

A SPACE OF ISOLATION AND A LINK TO THE EXTERNAL WORLD: MICHEL FOUCAULT'S HETEROTOPIA IN *AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 TRAINS* (2019) BY MONISHA RAJESH

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Rail journeys are an indispensable part of the history of Anglophone travel writing. With the advent of the first railway lines, the train became – and has remained – a source of fascination both on the Old and New Continents. This is because railways proved to be a decisive force in a country's political, socio-economic and cultural development, often determining its influence on the international stage and indirectly contributing to crucial shifts in public sentiments. Therefore, prominent contemporary travel writers, including Monisha Rajesh, have recognised the railway's cultural phenomenon and thereby willingly incorporated train-related themes and symbols into their narratives.

Monisha Rajesh is a British journalist and travel writer born in 1982 in Norfolk, England. Her parents came from India, and although the family returned to their homeland in 1991 owing to a deep attachment to the country, they again moved back to England only two years later ("Go trotting around India"). As a journalist, she gained international experience as well as recognition writing for numerous magazines and newspapers, including *The Week*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Time* and *The New York Times*. The adventure described in *Around the World in 80 Trains* (2019) was not Rajesh's first railway experience. In 2010, she set out on a four-month train journey throughout India, making exactly eighty train trips to visit the farthest locations of the Indian rail network (Walia). The journey resulted in her first travel narrative, namely *Around India in 80 Trains*, published by Roli Books in 2012 ("Go trotting around India"). As Rajesh admits herself: "[w]ith nothing but a three-month rail pass, an outdated map, and hopeless naivety, I'd travelled 25,000 miles – the circumference of the earth – reaching the four points of the country's geographical diamond" (*Around the World* 1). The journey was a remarkable opportunity to learn about and experience the rich and diverse Indian culture firsthand (Walia), since Rajesh eventually "[had] come to understand why Indian Railways is known as the 'Lifeline of the Nation'" (*Around the World* 1).

Despite a doubtlessly life-altering experience and the success of her first travel book, Monisha "[had] sworn never to take on anything so ambitious again" (Rajesh, *Around the World* 1). Indeed, the journey was far from comfortable and safe. Not only did Rajesh mention difficult Indian weather conditions and increasing travel weariness (qtd. in Walia), but – as a woman travelling alone – she had also experienced being "groped on a night train, cornered in a station, chased down a platform, stared at, leered at, spat at, shouted at, sworn at, and spent numerous nights crouched in hotels after dark with [her] bags piled up against the door" (*Around the World* 3). Nevertheless, the lure of a train proved to be much stronger than fear. At the very beginning of her second travelogue, Rajesh states:

Little did I know that the railways had followed me home – their dust in my hair, their rhythm in my bones, their charm infused in my blood. Slowly, the symptoms began to manifest: I'd linger on bridges watching freight thundering below. On warm afternoons, I'd buy round-trip tickets just to sit in the window and read, and at night, I'd lie awake listening to distant horns sound through the darkness. It became a sickness, one that had no cure. (*Around the World* 1)

For Monisha Rajesh, train travel has developed nearly addictive qualities. She describes the relationship between her and the railway in highly physical terms, creating an almost tactile effect of symptoms felt in one's hair, bones and blood. The only solution to the travel pain is one more journey, and although the side effects might be detrimental, the appeal becomes irresistible.

This article is supposed to prove that the symbolic function of a railway in a modern travel book, such as *Around the World in 80 Trains*, resembles what Michel Foucault (1926-1984) famously called *heterotopia*. The scholar draws particular attention to the places “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect” (24). In simple terms, every heterotopia is a localised, highly specific ‘other space’ with its own rigid social codes, intense physical proximity and distinct personality – in essence, a “sort of microcosm” (Foucault 24). It is a space simultaneously isolated from the outside world and physically connected to it. Foucault claimed the sailing ship to be a “heterotopia *par excellence*” (27). This is because the ship can be understood as “a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, ... it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures” (Foucault 27). If the ship was the ultimate heterotopia of the nineteenth century, the long-distance train could be its contemporary terrestrial equivalent. Indeed, Monisha Rajesh's travelogue proves the train to be a space of isolation and simultaneously a link to the external world.

What Rajesh seems to be particularly fond of when it comes to long-distance train travel is its close resemblance to daily life. The idea implies that passengers on board are able to perform a range of everyday activities – such as sleeping, eating, working or strolling – without interrupting the continuity of a journey. Indeed, Monisha admits to her readers that “[n]o other mode of transport combined [her] two favourite pastimes: travelling the world and lying in bed” (Rajesh, *Around the World* 116). Train space becomes therefore a peculiar reflection of reality – one that isolates passengers from the outside world while at the same time recreates it within the confines of the train compartment. Following Michel Foucault, it functions as a sort of *counter-site*, “a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (24). The concept of real-life simulation combined with isolation from the outside world is precisely what characterises Foucault's “heterotopia *par excellence*” (27).

What is more, railway can foster social relationships among passengers, serving as the basis for the emergence of a new community. As Rajesh notices,

Trains provided a ready-made, rolling community where you were free to be as involved or as aloof as you wanted. Conversation and good food were almost always within arm's reach, and even if you didn't want to be the centre of attention, the sense of belonging was innate. The white noise of other people's laughter, guitar-strumming and movies, provided a cloak of comfort, and the reassurance that as long as you stayed on board, you would never be alone. (*Around the World* 130-131)

The train can function, therefore, almost as a refuge from ordinary life, offering psychological protection and a sense of belonging that have been lost amid the pressures of daily life. It relieves a traveller from everyday concerns and responsibilities but also gives them agency to decide about oneself, one's route and one's free time spent on board, since only “mealtimes [define] [their] existence, bringing structure to the languor of ... days” (Rajesh, *Around the World* 69). Rajesh's engagement with “a ready-made, rolling community” on board corresponds to Foucault's understanding of heterotopia as “a sort of microcosm” (24), meaning a confined, highly specific environment marked by its own distinct social norms, physical closeness and a strong sense of identity. Through numerous descriptions of strangers and their behaviour, conversations held in train compartments as well as meals consumed in dining cars, Rajesh attempts to offer a more intimate view of the train microcosm and introduce readers to its unique, close-knit nature.

In one of the interviews following Rajesh's first railway trip across India, the woman was asked why she considered train journeys to be more romantic than those on a plane. In reply, she stated that [a]eroplanes are so generic and bland. At the very most you talk to one, maybe two people, and the subject is never more than asking if you can squeeze past to get to the toilet, or polite chatter about the destination. It's restrictive and very self-contained, which is fine if you are just trying to get from A to B; but to enjoy travel for the sake of travel, train journeys are unrivalled (qtd. in Walia).

As it is suggested in the fragment, Rajesh understands real travel as a slow and immersive process of cultural encounters. The so-called romance of a journey involves building interpersonal relationships and holding conversations that quickly become the core of a traveller's daily existence. In contrast to airplanes, train compartments force intimacy and social interaction. Traditional seating makes passengers face one another, while communal areas, such as corridors or a dining car, typically encourage conversation. Meanwhile, plane cabins are specifically engineered to prevent relational friction. Seats face forward to discourage eye contact; thus, passengers usually prefer to withdraw into their own privacy. It is a highly policed, strictly managed space which falls more within Marc Augé's definition of a *non-place* (defined by anonymity and transaction) rather than Foucault's *heterotopia*.

What is more, train journey allows a traveller to witness gradual transitions between places, since "[b]y air, the notion of being in-between was constant, but by rail there were always villages, towns and seas emerging like stepping stones between destinations" (Rajesh, *Around the World* 31). Foucault argues that heterotopia is not only physically linked to the outside world but has "the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites" (24) and must be able to juxtapose "in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25). A train, which is physically connected to the ground and cuts through actual geography, bridges vastly different panoramas observable through a single window – the inner city, industrial suburbs, quiet agricultural lands as well as remote wilderness. Furthermore, its passengers often comprise a diverse cross-section of society – including commuters, tourists, working-class locals and wealthy pensioners – who remain enclosed within the same physical space. Hence, the railway becomes a highly relational area where typical social hierarchies and differences are contested. As a heterotopia, it remains a physical, social and cultural 'pressure cooker' that preserves authentic friction of travel.

Another significant aspect which connects railways with Foucault's concept of heterotopia is the idea that trains may become tangible samples of different cultures, memories and identities – to put it in simple terms: miniatures of countries they pass through. During the course of her journey, Monisha Rajesh states that "[t]rains would always be an open window into the soul of a country and its people" (*Around the World* 304). Although the woman noticeably seeks to engage with local communities wherever she travels, her trip to North Korea – which constitutes one of the longest and most descriptive passages in the book – could be treated as the most accurate narrative representation of this statement. This is so because travelling through North Korea is not particularly conducive to engaging with local people, which stems from the journey's tight schedule and a constant supervision by tour guides. Nevertheless, Rajesh quickly realises that local trains create a space well suited to intimate conversations and direct observations "without being told what to see and how to feel" (*Around the World* 191).

Firstly, while being on the train Rajesh attempts to talk not only with other foreign participants of the tour but principally with the seemingly-unapproachable North Korean tour guides. Presumably the longest and most memorable one is the conversation with Miss Kim, who offers an insight into growing up in a North Korean diplomatic family and shares with Monisha her ambitions, disappointments and personal dreams. Thanks to this encounter, Miss Kim can be approached as an individual, and readers have an opportunity to recognise her personality rather than view her only as a symbol of state regime.

Secondly, a train window allows for an objective and relatively safe observation of local life, especially the one outside of the capital. Being given such an opportunity, Rajesh reports:

As we passed through local stations, the sweet smell of rubbish that often rotted between the tracks was noticeably absent. For all the criticism of the regime it had some reasons to be proud. The cities looked as though they were scrubbed and washed every night. Elderly women carried dustpans and brushes and even a handful of leaves would be swept up in an instant. (*Around the World* 196)

The fragment proves that Rajesh is far from viewing North Korea only in a negative light. She is certainly aware of the shortcomings of its political regime and does not restrain from expressing her frustration, as when being forced to worship its political leaders. However, despite all the controversy, she is also able to recognise individual people in the midst of everyday life, for instance by admiring their positive traits and dedication to the common good.

What is more, Rajesh strives to make contact with isolated ‘others.’ She describes one particular incident that took place on a North Korean train as follows:

Just then a freight train began to draw parallel with our carriage. It was the closest we had ever been to local people: I could see right into the driver’s cabin where three men were sitting together in grey overalls; ... as we attempted to wave they all waved back and started laughing. It was the first positive response. The engine eventually ran alongside us and the three staff gave us a thumbs-up ... They were no more than an arm’s reach away and we all jumped up and stood at the glass like children, that piece of glass representing so much that I wished we could break. (*Around the World* 194)

It could be argued that the train window functions as a sort of mediating screen which does not just isolate the travellers but actively curates and filters their relationship with the outside world. Speaking of heterotopias, Foucault used the metaphor of a mirror serving as a “placeless place” (24). When you look into it, he explained, “[you] see [yourself] there where [you are] not, in an unreal, virtual space, that opens up behind the surface” (Foucault 24). Moreover, the mirror reconstructs the ‘real’ space you are actually standing in, making it visible from a distance. The train window that separates Rajesh from local people plays a similar role to that of Foucault’s mirror. It is a physical sheet of glass that separates two contrasting realities: the warm, safe, relatively static interior of a compartment and the cold, dynamic, rushing exterior landscape. When passengers look through it, they are afforded indirect access to the external, ‘other’ world – in this sense, the North Korean society. As a result, the traveller remains insulated from the outside and yet deeply connected to it. The possibility of such a paradox lies in the heterotopian conceptualisation of the railway space.

To sum up, the train space, which forms the backdrop to the events in modern travel books – such as *Around the World in 80 Trains* (2019) – may be regarded as an example of Foucault’s heterotopia. Embodying the defining characteristics of this famous concept, several of which have been discussed above, the railway can be understood as a contemporary terrestrial equivalent to the sailing ship which, in Foucault’s view, realised “heterotopia *par excellence*” (27). For Monisha Rajesh, the train was indeed a space of isolation and simultaneously a link to the external world. It offered the semblance of everyday life, yet was governed by its own distinctive rules, also depending on national and cultural factors. And fundamentally, it was the key to acquaint oneself with the ‘other space’ – the experience made increasingly difficult by contemporary fast-paced means of transport.

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