

**Heterotopias of Deviation: A Study of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming Pool Library***

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The concept of heterotopia was propounded by Michel Foucault in his essay titled *Of Other Spaces* published in 1967. It is a difficult to describe the concept succinctly. The word has its roots in Greek where heteros means other and topos means place. Foucault describes heterotopia as a cultural, institutional and discursive space that is somehow 'other': disturbing, incompatible, contradictory or transforming. In the words of Russell Mead, "Utopia is a place where everything is good; dystopia is a place where everything is bad, heterotopia is where things are different – that is, a collection whose members have few or no intelligible connections with one another" (qtd. in Haliburton 213). Foucault divides heterotopias into two categories; crisis and deviation. Foucault defines crisis heterotopia as a separate space like a boarding school or a motel room where activities like coming of age or a honeymoon take place out of sight. The second type of heterotopia denotes the places allocated to the people who fail to conform to the norms of society they live in. Rest homes, mental asylums and prisons are some of the examples of heterotopias of deviation. Foucault puts forth that a society, "can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion; for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopias can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (*Of Other* 25). In *The Swimming Pool Library*, gay heterotopias have a function both for closeted individual and closeted society. Brutus is the name of a cinema which acts like a heterotopia. It is situated in Frith Street, Soho. The cinema ghettoize gay people like William. This place is visited by gay people not for watching porn but for having random sex with unknown people. Anonymus sex is preferred by them because revealing

one's identity is not considered safe. It is a hard fact that it is not possible for the homosexuals to reveal their identity. Hollinghurst depicts the building of cinema as a closet built underground:

The Brutus Cinema occupied the basement of one of those Soho houses which, above ground-floor level, maintain their beautiful Caroline fenestration, and seemed a kind of emblem of gay life.... One entered from the street by pushing back the dirty red curtain in the doorway beside an unlettered shop window, painted over white but with a stencil of Michelangelo's David stuck in the middle. This tussle with the curtain –one never knew whether to shoulder it aside to the right or the left, and often tangled with another punter coming out—seemed a symbolic act, done in the sight of passers-by, and always gave me a little jab of pride. (*SPL* 48)

The small cellar room of the cinema is hidden with the help of a red curtain. Through this process the cinema is disarticulated from the normalized world of heterosexuals. Hollinghurst uses the symbol of the red curtain to portray society's view about homosexuality. The heterosexuals consider it a foul practice. The pictures are other important things in the cinema. William is fascinated by the introductory scenes of these pictures: "since men on the street or the beach killing time or doing some kind of work all of a sudden transform into lustful demons the audience's world of fancy demands of them" (*SPL* 50). The contrast between Greek and Christian notions of sexuality is represented by the stencil of Michelangelo's David. Sedgwick writes:

Synecdochically represented as it tended to be by statues of nude young men, the Victorian cult of Greece gently, unpointedly, and unexclusively positioned male flesh and muscle as the indicative instances of "the" body, of a body whose surfaces, features, and abilities might be the subject or object of unphobic enjoyment. The Christian tradition, by contrast, had tended both to condense "the flesh" (insofar as it represented or incorporated pleasure) as the

female body and to surround its attractiveness with an aura of maximum anxiety and prohibition. (*Epistemology*136)

The cinema is the place which offers liberty and space to gay people. Will compares a sixty five year old man to a schoolgirl taken to a romantic trip. Will thinks that for this outing the old man would have saved money from his pension: "Could he look back to a time when he had behaved like these glowing, thoughtless teenagers, who were now locked together sucking each other's cocks in the hay? Or was this the image of a new society we had made, where every desire could find its gratification?" (*SPL* 51). The time the old man spent in cinema is a compensation for the time he lost. It is a problematic fact that gay people visit these places to seek sex and *jouissance*. Visibility is denied to these people and they are not even allowed to hold the hand of their partners in public. This is the reason they ghettoize themselves in dirty anonymous places.

Other heterotopias in the novel are gay bars and clubs. These places are like glass closet or open secret. In the words of Sedgwick, "a condensed way of describing the phenomenon of the 'glass closet,' the swirls of totalizing knowledge-power that circulate so violently around any but the most openly acknowledged gay male identity" (*Epistemology* 164). In the state of a glass closet a gay person does not conform to his sexuality and leads a carefree lifestyle. Both out and closeted gays visit these bars and clubs. William often visits a bar named Shaft to gratify his needs. He becomes addicted to the place:

I had been an addict of the Shaft. If I was out to dinner I would grow restless towards eleven o'clock.... The Shaft itself I hardly ever left alone, and I had made countless taxi-journeys down the glaring, garbage-stacked wasteland of Oxford Street and along the great still darkness of the Park, a black kid, drunk, chilled in his sweat, lying against me, or secretly touching me. (*SPL* 192)

A sense of liberty is provided to him by the bar. He feels free there and acts according to his conscience. This liberty is impossible in the outside heteronormative world. But this freedom is not the real freedom

because these places are designated to them by the society. The customers enjoy aphrodisiac environment and enjoy sex in the cabins. The sexual minorities pay high entry fees for the liberty they enjoy there. In this way these places have become commodified ghettos. Alan Bloom contends, “closet space is both internal and marginal to the culture, representing its passions and contradictions, even while marginalised by its orthodoxies” (qtd. in Sedgwick 56). Bloom believes that the post stonewall queer movements are responsible for the commodification of gays. Gay people are made distinct minority group by these movements. Gay bars act like brothels as they are used to gratify socially unacceptable desires.

Public loos are the favourite place for gay people to find their partners. Casper believes that cruising practices by gays is not a new phenomenon and can be found in every corner of the world. He adds that many writers have specified:

“certain peculiarities in the walk, look, demeanour and voice” by which such men “may be recognised.” He reported that one informant, who seems to have been exaggerating just a little bit, told the curious doctor that “We discover each other at once, at a single glance, and by exercising a little caution, I have never been deceived”.... It takes one, as the old saying goes, to know one. Cruising is a venerable tradition, and the city offers anonymity and opportunity. (qtd. in Higgins 13-14)

Gay people are closeted in the spaces allocated to them by heteronormative system. Cruising and cottaging are very common in Hollinghurst's fiction. For example, William and Charles meets in a cottage while the later is chasing an Arab boy. Society force them to go to such places because they have no other option.

Houses and hotel rooms are other closets in the novel. The relationship between Will and Arthur is totally closetedone. They ca live as lovers only at Will's home. About their relationship Will says, “their first week was a week spent in bed... I was engrossed in him.... Perhaps he felt stifled in the

flat. After hours of languid vacancy he would spring up and run from room to room” (SPL13). A life outside home is unimaginable for them and that’s the reason they lead a self enclosed life. Their darkened flat is the only safe place for them. That’s how their house becomes an heterotopia for them.

To conclude, gay bars, cinemas, public lavatories and hotels rooms are heterotopias in *The Swimming Pool Library* where homosexuals subvert and challenge the external heterosexist world. In reality, the places are ghettos but it is only these places where the homosexuals feel safe. In these spaces, they achieve self-realization and act as they desire instead of doing what the society demands.

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