
Microgeographies and the Entwined Places in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*

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Abstract:

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* weaves together memory, history and fiction. The novel is a 2012 Booker Prize shortlister. *Narcopolis* is set in an opium den in 1970's Old Bombay. It encompasses wider range of human experiences by moving between borders of past and present, class and religion, reason and imagination, etc. It shows the way by which bodies are constituted out of various spaces. The novel is intensely spatial in telling the stories of places at multiple scales. This study highlights the intertwined places and their mutual shaping as it appears in the novel. Microgeographies like body, home, city and street in the novel are entwined and overlapping. Places are open to the inscription of political, religious, historical and economic forces. Bodies, and the representation of them in particular temporal or geographical contexts, reveal spatiality's influence on bodies. Spatial representations are shown as the site of embodied practices of religion, geography, history and discourses.

Keywords: place, body, microgeographies, intertwined place, spatial scales, spatial practices, power, borders.

Introduction

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* is a Bombay narrative. The novel is intensely spatial in telling the stories of places at multiple scales- locales at microscale or microgeographies (Soja). It is evident in the detailing of spatial scales like bodies, borders, streets and cities in the novel. Intertwined places and their mutual shaping in the novel, captures the attention of the reader. Micro-geographies like body, home, city and street in the novel are entwined and overlapping. They mutually affect and interact.

Microgeographies and the Entwined Geographies in *Narcopolis*

Narcopolis pays keen attention in narrating microgeographies. A close relationship exists between bodies and places: "people and places are imagined, embodied and experienced in ways that are . . . radically and inextricably intertwined with each other" (Bondi and Davidson 337). Place plays an important role in producing and reproducing social relations/identities (Massey, "Spaces of Politics"). In addition, the material body

actively engages in the production of space. Hence, bodies and places are mutually constituted; they construct each other

Spatial complexity of *Narcopolis* is hinted in the very beginning of the novel. The story of *Narcopolis* is described as, “not fiction or dead history but a place you lived in once and cannot return to” (2) and the novel starts with defining itself as a story about “Bombay, which obliterated its own history by changing its name and surgically altering its face” (1). The entwined nature of place is marked as a combination of place and time, and the time that is both past and the present, that is both story and history.

It shows the way by which bodies are constituted out of various spaces. Bodies, and the representation of them in particular temporal or geographical contexts, reveal spatiality’s influence on bodies. Spatial representations are shown as the site of embodied practices of religion, geography, history and discourses. Body is controlled by the place. Thus the room of Rashid’s Khana “made people talk in whispers, as if they were in a place of worship,” (148). So while in khana, Rashid prefers to sit cross legged as he thinks he is “a businessman, a father. He wasn’t going to lie there with his legs open to the world” (148). Spatiality of the body is suggested in describing Dimple’s dreams because many of them are set in “somewhere in Bombay, Malabar Hill maybe, or Breach Candy, or Marine Drive, or Cuffe Parade, some neighbourhood where the rich lived, because everybody in her dream was rich” (60). Thus both the memories and the dreams are revealed as extremely spatial. It underlines spatiality as the underlying force of all cultural practices.

There are portrayals of those who are deprived of histories and spatialities to cling to. The beggar woman in the woman lives and dies in the pavement of the city without being claimed by religion or caste. The Pathar Maar’s killing of a mother and baby “who were sleeping under the Grant Road Bridge” (43) symbolically projects the unprotected marginal zones occupied by the subaltern in the grand narratives of the urban space. Salim “had no family and the body went unclaimed” (203) after his death. Lee is presented as subjected to a series of spatial transformations “a refugee driving from town to town” (76). Lee’s dreams about his home land and the dreams to return the homeland only remain a dream as he dies as a refuge in India. Dimple is deprived of memories and history: “she had no memories at all; perhaps she was stealing other people’s because she had none of her own.” (240). The naming process by which she receives her present name is significant as Dimple’s story as she remembers it now starts only with that although it is a history that others had selected for her. As it is Tai who had named her like that and put her in to the profession as a worker in a brothel.

Place bound notions exist in the matter of dressing patterns also. Thus Dimple wears different dresses like sari, salwar, or burka according to the different occasions. Rashid, the owner of opium khana, discourages his staff Dimple from wearing burkha in the Khana, as he says his customers are “conservative about some things and they would not take kindly to a woman in a burkha making the pipe” (159). The When visiting a church Dimple wears

something other than Burkha and kneels down at the church to keep the propriety of the body expected at this place (200).while even when appear in a night time restaurant Farheen's body is 'properly covered up' to suit the body space bordered by a specific religion: "And though she wasn't wearing a burkha, she was covered up, she was decent," (283)- bodies as religiously coded and conditioned. Woman's body thus becomes subject to the molding processes within social place like home and gender roles are naturalized and asserted through the repeated practices of everyday life: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43-44).

Spatial practices also are culture bound. Both place is a cultural artefact. Place is inclusive of material physical location as well as social and imaginative elements: "Places are duplicitous in that they cannot be reduced to the concrete or the 'merely ideological'; rather, they display an uneasy and fluid tension between them" (Cresswell, *In Place /Out of Place* 13). Places marked with specific boundaries necessitate particular behavioral patterns. The encampment of the labour camp has its own cultural boundaries. Thus Lee's father was allowed to smoke and sing in the camp, "but he was not to speak to his fellow workers or look at books or use a pen" (88). Thus Lee instructs dimple the proper way of drinking the milkshakes, by pointing to the others in the restaurant and Dimple simply imitates that (54). Spatial practices also are shown as culturally conditioned. Thus Lee "learned to drive like an Indian" (118) after his arrival in India. Bodily practices like eating food also is culture bound. Thus Jamal's Brahmin friend is not eating meat. Religious places also have its own spatial rules. Thus Khalid's rejection of Rashid's invitation to share his food is seen as a rude behavior and an 'unMuslim thing' (149). Places are marked by the presence of specific type of bodies and expected patterns of relations. Any deviation from it consequently invites the public gaze. Thus Dimple and Lee becomes the centre of attention as they walk through the street: "They walked for some of the way and he received steady attention on the street. They both did" the reason for this special attention is that Lee is a foreigner, a refugee from mainland China, and Dimple looks much similar to him in appearance (54).

Places marked with specific boundaries necessitate particular behavioral patterns. Place making and fixing of propriety rules are culturally decided: "A place is made when we take an area of space and intentionally bound it and attempt to control what happens within it through the use of (implicit and/or explicit) rules about what may or may not take place" (Sack 243). The encampment of the labour camp has its own cultural boundaries. Thus Lee's father was allowed to smoke and sing in the camp, "but he was not to speak to his fellow workers or look at books or use a pen" (88).

The place and the time of city are presented as marked culturally. Thus Rashid thinks as he sees the street "It was a holiday of some kind, a Hindu holiday, because the temple was full of people" (137). The city spaces are subjected to time bound cultural presences or absences. Thus the street through which Rashid walks is particularly marked by the cultural

event of a holiday. At the same time the it is also characterized by a specific group of bodies marked as Hindus. Bodies and spaces are revealed as mutually constitutive and defining. Spatial divisions across religious lines are made explicit through bodies. Body is shown as the most significant site of cultural classifications, divisions and religious representations. It is made clear to Rumi's words to Dom, "As a Nasrani, you should feel it as much as me. Okay, all Muslims cannot be trusted but what about the Hindus?" (217).

Rashid remembers how he had faced many unpleasant situations in the city because of his Muslim identity. Body as shown as having marks showing its religious/cultural grouping as Rasheed hints about the modern times when bodies are physically inscribed by religion "The city has changed, people wear their religion on their faces. As a Muslim I feel unwanted in many places..." (216). He also admits that his bodily practices explicitly reveal his religious affinities as he says: "Mine is a way of knowing me." (216). hence Rashid's words reveal religions power over the body space. To him his religion and its practices serve as a way of distinguishing him from others. Religious inscription on body also affects distinct spatial practices like having exclusive food habits. Hence, in contrast with a Man like Rashid, who is fond of eating mutton, Rumi is a pure vegetarian (247). It exposes the strange interplay of religion, cultural divisions, body and bodily practices like food.

Even a name is revealed as having religious meaning is attached to it, as Rumi is questioned by Rashid about the reason for having a Muslim name for a Hindu person (217). Cultural classification is shown as matter of being attacked or not being attacked at certain times. Dimple is once saved from a religious clash in the street, on the basis of her claim as a Christian. So she ironically says like this: "If I'd been wearing a burkha they would not have spared me, the dress saved my life." (204).

Landscapes are also affected by the writing of ideologies on them. The cultural inscriptions on the geography are hinted in Rashid's passing reflections on the effect of various policies and ideologies on Indian soil: "the years of regulation and control and planned socialism"... (153). Thus places marked with national boundaries and the various spaces in them are shown as affected by the cultural inscriptions in the form of policies and guiding principles, since all of them are manifestation of powerful discourses.

Places at various scales are marked with economic relations. For instance, bodies are writ with economic relations in the culture. "poor people in the suburbs are victims of a failed experiment, the Planned Socialist State of India,..."(2). Body is seen as carrying the traces of unequal economic relations in the culture. Thus the woman whom Rumi meets in the town and has sex with, is a mother of a small child because her breasts are swollen and 'wet at the nipples' (172). And the woman from whom he buys powder in his escape from Safer has a baby at her breast and tells about the economic conditions that lead her to selling it, namely the death of her brother who used to earn money for them (249-250). Body/bodily practices are also controlled by the economic relations. Thus Rashid's habit of eating mutton

two or three times a week is related to his financial set up: “Because he could afford it, he ate meat every day, sometimes twice a day, sometimes mutton and chicken” (149).

Body spaces too bear different types of cultural coding. Thus the woman whom Rumi meets in the street has ‘shopping bags like a house wife’ (170); Rumi has saffron tilak near his shaved hairline when he appears in the Bandra station.(207); Dom sees the burkha-clad teenage girls in the street (280); tea boy appears in Jamal’s office in blue uniform etc. are some of such sights which reflects body as subject to cultural coding. Pepsi, the Nigerian who comes to Raheed’s khana has a ‘prayer bruise on his forehead’ and ‘gold-rimmed spectacles’ on his face (218). While the first one reflects his religious marking on the materiality of the body his shining shoes, gold-rimmed spectacles and business shirt signifies the marks of modernity/capitalism.

The cultural making of bodies is ironically put in the saying of the narrator, “Then there are the addicts, the hunger addicts and rage addicts and poverty addicts and power addicts, and the pure addicts who are addicted not to substances but to the oblivion and tenderness that substances engender.” (39). Thus a reference is made to the non-material traces carved on body space. These traces are presented as the after effects of various discourses and ideologies in the society. At the same time bodies with similar traces are classified as a single group.

The space of home itself can be marked by the borders drawn by religion and class. For instance, Rumi’s conflicts with his wife is resulting from the caste divisions between two. At the same time it is related to the strange economic set up of the family where, Rumi and his wife are from different economic classes. Rumi’s low income also add fuels to the quarrels (160-161). Thus marriage and family are as shown as institutions with economic base, more than having roots in love or companionship.

Certain boundaries are culturally marked by the presence of a particular group of people in it. For instance the Chinese people in the city live together and they are separated from the surroundings (58). places are also exclusively marked by class politics, as see in the example of Topaz, a beer bar frequented by cops (283). The cultural borders that exist in the city create separate places for each cultural group. Thus after Lee’s death Dimple takes the ashes after cremation to the *Chinese* graveyard in Sewri. Similarly, Dimple who lives in close proximity with Rasheed’s house, experiences more distance culturally. In spite of her stay in the apartment on the half landing between Rashid’s khana for more than ten years “she had never been to his home and knew nothing about his family life” (190). Rashid’s wife never talked to Dimple and Rahid’s son hated her for a period. Rashid on the other hand “didn’t like to be seen with her in public” (190). Thus Dimple is shown as living in the peripheries of the Rashid’s family. It is her in-between position in the spatiality of body and her acting as a sexual partner for Rasheed outside the home, which brings about this spatial exclusion. Thus the spaces of the body and space of the home are shown as intimately related. Bodies are inscribed by these notions of borders and the associated ideas

of belonging or estrangement. Lee is not free from the age old narrations of belonging and native place. The emotional attachment to one's native place is mirrored in Lee's saying to Dimple:

"A man who does not return to his native place is like a man who dresses in finery and sits in the dark, he told her. He had always planned to return to China in his old age, to die there and be buried beside his ancestors. He said, You promise to rebury me in China." (120).

The reality of the borders are revealed as bringing with it exclusionary politics operating at various levels. For instance, the exclusionary politics of ideologies that tend to get rid of the poor is suggested in Rashid's linking of the 'Pathar Maar' incident to the 'Garibi Hatao campaign' of the Congress party: "The Pathar Maar is a Congress stooge," said Rashid. 'this is the culmination of the garibi hatao campaign" (44). The poor are thrown to the margins of the urban space and left to the violent erasure processes run by symbolic figures like 'Pathar maar'. While most of the descriptions of this killing involves the murder of women. Thus the exclusionary politics are also revealed as carrying gendered motives. Power is embedded forms as "the ways in which meanings are spun around the topoi of different lifeworlds, threaded into social practices and woven into relations of power" (Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* 76). Thus material landscape of vehicles, rooms, houses, streets, objects, bodies etc. become various sites of cultural inscription. Even a single word like 'antique' demonstrates the cultural coding on space (Thayil 215). Thus something named as an antique is supposed to bear dominant historical traces. As we see in the novel Rashid tries to give the status of an antique to Dimple's 'opium pipe' that Lee gifted her. By interpreting the opium pipe to the level of an antique, Rasheed could successfully improve his business. It shows how the spatial representations of various types are deeply political in nature.

Place is subject to manifestation of power relations. The postmodern experiences with cultural barriers on the spatial existence of bodies are symbolically put in the Newton Xavier's episode. The issues of citizenship, state of refugees, governmental controls by means of passports and identity documents, prohibition of the free flow of bodies across national and urban borders etc. are explicitly stated. Even a brothel has its definite pattern of spatial organization and hierarchical structure. Thus Tai is the organizing power in the brothel one who manages the affairs of the brothel effectively for the Lala who owns it. Along with it, she expects to hand over the same to Dimple later. "Dimple was the tai's chela, the tai-in-waiting. When she was old and no longer able to work, she'd take care of the business and oversee the other randis" (130)

City spaces are shown as controlled by the state power. Thus state power is shown as manifesting through systems like Customs and excise. Thus Khalid talks to Rashid: "all the khanas will be closed, ours included. Last month, they closed six" (153). The discursive practices in the urban politics operate through these kinds of spatial rules. Even when opium

khanas are being closed, the heroine is made available in the city. This shows the biased nature of these spatial rules.

The ‘Customs and Excise notice tacked to the wall’ on Rashid’s Khana is also an instance of spatial representation of power (175). While places like Rashid’s khana manages to overcome the regulations made by the governmental agencies through a spatial change—that is a temporary shifting to another place at the event of the closure of their shop near Shuklaji street: ‘Meanwhile, we have a temporary shop and we keep going.’(176). The governmental attempts of spatial control are effectively resisted through practices of spatial changes and spatial reterritorialisation .

At the same time the dominant voice of the State is repeatedly echoed through the various agencies- like writers, journalists, literary critics and party activists who all “recommended that the author be sent to prison” (91). They also demand to subjugate the body space of Lee’s father for the forced representational practices of the state. City spaces with its posters denouncing Lee’s father, and pages in newspaper and magazines with pages of criticism acts as different sorts of representational sites for the writing of the dominant inscriptions of the power. A Taylor argues, force and coercion are sometimes directly involved in bodily practices, and hierarchies of power can generate troubling ethical concerns” (xxvi). Even the body space of the novelist who criticizes lee’s father is taken as a representational site for the state as he was only “echoing what his masters told him” (Thayil 91). This episode shows the power of the state that manifests implicitly through the bodies that acts in conformity and explicitly through the bodies that acts in resistance. Body is again projected as the site of power, spatial representations, spatial conflicts and spatial resistance. The body as object, the Regulated Body, is a body that is being shaped to conformity to external rules and regimes (Cregan, *The Sociology of Body* 7-8).

The strange interplay of language, culture and place is made when Lee teaches Dimple some basic words in Chinese, so that “she could haggle with the vendors at the Chinese shop where she went to buy vegetables and fish” (70). Thus it is clear that in spite of its placing in Bombay streets Chinese shops are linguistically exclusive. The only accepted form of communication is in Chinese.

Questions of spatial propriety arises as Rumi, the body marked culturally as Hindu, carries a name , that resembles a recurring representation of another religion- thus Rashid asks Rumi:” ‘Tell me why you have the name of a great Muslim poet if you are a Hindu?’” (217). the cultural basis for this question is that the name ‘Rumi’ resembles another name from history, namely, Jalal al-Din Rumi, the great poet. So for Rashid to have a ‘Muslim’ name for a ‘Hindu’ body is an ‘out of place’ spatial practice (Cresswell). Thus rashid’s question echoes his claims over a name (‘Rumi’) and a body (the poet). Similarly, the girl whom Rumi meets in the *Nikita Ladies & Gents Beauty Salon*, also asks him about his religious identity as by name it feels as a Muslim one.

Even linguistic practices are place bound. Rashid's urge to Dimple to call him 'Rashidbhai' is an instance of resistance to standardization of culture by means of language. At the same time he connotes the place bond notions of propriety. 'You call me Rashidbhai or Bhai, not Mr Rashid, this is not America.' (124).

The discursive nature of the concept of righteousness is revealed in the course. The relative nature of right and wrong is exposed by Lee: "I on wrong side in war. You know why? Because we lose. If you lose, you wrong." (65). The right and wrong in any cultural set up is only a matter of power politics. This is exactly what Foucault says about the discursive nature of knowledge. The absurdity of the spatial laws are hinted in *Narcopolis*. Thus in spite of his explicit murder of the Lala Salim is not arrested in the riot times in the city. The large scale violence and massacre is not receiving much police attention. But Salim is 'arrested for a robbery he knew nothing about' (203) after the city had returned to normalcy (203). After the enquiry Salim is reported by the police as committed suicide, while the 'corpse bore bruises' there by raising questions about the police claims. It reminds Foucault's saying on "the way in which the body itself is invested by power relations" (*Discipline* 24) Power of the state is exhibited through the constant observation of people. Subsequently, the places and practices in the city are politically mapped and subject to omnipresent policing.

Violation of spatial rules is presented as resulting forced deterritorialisations. Thus a place like school has its own behavioral patterns. Newton Xavier is a school dropout, one who "was expelled for making pornographic murals in the boys' toilet" (13). It shows how the cultural boundaries of school are active enough to turn certain identities as social outcasts. Similarly Rumi is about to be expelled from Safer, the Rehab, for his violation of its spatial rules...

Conclusion

Micahel de Certeau's discussion of urban space explores the creative potential of urban spaces. Certeau makes the distinction between the strategies of power by which power marks out a space for itself and the resistive tactics of the pedestrian operating within a terrain organized by power (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 94). The constructive nature of city spaces are suggested in the saying "the street belongs to whoever takes it" (154). Places are subject to cultural production of power relations. It is designed according to the interests of those who are in power. Rashid's comment about the change from afeem/opium to heroin is indicative of the social changes it had brought. Thus spatial changes are symbolically shown as affecting cultural changes. City is perceived as a site of changes.

While a place like Rashid's khana is heterotopic as it afford a strange mixture of people from all social types: natives and foreigners, homosexuals and heterosexuals, man and 'man woman'(dimple), drugg addicts and tourists, pocket-maars and artists. In Rashid's own words: "We are all smokers here, nashe ki aulad..." (216).

Bodies are presented as crossing the boundaries of the city occasionally. Thus Dimple manages to make her presence in the hotel in the upper class area. The beggar woman in living in the pavement comes to the busy city streets and stay there for a while silently announcing her presence there. Lee is crossing the boundaries of India and China and later the boundaries between life and death. Rumi repeatedly violate the borders of the Rehab. Dom crosses the borders of past and present on the one hand and borders of the reality and imagination on the other. The regulars and visitors in the opium khana is moving between factual world and imaginative world.

Border crossings and the resultant spatial displacements are appropriated by the identities concerned. Dimple's journey from Tai's brothel to Raheed's Kahana is said as "relocating herself a piece at a time" (130). While Lee adapts to the spatial displacement that takes him to Bombay by choosing to stay in a place that satisfies him. The city is seen as a place marked by heterogeneous spatial experiences. Place's materiality to be formed, reformed and altered altogether, as Thayil presents it. The varied spatial experiences in the urban landscape make it a meeting place of many times at a single point of time. City itself is presented as experiencing many times simultaneously, as its cultures are so vivid and varied.

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