



## Heterotopic Counter-Sites in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.2.285](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.2.285)



### Article info

Article Received: 21/04/2026  
Article Accepted: 25/05/2026  
Published online: 29/05/2026

### Abstract

This paper "Heterotopic Counter-sites in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*" (1997) explores how the Indian spices have been employed by the novelist to produce heterotopic counter-sites within the narrative. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopic counter-sites as expressed in his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" this paper does an in-depth analysis of the novel's mythical as well as real spatial dimensions. It examines the mythical Island of spices where the Tilo had been initiated as the spice Mistress and the Spice Bazaar in Oakland where she practices her knowledge of the spices by invoking them to attend to the needs of her clients. It is a heterotopic analysis of the Island and the Spice shop to find out how far they conform to the Foucauldian principles of heterotopic counter-sites by probing into the spatial and temporal dislocations in the narrative.

**Keywords:** Crisis heterotopia, counter-site, heterotopia of deviation, Island, Spice shop, Space, temporal rupture.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices*, narrated by Tilo a woman of mythic origin who runs the Spice Bazaar in Oakland tending to the needs of Indian immigrants offers ample scope for a Foucauldian heterotopic analysis. The shop operates simultaneously as a commercial site for selling spices and at the same time evokes sense of a lost homeland through the nostalgic smell of the spices. This paper explores how the mythic Island and the spice shop function as

heterotopic counter-sites that are "simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" in the light of the essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" (Foucault 24).

"Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" ("Des Espaces Autres") is a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967 and published by the French Journal *Architecture/ Mouvement/Continuite* in October 1984. The manuscript was released into the

public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before his death. It has been translated from French by Jay Miskowiec. In this essay he explores the ways in which heterogeneous spaces are organized and experienced in modern societies. He observes:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (24)

These spaces, he classifies into two: Utopias – “sites with no real place” or “fundamentally unreal places” and Heterotopias – “counter-sites” or “other sites” in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.” It is “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (24).

Foucault lists out six principles of heterotopia in his lecture “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”. They are:

1. There is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. There are two types of heterotopias: crisis heterotopias (for example, the boarding school) and heterotopias of deviation (for example, mental asylums).
2. Each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society
3. The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.

4. Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time – heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of break with their traditional time.
5. Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.
6. Heterotopias have a function in relation to all the spaces that remains. Their role is either to create a space of illusion that expose every real space as still illusory or to create a space that is other, another real space.(22-27)

By reading the text against Foucault’s six principles of heterotopia this paper investigates to what extent the novel conforms to the laws of a heterotropic counter-site. Tilo was born with extraordinary magical powers, ability to foresee things and a fierce will to know more about her surroundings. She was named as Nayan tara, “the name which also means star seer” (8). She was captured by the pirates and they named her as Bhagyavati. She lived with the pirates for years:

Long after the calling thought had worked itself out and my powers came to me again, strengthened by hate as power often is, long after I overthrew the Chief to become Queen of the pirates” (19).

It was the sea serpents who had told her of the Island and its First Mother or the Old One. Tilo’s initiation in the Island is the beginning of indigenous knowledge transmission: an evolution that is at once empowering and isolating.

The Island is a mythical space that co-exists with the real. It’s a place that can be read as Foucault’s crisis heterotopia: “These 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” (Foucault 25). The

Island is a "heterotopia without geographical markers" (25). It's a place where the body undergoes transformation both physically and mentally. It's the place where young girls with extraordinary powers are trained to be Mistresses. It's a place where they have to choose their future after the ceremony of purification: either to become Mistresses or to choose an easier life. The Old One asks:

Are you ready to give up your young bodies, to take on age and ugliness and unending service? Ready never to step out of the places where you are set down store or school or healing house? Are you ready never to love any but the spices again? (Divakaruni 40)

The Island simultaneously functions as a heterotopia of deviation: "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault 25). when the Old One imposes disciplinary rules to the women if they fail to obey the rules of the Island. She says:

Remember this too: Tilottama, disobedient at the last, fell. And was banished to earth to live as a mortal for seven lives. Seven mortal lives of illness and age, of people turning in disgust from her twisted leprous limbs (Divakaruni 43)

As Foucault observes, "for each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another" (25). The Island tries to contain the women by imposing rules and laws on them in the name of serving ordinary people: "To help your own kind, and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need" (Divakaruni 68). The young girls are removed from society and brought to the Island not because they violated any rules but because they surpass the rules with their extra ordinary powers. They have to renounce their body, beauty, age and personal desires to fulfill the criteria of

becoming a Mistress. "Once a Mistress has taken on her magic Mistress-body, she is never to look on her reflection again", that was the rule (Divakaruni 59). Even though the island is ruled over by a matriarch, it operates on the patriarchal logic within the heterotropic counter-site. It's quite evident from the command of the Old One: "A Mistress must carve her own wanting out of her chest, must fill the hollow left behind with the needs of those she serves" (69). Their function is to serve the people through the Spices.

The third principle of heterotopia as "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" is clearly manifested in the spice shop set in Oakland. The ontology of the shop can be traced back to the mythic Island - an extension of the learning experience Tilo has had under the Old One. It's simultaneously a commercial space selling spices to the Indian immigrants in Oakland and a mythic site when Tilo performs her rituals of invoking spices. She says: "I will chant. I will administer. I will pray to remove sadness and suffering as the Old One thought. I will deliver warning" (7). The spice shop where the Indian immigrants come to buy spices for their specific needs is a confluence of different cultures.

The Island enacts as a heterotopic counter-site where conventional temporality ruptures. Tilo says:

If you ask me how long I lived on the Island, I cannot tell you, for time took on a different meaning in that place. We lived our days without hurry, and yet each moment was urgent, a spinning petal borne seaward by a swift river. If we did not grasp it, did not learn its lesson, it would pass beyond our reach forever" (52).

Tilo embodies in herself different temporalities - heterochronies, as Foucault terms it. "The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with

their traditional time" (Foucault 26). Tilo's body is made aged for the spices to communicate through it. It's a manifestation of absolute break of traditional time: a temporal collapse as time runs non-linear through her body. She says: "That I'm not old, that this seeming-body I took on in Shampati's fire when I vowed to become a Mistress is not mine" (Divakaruni 5). She has lived through multiple existence such as a girl who can tell future of others in her village, as the Pirate Queen, as the chosen one in the Island and as the Mistress of Spices in Oakland. Tilo's body embodies in itself a set of prohibitions: against desire, against passage of time and she's not even allowed to leave the store. The shop where she sells the spices is a repository of ancient cultural knowledge. Centuries of ancient indigenous knowledge gets accumulated in the form of the spices in the shop.

Heterotopias are not always freely accessible to all. As Foucault observes in the fifth principle:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as in the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. (26)

The Island doesn't provide access to everyone. The Island of spices opens only for those who are destined to be there. "See the spice glow under her skin, sign of her destiny" (Divakaruni 24). The serpents are afraid of sending Tilo to the Island. They say: "She will lose everything, foolish one. Sight, voice, name. Perhaps even self" (24). The women in the Island undergo purification process before becoming Mistresses. The Island closes to those who are not destined to live there:

Each year a thousand girls are sent back from the island because they do not have the right hands. It does not count if they have the second sight or if they can leave their bodies to travel to sky. The Old One is adamant. (34)

When the process of selection and the "ceremony of purification" is over the Mistresses are given a new name and a new identity. Purification involves prohibitions and disciplinary methods. Indigenous epistemological transmission occurs through the spices. The spices unravel their powers only to those who serve them selflessly. As the Old One says: "You must give up everything - your beauty, your life, your love. Only then will be the spices truly speak to you. Only then will you be worthy to carry their voices into the world" (62). There is a system of regulation to the spice shop as well. It's opened and closed by Tilo herself. The opening and closing of the shop are not mere external activities but it has a deeper metaphysical resonance encoded in it. Customers come there as a resort to their personal problems, not for commercial purpose alone. It opens selectively to Indian immigrants and Tilo offers different spices for different needs such as Turmeric for "heart's sorrow", cinnamon for cleansing evil, coriander seed for clearing sight, fennel for mental strength etc. But for each person there's one special spice and the Mistresses must never use the spices for their own ends.

The Island, though it seems to be a mythic place it establishes its connection with the real world through the Mistresses. As Foucault mentions in his essay,

The last trait of heterotopias is that they have a function in relation to all the space that remains. This function unfolds between two extreme poles. Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory....Or else, on the

contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed and jumbled. This latter type will be the heterotopia, not of illusion but of compensation. (28)

The Island of spices functions as the other – secluded from the main land with women sequestered to function as Mistresses in various lands. It functions as a real place with rules and laws; with a discourse of its own controlled by the First Mother: “On the island and also the waters that touch its roots, her power alone prevails” (23). It’s the other that prepares Mistresses for the real world. Its decrees are strange: “When you begin to weave your own desires into your vision, the Old One told us, the true seeing is taken from you. You grow confused, and the spices will no longer obey you” (72).

The Mistress with her powers is settled in Oakland, “the other city by the Bay” (55). The Spice shop with Indian spices functions as the other in an American city. It’s a heterotopia not of illusion but of compensation – a compensatory heterotopia. It’s a space where Indian immigrants arrive to compensate for their lost homeland: a space where sensory coherence encoded in the smell of the spices offer them comfort in the host topoi. The smell of the spices creates a sense of belonging. They escape into the indigenous epistemology of the spices from the “messy, ill constructed and jumbled” Americanness (28). The sense of home that this compensatory heterotopic counter-site evokes is no longer real but illusory or mythologized. The native language and the foreign language coexist in the linguistic register of the shop. The emotional burden the clients carry to the shop is reduced by agency of the spices, they believe. If the Island is a heterotopia of illusion, the spice shop functions as a heterotopia of compensation.

Of course, there are limitations in applying a western spatial framework in

analyzing an Indian narrative as the spatial ontology put forward by Foucault in his essay is based on western culture and history. The spice shop operates as a site of counter culture – it’s both a physical and spiritual space where the immigrants get in touch with indigenous epistemology in the heterogeneous space. It’s the space where they resist the homogenizing pressures of the western world. However the Island of Spices and Tilo’s Spice Bazaar manifest in itself heterotopic counter-sites that challenge the spatial and temporal dimensions of the external world.

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