



This Is Us: Spatial Effects in Gendered Norms through a Study of 'Cell One' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Dwitiya Sarkar

Research Scholar, Department of Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Design and Manufacturing, Jabalpur

The author is a research scholar pursuing her PhD from IIITDM, Jabalpur. She had done her graduation and postgraduation from Gour Banga University. She has also published papers in journals and has contributed a chapter in a literary book. She also presented a paper at an International Conference. She is currently working on Trauma and Memory Studies.

Abstract

In the last few years, literature and literary studies have been the beholder of many notions of space, place, and the way it has precept human life, society, culture, and since the cultural policy is implemented and designed in every part of social constructions, it is pretty fair to opine that not only gender but knowledge production as well as power morphology are also dictated by perception of space and place. And if gender is indeed space and place fabricated, how are these spaces constructed and later consisted? Owing to Henri Lefebvre's theory of space as a 'social product', that every one of us, in the context of our identity, location, and perception by society occupy spaces differently and Michel Foucault's 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias' where he brings up his theory of Heterotopia which focal point is to show the juxtaposition and combination of many places in one site. This study will discuss the interrelation between gender, place, race, and space as mediative of cultural strife and this present paper will take the short story 'Cell One' by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to analyse how different spaces like domestic, social, political, race, marginal, patriarchal can play a severe role in structuring a gender identity; thus, proving the point of gender being a social (re)-production.

Keywords

space, race, heterotopia, patriarchy, transformation

Introduction

In the last few years, a paradigm shift has occurred in the conventional meaning of space which is often known as ‘human geography’ or ‘geo-criticism’. For a growing number of researchers coming from different backgrounds of creativity, geo-criticism is a theoretical approach worthy of interest. Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) being the pioneer of Marxist spatial theory notes in his path breaking book “The Production of Space” uttered that the word ‘space’ is of geometrical meaning. One may wonder there is nothing new in that statement but he pointed out the structure of space as a ‘social product’. To speak words “the idea that it evoked was simply that of an empty area ... To speak of social space, therefore, would have sounded strange” (1). So, what he meant through his statement that space being social product effects all the spatial practices and perceptions surrounding it which include gender as well as power productions.

The other influential being preaching the notions of space along with its place spatiality and site is none but the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984). In his of other spaces, he brings up his notion of heterotopia to elaborate on certain institutional, cultural and discursive spaces that are somehow other: “it is a world within world mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside”. It is disturbing incompatible, contradictory, transforming. He remarks that “we do not live in homogenous and empty space ... The space in which we live, which draws out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, our history occurs that space that claws, and gnaws at us, is also in itself heterogeneous” (3).

This paper will certainly discuss through these two theories how in the short story by ‘Cell One’ Adichie presents a woman coming from a Nigerian background fighting through different spaces of society to shape her life by owning her destiny. The diversity of space only makes her stronger to negotiate a new place for her own identity.

Social Space and Heterotopia

Out of many books produced by Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Place* was the pioneering one. Here he explores the idea of ‘Differential space’ that ‘accentuates differences’ that is in absolute contrast with the homogeneity of the abstract space. According to the Marxist theorists in a social context, space is very much influenced by capitalism; that is what we call hegemony. Lefebvre notes, “(social) space is a (social) product ... The space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action; that in the addition to being a mean of con control and hence a domination of power ...” (26). His focal point is that “processes of production; the embrace the multiplicity of places that are socially produced and made productive in social practices and ... contradictory, conflictual, and ultimately the political character of the processes of production of space” (Stanek). The interrelation in social space with production and reproduction has been well developed in his theory and how each society has its own space with which they made themselves comfortable is also very much clear through his theory. His definition of social space is based on the idea that space relation in society works in two ways in the form of hierarchical social functions which can be witnessed both in the power of the working class or in the unity of the family. We will further explore his idea of spatial

hegemony through his concepts of spatial practice with its keen relation to the representation of space and representational space in this short story.

The subjects and the surroundings play a big part in conceptualizing spatial practice. According to Lefebvre in spatial practice how certain space is being used and constituted in specific times of spatial practice. It carries close relation between everyday realities whether is urban or routine reality “the places set aside for work private life or leisure” (38). Hence special space in contrast is in a bond with members of any society to that space which “implies a guaranteed level of competence and a specific level of performance”.

Representation of space according to Lefebvre “scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers ... all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived. . . . This is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (38-39, italics mine). This scientific representation of space relates to ideologies since it can be changed or redesigned with the change of time and mind.

The last concepts deal with “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols”. This is where artists, writers, and philosophers are flourished. They live it they sense it they experienced it through their creativity. According to Lefebvre “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 this space, we are given the freedom to perceive any space as we like it, whether it’s physical mental or actually lived social space. Going to the extent of various special spaces Henri Lefebvre also explores the pace of dominants space which means “space transformed and mediated by technology or by practice”. This space is highly influenced by political power, i.e. “Military architecture, fortifications, and ramparts, dams and irrigation systems” as well as “motorway[s] which brutalize the countryside and the land, slicing through space like a great knife” and this has been evidenced throughout history and with the progression of history. In the 21st century with of absence Henri and with the advancement of technology it is pretty obvious that every space is dominated. Gadgets have created a new “it” dominated space. It has met the need of people and has well as been appropriated and at the same time satisfied Lefebvre’s theory of the dominated and appropriated being mutually combined. But the history, which has witnessed the history of accumulation, has also been witnessing the notion of separation and mutual antagonism as technology has taken over the world.

Through his various notions of analysing space Lefebvre’s focus was to acquire and attempt to know a more detailed concrete knowledge of space that will help us understand better the power structure that alters through space. Victor Hugo says that “any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about” (15).

The foundational speaker of many theories Michel Foucault has also given profound thought to the concepts of space, which might be not as detailed as Henri’s but in its limited ideas he has given out common themes in regards to the concepts of Lefebvre’s. In his *Of Other Spaces*, he too unveils the notions of space, knowledge hegemony which goes back to experience from the Middle Ages until our modern times. He creates the theory of heterotopia relating to external and internal space and the notion

of utopia. Michel Foucault's assertion of the present age is that of it being juxtaposed. Now, what does it mean? He remarks our present age "will perhaps be above all the epoch of space" (1), the only reason for the anxiety of the modern age remains in the simultaneity juxtaposed position of the space, not time. But according to him, we have not yet reached in our limited human mind and notion to break the internal space hinting towards a point maybe there is still some hope that has left in modern times as they are controlled by certain oppositions. They "remain inviolable" and beyond our human courage both metaphorically and literary.

When it came to external space, he defined it to be a cluster of relations that we are yet to learn. Their existence among sites and their relations through networking are what we need to comprehend and understand. But his main focus lies in two types of space, i.e. utopia and heterotopia. Now we all know what utopia is? The unreal imaginary spaces present society in a perfect way. And the opposite of a utopia is a dystopia where everything is unbearable but what exactly is heterotopia? Foucault describes it as "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites; are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (3). Topinka said regarding heterotopia that it is a space that gives us "an alternate space of ordering" such space remains connected and at the same time separated from the central space. Amidst the many ways of resisting the hegemony and challenging the accepted and existed notion Foucault introduces this notion of hetero-topology which would according to him help us gain an extensive systematic knowledge of different spaces of society.

He here gives six principles regarding heterotopias. The first one is found in every culture but is deduced in different forms (4). Then again he assigned this to two classifications; those are crisis heterotopia "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals ... in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc." (4). These kind of crisis mostly found in primitive society according to Foucault in contrast to our society where he says "[I]n our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing", though a few remnants can still be found and they are replaced by what he describes as "heterotopia of deviations" (4, 5). The second principle is pretty much what Lefebvre had preached in representational space that with the progression of time, society can change some functions of its existing heterotopia. Here he gives the shifting of the graveyard from church to suburbs thus "the sacred and immortal heart of the city, but the other city, where each family possesses its dark resting place" (6).

In the third principle, he defines the concepts of the interrelation of space and juxtaposition where the amalgamation of many places takes place. It brings together several places and sites. The perfect example he gives is of theatre where the real and unreal come together mirroring the disturbing outside which could extend to today's movies and films. In the fifth principle, he gives the classifications of another two heterotopic principles, one is accumulating time and the other is fleeting time. Accumulating time as in where several ages mingle with each other; perfect example for that library and museum then with village festival and fairs we have time fleeing with no awareness of time in unconscious. Naming it heterochronic he is ascertaining that we have "a sort of absolute break with . . . [our] traditional time" (6).

The fifth principle suggests that heterotopic deduce must have an opening and closing. This will make them alienated and receptive to other sites while people will have a hard time getting hold of this site. Only with a compulsory entry or through performing certain rituals or rites we can access such a heterotopic site “partly religious and partly hygienic” (7). The relation that this site has with other remaining heterotopias decides its power. Thus, to fulfil the last traits of its functions it creates a space of illusion like a brothel or something of compensation satisfying every criterion that is fastidious and contentious which is beyond our ill-constructed age.

Thus, from the above discussion of two theorists and their theories we can say that they are both preaching the idea that space is not something beyond our idea and abstract illusion or void rather it is a product, not a process, it is fixed, it is of homogeneity and construction of age shaped by different thoughts and relations. And as they are criticizing this idea of space being fixed not flexible then we can say that are opting for a postcolonial approach to space. Coming from a first-world background they have broken the notion of space and place that plant a particular seed of homogeneous thought which sometimes become impossible to break apart. I will discuss in this paper how space confines in itself multiplicity of such as race, place, patriarchal, social and outside and how society plays an important role in producing and implementing them and also these spaces are in complemented and intimated relation with heterotopias, and to extend how these theories will help us break down and (re)-create the space which makes our society thus us.

Discussion

‘Cell One’ is the first short story of the collection *The Thing around Your Neck*. One of the major characters is Nnamabia. Here we see the transformation of a spoiled son (Nnamabia) of a University professor. With his development from an irresponsible person to a mature young is even up for sacrifice against the unjust treatment of an old man. His transformation begins with his supposed arrest and by witnessing the corrupt nature and brutality of the Nigerian policeman. Set around two major settings one is the “slower insular campus” in the “slower more insular town” commonly known as the Nasukka campus. The second one is most of the time-based in prison. An unnamed narrator, i.e. the younger sister, of the young man, the protagonist, narrates this short story.

The first place itself has exemplified Lefebvre’s notion of space being a social product. It embraces the multiplicity of spaces that succours too of action and thought where power is practiced as means of domination and control. The not only house of the protagonist but the house of other professors and the university, as well as the colleague, serve as a perfect specimen of space as “power-knowledge” (26). Also, the pub which is supposed to be a place of entertainment also serves as a space as a power product. Such a place can easily be conceived if we visualize it. These are the places that Lefebvre points out as abstract ones which symbolize something which is beyond a certain common being. It is fixed by some class thus some sort of homogeneity, only certain people belonging to a certain class can occupy it (inhabitants, students coming from the upper class, and workers). These places only symbolize the arrogance, pride self-deceptive values of these male professors who are so into their world. Their thoughts are only

reflective of the societal values of that space and place. This self-centred attitude gets more extended and emphasized when they ignore the crimes committed by their son, despite having full awareness of the thefts and taking action against them they argue about the “riffraff from town coming onto their sacred campus to seal” (5), turning blind eye to the real problem. This very attitude is reflective of the state that they think is superior to inferior common people. They are perceiving their space as a privileged and consecrated one created by none but society and societal status.

It is very well portrayed that the entire police super is in their pocket and they have marked their specific codes of values and attitudes which have made them easier to prompt and manipulated the legal system, hence saving their guilty children. Their social power and connection have made them “manage” the police superintendent. Thus, this very incident serves as a dominated space connecting with the power and the complexities of relationships that come with it. It only makes Lefebvre’s concept of spatial relation being defined by patriarchal more concrete in contrast to the marginal space of women. And according to Lefebvre one slowly acquires the space then masters it and appropriates it (Lefebvre 38). What’s more interesting is that though it seems like the father figures are their power through their influential practices but the actual hegemonic notion is represented by their very own spoiled son. They have taken over this space and through their shameless powerful voice they end up getting more powerful. They are aware of their possession of space through their powerful fathers which boosts their self-esteem and a sense of power. It is very much evident how they are gradually moving on from first stealing from their houses and neighbours to forming cults on their very own campus to performing gruesome murders of their peers. This certain turn of unexpected and adrenaline-rushing events converts the though homogenous but sort of peaceful places such as university and the houses of the professors into heterotopic sites which we have many antipathy sites and places into a singularity which is the actual truth (Foucault 6). Here we can very well see Foucault’s theory of juxtaposition of contradictory sites like the university which is supposed to be an establishment of education and institutional site preaching certain codes of values and ethics and or the professors’ home where the children should be raised principles of humanities but in contrast, they developed to be as sites of crimes in various forms under power politics.

Moreover, this short story is a perfect example of the exclusion of women where women are deprived of any active attitude. They are neither open to any closure nor have any active presence in any part of society. This is what we can call female “space- off”. For example, how Nnamabia’s mother plays a passive role regarding her son’s misdeeds as if even after being his mother she devoid of the power to do or say anything rather as an excuse for her son’s behaviour forced to say that “inside their hostel room after classes” to discard the violence on the street but did she able to avoid the violence even after her passive response. Thus, they were bounded in their restricted space. Even if show any sign of dear they are told or rather forced to go back to their respective place that is “home”. They are subjugated and victimized not only by the students or professors but by the entire legal system, i.e. the legal system and the police. And power is one-sided controlled by only patriarchy is evident when the female university professor was waylaid by the cult boys while driving “pressed a gun to her head, shoved her out of the car and

drove it to the faculty of engineering, where they shot three boys” (9). On the other hand, Ogechi, Nnamabia’s sister, a beautiful young girl was harassed and assaulted by a police officer only because she had two cell phones and was called whore by them, they had asked her of so much money that she had to knelt to the ground in the rain begging her to let her go. This shows the biasness of power which is only ruled by patriarchy. Both of the women coming from respective powerful backgrounds and positions still had to face subjugation only because of their supposedly weaker gender.

But Adichie redefines this patriarchal narrative which is lived, conceived, and as well as perceived by giving a rebellious voice to the unnamed sister. She is not that beautiful compared to her brother. Besides we see how people used to taunt her and pity her for her darker skin, unlike her brother who is very fair and handsome. "Namibia looked just like my mother—he had her fair complexion and large eyes... When my mother took us to the market, traders would call out, 'Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark?'" (6). The above quotation shows the mind-set of the patriarchal and post-colonial Nigerian society where beauty standard is fixed. Even in the mind of the sister who knows her features are not enough to attract the attention of popular guys like Osita, “he never notices me”. This space regarding beauty is implemented in the consciousness of the people there, which represents the society there. Yet we see how the narrator is breaking such space and rather found her to be an intelligent girl with an intuitive sense from the very beginning. On arriving from church with her brother, when her brother informed her that they have been robbed, without any hesitation she understood that it is her brother who is behind that supposed robbery and remarked, “It took me a moment to understand, to take in the scattered room. Even then, I felt that there was a theatrical quality to the way the drawers were flung open. ... Or perhaps it was simply that I knew my brother too well” (4). Also, her infuriating reaction in contrast to her mother’s dull reaction only shows her to be an ethical woman “I wanted to slap her”.

Still, by considering her opinion of being heard as a small little victory she deconstructs the power structure and traditional societal notions in her way. The dominated space is broken and slowly turning into an ‘appropriated’ one when her parents give attention to her opinion for the first time. This happened when her brother was in prison. And parents used to visit him every day even if it had taken three hours to reach there. Proving herself to be more mature than her parents she protested this daily visitation. She remarks, “it would not hurt Nnamabia to fend for himself for a day” (14). Unable to take her parent’s reaction toward her wish she takes the action into her hand and breaks the windshield of the car. Though they are stunned and mad by her reaction but still finally give in to her choice.

Adichie has very well used symbolism in order to make the narrator a rebellious character breaking the notions of patriarchal space. The house that was representing a domestic space of submission and subjugation throughout the progression of the story becomes the symbol of power and control not by the protagonist or any male counterpart but by the sister herself. Her “picking of some Ixora flowers” at the beginning of the novel is in contrast to when she “picked up a stone near the Ixora bush and hurled it at the

windshield of the Volvo” (14) in the middle of the story. A major transformation has happened, reflective of self-assertion unlike her parents and their negative attitude.

Conclusion

Thus, to use Lefebvre’s theory of representation space, the transformation is taking place simultaneously, in the character as well as in the space; the very house which was the initial place of oppression in the beginning also becomes the birthplace of initiative revolt by the sister. Thus, the creation of new space is a success. In defining social space Lefebvre remarks social space “incorporates” the action of its subjects in social aspects who regard the “behavior of their space ... at once vital and mortal: within it, they develop, give expression to themselves, and encounter prohibitions” (34). And “must either recognize themselves or lose themselves” in that very space to establish the emotion or transformation. They must surpass the line which might have “the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation, within social space” (35) and when analysed from a geo-critical perspective the sister does cross the boundaries accomplished by patriarchal norms by setting the new structure of power with her own parents’ societal space.

And Foucault’s crisis heterotopic notion is very much noticeable, where again the house of oppression and subjugation and submission where certain codes of domination and obedience are absolute necessary to fulfil the criteria of such notion is restored by the rebellious attitude of the sister. “Heterotopias hold up an alternate order to the dominant order . . .” (Topinka 60) and the sister does change the “heterotopic order” through her journey of power and resistance. The same theory can be applied to Nnamabia’s experience of the prison where he deviates from certain sacred values to raise his voice against the corrupt legal system represented by the police officer. Thus, he is developing and transforming against this unjust system. A place of initiation is produced just like his sister. We can link this part to Foucault’s fifth and sixth notion of heterotopia as entering into prison will lead to other sites, especially power, by opening and closing the gate which makes it isolate and thus compulsory to enter. Thus in ‘Cell One’ by Adichie, we can attribute both Lefebvre’s theory of space as ‘social product’ as well as Foucault’s theory of ‘heterotopia’ and (re)-define a world that will plant a new space and break the hegemonic space of patriarchy creating a new us.

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