

## The Heterotopias abounding in R.K Narayan's *The English Teacher*

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### Abstract

Foucault in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” defines heterotopic spaces or heterotopias as real, physical or mental spaces that exist alongside real spaces. He postulated six principles to define his concept of heterotopia and its functions. This paper aims to locate these principles through a Foucauldian re-reading of R.K. Narayan's “The English Teacher”. The alternative realm is first introduced by Susila's (Krishnan's wife) spirit, however, there are several physical, mental spaces which co-inhabit in the novel. These spaces at once imitate and distinguish themselves from the real spaces. The sites then curiously develop a relation with all other sites or spaces but not without suspending or inverting or neutralizing the set of relations designated or reflected by them. The tale then re-emerges as not just as a Bildungsroman tracing the growth of the protagonist but a novel about “other” spaces (apart from the fictional town of Malgudi) that spurt out as equally intriguing and challenging.

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, heterotopia, other, protagonist, spaces, sites.

*The English Teacher* by R.K Narayan depicts the life of the protagonist Krishnan, who is a teacher of English at the Albert Mission School. Throughout the novel we see him struggling to free himself from the shackles of self-depravity and ennui which surrounds him due to his dissatisfaction with his vocation. He not only opposes the colonial system of education but dreads the normalized Macaulayism. A surface reading of the text might simply present us with a plot which revolves around Krishnan and his love for his wife, his longings, dissatisfaction and a sordid tale of death and afterlife. In short it stands out as a tale of mundane existence within a synchronic plot. But a Foucauldian reading presents us with a multitude of worlds within worlds.

Foucault defines heterotopias or heterotopic spaces as real, physical or mental spaces that co-inhabit alongside the existing real spaces. It describes certain “cultural”, “institutional” and “discursive” spaces which are relegated as “other” spaces. These spaces tend to be incompatible, contradictory, disturbing, intense or transforming. Heterotopias represent worlds within worlds at once mirroring and upsetting what lies outside. The novel introduces “other” spaces through the portrayal of the spirit of Krishnan's wife (Susila) and her new abode that she describes post death.

The heterotopias built within the text truly mirror yet distinguish themselves from what lies outside. These spaces expose the outside world of humans and stand out at once as a resistance to the dominant norms and practices. Such spaces abound in this novel, hidden but are not opaque.

The novel depicts the plight of the protagonist Krishnan who is torn between the dichotomy of his heart and mind. Till the very end he is unable to make up his mind on several issues pertaining to his life until he emerges as an informed soul capable of following the course of life with zeal and steadfastness. He ultimately resigns from his post to join a play school much to the dismay of his colleagues and the numerous approbation that comes his way. Through anecdotes we see his transition from a student, to a bachelor, to a married man, a father and finally a widower. During his transition and growth as a character we get to see several spaces intermingling often as one and more often as deviations from the normal.

Krishnan's deceased wife Susila has been an integral part in the education of the protagonist. She becomes the transition, the guide introducing the heterotopias or the "other spaces". It is only after her death when she chooses to communicate with her husband as a spirit from a different realm, an anachronistic terrain much away from the comprehension of the linearity followed in real space we get to see how the real space is even more fragmented and partitioned from her space which is seemingly perfect and thus a juxtaposition. Krishnan asks her spirit about how she spends her time and she responds saying, "**Time in your sense does not exist for us,.... Our life is one of thought and experience. Thought is something which has solidity and power, and as in all existence ours is also a life of aspiration, striving and joy. A considerable portion of our state is taken up in meditation, and our greatest ecstasy is in feeling the Divine Light flooding us....**" It is only after this revelation Krishnan's fevered brain calms down and he realizes the shortcomings of his real space which is time bound, fragmented. He grasps the truth about how inaccuracies, dismantled linearity haunts humans and not spirits. He at once understands how memories and inaccuracies are coherent in real space of the humans and not of the celestial beings. Susila's spirit fails to answer the questions objectively which disheartens Krishnan who is governed by the rules of linearity (of thoughts) as a part of his earthly existence. He remembers events and asks Susila's spirit but she does not remember it accurately. However, Susila helps him bridge this complex terrain of thoughts and lifts him out of his gloom by describing how spirits are not bound by time and thus, she forgot the time bound facts which once formed the very basis of her earthly existence.

Krishnan comprehends the "other" space but not as a utopia but a heterotopia existing parallel to his being. This world of spirit then becomes a space of compensation in its alterity. It becomes the "other / real space" complete and perfect. It compensates for the dearth Krishnan found in his real space.

The linear, synchronic space becomes a site of contestation. It bothers Krishnan and he finds himself jumbled up in its inaccuracies. His deceased wife offers him the solution to survive his real space. She asks him to grow more passive, observant, meditative and garner the skill to master one's mind. She said, "**Thought is fulfillment, motion and everything. That is the main difference between our physical state and yours. In your state a thought to be realized must always be followed by effort directed towards conquering obstructions and inertia—that is the nature of the material world.**" This space of illusion or compensation comes across as a stark opposite to Krishnan's life which was guided by an old alarm clock which was a symbol of his timed, earthly existence run by reason and knowledge.

The fragmented real space of the humans is also depicted through the portrayal of the Anderson Lane which the narrator describes as a place forgotten by the municipality owing to its dilapidated stature. He describes it as a littered space with "wild- looking children".

The classrooms of Albert Mission and that of the play school functioned differently. The former becomes the heterotopia of crisis while the latter is the heterotopia of deviation. In Albert Mission the boys were sent for rote learning, i.e., to study Milton, Shakespeare etc the idea of which throttled Krishnan. Amidst the normativity he found himself subverted. He was averse to the idea of attendance, expulsion, the unaccountable authority of the teachers and found himself as a despotic ruler. Whereas, the headmaster of the playschool lived his life and later revved up his life through the classrooms amidst the children. It became a site for rest with gurgling children who broke stereotypes by visiting schools on Sundays. The “Leave Alone System” envisioned by Narayan is truly built by the old, eccentric headmaster of the play school.

The function of the classroom changes as the novel progresses and as Krishnan matures. From a dejected, horrific, mundane space it changes to a central space of solace and power where ultimately Krishnan envisions to join. The function of this heterotopic space changes with time.

Another very important space that is a recurrent picture in the novel is that of Krishnan’s home and his concept of a “home of his own”. When Susila enters the home for the very first time we see the home being pervaded with social customs and traditions. Certain customs of housekeeping are passed on to the daughter-in-law by the deft mother-in-law. The function of this home too changes as the novel progresses. When Susila succumbs to her illness she is relegated as the “other” in the “sickroom”. A new heterotopia of crisis is borne out of an ordinary room turned into a sick room meant for the sick where entry was regulated through permissible sickness and followed by ritualistic sanitization for the entrants. The child was generally kept away from the ailing mother and thus was denied access to enter the terrain, like any other heterotopias which has its system of opening and closing.

The house also becomes a heterotopia of deviation with Susila’s illness. It became a site for medical and non medical gaze, frequently visited by doctors and once an exorcist who hoped to cure her and nullify this newly created heterotopia of deviation.

The rituals of the house pertaining to the welcome of the daughter-in-law to the house and finally her last rites invert the functioning of the house. The same house that once was the sacred dwelling place becomes the dark resting space. A new kind of crisis heterotopia devoid of any geographical location but intrinsically prevalent in families sharing similar social condition and customs is easily traceable through Krishnan’s mother-in-law. Certain code of conduct pervaded before a son-in-law. Despite her ardent desire to speak her mind she chooses to bite her tongue just to honour the customs.

The letters exchanged between several characters in the novel are not just means of correspondence but heterotopias indefinitely accumulating time. Every letter preserves the chronological time and confines it into the limitless; be it the letters written by Susila which Krishnan presses on to for the rest of his life or the letter from his daughter or his parents. The stacked letters accumulate time breaking past the traditional times.

Apart from the town of Malgudi there are several “other” places strewn in the novel which stand apart either as a resistance to the dominant or are incompatible or transforming. Foucault rightly observes when he says, “...we do not live in a homogeneous and empty space, but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well. The space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams and that of our passions hold within themselves qualities that seem

**intrinsic: there is a light, ethereal, transparent space, or again a dark, rough, encumbered space; a space from above, of summits, or on the contrary a space from below of mud; or again a space that can be flowing like sparkling water, or space that is fixed, congealed, like stone or crystal.”**

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