

Heterotopia and the Myth of the Witch

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Abstract:

The distinction between the different kinds of spaces is important when it comes to witchcraft. Indeed, the relationship of witchcraft and space is somewhat inextricable, even though, in most readings, the analytical aspect of space is vastly ignored. Witches wear pointed hats, and fly in the outskirts of the proper city. The fairy tales involving a wicked witch and a princess was marked by the difference of location: the comforts of the castle or the confinement in a lonely tower or the wild forests. In this paper I, have attempted to show how space can act in the socio-political constructs of the witch figure, sometimes with motives that are drastically different from any supernatural influence.

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.¹

“Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, discusses the discourse of space as it has evolved over time. Foucault describes space as relational, much like his notion of power. Foucault believed space to be relational entity, in which space is defined by the relations of the objects within it to each other and therefore any limits on space would be defined by these relations. Foucault, in his effort to speak of the otherness of space or the space that is not hegemonic, begins his essay only from the Middle Ages, because only here can he discuss the hierarchical nature of spaces. Then he goes on to incorporate notions of empty spaces or imaginative space, something that is of integral importance to this paper. He touches upon the

¹ Michel Foucault ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, *Architecture /Mouvement/ Continuité*, trans. Jay Miskowiec, (1984), 1.

metaphysical conception of space, the entire significance of Utopias and the manifestation of Heterotopias.

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.²

In Foucault's Heterotopia, there is no definitive opinion of good and bad (corresponding to the idea of Utopia and Dystopia, respectively), but the occurrence of many different things. He uses the example of the mirror to distinguish between a Utopia and Heterotopia, while the image that is reflected on the mirror is unreal and therefore equated with the former, the mirror as an object is real and hence it is simultaneously the Heterotopia as well. Also, the fact that our gaze reflects from the virtual image to the real space is the testimony of its existence. His idea of Heterotopia has been adopted by others like theorist David Harvey and even in many other works of fiction.

Henri Lefebvre, in his seminal work on space, *The Production of Space* devotes an entire chapter to vividly illustrate the demarcation of abstract from real space, titled 'From Absolute Space to Abstract Space'. He says that space is comprised of memories, though one cannot totally depend on the past for the actuality of the existence of space. Space is an integrated formation that encloses all the past experiences and uses these to shape everything that is going to happen in future. For him 'organic' space is the conglomeration of times, and societies, along with relationship between the people who make up these different time zones. He makes this example very subjective by applying his theory to the example of the evolution of Roman empires. He talks at length about Christianity in Rome and also the Judeo-Christian relationship and its upheavals with the common denomination of time. The formation of societies and the existence of urban space, everything is viewed from the point of Rome. However, his example of the absoluteness and nothingness of cosmos can be universally applied, like the following extract:

² Ibid, 2.

With the dimming of the 'world' of shadows, the terror it exercised lessened accordingly. It did not, however, disappear. Rather, it was transformed into 'heterotopical' places, places of sorcery and madness, places inhabited by demonic forces - places which were fascinating but tabooed. Later, much later, artists would rediscover this ferment of sacred and accursed. At the time when it held sway, however, no one could represent this 'world'; it was simply there. Space was ridden with hidden powers, more often malign than well-disposed. Each such place had a name, and each denomination also referred to the relevant occult power: *nutnien—nomen*.³

Abstract space becomes many things at ones, it can be politicised or homogenised and even institutionalised. It all depends on how the idea is used by the people in authority. Space itself remains fluid and volatile. In this state, it can be attributed to the properties of occultism, as also mentioned in the paragraph quoted above. Occult has an impenetrable affiliation with space. Both share a seamlessness which tie them close together. And this is why it is of such crucial importance in the study of witchcraft. From the altar of the witch to the secret circles of the coven, every aspect of witchcraft is enmeshed with the attributes of space. In fact, certain facts or fictions that are written about the study of Wicca have to take into account the spatial question as much as the ephemeral quality of the study itself.

Wilderness became unanimous with every possible idea of witchcraft. Nature, which was once viewed as the source that provides humans with fertility and succour, abruptly ceased to be so. The entire belief in the *anima mundi*, or the animated life of nature assumed a menacing and threatening air. What was previously believed to have possessed healing and nurturing powers, very easily, took an insidious turn in the minds of people. The animistic basis of nature was thought to be the underlying grounds of magical practice. The churchgoers started believing that just as they equated the Catholic Church with their God, the Wiccans have transfigured the trees, the earth and everything animate or inanimate, which is disassociated with the civic society, to a harrowed space for practising their craft. In this manic fear, more and more people began to shun nature, and move consciously into the clutches of sophistication and civilisation. This is when, for the first time, the impression of

³ Henri Lefebvre 'From Absolute Space to Abstract Space', *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell Publishing, 1992), 263.

the 'dead earth' began to evolve. Men began believing that earth, by itself, has no life. It can only be used to facilitate men in producing for their needs. This forceful assumption helped them dispose of their irrational fears about nature.

History tells us, that most of the European cathedrals were built on grounds which was considered sanctified and hallowed by the practitioners of paganism. But, as is always the case with the predominant religion, those pagan altars were mercilessly torn down, in the most profane manner. It is true that Wiccans believe in the creation of an altar while calling upon their 'Mother Goddess'. They also feel that this space should be alive and teeming with energy because, within a secret place of worship, the connection with the source of higher Power becomes more effective. Stepping outside the restraints of ordinary world can open up wondrous possibilities. However, this can very well mean the psyche of the individual involved and not the literal space. A place which is in the heart of nature is understandably more suited to invoke the Goddess, and many people have claimed to have undergone some kind of psychological and physical transformations while meditating in such an environment. The idea of female space as one of the main settings of witchcraft is also crucial. It is in only these spaces that many women finally found their independence and could invoke their own strengths without any constraints of the male dominated society. The secret of the space hence became crucial, even in the perspective of gender differences.

To understand the power of the actions and reactions, spatial study in witchcraft becomes integral. Not only does it separate the witches from the members of the refined society, but it also marks the severance of the witch from the bewitched. Witchcraft and sacrifice, have been and, are still of crucial importance in certain societies due to the transformative function or the promise of power, but most importantly because of its seductive prowess into the realm of the indefinite. In societies that acknowledge witchcraft, the witch surfaces as a transgressive energy that operates through a continuation of itself – by overflowing social relations with invading agencies. On the other hand, in societies that place particular value on ritual sacrifices, it is a type of action that merges life and death, which brings aspects of the spirit world in contact with the world of the living, which replaces human life with animal life and which uses this shift of realms for the benefit of transforming identities. This is what strikingly contrasts societies at large. Thus, when we think about the dense jungles in an exotic setting like Amazon, we immediately picture dancing by the fire, organising séances,

sometimes even cannibalism. It is only through this spatial otherness, that we are able to maintain the recognition and security of our surroundings.

The idea of animated or free space as opposed to claustrophobia has been employed very differently and effectively in two movies; Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick directed *The Blair Witch Project* in 1999, and the Italian horror flick of 1977 titled *Suspiria* which was directed by Dario Argento. The former shows three students who start working on a documentary about the local murderess 'Blair Witch' and bizarrely go missing. The recorded documentary is discovered later which unveils what exactly transpired during their research. The students, after conducting a general survey in the city, went into the forest where this alleged witch was believed to reside. They set up camps in the heart of the forest to give a realistic approach to the documentary. The forest is filled with objects that are commonly identified with black magic or voodoo. There are human figures made with sticks and definite but makeshift structure fashioned with stone chips. The students in a strange turn of events discover after the first night that they cannot find their way back to the city. Relentless efforts prove to be of no use and as the surroundings gradually become increasingly ominous, the audience realise that supernatural is at work. The last scene of the movie captures amidst jerky camera movements some form of fatal blow inflicted on all the three students and the screen goes blank.⁴ In this movie, the woods assume the portentous air of the boding evil. Since no literal figure of the witch is shown the dark forest is the metaphorical trap into which these individuals walk in. *Suspiria* is the complete opposite of this. Here the entire action takes place with the walls of a dance academy which is only a cover for a coven of malefic witches. These witches entice young girls only to murder them and keep themselves forever young by feeding off the energy of their victims. The lighting and the sets, along with the incessant rains and deafening thunderstorms in the background, give us the feeling from the very beginning that something is not quite right with the place. After three mysterious murders the protagonist is able to uncover the terrible secret and put an end to the horrid crime.⁵

⁴ *The Blair Witch Project*, directed by Eduardo Sánchez, Daniel Myrick (1999; U.S.A: Lions Gate Films Home Entertainment, 2003) DVD.

⁵ *Suspiria*, directed by Dario Argento (1977; U.S.A: Synapse Films, 2014) DVD.

The witch has been explored by writers of varied backgrounds; Mahasweta Devi wrote about this demonising of the witch in the wild. Their spatial otherness has been explored and exploited in a short story in Devi's anthology *Bitter Soil*. The witch looms large in the dark forest adjacent to the village in the narrative. Hence, as soon as you step out of the patriarchal dominance, you step into the wilderness where reigns a form of Power who has been worshipped as Kali and shunned as Dakini alike. This is in unison with the figure of the temptress who lures men away from society into the perverse corners of uninhabited lands. Again, the self-proclaimed Wiccan priestess Ipsita Roy Chakraverty, in her autobiography called *The Beloved Witch*, presents a starkly contrasting story. In the chapter 'The Prophecies of Luciana,' Chakraverty writes that Luciana was one of the hauntingly beautiful women who was executed in the bloody witch hunts of Europe. She was perceptive and aligned herself more closely to nature than society. She read extensive books about exotic locations far away and wrote some striking documents which Chakraverty calls 'prophecies'. She had predicted very specific geographic and political conditions about the present times some four hundred years ago. Some of them might refer to India and its neighbouring countries. One in particular is in conformity with the question of space:

Beyond deserts and mountains high
Lie the lands of mysterii
There one day will women rule
There one day will ye find the tool
To combat ills which plague mankind
The answer lies in its rocks and sea
Near the rock tower built to Ra.⁶

These French verses have been roughly translated by Chakraverty herself, during her course of study in the chalet. She has also interpreted them in a rather remarkable manner. She believes that the locale discussed in these lines refer to the Himalayan range, which was always considered elusive by the Europeans of the sixteenth century. The prophecy about women rulers is indeed noticeable because in recent times these countries have experienced fierce leadership by women. Be it Indira Gandhi in India or Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, or

⁶ Ipsita Roy Chakraverty, 'The Prophecies of Luciana', *The Beloved Witch*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2000, reprinted in 2010), 83-84.

even Bangladesh's Begun Hasina, women have had the strong hold on national politics. The line about finding the cure for maladies could be a reference to the dawn breaking technological advances that have occurred in this part of the world, only recently. Not to forget that the Himalayas themselves are the most potent source of providing invaluable herbs that can treat some of the most complex ailments, even today. Wicca, here, has accomplished something which is absolutely astounding. A woman who had never in her life, stepped her foot out of Europe made predictions about places she had not seen, and about people who come into existence long after she had faded away. This is, in a sense, transgression of the limits of space. It could also be conceived as the abstract space that Lefebvre talks about, since it is envisaged in someone's imagination. This transcendence of actual space and let the mind take its own swing brings about astonishing results as these. Cynics who have vehemently opposed the existence of anything remotely out of the ordinary cannot come up with the possible argument to explain this scientifically. The only compromise that the reader needs to make is take her words at face value. But for that matter, any text is open to a range of interpretations. There is no knowing what a teenage girl living in a completely different era might have thought while writing these verses, but this Wiccan Priestess gives us a unique outlook and it should not be dismissed as a hoax (as these claims generally are).

Space remains fundamental in the exploration of the witch-hunts that take place in India. The space facet has to be taken into account while surveying the Indian scenario since the problem of identifying a woman as a witch and then undertaking the measures to punish or execute the person is very concentrated in specific parts of the country. Some parts of the country have felt its looming presence much more than the rest. Bihar, Jharkhand, some parts of Bengal and Rajasthan, and also Assam have been ravaged by the infamous practise of witch hunting.

In this article, a particular case that borders on the angle of space is quoted below:

Jonali Rabha was banished from her village on accusation of being a witch. Being homeless she was forced to take shelter in the village of her birth place, Hatigaon. She informed the Dhirabati Mahila Samata Sangha of Haitgaon. When the members of the Sangha wanted to negotiate with villagers of the Borjhor, the villagers did not reciprocate. Then Jonali along with her brother and members of the Dhirabati Mahila Samata Sangha of Haitgaon discussed the matter and filed a case in the

Lakhipur Police station. After an initial disinclination, the officer in charge of the PS interrogated the villagers and asked them to bring Jonali back to the village. The villagers apologized to Jonali who puts certain condition before the villagers. These conditions were 1. Her mother in law who had been banished from the village 20 years ago should be brought back. 2. Four years back Jonali had to pay rupees 3001 for the allegation of being a witch. This amount should be returned. 3. The villagers must give a written undertaking that such accusation will not be repeated. 4. Jonali should be allowed to live peacefully in the village. With this settlement Jonali now lives happily in the village.⁷

The argument about so called witches being driven out of the community by the rest of the people is explicitly proven here. The evident effect of this procedure is the denial of right to life to an individual whose rights should, in theory, be protected by the constitution. Jonali's good fortune is sadly not shared by many. Most of the women who are ones ousted remain that way till the end of their lives. Sometimes even if the woman is not killed by the villagers, the family of this branded witch suffers many indignities. The family is, for the most part, socially confined and more notably boycotted by the whole village and the community at large. This results in their loss of livelihood and also restricts the fluidity of their movements. When confronted with excessive aversion and avoidance these families tend to migrate out of their homeland and start living under unfriendly and unfamiliar circumstances at great personal inconvenience. Space is also crucial in terms of the property disputes that are so common among the rural populace in India. Due to the lack of proper implementation of laws, property rights are forever held in confusion. In such a situation, a woman –usually a widow –owning a considerable piece of land is targeted and brandished as a witch. She is then blamed for the sickness and death of cattle and livestock and consequently ousted from that land, which then becomes the property of the local goons or Panchayat. A woman is forced to accept a stereotypical identity, of the witch, behind such politicised agendas.

The Indian judiciary laws about witch hunting are rather limited, and have not produced quite effective results. While some progressive juries have shown the willingness to promptly

⁷ 'The Practice of Witch hunting: A Call for its Abolition', Assam Mahila Samata Society (2010), 6, http://www.google.co.in/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB4QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.assammahilasamakhy.org%2Fhunting.pdf&ei=TC9vVNI_zIy4BMfMgpAD&usg=AFQjCNGZo8DQFGRj8MTnW-dp768Yzjo1yA

punish the offenders, many others have taken an inefficient approach. Even though the states of Jharkhand and Bihar ruled these torturous events as criminal offenses, the crime have not been totally obliterated in these regions. It all culminates into the denial of the right to be free from inhuman treatment or the right to dispose of wealth. It also terminates one from the right be provided with adequate living space and facilities that should be commonly provided.

The argument of space and witchcraft can thus be found entirely interspersed with each other. Some parapsychologists believe that even the Out of Body experience or astral journeys that a person is able to undertake can be connected to the study of occult. If this be the case, then all the arguments about abstract space finds a perfect expression via this phenomenon. Heterotopia and occultism have continued to be part of one another. In the illusion that witchcraft provides to the less learned the spatial issue is neglected, but comprehensive reading will have to done in light of all the components—which includes space.

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