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Navigating Adolescent Liminality: A Critical Exploration of the Threshold Experiences in Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*

Kavya Nair K. S

Abstract

This paper explores the application of liminality in Abha Dawesar's novel *Babyji*, focusing on the protagonist Anamika's journey through adolescence, sexuality, and societal expectations in 1990s Delhi. Liminality, a concept rooted in anthropology and later adopted in literary studies, describes the disorienting ambiguity and fluidity experienced by individuals in transitional states or thresholds. *Babyji* serves as a fertile ground for examining liminality, as Anamika navigates the thresholds between childhood and adulthood, traditional and modern values, and heteronormative and queer identities. Through a close reading of the novel, we analyze how Dawesar employs liminality not only as a narrative device but also as a means of critiquing rigid societal structures. Anamika's interactions with her lovers, her intellectual pursuits, and her struggle with her identity are marked by a constant state of in-betweenness, challenging conventional narratives of coming-of-age and identity formation. The novel's setting in a rapidly changing India further amplifies these themes, positioning Anamika's journey against the backdrop of a nation in transition. I argue that Anamika's liminal experiences reflect broader questions of power, agency, and resistance in a society grappling with the tensions between tradition and modernity. By situating the protagonist in various liminal spaces- be it in her relationships, her academic ambitions, or her socio-political context- Dawesar highlights the potential for transformation and self-discovery that liminality offers. Ultimately, *Babyji* presents a nuanced portrayal of adolescence as a liminal phase, inviting readers to reconsider the complexities of identity and belonging in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Adolescence, Liminality, Heteronormativity, Subversion, Self-Discovery.

1. Introduction

Babyji is a captivating and challenging novel written by Abha Dawesar, an author renowned for her exploration of complex themes such as sexuality, identity, and the intricacies and nuances of human relationships and experiences. Published in 2005, the novel is set in the tumultuous and vibrant landscape of 1990s New Delhi, India, and provides a candid portrayal of the life of its protagonist, Anamika Sharma, an intelligent and smart sixteen-year-old navigating the trials of adolescence. *Babyji* stands out in Dawesar's oeuvre as a daring and introspective narrative that tackles themes of sexual awakening, the quest for knowledge, and the search for self-identity. Through the eyes of Anamika, readers are offered a glimpse into the life of a young woman who defies societal norms and expectations in her pursuit of personal freedom and intellectual fulfilment. The novel's exploration of themes such as class disparity, gender dynamics, and the tension between tradition and modernity, further enriches the

narrative, making *Babyji* a nuanced and thought-provoking read that captivates and challenges its audience. As we delve into the world of *Babyji*, we are invited to reflect on the complexities of growing up and the universal quest for understanding oneself and one's place in the world. Abha Dawesar's masterful storytelling and vivid characterizations make *Babyji* not only a story of personal growth and discovery but also a gripping commentary on the societal and cultural forces that shape our lives.

2. Contextualizing Liminality

The modern notion of "liminality" originates from the Latin term "limen" or "limin," which means "threshold" (Dictionary). The term 'liminal' was initially introduced by the folklorist Arnold van Gennep in *Les Rites De Passage (The Rites of Passage)* to describe a transitional phase in an individual's position within a ritual setting. Van Gennep observed that in various cultures, rituals could be categorised into three distinct phases - a prelude and aftermath - with the liminal phase occupying the intermediate position when contrived on a timetable. For instance, there were preliminary rituals, also known as separation rites, which involved separating an individual from their previous familiar and habitual environment. Additionally, there were post-liminal rites, which allowed an initiate to be reintegrated back into society. The transitional time, known as the marginal or liminal phase, was characterised by liminal rites. During this phase, one's identity might be broken down, disoriented, and reconstructed, allowing the initiate to reintegrate into society with a renewed identity and social standing (Gennep, 1960, p.11). Liminality thus describes "the quality of being socially segregated, set apart, and divested of status and relates to characteristics and qualities associated with this condition: indeterminacy, ambiguity, selflessness, and becomingness among them" (Joseph 2011, p.138). Van Gennep argued that the notion of liminality applies to all cultures and that the indicators of liminality are present during periods of change in social position, location, and temporal context. (For instance, a marriage can be viewed as a shift from one state to another, moving away from home is a transition from one location to another, and New Year rituals serve as a transition between distinct points in time) (p.1). Even if the terms were coined by Van Gennep, the concepts 'liminal' and 'liminality' gained popularity in the second half of the twentieth century, primarily through the writings of the Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner adopted and elaborated on Van Gennep's notion of liminality, guaranteeing its extensive application not only in anthropology but also in other disciplines (Chakraborty, 2016. p. 147).

2.1 Adolescence as a Liminal Phase

Adolescence is often viewed as a liminal phase, a transitional period between childhood and adulthood marked by significant variations and challenges. During adolescence, individuals experience a sense of in-betweenness, residing in a marginal state before integrating into their new societal roles as functioning adults. This liminal phase is characterized by a series of rites of passage, involving separation from childhood, a test or challenge to prove readiness for adulthood, and finally, incorporation into the adult world. These stages mirror the psychological and emotional journey that adolescents go through as they transition into maturity. Michael Joseph (2011) stated that in research on adolescence throughout the 1990s, the term 'liminal' was commonly used to describe the unclear social status and/or identity of adolescent subjects (p.138). The connection between liminality and adolescence arises from the understanding that adolescence is commonly regarded as a phase of transition, where individuals progress from one stage of development to another (Cart, 2010, p. 32). The teenage years represent a difficult and crucial phase in an individual's development, signifying the commencement of autonomy and adulthood. Peter K. Smith posits that:

socially, adolescence can be marked by increasing independence from parents, the

increasing importance of the peer group, and often aspects such as mood swings, conflicts with parents, and risky or reckless behaviours – what has been called the “storm and stress” of the adolescent period. (p.1)

Adolescence as a liminal phase is not only a physical transition but also a period of profound psychological and identity transformation. It is a time of self-discovery, coping with challenges, and ultimately healing from traumatic experiences. The liminality of adolescence is further emphasized by the use of symbols like water in literature and theatre to address the struggles and growth of young individuals (Bayoumy, 2024, p. 41). This phase is crucial for personal development, independence, and the establishment of one's identity. In the narrative *Babyji*, liminality is intricately woven into the fabric of the development of the adolescent character Anamika. Her experiences and the setting of the novel invariably explicate the concept of liminality in multiple ways. Anamika's journey through adolescence is marked by her exploration of identity, sexuality, and intellectual pursuits. This period of her life is inherently liminal, as she is in transition from childhood to adulthood, navigating the complexities of her desires and societal expectations. Her engagement with both her academic studies and her sexual awakenings exemplifies this liminality, as she is neither a child nor fully an adult, but in a state of becoming.

2.1.1 Sexual Identity and Exploration

Anamika's exploration of her sexual identity, particularly in the context of her relationships with Rani (the servant), India (an older divorcee named Tripta Adhikari whom the protagonist nicknamed India), and Sheela (the classmate), places her in a liminal space between societal norms and her desires. After an intimate episode with India, Anamika remarks, “Some girls come of age when they hit puberty. Others when they have a child. Girls like my friend Sheela when they start going to the temple. My coming-of-age was distinct and happened in a split second” (Dawesar, 2005, p. 26). This passage reflects the protagonist's recognition of her liminality, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood not through traditional milestones, but through a moment of personal and sexual awakening. The acknowledgement of a ‘split second’ transformation diverges from conventional markers of maturity, such as physical development, motherhood, or religious participation, and instead situates her coming of age within the realm of personal identity and sexual discovery. This moment of transition is emblematic of the liminal phase in adolescence, where the protagonist exists neither fully in the realm of childhood nor adulthood but in a threshold space that is pigeonholed by fluidity and the potential for self-definition. The above excerpt underscores the subjective nature of coming of age, suggesting that it is a deeply personal experience that can occur outside societal norms and expectations. Further, she says:

And came of age. All my life I had been taught to venerate elders. Anyone over five years older than oneself was an elder. Squeezing India's rear violated every rule of veneration. It transformed her from an elder to a sexual being, an equal. It made me an adult. (p. 27)

This excerpt vividly encapsulates the protagonist's transition into adulthood through an act that defies deeply ingrained societal norms regarding respect for elders. By physically engaging with India in a manner that is both intimate and equalizing, the protagonist steps into a liminal space where traditional boundaries of age and authority are blurred. The act of ‘squeezing India's rear’ is not just a moment of burgeoning sexuality but also a symbolic rejection of the societal rules that dictate how individuals should interact based on age differences. The protagonist's realization that this act has transformed her perception of India from an elder to a sexual being, and thereby an equal, signifies a profound shift in her own identity. She no longer sees herself as a subordinate child but as an adult capable of forming her own relationships outside the prescribed norms. This moment of defiance and self-assertion marks her coming of age, illustrating the complex interplay between personal desire, societal

expectations, and the formation of adult identity.

Moreover, Anamika's persistent rejection of her being a child and her imagination and further assertion of being an adult showcase her undulating attitude towards her liminal existence. Whenever someone addresses her as a child, she feels insecure and marginalized. She nonchalantly thwarts any assumptions that relegate her to a child status and embraces her being a mature adult through the enactment of a series of multiple "affairs" (p. 42). For instance, when Rani mentions her as a child, Anamika lashes out to her exclaiming, "I'll kill him," I replied. "But Babyji, you are only a child," she said. I didn't respond. Did my lover think I was a child? I felt hurt. I kept swabbing her skin. "I didn't mean it that way, Babyji," she said after a little while (p. 53). Another illustration is when Rani comforts Anamika after narrating an episode of sexual harassment she had to face on a public bus, Rani comments:

"They didn't even spare a little child like you," she said, her voice raised. I wasn't a child. She was sleeping with me; she was my lover. The men were dogs, but they weren't much older than she was. "Rani, they weren't that old, only in their twenties. They were your age." "So what? Couldn't they see you're young, a child," she said. (p. 85-86).

This passage highlights Anamika's struggle with her own identity and the perceptions of others regarding her age and maturity. The contrast between Rani's view of her as a 'little child' and the protagonist's insistence on not being a child underscores the liminality of adolescence, where one is caught between the stages of childhood and adulthood. The protagonist's relationship with Rani, characterized by both sexual intimacy and emotional complexity, further complicates this liminality, challenging societal norms around age, consent, and maturity. The men's actions, described as those of 'dogs,' reflect societal failings to recognise and respect the nuances of age and consent, especially in the context of young people navigating their sexuality and agency. Despite Rani's protective stance, Anamika's assertion of her identity and agency emphasises the fluid and often contentious nature of coming of age, where external perceptions and internal self-awareness clash, giving way to ambiguity.

My tears stopped as if a tap had just been turned shut. My head was hurting. "I'm not a child." I wanted to argue, but I felt as if my vocabulary had dried up. "We are together, I am not a child," I said. I was scared as I spoke that she would stop sleeping with me now because she saw me as a child. (p. 86)

Likewise, this passage poignantly captures the protagonist's internal conflict and her struggle with the perception of her maturity in the context of her relationship. The abrupt cessation of her tears and the physical manifestation of her emotional turmoil through a headache underscore the intensity of the moment. Her repeated assertion, 'I'm not a child,' echoes a desperate need to affirm her identity and agency within the relationship. This insistence is not merely about convincing the other person but also about asserting her own self-perception against the distress of being reduced to a childlike status, which could potentially jeopardize the relationship. The protagonist's fear that her partner might cease their intimate relationship due to perceiving her as a child reveals the complex dynamics of power, agency, and identity negotiation within their interactions. It underscores the liminality of her position—caught between the societal and personal definitions of childhood and adulthood, and how these definitions impact personal relationships. Her secret "liaisons" and the way she navigates her attractions and affections mirror a liminal state where she is experimenting with and understanding her sexuality, outside the heteronormative framework expected by her society (p. 198).

2.1.2 Intellectual Liminality

Anamika's intellectual pursuits, especially her engagement with Western literature like *Lolita*, alongside traditional Indian texts, like the *Kamasutra* place her in a liminal space between

distinct cultures. She remarks:

My knowledge of the facts of life was based entirely on books, and clean ones at that. I read nineteenth-century classics by George Eliot and Emily Bronte. These books never went into any detail. To remedy this I decided to read Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*. I had to do this while standing in the scooter garage, which had been converted into a storeroom. I would sneak out with a flashlight after my parents had gone to sleep. The *Kamasutra* that I force-fed myself seemed completely of another world, alien and absurd. After I read it, however, magical things started to happen. (p. 1)

An analysis of this excerpt through the lens of liminality reflects the protagonist's journey from innocence to a more complex understanding of sexuality, driven by a curiosity unsatisfied by the conventional literature of her upbringing. The transition from reading nineteenth-century classics, which offer little in the way of sexual education, to the ancient and explicit text of the *Kamasutra*, marks a significant shift in her quest for knowledge. This act of reading the *Kamasutra* by flashlight in a 'converted scooter garage' symbolizes a clandestine exploration of sexuality, one that is both physically and metaphorically removed from the light of day and the eyes of authority figures. The *Kamasutra*, described as 'alien and absurd,' initially appears as a stark contrast to her previous readings, yet it ultimately catalyses a series of 'magical things,' suggesting a profound transformation in her understanding of herself and her desires. This passage underscores the theme of sexual awakening as a pivotal aspect of coming of age, where the pursuit of forbidden knowledge leads to a deeper self-awareness and the initiation into adulthood.

Similarly, Anamika's engagement with literature and philosophy beyond her years, and further her identification with Humbert Humbert from Nabokov's *Lolita* and her reading of Sartre, showcases her intellectual curiosity and her positioning between the innocence of childhood and the complexity of adult understanding (p. 223). This reflects a form of intellectual liminality where she is navigating and making sense of adult concepts from the threshold of youth. Additionally, her reproduction of "Einstein's theories of relativity" while managing everyday activities like eating dinner with her family highlights her ability to oscillate between the realms of high intellectual thought and the mundane aspects of adolescent life (p. 170). This duality further emphasizes her liminal state, as she is capable of understanding and contemplating complex scientific theories while still being rooted in the experiences typical of someone her age.

Anamika's self-awareness of her liminal state is also evident when she visualizes herself transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, indicating a conscious recognition of her in-between status. This is symbolized by her visualization of crossing a chalk line, a metaphor for moving from one stage of life to another, yet doing so in a non-traditional manner that reflects her unique path through these liminal spaces. She says, "I visualized myself in a wedding, but instead of a groom leading me through seven circles around a sacred fire, there was a single chalk line. I crossed it three times" (p. 198). Intellectual liminality, thus in *Babyji* is presented through the protagonist's engagement with complex ideas and literature, her ability to apply these concepts to her own life, and her self-awareness of her transitional state between childhood and adulthood. Her ability to oscillate between these worlds showcases a liminality in her intellectual life, where she is neither fully anchored in the Western canon nor completely immersed in Indian tradition, but instead, navigates a threshold between the two. This liminality is a key aspect of her character development and the novel's exploration of growth and identity.

2.1.3 Social and Class Dynamics

The novel also explores the liminality underpinning the social and class structures in India. Anamika's interactions across different social strata, from her relationships with her school peers to her domestic help, highlight the fluid and often ambiguous nature of social boundaries. This liminality is further emphasized by her ability to move between these worlds, challenging

and sometimes reinforcing the social hierarchies that define them. The protagonist's navigation through the complex social hierarchies of Delhi is further examined through the concept of liminality. This exploration is particularly evident in her interactions with various characters and her reflections on her social standing.

Anamika's acknowledgement of the societal expectation to maintain distance from lower classes, despite her connections, highlights the tension between her internal values and external societal norms (p. 11). While feeling empathy towards the domestic servant Rani, undercurrents of misperception encircle Anamika. In that muddled-up state, she remarks "It was true that the lower castes suffered and that one should be kind to them. But one helped them from a distance. One helped them because one was of a higher station" (p. 11). This passage reflects the deeply ingrained caste system in Indian society and the protagonist's internal conflict with the traditional views she has been raised with. The notion that one should help the lower castes 'from a distance' because of being 'of a higher station' underscores the hierarchical nature of the caste system, which categorizes individuals from birth and dictates their social status, occupation, and even the nature of their interactions with others. This perspective is indicative of a paternalistic approach to charity, where assistance is given not as an act of genuine empathy or solidarity, but as a duty performed from a position of superiority. Anamika's acknowledgement of the suffering of the lower castes, while simultaneously adhering to the belief that assistance should be offered from a distance, reveals the complexities and contradictions within her understanding of social justice and equality. It highlights the challenge of overcoming deeply rooted societal norms and prejudices, even when one is aware of their unfairness. This passage thus serves as a critical commentary on the perpetuation of caste-based discrimination and the limitations of a charitable approach that maintains rather than challenges existing social hierarchies. This tension reflects a broader theme of liminality, as she finds herself in a transitional space between the classes, neither fully embracing the prejudices of her middle-class upbringing nor able to completely reject them.

Furthermore, Anamika's reflection on the moral responsibilities of the middle class illustrates the societal expectations placed upon her social group. The notion that "The middle classes were responsible for the moral fibre of society" suggests a liminal role for the middle class, tasked with upholding societal values while navigating the moral ambiguities of their own lives (p. 11). This positioning adds another layer to the protagonist's liminal experience, as she grapples with her own moral and ethical dilemmas against the backdrop of her class's expected role in society. The protagonist's intellectual and sexual explorations also serve as metaphors for her social liminality. Her engagement with literature and philosophy that challenge societal norms, along with her pursuit of relationships that defy conventional boundaries, further exemplify her journey through liminal spaces. These explorations allow her to question and redefine the boundaries of her social identity.

2.1.4 Cultural and Temporal Liminality

The setting of *Babyji* in 1990s New Delhi, a time of significant socio-political change in India, adds another layer of liminality. This period is marked by India's transition towards liberalization and the global economy, which is reflected in the changing dynamics of the city and its inhabitants. Anamika's experiences and observations, such as her perception of Delhi as a city of hidden passions and transformations, underscore the liminality of living in a time and place of flux. The novel presents Delhi as a place where passion and secrecy intertwine, a city that "churns slowly, secretively," revealing an "urgency" in its hidden desires and actions (p. 3). This depiction suggests a society where traditional norms and modern impulses coexist, often clashing in the shadows. Delhi is characterized by its palpable tension between public decorum and private indulgence. The narrative reveals a city where "everything happened" but was seldom discussed openly, from married women falling in love with pubescent girls to students engaging in sexual acts with their teachers (p. 3). This duality underscores the societal

pressures to maintain appearances while navigating personal desires in secret, reflecting the broader cultural and moral contradictions of the time.

Furthermore, the environmental description of Delhi further adds to the city's portrayal as a place of darkness and pollution, where "the evening sky sags with heavy dust" and "fumes the strength of twenty cigarettes burn your lungs every day" (p. 50). This not only highlights the physical challenges of living in the city but also metaphorically represents the suffocating nature of societal expectations and the struggle for personal freedom amidst these constraints.

Moreover, the novel touches upon the city's social issues, such as crime and violence, suggesting that these are not new developments but rather entrenched aspects of Delhi's identity (p. 50). This perspective challenges the notion of a deteriorating social fabric, instead proposing that Delhi has always been a place where the dark and the light coexist, shaping the experiences and identities of its inhabitants.

Conclusion

Abha Dawesar's *Babyji* presents a fascinating narrative that intricately explores the liminal experiences of adolescence through the life of its protagonist, Anamika. The novel adeptly captures the essence of being on the threshold of various dimensions of identity, including sexual, cultural, and intellectual realms. Anamika's journey is emblematic of the adolescent struggle to forge a sense of self amidst the conflicting demands of societal norms, personal desires, and the quest for intellectual and emotional maturity. The exploration of sexual liminality, where Anamika navigates her relationships with multiple partners, serves as a powerful lens through which the novel interrogates themes of power dynamics, consent, and the search for identity. This journey is not just about sexual discovery but also about understanding the complexities of love, desire, and the societal taboos that shape our experiences of them. Culturally, *Babyji* delves into the liminal spaces between tradition and modernity that characterize contemporary Indian society. Anamika's interactions with Western literature and philosophy, juxtaposed with her life in Delhi, reflect the broader cultural negotiations and hybrid identities that emerge in a globalized world. This cultural liminality is further complicated by the protagonist's engagement with issues of class and social hierarchy, highlighting the nuanced ways in which these factors intersect with the process of identity formation.

Intellectually, the novel portrays Anamika's precocious engagement with complex scientific and philosophical ideas as a metaphor for her broader existential inquiries. Her intellectual pursuits mirror her journey, as she seeks answers to questions about her place in the world, the nature of love, and the paths to personal freedom and fulfilment. *Babyji* thus offers a rich and nuanced portrayal of adolescent liminality, capturing the tumultuous, exhilarating, and often confusing journey from youth to adulthood. Through Anamika's experiences, Dawesar invites readers to reflect on the broader questions of identity, power, and the nature of transformation. The novel ultimately affirms the potential for growth and self-discovery that lies within the liminal spaces of our lives, encouraging a deeper understanding of the complexities of human experience.

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