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Gendered Spatial Politics and Queer Subjectivity in Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*

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Abstract: This paper reads *Cobalt Blue* through the prism of spatial politics, drawing upon Edward Soja's Thirdspace and Michel Foucault's heterotopia. This study focuses on how domestic and alternative locations mediate desire, gender, and power in a middle-class Indian household through close textual analysis of particular episodes when spatial memory and control overlap. To analyse how places like the tower room, rented apartments, and even open roads become precarious zones of autonomy for the siblings Tanay and Anuja, who are each negotiating their own identities against the backdrop of surveillance and normative expectations, the methodological framework combines Foucault's concept of heterotopia with Edward Soja's idea of Thirdspace. The novel's themes of sexuality and sibling dynamics are well addressed in existing literature, but the spatial dimensions of resistance and confinement are usually overlooked. To address this gap, the paper employs spatial theory and close textual analysis to argue that Kundalkar's story actively uses the domestic space as a tool for self-expression, exclusion, and control rather than just as a physical backdrop. This helps to advance discussions on gendered and queer subjectivity in modern Indian fiction.

Keywords: Spatial theory, Gender and surveillance, Queer subjectivity, Heterotopia, Thirdspace, Indian queer fiction.

Recent trends in Indian English writing mark a significant shift from grand post-colonial and diasporic narratives to a minuscule examination of personal experience. Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*, translated by Jerry Pinto, is an exploration of the private desire within the public constraints of a conservative household in early 2000s Pune. The novel reflects rigid gender roles, strict heteronormativity, and the silencing of one's sexuality. The narrative explores the romantic fallout of a shared, unspoken relationship with an unnamed houseguest through the dual narrative of siblings Tanay and Anuja. Not only do their emotional trajectories develop simultaneously, but they do so across distinctly gendered spatial boundaries within an emotionally claustrophobic landscape. The walls of the house become not just witnesses but also accomplices in their respective narratives.



At the heart of *Cobalt Blue* lies the tower room, quietly hanging above the main house. If the lone room upstairs with “its own access” (Kundalkar, 2006) promises an illusion of privacy, the domestic space below becomes a tool of close surveillance and social control. Initially intended by the parents as a future conjugal space for Aseem and eventually commodified as a rentable room, the space is persistently shaped by the family’s heteronormative and materialistic priorities. It underscores Foucault’s idea that space is not just a passive container of instances and emotions, but it is a dynamic entity and an active component in social life (Foucault, 1984). Every space is produced through social relations and is inseparable from the structures of power within a society. These spatial arrangements reinforce and enact social control.

The architecture of the house also speaks volumes about the tension between individual identity and the physical space. The lack of doors between rooms highlights the absence of spatial privacy, suggesting how domestic spaces turn into performance stages, where “each one of (them) must perform (their) joys and sorrows for the rest...” (Kundalkar, 2006). These emotions are policed and expected to follow normative scripts. The hall, with its “man-sized showcase” (Kundalkar, 2006), is erratically stuffed with items that represent middle-class respectability and conformity. Anuja, too, notes that the house was “big enough for middle-class dreams but not for privacy” (Kundalkar, 2006). It is for the same reason that Anuja is forbidden from venturing upstairs, thus guaranteeing her visibility and accountability. She also remains sceptical that her mother might read her personal diary entries, suggesting that the house is inhospitable to privacy. It establishes the core tension between space and individuality in the novel, where the house meets the material expectations but fails to provide individual autonomy to its residents. It also reiterates that power is made visible through such spatial arrangements.

The Joshi house also resembles what Sara Ahmed has termed the “domestic affective economy” (Ahmed, 2004). The house acts like a contained affective system of established rules, like that of Indian middle-class respectability, heteronormative priorities, and conformity. However, the induction of the houseguest disrupts this affective system, triggering new emotions and desires which may not be in conformity with the established rules.

Hanging just above the main house, yet physically removed from it, the tower room acts as a liminal “third space” (Soja, 1996), transcending conventional boundaries and allowing divergent identities to surface. It



becomes a site of resistance, creativity, and alternative order. It is in this room that Tanay's unspoken relationship with the renter unfolds. Away from the scrutinising air of the house, the tower-room becomes a locus of dreams and forbidden desires, mirroring Bachelard's idea (1958) that corners and nooks are where the imagination takes flight and the self is most vulnerable. This spatial dynamic also closely aligns with Michel Foucault's (1984) concept of "heterotopia", which refers to real spaces that exist as "other" than the normative environments we inhabit. These spaces of "otherness" act both as a reflection of reality and also as a space of illusion, offering a break away from the said reality. Hence, the tower room, too, shelters queer desires but at the same time reinforces social exclusion, shaped by heteronormative priorities. It suggests that sheltered spaces may resist dominant cultural discourses but cannot erase their power.

These heterotopias often expose the artificiality of real spaces and even compensate for what is lacking in the primary space. The tower room, in that sense, functions as a compensatory space for Tanay's homosexual identity to negotiate with the heteronormative priorities of the Joshi household. The lack of doors between rooms in the house is sharply in contrast to the closed and confined tower room with only one access door. While the impersonal items in the hall of the main house have been stagnant "for ages like an indeterminate green of fungus" (Kundalkar, 2006), the renter's ritualistic rearrangement of the tower room becomes a metaphor for self-making. When he invites Tanay to participate in this weekly act, it becomes an opportunity for reclaiming space and desire. The visual clutter and emotional stagnation of the main house contrast sharply with the aesthetic fluidity of the tower room. Here, Tanay's subjectivity can momentarily breathe. The tower room functions as a heterotopia of compensation, a temporary and fragile counter-site to the domestic order of the household.

In line with Soja's argument, the tower room undergoes constant transformation, its function shifting according to the family's changing needs. Once a shelter for ageing grandparents, it is later earmarked as Aseem's future conjugal space, briefly becomes Tanay's private refuge, remains a forbidden zone for Anuja, serves as a rental room for the family's financial convenience, and finally accommodates wedding guests. This continuous reconfiguration of the space reflects the layered and contradictory meanings imposed upon it; each aligned with the family's heteronormative and patriarchal priorities. The room, therefore, is never neutral. It is always embedded in structures of power, expectation, and social conformity (Soja, 1996).



Though it seems to promise solitude and autonomy, it ultimately cannot escape the ideological baggage of the household below.

As the eldest son and the family's normative heir, Aseem is granted the parents' bedroom, symbolically inheriting both space and authority. Tanay takes refuge in the upstairs room, carving out a space for his emotional desires. Anuja was, however, denied even that possibility. For her, the upstairs room was "a no-go area" (Kundalkar, 2006). This denial of access was not incidental. It was an enactment of gendered spatial politics drawn sharply by the family's expectations. Her mobility is controlled and confined to the ground floor. It is not just a physical boundary, but it suggests a patriarchal confinement of female agency. Even within the same house, these unspoken rules guide the allocation of space and thus authority. It reproduces a gendered politics of space which delineates who is allowed privacy, who is permitted transgression, and who must remain visible and thus accountable at all times. It is perhaps in response to this emotional as well as spatial confinement that she develops a growing obsession with treks and excursions beyond the city. It is her conscious effort to move beyond the domestic and to assert her agency in an ungendered landscape. It is during such liberating bike rides that she shares moments of privacy and emotional intimacy with the renter. The open roads become her affective landscape where she is momentarily freed from gendered roles.

Even when she returns home after fleeing away with the paying guest, the family's concern for her well-being is conditional and subject to her self-regulation. Anuja's dislocation for "a change of scene" (Kundalkar, 2006) is not an act of care but as a disciplinary measure to minimise scandal and reassert control over her life. Her body and her choices become sites of surveillance. The house thus becomes an apparatus where power operates quietly. Her right to stay in the house is exchanged for conformity to the normative behaviour and obedience to the family's rules.

In the absence of the renter's name or his previous associations, his life remains shrouded in mystery. Under such circumstances, it is safe to say that he is portrayed less as a full-fledged individual and more as a locus of the siblings' desires. The renter functions as an emotional vessel for the siblings' desires, affections, and aspirations. Tanay and Anuja project their innermost desires onto him, thus turning him into a shared site of emotional investment. In the process, he transforms into a "sticky object" (Ahmed, 2014), constructed due to the accumulation and circulation of the siblings' emotions. Consequently, when the guest leaves



unannounced from the lives of both siblings, his absence causes distress to both. Their emotions, rather than dissipating, get intensified and become even more pervasive in lieu of a fixed site of residence.

Drawing on Edward Soja's "third space" (Soja, 1996), the renter also functions as a metaphorical and a symbolic space. Since both siblings desire the same person, they compete for the same emotional and physical territory. This creates a unique and complex spatial dynamic.

Anuja's dream of spatial autonomy remains unfulfilled even as she absconds from the Joshi house. In her shared flat with the paying guest, she once again finds herself in the margins. While he gradually makes the space his own, both by means of payment of rent and cluttering it with his art supplies and poetry books, Anuja does not own the space either materially or emotionally. In her case, one form of displacement simply leads to another. She painfully finds herself to be an outsider to the "many dimensions of his personality" (Kundalkar, 2006). The seeming utopia of Anuja's dreams soon collapses when he leaves unannounced. With no means of sustenance, Anuja is forced to return home. However, the home she comes back to is no longer hers in a meaningful way. Anuja's room is quietly stripped of her identity, being repurposed as a storeroom. This physical reallocation signals that there is no space reserved for her return. It is the family's refusal to remember or acclimate to their child's emotional reality. Her absence was an inconvenience and an interruption to the family's social order.

The transformation of the tower room into "a museum of broken things" (Kundalkar, 2006) for Tanay further resonates with Foucault's examples of heterotopias as spaces of emotional and temporal accumulation (Foucault, 1984). The tower room mirrors this function, but in an intensely personal and melancholic manner. Far from serving as an emotional retreat, it becomes a repository of Tanay's unfulfilled love and lingering grief. Ultimately, the utopia collapses. This failure is made fiercely visible when the family, ahead of Aseem's wedding, decides to purge the room of every trace left by the renter. It is the family's final act of restoring order and appearance in the house. What was once a fragile heterotopia of dreams and desires is forcibly neutralised to reinstate the household's normativity.

As per Sara Ahmed, emotions such as desire, guilt, longing, and betrayal are not limited to the private sphere only. The emotions are triggered and thus interconnected, with shared objects, spaces, and experiences that continue to generate feelings. Therefore, the emotionally loaded spaces become repositories for desire,

heartbreak, and loss. It also acts as an active participant in creating and sustaining them. (Ahmed, 2004) While private spaces in the novel, such as the tower room, the shared flat, or the outdoors, become a sanctuary for forbidden relationships, they also function as spaces of intimacy, risk, and heartbreak. It is how Ahmed suggests the “circulation of emotions” takes place (Ahmed, 2004). Emotions get attached to spaces, like the tower room in this case, through repeated associations. Through Tanay’s repeated visits, the tower room transforms into an affective container. During his first visit, the combined fragrance of the paying guest’s scent – “*khus*, rum, cigarettes” (Kundalkar, 2006) – sparks his curiosity and evokes a hint of desire. His subsequent returns ensure a deepening of the room’s hold on him. The faint residue of *khus* or rum on his fingers, the lingering smear of cobalt-blue paint on his palm – all fuse to make the room itself a living archive of desire. The more he returns, the more the room’s atmosphere “sticks” to him (Ahmed, 2014). Even after the guest leaves and the room falls silent, Tanay is drawn to the space by memory, deepening his feelings of grief and longing. This falls in line with Ahmed’s idea that emotions continue to circulate even when the original trigger, the renter in this case, is absent. In this way, Kundalkar shows that space and affect are co-constitutive: the room doesn’t just host Tanay’s emotions, but it is shaped by them, and in turn, reshapes him.

The tower room serves as a repository of temporal memory in addition to being an actual site of desire. For Tanay, the room turns into what Bachelard refers to as a “space of intimacy” where the past and present blur into one another, haunted by the renter’s body that is no longer there (Bachelard, 1994). Every object that lasts, such as the cobalt blue paint or the *khus* scent, serves as a tangible reminder that preserves the memories. Even when the family makes an effort to sanitise the space, these lingering presences transform it into a palimpsest, laden with meanings that cannot be removed. Thus, the space functions on two temporal registers: the spectral past of forbidden intimacy and the lived present of the household.

Similarly, memory and longing serve as mediators in Anuja’s interaction with space. Her inability to use the tower room while the tenant was there makes her yearn for what she was unable to have. When she and he eventually share a space in Pondicherry, his departure causes that space to also feel tinged with sadness. She experiences spatial disorientation upon returning to Pune; her old room has changed from its original setting, suggesting the impossibility of reclaiming her former identity. In this way, her domestic space refuses to accommodate her evolved identity. Thus, both siblings are mired in what Soja refers to as a lived spatial



dialectic, in which emotional histories and physical spaces are inextricably linked, making it hard to return to or make amends with the domestic (Soja, 1996).

Rashmi takes a heartbroken Tanay to her flat, which, being completely detached from the social gaze, offers him a sliver of comfort and an illusion of escape. He can “shut out the world there” (Kundalkar, 2006), unlike his own house, where “the world has many ways of sneaking back in” (Kundalkar, 2006). A similar compensatory space is offered to Anuja by Sharayu Maushi in the form of an empty flat in the city, where she can “make [her] own decision whenever [she] wants” (Kundalkar, 2006). This gesture grants Anuja a sense of spatial autonomy that was otherwise denied to her within her own home. The flat in Pondicherry further acts as a spatial reversal for Anuja. Unlike in the Joshi household, the gender roles are subverted for a while. The paying guest, a man, takes the responsibility of cooking and managing the house. It provides brief relief to Anuja from the socially enforced script of femininity.

By the end of the novel, each sibling ventures out of the house in an effort to construct alternative realities for their own self. Aseem, along with his newly wedded wife, moves out to their new flat – a seamless transition into his new role as a household head. Tanay, unable to find a space for his grief and desire, relocates to Mumbai. Anuja, too, departs to Sharayu Maushi’s vacant flat as her final act of self-preservation. Each sibling, in different ways, attempts to escape the dominant spatial and social scripts imposed on them, creating parallel and private realms where they can experiment with new modes of being.

In *Cobalt Blue*, the siblings’ inability to speak openly about their desires mirrors the spatial constraints of the household. Both Tanay and Anuja are trapped within a culture of silence in a household where emotional transparency is discouraged. Their unconventional choices, guided by an effort to transcend normativity, are seen as dissent and therefore silenced. Tanay’s section, a monologic letter to the paying guest, reflects his isolation from the family. Anuja’s narrative, structured like a diary, is filled with details that she cannot share aloud. These textual spaces offer both of them temporary emotional refuge but also highlight a lack of dialogic space within the family. Kundalkar thus employs both space and silence to illustrate how Indian middle-class families conceal personal guilt, desires, and grief. These writings, on their own, illustrate heterotopias in text.



Space is never merely physical in *Cobalt Blue*. It is emotional, ideological, and deeply political. Through the lens of Soja's *Thirdspace* and Foucault's concept of heterotopia, this paper has examined how domestic structures in Kundalkar's novel function as sites of surveillance, control, and constrained agency. The tower room operates as a fragile heterotopia—a compensatory space where Tanay's queer desire momentarily breathes, yet one that remains tethered to the heteronormative priorities of the household below. The architectural absence of doors, the gendered allocation of space, and the transformation of Anuja's room into a storeroom all underscore how spatial arrangements enact power along lines of gender and sexuality. The renter, functioning as both an emotional vessel and a symbolic space, disrupts the affective economy of the Joshi household, triggering desires that cannot be accommodated within its normative boundaries. While alternative spaces—Rashmi's flat, Sharayu Maushi's vacant apartment, the open roads—offer fleeting moments of autonomy, they ultimately reveal the failure of utopia when structural forces reassert control. The siblings' textual refuges—Tanay's monologic letter and Anuja's diary—mirror the spatial silences imposed upon them, illustrating how both space and voice are withheld in middle-class Indian domesticity. Ultimately, the siblings' departures signify quiet resistance, as each is compelled to leave a home that cannot accommodate the complexity of their inner lives. *Cobalt Blue* reveals how space can nurture or constrain, and how, for those at the margins, the act of inhabiting space itself becomes a deeply political gesture.

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