapable. The narrative thereby complicates simplistic notions of liberation, suggesting that desire cannot exist in isolation from social regulation. By integrating Foucault's theory of disciplinary power with Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality, the novel positions lesbian desire as both a site of personal fulfilment and a terrain of constant negotiation, revealing the emotional and psychological toll exacted by cultural expectations (Foucault 95; Rich 638).

A central aspect of *Babyji* is the protagonist's relationships with other women, which reveal the complex interplay of power, intimacy, and desire. These relationships are rarely straightforward; they are shaped by age, experience, and social positioning, highlighting the ways in which desire is mediated by external pressures. For example, the protagonist's interactions with her older romantic partners involve both attraction and a careful awareness of authority, demonstrating how power dynamics influence intimacy (Dawesar 73). This dynamic reflects Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which suggests that identity and desire are not inherent but enacted through repeated social and interpersonal performances (Butler 520). In negotiating these relationships, the protagonist must continuously perform discretion, modulating her behaviour to align with social expectations while satisfying her personal desires. The emotional complexity of these encounters underscores the psychological burden of living within a heteronormative society that monitors and defines female sexuality. Dawesar's depiction of these layered relationships illustrates that lesbian desire cannot be fully separated from its social context. The protagonist's strategic engagement with intimacy shows how personal fulfilment and social compliance often coexist uneasily, reinforcing the broader theme that urban modernity provides opportunities for desire only when it is contained and carefully managed.

The psychological consequences of this negotiation are particularly evident in the protagonist's self-reflection and moral contemplation. She frequently questions the ethics of her actions, pondering not only the potential judgment from her peers and family but also the impact of secrecy on her own sense of identity (Dawesar 81). This mirrors Foucault's assertion that power functions internally as much as externally, shaping the subject's thoughts and behaviour in anticipation of surveillance (Foucault 93). The protagonist's internalized monitoring creates a persistent tension between desire and restraint, emphasizing the emotional cost of conformity. Additionally, Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality illuminates the social pressures that render lesbian desire an area of negotiation rather than unrestrained expression (Rich 637). Dawesar's narrative presents these pressures not as abstract forces but as lived experiences, capturing the anxiety, exhilaration, and vulnerability that accompany same-sex desire in an urban Indian context. Through detailed attention to the protagonist's thoughts and interactions, the novel demonstrates that lesbian desire is inseparable from its social and cultural environment. The careful balance between longing and concealment emphasizes that personal identity is continuously shaped by external forces, highlighting the intricate relationship between individual agency and societal expectation.

The urban setting of *Babyji* functions as both a facilitator and a constraint on lesbian desire, demonstrating how cultural and spatial contexts shape the expression of non-normative sexuality. The protagonist navigates schools, streets, and private apartments, each space offering different levels of freedom and surveillance (Dawesar 102). Public spaces such as classrooms or social gatherings impose implicit rules, where deviation from heteronormative behaviour could attract attention or censure. In contrast, private spaces like rooms, letters, and secluded areas allow desire to be enacted more freely, albeit under the constant awareness that exposure could have consequences. This division reflects Foucault's notion that power operates through both visibility and invisibility, regulating behaviour by making subjects conscious of observation and social norms (Foucault 92). Furthermore, Adrienne Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality explains why lesbian desire must be negotiated even in spaces that appear liberating; the social assumption of heterosexuality remains dominant, limiting the protagonist's ability to fully inhabit her identity (Rich 637). Dawesar's depiction of urban spaces illustrates that desire is not merely a personal experience but is continually conditioned by societal structures. The novel emphasizes that urban modernity, while seemingly progressive, reproduces heteronormative expectations through surveillance, social pressure, and moral scrutiny, requiring constant negotiation by those whose desires fall outside the norm.

Cultural norms and familial expectations further restrict the protagonist's ability to express her sexuality openly, reinforcing the tension between private desire and public conformity. In her reflections, the protagonist acknowledges the moral codes she must navigate, noting that even minor deviations from acceptable behaviour could result in gossip, shame, or social alienation (Dawesar 110). These observations demonstrate how urban Indian society enforces conformity not only through formal rules but

also through informal mechanisms such as reputation, social expectation, and the internalization of moral judgment. Foucault's framework of disciplinary power clarifies this dynamic, illustrating that individuals internalize social norms and regulate their behaviour accordingly, even in the absence of direct enforcement (Foucault 95). Similarly, Rich's perspective highlights the pervasive influence of compulsory heterosexuality, showing how the social expectation of heterosexual relationships shapes women's understanding and negotiation of desire (Rich 638). By portraying the protagonist's constant awareness of social surveillance and her strategic negotiation of desire, Dawesar emphasizes the emotional and psychological labour involved in maintaining both personal fulfilment and social acceptability. The novel thereby underscores that lesbian desire in urban India cannot exist in isolation; it is embedded in a network of cultural norms, social anxieties, and power dynamics that define and constrain sexual expression.

Emotional intimacy in *Babyji* operates alongside secrecy, demonstrating the careful balancing act the protagonist must maintain between personal fulfilment and societal expectation. The narrative presents moments of profound connection with other women, where affection, desire, and vulnerability coexist with a constant awareness of potential exposure (Dawesar 125). These intimate encounters are often framed by strategies of concealment, highlighting the social anxiety surrounding lesbian desire in urban India. The protagonist's internal reflections reveal the tension between genuine emotional connection and the need to regulate her expressions of desire, suggesting that intimacy is inseparable from social constraint. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is particularly relevant here, as it emphasizes that desire and identity are enacted within social frameworks rather than arising purely from internal inclination (Butler 520). Each interaction with a romantic partner becomes a performance shaped by anticipation of judgment, necessitating careful management of both emotion and behaviour. Dawesar's text illustrates how lesbian desire is mediated not only by personal inclination but also by social structures that define acceptable conduct, demonstrating the continuous negotiation required to maintain both selfhood and social conformity. The protagonist's dual awareness of passion and propriety reveals the emotional labour inherent in sustaining same-sex intimacy within a society that prioritizes heteronormativity.

Secrecy emerges as a central strategy in the negotiation of desire, allowing the protagonist to inhabit private spaces of fulfilment while avoiding public scrutiny. In the novel, letters, whispered conversations, and clandestine meetings provide arenas where desire can be expressed more freely, yet even these moments are tempered by fear and self-consciousness (Dawesar 132). Foucault's notion of disciplinary power offers insight into this phenomenon, illustrating how individuals internalize societal expectations and regulate their behaviour to avoid sanctions or social censure (Foucault 93). The protagonist's reliance on secrecy underscores the broader cultural pressures that compel conformity and highlight the invisible structures of surveillance within urban society. Additionally, Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality elucidates why same-sex desire is rendered clandestine, emphasizing that heterosexual norms define both visibility and acceptability of desire (Rich 637). Dawesar's careful depiction of the interplay between intimacy and concealment demonstrates that lesbian desire is experienced as both a source of personal satisfaction and a potential site of anxiety. The novel thereby positions secrecy not merely as a protective measure but as a structural necessity, reflecting the pervasive influence of social, cultural, and familial expectations on the formation and expression of lesbian identity.

Power and agency within the protagonist's relationships in *Babyji* are central to understanding the novel's depiction of lesbian desire. While intimacy offers moments of personal autonomy, it is always negotiated within structures of authority and social expectation. For instance, interactions with older partners reveal an implicit hierarchy where experience, age, and social positioning influence consent and the expression of desire (Dawesar 145). The protagonist's awareness of these dynamics requires constant self-reflection, highlighting the complexities of navigating both emotional fulfilment and power imbalances. Judith Butler's concept of performativity underscores this negotiation, suggesting that identity and desire are continuously constructed through social interaction and performance rather than preexisting internal traits (Butler 520). Within these relationships, the protagonist must consciously enact behaviours that balance personal desire with the implicit rules of social propriety, demonstrating how lesbian desire is simultaneously a site of empowerment and constraint. Dawesar emphasizes that even in moments of apparent freedom, power operates subtly, shaping decisions and emotional expression, which reflects broader societal forces that govern the visibility and acceptability of same-sex desire.

Consent in *Babyji* is portrayed as a multifaceted and context-dependent concept, entwined with social norms and cultural expectations. The protagonist's engagements reveal that consent is never merely a private agreement between individuals but is influenced by age, hierarchy, and social positioning, creating a continuous negotiation between personal desire and ethical consideration (Dawesar 150). Foucault's theory of disciplinary power provides a framework to understand this dynamic, illustrating how power structures influence the ways individuals perceive and exercise agency within intimate relationships (Foucault 95). The internalization of social expectations shapes the protagonist's sense of responsibility, as she weighs her own desires against the potential consequences of exposure or judgment. This tension reflects Adrienne Rich's observation that compulsory heterosexuality conditions women's understanding of sexual agency, rendering deviation from heteronormative norms fraught with moral and social complexity (Rich 638). Through the nuanced portrayal of consent and agency, Dawesar highlights that lesbian desire in urban India is both an intimate experience and a social negotiation, shaped by intersecting forces of power, culture, and personal ethics. The novel thereby demonstrates that desire and morality are inextricably linked, producing a layered psychological and emotional landscape for the protagonist.

Urban culture in *Babyji* functions as both a space of opportunity and constraint, shaping how lesbian desire is expressed and perceived. The protagonist experiences the city as a network of possibilities, including educational institutions, social gatherings, and private spaces, yet each setting carries implicit expectations regarding behaviour and propriety (Dawesar 165). Public spaces in particular enforce subtle forms of surveillance, where deviation from heteronormative norms can invite gossip, judgment, or exclusion. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power helps explain how these societal pressures operate, demonstrating that individuals internalize rules of conduct and regulate their own behaviour in anticipation of scrutiny (Foucault 92–93). Similarly, Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality illuminates why the protagonist's desire must remain largely private, showing how heterosexual norms dictate not only public visibility but also the internal experience of sexuality (Rich 637). Dawesar portrays urban culture as a paradoxical environment: it appears modern and permissive, yet it reproduces traditional expectations through observation, moral codes, and social hierarchy. The city thus becomes a critical arena in which lesbian identity is negotiated, revealing the constant tension between private desire and public acceptability.

Societal judgment and the fear of exposure are recurring motifs that shape the protagonist's sense of self and her negotiation of desire. Throughout the novel, she is acutely aware of how even minor transgressions could disrupt her social standing and family reputation, generating persistent anxiety and self-monitoring (Dawesar 172). This phenomenon reflects Foucault's claim that power is most effective when internalized, shaping thought and behaviour even in the absence of direct coercion (Foucault 95). The protagonist's consciousness of societal surveillance demonstrates that urban modernity does not eliminate social constraint but transforms it into internalized discipline. Additionally, Rich's analysis of compulsory heterosexuality explains why women's same-sex desire is often experienced as morally ambiguous or socially risky (Rich 638). By foregrounding the psychological burden of living under cultural scrutiny, Dawesar emphasizes that identity formation is an ongoing negotiation shaped by the intersecting pressures of desire, social expectation, and cultural norms. The novel thereby illustrates that lesbian desire is inseparable from the wider urban and social context, where freedom and constraint coexist, and selfhood is continuously mediated by both internal reflection and external observation.

Despite the pervasive cultural and social constraints, the protagonist in *Babyji* demonstrates moments of resistance and the assertion of personal agency, illustrating that desire can operate as a subtle form of subversion. These acts of agency are often small and private, such as initiating intimate encounters, choosing whom to trust, or carving out personal spaces where desire can be explored safely (Dawesar 185). While these actions may seem minor, they reflect an ongoing negotiation with societal norms and expectations, highlighting the protagonist's strategic autonomy. Judith Butler's theory of performativity helps explain this dynamic, as identity and desire are enacted through repeated behaviours that can both reinforce and challenge social norms (Butler 521). In the protagonist's case, these behaviours allow her to express her sexuality within a framework that might otherwise suppress it, demonstrating that even constrained desire can be a site of empowerment. Dawesar emphasizes that urban modernity provides both opportunities and limitations: while the protagonist can navigate spaces that offer temporary freedom, her agency is always circumscribed by the awareness of observation, cultural judgment, and moral expectation. The narrative thereby suggests that resistance is neither total

nor absolute but exists within the conditions imposed by society, making acts of desire and self-expression inherently meaningful.

Subversion of normative expectations in *Babyji* is closely tied to the protagonist's negotiation of identity, highlighting how desire can simultaneously challenge and conform to social structures. By pursuing relationships that defy heteronormative assumptions, the protagonist reclaims aspects of autonomy and emotional expression while maintaining strategic discretion to avoid detection (Dawesar 192). This dual strategy reflects Foucault's argument that power is exercised through both constraint and opportunity, making resistance possible only within the limits imposed by societal norms (Foucault 95). Moreover, Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality underscores the cultural pressures that necessitate such subversion, demonstrating that non-normative desire is conditioned by and responsive to dominant expectations of heterosexuality (Rich 638). Dawesar's portrayal of the protagonist's careful negotiation emphasizes that lesbian desire in urban India is both a personal and social project, enacted within a web of moral, cultural, and familial constraints. By foregrounding these subtle forms of resistance, the novel illustrates that personal agency is not defined solely by overt rebellion but also by the ability to assert desire, intimacy, and identity within constrained social spaces. This nuanced depiction positions the protagonist's experiences as emblematic of the broader struggle to reconcile individual longing with normative pressures in contemporary Indian society.

Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* provides a complex and nuanced portrayal of lesbian desire in urban India, revealing the intricate ways in which private longing is shaped by societal, familial, and cultural expectations. The protagonist's experiences illustrate that desire cannot exist purely as an individual phenomenon; it is always mediated by social norms, moral codes, and the pervasive expectation of heterosexuality (Dawesar 210). Through her intimate relationships, Dawesar portrays the constant negotiation between private fulfilment and public conformity, emphasizing the emotional and psychological labour required to maintain both selfhood and social acceptability. Even in seemingly progressive urban spaces, the protagonist's actions are shaped by subtle surveillance, social observation, and the anticipation of judgment, reflecting the tension between apparent modernity and enduring cultural constraints. By foregrounding these tensions, the novel positions lesbian desire as a lived experience that is simultaneously personal, relational, and socially constructed, demonstrating that the expression of sexuality in contemporary India involves continuous negotiation with external pressures, internalized norms, and the fear of exposure.

The novel also emphasizes the role of power, agency, and consent in shaping the dynamics of lesbian desire, showing that intimate relationships are not purely private acts of choice but are influenced by age, hierarchy, experience, and social positioning (Dawesar 150). The protagonist's awareness of these factors reflects Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which suggests that identity and desire are not fixed but are continuously enacted and regulated within social contexts (Butler 520). Similarly, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power illuminates the ways in which self-surveillance and internalized social expectations structure the protagonist's behaviour, making desire contingent upon social acceptability rather than personal inclination alone (Foucault 95). Adrienne Rich's notion of compulsory heterosexuality further demonstrates how societal norms frame non-normative desire as precarious or morally ambiguous, compelling the protagonist to manage her relationships through discretion, secrecy, and careful negotiation (Rich 638). Dawesar's depiction of these dynamics underscores that lesbian desire is experienced both as a source of emotional fulfilment and as a site of continuous negotiation, highlighting the interplay of autonomy and constraint in shaping personal identity.

Urban settings in *Babyji* play a critical role in defining the scope and limits of desire, functioning as both spaces of opportunity and arenas of subtle social control. Schools, social gatherings, and private apartments provide temporary zones in which the protagonist can explore intimacy, yet each space is embedded with implicit rules, expectations, and moral codes that regulate behaviour and visibility (Dawesar 165). The novel illustrates that modernity and education do not automatically translate into freedom, as the protagonist must continuously balance her own desires against the pressures of observation, reputation, and social propriety. Foucault's concept of power operating through invisibility and internalized discipline explains how even ostensibly open spaces become sites of constraint, shaping behaviour through anticipation of surveillance and social judgment (Foucault 93). Rich's theory of compulsory heterosexuality similarly clarifies why lesbian desire must often be enacted in private, demonstrating how social norms condition both the visibility and expression of sexuality (Rich 637). By carefully mapping the interaction between physical and social space, Dawesar emphasizes that the

negotiation of desire is inseparable from the cultural, institutional, and urban frameworks within which it exists, highlighting the complexities of identity formation in a socially regulated environment.

Ultimately, *Babyji* affirms the significance of lesbian voices in Indian English literature by presenting desire and identity as lived, embodied experiences rather than abstract or symbolic concepts. The protagonist's navigation of secrecy, emotional intimacy, and strategic autonomy illustrates the subtle ways in which agency and resistance operate within a socially constrained context (Dawesar 215). By integrating theoretical perspectives from Butler, Foucault, and Rich, the novel demonstrates that desire, identity, and social regulation are mutually constitutive, shaping not only the protagonist's personal experience but also the cultural understanding of sexuality. Dawesar emphasizes that acts of resistance and assertion, however small or discreet, are significant, highlighting the protagonist's ability to negotiate identity and intimacy in spaces that do not fully permit them. The narrative thereby presents lesbian desire as a site of tension, creativity, and resilience, revealing how individual longing and social expectation coexist in dynamic and often contradictory ways. In foregrounding these complexities, *Babyji* contributes meaningfully to the discourse on queer identity, urban modernity, and cultural negotiation, demonstrating that the experience of desire is inseparable from the social, emotional, and psychological frameworks that define contemporary Indian society.

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