

Brothels as Heterotopic Spaces: An Analysis of the Movie *Begum Jaan*

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Abstract

Brothels are restricted spaces for individuals who follow and praise the societal norms of morality. But these spaces also give easy access to the patriarchal society to suppress women since they do not fit into the so-called “respective” roles in society. Brothels are usually viewed as spaces for men to fulfill their desire for sex, enhancing their masculinistic peculiarities. Women are always suppressed in these sexual acts as they are viewed as derogatory subjects and forced to subjugate under men. The Bollywood movies have created a series of narrations portraying brothels where the above peculiar characteristics are reinitiated and represented. Contrary to this, the movie *Begum Jaan* portrays a brothel negating all the stereotypical understandings of it, as argued in the paper. To prove this, the paper views the Brothel in the movie as a “heterotopia,” keeping in mind the concepts related to gender, power, and space itself through qualitative analysis.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Brothels, Bollywood Movies, space

Introduction

Brothels are spaces inhabiting women in society grooming themselves to become an object to fulfill the sexual pleasure of males. These spaces also actively contribute to establishing women's subjugation by placing them against societal norms. They are not

respected in society. Many Bollywood movies have contributed to show brothels as spaces supporting the above arguments portraying the helplessness of women to sustain in these spaces. The movie *Pakeezah*, a 1972 movie by Kamal Amrohi, comments on the tawaif's character as a girl born to entertain others. As this is understood as her destiny, the woman wishes to die than live as a body without a soul. *Mandi*, another movie from 1983, portrays tawaifs in such a way that their presence is considered to be a challenge to the respectability of society. Another movie *Devdas*, released in 2002, represents tawaifs as ones who are destined not to have a husband. Most movies produced on the life of tawaifs portray them in a sexualized manner. They are treated either as prostitutes or whores, or as ones who grieve over the pathetic condition of being a tawaif. In the same way, brothels are portrayed in Bollywood movies as a space away from the dominant and respectable society from where the so-called prostitutes strive to escape.

Contrary to this, the movie *Begum Jaan* gives a different perspective of the Brothel, satisfying Michel Foucault's idea of Heterotopia as a space away from society's norms but providing representation to the people inside it. Through my research, I attempt to justify that the brothel representation in *Begum Jaan* differs from the portrayal of brothels in other Bollywood movies. The movie shows the complex economic, political and legal status held by the Brothel and the lady of the Brothel *Begum Jaan*. The female protagonist transcends patriarchal roles and exhibits her identity as someone fulfilling her will or destiny. The movie also deals with the question of sexual freedom in the life of women. This project explores how the film represents the Brothel and the women in it from a positive aspect, focusing on the atrocities committed by society on them by defining the Brothel of *Begum Jaan* as a heterotopic space. Although studies have been made on Brothels, brothels are not much studied as Heterotopic spaces equating women as powerful identities inhabiting society and negating societal norms. Hence the paper focuses on this argument establishing the

heterotopic nature of brothels which is peculiar to the movie Begum Jaan through a qualitative analysis exploring the concepts of concepts related to gender, power, and space.

Explaining the concept

Heterotopia, as defined by Michel Foucault, is a term that refers to spaces that disturb, pose a contrast to, or transform the existing social order while being placed within the same. Every society and culture contain heterotopias which are real spaces with different levels of meanings and relationships that contradict and disturb the accepted norms and rules (Foucault 3). Heterotopias are spaces where an “alternative social ordering” takes place and are considered to be regulating factors to “our imagination, desires, fears and our sense of power and powerlessness”(Hetherington 40). Heterotopias are often regarded as marginalized spaces carrying a sense of horror or mystery. These spaces that threaten the existing norm maintain their links to society through ordinary individuals, administrators, or the government. They are characterized by “sublimity” and are also referred to as a “marginal, paradoxical or third space” (Hetherington 40).

Heterotopias can be classified based on six principles, out of which the third principle talks about the Heterotopia of multiple spaces where “a single real space” is juxtaposed over “several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”(Foucault 6). The constituting substances of these spaces can be utterly alien to each other. The “traditional Persian garden, which was considered as a sacred space representing the four parts of the world with navel of the world like an umbilicus and the vegetation of the places in the same space,” is considered an apt example of this type of Heterotopia (Foucault 6). Other examples include “the carpets, which are the reproductions of gardens” and “the zoological gardens are containing a small parcel of the world”(Foucault 6).

The Heterotopia of illusion, which constitutes the sixth principle, is a space that exposes and subverts every real space of the individual’s public and private interaction space

(Foucault 8). One such space is the Brothel, often regulated or restricted by the dominant hierarchal structures from outside. Brothels are spaces where the idea of “otherness” is quite evident. They have become heterotopias as they stand away from the social order of society, thus creating an image of transgression or scariness. However, the fact is that there is an unavoidable relationship between the people existing within the social order and those in the heterotopias. A combination of private and public spaces is visible in brothels.

In his work *Production of Space*, Henry Lefebvre tries to explain how space is socially produced and how a marginalized community or individual is forced to have a separate space. He believed that the “social space is a social product” (Schmid 28). The theory of the production of space explains that space has a close relationship with social reality. Space is not “formed” in a natural process, but rather it is “produced” (Schmid 28). Henceforth the space cannot be considered an individual entity and “does not exist in itself” (Schmid 28). Both space and time are products of social reality. Space is produced at a specific point in time. Space stands for the “synchronic order of social reality,” and time stands for the “diachronic order and thus the historical process of social production” (Schmid 29). Another argument put forward by Lefebvre is that space and time are not universal, as they are understood concerning a particular social reality. These two entities are “fundamentally historical” (Schmid 29). Lefebvre explains the three dimensions of spatial production: spatial practice, representation of space, and spaces of representation. Spaces of representation are described as the inversion of the model of space, concerned about the symbolic dimension of space (Schmid 37,35). Lefebvre also focuses on how the body of an individual can be used “to locate and understand” the space being socially produced (Giesking, n.p). Space is also understood in the sense of how it is “structured by a great array of social relations,” which includes “gender, sexuality, race, age, language and disability”(Giesking,n.p).

Judith Butler explains the concept of abjection, which plays a vital role in forming the “subject.” Abjection is the process by which “otherness” is attributed to an individual's body and how it results in the exclusion of the space occupied by the “other.” The subject's identity is defined by the expulsion of the other, treating it as “not me” (Niyahp, n.p). This process of expulsion and repulsion forms the “binary definition that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject” (Niyahp, n.p). The subject also produces its barrier, both “internal and external,” to know where exactly “their body stops, and the other begins” (Niyahp, n. p). This process of abjection, including the “expulsion, exclusion and repulsion,” is marked by “homophobia, sexism, and racism” and is also reflected in the space that the “other” occupies (Niyahp, n.p).

Stereotypical gender views are formed chiefly based on this abjection. Society demarcates certain features to each individual, along with some social norms. When this is violated, these individuals will be treated as abject ones to be set apart from normal society. An individual who performs a form of sexuality that stands apart from the norms of a community, the individual and the space where this kind of sexuality is explored will be treated as abject. Sexuality is “materialized” in time with the influence of “regulatory bodies” (Funambulist, n. p). Abjection works on an individual, mainly based on gender and the space within which that gender is placed. Power relations in society play a significant role in determining abject bodies.

Michel Foucault comments that power sometimes exists in “an institution rather than an individual, which leads to the institution's function”(Felluga, n. p). Maintaining power relations implies “violence” to establish power over the subjects (Felluga, n. p). The patriarchal power relation holds that women shall be the subject of repression before men. Women, always subject to societal norms, are meant to support “discipline” (Felluga, n. p). Common people can be the subject of repression by the government or an authoritarian

system. There can also be power relations between those who belong to the same gender based on their affiliation to particular classes, races, etc.

Deciphering the *Begum Jaan's* Brothel as a Heterotopia

Society treats brothels as the 'other' space, and its inhabitants form the 'other' who live outside the social norms. Brothels are those places where there can be a power relation between the people inside and outside in which the power is established either of the antagonism towards the Brothel or for the establishment of power over the bodies in sexuality. Although fully occupied and represented by women, brothels tend to fall under male dominance. The purpose of the brothels is to satisfy the male gender, and it is the sexuality of the men that are explored in this space rather than that of women. Acceptance of this male dominance also depends on elements of class or power. In the movie *Begum Jaan* also, the same fate happens. The government officials identify the Brothel not as a home or a shelter but as a hindrance to establishing the borderline. It was considered as a mere building inhabited by some "whores", not as their shelter or means of livelihood. Although they had customers from the lowest to the highest class or caste, including government officials, in the daylight, these people placed the Brothel as the "other" away from the norm. By marking the Brothel as the "other," the people of the villages could define themselves as the 'decent' ones in the society. As Butler proposes, creating the other is necessary to establish the self as a standard, acceptable entity.

When India gained independence and the news was broadcasted on the radio, Begum Jaan was unhappy. She tells the Masterji, "For prostitutes, all days are same" (Mukherji 21:04). Their status as the "other" denied them any feeling of freedom or joy as the country got its independence. Their status as the "other" remains the same whether the country is free. Begum Jaan makes another comment on the entire community of women and the question of independence, "what about the sisters and mothers of our glorious nation?" (Mukherji 22:11).

This throws some light on how abjection works within gendered identities. Although the country gained independence, women still had to live dependent on men because of the lack of privileges they experienced in a patriarchal society. As Begam Jaan continues to say, “Hindu, Muslim, foreigners whoever they are, it will always be a man’s thing” (Mukherji 22:11-22:13). This statement clarifies that the freedom of the country has nothing to do with the freedom of the women in the country. A woman lies subservient to a man without any regard to their political status.

At another point, Begum Jaan asks Masterji, “Ask any man out of all the millions of citizens to marry one of the women and take her away,” hearing which the Masterji turns silent (Mukherji 22:23). No woman will receive freedom in their domestic spaces while their country achieves independence. The male gender identifies as the subject, labeling the female as the “other,” succumbing to the domestic space. Also, there will be no man ready to accept a “prostitute” from a brothel as his wife because that will surely go against the norms of society. However, men will come to these women to enjoy sex. The abject status of the women remains the same even when they are in direct contact with the men who appreciate all privileges of being the powerful self.

Gulabo leaves behind her place and elopes with Masterji out of her love for him, but Masterji plans the whole affair only out of hatred towards Begum Jaan, who refuses his hand. He leads her to a cartload and sells her to the men in it. When she asks her about the promise that he had given her, he says, “Gulabo, prostitutes only have buyers, not husbands” (Mukherji 1:45:25). A prostitute should never expect to have a husband and have a happy life, but she can only be with a man in bed to satisfy his sexual pleasure.

The government officials were not ready to extend their eviction period but were determined to attack them without sympathy. On the night of the encounter between Kabir

and Begam Jaan, the inmates of the Brothel are shot one by one. The Brothel was put on fire. Even when they decided to die inside the Brothel, although there were sensible officials there, there was no attempt to stop the brutal attack against them or to rescue them from the building completely engulfed in fire. Inspector Shyam even prepares to rape Jamila, Ladli, and Shabnam, who are running away from the place. He retracts only when he is shocked to see the young Ladli, who is only his daughter's age, removing her dress and standing naked before him. The police were not sympathetic towards even the minor girl because she was brought up in a brothel by the so-called whores who were considered the "other" in society.

The Brothel in *Begum Jaan* is placed on the outskirts of the village, away from the populated area. The spatial positioning signifies geographically how the people living in it are marginalized from mainstream society. The functionality of this space can be read alongside the third and sixth principles of Heterotopia, as expressed by Michel Foucault. During the partition, the Radcliffe line was drawn arbitrarily without any consideration of the geography or demography of the region, and the Brothel is found to pass precisely through the middle of the Brothel. One-half of the Brothel is in India, while the other half falls to Pakistan. The Brothel does not fit in any one country and needs to be demolished. Indeed, if the Brothel were given any significance and not considered the "other" space, it would be seen on the map. The absence of the Brothel in the geographical map is another instance that projects its abject status.

Although some effort could be initiated to save the Brothel, government officials refuse to do so. When threats of proceeding with legal action do not work, they even threaten to use physical force using criminals to evacuate the Brothel. None of the villagers who are customers of the Brothel come forward to protect the place. Towards the movie's beginning, a village head is seen complaining to the police that the Brothel is spreading diseases among

the youth and hence needs to be demolished, but further conversation reveals that the village head himself was a customer of the Brothel (Mukherji 15:26-16:11).

When the village head complains to the police inspector about the Brothel, the inspector comments that he must stop going there first before complaining about the Brothel spreading diseases, ruining his sons, and leading them to drink and smoke. The attempt of the village head to complain about the Brothel to the authorities, spite being a customer in the same Brothel, can be identified with Judith Butler's idea of "abjection," where the subject creates an identity for themselves by marginalizing the "other." Another instance is the police inspector Shyam also turns out to be a customer of the Brothel, but comes along with the government officials Hariprasad and Illyas to threaten and attack the Brothel as well as the "prostitutes" in the Brothel (Mukherji 2:12:25)

Begam Jaan's Brothel provides shelter not only to abandoned women but also to a few men. The women living there come from varying age groups and life conditions. The Brothel is home not only to heterosexual women but also to lesbians like Rani and Amba, who loves each other (Mukherji 35:27-35:34). Sujeet is an inmate who can easily take up the mannerisms of a woman and does not fit into the so-called male behavior, but on the other hand, Sujeet and Rubina are in love with each other. The nuanced way in which varying sexual behaviors are included within the representation of the Brothel makes it fit to be called a heterotopia of diversity, per the third principle put forward by Foucault.

Begum Jaan, as a child widow, was a victim of the Sati system, according to which the wife is either abandoned by the husband's family or forced to jump into the fire. She was thrown out of her house after the death of her husband. A conversation between the Government official Harshvardhan and the police officer Shyam tells us that after experiencing widowhood at an early age in Banares, "someone sold her to a brothel; she stayed there for few days and then fled to Lucknow. There she became a tawaif and acquired a lot of

fame. After many years she returned to the town and built this brothel” (Mukherji 34:21-34:42). The Brothel was created out of her basic necessity to make a living. It is a product of social reality. The stories of all the inhabitants of the Brothel are of the same stuff. They experienced severe pain, humiliation, abandonment, and danger before reaching this place. The Brothel provides necessities like shelter, money, food, and the feeling of home.

The same people who complain against them in the morning reach the Brothel at night. The Brothel serves multiple purposes to them. On the one hand, to have sexual pleasure, and on the other, to protect their status as decent followers of social norms. Begum Jaan, when abandoned by everybody, could only find a space for herself in the Brothel and live like a queen in her palace. When the officials ask her to leave the Brothel, she is determined not to do so because, outside this space, her identity itself will be lost. She tries to avoid eviction and finally reaches out to the Raja for help. When the Raja is found powerless in the changed scenario and tells her there is no option but to leave the Brothel, she replies, “I’ll die like a queen and not a beggar” (Mukherji 1:26:53). Towards the end, when Kabir attacks the Brothel. The place is engulfed in fire, and rather than escaping, Begum Jaan chooses to die inside the Brothel. This clearly shows her relationship with that space and how that space felt like home to her. Begum Jaan enjoys her power only while within the Brothel. She could order like a queen to anyone and dictate her will.

The comfort of home felt at this Brothel was not exclusive to Begum Jaan. Even though the place meant selling their bodies and was more of a business enterprise, the inmates considered it their home. Amba even comments to Jamila, “Jamila, this isn’t a brothel. It’s our home”(Mukherji 1:36:54). Rani adds to this, saying, “We never got so much freedom in our own home”(Mukherji 1:36:56). Even when Begum Jaan asks them to leave the Brothel for their safety, the other girls are determined to fight for the place. Even the old lady refuses to leave the Brothel. All these instances clearly show how this Brothel acts as a space where these

people got some voice and representation that was otherwise unavailable to them. The Brothel is not just a space for running a business, but it is also a space from which these women fought against the atrocities they faced in a patriarchal society.

As Lefebvre mentions in his discussion on spatial dimensions, the Brothel acquires multiple expressions about the women who live there. It is not just a space for performing business but also a home for the women living there. The Brothel serves different functions for the various people involved in it. For the old lady, it is more like a nursing home; for the other girls and Beegum Jaan, it is a place to enjoy freedom and power; for the younger girl, it is just like an orphanage with caring sisters and mothers. The Brothel, as mentioned earlier, provides some representation to all the inhabitants living there. Not only is the Brothel achieving some signification as a space of relevance, but their bodies also acquire a new sense of identity while occupying that space. When Begum Jaan was kicked out of her marital home, her hair was fully shaven. The image recurs to her in nightmares, and as she wakes up from sleep, she hurriedly checks the mirror to see whether she still owns her beautiful hair, face, and breasts. It also needs to be recognized that Muslim women like Jamila and Rani no longer face the restrictions to carry their faces covered by a veil and have started exploring their beauty shamelessly. They could wear any revealing dress to explore their beauty despite all the limitations prevailing even today in the patriarchal society regarding the need to cover women's bodies. The Brothel also becomes a space for Beegum Jaan to establish her power over other masculine figures, including their customers and government officials. She feels like a queen ordering in her palace.

To show how the women in the Brothel experienced some sort of freedom in exploring their bodies, the movie portrays them in clothes that are away from norms proclaimed by the patriarchal society. The women dress in such a way that their navel, cleavage, and the shape of their bodies are visible. Their hair is loosely tied, while society entertains a myth that

women need to secure their hair correctly and that not doing so signifies the loss of purity. Also, in a patriarchal society, women are asked to lie perfectly, keeping their legs close, but in this movie, they lie in such a way that their legs are laid apart. They argue and shout at each other and their customers at the top of their voices against the ideals of patriarchy that women need to be silent and calm and not raise their voices to laughter beyond the given limit. Begum Jaan is shown smoking from a hookah (Mukherji 20:57, 31:43). She sits and lies in a manner that exhibits her power to the visitors (Mukherji 31:44, 1:7:53, 1:14:43).

The camera focuses on their bodies in such a way as to enhance and project a different idea of female sexuality. The Brothel is shown from various angles. In one scene, the camera takes a bird's eye shot to show the characters and a small part of the Brothel. The shot is taken in such a manner as to show the naked upper back of Begum Jaan being massaged by Rubeena (Mukherji 7:40). In another scene, the camera is placed in a close-up shot presenting Begum Jaan's body as she lies in bed talking to Master (Mukherji 1:08:09). Both scenes challenge the traditional way of showing women in movies.

Another scene shows the Brothel in an extreme long shot, which places the Brothel as if it's an abandoned building (Mukherji 32:47). This kind of shot is also seen in the scene when the Raja comes to visit the Brothel (Mukherji 1:00:46). This shot shows how the Brothel stands away from the society in an abandoned place, but at the same time is placed in significant relation to the society that keeps it apart. The climax scene, where the Brothel is under attack, is done in a long/wide shot where the officials, as well as the police officers, are shown from an enlarged close view, but the Brothel is established far away as a magnified object.

Even as the Brothel stands in an abject position, experiencing exclusion and alienation from mainstream society, it provides the inmates with space for presenting their sexuality and establishing a new identity where they could find a place for themselves. Thus, this space can be considered a heterotopia, as proposed by Foucault,

where the society creates an illusion of itself yet somehow is separated from it. The space provides for the coexistence of multiplicities and challenges the existing norms.

Conclusion

As Foucault says in his discussion of heterotopias and their characteristics, brothels are heterotopias standing away from the norms of society but placed inside it. Brothels are always presented in movies as a space where a woman leads a deceitful life. Contrary to such a representation, the film *Begum Jaan* portrays the Brothel as a space that allows for the exploration of sexuality and gives them the freedom to act according to their will. The women inside the Brothel are chased away from their homes and understand it as a new home. They never decide to leave the Brothel but choose to live there even when it is engulfed by fire, and their life is in great danger. The Brothel is a habitat not only for heterosexual women but also for heterosexual, cisgender men, lesbians, older women, a young child, and a few animals.

The Brothel is located in an abandoned place away from the populated area. The Brothel, as well as its inhabitants, are experiencing an abject position in mainstream society. Although there is a frequent flow of public to the Brothel, society often abandons them. During the nation's division, the Brothel was divided into two halves, and society decided that the women must leave the Brothel.

Brutal power is used to suppress them, but the Brothel and its inmates resist fiercely till the end, not letting the outside men succeed in the attempt to overpower them. There is a power relation working inside the Brothel where *Beegum Jaan* is the madam of the Brothel. Anything would happen inside that space only according to her will and order. The Brothel thus provides a subverted image where women are entitled to power.

Begum Jaan portrays a brothel that has the characteristics of Foucault's Brothel of heterotopias and is different from the image of brothels created by earlier movies. The

movie also upholds sexual freedom, which is essential to a woman. *Begum Jaan* and the other members decide to stay in the Brothel even when it is engulfed with fire. Their refusal to move away from the Brothel and to address it as their home is a way the director appeals to a different understanding of the Brothel as a space that can offer some comfort to those abandoned by society.

The protagonist of the movie is a woman who is a sex worker and claims her right to run the business even though it stands away from the norms of society. Such influential female figures presented differently are rare in portraying female characters in Indian movies. The usual way of representing sex work as having a criminal aspect to it or being looked down upon with sympathy is wholly twisted in the film *Begum Jaan*.

The movie also takes a subtle perspective in the portrayal of homosexual relationships. Most Indian films portray homosexuality in an attempt at mockery. Still, in *Begam Jaan*, although it is only one short scene, it shows the depth of their relationship and how they could help each other amid a chaotic life. The movie is different in its themes and stands apart from the usual way of representing sex work, homosexuality, and women's claim over their bodies.

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