Visualising Heterotopias in Urban Spaces in Select South Asian English Fiction

Shweta Sur[1]
Khairun Nessa Begum Women's College, India

Abstract

Ecological challenges and environmental crises are topics that are discussed not only by ecological activists; they have spilled over into global mainstream discourse. Critics such as Cheryll Glotfelty and Andrew Karvonen have discussed the interconnectedness of nature, culture, and the resultant narratives. Foucault's heterotopias, in simplest terms, are utopias which exist in the real world. Heterotopian spaces can be used as a theoretical tool to locate ecological spatial importance in South Asian fiction. Temsula Ao and Manjushree Thapa have established a meaningful link between heterotopian spaces and their relation to the greening of South Asian regions in *Laburnum for My Head* (2009) and *Seasons of Flight* (2010), respectively. Offering an insightful examination of urban ecological studies, this paper not only contributes to the effort to bridge the gap between literary texts and the environment but also discusses how heterotopian spaces exist in urban human settlements and their relation to the greening of geographical regions.

Keywords

Heterotopia, heterotopian spaces, urban human settlement, urban ecology, ecocriticism, environmental crisis, South Asian fiction

Introduction

Green areas and biodiversity spots are undoubtedly a retreat in today's world. Hence, they can be posited as being parallel to Foucauldian heterotopias which are usually defined as real-world utopias. The concept of 'heterotopia' was coined by Michel Foucault and appeared in his 1996 preface to *Les Mots et Les Choses*, later translated into English as *The Order of Things* (1970). With the advent of the environmental crisis and climate change, the gloom of heading towards, of turning into, a doomed planet has been on a continuous rise. Literary theories related to ecological restoration and environmental awareness have emerged.

[1] **Shweta Sur** is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Khairun Nessa Begum Women's College, Assam, India. She earned a master's degree in English from Tezpur University and an M.Phil. in English from Bodoland University. Her research interests include Indian Writings in English, Transnational Migration Studies, and Cultural Studies. Apart from teaching, she takes interest in writing poetry. Many of her poems have been published in journals and anthologies. Email: shwetasur2020@gmail.com

Cheryll Glotfelty states that ecocritical studies have taken up the interconnectedness of nature and culture as the prominent subject matter because they are in constant contact (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii).

Andrew Karvonen is of the opinion that anthropocentrism has forced mass culture to react against this development by producing narratives depicting either ecological progress or scenes of apocalyptic proportions (2). There is a need to understand the intensity of this ecological imbalance and its hazardous effects. In the future, perhaps the botanical gardens, biodiversity parks, and green spaces shall be the alternative names for utopias. As utopias are nowhere to be realised in the real world, Michel Foucault has re-introduced into academia the existence of heterotopias, or real-world utopias in his "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." In contrast to urban areas, Foucault discusses the existence of "crisis heterotopias" given that "there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc" (4) in primitive societies which are now on the verge of disappearing. As the focus of this discussion is to configure heterotopias in urban spaces, this paper attempts to establish a link between Foucault's concept of heterotopias and urban ecocriticism.

Discourse on English Romanticism instils in people images of pastoral landscapes, green regions, and the praise of nature. But the discourse becomes completely negative where urban spaces are considered. Recent literary texts from South Asia have marked a gradual shift from a focus on portraying idyllic rural spaces to urban spaces. Portrayals of cities and urban spaces in literature and other cultural works have received mixed reactions. City spaces and urban settlements are celebrated for rapid industrialisation and economic growth; however, they are also condemned vehemently for neglecting to maintain ecological balance and ignoring pressing environmental issues. Despite the city being the epicentre for environmental degradation, amidst the concrete jungles and urban spaces, there are also ecological spots which may serve as heterotopian spaces.

In *Heterotopia: Anamnesis of a Medical Term*, Heidi Sohn claims that "[e]tymologically, heterotopia denotes the contraction of 'hetero' (another, different) and 'topos' (place)" (41) and further affirms that although he had "never explicitly referred to this, Michel Foucault borrowed the term heterotopia from the medical and biological contexts and inserted it into his own discourse" (41). Cordeiro and de Mello have discussed the concept of 'heterotopia' from an architectural perspective, but they have also argued that "Scholars from various fields – arts, literature, cinema, sociology, geography" (2), apart from architecture and urban studies, have "responded to Foucault's text with different perspectives" (2).

The advent of industrialisation can be seen as the inception of global ecological destruction. Ramchandra Guha in his *Preface to Environmentalism: A Global History* talks on behalf of the environment where he argues that postcolonial countries are also equally responsible for ecological destruction as they had joined the race for "catching up with the economically advanced nations" (xiii). In contrast to the gradual degradation witnessed today, Guha describes "the decades of the 1950s and the 1960s as the Age of Ecological Innocence" (xii). Mentioning India, Guha assures that "we are now in the middle of what might be called an "Age of Ecological Arrogance" (xvi).

Literatures from different regions have recently started to respond to the pressing issues of ecological imbalance and climatic change. Responding to Amitav Ghosh's question, "Are the currents of global warming too wild to be navigated in the accustomed barques of narration?" (Ghosh 10), writers have gradually shifted their focus to either dystopian or utopian aspects of the climate change and environmental crisis. The proposition is that referring to Focauldian heterotopias in ecocritical studies may serve as a way to promote the greening of the physical spaces, preserve the environment, and restore green spaces. A green recovery which must not be only restricted to the South Asian region because it has to be a global phenomenon.

Literary texts from the South Asian region reflect the writers' concerns about climate change and its effects on human lives as well as on other living bodies. By considering the convergence between ecocriticism and Foucauldian heterotopias, this paper attempts to examine the representation of eco-environmental and ecological consciousness in South Asian Anglophone literature. Foucauldian heterotopian spaces, when seen through an ecological lens, allows readers to understand more deeply the hazards of environmental degradation and motivates them to restore the ecological spaces, which shall prove to be real-life utopias, later.

Hailing from Nagaland, Temsula Ao (1945-2022) is an Indian poet, scholar, novelist, and ethnographer. Born in Jorhat, Assam, she had worked as an ethnographer on the oral tradition of her own community, studying and recording their myths, folktales, rituals, traditions, and belief systems. GJV Prasad in his introduction to his *Book of Songs*, mentions that Ao "searches for the past that has disappeared into the mists of time, for it is in the very unrealisability of that history that her people's troubled present arises" (Prasad xiv). A Fulbright Fellow at the University of Minnesota from 1985 to 86, Ao had received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, India's National Academy of Literature in 2013 for her short story collection, *Laburnum for My Head* (2009). She had received the honorary Padma Shri Award in 2007. She was also the recipient of the Governor's Gold Medal in 2009 from the government of Meghalaya. Temsula Ao has written five collections of poetry, two books of short stories, a book of

literary criticism titled *Henry James and the Quest for the Ideal Heroine* (1989)*,* and a book on her own culture called *The Ao-Naga Oral Tradition* (2000).

A highly acclaimed writer, Manjushree Thapa (1968-) was born in Kathmandu, Nepal. Thapa's first text, *Mustang Bhot in Fragments* (1992) is a travelogue and her novel, *The Tutor of History* (2012) is considered to be the first major fictional work in English to emerge from Nepal. She regularly writes for the print media in Nepal (*The Nepali Times*) and also translates Nepali literature into English. Manjushree Thapa's most acclaimed text, *Seasons of Flight* (2010), is an immigrant's tale, where the protagonist, Prema, leaves her war-torn homeland Nepal because of the adverse conditions.

South Asia is home to eight nation states which are confronting rising temperatures, increasing sea levels, and challenges associated with complex river systems. The region has been hit hardest by environmental degradation and climate change and is vulnerable because of the many environmental issues and natural disasters which are tied closely to the region's geography. Emerging writers from the South Asian region such as Temsula Ao and Manjushree Thapa do not shy away from discussing climate change and the environmental crisis. By catering their works to the global and urban reading public, these writers contribute to existing discourse on the climate crisis and are readily promoting the greening of South Asian regions in their works.

Visualising heterotopia through an ecological lens

To understand heterotopias, it is important to relate and compare it to the concept of utopia. According to Michel Foucault, "Utopias are sites with no real place" (3), whereas heterotopias are "the real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (3). According to Malcolm Miles, "Utopia is thus incomplete, an always unfinished project" (1). Focusing on the architectural level, Miles cites the presence of "thousands of alternative settlements today where people from diverse backgrounds have built a new society – in intentional communities, ecovillages, permaculture settlements, urban communes, rural religious and secular retreats, co-housing projects and activist squats" (1) and defines these as real-life utopias, or heterotopian spaces. In the chapter "New Cities," Miles compares Barcelona and England in terms of urbanisation and prefers England over Barcelona because here "urbanisation tends to mean extension of the city in the green belt, reflecting a town-and-country duality that is anti-urban and has its roots in a negative reaction to industrialisation on the part of late nineteenth-century elites, for whom the countryside is a residual Eden" (62).

Heidi Sohn believes that Foucault "posited the term heterotopia as opposition to utopia, as a sort of acronym, and as a different plateau or table of

thought and classification" (43). Understood as the theoretical counterpart to utopia, the concept of heterotopia is a part of Foucault's spatial discourse; a strategy to understand and investigate urban public spaces. Be it utopia or heterotopia, both are necessarily abstract concepts in spite of their indirect connection to the physical world.

In *Heterotopia and the City*, Michiel Dehaene and Lieven de Cauter find that the term heterotopia had entered "architectural and urban theory in the late 1960s – more as a rumour than as a codified concept" (4) but it "has been a source of inspiration in urban and architectural theory, but also one of confusion" (4) because according to them Foucault's concept of heterotopia lacks "definition and is perhaps too encompassing" (4). Similarly, Osman et al, also do not ascribe Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a full-fledged theory. According to them, Foucault's heterotopias cannot be justified as "a theoretically anchored concept with predetermined areas of analysis" (933) but instead they can only be regarded as "an intellectual framework that 'only' suggests a possible way of looking at place and space; its aim is rather a description of the next development stage of society, a search for the meaning of what comes after modernism" (933). Cordeiro and de Mello argue that Foucault used the term 'heterotopia' "to portray various institutions and places that interrupt the apparent continuity and normality of ordinary everyday space" (3). Cordeiro and de Mello further contend that Foucault calls these places heterotopias, or 'other spaces', because they are counter-sites which "inject alterity into the sameness, the common place, the topicality of everyday society" (3). Commenting on the working model for heterotopia, James D. Faubion in 'Heterotopia: An Ecology' claims that, heterotopias thus have no single logical or affective register or effect, but appear instead to oscillate between, or to combine, countervailing imagistic and rhetorical currents (32).

The interdisciplinary nature of heterotopias has perhaps allowed it to 'oscillate' (Faubion 34) between its own field and the field of ecocriticism promoting the idea of the availability of real-life utopias in the form of ecological sites. Applying the metaphor of heterotopias, the visualisation of urban human settlements through the ecological lens may prove to be a methodological point of a return to nature. Dismissing the fictional aspects and adding a scientific accountability to the heterotopian concept, Faubion opines that, "Heterotopias are not figments of our imagination. Nor is their constitution, unlike that of a triangle or a cube, purely formal or ideal. Heterotopias are concrete technologies" (33).

Human practices have been exploiting nature and the loss of biodiversity, and the resulting ecological imbalance has been an issue of utmost concern among the intelligentsia worldwide. Glotfelty and Fromm describe ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) and the upsurge of ecocritical studies was seen in the mid-eighties where

the "scholars began to undertake collaborative projects, the field of environmental literary studies was planted, and in the early nineties it grew" (xvii). Furthermore, in 1992, "the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, a new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed, with Scott Slovic elected first president" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii) and by 1993, "ecological literary study had emerged as a recognizable critical school" (Glotfelty and Fromm xviii). Scholars from the Humanities are actively trying to find ways to respond to the environmental crisis through their respective disciplines because they believe "that the environmental crisis has been exacerbated by our fragmented, compartmentalized, and overly specialized way of knowing the world, humanities scholars are increasingly making an effort to educate themselves in the sciences and to adopt interdisciplinary approaches" (Glotfelty and Fromm xxii). Highlighting the working model used by ecocritics, Laurence Buell notes that the basic difference between early ecocritics and the present ones is that "ecocritical dissenters sought to reconnect the work of (environmental) writing and criticism with environmental experience – meaning in particular the natural world" (6).

Europe had introduced literary utopias to the world in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Tommaso Campanel's *The City of the Sun* (1602) and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1626) where these writers had introduced "their narratives in distant geographical sites" (Miles 7) but Foucauldian heterotopias point to the existence of utopias in the real world, especially in urban spaces when seen through an ecological lens. Ozlem Akyol argues that "firstly, natural spaces can be identified with the idea of heterotopia on the ground that they are far from governmental policies, human population, and social codes" (29). Human habitat is gradually shifting from rural to urban spaces and this changing pattern is also marked in literature and other mediums of expression. Urban narratives have been focusing on the growth of cities and semi-urban areas, hinting at the migration of people from villages to these places. Shweta Sur in her dissertation finds that the recent upsurge in the study of city narratives and literature of urban spaces is probably due to increasing urbanisation in India. Sur argues that "the focus is shifted to the cities and the urban areas which may hint at the amalgamation of the crowd in the urban areas, migration of people to the cities, semi-cities and township areas from the villages" (4). Ozlem Akyol further finds that "heterotopias frequently appear in literary narratives with their implicit political connotations (29) but "the identification of heterotopias with ecological studies is quite rare" (29). Urban planners have often been rebuked by environmentalists for not having ecological sensitivity and thus, the purpose of introducing heterotopias in an urban settlement from an ecological perspective is to realise the restoring process of green spaces.

Locating heterotopia in fiction
Foucault's first principle allows us to identify heterotopias in any part of this world because Foucault states "that there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. That is a constant of every human group" (4). Focusing on two locations, this paper discusses heterotopian spaces in urban settlements in two texts, *Laburnum for my Head* and *Seasons of Flight*, respectively. Cemeteries are an indispensable part of urban spaces. Foucault specifically mentions the dynamics of the cemetery within his second principle on heterotopias, where he says:

> As an example I shall take the strange heterotopia of the cemetery. The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery. (5)

The cemetery is focal point of Ao's *Laburnum for My Head*. Foucault feels that cemeteries should enjoy a separate space as they exist in the isolated location of cities and "came to constitute, no longer the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place" (6). At the very outset of the story, readers are introduced to scenes of lush laburnum at the isolated cemetery of an unnamed town,

> Every May, something extraordinary happens in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town. Standing beyond the southernmost corner of the vast expanse of the old cemetery-dotted with concrete vanities, both ornate and simple---the humble Indian laburnum bush erupts in glory. (Ao 1)

In works of romance and the Gothic, cemetery sites are associated with eerie episodes. However, *Laburnum for My Head* curtails the horror elements of the cemetery. The writer instead is more interested in highlighting the aesthetic side of nature to prove the existence of heterotopias in an urban settlement. In the story, Ao associates the cemetery, which is actually a "dark resting place" (Foucault 6), with human beings in an ecological equation to formulate it as a heterotopian space. In contrast to the greyish cemeteries in the urban space of human settlements, the protagonist, Lentina, adds a green hue to her final death bed as she desires to die with a laburnum tree as a headstone at her gravesite:

> But lying in bed, Lentina was wide awake and planning her next move: she wanted to plant a laburnum tree on her gravesite while she was still alive to ensure that all this trouble of securing the plot and keeping everything quiet had the desired results. (Ao 6-7)

Lentina does not "wish to be buried among the ridiculous stone monuments of the big cemetery" (Ao 9) and she longs for "a place where there will be nothing but beautiful trees over my [her] grave" (Ao 9). Almost like a treasure for her, the cemetery of Lentina's town area is a real-world utopia where she could find peace and restfulness. Whenever Lentina visits her proposed resting place, she feels, "as

if she had found what she was looking for" (Ao 6). Her intended gravesite is probably the place where she could end all ties with the materialistic world in order to become one with nature.

In this era of environmental crisis, Lentina seems to understand the importance of ecological restoration and her wish to have laburnum trees planted at her gravesite, for them to bloom gloriously each year over her resting place, is probably her way of responding to the climate crisis. Although she hails from a well-off family, Lentina is unmoved by materialistic comforts and

> she would take him [her driver] for a drive the next day to the cemetery and would explain to him for what she wanted for a headstone when she died, and why. But there would be one condition: she had to see the tree bloom during her lifetime. (Ao 5)

After the death of Lentina's husband, she distances herself socially from people except her trustworthy driver, to whom she is closely connected. After many difficulties, Lentina manages to buy a plot of land at an isolated part of the cemetery from the town committee. However, while living, Lentina does not have the fortune to witness the sight of the blooming laburnum and thus,

> Lentina discontinued her visits to the cemetery because she was beginning to feel a fatigue that comes after a sustained effort and achieving a long-cherished dream. How that plot of land came into her possession was still a mystery to her when all she had craved for was a spot to be buried where a laburnum tree would bloom every May. (Ao 14)

It was not until after Lentina's death that her wish is granted "And every May, this extraordinary wish is fulfilled when the laburnum tree, planted on her gravesite in the new cemetery of the sleepy little town, bursts forth in all its glory of buttery-yellow splendour" (Ao 20).

Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* identifies reserve forests, butterfly reserves, and wetlands as heterotopian spaces. Foucault did not state 'wetlands' as heterotopian spaces explicitly but quite interestingly *Seasons of Flight* invites readers to see wetlands as a type of heterotopian space from an ecological lens. In his third principle, Foucault cites the garden as a heterotopian space, arguing that, "[t]he traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world" (6). Contrary to the garden, wetlands generally are not regulated by any boundaries as they sprawl into vast expanses of marshy lands and swamp areas that are covered with shallow water either temporarily or perennially.

Prema, one of the novel's protagonists, works for an organisation dedicated to the conservation of forests in Nepal and after she migrates to America from Nepal, she explores America. What catches her attention the most is the wetlands in America, and "[d]uring a lull in their conversation, Prema asks

Sam: 'Where is the wetland?' He waved a beer-filled cup inland" (Thapa 85). Prema informs her boyfriend Luis about it and tells him, the next time they meet at Meadowvale, 'There is a wetland near the international airport…. Let us go there sometime" (Thapa 86). When they reach there, Prema notices that "[t]he wetlands turned out to be a small expanse of cattails and rushes and – where it was dry – coastal scrub, hemmed in by roads and houses" and "[t]he wetlands lay beyond a wooden fence, and a signboard prohibiting entry" (Thapa 86, 87). Not interested in being a part of the urban life of America, Luis and Prema take up bird-watching, and they spend hours on bird 'Stalking',

> Luis sighted a great blue heron: tall, with a black-and-silver crown, white plumes spiking out of the chest, and wings of shimmering grey. It was standing at the edge of the pool hunting for fish. So elegant a bird. Prema searched for the term: 'Stalking'. (Thapa 87)

The novel suggests that reserve forests like Bazaar Hill in Nepal are no less heterotopias than places Foucault mentions such as libraries, museums, cemeteries, Scandinavian saunas, brothels, and colonies. Back in Nepal, Prema understands that it is because of the existence of the small patch of forest or the "buffer zone" (Thapa 41) nearby a human settlement, the bazaar-dwellers were able to "gather fixed quota of firewood and fodder" (Thapa 41). Being a forest conservator, Prema frequently walks uphill, to find "dragonflies buzzed past and gnats danced in the sun lights. The vegetation alters as the air thins. Broadleaf tress gives way to junipers and larches and silver fits" (Thapa 41). The "fluttering in a nearby branch and a snap of twigs, a scuttling in the underbrush" had brought complete "serenity" for people like Prema (Thapa 41).

As suggested by Yael Allweil and Rachel Kallus, heterotopias within human settlements can also be viewed as "public-space heterotopias" not only because of their "distinctly heterotopian character" (Allweil and Kallus 193) but also of their existence as "fully visible territories… within the urban fabric of public spaces" (Allweil and Kallus 193). Unlike heterotopian spaces within different contexts, heterotopias in urban spaces "reside within the domain of the open-to-all public space and hold no permanent physical borders" (Allweil and Kallus 193). Besides, people who live in a concrete world are seen attempting to restore the ecological spaces like gardens and public parks, so that they may remain closely connected to nature even in a globalised age. In the paper, two urban heterotopias from two different locations are examined, namely the cemetery and the wetlands. Though wetlands are not usually found exactly in the middle of an urban settlement, in *Seasons of Flight* readers are informed about wetlands almost near settlements and their existence are celebrated by people like Prema. Moreover "because they operate within the fabric of the city, these public-space heterotopias allow for the diffusion of people, activities and ideas, and possess the ability to affect hegemony" (Allweil and Kallus 193).

Conclusion

The environmental crisis has been a matter of concern among activists globally. The environmental warnings have been taken seriously not only by environmental activists but by every concerned citizen, including literary scholars and writers. Attempts to respond to the environmental crisis include binary visions – dystopian and utopian – and positing ecological spots of urban human settlements as Foucauldian heterotopias inclines towards a utopian understanding. Critics like Robert Osman, Daniel Seidenglanz, and Ondrej Mulicek find that a major setback in Foucault's concept of heterotopias is the fact that "there is not much material for a deeper understanding of Foucault's concept of heterotopias" (933) and therefore "the result is frequent criticism of the concept or multiple and variously conceived discussions, interpretations and explanations of the concept" (933).

With increasing globalisation and urbanisation, the number of green spaces has reduced significantly. The exploration of Foucauldian heterotopias in urban spaces of human settlements from an ecological point of view is an extension of ecocritical studies. Thus, the paper points to the relationship between ecology and the concept of heterotopian spaces that may be identified in human settlements. The literary texts allow readers to read between the lines and to configure the metaphorical representations. Temsula Ao's *Laburnum for My Head* and Manjushree Thapa's *Seasons of Flight* show appreciation of the gradual process of the greening of South Asian regions. Visualising ecological spots in urban human settlements as Foucauldian heterotopias may perhaps be one of the many ways people can celebrate, restore, and even return to nature. Heterotopias in urban human settlements have a social as well as utopian function, ascribing multiple meanings to a particular space. Foucault's consideration of cultural and natural spots for heterotopian existence suggests that heterotopias do not necessarily exist amidst nature only. The inclusion of urban spaces as Foucauldian heterotopias adds a new dimension to ecocriticism and is an area that can be researched further. Part of the urban ecosystem, heterotopias that have been discussed above, have the potential to exhibit utopian characteristics which, in the real world, are hard to find.

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