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ELEMENT THREE



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FULL PHD PROPOSAL

A full 1500 word PhD proposal based on the chosen title.

Intimate Cartographies: Domestic Space, Agency and Memory in the Contemporary Postcolonial British Novel

Contemporary British novelists from postcolonial backgrounds, particularly those from South Asian and African diasporic communities, use representations of domestic space and associated representations of female agency and containment within their novels to ask important questions about cultural identity and wider issues of multiculturalism and the diasporic experience. The depiction of the interiority of domestic space inhabited by women in a novel sheds light on their behaviour outside of the home and the social and cultural expectations that they are bound by or liberated by. The research will draw on a range of critical perspectives, taken from postcolonial theory, feminist spatial theory and memory studies to build the rich theoretical framework of 'intimate cartographies', which can be used to map the layers of meaning inscribed onto domestic space and offers a unique research contribution.

Research Context

The research will involve the close analysis of five contemporary British novels, each published in the UK over the past eight years, between 2015 and 2022; *The Year of the Runaways* by (2015) by Sunjeev Sahota *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie, *We That are Young* (2017) by Preti Taneja, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo and *Love Marriage* (2022) by Monica Ali. This diverse corpus reflects a range of perspectives and attitudes, and each novel examines aspects of the position of female identity and interiority within the home, which is subverted and/or celebrated, including aspects of politics, social reform and creative expression.

By only including novels published over the past ten years, the research is focused on contemporary understandings of multiculturalism and the diasporic experience. Through close analysis of each of the novels, we can draw valuable conclusions as to how the home can serve as a wider metaphor to examine wider issues of immigration and belonging.

This research addresses a significant gap in existing research, identified through an initial literature review. Although the relationship between gender, identity and domestic space within the home has been examined in literary studies, this thesis offers a wider

perspective, reaching beyond literary studies to postcolonial studies, feminist spatial theory and memory studies to examine the specific context of the way in which contemporary British novelists depict interiority through domestic space and how this represents issues of cultural identity, specifically in a contemporary multicultural context. This will contribute to wider discussions of the immigrant experience, diasporic communities and multiculturalism and present a unique contribution to research.

Research Questions

To guide this research, six research questions have been developed, informed by a preliminary literature review.

1. How do contemporary British novelists from postcolonial backgrounds, particularly those from South Asian and African diasporic communities, use fictional representations of domestic space within the home to explore wider issues of cultural identity and belonging?
2. How can the theoretical framework of 'intimate cartographies' be developed as a framework through which to interpret domestic and interior spaces and their relationship to the immigrant, diasporic and postcolonial experience within the contemporary British novel?
3. How does the concept of home operate as a site of tradition and memory within the contemporary British novel, and how are cultural practices preserved and/ or reimagined?
4. How do contemporary British novelists from postcolonial backgrounds, particularly those from South Asian and African diasporic communities, challenge associations between domestic space and female empowerment/ confinement? How can the home be seen as both a space of rebellion, agency, creativity and restriction? How do these positions overlap and/or operate in opposition?
5. Do contemporary British novelists from postcolonial backgrounds, particularly those from South Asian and African diasporic communities, employ specific narrative strategies or approaches to examine the 'third space' within contemporary society?
6. How can domestic spaces, as represented in the novel, raise wider questions about multiculturalism and cultural identity?

Literature Review

This research draws on a diverse range of research in the fields of spatial theory, postcolonial studies and memory studies. Of specific interest is the spatial theory work of Gaston Bachelard, particularly his work *The Poetics of Space* (1958/1994), which examines how we experience and navigate intimate domestic spaces and provides a foundational perspective into the psychological impact of interior space and Michel de Certeau's (1988) renowned research on spatial practices, which reveals how spaces are both navigated and conceptualised. These works are examined in the light of feminist research by Luce Irigaray (1985), which offers a wider understanding of the conceptualisation of being a woman and how identity and place within the domestic sphere can become a metaphor.

The research also draws on significant thinkers within postcolonial studies, including Edward Said (1978) for a rich conceptual framework to understand wider issues of multiculturalism. The work of Crystal Parikh (2017), which focuses on the imagination of American writers in connection to race and ethnicity is adopted to consider how British writers conceive of race and ethnicity in relation to domestic space.

It also draws on Homi Bhabha's (2004) conceptualisation of the 'Third Space', a hybrid space where different cultures interact, negotiate, and collectively create new meaning. This concept is of particular interest to this research as it is applied in contrast to the domestic space and is used to argue that the domestic space within the postcolonial experience can become a third space as it is not experienced by an individual in isolation. Instead, it is where the concepts and ideas developed by multiple people meet, and new meaning is negotiated through spatial encounter. This understanding draws on the work of Lev Vygotsky (1962), who conceptualised space theory.

The research will also position itself within memory studies, particularly using the work of Paul Connerton (1989) to understand the ways in which societies remember and how this can both be applied to how domestic spaces are remembered and how we remember within these spaces and Marianne Hirsch and Nancy Miller's (2011) work on postmemory, which will be used to understand the generational memory of diasporic communities and how this can be related to historical memory of domestic spaces, particularly the bedroom and kitchen.

Methodology

The research will involve close textual analysis, combined with research drawn from an extensive and wide literature review, incorporating feminist spatial theory, postcolonial studies and memory studies, to analyse representations of domestic and interior space in a corpus of five novels published in the eight years between 2015 and 2022; *The Year of the Runaways* by (2015) by Sunjeev Sahota *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie, *We That are Young* (2017) by Preti Taneja, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo and *Love*

Marriage (2022) by Monica Ali. This corpus includes writers from a range of postcolonial backgrounds, including African, South Asian and Caribbean. The eight-year time period between 2015 and 2002 has been selected as it was a time of rapid change in British society, including political upheaval, Brexit and increased media representation of immigration and issues of multiculturalism. The method of close textual analysis of each of these five novels will focus specific attention on narrative technique and the symbolic representation of a range of domestic and interior spaces, including associated imaginative and conceptual spaces.

Thesis Structure

The thesis will be structured into three distinct chapters, as well as include a methodology and literature review chapter, which will each examine both the findings from the close textual analysis of the corpus as well as those drawn from the literature review. The chapter *Domestic and Interior Space as a Site of Cultural Memory* will examine how domestic and interior spaces are represented in each novel, drawing on spatial theory and postmemory studies to inform its interrogation of the ways in which diasporic communities remember and conceptualise space.

The chapter *Spaces of Resistance and Political Imagination* will incorporate an understanding of the third space (Bhabha, 2004) into an understanding of the domestic space to examine how wider political issues are imagined within a framework of interiority. It will also examine how the third may not be experienced by an individual in isolation. Instead, it is where the concepts and ideas developed by multiple people meet, and a new meaning is negotiated through spatial encounter.

The chapter *Home as a Mirror of Creative Agency* will explore the liberating aspects of domestic space as a place for a woman to express her own creative agency. A conclusion chapter will connect the findings of these three chapters to wider issues of British multiculturalism and diasporic experiences and identities.

Research Ambitions

This research will examine how the contemporary British novel explores issues of gender, space and wider cultural identity. By incorporating approaches and understanding drawn from literary studies, postcolonial studies, spatial theory and memory studies, it will establish a rich and research-informed approach for examining wider issues of multiculturalism, diasporic experiences and identities through addressing memory, identity and belonging. In doing so, it will establish a framework of 'intimate cartographies', for understanding and interpreting the

domestic space within postcolonial and diasporic literature, which will offer a unique contribution to the research field.

References

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