Questioning the Representation of Urban Space in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

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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. In Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985) the city becomes a stimulating place for the characters like Quinn. The ending offers a symbolic reading of the city space: "I returned home from my trip to Africa in February, just hours before a snowstorm began to fall on New York ... The city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end." (Auster 129-30) The conversation between New York and Quinn that has been set in the latter's mental geography is replete with the consciousness of urban environments - economic challenges, urban planning, housing, infrastructures, ecological insecurities, economic poverty and many more. Taking cue from Luc Santé's Penguin Introduction to the novel we can conclude that there have been so many novels set in New York City, but Auster's *City of Glass* is unique as it "demonstrate its extreme antiquity, its surface flimsiness compared to its massive subterranean depths, its claim on the origins of stories far older than written culture." (Auster xi) Though there is no conscious involvement to romanticize the city in Auster's narration, New York emerges as a strong character in the novel which has a lot to offer to its readers.

Key Words: City, Urban, Auster, Space, New York

"… Geography, as a social science, is concerned with the analysis of the spatial dimension of social phenomena and with the synthesis of natural as well as social variables within a regional frame." (Raza xix-xx)

Introduction:

As the "cities live in our imagination" (Prakash 3) textuality offers a strong 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. 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) 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 Intellegent 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.

Representation of New York:

Vis-a-vis the nomenclature of New York, what comes first to our mind is that what newness is there in New York that randomly draws the attention from all over the world. Is its newness lies in that fact that it endorses the 'American dream'? Apart from these interrogations what remains unquestionable is that New York is essentially

a global city. Sandhya Shukla in *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (2003) defines a 'global city' thus:

> The term "global city" has a particularly wide reach for he imagination. In its evocation of the porousness of boundaries, the fluidity of capital, peoples, and goods, and the situatedness of each point in a broader circuitry of influence, the global city may approximate the cosmopolitanism that is the basic to the contemporary experience of urban life. (79)

At this point it should be clarified that the term 'global city' is a sophisticated version of the old conception 'world city': "There are certain great cities, in which a quite disproportionate part of world's most important business is conducted. In 1915 the pioneer thinker and writer on city and regional planning, Patrick Geddes, christened them *the world cities*." (Hall 7, original emphasis) In recent times it is important to note how the sense of the city's spatiality becomes a matter of concentration for the writers. In this article I will focus on the first book titled *City of Glass* (1985) of Paul Auster's famous *The New York Trilogy*, the other two being *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1986). The plot of *City of Glass* revolves round a detective-fiction writer who later becomes a private investigator. Paul Auster, the writer of the novel becomes a character in the story whom we can refer to as Paul Auster the detective. What is interesting to note is that in all these three novels, through Auster's adept textual representation of the particular urban space, New York emerges as a strong character as Luc Santé in the Penguin Introduction to Auster's *The New York Trilogy* observes:

> Paul Auster has the key to the city. If you have spent time in New York City and fully engaged with   the   place,   chances   are   that   you   will   have   caught glimpses of that space-time continuum. You will   have   noticed   certain   cryptic graffiti, certain glossolaliac manifestos crammed onto photocopied sheets that you did not understand because   they   were   written   in   the   language   of   that   slipstream.
>
> You will have wondered about various street characters—itinerant performers and site-specific   eccentrics and inexplicable middle-of-the-night apparitions— who are, it turns out, commuters from   that realm into the workaday world. But it may be, in fact, the essence of the city,   while what passes   for   the   city   in   the average experience is nothing more than a thin coat of paint. (Auster ix-x)

The story starts with a small New York apartment where Quinn lives and where he every day would leave his apartment to walk through the city—never really going anywhere, but simply going wherever his legs happened to take him. Taking cue from the urban critics that the best way to understand a city is to involve in walking the city-streets, Quinn, in his walking the streets of city, begins to realize: "New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well." (Auster 4)[1] Vis-a-vis this scenographic extension of the territorial framework of the city, there lies Quinn's epiphanic local participation in the city space. The different places within a city differ in terms of topography as the urban critic Sophie Watson in *City Publics: The (Dis)Enchantments of Urban Encounters* (2006) points

out: "Each part of a city is distinct from each other part … each subjectivity in the city is walking through the streets with a different set of images and imaginations, constituted in personal conscious and unconscious histories." (2) Quinn's exploration draws attention to urban transformations and reconstruction - a kind of social dialogues between Quinn and New York. The signs are visceral part of city and these signs are both iconic as well as ironic as observed by Jonathan Raban in *Soft City* (1974):

> Signals, styles, systems of rapid, highly conventionalized communication, are the lifeblood of the big city. It is when these systems break down … we lose our grasp on the grammar of urban life … The city … is soft, amenable to a dazzling and libidinous variety of lives, dreams, interpretations. But the very plastic qualities which make the city the great liberator of human identity also cause it to be especially vulnerable to psychosis and totalitarian nightmare. (9)

In many passages where we find that Quinn makes an exploration of the city's hidden delicacies, there are some obvious echoes of what L. Lofland in *The Public Realm* (1998) calls 'civil inattention' – where people 'rapidly scan each other' to gain some categorical knowledge about them, before turning their glance away for 'fear of invading their privacy.' At certain times, the city becomes more a mental space rather than geographical entity: "On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked of things: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again." (Auster 4)

Conclusion:

The city becomes a stimulating place for the characters like Quinn. The ending offers a symbolic reading of the city space: "I returned home from my trip to Africa in February, just hours before a snowstorm began to fall on New York ... The city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end." (Auster 129-30) The conversation between New York and Quinn that has been set in the latter's mental geography is replete with the consciousness of urban environments - economic challenges, urban planning, housing, infrastructures, ecological insecurities, economic poverty and many more. Taking cue from Luc Santé's Penguin Introduction to the novel we can conclude that there have been so many novels set in New York City, but Auster's *City of Glass* is unique as it "demonstrate its extreme antiquity, its surface flimsiness compared to its massive subterranean depths, its claim on the origins of stories far older than written culture." (Auster xi) Though there is no conscious involvement to romanticize the city in Auster's narration, New York emerges as a strong character in the novel which has a lot to offer to its readers.

Notes:

1. "Cities are no longer internally coherent and bounded entities but parts of vast urban networks that are often regional and global in scale." (Prakash 20)

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