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**Heterotopology of the Ganga *Ghat* in selected works of Raja Rao, Keki Daruwalla and
Mahasveta Devi**

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the Ganga *ghat* in the context of the work by three writers. This includes two short stories by Raja Rao from *On the Ganga Ghat*, Keki Daruwalla's poems from *Crossing of Rivers* and Mahasveta Devi's short story "Bayen". Such a variety of creatively diverse textual representations point towards a heightened sensitivity to differential spatial mappings that create 'real' and 'imagined' places that can never really exhaust a place and that can go on to create different characters and subject positions. Drawing on Foucault and Lefebvre, the paper discusses how the *ghat*'s heterotopology, in fact, inheres in the *ghat*'s production of space and how the Ganga *ghat* inserts, invents, undergirds, mirrors and inverts our cultural and individual relationship across time and place (that is with other water bodies, other river *ghats* or local water bodies, like ponds, streams, lakes and catchment areas and other incompatible spaces). The paper also attempts to locate the politics of space and othering through a brief reference to Soja.

Key words: Lefebvre, Foucault, conceived space, representational space, spatial relations, heterotopia, Ganga *ghat*, carnival, Soja

It is in the microcosm of the human imagination that spaces speak to and of the tangible and the intangible. Spaces make us negotiate the limits of our perception and yet allow us to conceive the transcendence of these limits through, what Foucault describes as heterotopic spaces. For Foucault, places are not spatially circumscribed but produce and are produced by a "regime of practices"—practices being understood here as places where what is said and what is done, rules imposed and reasons given, the planned and the taken-for-granted meet and interconnect" ("Questions of Method" 225). Space and spatial relations—produced



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within these ‘regime of practices’—are always active, present and consciously shape characters and cultures.

Different spatial and critical practices, differential representations of the *ghat*, of the city situated at the *ghat* and of the Ganga itself, contribute towards the *ghat*’s geographical register. Such a register contributes to and is informed by a changing relationship of time and place, including the continuities and discontinuities within, what Edward Soja calls, a “socio-spatial dialectic” or “a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial” (208).

The current paper explores the Ganga *ghat* through a spatially oriented approach. The Ganga *ghat* is discussed in the context of the work by three writers. This includes two short stories by Raja Rao from *On the Ganga Ghat*, Keki Daruwalla’s poems from *Crossing of Rivers* and Mahasveta Devi’s short story “Bayen”. Such a variety of creatively diverse textual representations, as is found in the works by these writers, point towards a heightened sensitivity to differential spatial mappings that create ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ places that can never really exhaust a place and that can go on to create different characters and subject positions. “Analysing space and place through heterotopology is, therefore finding out where, how, and for whom difference erupts and maintains itself ” (Saldanha 2081). Drawing on Foucault and Lefebvre, the paper discusses how the *ghat*’s heterotopology, in fact, inheres in the *ghat*’s production of space and how the Ganga *ghat* inserts, invents, undergirds, mirrors and inverts our cultural and individual relationship across time and place (that is, with other water bodies, other river *ghats* or local water bodies, like ponds, streams, lakes and catchment areas and other incompatible spaces).

Foucault’s Concept of Heterotopia

In “Of Other Spaces”, Foucault identifies two broad categories of heterotopias—crisis heterotopias and heterotopias of deviation—and six “principles” that characterize heterotopology. Crisis heterotopias are found mostly in primitive societies “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” (24). Such individuals, include pregnant, adolescent or menstruating women, elderly people, among others. In modern



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societies, crisis heterotopias are rare, exclusive and isolated sites that enable and maintain a “nowhere” for executing the first manifestations of male virility, like in military training or the deflowering of women, like on a honeymoon trip (24). As against these, he discusses “heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed”. On the basis of an ascribed deviant behaviour, individuals require to be identified and labelled in an extreme procedure of othering, so that the hegemonic mainstream dominance of the normative group and its neat functioning is left undisturbed, unvitiated and non-polluted.

For Foucault, heterotopias are “real places, places that do exist”, they are “counter-sites”, standing in an ambivalent and often oppositional relation to society’s mainstream. They are “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (24).

Heterotopias, according to Foucault, force us to consciously re-think, that is, think outside our everyday relationships. Unlike utopias, heterotopias are locatable in time and place, while they simultaneously exist outside society. They have the special property of inter-relatedness with other sites, are extremely heterogenous and have the crucial ability of mirroring as well as inverting our relationships with other sites. Thus, heterotopias are special places “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). The spatiality of heterotopias is inherently dynamic and according to the last principle of Foucault’s heterotopology, heterotopias “have a function in relation to all the space that remains” (27), that is, the dynamic internal heterogeneity of heterotopias are sustained by the function these heterotopias perform while they are “formed in the very founding of society” (24).

The Ganga in Popular Imagination

The Ganga is symbolic of a wealth of mythology. Far from being assimilative, it is positively productive in its rite of passage through linguistic, literary and cultural cross-



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pollination. Spatially speaking, the Ganga's geography is materially and imaginatively endowed with a language of its own—of (wo)men speaking to (wo)men and of many Indias—each with their own histories, contexts, mindsets, experiences, sensibilities, different from others, but emotionally conjoined, liberated and even hemmed in within the firmament of literature and lore.

The reverential Ganga inscribes a feminine space within the masculine space of the Vedas. She plays sport and banters with her sister Gauri in folk-songs and in Kalidas's *Meghasandesha*, locked in Shiva's locks before turning to the modern poet and compelling him to reflect about her erasure—her constant ascetism and inaction despite masculine/defiling/assaulting provocation: “Vistarhai apar, Prajadono par /Kare hahakar, Nishabdhasada /O Ganga tum, Ganga baheti ho kyun?” (On both sides of your vast incomparable expanse, people are screaming out of grief and pain as if denouncing you. Yet, O Ganga, why O why do you keep flowing silently without a voice?) (Originally written in Assamese by Bhupen Hazarika; translated in hindi by Narendra Sharma)

The Ganga with its *ghats* conjoins mythic pure and purifying divinity and an iconic geopolitical resonance as state-resource, polluting it in the process. The Ganga *aarti* is not only a concretization of the mythic re-telling of the Ganga, a ritual that symbolically reenacts the Ganga's ability to purify in totality—in body and soul, the self and the community—but also a rich text that draws global attention in ritual that is linked to activism around alarming pollution levels of the river and its *ghats*. It is often at the *ghat* sites, that the daily ritual of *aarti* is attended by seers, God-men, politicians, activists and even government officials undertaking and conducting public pledges about keeping the Ganga and its *ghat* clean.

Interestingly, the root of the word *aarti* lies in the Sanskrit word *aaratrik* which means the dispelling of darkness, which refers to spiritual illumination through the senses. The sounds of the brimming and gushing Ganga mixed with the ritual chanting of shlokas and bhajans reverberates as a symphony of sound and sight, marked by its internal heterogeneity contributing to a heterotopia that can simultaneously contain the ‘deviant’ (those at the wild edge of human society) as well as provide the “illusion” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 27) of



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power (by those who are designated to perform the aarti or the funeral rites in a certain way that constitutes and circulates as knowledge and truth about religion, spirituality and ideas of transcendence). The audience for the *aarti* is carnivalesque—constituted by a heterogeneous group of people across the divides of class, caste, race, religion, gender and belief. To name a few, the audience consists of sadhus, beggars, mendicants, seekers of all sorts of wish-fulfilment, those awaiting the grant of magical boons, pujaris, the errant traveller, the itinerant recluse, travel writers, bloggers, students, job-seekers and foreign tourists who wish to glimpse the heady and exotic orient.

Moreover, in many *ghats*, birth and death are witnessed together. Images of the *aarti* blur into images of the burning or half-burnt and fully charred corpses. The *aarti* and the cremation rites, like in Banaras, are both performed at either the same or adjacent *ghats*. The *ghat* thus becomes a heterotopic site celebrating the exuberance of life in the desiring, questing *atman* and aiding and achieving spiritual closure in the form of achieving ultimate peace/salvation after death. At the same time, the *ghat* is a waiting-room for the soul divested of its body and encodes a dis-embodied presence that is culturally designated in terms of horror and segregation. The *ghat* is thus characterised by a spatial supplementarity of difference and dissonance—a carnivalization of ideas and images that characterises, sustains and proliferates several spin offs of cultural anxiety and (dis)closure enabled by the *ghat*'s excess and difference.

This paper starts with a discussion of Raja Rao's short stories and Keki Daruwalla's poems that discuss the Ganga ghat's production of a highly heterogeneous and hybrid space. Following this, is a discussion of Mahasveta Devi's "Bayen" where the *ghat* in "Bayen" socio-spatially derives from the Ganga *ghat*. Thus, read as spatial narratives across a differential of time and place, these works show that the social production of space in the Ganga *ghat* extends to other *ghats* via the continuities and discontinuities offered by myth and legend. Together these become heterotopic sites that accommodate death and the fear around it in a utopia which is always already a dystopia because of the simultaneous presence of purity, spirituality, beginnings, endings, guilt and shame.

Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat*



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Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghatare* a set of short stories set on the banks of the Ganga in the city of Varanasi (Rao's 'Benares'). The current paper explores two stories from the collection, where Benares comes across as a heterotopic site that houses a carnival-community of man, beast and matter that perpetuates itself as a "differential space" that "accentuates differences" (Lefebvre 52). Borrowing from Henri Lefebvre's discussion about the production and reproduction of a particularly first-world, urban social space and the historicity of spaces, Benares and the Ganga *ghat* together become a geographic register that invokes a heightened sensitivity to the city's spatial relations with the Ganga, in terms of the differential critical and cultural narratives and practices that contribute to and generate conditions of their possibility. Lefebvre confirms that "each society (whether it is ancient or modern and whether it is Western or Asiatic) offers up its own peculiar space" (31). For Lefebvre, "(Social) space is a (social) product ... the space thus produced, also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power...." (26). Drawing on the Lefebvrian discussion of space as the dialectic interrelationship between the spatial "triad of the perceived, the conceived and the lived" and Foucault's principles of heterotopias, Benares, in my discussion of Rao's stories emerges as a highly spec(at)ialized geo-critical marker of paradoxical and hybrid traits.

For Lefebvre, 'spatial practice' emerges through an interaction between "subjects and their space and surroundings" (18). It "secretes that society's space, it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it" (38). 'Representation of space' refers to the way space is conceived of as a "dominant space" (39) that deals with the "history of ideologies" (116) where "scientists, planners (and other specialists) ... identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived" (38-9). Lastly, 'Representational space' is the "dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (39).

In "I", the writer is a visitor—a reverent Hindu—for whom, Benares as a conceived space is the ancient and sacred meeting point of Hindu myth, legend and ritual practice. However,



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as a representational space, Benares becomes a spatio-temporal site of dissonance for the errant traveller, the writer. The following paragraph clearly illustrates this:

‘Palanquin, Palanquin, leave the way, ho, for His Honour, the Palanquin’—this is how we should have been received at the Mughal Sarai station, but we’re met by self-selling, high-turban adjusting taxi drivers ... Even a cur in Benares is blessed ... and who can deny what these curs were, what ancient souls reborn for their ultimate salvation on the Ganga banks. (Rao 191)

The lived experience of Benares as a multi-scalar, multi-modal site of commercialization of the sacred (though various forms of haggling by the coolies who carry both the “ashes of the dead” and the “trousseau of the newlywed”) and the sacred-ization of the commercial (through the ‘clients’ who help establish an ancestral “pilgrim link between man and man” (194) and where the “unreal and the real are so co-adjuscent”—the red light area with the city’s more illustrious areas, for example) is sustained by Benares conceived as a sacred space. At the same time, as a representational space, it is a geocritical site of spatio-temporal dissonance that is both real and imagined. Moreover, a symbolic deployment of its objects and symbols, shows Benares as a heterotopic site, in its inter-relatedness with other sites, in its heterogeneity and in its crucial ability to mirror as well as invert our relationships with other sites.

For the visitor, Rao, the Ganga’s traditional representation of space is a mediated through a history of accretion of myth and ritual practice. Thus, the Ganga is characterised by flow—and together with its *ghat*—it conjoins beginnings and ends, births and deaths as well as God, man, animal and machine: “Only the Ganges flows, Mother Ganges carrying our memories away ... (of) dog-and-man-meetings, the bat and the travellers’ links, the coolie-and-the-pilgrim-contacts...” (195).

The first-hand and new experience of contraries—as they commingle and conflict—is epiphanic in its gritty realism. It is a life-in-death experience:

The flames seemed so alive, the only nightly action in this visible universe.
The string of lights seemed but reflections seen from the other side. Who were



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they, the one, two, or three, which had died, banker, virgin, retired police constable or Maharaja? ... The pyre makes death alive. He who has seen a body burn, knows he will never die. (Rao 197)

Here, Benares becomes the site that enables and sustains a heightened consciousness of the self by intensifying the contradictory and contributory interrelation of the self with what is not the self. It enables a gaze that allows the self to always already partake of what is beyond the self. Moreover, the sight of the pyre makes an infinite and inconceivable ‘death’ see-able in unforeseen and unforeseeable, yet in finite and conceivable terms.

For Lefebvre, each society has its own “spatial practice: It forged its own—appropriated space” (31) organized around “hierarchical social functions”. “II” is a bird fable that fades into human cultural representation of the Ganga in myth, legend and lore where delineations of caste pride and prejudice are performatively (re)built along the lines of social as well as bird-law that keeps intact a pervasive structure of untouchability.

Moreover, Benares is spatially conceived of as a highly stratified space that is politically organized: “the two provinces are so clearly drawn that the two types of vultures—the vultures of the left (peopled by the lowly and the low caste) and the vultures of the right (peopled by the high caste)—never invade each other’s domains” (Rao 206). Yet, it exists intrinsically as a carnival-community that discursively constitutes a heterotopic site, which juxtaposes, in one single space, several incompatible spaces and sites.

The “Bhim-Rupvati breed” of parrots are immortalized in myth with a “mighty mantra-intoning Siddha” that protects them while the myth itself, as a lucrative selling point, is appropriated and capitalized upon by bird-catchers. The *ghats* of Benares, as conceived space, are the bearers of both the ‘mythic’ bird and its catchers. As the legend goes, Prabhavati drowned in the Ganga and was hence immortalized in a platform around the neem tree “By Prabhavati’s stone”. Further, “Bhim was Prabhavati, and her companion ... was born as Rupvati ” and “Prabhavati ... is still in her own kingdom” (203). Arguably, the bird fable intensifies the spatial resonance of the Ganga *ghat* as a heterotopic site that can bring together heterogenous characters like the various birds, the suicidal Queen and her companion, ordinary people, Sadhus, Jains, ants, bird-catchers and more, all privy to—



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producing and reproducing—an inherited, preserved and continued legacy of a mythical and contemporary knowledge system—as well as incompatible spaces that include veritably the Ganga *ghat* itself, the neem tree on the *ghat* that houses the (descendents of) Bhim-Rupvati duo as well as Vikrampur, whose queen Prabhavati was. The *ghat* also acts as a heterotopia of deviance—the site for Queen Prabhavati’s suicide and one that makes rebirth possible for the defiled “London-returned parrot” who, in fact, has orchestrated his journey back to Benares where a “smell of the evil-touched amongst birds” (204) make the vultures fatally attack him. The *ghat* as a representational space becomes an enigma that draws attention to itself: “there are so many sounds in Benares that your ears cannot even smell of, leave alone see” (205).

In both “I” and “II”, the *ghat* enables subliminal and hybrid formations such as the reinforcement of contraries in terms of continuities and discontinuities within spatial practice. The discontinuities, that exist in the representational space, derive from the lessons learnt in the myth’s transgression as well as in epiphanic and enigmatic encounters. In fact, these discontinuities are co-terminous with and contribute to the continuities offered by Benares in terms of its spatial practice, which ‘secretes’ that society’s highly hybrid space and ‘propounds and presupposes it in a dialectical interaction’ between its heterogenous space and differential social relations. Thus, the discontinuities are always already part of the continuities in the spatial consciousness generated by mapping such subliminal formations within the lived space of the *ghat*.

Moreover, Benares emerges as a ‘discourse of multi-locality’ involving multiple and differential representations. The visitor’s rhetorical question “Was Benares a city or a Sanskritic statement? ” (198), in fact, confirms Benares as a heterotopic site where heterogeneity and multi-locality remain inseparable and enduring.

Keki Daruwalla’s *Crossing of Rivers*

This section discusses Keki Daruwalla’s “Boat-ride Along the Ganga” along with cross-references from other poems from “The Waterfront” section of *Crossing of Rivers*, with respect to the *ghat* as a heterotopic site.



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In “Boat-ride along the Ganga”, the poet describes a boat-ride along the *ghats* of the Ganga in Varanasi. The experience is extremely personal, deeply introspective and positively provocative and produces a spatio-temporal dissonance in the poet. As the poet moves along the Ganga, “the ghat-amphitheatre unfolds/like a nocturnal flower in a dream” (97). The Ganga and its *ghat* as conceived spaces keep him poised towards the *panda*’s “legend-talk” as the poet bows his “head to the finality of fate” at the sight of the pyres. Through traditional sanction, the Ganga is conceived of as “mother, daughter, bride” (98) and through the same sanction, the poet too has a certain conception of both personal and religious hygiene. To watch the Ganga and its *ghat* as a ‘lived space’, where the “sewer-mouth (is) trained like a cannon/on the river’s flank ...hygiene is a part of my conscience and I curse it. / and curse my upbringing...” is a death-in-life situation. It is a jarring experience, for the Ganga is meant to be venerated for its intrinsic purity that can purify (after)life.

Yet, as a representational space, the Ganga and its *ghat* are ‘directly lived through its associated images and symbols’ that are liminal, ambivalent and interrelated. These images and symbols are concomitantly traditional and personal, inherited and individual as well as real and unreal. The Ganga and its *ghat*, in fact, is an extremely unifying space—for it brings together all “pyres” and offers a glimpse of life-in-death. The corpse-fires initiate a heightened spatial consciousness as they come alive; they “shimmer, dance, levitate” and “death vibrates behind a veil of fire”(97); the encounter of death deeply personal. So, the “phantom-panorama” of seeing death-in-life and life-in-death “baffles” (98)the poet.

The *ghat* is a space ‘which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate’. The poet deals with the problem of referentiality by a strategic (re)structuring of space through and with a (re)positioning of the poetic gaze. The *ghat* becomes a universal waiting-lounge that deconstructs binaries between the dead and alive, men and women as well as the east and west. In “Death Vignette”, the poet inextricably links those who “mindless(ly)” (106) “walk with death/ on their copper shoulders” as “a part of the landscape on which they are walking” (105-6). Yet, they “wake up re-assured to find/ it is not their own death/they are carrying” (106). The pyres are not symbolic of the gloomy pall that deathbrings; they make for an extremely vibrant site sans any “lament(ation)s”(97). They are a ‘counter-site’ as they signify



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the celebratory reality of life's final confrontation along with the celebration of life in its quotidian lived space. Like all other cities, lived-space is built around gender codes in Varanasi's city life. But the *ghat*, as a counter-site, allows a (re)structuring of traditional gender codes—that are essentially binary—by dissolving the boundaries that make such binarisms even possible: “Women do not take off their sarees/as they enter the water;/ men leave their clothes behind./ The dead leave their bodies” (102). So, the *ghat* becomes a site where the consciousness of life and death, as simultaneously oppositional and interconnected, is intensified.

The contrast posed by the final question, “What plane of destiny have I arrived at/ where corpse-fires and cooking-fires/ burn side by side?” (98) in “Boat-ride Along the Ganga” is provocative. As a representational space, Benares offers a resistance to referentiality. Already as a visitor, Benares is incompatible with the poet's own world. Here, he “face(s) reality on a different plane” (97). It is also incompatible with the Benares of his imagination. Here, in the final stanza, the poet's postcolonial gaze provokes him to interrogate whether it is imaginatively even possible for the west and its ideologies to locate their Dantean gaze to make any representative/conceptual sense out of this location. The interconnections and contrasts between the lived, the conceived and representational spaces make the Ganga and its *ghat* a heterotopic site: a real site which is also a ‘counter-site’ and ‘where all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’.

Mahasveta Devi's “Bayen”

Mahasveta Devi's short story “Bayen”, read in terms of a strategic spatiality that embeds and enables the telling of such a tale, reveals a Lefebvrian ‘representational space’ that both produces as well as counters other-ing. Foucault's concept of heterotopology helps to envision and expand the spatial deployment of the figure of the *bayen* in terms of ‘otherness’ and liminality.

Death is a fearsome and dreadful space. The burden of anxiety around it is relegated to a particular caste, gender and social space. In “Bayen”, both Malindar and Chandi are attendants at the cremation ground. Though they belong to the community of ‘gangaputras’



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and ‘gangadasis’, gender is the crucial difference between them—the determinant of identities and subject positions. But it is, in fact, the heterotopology of the *ghat*, that not only organizes these differences, but also controls and determines their individual response to the *ghat* and its heterotopology. In Malindar’s words (to his son), “They were known as Gangaputras and Gangadasis, men and women who cremated the dead ones on the banks of the Ganga. Any river was the Ganga to them, in reverence to the great river Ganga” (Devi 5)

While Malindar and Kalu’s positions as Gangaputras are reassured within the semiotic of patriarchy and caste politics, their psychoanalytic response to their own work is integrated within the psychodynamics of their work praxis. Malindar’s male psychodynamics is a result of the space he occupies within the forces and relations of production in the *ghat* as a market-place. His government job, earned on the basis of his literacy as well as his caste-status, gives him both institutional validation and a special economic status within his own caste. So, he can and he will do his job with prestige without any physical hindrance, psycho-emotional conflict or emotional repression. His relation to the burning-bodies is strictly professional, and each serviceable task, like the bleaching of a single skeleton, brings him remuneration in corresponding measure. Each dead body’s burning, is a task accomplished with no psychodynamic carryover or transference reactions. The particular and contextual socio-spatial constructed-ness of gender and mothering, including the sexual division of labour, ensure Malindar’s insulation from potential trauma or panic anxiety.

Chandi, on the other hand, has taken on the job of her father after his death, only because her father had no sons. She is a Gangadasi and has to bury dead bodies of children below five years of age. Chandibayen is doubly marginalized in terms of caste and gender. A lovelier-than-thou wife, who is a symbol of people’s envy, is dependent on her husband and the marital-domestic space of the home and the hearth for validation as wife. In caste terms, she is the gangaputra’s daughter. She is a descendant of Kalu, the ancient Dom. In her case, caste, class and gender, overlap to produce a particularly vulnerable and monstrously deviant ‘Other’. She occupies the liminal space of a simultaneous utopia that is generated by her ouster from the *ghat* as a market-place (her ritualistically enacted ouster by her community has expunged the latter’s neat and ordered world of any anxiety related to the exceptionally



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tragic signification attached to her work) and dystopia (the exceptionally tragic and desultory ‘ghat’/bank of a pond where she has been re-located and which is outside the *ghat*’s market-place is a barren area, both literally and metaphorically). This is where her story becomes the feminist eco-psychological point of dissonance and disjuncture with the patriarchal-capitalist discourse of funeral and sacred rites, which are executed exclusively by the male within the highly gendered conceived space of the *ghat*.

Malindar, by virtue of his gender has managed to climb up the class ladder even within his caste confines. He represents this male-ness associated with the burning-*ghat*’s control and occupation. Like the legendary *Kalu-Dom* and his ancestors, Malindar’s work at the *ghat*, including the burning of pyres and bleaching of skeletons, is not just a vocation ordained by caste and ritual, but a gendered (male) legacy. His thundering declamations in the first-person pronoun regarding his own work at the graveyard, as well as his clinching declaration, that “Chandi is a bayen” and “O-ho-ooo! A bayen you are! Who was it in the grave when you were nursing with milk? O-ho ooo!” (11) are illocutionary acts executed within a gendered (male) lived space. It is only when Malindar forsakes his wife, and in the process declares her new identity, that she goes on to *become* a *bayen*. Both these instances are enactments of reassurance in his male-ness from the lived and conceived space of his home and the *ghat*. Malindar’s spatial occupation of his familial-social space is interrelated to and perpetuates his mastery over language, nature, gender and the market-place—which in this case is the *ghat*.

The *ghat* as a heterotopic site cyclically confirms the reinforcement of gender roles. Malindar’s role as the creator of his space—the neatly-ordered patriarchal confines of his home and the hearth—relegates Chandi to the margins. After her ouster from Malindar’s home, she is symbolically and materially re-located to an ‘empty’ site—a ‘heterotopia of deviance’.

The narrative lists the indictments around a *bayen*:

A Bayen is not an ordinary witch. She cannot be killed like an ordinary one, because to kill a Bayen means death for your children ... She has but to cast her eyes on a young man or boy and she sucks the blood out of him. So a Bayen has to live alone. When she walks, everyone —young and old—moves



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out of her sight... A Bayen should not eat too much... To talk to the Bayen meant certain death... A Bayen is crafty in her art, like any flower girl in the market. If she is keen on having some child, she walks close by her face in shadow, in spite of the fierce sun all around. In visible to mortals, she casts the shadow of her veil on the child as he walks... If you ill-treat a Bayen's son, your children will die. (1-4)

At the edge of the human, the figure of the *bayen* occupies the liminal position of one who has supernatural powers, that exceed the human *and* come not from an etherial, celestial, solemn space but from a dark, shadowy, subterranean space—a socially dead-space—that exists as a repository of the community's collective anxiety and fear around the inexplicably tragic contexts of infant deaths. This anxiety stems from and produces fear, guilt and shame which are then projected and displaced onto the figure of the *bayen*. This human embodiment of fear around the grave and the dealings with the dead infant bodies, causes Chandi to be projected as the infra-human with supernatural powers, since the human realm is epistemologically insufficient to house it. Tapping on the extreme vulnerability of the woman 'Other', her para-human and sub-human identity coalesce into a positive affirmation of her monstrosity—a dangerous distortion of the natural and the human.

In this scheme of othering, a sacred sacrifice of the supra/in human 'other' must not be acknowledged even as it is embedded within the tangible materiality of the encounter with the intangible para-human. This encounter is intangible, liminal and anxious, necessitating a monstrosity (of the other), that is not only justified but also constructively augmented by strategically ascribing a specific kind of spatially-enabled agentic potential to it. This agency, is not human, but exists in space—the liminal space between the inhuman and the parahuman. Members of the community who must ordain it, can only claim to partially know it imaginatively in myth and legend, for to know it fully, would mean to *be* it. Thus, they can only claim partial knowledge of its potential danger. This prompts all those in the mainstream to address the problem of how, why and where safeguards must be built around an empty dead-space—a 'counter-site' to the *ghat* but incompatibly linked with it.



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A victim of her community's witch-hunt, Chandi is blamed for Tukni's death, which is actually the result of improper treatment after a bout of smallpox. "What about the milk that spilled out of your breasts as you were piling earth on Tukni?". The maternal metaphor of breast-milk is appropriated and converted into a monstrous device. Levelled with the superstitious charge of Tukni's death, a girl she had loved dearly, Chandi, on the other hand, acts quickly and boldly. She quits her job. She looks to her husband for counsel but he disregards her feminine response as too soft and shuts her up each time. She is not voiceless. Her loud call of distress and anguish "I am not a *Bayen*! Oh, I am not a *Bayen*" (9) is distorted into the cry of evil. Driven to extreme vulnerability as her voice/act is neither heard nor deciphered as per her intention, she silently suffers from the psychic excess of neurosis and hysteria around her painful work of burying the infant dead bodies, the indictment and alienation by her community and the burden of her ancestors' rage at not continuing her legacy. She walks around with a sickle in her hand, in a terrain that imaginatively derives from the culturally-feared, marginal space of *aghor*i-practices; "The jackals had suddenly stopped their cries. Something in me said, there they are! Right at the holes, pawing for the bodies" (10). Thus, the ghat as a heterotopic space is re-constituted from its status as an economically (and culturally) positive market-space and a sacred resting-place for the dead to a jungle of the non/infra/para/supra-human, where the female-monster now dwells and from which, she needs to be exorcised in a ritual that guarantees itself as an unquestioned good.

Chandi, is thus a peculiar example of socio-cultural constructed-ness of mothering and/as othering organised around the spaces of her own body and the *ghat*. Her ouster from the 'masculine' *ghat* has cost her, her status as a mother-wife and as a Gangadasi. The narratively portrayed no-man's or no woman's land that she now occupies is a space imaginatively marked by absences. It is a "shed below the tree across the field where Chandibayen lived alone" (1).

The most telling image in the story is the performative role of shadows and reflections in the pond by which Chandi's current dwelling is located. The pond, unlike a river, has no movement or surface ripples; its waters are still. The Ganga, like *Bayen*'s "dead pond" is both within and beyond human bounds. The Ganga is sacred and desecrated at the same time. The



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‘pond’ and the *ghat* are desired as the redemptive sacrificial-sacred spaces that can contain and propitiate the fearsome and the dreaded. The deployment of funeral and sacred rites is enabled by the *ghat* as a special space sanctified as a specifically masculine space with a corresponding unease and anxiety associated with the female gaze.

As such, women are barred from funeral *ghats*. In popular imagination too, a woman’s appearance at a *ghat*, would be seen as aberrance, a chance occurrence or an active gaze that sees and reflects even as it is seen and reflected in the perceptions and attitudes framed by her chance occurrence in what is exclusively a masculine space. Like in an aarti performed at the *ghat*, the woman is not accorded the space for agency or subjectivity; she does not perform the funeral rites or the aarti.

When first mentioned as the only identifying tag of Chandi’s current dwelling, the pond is “dead” (1). It is the only current means of contact, the meeting point of the disjunctive family that has been rendered asunder by the triangulated and reciprocal mutuality of the politics of caste, gender and space that enjoins upon a particular time travel. This chance encounter with Chandibayen helps consolidate Malindar and Bhagirath’s own identities in terms of mirroring their other-ness from her.

For Foucault, “Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time [de’coupages du temps] which is to say that they open onto what might be termed, for the sake of symmetry, heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break [rupture absolute] with their traditional time” (“Of Other Spaces” 26). The heterotopology of the pond as a special ‘other’ space with complex configurations of heterotopia and heterochrony denote an ‘absolute break’, a ‘slice of time’, a ‘heterochrony’ where Bhagirath and Malindar can go across as an occasional occurrence and from where they can recover and re-situate themselves in their neatly ordered mainstream world as their fully human subjective selves.

The bayen stood on tiptoe by the pond. Bhagirath caught the reflection of the red-clad figure in the pond. A sun-bronzed face framed by wild matted hair. And eyes that silently devoured him. No, the bayen did not look at him



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directly either. She looked at his image as he saw hers, in the dark waters, shuddering violently.

Bhagirath closed his eyes and clung to his father.(Devi 1)

The pond creates the space for such an encounter, which is, essentially nightmarish and other-wordly. It evokes the spectral presence of an 'image', whose imaginative dissonance with the real and the mainstream renders it impossible to materially behold and touch.

The pond's structure enables the construction of a purified and consolidated male identity. As a representational space, it is both a regulatory and a restorative site. The pond's heterotopology organises the temporal dissonance with the 'other'. But, by being the crucial link between Bhagirath and his mother, it becomes the site of initiation for Chandidasi Gangadasi's revisionist story. It becomes the restorative site that prompts Malindar and Bhagirath to begin a re-articulation of Chandi's tale and her identity with empathy. The story ends with Bhagirath claiming the dead Chandi for a mother and a hero, whose act of saving others from the railway mishap is recognized by Bhagirath because it co-incides with the re-telling of Chandi's tale which has, in fact, been mediated and occasioned by the pond. Ultimately, in a proxy voice, Bhagirath makes a declaration of Chandi's truth, that inscribes and assigns both agency and subjectivity to the now dead Chandi. "My mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi... (Bhagirath broke into loud sobs)... my mother, the late Chandidasi Gangadasi, sir. Not a bayen. She was never a bayen, my mother" (14).

Thus, in the quest to analyse space and place through heterotopology, it is important to locate the politics of space and othering by finding out where, how and for whom the other emerges and maintains its status in terms of its own behaviour. According to Edward Said:

Whereas Derrida's theory of textuality brings criticism to bear upon a signifier freed from any obligation to a transcendental signified, Foucault's theories move criticism from a consideration of the signifier to a description of the signifier's place, a place rarely innocent, dimensionless, or without the affirmative authority of discursive discipline. (701)



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The heterotopology of the *ghat* in “Bayen” demystifies the ‘innocence’ and lack of disciplinarity around Chandidasi Gangadasi’s ouster and the ritualistic procedure of her violent ‘othering’ and shifts the focus on a spatial politics around the creation of such a sacred and subversive space as the *ghat*.

For Edward Soja, “Taking the socio-spatial dialectic seriously means that we recognize that the geographies in which we live can have negative as well as positive consequences on practically everything we do.” In “Bayen”, the geographical template of the *ghat* becomes the site of positive affirmation of identities of both Malindar and Chandi. While the *ghat* has positive consequences for Malindar, it has negative consequences for Chandi.

Conclusion:

For Edward Soja,

Critical spatial thinking today hinges around three principles:

- a) The ontological spatiality of being (we are all spatial as well as social and temporal beings)
- b) The social production of spatiality (space is socially produced and can therefore be socially changed).
- c) The socio-spatial dialectic (the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial) (Soja “The City and Spatial Justice” 2)

Through a spatially-oriented approach adopted in the above fictional works, three broad conclusions emerge:

1. The Ganga and its *ghat* emerge together as a heterotopic site: a real site which is also a ‘counter-site’ and ‘where all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’.
2. Read as spatial narratives across a differential of time and place, these works show that the social production of space in the Ganga *ghat* extends to other *ghats* via the continuities and discontinuities offered by myth, legend and social sanction. The



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discontinuities are co-terminous with and contribute to the continuities offered by Benares in terms of its spatial practice.

3. The *ghat* becomes a geographical register for the positive affirmation of identities. However, as a representational space, while it becomes a spatio-temporal site of dissonance for some, for others, it can have positive or negative consequences on everything they do.



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