## ARTICLE

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# The heterotopia of the palace in Abdo Khal's *Throwing Sparks* (2009)

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This article endeavors to negotiate Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia in Abdo Khal's Booker-Award winning novel *Throwing Sparks* (2009). The central premise of this article is to offer a new understanding of spatiality, constituted by the simultaneous existences of 'other' spaces, which can be viewed in their relations as proximate to, contradictory to, or even reflective of each other. In this novel, the Palace is a real and symbolic space and/or place which oscillates between oppressive homogeneity and individualized depravity. The Palace in *Throwing Sparks* is a representational temporality that embodies the demarcation and relation between the 'private' and the 'public', allowing for a new site of material spatiality. The rise of an interstitial (heterotopic) space to fill in between the public and the private is what characterizes the Palace in the novel. It allows for the emergence of a whole landscape of power politics driven by the ramifications of the space and affecting its inhabitants. Since this space is analyzable, its inhabitants are overshadowed by its grander aura. In the Palace, the body does not belong to the individual and his/her own will. It rather belongs to the 'institutionalized' volition of the Palace in which 'docility' rather than subjectivity and agency is what remains as a performative practice for the *survival* of its inhabitants.

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## Introduction

Since the 1980s, the term 'space' has experienced a shift from being primarily an archaeological representation of a concept to its more contemporary use within philological discourse. The inextricable link between spatial materiality and practiced ideology has featured in the anthropological studies which examined the role played by and through ideology in constructing space in whole or in part. It has been compartmentalized by new discoveries allowing for a better understanding of the embeddedness of the spatial within discursive practices (see for example, Ghulyan, 2019; Sadoughianzadeh, 2013). There is a plethora of studies which moves the space from the material to the ideological, such as Coleman, Collins (2006) *Locating the field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*, Dawson et al. (2014) *Negotiating Territoriality: Spatial Dialogues between State and Tradition*, Gupta, Ferguson (2006) *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, and Low et al. (2012) *The Anthropology of Space and Place*.

This problematization allows us to conceptualize a stark distinction between the commonly used interchangeable terms of space and place. The former is often defined as a geographical, material, and measurable conception whereas the latter is the locale/locus of converging material, cultural and ideological meanings. Other scholars of space and/or place such as Alamia et al. (2022) have attributed the *emergence* of new spaces, especially in the modern western world, to the rise of capitalism and its associated urban centers. To oppose and challenge the everyday struggle (which Alami perceived as completely political) and seek change is to create heterogenous forms and spaces opposing capitalism. The triadic process of producing space described by Henri Lefebvre (1991) in his analysis of social space (the physical, the representational and the lived) is meant to create new modes of spatiality. This spatial metamorphosis has prompted inquiries into the relationship between localizable spaces and how they are envisaged in literature. Before the explosion of the interest in the concept of space in literature in the 19990 s, the modernist novelist Virginia Woolf highlighted the importance of the archaeological and/or physical space (a room of one's own) for a female writer to discursively construct a mode of spatiality as well as subjectivity (Zhao, et al. 2022, also see Jimenez, 2009). Nonetheless, Julie Robin Solomon, in her rebuttal of the view that Woolf's space is dangerously disengaging 'intellectual' women from the real space of the social and the political, argues the actual space 'serves as a potent political metaphor for women because it concretizes visually, tactilely the politicization of the personal and the personalization of the political' (Solomon, 1989, 333). This exemplified a new literary focus on the materiality of space in which the fluidity of spatial demarcation is determined by relational powers allowing to create 'the private' and 'the public', and 'the central' and 'the peripheral'. The spatiality of the literary texts has been extended to the formulaic genres. Robert T. Tally Jr. argued that '[w]hole genres may be defined by such spatial or geographical characteristics, such as the pastoral poem, the travel narrative, utopia, or the urban exposé' (Robert and Tally, 2017, p. 1, also see Watt, 2001). It is notable that discussions of spatiality can be mirrored and enlarged on a global scale, when one considers how the dominance of the western (canonical) novel has created a material world opposed and undermined by the emergences of new world literatures which, as Casanova observes, manage 'to make themselves known at all verges on the miraculous' (Casanova (1999), p. 12).

## Indexing heterotopia

Heterotopia as a term first originated from the study of anatomy to refer to 'parts of the body that are either out of place, missing,

extra, or, like tumours, alien' (Daskalaki, 2012, p. 169). It then becomes a specific mode of physical (or even mythical), metaphorical, or literary spaces (Sajjad and Perveen, 2019). The non-medical use of the term is derived from the ancient Greek pronoun *heteros* 'other' and the noun *topos* 'place'. What combines the medical and non-medical usages of the term is its definition in relation to a bigger space (the body in the medical definition, and the existing normative space in the political one). The popularity of the term soared after the French philosopher Michel Foucault deployed it explicitly in his three of his works, namely *The Order of Things* (1970), a 'radio broadcast' on the theme of utopia and literature, and a lecture delivered to a group of architecture students translated into English as 'Of Other Spaces', in which he determines the principles of heterotopology with spatial and typological examples. The simplest definition for it lies in the title of his latest article as it is of *other* spaces, whether they are real or unreal. He uses the example of 'the mirror' as an example to manifest the virtual parallel of utopia and heterotopia- a space in which the shadowy reality of the real space can be reflected and emulated in a heterotopia as a space designated as a counter site, but relational to it (Foucault, 1984, p. 4). His six principles for identifying a heterotopia are as follows:

1. These spaces exist in all cultures, and they come in two ways: the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation. The former is a place designated to accommodate those who are substantially different from what society considers 'normal' such as boarding schools and even honeymoon suites. The latter, due to the rise of the institutions in the nineteenth century, started to take the ground and have become spaces 'reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis' such as prisons, mental institutions, and cemeteries (Foucault, 1984, p. 4). Therefore, the connection between the deviant bodies and these marginal spaces in which they have kept powers at some point to breed cultural repression and shape idealized norms governing the body politic.

2. Heterotopias habitually have a specific operation anchored to a specific time. For example, the emplacement of the public cemeteries in the outskirt of overgrown cities was directly due to the birth of clinics which came to vindicate the triumph of medicine over mortalities. Therefore, such failure must be out of sight and away from public life, lest its location in the center could infect other public institutions. This explains the natural occurrence of social changes over time where heterotopias become a sign of such public institutionalization.

3. Overlapping with the second principle, heterotopias are purposefully arranged in a single space. They have the power 'of juxtaposing in a single real space several places, several emplacements that are in themselves incompatible' (Foucault, 1984, p. 6). What is important about this juxtaposition is to be additionally governed by a sort of order: a reminder of his argument in *The Order of Things* where the term was first hatched there as a key difference is that utopias have a consoling order whereas heterotopias have a disturbing nature. Foucault (2002, p. xix) argues that 'Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold […]. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly language […]'. However, Foucault fails to explain how to separate between heterotopias and their surroundings spatially and operationally. Benjamin Genocchio has pointed out this failure

and argued that 'Foucault's argument is reliant upon a means of establishing some invisible but visibly operational differences which, disposed against the background of an elusive spatial continuum, provides a clear conception of spatially discontinuous ground' (Dehaene and Cauter, 2008, p. 205).

4. The relationship between heterotopias and bodies is defined by the one concerned with the materialization of time and its flow. Heterotopias function within a temporal discontinuity since they break with, and are set apart from, the normal flow of time. He illustrates this in two ways. Heterotopias of accumulation such as libraries and museums bring together a range of historical periods. Past, present, and future are brought into one building which serves to protect these documents and objects from the ravages of time. However, I find Amanda Caleb's example of the Victorian sickroom a more useful example for linking the body rather than the object to heterotopias in which sickness temporally interrupts the relationship between the flow of time and the space of the repurposed bedroom in which invalids are separated (Caleb, 2019). The second variety are 'heterotopias of festivity', such as festivals and fairs in which a place is transformed for a specific time and enjoyed as a precarious diversion. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque resonates in relation to Foucault's heterotopia. In his seminal work *Rabelais and His World* (Bakhtin (1965)), Bakhtin recognizes that a carnival during the medieval period served to suspend, albeit temporarily, the established rules of the state as well as the church. The term 'carnivalesque' has been subsequently used to describe both this historical phenomenon as well as a certain literary tendency. Carnivals are heterotopic in that a carnival is a place in which the 'suspension' becomes a form of expression throughout four principal categories: familiar and free interaction between people, eccentricity, carnivalistic mésalliances and profanation. Such places typify a joyful inversion of all structure and order resulting in a short period of liberation and even licensed transgression.

5. The existence of heterotopias in relation to other spaces is what grants them a claim to reality, in opposition to the idealized nature of utopias. Such practice can be best exemplified in two varieties of heterotopias: a) heterotopias of illusion such as brothels where the interiors of fantasies and domestic lives are exposed and gratified, and b) heterotopias of compensation such as Puritans' colonies which are perfectly structured to combat the social order of their contemporaries, which they saw as being characterized by messiness and ill construction. However, Foucault's definition of heterotopia is predicated on its spatial arrangement and configuration in relation to other spaces. This definition has made the concept into a prolific notion within which power is structured and analyzed, being central to Foucault's broader thesis about the invention of man in modern times.

## Throwing Sparks's palace as a heterotopia

*Throwing Sparks* is set in the Saudi city of Jeddah. The narrator is an inhabitant of a poor district where a grand palace is being built by the seafront, depriving the people of the district of fishing spots. At the first, most of the residents celebrate it, thinking that it will bring them jobs and investments. Its presence intrigues the young and makes them aspire to work there. However, a few are able to do so. One of the first people to have his dream come true is Issa who saves the wealthy businessman's son from drowning.

His entry to the Palace allows him to find jobs for his ill-fated friends and he manages to do so for two friends: Tariq, who also narrates the novel, and Osama. Once they enter its premise, they are faced with cruelty and merciless humiliation which reduces them to objects the Master's mischief. This becomes the central theme of the novel, and the binary it offers between life and death and their structures within the Palace's entire dynamics of oppression as well as the balance of power relations within it. These complexities are embodied within the contrastable space of the Palace.

The Palace, the central space of the novel, manifests an array of cultural and religious symbolism. It is a place which harbors a cascade of corollaries such as power and corruption, human disintegration, and soul damnation, love, and violence. It is also a place in which the extremes are brought into a form of dichotomic complementarity (wealth vs poverty, the protected vs the subaltern, violence vs love, marriage vs prostitution). Despite its separation from the neighborhood, it remains essentially relational. Its inhabitants can be productively compared to those who live outside. Unlike the romanticization of the poor prevalent in Victorian fiction, the novel characterizes them as sexually virile and exploitive in a manner comparable to those inside the Palace (Albalawi, 2022, p. 7). The emphasis here is on the association of power and wealth which leads to the major themes of the erosion of moral values, absence of justice, loss of empathy and devaluation of human life. Inside the Palace, characters go through a process by which their subjectivities are impacted and greatly altered. Even the Master of the Palace is transformed from a 'sayid' which, in Arabic bears connotation of an honor and reverence (a role model) to the equivalent of the English word 'Master'—a term associated with slave owning and abuse of power. This irony permeates both the characters and the spaces of the Palace. Alterity characterizes the building and makes it an apparatus of a demolished binary in which opposites coexist and complement one another. One of the boys in the district recognizes its alterity and inconsistency from the beginning: 'From that Palace, life will flow'. The narrator retrospectively interprets this 'oddly prophetic' statement in two contrary ways: 'It could be interpreted in two, contrary way: a soul gaining more out of life from the experience of being in the Palace or, conversely, of the Palace squeezing life out of every living soul' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 21).

In brief, the Palace represents any place under the control of a malevolent ruler who possesses unlimited authority and influence over others. However, the peculiar emphasis on its multilayered implications such as the systematic erosion of individual and social values, patriarchal suppression of women, hypermasculinity and sexual retribution transcends its symbolic reality to radically probe a wider range of issues (the social, the political, the religious and the economic) of the outside world. In other words, the novel asserts the fluid nature of this place. It is an amalgam of various heterotopias. It is a prison, a torture chamber, a brothel, a madhouse, a domestic household, and even a spiritually awakening altar. These spaces can be navigated through the retrospective voice of the narrator. Employing the techniques of stream of consciousness, recollections and foreshadowing, Tariq lets the reader know of his repulsive impulses inside the Palace. As a punisher, physical and sexual assaults of his victims are what defines his usefulness in the Palace. He says: 'I serve no other purpose; only when [the Master] had a victim in tow would everyone scurry around the [P]alace looking for me as if in search of a lost key' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 17). As if he were incarcerated in a prison, he confesses: 'Outcast and dispirited, I embraced a life of crime. Standing in the punishment chamber, I would contemplate my naked body, bruised and degraded by the cruel and brutal acts it had performed'. (Khal, 2009/2014, p. ix). As a

brothel, he admits: 'I turned to other Palace women for solace'. (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 188). As if he were locked up in a madhouse, he envisages that if he encountered the specter of the Master's dead body, his decision would be: 'to kill the Master had fully ripened. I had been carrying around images of his dead body in my mind for a very long time, summoning up visions of murder while lying in bed, killing him a different way before falling asleep every night'. (Khal, 2009/2014, p. xiv). Therefore, the Palace and its complex subtleties in the novel offer the reader access to the shared human experience which makes *Throwing Sparks* understandable to a wider readership beyond the Arab world.

However, what links *Throwing Sparks*'s Palace to the principles of heterotopology is not merely the application of these principles but the constant engagement with its representational complexities. It certainly echoes Kelvin Knight's argument that the heterotopia is 'never intended as a tool for the study of real places, but rather pertains to fictional representations of these sites, which allow authors to open up unthinkable configurations of space' (Knight, 2014, p. 1). However, what Khal's novel attempts to delineate is not the vile actions of its malevolent characters, but to create a space which embodies the dichotomy of wealth and poverty and divulges the power relations and dynamics operating through the whole structure of the Palace. In contrast with the poverty-plagued district outside the Palace and the aftermath of the Palace construction, it is shown as a relational site characterized, as Kuhling (2007) describes, by the 'alternate ordering' of the outside world. Its semi-mythical configuration constitutes a unique experience of imagined interiority differing from the expected one of wishful exterior performance. In the case of Khal's Palace, this relationality is reduced to the surreal physical juxtaposition which allows for its appearance from anywhere in the city (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 24). But strange mode of order can be located between the two different modes Foucault associates with spatial governance: resemblance and similitude (Foucault, 2002, p. 32). The Palace neither creates any form of social expectation inside it to resemble the outside world nor develops an ordering organically responds to this new and unexpected relationship with the public space through a random juxtaposition. This eerie space is run and ordered by the irrational command of pleasure which renders traditional hierarchy an invalid practice for its order but dissonance.

The relationality of space in *Throwing Sparks*'s Palace provides an illusion of other spaces and projects a subtle critique and satire of the concept of public space. This primary function of the Palace is in alignment with one of Foucault's many examples of the 'brothel' as a heterotopic site which renders it a space of the callous ordering of unrestrained freedom. Before entering the Palace, the protagonist and narrator Tariq tells the reader that their wild imagination of the paradisaic world of the high-walled Palace urges the young boys to begin their quest to enter it. For those impoverished boys, the Palace is imagined as a place of complete antithesis to their lived space which is known as the District of the Firepit. In the Palace, they envisage how 'heaven rains highly-bosomed damsels, causing all the clamour coming out of the Palace' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 26). This vision of the Palace changes as Tariq trespasses inside where he finds an environment more like a localized site of sadistic enforcement of total freedom- a place more like what Hetherington describes as the heterotopia of de Sade's Castle in his *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* which is a space 'of unlimited individual freedom, a freedom that pays no heed to moral sanctions over one's sexual conduct, a freedom that endlessly has to outdo itself in its severity and absolutism, […] a freedom that is defined by its desire to totally control' (Hetherington, 1998, p. 39).

However, what makes Khal's Palace interesting is the juxtaposition of another space which is largely unknown and secretive for most of the inhabitants of the Palace within its Sadean vision. It is the place where the Master's family resides, acting a counter-site to the Sadean heterotopia of the rest of the Palace:

> The Palace comprised two distinct wings: one for the Master's family, including a retinue of nannies and concubines, and the other for the guests. The two areas were not completely separate since various structures within the compound were common to both, notably the halls, foyers, lounges, gardens and recreational areas. (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 132)

This marginal space can be read as akin to Kafka's castle in his famous novel *The Castle*. This place allows 'total control' where 'there are no limits to which surveillance and discipline cannot be exercised' (Hetherington, 1998, p. 132). This juxtaposition provides a constant alternation of social ordering between total freedom and total control which makes the Palace a binarized heterotopia.

Louis Marin's term 'utopics' is necessary to understand the heterotopia of *Throwing Sparks*'s Palace. In *Utopics: Spatial Play* (Marin Louis (1984)), Marin coined this term to refer not to the imaginary perfect societies, but to the process involved in creating and/or imagining these perfect loci. Marin conjures the term from Thomas More's collision of the two Greek words: *eu-topia* meaning 'good place' and *ou-topia* meaning 'no-place' or 'nowhere'. Therefore, More's utopia is a good place that existed nowhere, except in the imagination. The split between the two original Greek words, which Marin labels as 'the neutral', is where Foucault's heterotopia is localized. Hetherington writes:

> Heterotopia do exist, but they only exist in this space-between, in this relationship between spaces, in particular between eu-topia and ou-topia. Heterotopia are not quite spaces of transition—the chasm they represent can never be closed up—but they are spaces of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve—social order, or control and freedom. (Hetherington, 1998, p. 7)

*Throwing Sparks*'s Palace is located in this interstitial space. It has its own position created in the mind of the narrator. He describes the Palace as follows:

> The Palace seemed like a gift from heaven, as enchanting as a droplet of water turning into a snowflake as it floats to the ground. It was suspended between the great blue of the sea and sky, at once mesmerizing and redeeming. Gazing at it, all one wanted was to enter and see it from the inside (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 17).

What allows the narrator to perceive the un/earthliness of the Palace is the fluctuation of his imagination from its real exterior to an imagined interior, in order to become an illusionary space that has the ability to contest the narrator's ordinary everyday life.

The suspension and exposure of cultural practices found in real spaces make the Palace into a 'cultural interstice', to use post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha's term (Bhabha 1994, also see Felice, 2015). The Palace becomes a space which is created in the head-to-head meeting between different worlds: the subalterns and the superiors. In it, the protagonist Tariq inhabits not only physically though this interstitial space of the two categorical opposition of social class, yet becomes reflective and, in some cases, assertive of a performative space. Therefore, this confuses his movement between the two categorical opposition of the victim and the victimizer, the Palace's Master and its inferior. Tariq describes his protean status in this space:

At the Palace, I belong to a group known as the 'punishers', a label reserved for people whose despicable deeds were considered beyond the pale. Its members were collected from the dregs of the city's poor neighborhoods and their sole mission was to destroy their victims' sense of manhood thorough sodomy. If they overexerted themselves in the course of their work, they would be confined to their quarters to recuperate or assigned to other, equally distasteful task. (Khal, 2009/2014, pp. 28–29)

However, the last words in his cursory memoir are a desire to resist the inevitable 'gravitational' downward spiral which leads to his destruction and self-alienation. Like the illustration on the cover of the first edition that shows a colossal rock swiftly falling from the sky towards the sea, he explains:

Gravity is an immutable law. Even though we are all governed by it, we have trouble understanding the precise way it affects our lives. The process of falling is gradual; it does not happen all at once, but in stages. The consequences of the fall are apparent only once the process is complete […] I fell, and from there I fell further. (Khal, 2009/2014, pp. 32–33)

### Docile bodies and the heterotopia of *Throwing Sparks*'s palace

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison* (1975), Foucault argues that the body has been identified as 'object and target of power' since the medieval period and that this was widely practiced in mostly heterotopic sites such as monasteries, hospitals, schools, and armies. There, he explains how the process of metamorphosing what he called the analyzable body into a manipulable body which 'obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces' (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). This is exactly what we can see in those individuals as soon as they become stuck between the walls of the Palace in the novel. The exemplar body of such docility is of the protagonist Tariq. The novel depicts his transformation from 'a scale of control' to 'a scale of modality'. Those entering the Palace to achieve what Foucault calls 'docility utility' (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). Before entering the Palace, most of the teenager Tariq's story is about the everyday life of the community and the hardship (mostly economic) he faced. He delineates the sources of their perilous circumstances due to the restriction of access to natural resources such as the sea. In this narrative, bodies are treated 'en masse' where the narrator conceives the body as a collective force represented in rhetoric of stoicism, strength, and optimism. He describes the shores before the construction of the Palace as unbounded and romantic place:

Lying against the bloated and belching sea, it was once a place that stirred even before the first rays of the sun could cast their beams on the windows of the houses. The neighborhood would wake up to the clamour of children wending their way to school down the narrow lanes, to the din of boisterous fishermen returning with their catch from a night at sea, and to songs blaring from radios that were as dawn of the day they celebrated. Like the fine mist from a summer rain, the songs refreshed our spirits and pierced our hearts, and our lungs filled deeply with energizing breaths (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 34)

When his retrospective narrative progresses, however, such rhetoric fades and is superseded by a scattered one, defined analyzability and reinvention, discourses which reflect Foucault would call as the Palace's 'micro-physics of power'. In other words, the Palace does not only become a locus of manipulating bodies and controlling the whims of its residents, but its power

certainly extends to other aspects of the social lives of its inmates. This happens throughout the element of regimentalization, since each individual is required to be 'enclosed' and then 'distributed' to be utilized. That can be exactly seen in the process of docilizing Tariq's body. As soon as he is recruited to be part of the Palace's dark forces, he is given an executioner role to perform against the adversaries of the Master of the Palace. Despite his previous history of committing rape (as in the case of Tahani who has been killed by her family for the honor crime), he becomes fully aware of his callous acts:

I remember that last, terrible night as if it were yesterday […] The night I stole her virginity, the ogre stole my life. It wrenched her life away, and mine with her (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 107)

Interestingly, inside the Palace, these epiphanic moments are eclipsed by the systematic erosion of his conscience. Tariq's enslavement into the role of executioner causes him to analyze his body and in consequence the collectivity of the public space represented in his guilty conscience to be replaced by the internalized 'partitioning' associated with his role. This 'individualized multiplicity' reflects the same institutionalized docility which pervades the locus as a whole. He is no longer connected to his wholesale body with its associated conscience. He becomes rather fragmented or more accurately an 'automaton' whose body is dictated by the Master of the Palace with no resistance:

During the early years at the Palace, I was like the tethered ram in Aunt Khayriyyah's pen. But rather than slithering on ewes, my job was to service the other rams before they had a chance to wander out of the pen. My role at the Palace was to be the prized stud on call (Khal, 2009/2014, p.108)

At this point, the Master's control of Tariq becomes the economic investment of his body in which his behaviour and even language do not only showcase docility, but a driven capacity to exercise and fulfill a duty prescribed to him since the first day of entering the Palace. Lastly, such a transforming mechanism is applied to all the executioners recruited to coerce them and alter their consciences. This 'modality' becomes a fundamental method to activate this docility and turn it into a force which serves the Master's unperformed criminality. This exercised method intersects with what Foucault has proposed about the disciplinary modality in which 'relation of appropriation of bodies' (in the case of Tariq's enslavement by the Master who has no control over his body whatsoever) is elegantly replaced by a self-operating individual who is no longer driven by his will, but the will or the caprice of the superior. (Foucault, 1977, p.137). Tariq's systematic enslavement starts from the first day he enters the Palace where he meets the Master who boldly and shockingly examines Tariq's genitalia 'as if he were examining a fish for its freshness' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 125). The tropes of the 'slave market' are inextricably associated with the practices of the Palace and its Master. This is not applied to Tariq, but to all punishers who are displayed in there Palace as 'baboon[s] in a zoo' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 246). Tariq therefore admits 'The Master had now snatched thirty-one out of my fifty years' which means that the prime of his life is wasted inside the Palace before he eventually gets liberated. Tariq's final words addresses the theme directly:

Slavery has not been abolished. It exists in many guises and lurks hidden behind all sorts of façades. How I yearned to be my own master. Wealth and power are the foundations of sovereignty: throughout history these alone have determined whether one belonged to the master class or to the mass of slaves. Without wealth or power, we are

slaves even if it does not feel like it (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 248)

Shifting the focus from the executioner's rapes to the women sex workers procured for the Master, Khal's Palace is a heterotopic brothel where the female bodies procured for the Master can be optimally degenerated and sexually optimized. It is apparent that Foucault's notion of 'docile bodies' is indifferent to the concept of gender. While the body Foucault invokes is more likely to be a male body, like those which populates the heterotopic institutions such as prisons, military establishments, hospitals, factories, and schools, feminine spaces also occur. Brothels are included as heterotopic sites in his conference paper 'Of Other Spaces'. As argued by Althagafy in his doctoral thesis titled as *Approaches to the Prostitute Figure in Late Eighteenth-Century British Ideologies: Space, Economics and Feminisms* (Althagafy (2020)), the calling for establishing public stews or bawdy houses for example in Bernard Mandeville's *A Modest Defence of Publick Stews, Or, An Essay Upon Whoring* (1724) responds for the necessity of creating heterotopic sites in which the public space can be paralleled and harmoniously contrasted (Althgafy, 2020, p. 31). It is even more surprisingly ironic that the mid-eighteenth-century outcries against prostitution urged the social reformers and benefactors to create another kind of heterotopias known as the Magdalene Houses to alleviate the suffering of those unfortunate individuals. The sole purpose of those secluded spaces was to reinforce the docility of the female body: a revolutionary realization by the early feminist writers in the history of British literature such as Mary Wollstonecraft that the domestic household is no different from the aforementioned heterotopic sites where domesticity of the wife is a practice of the docility of the female body. These eighteenth-century heterotopic discourses can be usefully placed in discussion with the Palace of *Throwing Sparks*. In it, the women of the Palace are described as individuals who 'provides nothing but pleasure' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 204). The Palace evokes William Hogarth's famous moral cycle *A Harlot Progress* (1732) where the innocent girl Moll Hackabout is encountered by a procuress and brothel keeper and gets deceived to become a prostitute and dies of a sexually transmitted disease:

> In all, there were three women who were involved with procuring a steady supply of nubile young women to Palace parties; they also trained the young men in the best approaches to lure girls and ensnare the more difficult tones (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 69)

The materiality of the female body overshadows its humanity. It is treated as a transient space in which all forms of objectifying spectacularity are exercised and registered. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator eliminates the humanity of the female body by distancing their voices and emphasizing their fleshly attractiveness. This alienation what perpetuates women's subjugation and victimization inside and outside the Palace. The cultural normalization of women's sexual abuse condones patriarchy, and the narrator vividly reduces the word 'woman' to a fleshly materiality that can be viewed as a spatial encompassing of time's passage. He declares that:

> Women are like the fruit of the earth, each with a unique provenance and a particular flavour to entice us. They are gone one season and back the next and we eagerly anticipate their return. Summer and winter: seasons change on earth as in our souls and our desires (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 10)

When comparing the ephemerality of the female body can be compared to the heterotopic existence of the Palace, we see that it is neither a static body (as the wife), nor an instant body (as the male executioner). It is rather, if I use Mikhail Bakhtin's term, a personal chronotope delimited by a spatial arrangement and a passage of time which configures its meaning (Bakhtin, 1981). The Palace's female body is anchored to a temporal reality that transiently and simultaneously mobilizes and demobilizes it. The narrator explains this the spatio-temporal reality of these bodies explicitly:

> The evening had begun in a large circle that gradually disintegrated and scattered to the loud music of the band. The guests had shed their stiffness as a Khaliji ensemble., brought in especially for the occasion, belted out rhythmic dance tunes and the lead singer whipped the crowd into a wild frenzy. The girls shimmied and shook their bottoms skillfully while the men, their joints loosened, leapt around them gracelessly (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 177)

This transient reality allows the female body not only utilitarian docility, but a transitory empowerment that paradoxically provides an opportunity for an individualized wholeness.

Maram's body, called by the Master of the Palace as the bewitching, resembles the yacht which transports her to the Palace. In 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault finds the example of the boat as the 'heterotopia par excellence':

> a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is self-enclosed and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from bank to bank, from brothel to brothel…. (Foucault,1984, p. 9)

The striking similarity of the ship and the body of Maram lies in the imaging of a constantly moving whole, unmoored from a specific mode of social and cultural regulations and determinisms. Both have a capacity for spatial and temporal fluidity which makes them exceedingly utilizable and docile. Like the ship, Maram's body can be spatially rearranged and exploited according to the regulative rules imposed within the public space. The Master of the Palace reduces Maram to a relativist place allowing for defying all the established cultural politics of the female body. However, Maram's narrative is admittedly too limited, and unlike most of the characters of the novel, it is given a hearkened voice compared to the rest female characters. Therefore, it becomes hard to speculate to what extent the personal body is relationally conceived in comparison to the sexual one.

## Heterotopic proximities

The docility of the female body which is inextricably linked to heterotopic sites leads to the convergence of marriage and prostitution. In her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), the eighteenth-century feminist polemicist Mary Wollstonecraft courageously dubbed marriage as 'legal prostitution' (Wollstonecraft, 2004, pp. 91-2). What most critics have failed (including my own scholarship) to recognize is that the institutional space of marriage (the domestic household) and prostitution (the brothel) shares a fundamental force by which the docility of the female body is operated. The bodies of the wife and the prostitute have been historically and meticulously spatialized, confined to the house and the brothel until those institutions are superimposed on the very nature of their bodies. Therefore, Khal's Palace is an apt example which harnesses marriage to prostitution within its spatial configuration and politics. As I mentioned earlier (Section 'Docile Bodies and the Heterotopia of *Throwing Sparks*'s Palace'), the heterotopia of the Palace is a hybridized, yet binarized space in which the female body is docilely anchored to the desirable practices of the male. The Palace fluidly contains the two extreme opposites of women,

namely the chaste and the promiscuous, where they both 'were not completely separate' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 140).

However, what links the two extremes (besides the liminal juxtaposition of the space) is the language that discursively locates the female body in the premise of its sexuality. This is a fundamental characteristic of heterotopia that allows for the emergence of a disruptive force. In *Order of Things*, Foucault (2002, p. xviii) states:

> Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences, but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and opposite each other) to 'hold together.' … [Heterotopia] desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences.

In the novel, therefore, it is effortful to distinguish between topos of marriage and prostitution, and the complexity is largely due to the spatial proximity of the two categories of the female body in the Palace. In the section allocated for the chaste women of the Palace, the bodies of those women are forbidden and exclusive sites where a remote contact with their persons is granted to a handful of selected entrusters. The word 'dare' is used in the novel to warn against three things in the novel: the Palace 'Who dares to enter the Palace' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 38), the chaste/married women 'No body dares to enter the cabin allocated for the families' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 140), and the kept mistress Maram 'Nobody dares to be close to Maram' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 259). This language of proximity associates the female body with the heterotopia of the Palace.

The proximity of prostitution and marriage is embodied in the character of Maram. The two binary extremes of the Palace are rendered a lived experience which makes her body a medium of heterotopic transportation from one to another. These two extremes are presented to be regulated according to a particular set of norms and traditions. Mirroring this in the female bodies with these extremes, makes their access generally restricted, which is one of the typical characteristics of heterotopia. Such restriction institutionalizes the female body and reduces it to a kind of spatial materiality. However, in Maram's narrative, marriage as an institution commonly shares the one in the Palace (a space more likened to a brothel for her). In the beginning, her mother sells her out in the marriage market to a rich person as a second wife. However, this union is untypical to the cultural traditions of polygamy as she is lodged in a hotel where the husband just meets her there for sex and leaves her a note of 50 Riyals under the pillow. The replacement of the traditional household with a hotel uncovers a heterotopically liminal threshold occupied by women in the novel occupy. Nonetheless, this marriage remains clandestine and conditioned to childlessness which is a characteristic of the sex market norms. Therefore, it is easy for the first wife once discovering the marriage of her spineless husband to call her a 'prostitute with whom Waleed [the husband] is cheating on her' (Khal, 2009/2014, p. 301).

themes and the psychology of the character to fluidly show the interconnectedness of the Saudi novel and the late twentieth and early twentieth-first-century literature (Albalawi, 2022). In the prologue, Khal quotes The Song of Solomon, 2:3 which reads 'As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste'. The theme of marginalization as well as the instability of Tariq's personality, due to his fragmented psychic experiences, invite a heterotopic reading of the novel as it does not represent detachment but temporal continuity with world literature. This enriches its argument about space and the political overtones of its narrative. Hence, *Throwing Sparks* showcases the complexity of the Saudi novel, and this could open a huge window which is a worthy venture for researchers to investigate the optimal relevance of the Saudi literary canon to the one of the World Literature.

The Palace in *Throwing Sparks* conforms to the six principles of Foucault's heterotopology. The representational complexities of the Palace overshadow its physical interaction with the public space. It is a contested site of disturbing chaos and consoling order to satirically depict the extent to which the individual's pursuit of freedom is curtailed in the public space but augmented in the private one in such theocratic culture of Saudi Arabia. The alternate ordering of the Palace is driven by two competing forces of cultural conformity and whimsical nature of the Master which prompts a space of two binaries. Furthermore, this heterotopic binarism establishes a new understanding of the bodies populating them. As a notion associated with heterotopia, the docile body mirrors the politics of space in which it is merely tied up. Despite this heterotopic polarization, the body is regimentally controlled where the agency and the subjectivity of the individual is no longer able to exist. The concepts of gender, hierarchy and social performativity are profoundly blurred and undergo a force of total effacement. Bodies which monumentally yet docilely stand for cultural institutions such as marriage and prostitution become no longer distinguishable. For example, the Madonna/whore dichotomy in relation to this space is utterly dismantled and replaced by total sexual perversion and uncontrolled carnal gratification: a moment in which the wife and prostitute stand on equal footing.

The understanding of the politics of *Throwing Sparks*'s Palace can prolifically inaugurate inquiries into how power functions and these spaces determine power relations. They become merely symbolic and indicate the unrestricted powers and influences of such spaces accompanied by the multilayered implications of identity loss, periurachal oppression and class disparity. This shows how the Palace made the novel internationally recognized as 'a novel of politics' which 'proposes something more open-ended and transcendent' (Long, 2022). The Guardian reviewer (2011) realizes that the Palace is the source of the novel value which 'shines a light on life at the bottom of the heap, in Saudi's often forgotten villages […] casts an unflinching eye on those seduced by the glamour of palace politics'.

## Conclusion

The Saudi novel has emerged in the new millennium to interact and build a relationship with canonical and world literature. Albalawi has argued that Khal in his novels and in particular in *Throwing Sparks* attempts to use not only 'intertextuality' but

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## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

## Additional information