

# Heterotopology of Home and Homelessness: Space, Identity and Yearning in Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* (2010)

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the depiction of space in Daisy Hasan's *The To-Let House* (2010) in light of Foucault's notion of heterotopias. Heterotopias are alternate spaces that serve as counter-sites that challenge established notions and discourses. They are real-world spaces that perform a unique function or possess a symbolic meaning within society. It is argued that the physical spaces within the domestic environment described in the novel *The To-Let House* act as heterotopias on multiple levels. How the crafting of space is used as a means to convey the psycho-social states of the characters are discussed. Literary cartography, pioneered by Robert Tally, is used in addition to the concept of heterotopia to understand how the spaces serving as counter sites reveal an understated layer of storytelling. This analysis attempts to understand how physical space functions as a reflection of the emotional struggles and yearnings of the characters and the intricacies between space and identity.

## Keywords

Heterotopia; literary cartography; domestic space; spatial analysis.

## Introduction

*The To-Let House* (2010) by Daisy Hasan is one of the many Shillong novels, that is novels that are set in Shillong. Other examples include Anjum Hasan's *Lunatic in my Head* (2007), Daribha Lyndem's *Name Place, Animal, Thing* (2020) Siddhartha Deb's *A Point of Return* (2002) and Nilanjan P Choudhury's *Shillong Times* (2018). The novel is set in the period 1979-1990, in the background of political unrest in Shillong. Meghalaya, like other states in India's northeast, has a history of ethnic conflict and insurgency arising from an interplay of ethnic, political, economic and cultural factors. There was tension in the state since India's independence as a consequence of which Meghalaya was carved out as a separate state from Assam in 1972. The influx of migrants from other parts of India created anxiety about cultural identity

and loss of economic opportunities for the migrant settlers, resulting in tension between indigenous groups and settlers. These tensions broke out in the public sphere, resulting in an open conflict in 1979. This atmosphere of tension continued till the 1990s.

The novel *The To-Let House* is based on the author Daisy Hasan's recollected memory of growing up in this period of conflict. She is an academician who has researched and written about the cultures of North-East India and South Asian women's art in conflict situations. The novel tells the story of four children growing up in Shillong during this period, their search for identity and belonging. Hasan explores the insecurities and anxieties an individual imbibes when living in an atmosphere of conflict for a prolonged period. In an interview given to *The Hindu* titled "The Homecoming", Hasan says that the emotional

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kernel of the story is the experience of growing up in Shillong as an outsider with a strong sense of belonging and having close friends in the indigenous population. Expressing this complex emotional state is the dilemma of the narrative voice.

This article argues that the author employs heterotopic spaces as a narrative device to express the anxieties of contested belonging. The domestic space in the novel is examined as a heterotopia based on the six principles of heterotopias put forward by Foucault in "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (1986). This analysis enables an understanding of the function of heterotopic spaces in a literary work. The following section discusses the meaning and function of heterotopias in Foucault's writing and how they can apply to fictional spaces.

### **Understanding Heterotopia**

The term heterotopia comes from the medical sciences where it refers to the displacement of a part of the body from its actual position. Though Foucault engages with spatiality and refers to heterotopias in many of his works, this analysis is based on Foucault's description of the concept in two of his works, "Of Other Spaces" (1986) and *The Order of Things* (1966). Foucault provides a contextual definition of the term, as he uses it in relation to different functions in these two texts. The following section attempts to arrive at an understanding of heterotopia by integrating Foucault's discussion of the concept in the varying contexts of these texts.

Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" outlines six principles of heterotopias. The first principle is that they are present in every human culture in a form specific to each cultural context. He gives the example of two types of heterotopias that are universal, heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation. Heterotopias of crisis are for people who are in a state of crisis in relation to the society they live in like menstruating women, adolescents etc. Heterotopias of deviation are for people whose behaviour is deemed deviant by the norms set by the social structure they live in. Prisons and mental

asylums are examples of the latter. Foucault mentions that certain spaces can be simultaneously heterotopias of crisis as well as deviation, giving the example of old age homes, as old age can be seen as a state of crisis while the idleness of retirement is a deviation in a society where work is the norm.

The second principle of heterotopias is that their function can change over time according to the needs of the society within which they operate. The third principle is that they can combine multiple spaces which are often contradictory within one space. The fourth principle states that heterotopias can be created by a difference in the perception or working of time from the temporal experience of normal, everyday life, as in carnivals or festivals characterised by fleeting time, or museums that represent infinitely accumulating or frozen time. The fifth principle states that access to a heterotopia is not simple, it is either mandatory or requires the passer to qualify in some way. The sixth and final principle of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all other spaces in the social framework of its origin.

Foucault describes heterotopias thus in his preface to *The Order of Things*:

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. (10)

While Foucault discusses heterotopias as a spatial concept in "Of Other Spaces", his description of their function in *The Order of Things* is predominantly in the realm of knowledge production. The ambiguity in Foucault's use of the term has resulted in varying views regarding the nature and purpose of these sites. Several authors including Edward Soja, David Harvey and Sara Chaplin refer to heterotopias in their analysis of real-world spaces but critical focus on the concept itself

is scarce. Bruno Bosteels, in his survey of French theory, discusses heterotopias as sites of resistance. He understands heterotopias as sites that contain a potential of disruption where power dynamics and nuances of identity become legible and possibly subject to challenge and even subversion.

Kevin Hetherington theorises heterotopias in *The Badlands of Modernity; Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (1997) as spaces that are organized or ordered differently in relation to their surroundings. Thus, they contain the potential to be tools for resistance but can also serve to reinforce or reproduce the existing normative structure. While most of these writers have relied solely on “Of Other Spaces”, Robert J Topinka builds on the third and sixth principle of heterotopias put forward by Foucault and, by connecting that with the textual function of the term in *The Order of Things*, argues that heterotopias create an intensification of knowledge by juxtaposing multiple spaces in one, which in turn makes it possible to see the foundations on which knowledge is built. While this implies that they can potentially instigate a reordering by revealing the basis of power and knowledge, this potential can very well remain locked, problematising a view of heterotopias as necessarily a site of resistance or transgression.

For the purpose of this study, the spatial and textual aspects of heterotopias are taken into consideration. Heterotopias are conceived as alternatively ordered real-world spaces that create a disruption of existing foundations of knowledge by combining diverse spaces in one. The spaces in the fictional text are analysed in relation to the principles of heterotopias discussed above to arrive at their spatial and textual functions within the imaginary world of the novel. Robert Tally’s technique of literary cartography, an author-centred method that studies how the author builds the fictional world of the text by paying attention to the spatial metaphors in the text, is employed to understand the working of heterotopic spaces and their role as a narrative device. This analysis aims to understand the function of heterotopic spaces in the text, their potential for resistance/subversion, their relation to systems of knowledge production and how these

relate to the characters and the shaping and articulation of their identities.

### ***The To-Let House: Characters and Plot***

The novel takes place in three different timelines and it is divided into three parts accordingly. The first part is titled “The Mansion” and it narrates the events of the year 1979, which was the year in which socio-political conflicts broke out in Shillong. The novel starts with the arrival of the nine-year-old Di, her sister Addy and their mother to the colonial-style mansion owned by the Khasi heiress May, to rent out one of the rentals in the mansion grounds referred to as ‘the to-let house’. The girls and their mother, referred to as Ma, arrive visibly distressed, with Ma carrying a bright wedding saree in her hands. It is revealed that Ma was in a long relationship with the father of the girls who kept Ma in a loop with the promise of marriage for years only to fall out of love and emotionally abandon her.

May occupies the mansion with her husband, called Governor, her children Clemmie and Kulay and her orphaned niece and nephew. The first part of the story mostly takes place in the mansion grounds. The readers experience the nature of the city outside and the turmoil lurking therein through the characters of the mansion whose inner worlds provide an uncanny reflection of the conflicts taking place outside. The novel is woven through two separate overlapping worlds, the world of the adults and that of the children. The adults are caught up in the web of their desires and pain, addictions and emptiness. As a result, the Children Addy, Di, Clemmie and Kulay grow up without receiving the care and attention they need. Kulay’s situation is comparatively worse, being intentionally mistreated by May and ignored by Governor. He feels like a misfit in the mansion and the first part of the novel ends with the twelve-year-old Kulay running away to join the Khasi students Union.

The second part of the novel is titled “A Home and The World”. As the title suggests, the world outside, set in 1984, forcefully breaks into the life in the mansion and the to-let house. By then the children are teenagers. Kulay returns to the mansion

when the fear of being arrested and tortured by the police hits him. May, disgusted by Governor and disturbed by the soft spot she was developing for Kulay, leaves the mansion with Clemmie to the new house she had built for herself, leaving behind Kulay and Governor and separating Di and Clemmie who had developed a very tight bond over the years.

Later that year Kulay gets arrested by the police for being a member of the union and is released as a result of May's interference. However, the physical and mental trauma of being held captive and brutally tortured changes him. Kulay and Di start spending time together after his return to the mansion and they eventually enter into a relationship. But a conflicted Kulay has doubts about associating with a non-tribal and eventually stops seeing her. This infuriates Di and she swirls crucial information from a conversation between May and Kulay that she had overheard as a child, that Kulay was born out of an affair that Governor had with the Nepali immigrant Redcoat, which eventually causes Kulay's murder. Kulay's death comes as a big shock to everyone, particularly May. Despite her attempts to resent Kulay and use him as a means of executing her revenge on Governor and Redcoat she had come to love the boy and his death disturbs her deeply. Clemmie and Di leave Shillong together after Kulay's death in an attempt to distance themselves from the pain of the event. The last part of the novel is titled "Truce" and it is set in the year 1997. Di returns to Shillong after nine years of being informed of Ma's death by Addy who never left Shillong. During her stay, she realizes that some of the wounds of the past have healed and she has come a long way from the insecure sixteen-year-old girl who had left the town in a bubble of pain.

### **The Mansion and the To-Let House as Heterotopias**

The following section argues that the physical spaces of the mansion and the To Let house function as heterotopias individually and together to create a disruptive space that challenges conventional social norms. The To-Let house can be said to be a heterotopia of crisis/ deviation while the mansion is a heterochrony of sorts. The two spaces

when put in the same frame serve as a possible critique of the conventional family system, destabilising several other structures built on normalcy or an assumption of unequivocal primordality of that order. The heterotopic space of the mansion and the to-let house are then analysed based on the principles of heterotopias put forward by Foucault discussed above, to tease out the nature of their function. This in turn engenders an understanding of the interrelation between the characters and their environment.

The Mansion is an elegant and stately structure with a long history. It was built by a British tea planter when Shillong was a colonial capital. It came into the hands of May's father, a high-flying diplomat after India's independence. The mansion is almost as old as the hill town and embodies its several aspects, with its mix of colonial and indigenous elements. The narrator Di describes the mansion in abundant detail, admiring its exquisite interiors, shining kitchen, library filled with a prestigious collection of canonical texts, the secret tunnel built during World War, trophies and artefacts from the British period etc. The mansion mirrors Shillong in its history and architecture. It is more of a museum than a home, housing the history of the place. In this sense, the mansion, just like the hill town, can be considered a heterotopia of infinitely accumulating time.

The To-Let House stands in stark contrast to the mansion. It is a humble, semi-dilapidated structure, separated from the mansion by a forget-me-not hedge. The history of the To-Let house and its occupants present and prior, is one of destitution. The only object in there when the girls arrive is an old trunk box left behind by the previous tenant with some miscellaneous objects. The inhabitants of the to-let house arrive in a visibly distressed state, Ma carrying a hanger with a bright peach wedding saree and her confused daughters struggling to catch up with her pace. She had sneaked out of the house she was living in with the father of the girls without informing him, hoping to win his love back. Though he never comes looking for her, Ma never gets over the pain of being denied his love. She holds on to the wedding saree, symbolic of his promise to marry her

someday, which he never did. For Ma, the To-Let house is a purgatory for the ghost of her lost love that she is unable to move on from. The house is her unending doomed waiting that goes on until her tragic death in a freak accident.

After moving to the to-let house, the girls are almost immediately made aware of the fact that they are outsiders or 'dhkars', which associates their status to their shift to the to-let house. Being raised by their unstable mother who is fixated on the partner who abandoned her, the girls grow up in a state of crisis. The physical space of the to-let house becomes an embodiment of this state that the family finds themselves in, something caught between a heterotopia of crisis and deviation.

While the To-Let house becomes a heterotopia of crisis, it also becomes a site of deviation on two grounds. The girls of the To-Let house are love children, born out of wedlock. The family does not have a father figure or a male member. With respect to the Indian societal norms, the family is incomplete, broken and deviant. On the other hand, in relation to Shillong society, Ma and her daughters are outsiders. They are not a part of the indigenous community. They do not enjoy the feeling of belonging to a community or a social group. May and the occupants of the mansion are the only human connection Ma has. The family becomes deviant in this sense as well, particularly in a period of social conflict on the grounds of ethnicity.

### **Juxtaposition of Incompatible Spaces**

Foucault states in his third principle that the convergence or juxtaposition of multiple incompatible spaces results in a heterotopia. The mansion grounds housing the colonial mansion and its drab tenant's quarters can be examined in this light. The mansion is a family home and represents a sense of rootedness and belonging. The mansion is an apparent ideal, in the sense that it houses what seems like a normative family consisting of married parents and their two children. This ideal breaks later in the novel, when it is revealed that Kulay was born out of an affair between the Governor and

another tenant Redcoat, and May leaves the mansion to her new house to start an affair with Clemmie's teacher Benjamin, the mansion continues to symbolise a sense of home for the children who grow into adulthood. Clemmie hopes to return to the mansion after May's death. "She will inhabit the house she was born in, open out the windows and bring back the flowers. But she must wait for May to go" (226). The tenant's quarters including the To-Let house on the other hand is a shabby imperfect structure that represents a transient state. It is more like the physical place that mirrors a state of distress someone falls into and aspires to escape from. Ma lived in the to-let house tormented by her unrequited love, silently hoping for her old lover to return and take her away. The first thing Addy does after Ma's tragic death is to pack her belongings and move out of the To-Let house to a different rental. The To-Let House represents a constant state of psychological homelessness.

Foucault in his discussion of heterotopias speaks about the expulsion of cemeteries from urban centres to the suburbs that came along with a change in the understanding and symbolism of death. Just as a cemetery in the middle of the city stands as a constant representation of mortality that seeps in challenging the routines of life driven by capitalism, the deprived To-Let House complicates the significations of the mansion. A mansion taken in isolation can be viewed as an ideal family home that symbolises an effortless sense of belonging. But when the sight of the tenant's quarters is juxtaposed the mansion grounds reflect something deeper and murkier, like the hill town itself. A home and a borrowed home when placed side by side create a glitch, like a cut that renders a bone visible, it makes the underlying psycho-social and political structures engendering the sense of home and its lack legible and readable.

### **The Function of Heterotopias of Fiction**

The sixth principle of heterotopia is that they have a function in relation to all other spaces. This principle asserts that heterotopias are real world spaces originating from and operating within or

related to a specific social context. While they often stand out and are separated by a sufficient degree to provide a vantage point to read and understand the social order, they are not independent of that social order. This can also mean that heterotopias might simply end up confirming or reaffirming the set social order. If the domestic environment portrayed in the novel is seen as a heterotopia, this principle would imply that the domestic space has a function in relation to space and social order in a broader sense. The following section analyses whether the heterotopic space in the text functions as a site of resistance as Bosteels and Hetherington opine by examining the way the space is perceived and used by the characters in the text.

The heterotopic space in the novel, that is the mansion grounds, is a reflection of the city of Shillong. The interpersonal relationships, whether it be the close bond between Clemmie and Di, Kulay's distrust of the sisters Di and Addy, or the different treatments received by Kulay and Sissy Kay, reflect life in the wider city space. In this sense the heterotopia acts like a mirror, reconstructing the socio-political fabric within which it exists, making the means of its working readable. The To-Let house works like a typical crisis heterotopia. It houses the girls throughout their difficult childhood and adolescence and they leave once they outgrow that phase. Ma, who never manages to heal or regain her mental balance dies in that space. It waits for the next tenant who is in the right state of destitution to qualify for access to the space.

The fate of the mansion remains uncertain at the end of the novel. After Kulay's death, May is the sole inhabitant of the mansion for several years. She disappears, haunted by guilt over the death of her son she couldn't forget, like the mythical Lykai. The mansion is left empty after May's death under the watch of its caretaker Borthakur. All that is said about its future is in Clemmie's letter to Di that she would return to the mansion and the city after May's death and bring back the flowers, leaving an implied anticipation for a new order.

In the social context of the text, the function of the heterotopic space that can be said to oppose

or reconstitute a normative order is the engendering of human relationships that transgress the boundaries that were in place between tribals and non-tribals in the period of political turbulence in Shillong. The proximity of the To-Let house to the mansion made the tight knit friendship between Clemmie and Di and the romantic relationship between Di and Kulay possible. While the former gave the girls a sense of home with each other and made it possible for them to grow out of the small town and heal themselves, the latter ended tragically with Kulay's death.

### **Mapping the Textual Function of Counter-Sites**

Robert J Topinka argues in his article "Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces", that heterotopias have a textual function as well as a spatial one. While they could be sites of resistance to the dominant order, their primary function is argued to be different.

Traditionally, heterotopias are understood as sites of resistance. There are certainly grounds for this. Yet, I suggest that such an understanding obscures their primary function: making order legible. Heterotopias are sites in which epistemes collide and overlap, creating an intensification of knowledge. Such intensification is certainly not at odds with the practice of resistance, but shifting our emphasis from one to the other promises new insights into the primary function of heterotopias. (Topinka, 55)

Topinka says that Foucault's description of heterotopias in his preface to *The Order of Things* as something that undermines language is perhaps the most succinct definition of the term he has given. This clearly asserts that Foucault conceived of the term to have a function in relation to language and knowledge production.

Coming to the novel, the narrative voice adopted by the author is that of a nine-year-old child. In an interview given to the *Hindu*, Daisy Hasan speaks about how she has tried to recreate the

consciousness of a child through the text, with the narration following the movement of its distracted, playful attention. She also recounts how this novel is partly based on her own experiences and was a difficult book to write. In another interview given to the *New Indian Express* she speaks about growing up in a conflict-ridden city and how the experience of prolonged conflict could make people psychologically insecure. Being a text based on memory; it can be safely assumed that the author had to face dual challenges in writing the novel. On the one hand, she had to re-encounter the experiences and emotional struggles of this extended period of conflict. On the other hand, she also had to distance herself from these experiences to some degree and find a way to articulate the story of growing up in a period characterised by difficult and conflicting emotions.

Topinka states in his article that for Foucault, knowledge is a result of the clash of forces. Humanity then attempts to order that knowledge. Foucault repeatedly describes this process of knowledge formation and ordering in spatial terms. The primary function of the heterotopic space in the text is to reflect the underlying struggles of storytelling and to create a point for the author to break into the fictional world mirroring the real Shillong. It gives an avenue for the writer to confront the period indirectly. The anxiety and insecurity of growing up as an outsider in a period of conflict are expressed through the grid of a spatial system that lays bare and problematizes the underlying social order. In the context of the *To-Let House* and the Shillong society of the 1980s that it describes, the concept of ethnic identity was fundamental to social ordering. The juxtaposition of multiple spaces housing people of varied and overlapping identities in the mansion grounds, non-tribals of unknown origin like Di and her family, the Nepali immigrant called Redcoat, the Khasi family and children of mixed origin like Kulay, creates a sense of tension resulting in an understated spatial exploration of the knowledge systems that determine where people belong. This space makes it possible to speak about human relationships that

overcome the boundary lines that place people in small boxes.

## **Conclusion**

Heterotopias are counter sites or sites of alternate order that juxtapose multiple, incompatible spaces and direct the resulting state of conflict to shed light on the structures that produce knowledge or order in society in relation to which they operate. They can have a spatial as well as a textual function. Though the heterotopic space in the novel *The To-Let House* performs a spatial function, its primary function is textual. It provides a vantage point to narrate the story built on the memory of the experiences of growing up as an outsider in the conflict-ridden city and to grapple with sensitive issues of identity and strained and complicated human relationships in troubled times. The heterotopic space mirrors Shillong, making it possible for the author to articulate her experiences indirectly through the spatial metaphor of the mansion grounds. It also makes a nuanced discussion of the issue of identity and its socio-political roots and implications possible by projecting it in spatial terms. Thus, the heterotopic space performs a narrative function in the novel.

However, the heterotopic space does not necessarily act as a site of resistance in the fictional world. The heterotopic space can be said to have created a disruption or destabilization of order. The life of the inhabitants of the mansion was turned upside down by the relationships that were forged that transgressed the social norms of the period. Kulay's affair with Redcoat resulted in Kulay's birth. May decides to take revenge by raising him as her son but mistreats him. This results in Kulay's murder years later. May leaves the mansion driven by guilt as she couldn't stop herself from having maternal feelings for him. Her husband Governor is driven out as a consequence of his affair with Redcoat. The girls Clemmie and Di leave to escape the pain of Kulay's death. The mansion is vacant at the end of the novel, uncertainly awaiting what could be a reordering or a reconstitution of the old order.

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