

## Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly  
Journal of Literature and Cultural  
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614  
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2  
March 2026

© 2026 by the author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**Citation:** Najeeb, Muhsina. "Bīnamāzī as Domestic Carcerality: Period Politics and Gendered Space in Sujata Massey's *A Murder on Malabar Hill*." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 598–612.



A Literariness.org Project

## Bīnamāzī as Domestic Carcerality: Period Politics and Gendered Space in Sujata Massey's *A Murder on Malabar Hill*

**Muhsina Najeeb**

PhD Scholar,

Department of English and Comparative Literature,

Central University of Kerala, Kasaragod, India

Email: [muhsina.lec072201@cukerala.ac.in](mailto:muhsina.lec072201@cukerala.ac.in)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6405-4492>

### Abstract

This article examines menstrual seclusion in *A Murder on Malabar Hill* (2018) through the analytic framework of domestic carcerality, arguing that the Parsi practice of bīnamāzī functions not as a benign ritual observance but as a gendered apparatus of spatial discipline. Set in colonial Bombay and Calcutta, the novel portrays elite households in which menstruating women are confined to segregated rooms and subjected to regulations governing movement, proximity, hygiene, and visibility. Rather than ensuring protection or ritual purity, these restrictions operate as technologies of bodily control that curtail circulation, normalize isolation, and shield patriarchal authority from scrutiny.

Drawing on feminist geography, critical menstruation studies, and carceral studies, the article reconceptualizes the home as a regulatory interior where confinement is naturalized through the idiom of care. Menstrual status emerges as an administrative classification that mandates withdrawal from social life and transforms domestic space into a diffuse penal environment structured by surveillance, dependency, and suspended autonomy. The narrative foregrounds the material consequences of such segregation, including immobility, deprivation, medical neglect, and prolonged solitude, thereby revealing menstrual seclusion as a form of slow, routinized violence embedded in everyday life.

By situating these practices within both their colonial specificity and their broader structural persistence, the study demonstrates how domesticity itself can operate as carceral infrastructure. Massey's novel ultimately reframes menstruation not as a private biological condition but as a spatial and political category through which power is exercised over women's bodies. Menstrual seclusion thus emerges as a critical site for analyzing the intersections of ritual, architecture, and governance in South Asian domestic modernity.

**Keywords:** *Bīnamāzī, Domestic Carcerality, Sujata Massey, Menstrual Politics, Gendered Space, Historical Crime Fiction*

**B**ioomedical discourse typically construes menstruation as a private, cyclical, and strictly physiological process confined to the interior of the body. Feminist and socio-cultural scholarship has long challenged this reductionism, demonstrating that menstrual experience is never merely biological but socially produced through norms, prohibitions, and regulatory practices that structure everyday life. Menstruation is governed not only through belief but through space. Rules determine where menstruating bodies may move, what they may touch, and how they may participate in domestic and communal life. What appears natural is thus organized through discipline. As Lopamudra Ganguly and Lakshminarayan Satpati observe, across religious traditions “menstruation has been condemned,” resulting in “isolation, exclusion from religious practices, and sexual abstinence” as routine features of women’s lives (123). Menstrual taboo therefore operates less as theology than as governance.

Such restrictions are frequently justified through the language of care, purity, or protection. This rhetoric, however, obscures their regulatory function. Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand note that menstrual taboos systematically “exclude women and girls from many aspects of social and cultural life,” including kitchens, temples, and shared domestic interiors (184–85). Exclusion reorganizes labor, proximity, and visibility. Movement is curtailed, contact restricted, and participation suspended. Menstrual management consequently exceeds hygiene or ritual symbolism and becomes a technique of containment through which the female body is periodically withdrawn from circulation. In this sense, menstruation produces what scholars increasingly describe as patterned immobility. Research on “menstrual (im)mobilities,” for example, shows how the everyday navigation of both domestic and public environments is constrained by the need to conceal, withdraw, or self-isolate, rendering mobility itself conditional and gendered (Tuli et al. 1–2). Space becomes stratified into permissible and impermissible zones. The body’s cycle is translated into a geography of access.

Comparative religious traditions reveal the durability of this spatial logic. Jewish laws of Niddah mandate separation and restricted touch. Orthodox Christian communities frequently bar menstruants from sacraments. Islamic jurisprudence suspends prayer and mosque attendance. Hindu practices often designate menstruation as polluting and require segregation within the household (Bhartiya 523–25; Ganguly and Satpati 124). Despite doctrinal variation, the practical outcome remains strikingly consistent: each tradition institutes temporary removal from sacred and social space. Menstruation thus repeatedly functions as a mechanism for reorganizing architecture, proximity, and participation. It is not simply a ritual status but a spatial technology.

This spatialization becomes especially visible within Parsi Zoroastrian domestic practice through the institution of *bīnamāzī*, which designates menstrual withdrawal. More than devotional abstention, *bīnamāzī* entails material displacement. Menstruating women are separated from prayer, food preparation, and routine interaction through designated rooms, objects, and controlled thresholds.

Ritual purity acquires architectural form. The home anticipates periodic absence and incorporates it into its layout. Rooms, distances, and barriers enforce segregation. Domestic space thus functions not as sanctuary but as a regulatory apparatus that disciplines movement and visibility. What appears as custom operates as enclosure.

Despite the centrality of such practices to women's everyday lives, literary criticism has rarely examined menstrual regulation as a form of spatial governance, particularly within crime fiction, where critical attention often gravitates toward spectacular violence rather than slow, normalized confinement. Yet it is precisely these ordinary immobilizations that create the conditions under which harm becomes both possible and unreportable. When bodies are segregated, unseen, and socially withdrawn, violence can unfold without witnesses. Reading menstrual seclusion spatially rather than symbolically therefore clarifies how gendered power operates beneath the threshold of law through the mundane organization of domestic interiors.

This article addresses that lacuna through a reading of *A Murder on Malabar Hill* (2018) by Sujata Massey. Set in 1920s colonial Bombay, the novel situates legal intrigue within Parsi households and exposes how ritual custom, kinship authority, and architectural design regulate women's mobility and visibility. Within this framework, *bīnamāzī* emerges not as benign retreat but as a form of domestic carcerality. Menstrual seclusion converts the home into a gendered regime of surveillance and legal invisibility, removing menstruating bodies from circulation and depriving them of witnesses. Crucially, the novel's detective figure disrupts this regime by crossing thresholds and translating private confinement into public evidence. Detection becomes a spatial breach. By foregrounding the governance of menstruation, the narrative reveals how the ordinary management of domestic space underwrites structures of gendered power that precede and enable juridical injustice.

Sujata Massey's broader body of work establishes these concerns as central. An internationally recognized American writer of historical mystery, she consistently links gender, law, and constrained movement within colonial and transnational contexts. Born in England to Indian and German parents and educated in the United States, she brings a cross-cultural historical sensibility to minority communities and marginalized female subjects. In *A Murder on Malabar Hill*, domestic interiors emerge as critical sites where ritual practice and legal modernity intersect. The novel ultimately demonstrates that the management of menstruation cannot be separated from the organization of space and power.

### Historical and Ritual Context: Bīnamāzī as Spatial Regulation

Within Zoroastrian cosmology, menstruation is not construed as a neutral or purely physiological event but as a ritually charged condition that necessitates spatial reorganization. Designated in Persian (Pahlawi) as *daštān* and more specifically as *bīnamāzī*, literally “without prayer,” the state signifies both ritual abstention and enforced displacement. In Zoroastrian practice, prayer is inseparable from place. Devotion occurs near consecrated fire, in proximity to ritually pure elements, and within carefully ordered domestic environments. To be “without prayer,” therefore, is not merely to suspend worship but to be removed from the spaces that make worship possible. Menstruation interrupts not only liturgical action but spatial presence. The body must be relocated as it is under Ahrimanic (demonic) influence.

Ritual and legal traditions articulate this displacement through the language of containment rather than guilt. Sangari and colleagues describe *daštān* as a state requiring women to observe “a set of rules... to prevent the spread of pollution” (116). The crucial term here is “spread,” which frames impurity as mobile and transmissible across shared environments. Menstrual blood is imagined not as a private matter but as a substance capable of circulating through contact with fire, water, soil, objects, and persons. The appropriate response is therefore not penitence but distance. Spatial control replaces moral censure. This logic assumes architectural form in the institution of the *daštānistān*, defined as “a separate place for women to stay at the period of *Daštān*” (Sangari et al. 117). The vocabulary presumes built space rather than abstraction. Withdrawal is material. The menstruant does not simply refrain from ritual life; she occupies an isolated room or designated enclosure. Ritual law thus becomes domestic planning. Seclusion is spatial and infrastructural rather than symbolic.

Spatial separation is further calibrated through measurable proximities. Rather than advocating general avoidance, the rules prescribe counted distances. Drawing on prescriptions from the Parsi scripture *Vendīdād*, Dadrawala records that the menstruant should “keep fifteen steps away from fire and water” and maintain fixed separations from others (5). Purity is here conceived geometrically. Proximity itself contaminates. Regulation operates through quantifiable space, transforming the household into a mapped terrain of permissible and forbidden zones. Distance becomes doctrine. Material restrictions reinforce this spatial regime. Sangari and colleagues note that women in *daštān* must remove ordinary garments and use separate clothing and utensils to prevent contamination (118–19). The *Encyclopaedia Iranica* entry by James Russell and Hamid Algar specifies that food is served “in metal plates and taken with a metal spoon,” since porous materials are believed to absorb impurity, and that the menstruant is “allowed less food than usual—and no delicacies” (263). Objects, like bodies, are segregated. The menstruant inhabits a parallel circuit of things: distinct textiles, vessels, bedding, and implements. Menstrual status reorganizes not only rooms but material culture itself.

Historical accounts from colonial and early modern Parsi communities demonstrate that these prescriptions shaped everyday architecture. Tavaría recalls that “a separate room on the ground floor was kept” during menstruation, functioning as an “isolation-home” where women avoided “fire and articles of food or water or... other members of the family” (2). The ground-floor placement was justified through the belief that impurity settled downward, revealing how cosmological reasoning translated directly into floor plans. Houses anticipated cyclical exclusion. Seclusion was embedded in design rather than improvised in practice. Such practices also carried communal significance beyond ritual purity. Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina argues that menstrual regulations operated as “salient markers of socio-religious distinction,” materially differentiating Zoroastrians from surrounding populations (62). Spatial segregation therefore functioned not only as ritual discipline but as boundary-making. Architecture reproduced identity. The community’s theological commitments were enacted through rooms, thresholds, and distances.

Taken together, these sources demonstrate that *bīnamāzī* operates not as symbolic taboo but as a technology of spatial governance. Menstruation triggers a temporary restructuring of domestic life: rooms are reassigned, thresholds restricted, utensils segregated, and proximities measured. The home is periodically divided into regulated zones of access and prohibition. Purity is not simply believed; it is architecturally produced. This historical configuration clarifies the stakes for reading *A Murder on Malabar Hill*. What appears in the novel as domestic confinement is not an aberration but an extension of an already established ritual grammar that disciplines bodies through space. Ritual withdrawal shades into everyday detention; seclusion becomes normalized governance. From theology to architecture, the principle remains constant: menstruation reorganizes space, and space, in turn, regulates the body.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The preceding section demonstrated that *bīnamāzī* reorganizes domestic space through segregation, calibrated distance, and routine withdrawal. The analytical problem, therefore, is not whether such arrangements exist but how they are to be conceptualized. Descriptions such as ritual, custom, or tradition soften their coercive character and recast them as devotional rather than regulatory. Piety and devotion mask control and discipline. What appears to express belief in fact structures conduct, movement, and access. The language of faith obscures the material fact of confinement. To register this shift from religion to governance, this study draws on three intersecting bodies of scholarship: carceral studies, feminist geography, and critical menstruation studies. Taken together, these fields reconceptualize the home not as sanctuary but as an administrative apparatus, and menstruation not as private physiology but as a mechanism through which space is organized and bodies are controlled.

Carceral scholarship first unsettles the assumption that confinement belongs exclusively to prisons. As Boris, Butler, and Mireles argue, “the carceral spreads beyond the prison,” extending into “family, church, school, and home” (808). Carcerality thus designates not a specific institution but a diffuse condition, a “set of social arrangements that advances a reliance on punishment or incapacitation” (808). Confinement need not involve bars or cells. It may be enacted through dependency, routine, surveillance, and restriction, often justified through the rhetoric of care. Immobilization becomes infrastructural rather than exceptional. It is woven into everyday life and presented as protection even as it curtails autonomy. Such power operates through normalization rather than spectacle. Boris and colleagues describe the production of “a self-policing subject” through “mechanisms of normalization” (808), while Michel Foucault locates modern discipline in “the minute, everyday operations of discipline” rather than in dramatic punishment (*Discipline and Punish* 26). The prison functions as a model whose techniques migrate outward into ordinary environments. Surveillance, separation, inspection, and regulated circulation become habitual practices. Domestic life can therefore reproduce the logic of incarceration while appearing benign. Confinement becomes indistinguishable from common sense. Care and coercion collapse into the same register.

Feminist geography sharpens this analysis by foregrounding the spatial production of power. For Doreen Massey, space is neither a neutral container nor an inert backdrop but an active social product. It is “constructed out of social relations,” and “the spatial organization of society... is integral to the production of the social” (2, 4). Spatial form does not simply reflect hierarchy; it materializes and enforces it. Architecture distributes power through placement and proximity: rooms allocate access, corridors regulate circulation, and thresholds determine who may enter, remain, or withdraw. Immobilization, in this sense, is not incidental but designed. Gendered power operates precisely through such arrangements. Because “the mobility of women does indeed seem to pose a threat to a settled patriarchal order” (11), restricting movement becomes a mechanism for securing dependence and surveillance. The home itself, conventionally idealized as refuge, emerges as one of the primary sites of this regulation. Massey observes that “home... can be a space of enforced confinement” and “as much a place of conflict... as of repose” (11). Domestic space thus functions less as sanctuary than as gendered infrastructure: a bounded environment that disciplines bodies through everyday routines of separation, visibility, and containment. Gillian Rose similarly characterizes domestic interiors as spaces that may function as “prison” and “trap” (279). The private sphere, traditionally imagined as protective, instead appears as a regulatory system organized through placement and proximity.

Critical menstruation studies further demonstrate that this spatial discipline adheres with particular intensity to the menstruating body. Rather than treating menstruation as a private physiological event, scholars show how it is managed through regimes of concealment that regulate visibility, movement, and comportment. Maureen C. McHugh identifies “cultural practices of secrecy” that require women

to “engage in surveillance and control practices to keep it hidden,” rendering the body an object of continuous self-monitoring (413). Iris Marion Young theorizes this logic as the “menstrual closet,” a normative command structure that instructs menstruants to “leave no bloodstains” and to erase all public signs of bodily process, effectively demanding disappearance from shared space (106–07). J. M. Wood extends this account by describing a “menstrual concealment imperative,” a “panopticon-like form of social control” sustained through anticipatory self-policing rather than overt coercion (328). At a global scale, Catarina de Albuquerque documents the material consequences of this ideology in practices of “seclusion,” “reduced mobility,” and everyday restrictions that confine menstruants within domestic or segregated spaces (479). Across these accounts, concealment emerges not as etiquette but as labor, requiring constant vigilance, spatial withdrawal, and behavioral regulation. Menstruation is thus administratively managed through absence: the menstruating subject becomes socially invisible by being spatially displaced.

Across these traditions, a consistent analytic emerges. Homes may operate as soft carceral spaces. Spatial organization encodes hierarchy. Menstruation mandates concealment that translates into restricted mobility. Confinement is enacted simultaneously through gendered spaces and embodiment. What appears temporary or protective may, in practice, function as routine detention. This convergence supplies the vocabulary necessary to interpret *bīnamāzī* as micro-carceral infrastructure rather than symbolic taboo. The menstruation room is not simply a devotional retreat but a custodial enclosure that regulates access, movement, and visibility. Read through this framework, the interiors of *A Murder on Malabar Hill* cease to function as neutral cultural background. They become deliberate spatial designs that materialize power and authority. Rooms, thresholds, and rules operate as instruments of governance. Menstrual seclusion assumes the character of everyday house arrest.

### ***Bīnamāzī as Everyday House Arrest in A Murder on Malabar Hill***

When carcerality seeps into domestic life through architecture, routine, and practices framed as care, menstrual seclusion in Sujata Massey’s *A Murder on Malabar Hill* (*AMMH*) no longer reads as symbolic or devotional observance but as a form of everyday house arrest. The novel dismantles the abstraction of *bīnamāzī* by translating ritual into concrete spatial arrangements. The novel defines the custom as, “*Bīnamāzī*, the Zoroastrian tradition of seclusion for women during menses, likely originated during the Yazdani era, 1200 years ago. Orthodox Parsis still practise this archaic custom to an extreme, forcing women to avoid cleansing themselves properly for the entire menstrual period, plus two more days.”(343) After moving to Cyrus Sodawala’s house in Calcutta, as part of her marriage in 1917, Perveen Mistry began to face this age-old custom which physically and mentally affected her. She did not have to face such a practice before her marriage as she belongs to an educated modern family in Bombay.

Seclusion materializes not as belief but as infrastructure: a segregated wing, “doors she’d never opened,” and a metal entrance that marks the space as forbidden territory (*AMMH* 182). The room itself is rendered with stark materiality: “a small room, about twelve by eight feet,” furnished only with “a narrow iron cot,” “a straight-backed chair,” and “small table,” its austerity resembling custodial quarters rather than domestic shelter (183). What should be a home reorganizes into enclosure. Confinement is thus neither metaphorical nor voluntary. It is imposed through the organization of space itself. The household assumes the character of a custodial interior.

This coercion emerges not through overt ideological justification but through the grammar of command. When Perveen asks whether the assigned room concerns menstruation, Gita, the housemaid at Cyrus Sodawala’s house, replies without qualification, “Yes, you must stay here because of that” (184). The modal verb *must* nullifies the possibility of consent and transforms ritual expectation into obligation. Seclusion is presented not as advice but as mandate. Withdrawal is not chosen; it is enforced. The menstruant does not elect to leave shared space; she is placed within it by others.

The room’s daily operations further replicate the logic of detention. Provision is not communal but delivered across a boundary: “You can ring the bell any time, and I’ll come to the door and bring more water and your daily meals” (184). Food and water arrive through the doorway rather than at the table. Exchange occurs across a barrier. Even sanitation is regulated through substitution rather than access, as Gita explains that “the smaller pitcher contains taro... Mummy says it’s for cleaning yourself” (184). The smell of bull’s urine, which “hit her first,” underscores that ritual purity produces bodily discomfort rather than care (184). The door thus functions as checkpoint rather than passage, converting domestic service into custodial management. Contact is controlled, autonomy suspended, and the body administered. This arrangement closely resembles what Boris, Butler, and Mireles describe as ordinary “arrangements that advance... incapacitation” (808).

Spatial separation is further enforced through quantified distance. Gita instructs that “everyone should stay three paces from a bleeding woman, so do not get too close to the door” (184). Proximity itself is constructed as contamination. The corridor becomes regulated territory. Space is measured, policed, and recalibrated to prevent encounter. Ritual geometry thus becomes disciplinary technique. The body is effectively quarantined.

Once enclosed, the narrative adopts explicitly penal language. Alone, Perveen recognizes the nature of her surroundings: “These quarters were too bleak for even the lowest servant,” and moments later she concludes, “This was a stinking prison; she would not tolerate it” (185). The comparison is declarative rather than figurative. The room is not like a prison; it is experienced as one. Sensory detail registers confinement as corporeal reality. Smell, airlessness, and discomfort displace any association with

refuge. The domestic interior resembles what Gillian Rose characterizes as a space experienced as “prison” and “trap” (279).

Attempts at movement encounter immediate resistance. When Perveen steps toward the threshold, “the door... smashed back into her face,” and Behnoush (Perveen’s mother-in-law) shouts, “Don’t come out!” (AMMH 185). Authority is exercised precisely at the doorway. The threshold becomes a barred gate. Movement is physically repelled. The scene literalizes Michel Foucault’s account of discipline as operating through enclosure and regulated circulation (141). The body learns its limits through impact.

This confinement is not episodic but cyclical and therefore systemic. Perveen calculates that she must “seclude myself eight days per month” (AMMH 193). Time itself becomes carceral. Nearly one quarter of each month is lost to immobility. Seclusion structures life through recurring absence. Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary time, organized through schedules and repetitive cycles that produce docility, is reproduced within the domestic sphere (149). The menstrual calendar becomes a timetable of incarceration. Stillness produces psychological effects as well. Perveen studies the walls, imagines tallying days, and later calculates that she has been “confined” for forty-three days in six months (AMMH 198). The verb *confined* translates ritual observance into detention. Time is counted because it cannot be inhabited. Presence contracts into arithmetic.

Material deprivation compounds this punitive structure. When she asks to bathe, she is told, “No, you must not” (AMMH 184). Hygiene is replaced by ritual substitute, and ordinary facilities are denied. Measures framed as protection generate discomfort and indignity. As Boris, Butler, and Mireles observe, systems of regulation often convert the rhetoric of prevention into instruments of control (808). The most severe consequence of this logic appears in Azara’s death. Gita reveals that “Azara was in binamazi before she died,” and the memory of a child confined under such conditions exposes the lethal stakes of isolation (AMMH 184). Later, Perveen’s father Jamshedji who is a reputed lawyer acknowledges that denying contact “can lead to her own death” (343). Seclusion withdraws witnesses and care. Domestic privacy becomes lethal opacity. At this point, the legal register names what ritual language conceals: the practice amounts to keeping a woman “in a small prison” (343). The law identifies the room as custody.

Taken together, these scenes demonstrate that menstrual seclusion operates through mechanisms characteristic of carceral space. Residence is compulsory. Thresholds regulate exchange. Contact is mediated. Movement is restricted. Time is scheduled. Facilities are withheld. Visibility is erased. Architecture enforces stillness and routine normalizes it. The household functions as a diffuse penal site embedded within intimacy. Bīnamāzī, therefore, does not operate as symbolic purity but as domestic house arrest. The menstruating body is not protected but detained. By grounding confinement

in rooms, doors, smells, and counted days, the novel insists that menstrual politics are spatial and material rather than abstract. Ritual becomes governance, and the household becomes the jail.

### **Surveillance, Patriarchy, and Legal Invisibility**

When menstrual seclusion operates materially as house arrest, its implications extend beyond immobilization to the wider political structures that make such confinement both enforceable and unaccountable. The novel shows that *bīnamāzī* is sustained not solely through ritual belief or architectural segregation but through a dispersed regime of surveillance, patriarchal authority, and juridical opacity. Confinement endures because it is naturalized within domestic life. The household quietly absorbs functions typically associated with penal institutions while remaining shielded from scrutiny. What appears private operates as regulation.

Michel Foucault's formulation of power as a "micro-physics" exercised through "the minute, everyday operations of discipline" clarifies this process (26). Power rarely manifests in spectacular acts. Instead, it works through routine arrangements that determine where bodies may move, what actions are permitted, and who controls visibility. The Sodawalla household exemplifies this capillary logic. Authority is enacted through small directives, habitual prohibitions, and spatial assignments that accumulate into comprehensive regulation. Menstrual seclusion thus appears not as exceptional coercion but as the ordinary administration of domestic order.

Control begins with the gendered partitioning of space itself. When Bahram (Perveen's father-in-law) instructs Perveen, "Leave the business dealings and talking to me. Your work is with Mummy," the directive does more than allocate tasks; it territorializes the house and confines her to feminized interiors (*AMMH* 207). Economic and public domains are masculinized, while the domestic sphere becomes her assigned jurisdiction. Henri Lefebvre's proposition that "social space is a social product" becomes materially legible here (26). Hierarchy is mapped onto rooms and responsibilities. Spatial allocation determines access to knowledge, authority, and decision-making. Architecture thus produces subordination.

During menstruation this territorial logic intensifies because withdrawal becomes mandatory rather than customary. Time itself is appropriated. Perveen remains "highly conscious of how many days of the month she had until she went into the little room," calculating in advance when the cycle will "send her into seclusion midway through the holidays" (*AMMH* 198). Seclusion is anticipated like a sentence. Later she records "the approximately forty-three days she had been confined over her six months in the bungalow," time converted into arithmetic (198). Most starkly, she recognizes "one quarter of every month spent in stinking solitude." Temporal dispossession becomes measurable. Foucault notes that disciplinary regimes operate through "time-tables" that regulate bodies into

predictable cycles (149). Menstrual confinement functions precisely in this manner. Absence is scheduled. Participation is periodically suspended. Movement is curtailed in advance.

Immobilization is reinforced through surveillance and the management of visibility. Foucault's assertion that "visibility is a trap" proves especially apt (200). The menstruant must remain unseen by the social world yet is closely monitored within the household to ensure that invisibility. Even before confinement begins, the house trains her into watchfulness. She becomes "highly conscious" of her own cycle and movements, anticipating the moment of withdrawal (*AMMH* 198). Once secluded, she exists only at the threshold, dependent on others who approach but do not enter. The asymmetry is structural. The secluded woman is visible to authority but denied reciprocal presence. She is observed without participating. Seclusion thus produces not absence but controlled exposure.

Mary Douglas's account of purity systems clarifies the mechanics of this order. Pollution practices operate through "separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions," strategies designed "to impose system on an inherently untidy experience" (4). The idiom of contamination naturalizes exclusion: proximity appears hazardous, distance necessary. The novel literalizes this logic when Behnoush reacts to Perveen's injured return home not with concern but with ritual panic: "You are soiled! What happened?" followed by the admonition, "You know the rules!" (*AMMH* 214). Even visible bodily harm is reinterpreted through the grammar of impurity. Authority speaks the language of hygiene and protection even as these measures enact classification and control. Power presents itself as care.

This fusion of protection and control corresponds to what carceral scholars identify as domestic governance. Boris, Butler, and Mireles observe that confinement frequently appears through the rhetoric of "care and prevention" rather than punishment (808). The novel repeatedly mobilizes precisely this language. Behnoush insists, "I love my son enough to wish him to stay in good health," justifying isolation as safeguarding others from contagion (*AMMH* 186). Care becomes incapacitation. The menstruant is rendered administratively harmless by being rendered immobile.

Such enforced immobility carries serious juridical consequences. When bodies are spatially removed from circulation, they are also removed from witness. Harm becomes unverifiable because it occurs beyond observation. Azara's death renders this structural danger unmistakable. Confined "in an eight-by-twelve-foot room in a remote area of the house," she suffers illness alone and receives no timely assistance (344). Isolation withdraws precisely those relations that sustain survival. Domestic privacy becomes lethal obscurity. Legal doctrine compounds this invisibility by treating the household as exempt from intervention. Colonial law hesitates at the threshold. Confinement persists because it is classified as custom rather than custody.

The novel dramatizes this juridical barrier through recurring images of blocked access. Doors must be forced open and thresholds must be crossed. Investigation becomes physical breach. The detective hammers at the house to enter. Knowledge demands impact and domestic opacity resists inquiry. Speech is similarly obstructed. Women who might testify are separated by corridors, screens, and proprieties. Silence becomes infrastructural rather than accidental. Only when the courtroom names the practice directly as “Binamazi” does custom become evidence and recognizes the negligence of family members in caring for menstruating women of the house (345). Translation into legal language converts ritual into accountability. Naming transforms a normalized domestic practice into an object of scrutiny. This moment enacts what Foucault describes as making hidden mechanisms of power visible (187).

In a nutshell, these dynamics reveal that *bīnamāzī* operates as a dispersed carceral regime sustained through patriarchal command, normalized surveillance, temporal confiscation, and juridical insulation. Fathers and husbands allocate territory. Time is withdrawn and rooms function as cells. Doors prevent intervention. Illness and pain unfold without witnesses. As Foucault reminds us, “power is everywhere because it comes from everywhere” (93). In the novel, it emanates from the most intimate site of governance, the home itself.

Menstrual seclusion therefore constitutes not merely spatial restriction but political invisibility. The menstruating woman is removed from sight, speech, and law. Only when Perveen crosses thresholds such as leaving the house at night, confronting her husband Cyrus, and ultimately departing the household altogether, does the patriarchal regime begin to fracture. Her final gesture, stepping “firmly into the stencilled chalk border, smearing her delicate powdered designs into dust,” symbolically disrupts the very domestic order that had confined her (*AMMH* 215). Hidden domestic confinement becomes legible as evidence, and what had been naturalized as custom is recognized as coercion.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that menstrual seclusion in *A Murder on Malabar Hill* by Sujata Massey should be understood not as incidental ethnographic detail or ritual background but as a spatial technology of governance that reorganizes domestic interiors into structures of confinement. Rather than presenting menstruation as a private or purely biological condition, the novel renders it as a socially regulated status that authorizes withdrawal, segregation, and immobilization. Menstruation operates administratively. It determines where women may reside, how they may circulate, and whether they may participate in the ordinary rhythms of household, social, and legal life. The body becomes legible to authority through rules that map conduct onto space.

Historical and religious evidence confirms that these restrictions were materially embedded in Parsi domestic architecture through designated rooms, regulated distances, and segregated objects. Seclusion was therefore infrastructural rather than symbolic. It was built into the organization of the home itself. When interpreted through feminist geography and carceral studies, this arrangement emerges as domestic carcerality, a mode of confinement diffused into everyday interiors and normalized through the language of purity, safety, and care. The home ceases to function as sanctuary and instead appears as a regulatory apparatus in which gendered bodies are managed through placement, surveillance, and restricted mobility.

The novel translates this structural logic into lived experience. Seclusion appears as compulsory residence, mediated contact, sensory deprivation, and cyclical disappearance from social and legal arenas. Confinement is not abstract but material, enacted through doors, thresholds, timetables, and the withholding of facilities. Such isolation produces not only immobility but heightened vulnerability, since women removed from circulation are simultaneously removed from witness, assistance, and accountability. The consequences are cumulative. Harm unfolds slowly, often invisibly, until neglect becomes injury and injury becomes death. Confinement thus registers as a form of slow violence embedded within domestic routine.

At the same time, the narrative situates these practices historically rather than ethnographically. It does not claim that strict menstrual segregation characterizes contemporary Parsi life. Instead, it preserves the structural logic that made such segregation possible: the ease with which protection becomes custody and care becomes control. By foregrounding menstruation as an analytic lens, the novel reframes domestic space as a site where power is exercised through ordinary arrangements. Gender hierarchy is neither abstract nor merely ideological. It is constructed through rooms, schedules, and restrictions that shape who may appear and who must withdraw.

Observed in this way, the text expands the scope of historical crime fiction itself. Violence is not limited to spectacular acts but embedded within everyday infrastructures that render certain bodies immobile and unaccountable. Detection therefore entails more than solving a crime. It involves making visible the hidden mechanisms that regulate domestic life. By converting private confinement into public testimony, the novel transforms what had been dismissed as custom into a matter of evidence and judgment. The politics of gender thus emerge as inseparable from the politics of space, and the household reveals itself as one of the primary sites through which governance is enacted.

## Works Cited

- Bhartiya, Aru. "Menstruation, Religion and Society." *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, vol. 3, no. 6, 2013, pp. 523–27. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJSSH.2013.V3.296>.
- Boris, Eileen, Sara M. Butler, and Alex Mireles. "Engendering Carcerality: An Introduction." *Gender & History*, vol. 36, 2024, pp. 807–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.12822>.
- Dadrawala, Noshier H. "Should Parsis Abandon Ancient Customs?" *Dīn-Avaz*, vol. 11, no. 5, n.d., pp. 5–6.
- de Albuquerque, Catarina. "Practice Note: Why We Started Talking about Menstruation." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 477–80.
- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. Routledge, 2001. Originally published 1966.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Penguin, 1977.
- Ganguly, Lopamudra, and Lakshminarayan Satpati. "Religion & Menstruation: An Inseparable Part of Women's Life." *International Journal of History*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, pp. 123–26. <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2023.v5.i1b.204>.
- Garg, Suneela, and Tanu Anand. "Menstruation Related Myths in India: Strategies for Combating It." *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 184–86. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2249-4863.154627>.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, 1991.
- Massey, Doreen. *Space, Place, and Gender*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
- Massey, Sujata. *A Murder on Malabar Hill*. Penguin Books, 2018.
- McHugh, Maureen C. "Menstrual Shame: Exploring the Role of Stigma and Secrecy." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 411–20.
- Rose, Gillian. *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Russell, James R., and Hamid Algar. "Bīnamāzī." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 4, fasc. 3, 1989, pp. 262–63, [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/binamazi-npers/](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/binamazi-npers/).

- Sangari, Esmaeil, et al. "Daštān (Bīnamāzī), the Related Rules in Sasanian and Post-Sasanian Texts." *Ancient Iranian Studies*, vol. 5, no. 14, Jan. 2026, pp. 115–26. <https://doi.org/10.22034/ais.2025.523992.1162>.
- Tavaria, Piroja N. "A Peep into the Domestic Life of the Parsis a Hundred Years Ago." *Dīn-Avaz*, 2003. Reprinted from *A Manual of Khshnoom*.
- Tuli, Anupriya, et al. "Menstrual (Im)Mobilities and Safe Spaces." *Proceedings of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '20)*, Association for Computing Machinery, 2020, article 524. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3313831.3376653>.
- Vevaina, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw. "Purity and Polemics: Zoroastrian Women's Bodies as Sites of Difference and Contestation in Early Islamic Iran." *Iran*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2024, pp. 62–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2021.1945421>.
- Wood, J. M. "(In)Visible Bleeding: The Menstrual Concealment Imperative." *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies*, edited by Chris Bobel et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 323–33.
- Young, Iris Marion. "Menstrual Meditations." *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays*, Oxford UP, 2005, pp. 97–122.