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THE URBAN PALIMPSEST IN THE NARRATIVES OF THE CITY OF KABUL

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ABSTRACT :

*The poetics of representation in a narrative of a city engages in the metaphorical and literal depiction of the urban spaces. Shaped by the diversity of elements like observation, memory, authenticity and imagination, the literary representations of a city portray the heterogeneous palimpsest images of a city. On the other hand, the historical narratives of a city chronicle the stories of urban cultural spaces that are embedded in contestation for power. Thus, the narratives of a city are embedded in the cultural spaces of a city. The city of Kabul has been experiencing conflicts and contestations between the ruling dynasties and factions led by individuals for occupation of the city and the region. The emergence of new regimes in place of the existing rulers resulted in political instabilities in the region. Thus, the narratives illustrate the images of the city and the incidents of conflict and trauma. Considering the images of the city of Kabul in Taran N Khan's *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* (2019) and Nayanima Basu's *The Fall of Kabul: Despatches from Chaos* (2024), the paper aims to analyze the poetics of representation of the transformation of the urban spaces in the city of Kabul during the change of guard in Afghanistan in the month of August 2021. Taran N. Khan a journalist explores the veiled city of Kabul from the days of her arrival in the city in the year 2006 to the days of her departure in 2013.*

On the other hand, Nayanima Basu's work chronicles the scenario of the fall of the city of Kabul from 8th August to 17th August 2021 with the collapse of the government of the Republic of Afghanistan. The narratives reflect on the city during the occupation of Afghanistan by the US-led NATO forces and their withdrawal after the return of the Taliban to power in the year 2021. The constant and frequent political instabilities present the city of Kabul in a state of flux. Consisting of the stories of the people, who are uprooted from the city, the people who are addicted to drugs, and the people who died in the city turning the city into a vast graveyard, the city is portrayed as a hotbed of conflicts and violence. An attempt to understand and interpret the urban spaces in these narratives presents the nostalgic and dystopian images of the city. Resultantly, the narratives serve as the elegies of the city. Employing the method of qualitative textual analysis and the review of the relevant works of literature, the study is essential to understand the decline of the city of Kabul in the contemporary context. The examination illuminates the impact of the political instabilities on the city leading to the transformation of the city. These and other related issues are the focus of the paper.

Keywords: Taran N Khan, Nayanima Basu, the Cityscapes of Kabul, the Palimpsest, Urban Polity

Introduction

Aimed at examining emergent frameworks and methods for the analysis and interpretation of narratives relating to the transformation of the city of Kabul in the last two decades, the paper examines the palimpsest representation of the city of Kabul in Taran N. Khan's *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* (2019) which details the transformation of the urban cultural spaces and Nayanima Basu's *The Fall of Kabul: Despatches from Chaos* (2024) that chronicles the events leading to the fall of the city from 8th August 2021 to 17th August 2021. Based on observations, experiences and memories of the city of Kabul *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* (2019) illuminates the layered nature of the city like a palimpsest. In the representation of the urban spaces that are lived, the journalist portrays the impact of political instabilities on the urban cultural spaces. Arriving in the city in the year 2006, the author explores the veiled city up to the days of her departure in 2013. Published in the year 2019, the memoir presents the cityscapes of the city of Kabul that are heterogeneous and transforming. On the other hand, *The Fall of Kabul: Despatches from Chaos* (2024) informs about the chain of events leading to the fall of the city of Kabul to the Taliban-led forces. The journalist realizes the crisis in the city that began with the withdrawal of the US-led NATO forces followed by the entry of the Taliban-led forces into the city on 15th August 2021. Examining the emerging cityscapes at the time of the crisis, the journalist unfolds the events through her interviews, updates from the diplomats and officials working in consulates, and individuals working for different intelligence agencies and journalists.

Engaging with the memoirs authored by two journalists from India who lived and experienced the city while reporting on the events unfolding to the media houses, the paper reflects on the representation of the transformation of the urban spaces like a palimpsest. The experiences and observations of the journalists are translated into the narratives of the city. *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* portrays the transformation of the city during the occupation of the city by the US-led NATO forces for more than two decades and *The Fall of Kabul: Despatches from Chaos* reflects on the urban spaces in Kabul after the withdrawal of the US-led NATO forces from the city. Though the journalists are outsiders and their knowledge of the city of Kabul is limited, the memoirs are enriched by their observations and experiences of the city.

Unpacking the Cityscapes

The study attempts to unpack the questions on the poetics of representation of the city of Kabul in these memoirs because of the relationship between literary forms and urban

spaces. The act of representation is understood as a mode of translating the perception of reality. The subject of representation, the relationship between space and place, and the city and its people provide the frameworks for the analysis of the narratives as palimpsest.

Making of the Spatial Stories

Reflecting on the people who lived in the city and the people who claimed their right to the city, the lived spaces are reconstructed through spatial stories that the authors recreate. Though journalists are guided by the authenticity of the situations, they are also led by personal experiences and the perception of reality.

Living with her colleagues and staying away from the family, Taran becomes familiar with the city and presents the lived spaces of the city that are filled with anxiety and nostalgia whereas Nayanima Basu was put up in the Hotel Serena in the city where the journalists from media houses stayed and reported. Ignoring the words of advice and the dangers prevailing in the city, the act of walking in the city was an attempt to know the city.

The journalists tour and map the city and their narratives serve as spatial stories of the city. Filled with memory, observations and experiences, the readers are reminded of the figure of the flaneur employed by Charles Baudelaire and the significance of the Flaneur as a method. The acts of flanerie reveal the layers of the city. Taran N Khan declares “In this ‘amnesiac city’, I found that walking offered a way to exhume history - a kind of bipedal archaeology as well as an excavation of the present” (xiv) Thus, the act of walking in the city is analyzed as the mode of spatial practice as enunciated by Michael de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).

Employing the framework of Spatial Stories, the examination of the representation of the cityscapes of Kabul in the narratives illuminates the nature of the transformation of the urban spaces as a result of the political crisis in the region. Imagining the paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks of the city as proposed by Kevin Lynch in *Images of the City* (1960), the city of Kabul is reimagined.

Walking through the settlements by the River Kabul, Taran recollects the origin of the Walled City that witnessed infighting, coups and civil wars during which the armies of Zahiruddin Babur, Timur Shah, and the Russians, the British, Tajiks and the US-led NATO forces occupied the city. The series of wars had ruined the city and the author finds the debris of war everywhere. The streets of the city are guarded and barricaded and forces are stationed in every corner. The roads are full of military vehicles and the vehicles of International aid workers as if the city is preparing for an unknown battle. The newly raised city of Kabul had

erased the history of the city that was known for poetry, scholarship and culture. The city of the present appeared unfamiliar and strange. The poetry has fled the city.

Drawing knowledge from walking, the author exercises the freedom of the self. The act of walking in the city was an act of resistance to the words of caution. The paths that the narrators walk are the routes of discovery. Noticeably, Taran N Khan finds the walls with the marks of bullets. The walls remind the tragic past during which the city served as a battleground for many wars and wounds in the psyche of the people. Realizing the gravity of suffering and the sense of alienation, the narratives present the dystopian images of the city.

The act of walking shows the journalists a way to read the city like poetry. It was an attempt to explore the city within the city. The city lends itself to multiple interpretations though meanings of urban spaces remain hidden in the shadows of the city. The explorations of the city are enriched with allusion to the history, legends, and myths of the city in Persian poetry. The city of Kabul was considered as the city of poetry but the series of wars had altered the poetic traditions of the city. It is in these wanderings, that the author attempts to map what is lost and treasured but forgotten. Thus, the narratives illuminate the spectacles of the city that inform about the urban spaces that are transforming. The perspectives in these narratives relate to the scenes emerging on the streets like a kaleidoscope.

Unfolding the Spectacles of the City

Taran N Khan realizes the spectacles of the city that include the walls with bullet marks, barricaded roads, debris of war, land mines and graves, deserted cinema halls, and crowded hospitals for the depressed and addicted. The ruined buildings, monuments and altered cityscapes reveal the forgotten and often obscure stories of the city. Interestingly, the explorations reveal the obscured spectacles of the city.

Travelling between the city of Kabul and other cities in Afghanistan, Nayanima portrays the changing spectacles of the city where the public spaces are monopolized by the agents of power. Diana Agrest notes, "The city is not only the representation of power...it is also the scene of power." (10) Further, the urban designer states, "The city is the scene of the spectacle rather than the representation of theatrical space." (11)

The explorations unfold the vast stretches of the graveyards of the unknown soldiers and the tombstones of the others rising on the horizon, layer after layer covering the surrounding hills. The author asks "Where do the graves end in Kabul?" and continues, "Names without graves, graves without bodies" (78). The narrator concludes that walking is an act of digging the tombstones to unearth the stories of the people. The graveyards that saw

the death of many soldiers during the conflicts and wars had buried their memories of the dead in them. The author adds that a pedestrian is sure to stumble over some kind of a grave while walking through the streets and “these spaces seemed to offer a story written into the earth that could only be read by walking” (65). Apart from the death of so many, the survivors had left the city as refugees along with their cultural capital making the city a large burial ground.

After detailing the stories of the graveyards, the author deals with the fallen state of the cinema halls in the city. The cinema halls thronged by the men served as an escape from the sounds of war for the commoners but the cinema halls were one of the earliest ruins that Taran was drawn to in the city. Moreover, the films were burnt and destroyed during the regime of the Taliban never realizing the fact that the cinemas marked the visual heritage of a nation. The civil war had undone the city silently. The walls with bullets and the destruction of the public amenities illustrate the visual stories of the Civil War.

Believed to cause destruction and violence, the faith in djinns caused much mental agony to people leading to addiction to drugs, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The people in distress sought help from faith healers, talismans and prayers. Some of the people visited shrines seeking solutions to get rid of Djinns. Others in the city visited doctors seeking treatment for psychological trauma caused by unending wars and drugs. Many Afghans consumed drugs as a kind of self-medication but the refugees who returned home from abroad consumed a higher amount of drugs to escape from the problems of poverty, displacement and trauma. The drug addicts included boys and men who huddled with needles over the wastelands. The men roamed around the ruined monuments and isolated buildings and the women suffered in isolation wards.

Staying in at the Hotel Serena, Nayanima reports the war intensifying between the Taliban and Afghan Forces. Awaiting the arrival of the Taliban into the city, the journalist reports that the city had no way to defend itself against the Taliban and the Afghan army was falling like a pack of cards. The journalists negotiate the orderliness and chaotic situations in their representations of the city.

Spaces of Transformation

The explorations of the journalists illumine the heterogeneous and shape-shifting cityscapes of the city that are transformed during the decades of occupation. The war was constantly moulding the contours of the city as it was influencing the psyche of the people. The narrator notices that the city is spreading across the hills. The old city of Kabul was

crumbling with chaos, though the new regions of the city were expanding on the Northern side. The residents were building and rebuilding their homes with whatever they could salvage from the ruins and relics of the wars (12). Further, the journalist notes that US-led air strikes aimed at ousting the Taliban contributed to the greater destruction of the city. However, the author notes about the attempts of some of the archaeologists to conserve the archaeological sites including the sites of the Buddhist archaeological heritage during the times of the war.

The author Taran declares that the decades of conflict had transformed the city into one of the most heavily mined cities in the world (14). There were many restrictions on social infrastructure. The settlements lacked the supply of water and other public amenities. The uncleared mines remained as the legacies of the wars and the residents had to risk their lives to reach their homes. Thousands of families fled the city, and the remaining families were disintegrated. The author realizes the abilities of the people to live with the war. Though the act of fleeing from the city involved many risks and uncertainties, the survivors anxiously waited for their reunion in the other corners of the world. The refugees were returning home with the hope of reconstructing their lives and claiming their part of the city that once belonged to them. The city of the past had vanished and the ruined state of the city disappointed the people who were returning. When the Taliban came back to power on 15th August 2021, the exodus of the people from the city to the airport reminded the author of the signs of a vanishing city. The city of the past was vanishing and it was entering an era of silence.

The modern streets in the city house book shops, coffee houses, restaurants and guest houses that provide relief for the visitors to the city. The visits of Taran N Khan to the bookhouses and libraries reveal the literary wealth of the city that is lost. The presence of underground bookshops in the city reflects the limitations to access to knowledge and education. During her visits, she was informed that many books were destroyed by the erstwhile rulers and the remaining books were stolen during the Civil War. It is noticeable that the cost of the war included not only the loss of books but also the loss of readers and readership. The loss of books is the loss of the cultural legacy and literary heritage of the city, the inheritance of which is denied to the generations of the future.

Every family in Kabul had a story of its suffering and trauma. The troubled psyche of the people due to the civil war and the regime of the Taliban discouraged the celebration of marriages though the elite and rich families arranged marriages in hotels and clubs. However,

many magnificent wedding halls mushroomed and other associated businesses like food, clothes, music and decorations, fountains and fireworks increased in the city after the ousting of the Taliban in 2001. The restaurants and guest houses were closing as international forces and aid workers were withdrawing. The author recollects that the city of Kabul was the city of hope and refuge for muhajirs in the early 1920s who left India to join the caravans to Afghanistan but now the people were looking for other better cities for their future exits and to negotiate their lives as refugees elsewhere.

The Urban Palimpsest and Multiple Frameworks

The spatial experiences of the city become the text of the narratives. The journalists imagine the urban spaces that are representational in their metaphorical representations.

By mapping the urban spaces in terms of walking in the city, the authors who are outsiders contribute to making the spatial stories of the city but the explorations are reduced to narratives. The referentiality to the city imagined is relative since the details of the experiences are lost in the process of retelling. This leads us to the role of cognitive mapping in the representation of the city. The narratives serve as the literary maps of the city though they are discontinuous in their representations. The language of representation shifts between subjective experiences and realistic portrayals of the city. The loss of referentiality and authenticity of the city imagined is explained in terms of Reductive Phenomena. However, the acts of flanerie remain an important mode of experiencing the city. The method of the Flaneur amplifies the scope of narratives that are inscribed with stories within the stories from myths and poetry that enrich the experience of reading the city.

The author recreates the stories of the city like a palimpsest. Filled with allusions from literary texts, the urban spaces are contrasted. The heterogeneous stories reveal the overlapping layers of the city. Detailing the material and metaphorical aspects of the city, the narratives attain the form of literary maps. These narratives illumine the lived, conceived and imagined spaces that are contested and contrasted. The discontinuous memory plays an important role in reconstructing the past and the present of the amnesiac city. The fact is that the narratives of the city of Kabul serve as the narratives of a city that is disappearing. The journalists conclude the memoirs with their stories of return from Kabul to India.

Conclusion

With the departure from the city, the authors capture the palimpsest nature of the cityscapes of the city of Kabul. They observe that the city was shifting and landmarks were

changing. These allied forces were leaving behind innumerable containers, ruins and debris of wars. The occupation of the city by the international forces and their acts of reconstruction altered the urban spaces like a layers of the city and its narratives. With the withdrawal of the NATO forces, the city was retreating and preparing itself for the unknown future. As international forces were preparing to withdraw, the Afghan militia was surging. The wars had remained inconclusive and Afghans were left to face the conflicts every day.

It can be concluded that the shape-shifting cityscapes in the narratives reflect the transformed city that is structured like a palimpsest. Though the study contributes to the understanding of the city in transformation, the narratives indicate the uncertainties leading to the dystopian spaces of the city. The city is imagined as a heterogeneous space where utopian orderliness and the realities are negotiated.

The narratives briefly mention the fall of cities like Kandahar, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Bagram Air Base. So it can be argued that the narratives are not only about the fall of the cities but also about the decline of a nation. The narratives reflect on the changing polity. Since a city is a dream and a vision of mankind, the stories of the emergence, growth and decline of the cities illustrate the stories of civilizations that are synonymous with the stories of transformation of the mankind. The narratives are important sources to evaluate the heritage of the city of Kabul and the study enables us to contemplate the future of the cities.

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