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A Space that Gnaws and Claws: Locating Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out and Harvest*

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Abstract:

Following the 'spatial turn' in the 'epoch of space', there is an increased integration of spatiality into our understanding of social organization and experience. The paper attempts to locate two modern Indian plays viz-a-viz Foucauldian spatial theory. Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' is used as a methodological tool to investigate the spatial interstices of the texts. The design of the study involves a systematic description of the simultaneously mythic and real heterotopias. These characteristics are then extended and critically applied to the evaluation of space in the plays. How the space in the texts transforms into a crisis heterotopia, how its function changes in society, how it juxtaposes in a single place several spaces, how it opens up to heterochronies, its inaccessible nature and illusory character are explored in the paper. The spatial dynamics open up the inherent marginalities and complexities of the texts chosen for study.

Keywords: heterotopias - spatial theory - modern drama- gender - violence - dystopia - socio-economic ethos.

"The present epoch will perhaps be above all an epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault 22). Space has resurged as the complex network that binds our contemporary lives and experiences. This article tries to explore the inherent marginalities of the plays *Lights Out* (1986) and *Harvest* (1997) by Manjula Padmanabhan through the dimensional dynamics of space. Drawing on Foucault's analysis of heterotopias in 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', the texts are read against the theoretical paradigm. Following the 'spatial turn' in the 'epoch of space', there is an increased integration of spatiality into our understanding of social organization and experience. Theories of Geocriticism explore the range of literary critical practices that focus on space and spatial relations vis-à-vis literary texts and contexts and make us recognize the importance of space in our critiques of literature, society and culture.

Enhanced spatialization is a defining phenomenon of the postmodern condition. This appears not only in direct geographical delimitation but it also in the more general ordering of demographic, economic, political and medical data. Foucault in his influential essay 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias

and Heterotopias' investigates the scientific distribution and codification of individuals in space. He explores the processes by which "bodies become situated, distributed, classified, regulated and identified in mutable matrices of space" (Foucault 22). Strict spatial partitioning, constant monitoring and registration of data all constitute a compact model of disciplinary mechanism. Space is no more the dead and the immobile; it is both a product and productive.

The powerful vestiges of the sacred/taboo hinder a complete opening up of space. Certain fundamental binaries continue to dominate deliberations on Space. Nevertheless the space of our lives is dynamic, varied and coloured. Foucault elaborates on the 'heterogeneity' of space:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault 25)

Certain sites, according to Foucault, have the property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect. These spaces are linked with all the others but which, however, contradict all the other sites. They can be divided into utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are fundamentally are unreal spaces that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. Heterotopias are a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. They are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. While utopia is a placeless place, heterotopias exist in reality. Foucault enumerates six principles involved in understanding Heterotopias:

- 1) Heterotopias are part of all cultures. They can be broadly classified as heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation.
- 2) Each society can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion.
- 3) Heterotopias are capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible, i.e.; they take the form of contradictory sites.
- 4) Heterotopias are linked to Heterochronies, i.e.; they are most often linked to slices in time.
- 5) Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing and is not freely accessible to the public.
- 6) Heterotopias have to function in relation to all the space that remains. They can either create a space of illusion or a space of compensation. (Foucault 28)

Lights Out, a disturbing debut, deals with Indian society and the various issues that grapple its people. The setting is Santa Cruz, Mumbai, 1982. Though the play has gang rape at its centre; what is more shocking is the portrayal of the indifference and callousness of the middle class. The reluctance of the middle class to get involved and to take a stand against the criminal brutality in our society dents their sanitized superficialities. The residents of an Apartment complex in Mumbai filter out from their day to day life, a nightly rape that takes place in a neighbouring compound with complete apathy. The married couple, Leela and Bhasker, detail a set of arguments as to why they should not interfere or go to the police. They along with their friends, Mohan, Naina and Surinder, choose to watch the brutal gang rape of a woman from their apartment and indulge in endless discussion of the same. By which time the rape is over and the rapists have all gone away. The futile ending reinforces the sheer apathy of the society against the marginalized.

Home is where the heart is. This proverbial adage is taken to its literal logical conclusion in Manjula Padmanabhan's *Harvest*: a play that explores the outcome of international trade in human organs as a metaphor for neocolonialism. Performed first in 1998, this dark fantasy set in Mumbai in the year 2010, posits a not too-distant future in which poverty can limit moral options and degrade human lives. A modern trade in body parts can be understood only within the context of gross material inequalities between the first and third worlds. Consequently, the Donors in the play are Indians and the Receivers North American. Both plays are located in the swarming metropolis of Mumbai. While the characters in *Lights Out* live in an apartment complex, the ones in *Harvest* live in a single room tenement in a chawl. The action of both the plays is confined within the four walls of their homes. They both have a family in crisis struggling to cope with external forces at their core.

Heterotopias of crisis are sites reserved for individuals, who are in relation to the society and the environment in which they live, are in a state of crisis. *Lights Out* opens with Bhasker returning home from work to the mentally strained Leela. Her condition goes largely unnoticed by her husband who is busy with his tea and newspaper. Her paranoia and repeated pleadings to Bhasker about contacting the police remain a mystery for the readers. She describes her fear: "I carry it around all day. Sometimes it's like a shawl, it wraps itself around my shoulders and I start to shiver" (LO 86). Eventually, the reason for Leela's condition is revealed: a nightly gang rape that takes place in the vacant construction site next to their apartment complex. The cries of the victim reverberate throughout the day in Leela's ears and agitate her nerves. The crisis is precipitated by the inactions of Bhasker who comes up with redundant excuses as to why they must ignore the rape. Leela begins to turn more and more inward and envelops herself in a false sense of security and self-preservation. She ensures that the curtains are closed and even switches off the lights in the living room at the slightest hint of a cry. She refuses to look out and watch the disturbing sight even though Bhasker and his friend Mohan watch it from the window. There is a serious psychological and moral issue at stake here. The withdrawn wife, Leela; the

visibly inconspicuous servant, Frieda; the indifferent men, Bhasker and Mohan; and the well-meaning but ineffectual couple, Naina and Surinder; represent the different attitudes of Indian society. The apartment turns into a space that limits moral options and degenerates its inhabitants into complacent apathy.

The Prakash household in *Harvest* could also be viewed as a heterotopia of crisis. Om's selection as a prospective donor for Interplanta Services triggers off a precipitating crisis for the entire family. Signing up for organ donation, a moment of deep personal and moral reckoning is what separates Om from the others. By virtue of his contract, Om is forced to accept the Interplanta way of living which turns his family into a 'domestic unit'. The Mephistophilean pact transforms their one room apartment in a Mumbai chawl into a 'privileged' dwelling unit. As Interplanta welcomes Om into its fold, the house undergoes certain drastic changes. There is unregulated water supply, a brand new toilet is installed, the kitchen is dismantled, pellets become the new health food, new furniture do the rounds, smell of antiseptic wafts through the air and gadgets galore. The neighbours certainly believe that the family has "put on airs" because of their new position. However, the place can be viewed as an isolation ward *par excellence*; an innocuous incubator where the organs were being prepared for a healthy transplantation. Therefore, the 'privileged' household caveats a thoroughly materialistic and investment protection agenda.

The "society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia easily function in a very different fashion- for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (Foucault 5). Leela's living room transforms seamlessly into a site of invisibilities. Frieda, the servant, though present in all the three scenes of the play is never once acknowledged by the others. She does not utter a single syllable but mechanically responds to the tasks assigned to her. Her presence or the lack of it throws an open query to her role in the play. A cloak of invisibility enshrouds the living room as the curtains of the rear window are drawn shut as the evening wanes. Even, the children of the house are totally absent from the scene though their presence in the apartment is confirmed by Leela. The living space is also a site of deferred decisions and arguments. Lakshmi Chandra in the Preface to *Lights On: Indian Plays in English* delineates the various arguments that the couple have for not responding to the cries of the rape victim or call the cops:

These are the arguments not to go to the police: ugly sounds cannot hurt; the police will not come even if they are informed; the unnecessary interference if it is a domestic fight; maybe it is something religious and therefore no one should interfere; if the victim is a whore she requires no protection; why should we interfere when we ourselves haven't been harmed; the 'rapists' are human beings and so we must understand that they have problems too; and then the endless discussion on what to do. (Chandra xxii)

Om's one- room tenement in *Harvest* functions not just as a living space but as a claustrophobic prison house. The intermittent march of guards, the detailed classification of the individuals, the issue of permits, the marking of identities all enhances the parallels. The bolted doors discourage any interaction with the neighbours. Whatever semblance of normality the Prakash family partook of shatters forever with the arrival of the contact module. A thorough warden, Ginni puts the family into constant surveillance through the panoptic contact module. Her attempts to control the bodies of the inmates are met with little resistance. They acknowledge Ginni's paranoia for sneezing, paste plastic smiles on their lips to appease her and adhere to her demands of eating at a fixed time. The inmates order their lives according to her whims and demands. Ma's transgression of using the toilet without her permission invokes immediate censure; "I don't know if I can handle it...walking out of me like that" (*Harvest* 225). Ginni, unwilling to relax control, keeps the family in a tight leash through seamless monitoring.

The third characteristic of a heterotopia is its capability of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible. The theatrical stage is one such space that is open to such a heady mixing of sites. The rear window with its drawn and shut curtains presupposes a stage in *Lights Out*. Even when the lights of the living room are shut, the light from the street illuminates the space/stage. The living space has a room-divider-cum bar which foregrounds the action. The loud and desperate cries from outside are the cues that regulate the conversation among characters. Reinforcing the stage/living space metaphor, there is no final curtain call at the end of the play, Through the rear window, one can discern "just a suggestion of the rooftop of the neighbouring building, as yet painted" (*LO* 84). This is the site of the nightly rape that takes place over a period of weeks where a woman is brutally raped by four men. The residents of the apartment complex chose to ignore the battered cries of the woman for weeks together. For the middle class residents, the unfinished building is a shady space inhabited by laboureres, migrants and the poor. There is a concerted effort on part of the residents to keep their space sanctified by ignoring what takes place in the neighbourhood. They remain "just far enough not to get involved, just close enough to see everything clearly " (*LO* 95). But the isolation is incomplete and completely fails as indicated by Leela's mental trauma.

The dingy apartment of the beginning of *Harvest* is symptomatic of the squalour, congestion and penury of the third world. Due to population explosion, human bodies are forced to crowd into smaller spaces. Denied of even basic amenities, the tenement dwellers are forced to share a common toilet and frequently skip baths. Om's description of Interplanta's recruitment facility recalls a fully automated factory. Human bodies are treated just like commodities- categorized, sifted, transported, tested and selected. The contact module, a dream selling entity, stands in for a real body as virtuality supplants reality. The body itself becomes a site of resistance, reclamation and transformation. Both Om and Jeetu use their bodies as currency in an economy in which physical utility is the only criteria of value. Collapse of individual identities seems to be the order of the day (Sister/Wife, Om/Jeetu, Virgil/Ginni). It is only Jaya who reinvests the body

with dignity and individual uniqueness. Jeetu's narrative of his life on the streets reveals a dangerous lack of any state support mechanisms. The reference to 'game sanctuaries' exposes the cannibalistic streak in humans. Ma's obsession with T.V pushes her into a media-controlled oblivion. The uber-modern Videocouch becomes her tomb for all seasons.

It is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space. Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time. *Lights Out* opens at a time when the sky wanes from dusk into night. At the crux of the play, is the nightly rape of the woman in the neighbourhood. All the activities of the household are timed around this incident. Dinner is served, curtains are drawn, lights are shut, children are sent to bed, doors are bolted, and guests are avoided in perfect synchrony with the grim event. Leela keeps anxiously looking at the watch throughout the play in dread of the impending rape and once it is over mutters, "Oh! Then it must be over for tonight" (*LO* 128). It is quite a chilling statement as it anticipates the gory and bestial gang rape being repeated over and over.

The time, in *Harvest*, between Om's selection as a Donor and the actual transplantation run on chariots of fire. The narrative is punctuated with the sound of boots and knocks on the door- a cruel reminder of the impending transplant. In a span of a little over two months, a full body switch occurs. The warning tones of the contact module force Ginni's authority on the family with absolute regularity. In fact, Om plans his activities in synchrony with the warning tone. Ma too has fully become a slave to 'episodic' time -her life is regulated by the episodes of serials. Jaya totally abandons time at the end of the play as she celebrates existence outside time- "For the first time in my life and maybe the last time of my life, I'm going to enjoy myself, all by myself" (*Harvest* 249).

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. "Frieda! Put the chain on! Don't let anyone in", implores Leela in *Lights Out* (*LO* 108). The doors of the apartment are perpetually shut with the chain on. Leela is startled out of her wits every time the doorbell rings. The children too are locked up in the guest room all evening and are not once allowed to come to the living room.

Om's house in *Harvest* exhibits a strong garrison tendency. Not once are the doors of the house left open and there are specifically demarcated knock-codes for the neighbours. The entry to the much envied toilet is also restricted as is made abundantly clear to Bidyut Bai. She could well be representative of the public who cannot gain access through the barricaded doors. Once Jeetu's 'permit' to live in the house is revoked, he technically becomes a *persona non grata* for his family. Even the vision of Ginni's mansion and Ginni herself is denied to everyone except Jeetu, much to Om's chagrin. Thanks to his hi-tech eyes, Jeetu 'sees' the wonderful world of wealth,

beauty and luxury. However, it is this very restricted assess mechanism that Jaya utilizes to her benefit at the end of the play.

Heterotopias have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This latter type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation (Foucault 8). The play *Lights Out* ends with the projection of five slides with the following message:

‘This play is based on an eye-witness account. The incident took place in Santa Cruz, Bombay, 1982’.

‘The characters are fictional. The incident is a fact’.

‘In real life, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighbouring compound’.

‘In real life, as in the play, the incident took place over a period of weeks’.

‘And in real life, as in the play, no one went to the aid of the victim’. (LO 128)

The stage becomes the illusory space that exposes the hollowness and depravity of our society that thrives on apathy and indifference.

Om with great alacrity tries to create an illusory image of the Western world in *Harvest*. His pseudo-western attitude, affected nasal twang, and choice of clothes further his illusions. His unabashed surrender to the West is complete when he declares to Ginni, “I live only for your benefit” (230). His belief in the Western world is much stronger than his contemporary reality- “How little you understand of Westerners! They are not small, petty people.” (232). The carefully designed image of Ginni is only a “computer animated wet dream” (246). The blonde, blue-eyed Caucasian beauty with a husky voice is a sure hit with the male Donors. Even Jeetu could not escape the tentacles of illusion as he falls flat for Ginni. Virgil’s remark about Jeetu, “He sees what he wants to see. He lives what he wants to live”, effectively drives home the idea of a constructed imaginary space (246).

Thus, the spatial dynamics of *Lights Out* and *Harvest* problematize the embedded interstices of the texts and contribute towards a deeper understanding of them.

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