

Theorizing the Urban Space: City, Space and Place

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Abstract: *Vis-à-vis this instrumentality of modernity in different narratives, we find a necessary emergence of the representation of urban space – the geographical crystallization of the alluring beauties of the city into textuality. Against the backdrop of the intermingling issues like modernity and narratives the American social critic Sharon Zukin in the oft cited book *The Cultures of Cities* (1995) rightly points out: “Modern cities ... owe their existence to a second, more abstract symbolic economy devised by ... officials and investors whose ability to deal with the symbols of growth yields “real” results in real estate development, new business, and jobs.” (7) At this point Manuel Castells’ statement may well be referred to indicate the multiplication of space in the modern age. Castells in the book titled *The Power of Identity* (1996) observes that ‘territorialized identity’ is at the root of the ‘worldwide surge of local and regional governments’ as significant actors in both representation and intervention. Further Castell adds that the ‘reinvention of the city-state’ is a salient characteristic of this ‘new age of globalization’ that additionally connotes the rise of trading, international economy and the origin of the Modern age. Due to varied philosophical, ideological, artistic and cultural roots of the cities it is impossible to offer a single definition of what a city really means – the more one tries to grab the meaning of a city the more difficult it becomes for understanding.*

Keywords: *City, Urban Space, Modernity, textuality*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Well known cultural critic Jonathan Raban in his oft cited book *Soft City* (1974) points out that the idea of the city is a ‘controllable option between heaven and hell’ (14). This Janus faced standpoint of any city is the hallmark of the urban space. The conceptualization and consideration of city as a matter of discourse in the critical parameter have enriched not only the theoretical execution but also the fields of literature. *Vis-à-vis* this instrumentality of modernity in different narratives, we find a necessary emergence of the representation of urban space – the geographical crystallization of the alluring beauties of the city into textuality. The city becomes a stimulating place for the characters. Urban theorists like Henry Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Michael de Certeau, Doreen Massey have all focused on the evolution of city space in terms of cultural and economic standpoint. Though there is no conscious involvement to romanticize the city in these cultural critics’ theorization, the city space emerges as a strong character in the postmodern world. Taking cue from some social studies on urban space this article will focus on how city becomes vibrant with the voices of theoretical discourses.

2. WHAT THE CRITICS SAY?:

The reputed cultural critic T.G. McGee in the thought provoking essay “Catalysts or Cancers? The Role of Cities in Asian Society” puts the roles of the cities in exclusive parameters – ‘Catalysts’ or ‘Cancers’. Another great critic of urban space Ursula K Hicks in the Introduction to *The Large City: A World Problem* (1974) writes:

All over the world the great cities are in trouble. The problem of how to deal with the large urban concentrations of the modern world has not yet been solved. It is a problem which besets not only the advanced countries, but afflicts all areas with dense populations and consequently large cities. (3)

As the concept of city is nourished by human imagination, textuality offers a strong sense of visuality of the city. The journey from city to text was started a few decades ago as pointed out by Raymond Williams in his celebrated essay “Modernism and the Metropolis”:

Paris, Vienna, Berlin, London, New York took on a new silhouette as the eponymous City of Strangers, the most appropriate locale for art made by the restlessly mobile émigré or exile, the internationally antibourgeois artist. From Apollinaire and Joyce to Beckett and Ionesco, writers were continuously moving to Paris, Vienna and Berlin, meeting there exiles from the Revolution coming the other way, bringing with them the manifestos of post-revolutionary formation. (Walder 185)

What is important to note in the abovementioned observation is that Modernity is always the marked feature of the city. *Vis-à-vis* this instrumentality of modernity in different narratives, we find a necessary emergence of the representation of urban space – the geographical crystallization of the alluring beauties of the city into textuality. In the Introduction to *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin And Gareth Griffiths point out the

construction of 'self' and the predicted role that the sense of dislocation plays in the formation of selfhood: "A valid and active sense of self may have been eroded by *dislocation*, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour." (9, original emphasis) This sense of 'dislocation' casts its impact on the characters (particularly the members of the diasporic community) to be involved in the nostalgia of loss.¹ Vis-à-vis the construction of identity, T.K. Oommen in *Citizenship, Nationality and Ethnicity* (1997) observes:

Individuals and collectivities tend to invoke the appropriate and/or convenient element from their identity-sets which consist of their total number of identities. It is the invoking of an identity, while ignoring the context, that creates problems and raises the issue of legitimacy. That is to say, the idea of one master identity being displaced by another master identity as society 'modernizes' or 'progresses' is the wrong way of looking at the empirical processes ... Many of the contentious issues in the world today are due to the invoking of identities, while ignoring the contexts. (11)

3. STANDPOINTS OF THE URBAN THEORISTS:

Against the backdrop of the intermingling issues like modernity and narratives the American social critic Sharon Zukin in the oft cited book *The Cultures of Cities* (1995) rightly points out: "Modern cities ... owe their existence to a second, more abstract symbolic economy devised by ... officials and investors whose ability to deal with the symbols of growth yields "real" results in real estate development, new business, and jobs." (7) At this point Manuel Castells' statement may well be referred to indicate the multiplication of space in the modern age. Castells in the book titled *The Power of Identity* (1996) observes that 'territorialized identity' is at the root of the 'worldwide surge of local and regional governments' as significant actors in both representation and intervention. Further Castell adds that the 'reinvention of the city-state' is a salient characteristic of this 'new age of globalization' that additionally connotes the rise of trading, international economy and the origin of the Modern age. (357) Vis-a-vis such locational determinants as space requirements one may refer to the Indian scholar Jasbir Jain's significant focus on 'location' in her book *Beyond Postcolonialism* (2006) where she contends that 'location' determines our geography and this sense of location is definitely 'connected with power'. (44) Writers and observers of/on cities have always focused on the ambiguity in the city life as Henry Lefebvre in *Writings on Cities* (1996) points out: "To think of the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation, the trivial and poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation." (53) When the problem continues that "Space still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical; time as richness, life, dialectic, the revealing context for critical social theorization." (Soja 11) Soja goes on to offer a pedagogic solution: "My intent is not to erase the historical hermeneutic but to open up and recompose the territory of the historical imagination through a critical spatialization." (12) Social space implies, as Doreen Massey writes in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), "a simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism." (3) At this intersection of space and city it would be relevant to mention the urban critic Michel De Certeau's observation:

Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible. Within this ensemble, I shall try to locate the practices that are foreign to the 'geometrical' or 'geographical' space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions. These practices of space refer to a specific form of *operations* ('ways of operating'), to 'another spatiality' an 'anthropological', poetic and mythic experience of space) and to an *opaque and blind* mobility characteristic of the bustling city. A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city. (qtd in Gupta 219)

Against the backdrop of mental geography in narrating a city, Nilanjana Gupta writes in *Cultural Studies* (2008):

An outsider to a city is part of a different history of the concept of the city. The city becomes more than a place to live – it becomes an integral part of the individual's desires, fears and successes. Successfully negotiating life in the city becomes a celebration of one's sense of creating an identity for oneself. In these acts, the city itself is proved to be a shifting, unstable concept in itself one that is created by one's very sense of being an outsider. (227)

Vis-à-vis this making of city space as a social product, it would be relevant to refer to G.N. Devy's essay "Hoshiyar Shaher: The Intelligent City" where the essayist goes on to narrate that due to varied philosophical, ideological, artistic and cultural roots of the cities it is impossible to offer a single definition of what a city really means – the more one tries to grab the meaning of a city the more difficult it becomes for understanding.

4. CONCLUSION:

What is important to note in the abovementioned discussion is that Modernity is always the marked feature of the city. The regular disfiguration of the citizens through the paradigm of dislocation needs the positive politics of changeability that will disrupt the ongoing *status quo* of the city public. Vis-à-vis this instrumentality of modernity in

different narratives, we find a necessary emergence of the representation of urban space – the geographical crystallization of the alluring beauties of the city into textuality. As the cities have been the pivots of literature in many time specific narratives, it is significant to mark how the city based texts to be read and reread through the characters' psychological topography.

Notes:

1. As Vijay Mishra in his critical study *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) very precisely comments: "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way." (10) In the Introduction to *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora* (2008) Susan Koshy in an argumentative way points out:

The formation of South Asian diaspora offers a vantage point for writing a transnational history of minoritization because it takes a subject normally viewed in isolated national area studies, or postcolonial studies, and formulates it on a global scale ... Thus, the South Asian diaspora offers a powerful heuristic for identifying the interplay of local contexts and global structural forces in producing the social exclusion of religious and cultural minorities in modernity. (Koshy and Radhakrishnan 4)

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