Grave As A Heterotropic Space: An Analysis Of Mahaesweta Devi's Bayen

Abijith P S
Independent Scholar

Abstract

Heterotopic spaces are physical spaces that deviate from normalised spaces and accepted realities. The grave in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen is one such space that questions the accepted social standards and questions normalised social norms. The grave acts as a space which restricts the play's protagonist, Chandidasi Gangadasi, from experiencing a normal life and forces her to lead a life constructed by customs and superstitions. The nature of the grave and the relationship between life and death associated with it makes it a social mirror which projects the social injustice associated with it, qualifies it as a heterotopia.

Keywords: Heterotopia, Grave, Marginal, Superstition, Mirror.

INTRODUCTION

Heterotopia, according to Michel Foucault, describes places that challenge, contrast with or alter the current social order while existing inside it. Heterotopias are places with varying meanings and interactions that defy and disrupt the norms and regulations accepted in every community and culture. Heterotopias are considered spaces where an "alternative social ordering" takes place and are deemed to be regulating factors to "our imagination, desires, fears and our sense of power and powerlessness" (Hetherington 40). According to Foucault, Utopias are idealised, imaginary spaces that do not exist in reality but represent perfect versions of society. Thus, Foucault says "by way of contrast to utopias" that heterotopic spaces are real, physical places that exist within society but function as "counter-sites" (Foucault 4,3).

Heterotopic spaces represent society's norms, question them, and even flip them upside down. Although they physically exist, and you can point them out on a map, their meaning and purpose go beyond their physical location. They stand outside the usual rules of everyday places. Heterotopias are often considered marginalised locales with a sense of mystery or terror. Through everyday individuals, administrators, or the government, these spaces challenge the norms and continue to have linkages to society. They are characterised by "sublimity" and are also mentioned as a "marginal, paradoxical or third space" (Hetherington 40).

Heterotopias can be distinguished based on six principles, of which the third principle discusses 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 following are the six principles: The space serves the following purposes: 1) it is for people who experience crisis and deviation; 2) it changes over time; 3) it merges with other unrelated space functions; 4) it is a space for something that breaks from traditional human time; 5) it has an opening and closing system; and 6) it has a relationship with the other spaces surrounding it. (Foucault)

Foucault uses Christian cemeteries throughout Europe as an example of heterotopia space in his discussion, particularly about the second and fourth principles. According to Foucault, the second principle explains why Christian cemeteries in Europe constantly shifted. Before the 18th century, graves were always found in the church environment in the heart of the city. However, when corpses started to be seen as having an impact on health, they were later relocated to open land on the outskirts of the city. (Foucault, 1967; see also Ariès, 1981: 747-752). Then, according to Foucault's explanation of the fourth principle, a cemetery is a location for those who have passed away or stopped their normal human time (Foucault, 1967: 20). On top of that, cemeteries are typically used as a place to display the buried person's status in society. Ordinary people's tombs are typically located in the churchyard, whereas those of great social standing are typically

located in strategic locations, such as close to the chancel room, a hallowed area surrounding the church altar (Nater 11; O'Sullivan 14; Saul 116).

Mahasweta Devi's Bayen offers a moving examination of identity, gender, and societal oppression through the figure of Chandidasi, who is perceived as a 'Bayen' witch), marginalised in her rural community. The complexity of Chandidasi's life and the larger societal commentary on how women and oppressed groups are treated in Indian culture are both reflected in Devi's use of the graveyard as a heterotopic location, which is examined in this article.

Chandidasi Gangadasi is the play's main character. She is depicted as a woman from the Dom community who is traditionally in charge of burying children who have passed away. When Chandidasi is called a 'Bayen', or witch, because of her profession and the superstitions associated with it, her life takes a tragic turn. Because of this title, she is shunned by society and is compelled to live on the fringes of the graveyard, close to the railroad tracks, where the inhabitants treat her with contempt and terror. She is not allowed to see, speak, or enter the village. She is even shunned by her husband and son and is also denied the opportunity to enjoy and experience motherhood, as well as the roles of Bhagirath's mother and Malindar's wife. In this case, Bhagirath is prevented from experiencing maternal love and believes his mother has passed away. The life of Chandidasi is evident from Malindar's speech:

> Now I've told you everything. Your mother's been a Bayen ever since. They would
> have burnt her to death if she had been a witch. But, son, a Bayen is not for killing, kill a Bayen, and
> the children start dying. (Frowns, speaks hastily). They set up a hovel for her beside the railway
> track, every Saturday, they leave a hamper of food for her at her doorstep. Once a year, they give her
> two saris and two gaamacchas (Devi 116).

The majority of her life in the narration of the play, apart from the flashbacks narrated by Malinder, is associated with the graveyard. Chandidasi is socially exiled by her community, accusing her of witchcraft. She is confined to the periphery of society and is considered a living ghost even though she is not physically dead. The grave she resides in, which symbolises her social death, is a reflection of where the living and the dead meet, which is one of the basic ideas of Foucault's heterotopic spaces. But although graveyards are considered away from the normal lives of people, the one in Bayen is different. The graveyard in Bayen does not symbolise death alone.

Mahasweta Devi presents Chandidasi as a respected housewife and a Dom woman who does the job which was passed through generations of burying deceased children. She is initially proud of her position in maintaining the graves and conducting final rituals, but as the villagers blame her for misfortunes, she grows more and more alienated. Because of her occupation, they think she has wicked abilities, which makes her an ill omen in the end. She nevertheless shows a strong love for kids and yearns to be accepted in her society despite this ill-treatment. The villagers accuse her of the deaths of their children and believe that it happens so due to the curse of Chandi on the children, but they also rely on her and are seen requesting her to bury their children and do their last rites. But the attitude shifts when she is seen in a vulnerable situation and accused of being a 'Bayen'. Tukni, the niece of Chandidasi, falls ill and later dies. Chandidasi is accused of the death that she cursed Tukni to die. Initially, Chandidasi is reluctant to do the final rites for the young girl but agrees to do so, stating that it is her last time.

The protagonist is pushed into a life which was laid forward towards her by the customs that existed in the village of the fictional Daharhati. It is evident when the circumstances of Chandidasi being labelled as 'Bayen' or 'witch' arise, Malindar, her husband, also joins them, chanting that his wife has turned into 'Bayen'.: "I ... Malindar Gangaputta... strike my drum (beats the drum frantically) ... to declare that my wife has turned into a bayen, a bayen!" (Devi 115).

The thresholds or transitory places that separate two different states or identities are known as liminal spaces. These locations, which operate as backdrops for characters to confront change or question social conventions, frequently represent ambiguity, uncertainty, and metamorphosis in literature. Areas or experiences that fall outside of social standards are referred to as marginal spaces. As a reflection of larger themes of identity and belonging, characters in these settings frequently struggle with feelings of exclusion or alienation.

Foucault calls heterotopia "real sites", which is the study of physical locations (Foucault 3). Whereas Herman Meininger diverts from this idea and instead uses the concept to refer to "a dimension of human social reality" in which heterotopia does not refer to spaces with physical borders (Meininger 31). Instead, he says that heterotopic space "consists in relations between people who live on the margins and people who live in the centre of civil society" (Meininger 31).

In Bayen, Chandidasi, after being called a 'Bayen', is compelled to reside close to the grave, which is a location that represents the transition between life and death. She lives in a liminal state there, treated as an outsider, almost like a ghost or spirit, and this is not just a physical place but also a representation of her psychological and social state. Before being accused of being a witch, Chandidasi was a respected midwife and held a respected position in society along with her husband. After being accused of a ''Bayen'', she is pushed into a liminal existence, neither fully alive nor dead, with society considering her not an important figure but rather a cursed one. This liminal existence of uncertainty places her in a state of uncertainty. Her life is suspended in this transitional space where neither the customs of the dead nor the social standards of the living entirely apply.

The graveyard can be seen as a marginal space which conforms to the idea of Foucault's heterotopia. It has the characteristic of both physical and social marginality. The graveyard is physically marginalised as it is located on the outskirts of the village, away from daily life and established norms and conventions. The presence of the protagonist in this presence marks her exclusion from the community's social and moral order. Her status as 'Bayen' shows how a person, in this case, a woman having subversive and misunderstood roles in society, is marginalised by the existing social power structures, forcing them to lead a life in the margins. This marginal existence in the grave proves the space to be a heterotopia which exists outside physical walls and away from normalised social norms.

Foucault introduces the idea of Crisis Heterotopias in his essay, Of Other Spaces. He says:
In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. (Foucault 4).
Major life transitions that upset a person's routine, including puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, or old age, are referred to as crises. These shifts frequently entail social, emotional, or physical adjustments that put people in a liminal state concerning the rest of society.

Chandidasi in Bayen is seen to be in a state of such a disruption in routine, which conforms to the idea of a crisis heterotopia. At work, Chandidasi is a lactating mother who is seen with a breast full of milk when near other children. She is seen worried while digging the grave for Tukni, her deceased, since it reminds her of her son Bhagirath.
It hurts to do the job these days, the job handed down to me by my ancestors. My hands rebel and yet I have to go on doing it....They say I have the evil eye. The little ones die of summer heat, winter's cold, and smallpox, don't they? And is it any fault of mine?... Why can't you see it, Gangaputta, why do I think of throwing up the job again and again? When I guard the graves through the night, my breasts burst with milk ache for my Bhagirath back home, all by himself. I can't, can't stay away from him.

The image of a worrying and struggling mother also disrupts the image of a typical gravedigger. The job of the gravedigger and keeper of graves is usually attributed to men, especially commoners. The construct can be witnessed even back in Shakespeare, where "the gravediggers represent the commoners or peasants who use their wits to outstand the people of higher rank in the society" (John 163). But in Bayen, the role of the gravedigger is done by a respected housewife, a wife of someone with a reasonable job and a mother, which is a subversion of the constructed idea of the job being male-oriented. This idea of the subversion of societal rules and the inversion of traditional rules also exists, making the grave a heterotopic space.

Heterotopias often house contradictory elements, bringing together opposites in normal life, making them heterotopias of difference. According to Marco Cenzatti,
Heterotopias of difference are still places where irreconcilable spaces coexist, but what constitutes irreconcilability is constantly contested as changing. As these heterotopias fluctuate between contradiction and acceptance, their physical expression equally fluctuates between invisibility and recognition. (Cenzatti 81).

These heterotopias unite irreconcilable spaces that house opposing realities in one physical space or place. In Bayen, the grave juxtaposes life and death, and Chandidasi represents opposites. Once a mother and a respected midwife is now considered a 'bayen', a symbol of death. In India, the mother figure represents the "generative, nurturing powers of life, itself celebrated in temples, and sculpture, poetry and literature" (Krishnaraj 1). She is accused because she was singing a lullaby while her child was away from her, and her sari was dripping with milk. The mob confirms her as a 'Bayen' and excommunicates her with this physical proof of milk dripping. The superstitious beliefs of the locals suggest that when possessed, women who bury children can bring the dead newborns back to life by kissing or nursing them before changing into 'Bayen'. In this sense, 'Bayen' is unquestionably a mother figure, but she is dehumanised, cruel, and banished from human civilisation. Along with this idea, the villagers fear the curse of 'Bayen', which is believed to cause death. This blended existence of Chandidasi as a mother, the giver of life and 'Bayen', the taker of life, enhances the heterotopic nature of the grave where societal oppositions are blurred and accepted opposites exist in cohesion.

The graveyard in Bayen acts as a social mirror which reveals the prevalent social injustices. Heterotopias are areas that have a special connection to other spaces in society. Foucault considers such spaces as "certain ones that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralise, or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. (Foucault 3). In addition to their independent existence, they interact with the outside world in ways that cause us to reevaluate or even reinterpret the normality. In this regard, heterotopias serve as mirrors that reflect society at large, although frequently in a skewed or modified manner, provoking us to reconsider the way the world is organised.

The way that Chandidasi transformed from a well-respected midwife to a social misfit illustrates how women's roles depend on acceptance from society. The fragile nature of women's place in society is reflected in the heterotopic graveyard, particularly when they deviate from conventional roles. Using the graveyard as a symbolic instrument of repression, the community reasserts patriarchal power by calling her a 'Bayen'. The village's superstitious ideas are also revealed by the graveyard. Even though it is a sacred place, their anxiety around Chandidasi's presence shows how superstition triumphs over reason. The graveyard's placement on the outskirts of the village is a reflection of the marginalisation of the weaker sections. The forced presence of Chandidasi there demonstrates how social hierarchies uphold social order by rejecting and isolating people who are thought to be dangerous or abnormal. These social injustices associated with the grave project its heterotopic nature associated with it.

CONCLUSION

The graveyard in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen acts as a heterotopic space as they are real, places that exist away from normalised social spaces where normal human interaction takes place and functions as "other" spaces where norms are paused, inverted, or deviated. Chandidasi is shown as a character whose nature is deduced by her gender, caste, class, interpersonal ties, and line of employment. She hates the job but is obliged to carry out her ancestral responsibilities. The work she does as a 'Dom' or someone who burns corpses is customarily associated with masculinity. As a result, Chandi's manly endeavours alienate her from society, and later she is dehumanised while being attributed the role of a 'Bayen', making her feeble, unproductive, and weak as a woman and feared, dark and evil as a witch. The juxtaposition of life and death, the superstitions associated with the graves and the fact that they exist as a marginal space while leaving Chandidasi's life there as a liminality along with this alienation and inversion of roles surrounding the graves qualifies the characteristics of a heterotopic space.

The grave functions as a heterotopic space in Mahasweta Devi's Bayen, exposing the inherent inconsistencies and injustices in conventional societal structures. According to Foucault's analytical framework, the cemetery reflects societal hypocrisy binary oppositions and subverts social standards. Devi challenges caste, patriarchal, and superstitious structures by placing Chandidasi in this context and argues for a rethinking of social borders and identities.

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