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Heterotopias of Illusion: Imagined Representations of Space in Anita Nair's *Mistress*

Abstract

This paper proposes a cognitive interpretation of place. The argument is based on the artistic presentation of geographical boundaries in novel that goes beyond social and political control and accepts the 'desired' possible worlds. In this paper I will analyse Anita Nair's novel *Mistress* and the art of Kathakali on which the structure of the novel is developed. Approaching *Mistress*, one identifies the work to be an acute combination of visionary narrative and intensely persuasive study into the search for purpose in life and art. The Idealized Cognitive Model proposed by Gilles Fauconnier offers a productive interaction between base space (the reality space) and built space (the desired space). Further his concept of 'mental spaces' examining the historical, mythological and emotional blend in the novel. Through Michel Foucault's heterotopic approach towards society, I will compare and contrast past' impression on present, man-woman relationship and image of women in Kerala through the novel.

Keywords: Space, Art of Kathakali, Built space, Mental space, Heterotopia.

Introduction

When we learn, we learn to object. When we object, we create. This creation tends to grow with growth of mental and physical entities. The main thrust of spatial structure engages relationship between conceived spaceⁱ and lived spaceⁱⁱ. Spaceⁱⁱⁱ is not a passive body. Rather, it is something ever evolving through time and history and in concept and in practice. It is considered to be the dominant space of society. It operates on a particular set of order, signs, code and relation; all are at producer's disposal. It also carries practical influence on the established social structure. It is not just an imaginary texture rather, a project that calls for representation. The historical period, society, and mode of production contributes towards these representations. The focus is on the need of construction and means of living in that space. Therefore, such spaces are subject to revision and have a definitive role to play. Within space everything is clearly defined and written. It is a space of producer and the power^{iv} he possesses over other possible space users. A space is actually produced to serve power. Knowledge^v becomes a medium of understanding of power reception. In the process of production, knowledge plays an essential role in giving shape and meaning to every space produced. As knowledge grows, so does space. Therefore, a space is an association of comprehension (knowledge) and ideology (concept). Further, knowledge can be divided into two parts: "knowledge that serves power (*savoir*) and knowledge that refuses to acknowledge power (*connaissance*), a critical and subversive form of knowledge that allows us to develop a more critical understanding of space" (Ng, Tang, Lee, Leung 413). In any spatial construction power-knowledge is operated upon body^{vi}. The concept of body and space is immediately related. Each living body is space- the body's deployment or the body's occupation. The objective of occupation could be entirely personal depending upon the nature of individual and his desires. In here, the meditation of external forces is least

required. Also, if conceived space is implied to every-body independently, provenance, culture, and time become an important aspect of its characteristics.

Analysing *Mistress*, a novel by south Indian writer Anita Nair, is a vivid blend of performing art and intricacies of lives of people in Kerala. The art of Kathakali functions as catalyst in interpreting author's imagination and hierarchy of the region in which the plot is set. The title of *Mistress* functions at two levels. The story begins when Christopher Stewart, a travel writer from England comes to small town of Shoranur in Kerala to meet Koman, a renowned Kathakali dancer. The plot is set in the riverside resort, Near-the-Nila. The resort is run by Shyam, Radha's husband. He is ambitious. He owns much business. Radha is Koman's niece. She is caught up with Shyam in despised marriage. Both Radha and Koman are drawn towards Chris (Christopher). Radha passionately falls in love with Chris. Shyam gets reasonable understanding of his wife's adultery. For Shyam, Radha is, "someone to indulge him with feminine wiles" (53). She is his possession. He controls his and Radha's universe. He never wants Radha to hover around and expects her to be by his side as his wife. Once, Radha told the staff (at the resort) to call her and Shyam by their names and not as sir or madam. But Shyam prevented her from doing that. He told Radha that such divisions are necessary and none of his employee would transgress them. Radha could never keep her opinions nor could she make any decisions without consulting Shyam, whether personal or professional. Shyam wanted Radha to respect his place in society rather than treating it carelessly by indulging in trivial activities. Radha's dressing style reminds Shyam "of those activist women burning with vitriol and a cause. Women should wear silk, jewellery and flowers in their hair" (117). Even after eight years of their marriage, Shyam's hold on Radha remains ephemeral. Shyam believes, "women like to be made to feel like women, dominated and put in their place" (164). All this pushed Radha away from Shyam. She once told Koman, "My marriage is dead. And Shyam means nothing to me" (207). Radha's emptiness

dragged her towards Chris and she found her peace with him. Shyam became envious of Chris when he came to know about Radha and Chris. He knew that someday Radha will leave him. Shyam could not help than becoming a passive observer. On the other hand, Koman plays an important role in envisioning love-hate relationship between Radha, Chris, and Shyam. In the story, he is the observer-participant. Chris came to meet him for learning about his art and his life as a Kathakali dancer. And also to discover whether Koman is his biological father? Koman treated his art to be living. He believed that Kathakali is something that possesses you, rules you and excludes you from everything else. The various roles Koman had played all through his life defines how much he has let his surroundings and socio-cultural environment rule him, his dreams, hopes, compromises and sacrifices he made. He sees his true self in legends and mythical characters that he dons in his skin and blood and performs their account on stage. He desires to live, forever, within this world rather than the world outside. Kathakali keeps his body and soul connected. Thus, *Mistress* is a story of four major characters moving from compromising social being to self-referential individual. In the Prologue, Nair discusses about the art of Kathakali^{vii} and her love for it. She herself learned the art before encasing her vision into it in the form of story.

French linguist and researcher in cognitive science, Gilles Fauconnier proposed the concept of Base Space^{viii} and Built Space^{ix}. Base Space is a space of reality, the ground space for other spaces to establish. On the other hand, Built Space is a concept originating from varied physical and mental sources. One such source could be the conceptual domain thriving on our underlying information and understanding of things around. “Another source of mental space is immediate experience” (Fauconnier 3). Thirdly, mental space^x is an outcome of social conversation, resistance, and self discovery. A person’s behaviour and actions are inferred upon his beliefs and approach towards life. What one conceives is what one live. Fauconnier argued, mind and mental competence plays a vital role in building our

surrounding and space. He studied different spatial structural and treated mental space to be a cluster of partial assemblies constructed through our knowledge, force, and local understanding. Time is one such factor in formulating the cognitive model. For instance, in the novel the story is consumed within 90 years of time frame. One finds different plots flowing analogously at same pace. This technique provides sufficient room for author to express and for readers to appreciate. For each character the past is a memory, future is for hope and present is the harvest in which, prevails these emotions or “the nine faces of the heart” (1). Besides, when Chris finds it challenging to interpret Koman’s biography then Radha says, “to understand my uncle as a dancer and a man, you need to know about his parents” (58) and his past. In return, Chris replies to Radha and says, past is a “Baggage...None of us is free of it and yet, if we were, we wouldn’t be who we are.” (58). There is a chronological development of plot from years 1937 to 1971 and now. Koman tells about his father Sethu- a Hindu, mother Saadiya- a Muslim, his guardians Faith and Mary Patty- a Christian. He explains how from Omar Masood he became Koman. “Koman with no tags, tails or suffixes...With a ready-made family...whose mother was dead and whose father lived elsewhere because he had a livelihood to earn (262, 263). He tells Chris about the seriousness of ‘I’ that he needed to know. He reveals how he became a Kathakali dancer. Kathakali, that isn’t a drama or playacting but a being. He is an artist seeded in the nine faces of being- a man when turning into a character ceases to be Koman. He says, “In that congress of body and mind, beat and word, I knew myself. Luring memories and possibilities, drawing on dreams and imagined happenings, I learnt to live the character I was to be. I learnt that beneath the guise, I was the character. For me that was the only way to be” (273). A general property of space configures that identity is linked to the elements across time/space. Its characteristics are, partly, built up in the working memory and the long term memory in which the thought and discourse is continuously constructed and modified. When these

elements and relations are organised as a package, that we might already know, we say that mental space is framed and call it the organisation of frames. Mental space operates on the frames of working memory and long term memory placed in specific time period. It is drawn out of one's rejection or disapproval of certain social conventions. So, in order to accumulate to what one lacks, a person calls in for his mind. He creates a protected zone, a kind of escape, for him in his mental space. This is what Koman did through his art. Koman is both a creation and a creator. He has created the world of his own with his knowledge and passion for the art. He sees that Chris desires Radha. He thinks of them as Nala and Damyanti "lovers in Kathakali who embrace without actually doing so...he lets her know that he desires her" (29). And for Shyam, Radha's husband is Keechakan who long for Vidarbha and whose sister's handmaiden had blinded him.

Prominent cultural historian Yuri Lotman, is the first person to propose the relationship between real world space^{xi} and textual space^{xii}. He believed that any information provided by the author about space is partial as space is incomplete and ever evolving. Both the textual and actual space systems are governed by social and cultural conventions. The textual space is an extension which gives adequate information about real world. Lotman argued that what does not exist in created space might not truly exist in the real world as well. Also, in understanding mental spaces, Lefebvre differentiates between the truth of space and true space. Lefebvre takes up the example of a room, a corner or market place or public place in order to comprehend the difference between the two. Such spaces have specific use value. For this, he considers Michel Foucault's concept of Heterotopias^{xiii}. Though, Foucault apparently does not mention what space he is strictly referring to, he simply delivers six principles of Heterotopias that are assumed to be applicable to any form of social structure. Both Lefebvre and Foucault accepted "where there is space there is being" (Lefebvre 22). In creating one's own space, natural space does not wholly vanishes but forms the background

for imaginary picture to emerge. Foucault gives an example of a theatre- the rectangular stage on which a complete story is staged irrespective of time, history, and place. Or a cinema- the two dimensional screen on which one witness three dimensional and even four dimensional picture teleporting the audience to a world which is quite similar or different from the real world. Foucault also refers to a garden as being the oldest example of Heterotopia. Garden is a place with astonishing creations, as old as human survival, where “all the vegetation of the garden was supposed to come together in this space, in this sort of microcosm” (Foucault 6) including the fountain, basins and asceticism. It “...is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world” (Foucault 6). In here, what we are concerned with is the idea of built environment (physical and cultural) and its relationship with time and space. This built space is believed to be a polished version of reality, a remake of our surrounding. It is considered to be real as far as we are living it and living in it, yet outside the real world. Foucault had established heterotopia as something that makes a particular place, occupied at the moment, looks absolutely real “connected with all the space that surrounds it and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through the virtual point which is over there” (Foucault 4). Heterotopias differentiate inner from outer, internal from external and real from virtual. Thus, the focus is on those places which have a curious relation with other existing places that one can perceive, conceive and live. A novel^{xiv} is one such Built space. Cultural prospect, historical environment, and life process is brought together in a single place (in a novel). This heterotopic space could be self contradictory since it is not united by an actual world but by a vision of that world. An artist lives in two minds- the inner and the outer. It is his private world, the world in which he resides the most and cannot let go of any of these two spaces. The characters he puts on, the roles he play are all part of his sheath. It is the only way he could associate the external with internal and can be satisfied with life. In *Mistress*, Koman has created a space of peace and

comfort for him through his art. The Near-the-Nila is Shyam' idea of his personal space. Radha lives with Shyam in her ancestral home. But now, it is no more hers but of Shyam's. She finds herself trapped in his world. It is only when she is with her uncle Koman or with Chris that she finds her space and herself as well. Author also comments on various aspects of man-woman relationship specifically referring to Kerala. In some regions of Kerala woman, is still, considered to be inferior to man. Radha is mistress of property and the resort Nera-the-Nila, but only in name and on papers. All the instructions and guidelines are given by Shyam. Radha wanted to teach, but Shyam did not approve of this idea. She wanted to open a crèche which, too was opposed by him. Of what all Shyam could think about is his resort. His resort is his kingdom. Shyam always wanted Radha to be a sort of wife he wished. He believed that a man is always superior to woman and Radha played the role of Shyam's mistress. Shyam gave much importance to his standing in society to which he believes "Radha has always treated rather carelessly". (71). Radha wanted to teach but Shyam did not approve of this idea. She wanted to open a crèche which, too was opposed by him. Of what all Shyam could think about is his resort. His resort is his kingdom. Shyam always wanted Radha to be a sort of wife he wished. She played the role of Shyam's mistress. He believed that a man is always superior to woman. He can never be infertile. "Women were infertile, not men" (204). Even when Radha is supposed to attend seemantham ceremony with her sister-in-law Rani Oppal, she said, "I don't think you should come with us. You know how people are; they think a married woman who hasn't had children for so long is a macchi. They won't like it. It is inauspicious to have a barren woman at such functions...the evil eye..." (114). When Radha calls Rani Oppal by her name, Shyam retorts that she "musn't call her by her name. It is so disrespectful, and...she doesn't like it at all" (60).

Additionally, another determinant of spatial view is the mood in which the story is set. Mood is a kind of atmosphere built on background setting, temperament and depiction of the

author and his characters. It has a significant influence on the story. It addresses to readers conscious and emotions and depends upon subjective reaction of the reader. Usually, what is happening, what happened or what will happen is referred to indicative mood (based on facts). Whereas, what would happen, what you wish would happen or what you would do is referred to subjunctive mood (based on possibilities). In *Mistress*, the art of Kathakali and navarasas can serve to indicate differentiation in the accessibility of place/space. For instance, in order to create a feeling of sringaaram a mood of pleasure- longing, lust and love is created. “The skies are lit up with the moon. A night orchestra plays: crickets with malaccas strung on their wings, the frog with the rattle in its throat, the howling owl, the rustle of palm leaves, the wind among trees” (8). The characteristic of haasyam “unlike the rattle of mirth is the quiet smile” (52) is also “contempt for convention” (53). It brings out gender and social inequalities in showing a disregard for everything. Next, the story is moved in third mood of karunam. “All of us have known sorrow some time or the other” (104). Radha, Shyam, Koman and Chris refuse to accept truth and would never wish to leave their personal space. And so we come to raudram. The face you wear when you are angry. Not just that it is the frenzy of passion which is locked within you and rules your thoughts and actions. Shyam is passionate about his resort and never wanted to think of his rough childhood. On the other hand, after being mauled by Shyam all night, Radha did not feel anger but revulsion and disgust. Under the impression of raudram, Koman tries to understand the reality of deceit by sneaking into his past and his future. Despite everything, the painful past, the unfair present and hopeless future, Radha and Koman shows the courage to survive. Courage is an expression of veeram. Radha shows courage to end her loveless marriage with Shyam and Koman to accept Maya as his wife. “...the sixth emotion with which we dress our faces. Bhayaanakam. Fear.” (240). It is a state of being frightened from “a wild beast, an evil man, a natural calamity, a dark night” (240) or from one’s behaviour and actions. It is the

mood which states that something unexpected will happen or had happened. What Shyam did to Radha one night was forced sex and not love. The mood that brings revulsion and agony is that of beebhalsam. Beebhalsam is more than being disgust. It is about encountering your absurdity. It is an interpretation of character's inner world. By living all these years as Shyam's wife Radha realises that how well she has played her role as Shyam's mistress. Shyam trivialising the art of Kathakali to just another colourful performance makes him even more disgusting in the eyes of Koman and Radha. Shyam did not want to understand that he is minoring what is sacred to Koman. The eighth mood is that of Adbhutam and finally shaantam the mood of utmost peace and freedom. Navarasas evokes various emotional responses through emotional attachment of the reader with the story.

Considering language, it is the choice of words the author has made in the description of events, places, characters and action. In Kathakali, "it is with the face we decode thoughts into language without sounds" (1 Mistress). Interpreting sringaaram- "the widening of the eye, the arching of eyebrows, the softness of the mouth that curves..." (7) to ultimate expression of shaantam- "there can be stillness that is alive. The mind works but the thoughts must be like Palmyra fruit..." (397). Fauconnier adheres that by language a, "structure from the parent space is transferred to the new space by default" (6). He had discussed about the language that is spoken and the language which has become the medium of communication and of instruction. "Spoken language offer considerable evidence for mental space organisation" (Fauconnier 21). On the other hand, Scott Liddel discusses about sign languages that "are well known for their ability to create, as part of the most ordinary discourse, elaborate conceptual representations in the space in front of the signer"(Fauconnier 21). Both the sign language and the spoken language are grammatical devices for building of space. In sign language the elements of mental space, or conceived space as forwarded by Lefebvre are achieved in "constructing grounded spaces, which take

advantage of the spatial modality” (23). It is a dynamic space produced on clues and information generated through the ongoing discourse- a new space built in relation to the existing ones. Language has a power to connect people and even isolate them from each other. For instance, in the novel, Chris being a foreigner feels excluded when Radha, Shyam or Koman speaks in their own language.

As power, knowledge, time, mood and language are some of the noteworthy elements in production of mental space so is the user or viewer of that space. The producer’s expressions, spoken or implied, sets “up space containing various elements and situations holding among them basing on which the hearer” or user “...can construct the related spaces and conduct cognitive operations” (Hui Lui 4). A series of psychological activities takes place between the speaker (author) and listener (reader). In *Mistress*, Koman is one such character who is both a creation and a creator. He designs the world of his own with his knowledge of traditional dance form of Kerala and his experience with/about people around him. He associates his surrounding and situation to various Indian mythological conventions. Koman can see that Chris desires Radha. He thinks of them as Nala and Damyanti “lovers in Kathakali who embrace without actually doing so...he lets her know that he desires her” (29 *Mistress*). And for Shyam, Radha’s husband is Keechakan. “...the able commander-in-chief of the kingdom of Vidarbha...longing for Sairandhari, his sister’s handmaiden, blinded him. He couldn’t see that she detested him. He thought it was his pride. He thought that he could break that pride...Or is he Bheema...whose goodness Radha makes use of. Whose gaucherie she flees from” (29).

There is a close connection between idea, concept and place/space. In the novel the art of kathakali is not just a performance of mythological events. Rather, it is noted to be a complete encyclopaedia, a conceptual space where the artist generates many possible ways of telling history (placing together everything without attempting to reconcile or distort it).

While, performing on the stage, an artist gets a chance to enter into the different world. There is a possibility that the artist might take some time in shedding off his character and get back to the routine world. Temporarily, his performance becomes a representation of his historical, spatial, and social boundaries. Thus, performing Kathakali is similar to overlaying of imagined space onto worldly physical space. Such partnership of concept, imagination, concrete space and particular time period is what a space characterise. Knight analysed Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which states, "that there are some such mythical non-spaces that can be tied to a specific time and place" (Knight 7). These mythical and textual spaces are in contrast to the world of existence and reality. These spaces cannot be created only by perceiving a subject or a character. They are unthinkable until we believe in their existence and individuality. Although, utopias, as Foucault suggests, "have no real locality", there is nevertheless an implied imaginary geography that precedes the writing of utopian fiction. In present times, the complex social structure is the extended utopia- the open space "without law or geometry" (Knight 16). Heterotopias are semi-mythical site, a comment on the society (of which it is born) and perhaps which could be accepted as part of real world. Such spaces claim to be non-contagious, an interpolation of unreal spaces into real place, possessing some characteristics and method of actual space. The process of construction and deconstruction of textual space seems to be an impossible desired space which is "the superimposition of two or more real spaces onto each other" (Knight 32).

Conclusion

In *Mistress*, author modelled her desired space, in a manner, in which nature and regional code operated during 1950s Kerala^{xv}. The art of Kathakali can be regarded as a virtual space in which the artist is very close to what he performs (without actually living it). It is a delusion, implicated by an artist's intellectualism and conscience. The stage on the

whole is converted into heterotopic entity- the entry to which is restricted. Kathakali is the ideal illusionary world conceived around which the whole act is weaved. An episode in Kathakali is always secured in certain time frame and the performance deals with the present scene staged by the artist. In order to understand and analyse the significance of the performance, one needs to allude to that particular time of the scene and the present spatial characteristics. Thus Nair, in her work, concentrates on artistic blend of society and people in Kerala. The focus is on literary topographies and human environment geography of the region. For Koman, the inner world of his art is real and the real world seems to be complex and illusionary. For Shyam, his resort, Near-the-Nila is real and rest is illusionary. "...he reads. 'A river retreat with everything you wished for and more...knows your needs ...will make you want to never leave'" (10).

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