



## AN EXPLORATION OF ‘TANTRIC SPACE’ IN SHWETA TANEJA’S *CULT OF CHAOS* THROUGH THE LENS OF ‘HETEROOTOPIA’

Dr. PULAK AVINASHI<sup>1</sup> and Dr. DIKSHA SHARMA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Assistant Professor, Thapar Institute of Engineering and Technology, Patiala, Punjab, India.

Email: <sup>1</sup>pulakavinashi26@gmail.com, <sup>1</sup>pulak.avinashi@thapar.edu,

<sup>2</sup>dikshapuneetsharma@gmail.com, <sup>2</sup>diksha.sharma@thapar.edu

### Abstract

This paper traces a different genre of Speculative Fiction, termed ‘tantric literature’, and its roots that occupy a prominent place in Indian and Buddhist scriptures that existed in Vedic and Non-Vedic scripts. Shweta Taneja’s *Anantya Tantrist Mystery* (trilogy) is a representation of an urban occult detective fiction where she applies cosmic sciences to solve supernatural crimes in New Delhi. Her protagonist experiences the aesthetics of paranormal spaces through tantras and expands and liberates her subaltern consciousness while solving the mystery. The paper studies the first book of the trilogy *Cult of Chaos* which bring to the fore the role of spaces, of the absurd, the hidden, the mystical, the esoteric, and the fantastic through abstract and concrete symbols; spaces that are neither here nor there and represent the mystic world of the unknown. In the present paper, I intend to analyze her concept of space through the lens of Foucault’s theory of ‘heterotopias’ and ‘the other space’.

**Keywords:** Tantra, Supernatural, Space, Mystic Space, Paranormal.

Tantric literature, broadly speaking, as a practice can be analyzed under the genre of Speculative Fiction, represented through make-believe worlds and the writer’s desire to escape from reality and live in an alternate space of ‘the other’ world. Embracing the categories of ‘fantasy’, ‘horror’, and ‘mystery’, Speculative Fiction is defined as an imaginative and open genre of fiction including supernatural incidents, folklore, epics, and oral traditions which are narrated in specific regions and a space which is unfamiliar and fantastic where one forgets the real world and immerses him/herself in an unknown space. Similarly, Tantric literature explores the supernatural and mystical journey and therefore critics of tantric literature hold that the origin of various published and unpublished writings on tantric rituals originated from Buddhist, Hindu, and, Jain roots. Vedas and Puranas have explicitly dealt with the aspects of tantras— which apparently expound tantra as a quest for attaining moksha or siddhi. The philosophy of tantra brought a revolution where the emphasis shifted from the temporal and empirical world of facts and reason to the intuitional space of knowledge which is beyond the realms of the practical world of physical beings. As many scholars have argued, there is an inherent connection between tantra and Hinduism, and India as a space; reflects the roots from where the tantric philosophy emerged.

In *Tantra Illuminated: The Philosophy, History, and Practice of a Timeless Tradition*, Christopher Wallis provides how the study of tantra took prominence in the Indian context as it showed the proof of its existence by providing results to its followers:

“The Tantrik scriptures themselves are always said to be spoken by a form of God or the Goddess, Siva or Shakti; or, in Buddhist Tantra, a celestial Buddha or Bodhisattva, which arguably accounts to the same thing.”

David Gordon White holds a similar observation on tantra in his book *Tantra in Practice*, he asserts that “Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy.... that creates and maintains that universe....” (White, 9). Brooks, discusses how intricately writers of tantric texts describe details of the rituals that are actually being



performed in *Auspicious Wisdom: The texts and Traditions of Srividya Sakta Tantrism in South India*. He asserts, “Tantrics exhibit... ‘sacred persistence,’ defined as the rethinking of each little detail in a text and the obsession with the significance and perfection of each little action” (12). He believes that by narrating the events the distinguishing factor between real and unreal space blurs. The philosophy of tantra is also discussed by KA Harper in his book *The Roots of Tantra*, he avers: “The term Tantrism was coined by Western Indologists of the latter part of the nineteenth century whose knowledge of India was limited and who could not realize the real nature, let alone the extent of Tantric phenomenon” (17). This excerpt draws attention to Harper’s understanding of the inadequacy of the occidental perspective of tantra.

One of the most pertinent issues related to tantric literature is the use of ‘spaces’ that are both tangible and intangible. It involves the hidden, mystical, esoteric, and fantastic spaces i.e. the ‘unsaid’ along with the ‘said’ spaces and portrays their influence on the psyche of an individual. The present study focuses on the writer’s use of space in both concrete and abstract realms that the characters’ experience while practicing tantric rituals. Occult imageries used in rituals and their related works of literature represent concrete spaces that are used by authors of tantra, as they portray blood, magic, human and animal sacrifices, and sculptures of Kali in dark spaces of caves. The abstract space of the dead and of the world unknown is attained through supernatural powers and divine energy by using abstract symbolism. This aspect of the unknown space which is still unexplored and immersed in ambiguity is a topic of curiosity for many newage theorists. Michael Foucault’s ‘heterotopias’ focus on the unknown spaces of the mystic world. The paper, therefore, intends to discuss these spaces of tantra with the arguments proposed by Foucault in his theory on ‘heterotopias’.

The space that tantric philosophy exhibits is similar to the theory proposed by Michael Foucault in his speech on ‘other spaces’, the state that portrays the region of the unknown/surreal. In his theory of ‘heterotopias’, he discusses the appearance of a different reality, a space that distorts our perception of the physical world and includes spaces of dualities and contradictions, death, illness, suffering, and pain. Heterotopias, as explained by Foucault propose the concept of spatialization, and these spaces draw their scientific knowledge from empirical data which includes cultural, social, functional, and symbolic aspects of the society we live in. The existence of the abstract space, however, is still questionable it has also been discussed as a contradictory space that results in dilemmas and conflicts. Such spaces belong to a different realm of consciousness which individuals experience at subjective levels. Foucault states, “These oppositions...[are] simple givens...between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between space of leisure and that of work” (2). He mentions spaces that are fluid and transparent, spaces that individuals live and experience, spaces that are fixed and immobile, and that restrict the activity of a person.

Individuals encounter such virtual spaces in their everyday lives and they are considered an “absolute break with their traditional time” (6). He reveals spaces that are present in our society and even though they are physically present in our surroundings, they are still considered to be heterotopias by Foucault as they are violently displaced. The space and time which is contradictory and fluid as proposed in the theory of heterotopia are similar to spaces depicted in tantra as time has no boundaries. The absurdity of time and space is reflected in tantra as the dead becomes alive and acquire different physical forms and shapes, there is an erosion of time, and darkness and void take over reality. The themes of pain, suffering, mystery, and horror which portray Speculative fiction is represented through these space of crises. Therefore, they are in an ‘epoch of juxtaposition’ with the real world and raise the question of its existence.



According to Foucault, heterotopias not only represent fluctuations of spaces; but also focus on the divergent aspects of time in which an individual travels. He discusses 'heterotopia of ritual or purification' like certain places which are marvelous, thus defining space as "the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed", and argues that we experience the contemporary world less as "a long life developing through time", than as "a network that connects points and intersects with its skein" (29). Foucault mentions these inherent spaces through which individuals frame their psyche and the analytical construct of the hidden world around them. The space of tantric literature also represents this fluidity, where the proof of its existence juxtaposes with reality and consciousness. Tantrism also takes into account the question of purification and ritual. The paper tries to focus on tantrism as a doctrine that blurs the distinction between the real and the unreal. Such heterotopias of crises where the characters lose their sense of existence and time are written by writers of fiction. Iwan Sudradjat in his article "Foucault, the Other Spaces, and Human Behaviour" states, "Space, Foucault argues..., it's always closely bound to our experience of time." (29). These times and spaces are inherent in our consciousness but our physical contact with them is existential. Foucault calls a society with many heterotopias. It means that the existence of these spaces is beyond the boundaries of our comprehension as they question the real world of practicality and believe in the world that exists beyond.

Foucault's speech on 'heterotopia' discusses the aspect of space; and metaphorically resonates with the world of the unknown where the surreal world supersedes the physical world of reality. Foucault mentions the contradictions of time through 'other times' (a dimension that is not comprehensible to ordinary people i.e. supernatural realm of existence). Tantrism includes the elements of space 'of other' integrating contradictions of the two worlds i.e. of the living and of the dead. As mentioned by Taneja in *Cult of Chaos*, the living and the deceased are simultaneously surviving in the world of technological advancement. Taneja's narrative very smoothly weaves two different worlds making it surreal for its audience and also arousing a sense of horror. The audience unknowingly moves with her characters in the esoteric world forgetting the distinction between reality and fantasy.

Shweta Taneja's *Cult of Chaos* which is the book of reference for discussion; portrays how tantric philosophy of ritual, sacrifice, and purification are practices done in spaces that exist in the temporal world of imagination. Foucault's concept of space denotes the power/knowledge that these spaces and times have on an individual. The influence of such spaces on the minds leads to heterotopias of crises. Foucault's theory of heterotopias refers to the crises in the form of forbidden and scared places that are experienced by an individual and which lead to mental and emotional turmoil. Therefore, Foucault's mentioning of the unknown spaces and their fluidity through which individuals move also projects a similar situation in the space of tantric literature.

Shweta Taneja is an Indian novelist whose oeuvre includes several books and nominations for prizes in several national and international literary canons. Taneja explores numerous elements of Speculative fiction and adheres to tantric tradition in *Cult of Chaos* by giving it a supernatural appeal and by fusing elements of surrealism. In an interview, *Imagining New Futures: Shweta Taneja's Sci-fi Story Nominated for Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire Awards* with Mini Anthikad Chhibber, Taneja explains the genre of Speculative Fiction and the importance of amalgamating the elements of paranormal to get horror responses from its readers. Shweta says, "Speculative fiction is about exploring future alternatives and how new technology, new possibilities change the fabric of our society and how we perceive gender. That is the reason that SF writers have, and continue to explore societal, cultural, and biological consequences of

new reproduction technologies.” According to Taneja, her stories invert the hierarchies by presenting the false worlds and her characters moving through the dark realms of their subconscious mind. The writer of Speculative Fiction creates an imaginary space that is built by reimagining and rebuilding another space with lies and fantasy.

*Anantya Tantrist Mystery* is a detective fantasy trilogy based on a tantric system that includes the spaces of occult and myths. In all three series Anantya, the protagonist solves murder mysteries through occult science. In the prologue of the novel *Cult of Chaos*, she reveals the horrifying scene of a crime that was committed by a father at midnight by brutally sacrificing his young virgin daughter to attain moksha. Taneja; artistically weaves rationality with fantasy fiction in order to amuse its readers by shifting their imagination from reality to fantasy. The distinction between these boundaries is blurred when the reader gets a reality check of how the world of dark magic works. Riju; influences these hideous crimes by hypnotizing fathers to kill their own daughters to attain moksha. According to him, the spaces that separate the good and the evil will be merged when the control of power is in his hands. As discussed by Foucault, he draws attention to the inseparability of space and time and says that spatial and temporal relations fuse and intersect into a concrete whole in the world we live in. Foucault also explains this unknown space as this not only derives its existence from the material essence of the physical but from the meanings that emerge from the social and cultural intermingling of spaces. According to Foucault, this space constitutes both the negative and positive influences in which we live and the impact of such obscure spaces on our psyche. Riju exclaims: ““Erase the boundaries between the spirit and the living and the dead. The boundaries between civilization and wilderness. The boundaries between jungles and cities. The boundaries between the sky and the earth. All will be erased, all consumed”” (109). Another theorist who talks about space is Henry Lefebvre in his book *The Production of Space* (1991), wherein he explains, the fusion of the positive and negative spaces as they represent the contradictions and dualities that are rampant in personal and public spaces. He continues, “Thus space emerges consecrated—yet at the same time protected from the forces of good and evil: it retains the aspect of those forces which facilitates social continuity, but bears no trace of their other, dangerous side” (34). According to Lefebvre, such spaces arouse both positive and negative emotions in an individual. He/she faces confusion about existence when these spaces become a threat to their integrity. Anantya fights to bring back peace and save the world from the evil black tantrics by interrupting in Riju’s evil intentions of sacrificing young girls. Such explicit images arouse feelings of horror among its readers and provide a setting for the tantric rituals that will take place in the narrative.

Galileo in his cosmological theory discussed the distinction between the supercelestial spaces as opposed to celestial spaces where they were violently placed and this space was called the space of ‘emplacement’. He literally meant those spaces which are differently perceived and the relationship between different locations of space. Foucault in his further attempt discusses various heterotopias and distinguishes between spaces that are blurred as they do not indicate clearly the difference between the spaces of the living and the dead. The use of space and time in tantrism is studied in this paper where Taneja blurs the contradictions and dichotomies of space throughout her narrative leaving her reader in a space of confusion. The reader becomes one with the narrative of the story eventually surrendering to a make-believe world of tantra forgetting reality. Taneja artistically weaves the abstract spaces of horror by combining the occult with modern-day technological advancement, whereby transporting its readers to an imaginative space of tantrism.



*Cult of Chaos* is the first novel from the trilogy *Anantya Tantrist Mystery* where Taneja's protagonist Anantya, is a detective tantric who solves murder mysteries related to tantrism and black magic. The story denotes elements of Speculative fiction which consist the life beyond this physical life. Anantya brings the revelation of the criminal by exposing the trap laid by her friend Riju who wants to have control over all the powers of the world. Anantya who belongs to Kaula's sect of White Tantrics resolves and reveals the evil characters who sacrifice humans for their selfish benefits to attain moksha. Taneja while solving the murder mystery through Anantya, frames the entire narrative through the elements of tantrism and technology. She exclaims while reading a book: “*Is Tantrism a Science? Logic in Tantrik Rituals, Secret Science of Tantrism....* They explain tantrism as a logical science, as a science of cause and effect and even teach you how to create rituals that could tap into energy using scientific mediums. I know some scientists who are a part of the technology department in Central Association of Tantriks (CAT) and are trying to disassociate themselves with magic per se, and now call themselves scientists who reform the world through scientific rituals” (169). Foucault mentions the new advancements in the theories on space through heterotopias of ‘deviation’ as contemporary writers move beyond the fixed notions of narratives but experiment by fusing realism and imaginary spaces in order to transform their readers into a contradictory space. Anantya in order to solve the crimes explore the dark haunted streets of Delhi and expand and liberates her aesthetics of the paranormal (the presence of a mysterious supernatural space that is beyond the comprehension of an ordinary individual) space. Anantya mentions: “Dark rituals always happened in secret, in hidden basements or inside caves deep in the forests. Never on a terrace in a middle of a city. (61). these rituals do actually happen in the middle of Delhi. Taneja’s narrative seamlessly weaves the real setting of places in Delhi with tantric rituals which are secretly done and not everybody from the outside world is allowed to enter this unknown space. She elaborates that there are ‘unknown’ spaces right within the ‘known’ space of the city. Therefore, the known and unknown might be one and the same – perhaps it is the use of these spaces for tantric rituals which makes them ‘unknown’. Foucault in his theory mentions the unknown spaces which are the ‘other’ and its comprehension in concrete terms is not possible as these spaces can only be experienced beyond one’s senses.

Foucault describes places and spaces of ‘of otherness’, which are neither here nor there, that are physical or mental, which have more layers of meanings. This aspect of space reflects those places which are beyond ordinary spaces, spaces that have multiple meanings and are yet a part of one’s existence. The plot fuses the places that truly exist in their physical aspect but when combined with the occult gives its readers a sense of surprise, where one questions the real existence of the world beyond. He also talks about the “heterotopias of cemetery” that depicts a space that is present in a city or a village but does not constitute the present as it contains bodies of the dead. Taneja in her reference to tantrism focuses on spaces where the living and the dead coexist. Anantya is the part of the supernatural world that continuously moves from the real world where humans reside to the surreal space of supernatural creatures through the narrative on Banaras, a historical city in India where the dead are cremated and is the location of ashrams where tantrism is taught depicting the forbidden activities that take place in that space. Foucault also mentions various dimensions of space as experienced by Anantya and society at large in its everyday experience and how this space impacts people’s behaviors and surroundings.

The story revolves around the seven sacrifices that were committed by characters and the Central Bureau of Investigation trying to solve the case with the help of Anantya, the detective who is also a tantric and has contacts with the renowned personalities who run ashrams and teach the art of tantra to attain moksha. Anantya in order to expose the people behind these

sacrifices puts her own life and image into trouble. Taneja's use of supernatural elements through tantric portrayal mentions the ritual of sacrifice as an important element to attain nirvana by forgoing the sufferings of this materialistic life. The murder mystery that Anantya solves includes sacrifices made of young virgin girls by their fathers under the influence of a tantric who misleads them to perform such acts of catastrophe where the girls are tortuously sacrificed along with their fathers who commit such acts. Anantya exclaims:

“She was the only pure thing in this beastly world. A cradle of pure Shakti, the power of unshed blood. She was all that mattered. He placed her delicately on the hard ground, in the middle of the triangle. He spread her legs apart, her womb exactly aligned with the triangle's apex point. Her Shakti needed to face the same direction. To invite. The ritual demanded it. He looked at her body, naked except for the kumkum, which more looked like black smears in the moonlight. For a moment, his heart lurched. She was just a child, really. Could he go through with this? (3).”

As Foucault discusses the use of the real and the imaginary spaces that are fused together, the reader believes it to be true and part of their everyday existence. Similar to Foucault's theory of the unknown spaces that contain the real and imaginary spaces and which appear to be part of our everyday existence. Edward Soja through the theory of the 'Thirdspace' in his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996) focuses on the relationship between space and society. He states: “My objective in *Thirdspace* can be simply stated. It is to encourage you to think differently about the meanings and significance of space and those related concepts that compose and comprise the inherent *spatiality of human life*: place, location, locality, landscape, environment, home, city, region, territory and geography” (1). According to Soja, *Thirdspace* is a transcendental concept that is constantly expanding whereby, amalgamating the abstract and concrete, the micro and macro, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable places. Taneja artistically weaves the tantric rituals that are performed amidst New Delhi in order to solve the murder mystery. As Foucault and Soja explain the space whether physical or mental in which an individual travels shapes his experience and identity thereby combining the real and the unreal experiences of life.

Taneja creates this space of the unknown through the symbolic representation of the 'night' (Ratri) in which the sacrificial acts are performed portraying the impact of darkness by committing black magic to bring evil into this world to destroy goodness and peace of the land. The darkness and the unknown space denote hidden territories which conceal the sacrificial black magic committed for the performance of tantrism. As Taneja describes “Tonight was special. Tonight would mark the beginning of the end of all impurities. Tonight, they would cleanse all evil from the world. Clean away putrid, evil places like these, where vile humans live with dirty rats, nibbling away at the world, bite by bite” (2). Characters perform horrifying acts in the dark as to not reveal their true identities and also the power that this abstract space (night) contains. The space depicted by Taneja is mystifying, the impact of darkness and the secrets hidden in those spaces have an aura of suspense attached to it.

The symbols used in Speculative fiction arouse the feeling of horror and suspense. The stories long heard, of the rituals being performed at a specific time during the day and their effectiveness provides nirvana to the performer. Foucault's notion of heterotopias also explains the mental and emotional realm into which one transforms after experiencing an epiphany. The central theme in tantrism is into attaining moksha or enlightenment by forgoing the physical spaces around us and increasing a sense of belongingness with the esoteric world and the space beyond one's comprehension. Kathleen Taylor's in his book *Sir John Woodroffe, Tantra and*

*Bengal: 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?':* "...believed that the influence of foreign orientalists was almost solely responsible for the extremely negative reputation of Tantra among members of the English educated Indian middle class" (1). Taylor believed that by negatively projecting the world of the occult to the West, they rejected tantrism as a practice and an area of discussion in Speculative Fiction. The horror or suspense it evokes is not of haunted castles or ruined places but the space is not accessible and real but is supernatural and constitutes a part of being paranormal.

Anantya uses the logic of cause and effect in order to solve the heinous series of murders in the city of Delhi. Fantasy mingles with reality in the narration as contemporary tantrism where it coincides with the religious backdrop that belongs to the sensibilities of the Hindu tradition of Lord Shiva and Shakti (Kali). "During my training days, I had found out about shava sadhana, a complex tantric ritual performed by sitting on a corpse – symbolizing life over death. I had watched it being performed a couple of times when Dhuma had had a midnight party with a bunch of her friends, but I had never actually participated in the ritual myself" (344). Such acts that are performed do not include spaces that are familiar to ordinary people. As tantric space, itself poses questions of its existence, this space, therefore, holds many unknown facts which are still under discussion by critics of tantrism worldwide. The powers that Taneja reflects move beyond the human consciousness of life and death as they contain the ultimate truth of human existence. Taneja through her portrayal of solving the mystery behind the sacrifices made during the entire narrative fuses the elements of the supernatural with the scientific advancement of technology. Foucault thus in his theory emphasizes the continuous evolution of spaces and reveals the significance of such abstract spaces which are neither concrete nor physically present.

What is striking here is that how tantra which has been a topic of curiosity worldwide is so easily projected by Taneja? It also depicts her imagination and her art of seamlessly combining science with the occult. Anantya shows science and technology have also interfered with the ancient art of tantrism. The realization that we are one with the universe and possess the unlimited potential to change our surroundings brings an acceptance of the world within and the world beyond. It leaves no contradictions and distinctions between the worlds that are powerful and submissive on the other hand. A similar idea is proposed by Rita DasGupta Sherma in her article "Sacred Immanence: Reflections of Ecofeminism in Hindu Tantra", explains:

"The tantric model posits that the self is Shakti and that Shakti is the world, thereby creating a dialectic of identification between self and world. Ideally, the process by which this understanding is arrived at begins with the sacralization of the body as the site of the same cosmic forces that control the universe and ends in the eradication of the personal ego-consciousness, which is replaced by a profound realization of oneness with the Absolute (126)."

According to Sherma, our consciousness of realizing the importance of our mental identity invariably comes when we distance ourselves from bodily pleasures and become one with the universe. The acceptance of the permanence of life can only be attained through meditation and control. Therefore, the space of the occult and the supernatural leads to enlightenment where one renounces the pleasures of this materialistic world and surrenders to the power of the Absolute. Taneja explores this esoteric world amidst technological advancement and projects the immense disaster it can bring to this world. Foucault's definition of this unknown space also reflects the power it has to change one's subaltern consciousness. The paper amalgamates Foucault's theory of heterotopias discuss spaces that are mentioned by him which



are fluid and contradictory, such similar spaces appear in tantra where there are no boundaries of the fixed and immobile, spaces which are neither here nor there, but constitute a different realm in one's experience of this world. Foucault's representation of such opposing spaces and an individual's response toward them reveals our ambiguous existence in the world we try to survive. Spaces that are described by theorists reveal multiple layers of space in which an individual lives; these spaces are dark, rough, encumbered spaces that reflect the void we face internally. Tantra also projects such dichotomies of spaces that include internal and external, abstract and concrete, and literal and metaphorical spaces to attain moksha or nirvana from this world. The story *Cult of Chaos*; revolves around the supernatural and tantra bringing a new understanding to Speculative Fiction further illustrating the spaces of horror and suspense which were usually considered Gothic and an immanently permanent part of the tantric storyline.

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