
Disrupting the Status Quo: Forbidden Love and the Use of Heterotopias in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

While shared beliefs, standards, and norms can often influence our perception of what is morally right or wrong, it is necessary to question the origin of certain cultural ideals. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) questions the importance of adhering to the status quo as the novel explores the theme of forbidden love. The use of heterotopic spaces in the book produces variations of the real world where characters can explore their forbidden love interests and challenge societal constraints. These heterotopias are environments that are characteristically 'other' because they represent ideas which are intense, incompatible, or transforming (Foucault 4). Central characters in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* use these spaces to interrogate the complexity of forbidden love and disrupt the status quo.

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Individuals are often conditioned to adhere to persisting societal expectations and norms. This mindset creates challenges for individuals seeking to alter the existing narrative and expand the status quo. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) reflects on the consequences of rigid societal structures integrated within Indian society while exploring the themes of familial expectations, forbidden love, and discrimination. The novel is centered around the lives of twins Estha and Rahel, their mother Ammu, and the family's servant Velutha. The character's experiences shed light on the struggles of forbidden love and illustrate how they were able to use heterotopic spaces to cope with societal restrictions. The heterotopias represent a refuge for characters to explore their forbidden love interests away from the expectations instilled by individuals within a society. This article will discuss the symbolic use of heterotopic spaces in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, such as the History house, the river, and the boat, to interrogate the complexity of forbidden love and understand how characters disrupt the status quo.

The God of Small Things is a post-colonial novel that brings together important narratives and explores the theme of forbidden love through the experiences of characters who occupy heterotopic spaces. The novel revolves around the lives of twins Estha and Rahel, addressing the cultural cycles present in their dysfunctional family. The story takes place in the village of Aymenem in Kerala, India. The timeline switches between the past and present, following the twins' journey in exploring their emotions for one another. The experiences of the twin's mother, Ammu, further illustrate these themes as she falls in love with Velutha, the family's servant. The story begins in the present when the twins are 31 years old and are reunited as adults after having been separated as children. Their closeness is heavily felt by readers, bringing up important questions on what limits exist for love and what can be considered socially acceptable for siblings. The twins' experiences also parallel those of Ammu and Velutha, who face societal restrictions that hinder their ability to love one another. In order to escape reality, these characters occupy heterotopic spaces that allow them to explore their love interests freely. The theory of heterotopias was first cultivated by French philosopher Michel Foucault. In general, a

heterotopia refers to a space that exists outside the norm, representing alternative realities. A heterotopia is "[c]apable of juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces, several sites that are themselves incompatible" (Foucault 6). These locations challenge the conventional understanding of society and can be both real and imaginary. There are a variety of heterotopic spaces in *The God of Small Things*, such as the History House, the river, and the boat. These environments are "characteristically other" (Foucault 4) and help characters navigate their own choices and pursue forbidden relationships.

In the *God of Small Things*, the History House is a heterotopic space used by several characters and symbolizes a disruption to normative social expectations. The place is an ancestral home across the river from the twin's house. The History House belongs to Kari Saibu, who once lived there, and it is where his past secrets are hidden. His character is significant to the historical context of the home and its categorization as a heterotopic space. Kari Saibu "shot himself [...] when his young lover's parents had taken the boy away from him" (Roy 24). Saibu's parents did not accept his love for a boy as it did not align with existing cultural expectations. This heterotopic space belongs to him because it is in this location that he deviates from the norm and explores his forbidden love interest. For this reason, the house can be referred to as a heterotopia of deviation, which is a place reserved for "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm" (Foucault 5).

While the History House belonged to Kari Saibu, the twins also used this heterotopia to break free from rigid societal rules. Saibu's story parallels Estha and Rahel's forbidden love and the hardships that they experience in concealing their desire for one another. The twins are not allowed within the house's vicinity, which symbolizes the idea that they cannot deviate from tradition. The restrictions that they experience make it a place that "[...] fascinated them. They thought about it often. The house on the other side of the river" (Roy 25). The twins' fixation on the history house represents their curiosity about forbidden ideals. Estha and Rahel are not allowed to explore their love for each other beyond the limits of what is acceptable for siblings. Nonetheless, it is

common for individuals to stray away from the expectations of people in a society. Eventually, the twins give in to their desires as Estha says, "I'm going to ... the History House" (Roy 92). The moment the twins decide to explore the history house is transformative as it depicts a deviation from an expected standard. Their transition connects to the events of Kairu Saibu's past, attributing to the unconventional flow of time within the house and blurring the line between past and present. Through their courage, the twins explore their relationship within the safe walls of the house, painting a picture of how the characters can freely express themselves within the heterotopia.

The river near Estha and Rahel's home can also be considered a heterotopia because it symbolizes the idea of navigating away from an acceptable path. The stream's positionality blurs the line separating the permissible from the forbidden. It is liminal in that it functions as a transitional space between the History House and the twin's home at the same time as it separates them. The river is also a heterotopic space because it can juxtapose several functions in one space in contrast to the fixed societal norms. Furthermore, the fluidity of the water itself is symbolic of how rules do not have to be completely rigid, and that one can challenge cultural traditions. Characters such as Ammu and Velutha apply this mentality and utilize this isolated space to dictate their own rules and step out of normative expectations. Ammu is the twin's mother and is not allowed to pursue a relationship with Velutha because he is the family's servant. He is a member of the Paravan caste, which places him in a lower social class than Ammu, ultimately making their relationship impermissible. Regardless, they choose not to conform to societal standards of love and use the river as a heterotopia to escape the restrictions of the caste system.

Velutha and Ammu disrupt the status quo by using the river as a space where they can freely express their love to one another. They also expand this heterotopia to the river's shore, which is characterized as such because it is where time is transitory. For this reason, the river and shore can be classified as temporal heterotopias. The term 'temporal' is used to express that time is limited, and there is often a sense of haste within these spaces (Foucault 7), which is

seen when Velutha and Ammu meet on the shore at night and "each time they [part] they would extract one small promise from each other: tomorrow?" (Roy 153). This urgency illustrates how their interactions are short and stolen from the rigid structures of their lives; they can only promise each other one day at a time. Promising another day allows them to transcend societal prejudice and temporarily bask in their time together. The distortion of time present when Ammu and Velutha meet at the river reveals that these are temporal heterotopias used by characters to disrupt the status quo.

In *The God of Small Things*, the boat is another significant heterotopia. It does not have a precise location, and, like the river, it "has a function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault 8). For example, the boat can connect individuals to any location as long as they can navigate the river. The vehicle offers the freedom that is necessary for characters to be able to choose their own paths. Ammu, the twin's mother, uses this vessel to "cross the river. To love by night the man her children loved by day" (Roy 94). Ammu uses the boat to visit Velutha, which illustrates how this device empowers her to challenge the hierarchies in Ayemenem culture. The boat holds significance as it is located on a river that separates the forbidden from the permissible. Ammu uses this boat to cross this boundary for temporary periods of time, which communicates that the river is a space that provides momentary pleasures where characters do not have to adhere to the status quo. Furthermore, because the boat defies the flow of water, Ammu is able to have a transformative experience and formulate her own choices. The direction of the flow symbolizes a direction that should be taken when it comes to normative relationships, and Ammu uses the boat as a tool to maneuver around this path to reach her lover, Velutha. There is an important contrast between the water's direction and the ability to change it with the boat. These opposing situations exemplify how heterotopic spaces interrogate the complexities of forbidden love. The boat redefines boundaries because it is "a place [...] that exists by itself" (Foucault 9) and allows characters to navigate their own choices with a sense of autonomy.

Similar to Ammu and Velutha, Estha and Rahel also utilize the heterotopia of the boat to break free from the restrictions instilled upon them by Ayemenem culture. In a passage where Estha contemplates many aspects of his life, he thinks about "a boat to row across the river Akkara" (Roy 91). In Malayalam, the word 'Akkara' means the land on the other side of the river. It often symbolizes hope and the expectation of positive outcomes in a new space. The boat is the only vessel that can get the twins to the other side safely and offers them the choice to navigate the river in their chosen direction. Moreover, the boat is a "floating piece of space, a place without a place" (Foucault 9). This heterotopia is not restricted to one location and offers the opportunity to step out of cultural norms by occupying new spaces, which is seen when Rahel expresses that the twins will take the boat and go "off to Africa!" (Roy 99). Her dramatization alludes to the idea that the possibilities of where the twins can go are limitless. There are no physical restrictions on the boat in contrast to the ideals of everyday society. These characteristics can be interpreted as a symbol of hope and opportunity for the twins to explore their forbidden love by utilizing the heterotopia of the boat.

twins Estha and Rahel undergo transformative experiences by isolating themselves from rigid societal rules and dictating their own destinies. The novel's orchestration around the theme of forbidden love and the characters' use of heterotopic spaces sends a message to readers about the importance of challenging fixed ideas and formulating individual choices.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the History House, the river, and the boat are heterotopic spaces contributing to the character's ability to disrupt the status quo. The History House is considered a heterotopia of deviation where characters such as Kari Saibu and twins Estha and Rahel stray from accepted norms. In this space, the past and the present collide, illustrating that the heterotopia combines several incompatible spaces (Foucault 6). Additionally, the river can be characterized as a heterotopia because it is where Velutha and Ammu secretly meet to love one another. They utilize this temporal heterotopia to challenge the rules of the caste system and go against prevalent hierarchies within Indian society. Finally, the boat is a significant heterotopia because it is not bound to one location and provides the characters with the freedom to navigate their own path. More importantly, the boat is a vessel that can connect the river and the History House to one another. This connection sheds light on the complexities of forbidden love because it illustrates how characters combine these spaces to transgress cultural expectations. Ammu, Velutha, and

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