



BEYOND THE ZENANA: GENDERED SPACES AND RELATIONAL AGENCY IN TAGORE'S FICTION

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Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore's literary vision is distinguished by a poetic sensibility that intertwines philosophical depth with psychological realism. His fictions, especially concerning women's lives, unfolds in domestic spaces where identity, ethics, and emotion intersect. This article explores how Rabindranath Tagore reimagines gendered spatiality in his fiction, focusing on the negotiation between domestic and public spaces in *Chaturanga*, *Chokher Bali*, and *Nashtanirh*. Drawing on feminist spatial theory, especially of Luce Irigaray and Doreen Massey, it examines how his women characters navigate and transform the "zenana" or inner domestic quarters. These female protagonists are active agents who subtly reshape their spatial and emotional environments. Irigaray's concept of the feminine as both a site of inscription and ethical disruption, coupled with Massey's view of space as relational and fluid, provides critical lens to analyze how gender, space, and agency intersect. The zenana, often emblemizing patriarchal control, becomes a liminal space where emotional labour and relational agency subtly challenge and reshape gendered subjectivity. Through a feminist-materialist lens, the article shows how Tagore's domestic interiors operate as terrains of ethical inquiry and emotional resonance, challenging rigid dichotomies between public and private, and spiritual and material life.

Keywords: feminist spatial theory, gendered space, domesticity, emotional labour

Introduction

In colonial Bengal, the division between "bahir" (outer) and "andar" (inner) structured not only physical spaces but also gendered identities. These spatial arrangements were not merely architectural but embedded within the cultural, religious, and ideological fabric of society. The



domestic sphere, especially the zenana, was idealized as a space of purity, modesty, and moral rectitude, while the public domain was associated with masculine authority, reason, and governance. Rabindranath Tagore's fiction interrogates this binary, not just by presenting conflicts between characters situated in these domains, but by complicating and dissolving the binary itself. His narratives expose the violence of such spatial segregation and highlight the ways in which women engage with, resist, and reinterpret their confined environments. The zenana in Tagore's works is not simply a physical enclosure—it is a space deeply charged with affect, discipline, and ideology. It disciplines through silence, expectation, and ritual, but also becomes a crucible for inner resistance, emotional self-fashioning, and ethical reflection.

Tagore's women characters are often positioned at the cusp of spatial and symbolic transition, embodying the friction between entrenched patriarchal norms and emerging expressions of female identity. Their journeys unfold at the intersection of emotional longing, social restriction, and ethical confrontation. Far from being passive subjects of domestic surveillance, these women actively navigate the ideological architecture of gendered space with subtle yet potent expressions of dissent. Their agency is inscribed not in grand rebellion but in the quiet assertion of presence—through strategic silences, recalibrated relationships, and introspective resistance. By engaging emotionally and morally with their environments, these characters destabilize the symbolic order that traditionally consigned them to invisibility. Their interior lives, rendered with psychological acuity, transform the zenana from a space of confinement into one of relational assertion and ethical critique. Tagore's portrayal of such characters thus moves beyond representation toward a reimagining of space as an evolving field of gendered negotiation—where emotional resonance, ethical agency, and relational complexity challenge the rigid binaries of colonial spatial ideologies.

In *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), *Chokher Bali* (1903/2005b), and *Nashtanirh* (1901/2003), Tagore constructs gendered space not as a static enclosure but as a dynamic field of emotional and ethical struggle. Binodini, the widow in *Chokher Bali* (1903/2005b), maneuvers through the architecture of the home with a disruptive agency that challenges both moral and spatial conventions. Her calculated crossings of thresholds and reconfigurations of domestic relationships reflect a deliberate engagement with the power structures embedded in space. Charu in *Nashtanirh* (1901/2003), by contrast, represents the silent implosion of agency within an emotionally desolate



household; her desire and creativity are framed through interior silence and spatial metaphor, exposing how aesthetic order masks emotional deprivation. Her agency surfaces not through overt rebellion but through poetic reflection and quiet despair, transforming the home into a psychological landscape of longing and loss. Meanwhile, Damini in *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a) penetrates the patriarchal citadel of philosophical discourse, destabilizing male authority with her emotional clarity and ethical resilience. Her intellectual intervention not only reclaims epistemic space for female subjectivity but also collapses the dichotomy between emotion and reason. Taken together, these women do not simply transcend the zenana—they reconstitute it. They convert spaces of confinement into sites of negotiation, visibility, and ethical resistance. Tagore's spatial poetics thus interrogates the gendered politics of location, showing how domestic interiors are reimagined as terrains of relational agency where silence, sentiment, and subversion converge to challenge both patriarchal spatiality and the emotional sterility it perpetuates.

In this way, Tagore critiques not only the patriarchal spatial order but also its emotional economy—questioning the legitimacy of confining love, intellect, and desire to the private sphere. His literary project, therefore, does more than represent women in confined spaces; it reimagines those spaces as dynamic zones of moral inquiry, agency, and transformation. This paper, therefore, sets out to examine how Tagore's fiction challenges the gendered dichotomies of space and subjectivity by foregrounding women's emotional and ethical agency within domestic interiors. Through a close analysis of *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), *Chokher Bali* (1903/2005b), and *Nashtanirh* (1901/2003), it investigates how Tagore dismantles spatial hierarchies and reconfigures the zenana not merely as a site of containment but as a crucible for self-articulation and relational autonomy. The objective is to demonstrate how Tagore's spatial poetics intersects with feminist spatial theory to offer a nuanced vision of gender as a process of negotiating agency within, and often against, the limits of cultural architecture.

Review of Literature

Much of the scholarship on Tagore and gender has focused on his progressive portrayal of women, with critics such as Chakravarty (1986), Sarkar (2002), and Radice (1991) lauding his female characters for their psychological depth and moral agency. More recent feminist critiques, however, engage with the spatial and ideological dimensions of gendered identity in his work. Luce Irigaray (1985) and Doreen Massey (1994) provide crucial theoretical frameworks,



emphasizing how patriarchal systems inscribe gender onto space, and how such spaces are socially produced, contested, and transformed.

Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) have articulated the nationalist construction of the "inner domain" of women as a site of cultural authenticity, reinforcing the very binaries Tagore seeks to destabilize. Spivak's (1988) seminal work on the silencing of the subaltern finds resonance in Tagore's representations of women who, although socially marginalized and spatially restricted, carve out a voice through affective and ethical self-articulation. Rather than speaking from a position of overt political resistance, these characters articulate subaltern agency in quieter, interior modes—through emotional labour, relational bonds, and moral reflection. Tagore's women are not granted voice in conventional terms but are written in ways that expose the fractures of dominant discourse. Their silences, hesitations, and inner monologues function as critical counter-narratives to colonial and patriarchal authority, echoing Spivak's call to attend to the submerged, encoded voices of the oppressed within hegemonic structures.

Nandy (2004), in his cultural psychology of colonialism, argues that Tagore's resistance to colonial modernity lies not merely in political dissent but in a deeper epistemological challenge. Tagore critiques the Enlightenment-derived rationalism that undergirds colonial governance by offering a counter-vision grounded in emotion, affect, and relational ethics. Nandy suggests that for Tagore, the human self is not a rational, autonomous entity but a relational being shaped by empathy, memory, and moral interdependence. In this framework, the colonized subject is not simply a passive recipient of modernity but an agent capable of reimagining modern life through indigenous knowledge systems and cultural sensibilities. Tagore's valorization of emotional intelligence and ethical relationality serves as a critique of both colonial instrumentalism and native elitist mimicry of Western rationality. His literary and philosophical interventions thus become acts of cultural resistance that unsettle the moral authority of colonial modernity while recuperating the legitimacy of alternative, emotionally grounded modes of knowing and being.

Rajan (1999), Chaudhuri (2000), and Tharu and Lalita (1993) demonstrate how women's affective labour and emotional intelligence act as subtle yet powerful mechanisms of subaltern resistance in South Asian literature. Rajan explores how the interiority of female characters—often dismissed as private or apolitical—becomes a potent site for ideological contestation and ethical



agency. Chaudhuri examines the narrative functions of women's emotional investments and caregiving practices as means of disrupting dominant gender scripts, emphasizing that such labour is not passive but a transformative force within constrained environments. Tharu and Lalita's anthology foregrounds indigenous feminist voices, illustrating how women's affective presence reconfigures the sociopolitical landscape from within, resisting marginalization by reasserting their roles in ethical and emotional terms. Together, they illuminate how in texts like Tagore's, the emotional lives of women are not just personal narratives but political acts that challenge the epistemic silencing embedded in both colonial and patriarchal systems.

From a stylistic angle, McLuskie (1998) and Jeffries (2010) examine how narrative voice, ellipsis, and focalization encode emotional subversion by revealing the affective undercurrents beneath the surface of domestic narration. These techniques allow for the suggestion of dissent, ambiguity, and inner turmoil without overt declaration, aligning closely with the subtle resistances enacted by Tagore's women. Simpson (2004) offers valuable insight into how modality—expressions of possibility, obligation, and doubt—and spatial deixis—markers that position characters and events in space—are employed to construct ideological alignments within domestic fiction. These linguistic features expose how power circulates through not just what is said, but how and where it is situated. Stockwell's (2002) cognitive poetics contributes another crucial layer, demonstrating how the spatial structuring of narrative—how characters move through and interact with space—triggers schema disruption that prompts ethical re-evaluation. Through these disruptions, readers are forced to reassess normative assumptions about space, gender, and power. These stylistic tools are integral to understanding how Tagore embeds resistance within narrative form, using linguistic and spatial strategies to foreground ethical tension and emotional depth in his portrayal of gendered agency.

Tagore's engagement with the domestic/public binary has also been explored by scholars such as Hogan (2003) interprets domestic space as a metaphor for ethical and emotional order, suggesting that the inner architecture of the household reflects broader ideological frameworks and moral hierarchies.

In Tagore's fiction, this metaphor becomes particularly charged as domestic interiors simultaneously signify intimacy and surveillance, safety and subjugation. Hogan's reading encourages a layered interpretation of the home—not as a backdrop but as a protagonist in the drama of gendered agency. Narayan (1997), on the other hand, analyzes the zenana not simply as



a static domestic realm but as a potent literary and ideological construct that is consistently interrogated and deconstructed in Tagore's narratives. She demonstrates how the zenana in Tagore's fiction is re-imagined through the emotional, ethical, and epistemic engagements of women characters who challenge the normative boundaries imposed upon them. Together, these readings provide a critical foundation for understanding how Tagore reframes interior spaces as ethical landscapes—charged with conflict, transformation, and relational agency. Moreover, Mukherjee (2010), DeLoughrey and Handley (2011), and Huggan and Tiffin (2010) address the intersection of environmental, emotional, and spatial discourses in postcolonial literature, highlighting the complex entanglement of gender, space, and power in literary representation.

Critical perspectives from Bhabha (1994), Butler (1990), and Beauvoir (1949) offer broader interpretive tools for analyzing how identity and space are co-constructed, particularly within the intersecting matrices of power, gender, and cultural discourse. Bhabha's concept of the 'third space' is particularly relevant to Tagore's literary settings, where the zenana and other domestic arenas are transformed into liminal zones that unsettle binary divisions between public and private, male and female, colonizer and colonized. These in-between spaces, much like Bhabha's theorization, foster ambivalence, negotiation, and hybridity—key features in Tagore's spatial politics. Butler's theory of performativity, which posits that gender is not a static identity but an iterative performance shaped by norms and repeated acts, finds expression in the way Tagore's women characters subtly shift their roles, renegotiate norms, and challenge spatial expectations. Their gestures, silences, and interior monologues become performative acts that resist fixed gender roles. Beauvoir's idea that woman is constructed as the 'Other' resonates with Tagore's critique of the zenana as a space designed to uphold the myth of feminine purity and passivity. By granting his women characters depth, reflexivity, and ethical autonomy, Tagore challenges this myth and creates characters who speak back to their spatial and social confinement. In this way, Tagore's narratives refuse stable binaries and emphasize the provisional, performative, and contested nature of identity and belonging within gendered spaces. Together, these scholarly works provide a rich background for understanding Tagore's spatial politics and his literary investment in reimagining female agency within and beyond the zenana.

Scholarly readings of Tagore's fiction have often emphasized his humanism, psychological insight, and reformist tendencies. Early critics such as Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson



(1995) noted Tagore's progressive portrayal of women, particularly in relation to social customs like widowhood and arranged marriage. More recent studies, such as those by Sukanta Chaudhuri (2001) and Radha Chakravarty (2008), have focused on Tagore's exploration of female desire, interiority, and ethical dilemmas. However, the spatial implications of these gendered portrayals have not received equal attention. While critics have acknowledged Tagore's nuanced rendering of domesticity, few have approached it through the lens of feminist spatial theory. Studies such as Swati Ganguly's essay on Tagore's "feminist poetics" gesture toward the affective topography of his domestic spaces, but do not systematically theorize space as a site of gendered negotiation. Furthermore, while postcolonial readings of the zenana often emphasize its symbolic role in colonial-nationalist discourses, this paper shifts the focus toward its affective and ethical dimensions in the context of everyday relational life. Tagore's depiction of the zenana is neither idealized nor wholly critical. Rather, it offers a complex site where spatial practices, emotional investments, and ethical tensions converge. This study builds on this critical lacuna, bringing together literary analysis and feminist geography to reread Tagore's fiction.

Methodology/Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Luce Irigaray's (1985) theory of sexual difference and Doreen Massey's (1994) reconceptualization of space as relational and socially produced, this paper formulates a theoretical lens that interprets Tagore's zenana as a site of simultaneous constraint and potential transformation. Irigaray argues that within patriarchal structures, woman becomes the spatial metaphor through which male subjectivity inscribes itself—she is not regarded as a subject inhabiting space, but rather as space itself, a vessel through which meaning, power, and authority are projected. This spatialization of the feminine reflects a structural passivity, whereby woman functions as the silent backdrop to the male narrative. Tagore's depiction of the home in his fiction echoes this ideological dynamic; the zenana becomes a palimpsest of normative gender inscriptions—where silence, decorum, and ritual are continually performed and reinforced.

Yet Irigaray (1985) also suggests that such symbolic inscriptions are not absolute. Within the framework of sexual difference, she posits the potential for a reconfiguration of subjectivity through ethical and relational modes of engagement. The female body, even when constructed as space, retains the possibility of resistance—not through overt confrontation but through the



generative power of embodied presence and ethical desire. This notion proves useful for interpreting Tagore's women, who often navigate their spatial confinement with emotional intelligence and relational depth, subtly transforming spaces of subjugation into arenas of moral agency and affective negotiation.

Doreen Massey's (1994) spatial theory complements and deepens this framework. Arguing against the conception of space as a static, neutral container, Massey theorizes space as a dynamic field constituted by social relations, constantly shaped by ongoing interactions, power asymmetries, and negotiations. Her assertion that space is "always under construction" (Massey, 1994, p. 3) challenges any essentialist reading of domestic interiors, urging us instead to perceive them as fluid, contingent, and historically situated. Applying this to Tagore's fiction, the zenana emerges not merely as an architectural enclosure, but as an emotionally and ideologically volatile terrain—where patriarchal norms are embedded yet continually destabilized through the everyday practices, decisions, and desires of its inhabitants.

This combined theoretical perspective enables a feminist-materialist reading of Tagore's gendered spaces. The zenana is not simply a symbol of patriarchal control, but also a site where the intersection of spatial practices, emotional labour, and ethical inquiry generates new configurations of female agency. Irigaray's (1985) conceptualization of woman as the 'place' of inscription is thus reimaged within Tagore's fictional world as a figure who actively negotiates, resists, and redefines her spatial and symbolic positioning. Simultaneously, Massey's (1994) framework encourages us to see this negotiation as part of a broader relational process in which space and identity are co-constitutive and perpetually in flux.

In this synthesis, we begin to understand how Tagore's literary spaces function not as passive settings but as active agents in the narrative. His women characters transform the zenana through their emotional presence, ethical reflections, and affective ties, thereby dismantling the binary logic that traditionally divided public (male) and private (female) spheres. The result is a dynamic, non-binary spatiality where gendered identity is continually rewritten in response to emotional, ethical, and relational stimuli. Such a reading aligns with Tagore's broader humanist ethos and his challenge to Enlightenment rationalism, wherein he privileges relational consciousness and moral depth over rigid systems of control and categorization. This theoretical framework provides



the conceptual foundation for analyzing how gendered subjectivity is produced and contested within spatial imaginaries in Tagore's fiction. It allows us to see the zenana not only as a product of patriarchal ideology but as a contested and reconstructable field of agency, where silence, desire, memory, and emotion converge to reshape the very terms of feminine subjecthood.

Discussion

***Chaturanga*: Intellectual Space and Gendered Exclusion**

In *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), Tagore presents Damini as a disruptive presence within an elite male philosophical milieu. She is a widow—a figure socially coded with silence, modesty, and exclusion—yet she unsettles the male-centric discourse of Sreebilas and Sachis not by direct opposition but through emotionally grounded interventions. From a Masseyan perspective, the intellectual home of the male protagonists is constructed as an exclusive epistemic enclave, a gendered space that ostensibly values reason over affect. However, Damini's entry into this domain reveals its fragility. She is not allowed into this space in the traditional sense; rather, she penetrates its walls through relational insistence and ethical clarity. This disruption echoes Massey's (1994) notion of space as "always under construction" (p. 3). The philosophical domain, far from being abstract and universal, is shown to be contingent on gendered exclusions.

Irigaray's (1985) framework is particularly relevant in analyzing how Damini is positioned. As a woman, she is expected to embody containment—her desires and intellect sequestered within the symbolic zenana of widowhood. But Irigaray also insists that woman, though constructed as "the place" of inscription, harbors a destabilizing potential through her relational and ethical being. Damini enacts this subversion. She challenges Sachis's renunciation not by debating but by exposing the ethical vacuum behind his spiritualism. Her ethical demand—that Sachis acknowledge his emotional obligations—repositions emotionality as a valid and necessary epistemic force. In doing so, she inserts affect into the abstract, patriarchal space of discourse. The result is a collapse of the male philosophical world's supposed autonomy. Damini becomes the ethical agent who redefines knowledge as relational, not detached. Her very presence destabilizes the ideological purity of the male intellectual domain and reorients it around care, memory, and mutual responsibility (Irigaray, 1985; Massey, 1994).



Thus, in *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), Tagore explores the intersections of philosophy, love, and gender through the character of Damini. Damini's entry into an intellectual and spiritual world dominated by male discourse challenges the rigid gender boundaries of spiritual and philosophical authority. While the home serves as a shelter, it is also a space of surveillance and moral judgment. Her relational agency unfolds through subtle defiance, emotional integrity, and her refusal to be reduced to a passive muse within the male philosophical quest. The narrative maps how intellectual spaces, often framed as neutral, are themselves deeply gendered and exclusionary (Chakravarty, 2008; Ganguly, 2004).

***Chokher Bali*: The Intimate Politics of Spatial Transgression**

Chokher Bali (1903/2003) offers a complex meditation on desire, transgression, and domesticity. The zenana here is both spatial and symbolic, framing the emotional and moral economies that regulate women's lives. Binodini, a widow like Damini, enters a household already structured by codes of modesty and hierarchy. Yet she refuses the passive role assigned to her. Drawing on Irigaray (1985), we see that Binodini, too, is constructed as a vessel—the widow's body emptied of desire, silenced by ritual. But this construction is unstable. Binodini fills this void with relational force. She manipulates relationships, crosses spatial thresholds, and unmoors the household from its normative foundation.

Massey's (1994) spatial theory illuminates how Binodini's movements transform the household. Her transgressive wanderings—entering rooms uninvited, fostering illicit relationships—undermine the zenana's spatial order. The home ceases to be a coherent, moral enclosure and becomes a contested, mutable site. Binodini's actions do not just violate moral codes; they rewrite the spatial logic that upholds them. The relational dimension of her presence is crucial—she is not a solitary figure of rebellion but one who activates and distorts the network of relationships that constitute the home. Her agency is not located in freedom from space but in her capacity to remap it. (Massey, 1994)

Critically, Binodini's subversion is not framed as redemptive. Tagore does not romanticize her disruption. Instead, he dramatizes the emotional costs of spatial transgression. The zenana is shown to be so heavily inscribed with gendered expectations that any attempt to reconfigure it



results in social alienation and personal loss. Binodini's eventual departure signals not defeat but a recognition that space, though relational and reconstructible, is always mediated by power. Her exit leaves behind a destabilized space, its emotional architecture permanently altered, yet also underscores the resilience of patriarchal structures. (Chakravarty, 2008; Hogan, 2003)

***Nashtanirh*: Emotional Dislocation and Feminine Desire**

In *Nashtanirh* (1901/2003) Charu's experience of domestic space exemplifies the silent, inward dimensions of gendered subjugation. The home is meticulously ordered, aesthetically refined, yet emotionally barren. From Irigaray's (1985) perspective, Charu represents the "invisible" woman whose subjectivity is absorbed into the spatial order she maintains. Her presence is unmarked, her voice is mediated through her roles as wife, hostess, and muse. She is the zenana's ideal: contained, aesthetic, passive. Yet Charu's interiority, rendered through nuanced narrative focalization, becomes the site of subtle resistance. Massey's (1994) notion of space as socially produced becomes critical here. The seemingly tranquil home is revealed to be a product of power—its spatial harmony masking affective neglect. Charu's movements within the home become increasingly restricted, paralleling her growing emotional estrangement. Her creative impulses—writing, music—are not just hobbies but insurgent acts that momentarily reconfigure her spatial reality. Her relationship with Amal creates a fissure in the domestic structure, opening a relational space that momentarily allows for emotional reciprocity and aesthetic dialogue. (Chakravarty, 2008; Ganguly, 2004).

This reconfiguration, however, is incomplete. The spatial and emotional rupture is not sustained. Amal departs; Charu remains. Her return to silence is not a restoration of order but a mark of unhealed fracture. The zenana, though reimagined briefly as a space of affective possibility, ultimately reasserts itself. Yet the narrative does not close the door on transformation. Charu's silent sorrow lingers, refusing closure. Her agency lies in her refusal to forget—in her emotional memory, which keeps open the possibility of spatial and ethical reimagining.

Together, these textual analyses show how Tagore's gendered spaces are not fixed sites of enclosure but dynamic terrains of emotional and ethical negotiation. Through Irigaray and Massey, we see how the zenana in *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), *Chokher Bali* (1903/2005b), and



Nashtanirh (1901/2003) is simultaneously a structure of constraint and a crucible of agency, where women reconfigure identity through relational labour, emotional presence, and spatial subversion. (Irigaray, 1985; Massey, 1994)

Conclusion

In rethinking the narrative spaces within *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), *Chokher Bali* (1903/2005b), and *Nashtanirh* (1901/2003), it becomes evident that Tagore's domestic settings are far from passive enclosures—they are active terrains where power, desire, and resistance collide. The zenana, traditionally emblematic of feminine restriction, is reinterpreted not as a monolithic space of confinement but as a liminal threshold—a zone constantly negotiated and redefined by its female inhabitants. (Ganguly, 2004; Narayan, 1997) Rather than offering emancipatory blueprints or redemptive trajectories, Tagore's fiction foregrounds ambivalence and contradiction. His protagonists do not seek absolute escape from the domestic realm; instead, they recalibrate its internal coordinates. In *Chaturanga* (1916/2005a), Damini's ethical intervention destabilizes a masculinist epistemology, revealing how affective and relational modes of knowing can disrupt hegemonic reason. (Chakravarty, 2008; Irigaray, 1985) Yet her agency remains precariously contingent on male acknowledgment. In *Chokher Bali* (1903/2005b), Binodini's transgressive presence reconfigures the household as an unstable, morally ambivalent space. Her departure underscores the painful residue of spatial subversion—her remapping of the zenana leaves scars, not liberation. In *Nashtanirh* (1901/2003), Charu's creative stirrings remain interiorized; her aesthetic agency is quietly revolutionary but ultimately circumscribed by the spatial and emotional regimes of her home. (McLuskie, 1998; Ganguly, 2004) These acts are not heroic in conventional terms; they are fragile, often transient, yet they fracture the solidity of normative domesticity.

Irigaray's (1985) notion of female subjectivity as both inscribed and disruptive proves central here. The women in these stories do not represent blank slates but complex ethical agents who bear and transmit affective knowledge. Their resistances are rooted not in external rebellion but in internal rearticulations of space and self. We observe how the female body, marked as a site of containment, becomes paradoxically the locus of ethical interruption. Women in these texts do not always dismantle the zenana; they haunt it, resist it, reimagine it. Their relational actions—subtle, often non-verbal—carry transformative force precisely because they operate within rather



than beyond the boundaries of domestic space. Through silences, gestures, and ruptured rhythms of everyday life, they question the naturalness of the roles assigned to them. (Butler, 1990; Beauvoir, 1949) Likewise, Massey's (1994) spatial theory helps reveal how domestic interiors, though socially produced to reinforce hierarchy, remain susceptible to reconfiguration through relational encounters. Importantly, Tagore resists romanticizing these moments. There is no triumphal rhetoric, no assured liberation. What emerges instead is a poetics of incomplete transformation—a recognition that change is interstitial, often deferred, and always embedded in the messiness of lived experience. The domestic space, as such, becomes a site of contested meaning rather than fixed significance. (Hogan, 2003; Nandy, 2004)

Thus, the zenana is neither purely oppressive nor entirely redemptive. The zenana becomes a liminal domain—one that bears the weight of historical constraint but also shimmers with the possibility of reconfiguration. The women who inhabit it are not archetypes but interlocutors with their surroundings, crafting meaning through relation and affect rather than through categorical resistance. Tagore's fictional worlds present gendered space not as deterministic but as ethically and affectively mutable. His women are not fully emancipated, nor are they simply victims; they are situated agents whose emotional and relational capacities disrupt spatial norms and gesture toward alternative imaginaries. Thus, Tagore's fiction invites a feminist-materialist reading of space that is as attentive to emotional texture and ethical tension as it is to structural critique. In these domestic interiors, we do not find closure but the ongoing labour of relational becoming.

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