

Conceptualising Spaces, Constructing Gender: Spatial Dimensions of Human Geography in Anita Nair's *The Better Man*

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe how Other Spaces or Different Spaces that are present in every society play an important role in regulating gender relation and gendered spaces. The focus will be on the South Indian writer Anita Nair's novel *The Better Man* which is set in the fictitious village of Kaikurussi situated somewhere in North Malabar region. The nature of the argument lies in every human attempt to find inner peace and bliss, longing for true love and understanding of human relationships. The prospect is to explore women characters in analysing the notion of love and marriage and pre-marital, marital and extra-marital affairs in the novel extensively. Because of rapidly shifting ideas and practices space is represented as being fluid. The place in which the elements of the story are arranged is part visual and part virtual. It's based on correlation between power of space and spatiality, between space and time and between historical and spatial imaginations. Subsequently, I will examine the text by implementing the First and Second principle of 'Heterotopia' (a concept elaborated by French Philosopher and Social Theorist Michel Foucault). Thus, in this paper I will discuss about the application of geography, knowledge and power that will represent, develop and resolve gender troubles and man-woman relationship attributing to Keralan society.

Keywords: Gender, Space, Heterotopia, Gendered Spaces

Introduction

Gender¹ is social and social is spatial. Gender is contemplated to be a social construct²; a role behaviour that which is learned, adopted and professed. It is typically based on society's judgement to a person's bodily preoccupation. Whereas, space before 1920s, was merely appropriated as a natural geographical setting which formed the background of a situation to grow and an action to develop. In literature, especially in literary fiction Buchholz and Jahn illustrated that space has often been considered "to supply a general background against which the action takes place, something to be taken for granted rather than requiring attention" (2005: 551)³. It was only after 1920s geographers started analysing space as an important factor for studying human beings and his nature. According to postmodern political geographer Edward W. Soja, man has always been a spatial being and an active participant in the construction of social spatialities which he has (knowingly/unknowingly) embraced. In order to understand the complexities of spatiality-sociality-historicity⁴ one needs to

consider history and biography, geography and culture. He believed that our biography, which gradually adopts temporal and spatial features must be sought to be equated with the lived time. He emphasised that geo-historical perception of a society must be placed along with the spatiotemporal nature of that society. Likewise, the society also becomes a place of open possibilities, of new potentials, of contested and other existing spaces. Every place is bound up in space, time and social being. In literature, especially in a novel, for a writer a "place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference; in his work, the point of view"⁵. It becomes a conscious process that grows out of person's association and identification with his place. Today, the concept of space has become much progressive in dealing with environmental problems, geopolitical differences and social exclusion/inclusion.

Further, this paper is commenced on Heterotopian understanding of gender division in *The Better Man* with reference to the first and second principle of Heterotopia⁶. The First Principle states that "there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. The Heterotopias does not acquire universal form, but adopt diverse forms" (Foucault 4). These heterotopias can be categorized in two main categories: "Heterotopias of Crises" (Foucault 4) and "Heterotopias of Deviation" (Foucault 5). Foucault believes that heterotopias are developed along with the formation of social life and are probably invisible as we take them naturally to be part of our living. The act of disciplining and controlling leads to distribution of people into different human groups which keep on (re) producing within specific spatiotemporal habitat. The formation of various spaces is due to the differentiation of normal and abnormal (that grows out of the caste, class, race and tradition). Further, Foucault categorized spaces as privileged, sacred, forbidden and reserved. Such spaces have the tendency to be placed, displaced and replaced according to the changing standards. But the question that remains is how to define what societal norms are? Or what is real/unreal? What about those people who are isolated from the society, not accepted as equals and lives in the state of transition or crises? Geographically, Kaikurussi⁷ is set somewhere in between the north and the centre of the region. A little hollow land surrounded by medium sized hills, no river running this way; only fields, wells, and Pulmoorth Mountain. "To the north were Kozhikode, Kannur and Kasargode. To the south were Kochi, Alapuzha and Kottayam" (Nair 104). Moist and humid climate and heavy rainfall supports diverse sacred forests and rare medicinal plants. "The meadow that is in the middle of the forest where trees standing brushing, trunks, their branches sweeping the skies..." (Nair 186). The villagers called it a sacred forest. It is said to be "inhabited by a yakshi who liked to feast on the blood of virile men" (Nair 190). It is also believed that "when the pala tree's fragrance fills the night sky, the Gandharvas come prowling, looking for virgins to seduce" (Nair 128). Since, physical and climatic conditions of every place performs a significant role in outlining the occupational choices of its inhabitants; likewise, one will find landlords, toddy tappers, rice mill workers, tailors, barber and other minor job workers in the village. Secondly, the religious scene describes the mythological and cultural space of the region. "In Kaikurussi there were no Christians. There were Hindus. There were Muslims.

And in the fringes of the strictly segregated society were the Harijans, a community by themselves. There were no room for Philipose" (Nair 151), the Christian here.

Economic and sociopolitical environment of Kaikurussi acknowledges the growth and development of the area. The village has its own post office, library, Ayurvedic health center, Insurance office, Primary school, local youth club, gymnasium and telephone exchange department and Cinema hall (Murugan talkies) in the next village. People are politically aware of their rights, especially the elites and actively participate in domestic affairs. The newspaper The Indian Express and magazines, Reader's Digest and The Week keep them updated about the activities outside the village. The novel substantiates the fact that in the mid twentieth century (during India's struggle for independence) even the minor regions of Kerala had enough exposure to education, governance and economic growth quite early as compared to several other states in India. However, the state has also dealt with communal violence and found traces in the novel as well. "...the burning of Babri masjid. The violence that has stricken Ramajanambhoomi, thousands of kilometers away had been reenacted outside Shankar's Tea Club. A couple of RSS workers had taunted few Muslim students..." (Nair 134). Kaikurussi has also witnessed political violence and Naxalism. In his younger days Che Kutty was admired as Che Guevara who followed leftist leanings and militant youth. He had worked against commercialization and helped in reducing "the profits earned by the bourgeoisie who peddled" (Nair 5) whisky, brandy and rum. On the other hand, Meenakshi (Mukundan's cousin) "had become naxalite Armed with books on revolution and driven by the mythical powers of Stalin and Lenin, Meenakshi had pledged to cleanse the earth of Bourgeois vermin. And her first target of attack was Achuthan Nair- Mukundan's father, her uncle. Feudal landlord. Tyrant. Master of oppression" (Nair 56). Kerala is considered to be one of those states in India which had validated growth and prosperity quite early, but with the passage of time it is noticed that the region has failed to develop fully as one state. With education, opportunities and power came unequal distribution of wealth, corruption, inflation and class distinction. The village administration operated on certain rules and regulations. On the external level, there were temples and mosques in every nook and corner of the region. But not everyone was allowed to visit each of these places. Similarly, only men flocked to Toddy shop to fill their bellies and get rid of their everyday's tensions. In Shankar's Tea Club neither Bhasi nor Kamban participated in any group discussions or gossips as the former was not a native of the village so his words did not hold much value. Moreover villagers believed that he was quite mystic and the latter was a Harijan. Harijans found a different space for themselves on the outskirts of the village. There is a common pool for both men and women. Men are not allowed to go near the pool when the women bathed. Within the village there was a Hindu committee, a masjid committee, a pooram committee and a community hall committee. The working of each committee was different. People with definite characteristics could only become a member of such committees.

The Second Principle states that “a society, as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion” (Foucault 5). The heterotopias has the ability to change its course that is for one social group it can be precise for other it can determine the functioning of that society. Foucault argues that heterotopias have a specific operation to perform that breaks at one point and assumes the altogether different shape according to the present time and norms. Within Kerala one finds diversity in culture and tradition due to varied histories and geographies. Presently, in the north of Kerala (earlier Malabar) people are generally conservative by ethos and are dependent on society. Whereas, the south of Kerala is more developed and urban culture is abundantly practiced by its people. Therefore, in *The Better Man*, the novel explores the dynamics of the past and the present by correlating the real in imaginary aspects of the region. The regional study of north Malabar exhibited that it followed a matrilineal system of inheritance⁸. It was a basically agrarian society strictly following Landlord system. The introduction of land reform Bill in 1958 subsequently puts an end to Feudal system and the domination of landlords in small villages of Malabar. The current features of Kerala reveal that the matrilineal system broke and lead to a patriarchal style⁹ due to the influx of modern education and collapse of rural life in Kerala. In 1912, the rise of the nuclear family modeled on patriarchal style in 1912 lead to the influence of patrilineal system. These shifts revised the household patterns, gender difference and status of women in society. Anita Nair also portrays the gender inequality in her work. Women such as Paru Kutty, Meenakshi, Valsala and Anjana are exploited by their male counterparts both physically and psychologically. These women never found an escape for themselves. They shared a double burden of establishing their identity and guarding their independence. Anjana loved Mukundan truly but is densely seeded in the traditional and patriarchal values. She attempts to explore her lost identity. She considers herself as “one of those old maids destined to remain at home. Unloved, unwanted, unfulfilled. Long in the tooth, sunken, cheeks and vacant eye” (Nair 223). There are various illustrations in the story that highlights the rooted inequality, discrimination and social domination in Indian society. The plot of the novel is designed for the in-between situation of inclusion and exclusion of a social man. The issues of gender differences, caste discrimination, sexuality and ethnicity are being questioned. Nativism¹⁰, migration and cross culturalism¹¹ are also subject to problems. My fundamental argument will be dealing with the idea of love and marriage and pre-marital, marital and extra-marital relations. How the man-woman relationship is anticipated in the fictional land of Kaikurussi hence in Malabar? What is the intensity of variation in the status of women in such liaison? And how spaces are (re) produced and how gender is (re) constructed? Paru Kutty knew that her husband Achuthan Nair will never “...take kindly to anyone questioning his authority” (Nair 17). She had tried to make his son and herself “...believe that tyranny was simply another expression of love and concern” (Nair 31). She was troubled to know her husband’s affair with another woman. She wanted to go far off to someplace away from her husband. But she never managed to get out of that house and died (or murdered) of agony and

stressful life. Similarly, Valsala a lonely woman and wife of the village schoolmaster Prabhakaran Chandaran characterize those wives who are confined to kitchen space or household chores. Due to her misplaced existence and lack of pleasure in her married life she falls for his neighbour Sridharan who provided her emotional and physical freedom. Finally, she decides to liberate herself from her unhappy marriage and with the help of her lover, she kills her husband. Certainly, both of them faced the consequences and were confined for this crime. Although, what I am here interested in is not what these women has done, but who/what made them do so? Another woman Anjana who is represented as to be raised in a liberal atmosphere, lands up in an unhappy marriage with Ravindran. She always pretended to be a perfect conventional wife, submissive and obedient, but with that she lost her independence too. Her home space became meaningless to her and her mother's house becomes an escape from her emotionally depressed life. Her longing for flexibility and love in marriage aggravated her pain, misery and hatred. Eventually, she got separated from her husband. Likewise, another woman Meenakshi is known by the villagers as a woman left by her husband Balan with their only son Mani. With the passage of time she has "acquired a reputation for sagacity and wisdom. People forgot that she had ever married or that her husband abandoned her. And as the years passed, Meenakshi forgot how to smile with her eyes" (Nair 60). She "was more educated than most other women in the village" (Nair 58). In all her childhood she had thought of being with Mukundan (her cousin) and living her life with him. They considered each other as a companion and soul mate. She always dreamt of going that far, pointing towards the horizon where she expected her life to be different. But she too never managed to escape. All these women never found liberation for themselves. French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre argued that each society creates its own norms, caste and gender system, the way of categorizing masculinity¹² and femininity¹³ and these categories keep on transforming with time.

The paper spreads out by reviewing Kaikurussi as the author's visual and virtual perception¹⁴ of the then Malabar¹⁵ region. The writer focuses on the hierarchy of spaces and the gender formulation of its subjects. Foucault analysed space in the context of geography, knowledge and power. He emphasized on the relation between power of space and spatiality, between space and time and between historical and spatial imaginations. He asserted that time deals with space in a certain manner in relation to history. Historically, society has always been an ensemble of multiple spaces and so is the imaginary village of Kaikurussi. These spaces negotiate with the real lives of men and women and have been ever evolving with time according to the society in which it nurtures. These are the places where those things find their resisting potential that had been violently displaced. For villagers like Bhasi, Mukundan, Meenakshi, Valsala, Anjana, Che Kutty Kaikurussi is a place of resistance and the characters have created a personal space where they found peace and a sense of belonging with their village respectively. On the contrary, "there are other places as well where other things found their natural stability" (Foucault1). Anita Nair creatively presents the facts and discoveries of Malabar in her work- its opposition, intersection and the

sense of emplacement in the real corporeal space. Modern life is governed by varied rules and oppositions which are nurtured by certain hidden powers. These forces operate on definite principles and have divided the society into public and private space and cultural and social space. One need to understand the types of classification and marking that is adopted in order to reach the desired end. The writer in the novel deals with "the space of our primary perception" (Foucault 2) which describes our set of relations and defines our identity. Nair concentrates on the culture, civilization and real places of Malabar and presents Kaikurussi the God's own country¹⁶ as both a utopian and heterotopian land.

In the novel, the village has tremendously conditioned the language, behaviour, dress, cuisine, art and occupation of the region. Villagers are highly conservative of their land. It is the house which determines the power and identity of a person in the village. Land has attributed a unique heritage in the village. Keeping in mind that place does not have the lasting effect and that it keeps on reproducing and so does a person's identity. Similarly, the social background of Kaikurussi has its own religious and cultural expression. Each family possesses a distinct ancestral background. Mythical heroes, gandharvas, yahkshis, odiyans and various other ancestral spirits are an integral part of the customs and tradition of Kaikurussi. The village society is inhabited by Hindus, Muslims and Harijans. Although Christianity is the third largest religion in India and it is said to be first introduced in Kerala in AD 52 but here in Kaikurussi there are no Christians. Institutions such as home, society, ancestry, preferences and profession regulate the place of man and woman in society. For instance, men in Kaikurussi have retained their privileged place. They are treated as the head of the family. In the novel "Achuthan Nair, Paru Kutty knew, hated sharing his position of 'man of the world' in the village" (Nair 76). Only when Achuthan Nair has dined was the rest of the family allowed to eat. Women from low caste were not allowed to enter inside a Nayer home. When Mukundan tells Krishnan Nair that he had hired Neeli (a woman from low caste) for household chores "he barked...'she's a young woman, and you know how people around here...Don't you know that when the mother goddess chose to make the macch inside this house, her home, she laid down certain conditions?...so you need to be careful whom you let into the house'" (Nair 37,38). Krishnan Nair tells him that he will find an elderly Nair woman for cooking and cleaning work. Even Bhasi refers Valsala to be:

...a young middle-aged woman. As for her voice, it is typical of Kaikurussi. God knows what it is about village, but all the women here sound old and weary by the time they are twenty-five. I wonder if it is because they feel they are destined to a life-long tedium of chores, a monotony that is more mind-glazing than backbreaking (Nair 125).

Besides, in the novel, Anjana tells Mukundan that marriage does not give any right to a husband to treat his wife the way he wants to. As far as Anjana's husband is concerned, she is "merely a servant who doubles as a whore..." She "thinks a prostitute has more rights" than she has in this marriage. "At least she gets paid for her services, and she can say no if she wants to." But Anjana "...have

no such choice in the matter" (Nair 243). Along with, before leaving Kaikurussi, Meenakshi tells Mukundan that she has given away the best years of her life. She is a constant reminder of everything each one wishes to forget. "Unhappy daughter. Abandoned wife. Wheeler-dealer mother." But now "I won't think of anything or anyone else-except myself." No expectations. No heartbreaks. I will read. I will sew. I will watch some TV and I will sleep" (Nair 250). These women also get into extra-marital relationships in order to fulfil their repressed desires or for shelter and economic security. Foucault argued that heterotopias have a specific function that breaks at one point and assumes an altogether different form depending upon time and existing norms. The history of Kerala society describes how certain practices emerged, how they have been transformed by social norms/practices and how these norms are unquestionable and naturally being adopted by the people. The everyday life¹⁷ in Kaikurussi is organized on the basis of the interrelations of society, space and power. At one level the public sphere provides a free will, at the other level, it even controls him/her by reducing his "autonomy and his sense of identity." Power House Ramakrishnan "...operated on a simple theory: every man has a price. In some cases it was a little more difficult to settle on. The currency was intangible, the exchange rate was high but he was yet to discover a human being who couldn't be bought. All you had to do was figure out at what price principles began to erode" (Nair 306).

Gender relations in Kerala are marked with power relations and individuals of distinct gendered identities¹⁸. Gillian Rose, a British Scholar interpreted landscape as not only a scene but as a visual ideology "a gaze which itself helps to make sense of a particular relationship between society and land" (87). She emphasized on the concept of gendered body which is culturally constructed by the male gaze with regard to the tendency of suppression. On the other hand, she exercises on certain principles of power and to what extent it is driven by social structure. By placing the long lost perspective of Malabar in Tamil anthologies, one can draw a vivid picture of distinct historical developments and the respected position that was accorded to women in Kerala during the Vedic ages. The state of Kerala observed different rules for women as compared with other states in India before Independence. Education, widow remarriage, a matrilineal system of inheritance provided a higher status to a woman in the family and outside. With the rise in religious differences and conflicting class, caste and social thoughts lead to the subjugation of women even more. Soon patriarchy took over matrilineal system and worsened the condition. Although, the women literacy rate is high in the state, but due to lack of economic growth and independence women in Kerala are too depressed and frustrated. This leads to higher suicidal tendencies in women within the state. The data collected on the suicide rate in India confirms the above statement. Thus, the paper presents space as a mode of resistance that represent, develop and resolve gender troubles and man-woman relationship in Kerala society. Kaikurussi is a place with a wonderful combination of Nair's love for nature and her profound understanding of the contemporary abominable condition of the everyday man. It is designed on the vision of the past, activities of the present and expectations in the future. It is a record of how the world manages to retain male dominance every time (either directly/indirectly) and

their inheritance in society. The text is a mark of the author's personal experiences and observations in affirming, strengthening and even weakening social relations.

In order to comprehend and analyse author's narrative style, I would further trace the trajectory of the work in three time zones. Firstly, the time the novel is written. Secondly, the time the plot of the work is set. And thirdly, the time author was born. The writer is concerned with the content and not reasons of gender differences. Further, the narrative of a writer (in representing a particular place) is considered to be two fold. At first, the place is observed as a frame which carries author's emotions, memories and experiences of that time. Secondly, the place is recognised as an apparatus through which a reader travels through time into the past. The power of moving within time combines one moment with another, hence creating a series of incidents and history. In her work, Nair creates a fictional world with her familiarity of the real world and recreates realistic images that are placed in the subjective location of the writer. She provides a pleasing allusion of the age in which the reader lives and the age he/she has evolved from. Besides, the novel is a mirror image that reflects the author's state of mind and intentions, thus exploring the shadowy aspects of human psychology. The work is thus "reconciliation between formal abstractions about space, on the one hand, and the physical and social spaces within which we live, on the other" (Aitkens 171).

Conclusion- This paper began by outlining and understanding the possibilities of thinking gender spatially; about text which itself becomes a lived space comprising the first (perceived) and the second (conceived) space¹⁹ which is drawn out of the author's point of view in relation to gendered spaces. A brief comparison is made between man and woman and their respective positions in the course of love, marriage and social life. Having established an intricate position of women in modern Keralan society, the paper also seeks to identify how spaces are produced, how gender is constructed and how hierarchy always managed to favour men over women. Finally, commenting on the author's style of narration it is clearly evident that knowing historical, geographical, ideological, psychological, economic and social history of any society is imperative for both the writer and the reader. This helps in interpreting why and how societies thought and worked in a particular manner and what are the ramifications of this collective act. "It thus becomes more urgent than ever to keep our contemporary conscious of spatiality-our critical...use of the concept of Third Space..." brisk, "dealing with our everyday lives, the closely associated historical (or temporal) and social (or sociological) imagination" (Soja 2).

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