

# Politics of the *Para* and the Dynamics of Spatiality in Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird*

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## Abstract

When a writer writes a city it is often a conscious choice rather than a mere trope or a setting. Moreover, the tight-knit structure of the city often obscures the insight into the social fabric of city life. It is the *para* meaning a neighbourhood or locality, characterized by a strong sense of community which reveals the gaps and fissures in the social fabric of the society. Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird* (2017) opens the heart of the 1980s Calcutta through an unbiased glimpse into the *para* which comes across not only as a lane but a mesh of interconnected voices constantly making and remaking the self and the other. Building on Henry Lefebvre's theory of the "lived space," this paper attempts to locate space within the contexts of gendered bodies, mental terrains, and physical manifestations as lanes, nooks, and crannies and study the politics of spatiality through the site of the *para* in Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird*.

**Keywords:** City space; Lived space; Politics of spatiality; Resistance of art; Space as ideology.

## Introduction

"The city is a form of literature in which the streets are the lines of a book which can never be completed" (Ackroyd). Writers have deemed the city as the loci of their desire, conflict, passion, and memory to delve into the quotidian life in its intricacies for long. The act of writing a city consciously raises certain questions; what does a writer add to the act of writing the city? Does space collapse the binaries between reality and fiction? What is gained when a narrative is written from a spatial perspective? Jacques Derrida's understanding of how writings and texts are not just words on the page, but building blocks of meaning has ascertained the relevance of these questions in the present times. This notion complicates the lines

between reality and fiction and influences architectural theorists as much as literary theorists. Of particular interest to this paper are the spatial analyses of urban theorists Henry Lefebvre and Edward Soja. As spatial thinkers, they shared an interest in what has, in the wake of Lefebvre's work, come to be called "the social production of space."

Cultural geography which conceptualizes space as interdisciplinary has understood the notion of spatiality as a continuum or a process that is socially produced, lived, and represented. Therefore, to understand the city we must move beyond seeing spaces in terms of the specialization of functions and find microstructures through which we can study power dynamics. In this sense, the act of writing a city is a conscious choice. The city inhabits multiple spatial histories expressed by the movements and interactions of the bodies within it. In their perpetual making and dismantling, the cities bear an impression of what Amit Chaudhuri terms the "unfinished-ness" (Brunel University) in the context of modern cities. On the one hand, it bears an impression of ruin or fragmentation in an urban landscape. On the other hand, it also refers to the backward spaces within urbanity. However, ahead of these manifestations, the city is also indicative of a "radical openness", a potential of remaking itself. In this sense, space was no longer just a physical structure or a medium rather was understood as a milieu. It was therefore, a set of interactions with and amongst the material objects which gave birth to the lived reality of space. Through the implication of Urbanist, Henry Lefebvre's theory of the 'lived space,' this paper would attempt to locate space within the contexts of gendered bodies, mental terrains, and physical manifestations as lanes, nooks, and crannies and analyze the complexities of lived spatiality through the site of the *para* which gives an insight into the consciousness of an Indian space which is crisscrossed through the idiosyncrasies of multiple individualities in Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird* (2017).

### **The *Para* as a Lived Space**

The novel introduces the matrix of spatiality in the beginning as Majumdar writes, "It was more than a neighbourhood constructed from bricks and mortar; it was a *para*, a mesh of lanes and voices that chattered tirelessly with one another...densely honeycombed with people and houses, those streets had too much to talk about" (*The Firebird* 31). A clear distinction between a neighbourhood and a *para* foregrounds a sense of estrangement which escapes through the familiarity of surroundings and reinstates the politics of spatiality. While geographically curtailed in the same ambit, however, a neighbourhood realizes a share of common val-

ues and social control. On the other hand, a *para* gives a strong sense of community and conscience of oneness. The word has its roots in Bengali colloquial language where historically *para* often consisted of people of similar livelihood, and caste, who had a rich sense of belonging determined by a set of rules and biases. More often it is the mundane affinity with everyday safe space which resists recognition of the unfamiliar recesses. A conscious choice of distinguishing the *para* from the neighbourhood shows Majumdar's politics to reveal the consciousness of the city about the leftist sensibility.

In his, *The Production of Space* (1991) Lefebvre demarcates between the perceived (Physical), the conceived (mental), and the lived (social) space. He describes the lived space as space where "social relations project themselves into a space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing the space itself" (Soja 46). It is a space of radical openness that foregrounds all relations of dominance, subordination, and resistance in so far as one escapes the logic of objectivism and subjectivism which weakens the insight into the workings of power. The *para* situated at the epicenter of 1980s Calcutta evokes the historicity of the city which was politically aware and had a passionate edge to show up resistance in battling injustice and exploitation. Politics, as well as political events, were legitimate motifs shaping the creative endeavours in the city. Majumdar's memory dwells on this history to derive a spatiality that was built on a closed-knit structure that serves nooks and crannies as a result of a dependent relationality.

*The Firebird* (2017) set against the backdrop of 1980s theatre culture in Calcutta, which was predominantly commercial, mostly sponsored by the elite *bhadraloks* who enjoyed it as their pastime is a story about the resistance of art against the state. It was in the mid-1870s that theatre became a level ground with the commoners and introduced female actors who were essentially prostitutes. While over the ages literature has celebrated the presence of a public woman at the social fringes for sustaining art and culture, however, by the 19<sup>th</sup> century these women began to be perceived as "dangerous outcast(s)" (Gooptu 2) and a threat to the social order. This conscience of proprietorship and morality escalated through the cultural wing of the communist party of India in the 80s. The dominant sensibility of political surveillance looms over the streets of the *para* in the novel which redefined the notion of spatiality making the familiar, strange.

In this vein, the notion of social space as given by Lefebvre comes mired in politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined. The

familiar lanes of the *para* which leads to home and gives a sense of belongingness come across as a construct of 'the other.' The citizen's party lead by Trinankur becomes the face of the *para* as they determine to fix the conduct of society. The Spatial matrix, therefore, works as a tool for social control to regulate the social order. This is where Majumdar departs from Lefebvre's notion of spatiality where spaces of representation "combining the real and the imagined, thing and thought on equal terms, or at least not privileging one over the other a priori" (Soja 68). While space was othered, it also became a site for resistance through the marginalized voices of Garima, Shruti, and Ori. Lefebvre's understanding of space as ideology opens a possibility to challenge the dominant order which works as an a priori through the machinations of the party. The struggle to have space constructs the lived spatiality of the *para*. The spatiality of the city structured on the matrix of historicity-sociality-sexuality influences the workings of the space which impinges its spatiality on determining gendered roles. It was the "geography of patriarchy" which exerts power and determines "how and what constitutes difference, the weight and gravity it is given in representation" (Soja 110). In other words, the patriarchal nexus of the party materializes in exerting a moralistic compass that resists an individual's agency.

### **The (Gendered) Politics of Space**

Through this discretion, the male-dominated nexus of spatiality limits the lived spatiality of the *para*. Garima who's caught in the gendered space struggles to carve her niche however, her doubly marginalized status as a 'woman actor' makes her body a site of contestation. Elizabeth Grosz in her seminal essay "Bodies-cities" writes, "the city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, 'citified,' urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body" (242). The negotiation of power between an individual and society emphasizes that social relations of production project themselves into space, becoming inscribed there, and in the process producing the space itself. Therefore, Garima's continuous struggle between the group theatre and the commercial theatre, which blurs the lines between an actress and a prostitute, a tag naturally associated with theatre actresses who're commodities for the wealthy patrons constantly remakes her in the garb of performance.

Lefebvre recognized that "space structures and is structured by social relations of gender and sexuality" (Gieseking). While the fluidity of the *para* allows Garima access to her 'theatrical space' however, this agency comes with a price. The party who's responsible for the sanctity of the *para* ap-

appropriates the space by abandoning Garima as a bad influence on society. This constant tussle between Ori and the party to position Garima as 'the other' keeps their position in oblivion. While Garima is the provider yet her profession always keeps her away from initiating a bond more than that of exchange. Being a theatre actress, an independent woman she's aware of the voyeurism that surrounded her. Having no amiability in her marriage she explores her sexuality through her performances as society ostracizes her position to the periphery. Through her characterization, the body becomes a medium to locate and understand how space is produced.

This everyday struggle to penetrate and control the social spatiality defines the relationality of the *para*. While there's a deeply peripheral consciousness as Lefebvre exclaimed, "...these lived spaces of representation are thus the terrain for the generation of "counter spaces," spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning" (Soja 68). Yet, Majumdar's geographical imagination is shaped beyond the established dialectics of spatiality. This resistance is evident in Garima's struggle against the constraints of spatiality as she decides to leave her husband's house to find a space where she can be seen and heard. However, the narrative juxtaposes both spaces to pose a larger question of bodily confinement and territorialization as Garima could not find solace even in her newfound space, arguing that the legacy of sexism is perpetuated through spatial constructions. Moreover, her silence in confronting her son about her profession causes estrangement in their relationship and the inhibition intrinsically redefines their spatiality in the socio-cultural milieu.

A similar fate awaits Shruti who withstands the patriarchal consciousness by making her way through the *para*, and merely remains an object of titillation both for Abir and Ori. Ironically, her freedom comes through a male, her ten-year-old cousin brother, Ori. Moreover, her fascination with her aunt's life also reaches a reconciliation but at the cost of her life. This inevitable fate of a "slut's death" (*The Firebird* 178) becomes a mockery similar to Garima's whose lived space was constantly appropriated until she's left with nothing. This is where Majumdar's notion of spatiality departs from Lefebvre's understanding of the social space, where on the one hand, Garima essentializes the fluidity of space by positioning herself on her terms through her profession and by taking a stand against her husband's misconduct. However, as a woman, she has to succumb to the a priori assertion of the party's politics over her marginal status by pushing her to the fringes of the city and robbing her of her son.

Through this understanding, the slippages and fault lines of the matrix of spatiality in an Indian context appeared to be denser and more complex as it was not just a result of the socio-political reality of the times but was equally affected by the manifold versions of the immediate realities surrounding an individual. Synonymous with the politics of the *para*, Bhisam Sahni's *Tamas* (1974) delineates the gaps and fissures in pre-partition India through an insight into the *mohalla* which constantly exerts a pressure of 'becoming' on men and women alike. In the wake of the partition struggle, Sahni gives us an insight into the politics of gender performativity which weaves the trap of normativity and annihilates 'the self.' The pivotal scene of the initiation of a 15-year-old Ranveer into the politics of Master Dev Vrat's Youth Wing is clearly an exemplar of the pressure of social conditioning. The child's reluctance and dilemma in slaughtering a hen reflects a tussle between being and becoming as he hesitantly manages to pierce the bird to prove his masculinity. Another significant scene comes when the peon's daughter, Prakasho, a Hindu is forcefully married to Allah Rakha; though initially she resists by not talking and eating at their place however eventually succumbs to the duties of a wife. The scene clearly explicates the undercurrent of gendered spatial dynamics wherein the patriarchal power structure strictly conditions the identity formation of an individual in the garb of social conditioning.

Consequently, the gendered identity is interpellated with the hidden gaps in the social fabric of the *para* or the *mohalla* which guarded the interests of all. The façade of protecting the righteousness of an individual under the garb of normativity reveals the rooted undercurrents of patriarchal nexus. The familiar lanes and voices therefore exert a pressure of social ostracization and threatens identity formation.

### **Space as Ideology**

The construct of spatiality in determining gendered bodies constantly overlaps and disjuncts the mental terrain in the construction of social identity in the novel. The influence of space on behavioral emotions destabilizes a person which impacts the trajectory of human relations. As Lefebvre argues, "this is a dominated- and hence passively experienced or subjected- space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Soja 68). A utopian architect and painter Constant Nieuwenhuis also emphasize this idea of "an architecture of ambience" in his 1953 project for "New Babylon." According to his understanding, feelings of emotion are not external to space, nor is space indifferent to emotional feelings. In a compulsion to establish his spatial relation with the culture of the *para*,

the protagonist struggles to find a balance between his physical and mental space. For Oritro whose naivety keeps him transfixed between life and art as he struggles to understand his mother's true identity, the political consciousness of the *para* further comes like a trap. On the one hand, the familiarity of space eases his movements. On the other hand, it exerts a pressure of conduct on his behaviour.

Ori's perspective of the world constantly changes through others. As the child struggles to make his way through the dominated space, his innocence gets exploited. The *para* as a social space governs a leftist perspective which takes the onus of appropriation. This proprietorship to curtail the spatial practices restricts the spatiality of the public and the private domains. As a consequence, the idea of a home gets fractured causing social struggles. Their stringent rules which evoke the national beliefs of the times stir a conscience of the divide in the child for whom the fragile knowledge of his mother's proximity to him gets marred by an imposed knowledge of her corrupt profession. "He carried that knowledge like a wound" (*The Firebird* 11), as it creates bitterness at home with everyone's opinion against his mother. This animosity in the atmosphere threatens their bond and exhibits a relationship of adaptations and adjustments as discussed by Georg Simmel in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903) which ultimately reflects the structures of the metropolis. The social ostracization by the party instills a sense of guilt in Ori which makes him take the back route while making his way toward home, make excuses to escape questions about his mother, and turns hostile to the environment at home. In this sense, Ori's understanding that his mother is a shame to the *para* instills a sense of discord in him. This conflict fueled by his aunt, Rupa as she wants to replace his mother's position creates a larger gap. Therefore, the complex spatial matrix of the home exploits the vulnerability of a dysfunctional family, a common theme in Majumdar's narratives. In his first novel, *Silverfish* (2007) which explores the contours of spatiality over two decades also reveals the cracks in a feudal household through the camaraderie of Kamal and Suhasini, who often escapes their mundane lives on the terrace. As a symbol of resistance, the terrace acts as a fluid space that nullifies all hierarchies of caste and class.

Moreover, this consciousness of spatiality takes a tragic turn when Ori's fascination with his mother's profession and his confrontation with the reality of Sonagacchi gives him an insight into another dimension of the *para*. However, his confrontation with the complex space frustrates his Oedipal desire toward his mother. His disbelief and unacceptance of the situation are reflected in his attitude when he confronts his grandmother

about the play in which he has seen his mother in bed with another man. His emphasis on the incident and his conscious choice to not reveal the reality of 'the play' clearly shows his resentment. In conscious disapproval, Ori turned towards his baser instincts and eventually sets the stage on fire. This fusion of the physical with the mental space constructed the social space of the *para* which broke the rigid object-subject binary which had confined spatial imagination for centuries.

A similar manifestation of mental consciousness through the overwhelming forces of power also finds voice in the '*mohalla* politics' in *Tamas*. The significant act of Harnam Singh and Banto's forcefully leaving their house due to increasing communal tension in the *mohalla* foregrounds the machinations of those in power, despite Karim Khan's timely information to Singh's family about the riots yet the latter clearly stated "things aren't good Harnam Singh, you should leave...the villagers won't touch you, but there's fear of rioters from the outside. We have no way of stopping them" (Sahni 217). The scene clearly hints at the hypocrisy of the *mohalla* which on the one hand would not harm Singh's family, on the other hand, would not even stand with his family who's lived there for more than 20 years. Moreover, the trajectory of upturning the worn-off streets of Dhok Elahi Baksh village into that of doubt, apprehension, and animosity reflects the impact of spatial fragmentation on social relations which are marred by the praxis of power.

Space therefore infiltrates the thought process against the push and pull of the voices of power. The dominant discourse of the spatial matrix resists the harmony of individual existence as it not only exists in temporality cohabiting material objects instead constantly undergoes a rupture in the idea of existence, giving birth to a new self, modified relationships, and changed circumstances.

### **Dynamics and Complexities of other Spatial Markers**

The cinematic narrative of *The Firebird* unfolds to reveal the physical manifestations of space in the form of home, theatre, neighbourhood, and Sonagacchi, which frequently cross over to make the larger spatial frame of the *para*. This proliferation of spatial containers, on the one hand, layers the expanse of narrative geography. On the other hand, resists the agency of an individual. This dense complexity of the space as manifested through these symbols works as institutions of patriarchy that resolve to change and appropriate the physical space. Through this matrix, the climactic episode of stage burning comes as an act of resistance against the



confinement of the politics of spatiality. While for Ori it was a conscious act of resistance against the socio-spatial world order. On the other hand, for Garima, it was a relief to achieve a sense of freedom against another structured compulsion of space. While on the one hand, the stage is Garima's identity, on the other hand, the patriarchal nexus of theatrical space continuously redefines her. As evident from Ahin Mullick's obsession over the play *Dusk*, where Lila and Meera remain a possession and are constantly remade in the garb of performance. This episode significantly re-defines spatiality of larger world order by resisting a space that is threatening individual agency and at the same time impressing a narrative of 'lack.' Moreover, this is where Majumdar blurs the binary between reality and fiction in his act of writing the city to show resistance through the satisfaction of Garima who did not want to be a part of that act and gets a physical and emotional release from the shackles of the politics of the party.

Therefore, various manifestations of space in the Indian narratives overlap and are disjunct to reveal the complexity of the Indian matrix where closed spaces alienate the individuals against all forces of life. Consequently, the restriction in place which is a product of a rooted, layered, and interconnected scheme of things resists the making of an individual.

## Conclusion

Thus, the spatiality of history and social life was, for the most part, frozen into the background as an external container or environment for social action. The understanding that we do not live in a homogenous and empty space but on the contrary in a space thoroughly imbued with quantities makes an individual an active participant in the social construction of spatiality. The complexity of geographical imagination as reflected through a dense representation of the city space (Calcutta), guided this paper to explore the contours of how and what constitutes a difference in the construct of spatiality. In this vein, examining the *para* became an opportunity to rethink the dialectics of space, time, and being. Moreover, a spatial inquiry into the narrative has opened a lens to view the four-cornered dimensions of what constructed an individual. Influenced by the ideology of sociologist Henry Lefebvre and his idea of the 'lived space', the *para* comes across as a space that was at once social, personal as well as political. The omnipresence of the Citizen's Party as a guiding conscience of the narrative blurs the boundaries between the public and the private space.

Through this development, the lived space of the *para* differs from Henry

Lefebvre's argument by impinging a dominant narrative of the citizen's party which inevitably makes the familiar, strange. The commanding gaze of the party disrupts the movements of individuals by arresting them in closed compartments which makes the matrix of the Indian narrative narrow, rigid, and complex. Through this act of writing the city, Majumdar collapses the binary between reality and fiction, home and the other to reveal the city-ness of Calcutta which revealed a passionate edge of the city to find expression to endure and show up resistance in battling injustice and exploitation.

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