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Original Paper

Delineating Delhi: Spaces of Neoliberal Urbanism in Tarun Tejpal's *The Story Of My Assassins*

Swaralipi Nandi[1*]

[1] Loyola Academy, Hyderabad, India

[*] Swaralipi Nandi, Loyola Academy, Hyderabad, India

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Abstract

Recent Indo-Anglican literature has also seen a burgeoning of the genre of urban crime fictions set against the backdrop of India's modernizing metropolises. While explorations of the contemporary Indian city mostly consists of non-fictional, journalistic writings, like Katherine Boo's Pulitzer winning book Behind the Beautiful Forevers, William Dalrymple's City of Djinns and Suketu Mehta's Maximum City, *the genre also includes fictions like Altaf Tyrewala's critically acclaimed debut novel No God in Sight, Vikram Chandra's bestseller Sacred Games, Tarun Tejpal's The Story of My Assassins, Hrish Sawhney's volume of short stories Delhi Noir, Atish Tasser's The Templegoers and others, which deal with the dark underside of the cities. Significantly, as rapid urban growth deepens existing disparities, a distinct rhetoric conflating impoverishment and criminality emerges, further justifying the exclusion of certain sections from the vision of urbanism. This paper looks at the representation of Delhi in Tarun Tejpal's novel The Story of My Assassins, as a dystopic space riddled with contradictions of.*

Keywords

economic liberalization of India, urban dystopia, Delhi noir, contemporary Indian fiction

> "Why is the Third-World metropolis suddenly taking over western culture?…Why would it be so? For a start, the rumours crackling in from the Third World have ceased to be quaint. Indian and Chinese business people rattle assumptions by buying up major corporate assets in America and Europe; there are stories of Asian billionaires buying houses at record-breaking prices in Belgravia. There is a dim awareness of something monumental happening far away, of extraordinary wealth creation that goes beyond mere imitation. More perceptive observers see something awe-inspiring in outsourcing: for a western, metropolitan outlook could not have imagined a world so devoid of centre, so unsentimentally flattened out… exist in those places for such plans to be dreamed up. All that was "backward" swings round to the front, full of vast and uncanny promise".
>
> Rana Dasgupta, "The Sudden Stardom of Third World City".

City as New India

The modern Indian novel is often the novel of urban India, particularly cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai, and the story of the third-world underbelly grappling with the changing dynamics of the urban space. India's neoliberal transformation has been most conspicuous in the visible markers of the glitzy billboards and world class amenities, in the shopping malls, IT hubs, MNC offices and sleek buildings, in the frantic real-estate growth and in the privation of spaces for the entrepreneurial elite in the Indian cities. The transformation of the Indian cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore from just cities to what Saskia Sassen terms as "global cities" as the crucial localized nodes in the network of global capitalism (Note 1) has been attempted through various processes of neoliberal urban re-structuring, whose comprehensive goal has been to relocate the city space as a site that prioritizes both market-oriented economic growth and the consumption practices of the elite class. Nandini Gooptu offers a seminal study of the post-liberalization Indian city in which both the public and the private sector coalesce together in a "revanchist" plan against the urban poor, signifying the "emergence of the 'entrepreneurial city'" in India and "the process of urban gentrification as a form of elite revolt" (35). Similarly, Aditya Nigam's impassioned study of Delhi, which he calls a "postcolonial city with a first world desire" reveals a restructuring of the city in accordance to neoliberal urbanism, whereby city planners desire to make Delhi into another "global metropolis", in concurrence with the rapidly emerging "new global order" (40). However, the narrative of the spectacular transformation of the re-engineered Indian cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, Ahmadabad into world class cities of entrepreneurial opportunities is countered by the increasing social inequalities and spaces of exclusion for the urban poor on the margins, often witnessed through a growing compartmentalization of the urban space into the binaries of what David Harvey calls as "the micro-states of the rich and the poor" ("Neoliberalism and the City", 12). As Kitambi points out:

> The so-called urban turn has also been impelled by the recognition that the Indian city is now in a new post-nationalist stage marked by the deepening contradiction between economic inequalities and political opportunities, giving rise to new claims and conflicts over its identity.

In this paper I study how Tarun Tejpal's novel *The Story of My Assassins* challenges the narrative of Delhi as a sanitized urban space of neoliberal growth and success and instead projects the various contradictions that riddle the city. Teeming with criminals, marginalities, spaces that threaten the city, threatening to unravel the apparent semblance of peace and control. Dismissing the myths of economic boom and progress brought in by economic liberalization in India, Tarun Tejpal's novel *The Story of My Assasins* takes up the form of the noir to expose Delhi as an urban dystopia of inequality, crime, and exclusion of the marginalized. Set in the present day cityscape of Delhi, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins* projects a sharp critique of India's neoliberal turn in the 1990s and its discontents (Note 2).

City of Contradictions

Theorizing the cultural manifestations of postcolonial cities, Rashi Varma asserts that the "postcolonial city is riddled simultaneously with imperial legacies and nationalist re-inscriptions of spatial practices, as well as with the complexity of representing difference within the city, situated as it is within a global capitalist order". Varma terms it as a "conjunctural space that produces a critical combination of historical events, material bodies, structural forces and representational economies which propels new constellations of domination and resistance, centers and peripheries, and the formation of new political subjects" (2). As a city that has experienced a dizzying variety of historical moments closely—the Mughal empire, British colonialism, the vagaries of partition, emergency and Sikh pogrom—and acts as the hub of political power and the epicentre of India's urban expansion into localized nodes of global capitalism, Delhi's conjectural space has been variedly represented in Indian Writing in English in polychromatic shades. A series of novels etch the city in the nostalgia of a historical past—Khushwant Singh's "Delhi: A Novel" traces the trajectory of the city over centuries, Ahmed Ali's "Twilight in Delhi" invokes a nostalgia for a fading Mughal past, while Krishna Sobti's *The Heart Has its Reasons* tells a torrid love story amidst the bustling bazaars of old Chandni Chowk. In contrast, Anita Desai's "Clear Light of Day", Nayantara Sahgal's "Rich Like Us, and R. Chandrasekar's" The Goat, the Sofa and Mr. Swami" present the turmoils of a post-independence city amidst the mechanisms of power, politics and state bureaucracy. However, the most memorable sketches about the city have often come through a depiction of its underbelly and their struggles on the margins—the slum demolitions of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the struggling marginal lives of Uday Prakash's *The Walls of Delhi* or the seething, dangerous underbelly of Adiga's *White Tiger* have etched the city in strokes of unabashed discrimination, where multifarious forms of power coalesce together to produce a deeply divided city of privilege and deprivation. In Tejpal's novel, Delhi is more than just a backdrop to his noir tale. Rather, Delhi's unique

history and their multiple urbanisms add a distinct character to the dystopia of violence that Tejpal constructs.

Gyan Prakash points out that literary representation of the twentieth century city has been predominantly dark and dystopic. The city has variously appeared as "dark, insurgent", "dysfunctional", "engulfed in ecological crises, seduced by capitalistic consumption, paralyzed by crimes, wars, class, gender, and racial conflict" (1). Similarly, Amardeep Singh points out the trend of new urban realism in contemporary fictions, asserting that "The style also tends to feature an encounter with themes of criminality, violence, corruption, and anopen-eyed acceptance of liberal Indian hypocrisy (especially in an era of simultaneous wealth accumulation and urban slum growth) and double standards around topics such as caste and religious biases" (6) PRINTED FROM the OXFORD RESEARCH ENCYCLOPEDIA, LITERATURE. Singh thus contends "Urban Realism might be the Indian analogue to "post 9/11 fiction" in the British and American publishing worlds". Subsequently, noir being a literary form that essentially represents a bleak dystopia of violence in a dysfunctional society, ushered in by the modernizing forces of technology and capitalism, becomes a preferred mode of etching the modern city. The emergence of the film noir in America coincides with the turbulence of the World War II era, the form commenting on the insecurities, violence and pessimism of the post-war society. However, Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland assert that despite its American roots, the popular crime form "is best appreciated as an always international phenomenon concerned with the local effects of globalization and the threats to national and urban culture it seems to herald" (2010, ix). Similarly, pointing out how film and literary noir invoke overtones of pessimism and disillusionment about the modern society, Lee Horsley comments that the genre of noir embodies the voice of violation and dissent—"it also has the potential for critique, for undermining complacency and illusions (the false promises of the American dream, the hypocrisy of the British establishment)"...More generally, the noir sensibility might come to the fore at any time of discontentment and anxiety, of disillusionment with institutional structures (2001, pp. 143-144). In current times, noir holds a particular significance in neoliberal socio-cultural contexts where the optimism about new emerging economies is contrasted by the despondence of depleting older economies, promises of social mobility are offset by increasing income gap, and the rapid transformation of spaces into glittering hubs of capitalistic consumption is challenged by a dark underbelly battling poverty and deprivation. The "neoliberal noir"—as Misha Kokotovich terms it and explains in the context of burgeoning crime fictions in post-1990 Latin America—thus acts as a social criticism of neoliberal, free market capitalism raging in Latin American societies post Reagan-Thatcher era:

> This new Central American noir forms part of a larger Latin American literary phenomenon I refer to as neoliberal noir. Since about 1990, most of the continent has experienced something of a boom in narratives that use elements of detective or crime fiction to criticize the effects of the neoliberal, free market capitalism imposed

on Latin American societies over the past two decades.

Matthew Christensen observes a similar connection between the prevalence of African popular crime genres and the problematics of structural changes imposed on African nation states by market-driven policies of the IMF and World Bank. The genre resurges with prominence in the context of the neoliberal changes, as Christensen observes: "Given its historical engagement with the crises of liberalism and global capitalism, crime fiction offers an even richer critical apparatus for investigating the morphing valences of sociability, criminality, and political legitimacy under neoliberal governance" (2013, p. 106).

In the same strain, the rise of the Indian film noir of the 1990s in mainstream Hindi cinema and the morally ambivalent, dystopic and cynical worldview it represents coincides with the free-market liberalization in the 1990s and the concurrent anxieties of the shifting socio-economic paradigms in neoliberal India (Note 3). While the crime films of pre-liberalization Bollywood dealt with the disenchantment with the state and its systems through the figures of individual criminals, embodied primarily in two archetypes—i) the once innocent man turned into an outlawed, vigilante hero (Shahenshah), and ii) the gangster or the seasoned criminal boss (Parinda, Don), crime in post-liberalization cinema caters to the convention of an all-pervasive cynicism typical of the noir form. Thus Post-1991 Bollywood sees the emergence of a plethora of noir/crime dramas—for example, *Satya* (1998), *Vastaav* (1999), *Company* (2002), *Black Friday* (2004), *Shootout at Lokhandwala* (2008), *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (2010)—that takes crime beyond the purview of individual morality to invoke crime on an all pervasive, populous and grander scale. These films offer a more comprehensive narrative of moral corruption that taints every level of the society beneath the gloss of shopping malls and multiplexes, advertisement hoardings, offices of multinational companies, and the burgeioning real estates that emerged with the onset of India's economic liberalization. As Ranjani Mazumdar points out, the new wave of noir cinema in Bollywood is marked by a complete absence of tradition and romance, and reveals a "new, melancholic, almost sinister imagination" in portraying the city of Mumbai as it grapples with urban violence while undergoing seismic changes under neoliberal globalization (2010, p. 152).

In crime fiction too, the traditional dialectics between the detective and the erring individual criminal, and the consequent resolution of the novel through the detection and punishment of the errant criminal, is replaced by a bleak milieu that represents overall moral depravity of the society in question. Recent Indo-Anglican literature has also seen a burgeoning of noir fictions mostly set against the backdrop of India's modernizing metropolises. A host of new fictions like Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight*, Vikram Chandra's bestseller *Sacred Games*, Tarun Tejpal's *The Story of My Assassins*, Hrish Sawhney's volume of short stories *Delhi Noir*, Atish Tasser's *The Templegoers* and others take up the form of noir, primarily focusing on the murky 'reality' behind the glitzy global cities. As Rana Dasgupta observes:

> What kind of Indian reality emerges from this new fiction? It is almost unremittingly dark…Literary fiction of the last five years is far more cynical, for in it finer feelings have all but died out and pretty much everything is meaningless. Power mongers and businesspeople are unsentimental and terrifying; their relationships and intellects are crippled. The majority of society lives precariously amid violence and exploitation, and it must kill and manipulate to survive. There is not even any room for moral judgement because the world is so sick—and its protagonists, spiritually lost, have no comment on the terrifying reality they discover. Respite and tenderness are found rarely and usually, as in Koshy's and Mehrotra's collections, in uncanny, provisional relationships.

Set in 2000's Delhi, Tejpal's novel projects Delhi as a post-liberalization city that bears the physical markers of India's economic globalization—the McDonald's joints, cable TVs telecasting American soaps and NBA, gated residential complexes and farmhouses, sports clubs, restaurants and all the other amenities of modern urban living. India's economic liberalization of 1991 has prompted a major makeover of its metropoles, most conspicuous in the surge in the real estate market of luxurious residential buildings, multination corporation offices and commercial centres of global retail brands, new spaces of entertainment and consumption like multiplexes and restaurants, and urban development through flyovers and new roads that have increasingly transformed the public space in the city into privation of spaces for the entrepreneurial elite. Amidst such dramatic urban changes, Tejpal explores an alternative city through the form of a noir fiction that invokes a bleak world of violence, crime, gore and murder that lies beneath the sheen of the modern city. Representing the city as a space of dystopia—of intense economic disparity, crime and violence at every level of the society—Tarun Tejpal's noir fiction *The Story of My Assassins* depicts a moral universe that is irreparably damaged. Consequently, Tejpal depicts violence in multifarious forms against the backdrop of a palimpsest city, where a polyphony of power structures—both residual and contemporary—form a tapestry of Delhi's complex urbanscape and its urban outcasts.

Crime in *The Story of the Assassins* is out there, threatening, lurking, and destabilizing the apparent order of the city. The five identified assassins In terms of their description, the officially recognised criminals in the novel share more than one commonality. They are essentially members of groups socio-economically marginalised—the poor, homeless, vagabonds, beggars, Muslims, ethnic minorities, landless labourers, low castes—all constituting the fringes of the global city. They are narrated in the form of police profiles that assume the rhetoric of othering: their descriptions furnishing all details about their backgrounds and actions, but etched only in terms of their exteriority. Though their crimes and lives are meticulously detailed, they never assume narrative agency to share the interiority of their characters, and remain profiled only as criminals. Thus, constructed through a rhetoric of criminality emerging from the privileged point of view, they are etched as the dangerous "other" in the city

contrasted with the "normal", law-abiding citizens of the urban community. Though the assassins are essentially *lumpenproletariat*, their descent into crime is not individual choice or a faulty moral judgment. Rather, each assassin testifies the systemic violence affected by the triple forces of a failing welfare state, an intensely discriminatory society, and exploitative economic systems—both feudal and capitalistic. Amidst attempts to sanitize and aestheticize the city for the elite, the assassins thus stand out as oddities, coalescing with the bourgeoisie imagination of the urban poor as the dangerous, criminal "other" threatening the order of the neoliberal city. Gooptu notes that there has been an aggressive effort to re-engineer the erstwhile images of the Indian cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, Ahmadabad from being cities of poverty, squalor and political unrest to world class cities of entrepreneurial opportunities (37). The conjoining of the urban poor with criminality, however, is a legacy that Delhi has carried from the colonial times. As Michael Waibel points out, the conflation of criminality with the poor populace of the city was reflected in colonial urban policies where "respectable elites" were segregated in separate areas from the common populace residing in Old Delhi (53). During the Emergency period too, Waibel observes, the urban poor were targeted by draconian policies of slum clearance and forced sterilisation. The criminalization of the poor takes a more ominous turn with India's neoliberal transition that was implemented, as Nandini Gooptu notes, with an aggressive effort to re-engineer the erstwhile images of the Indian cities like Kolkata, Mumbai, Ahmadabad from being cities of poverty, squalor and political unrest to world class cities of entrepreneurial opportunities. Consequently, the "misfits" of the new urban space are often identified as non-productive, thus potentially dangerous and disruptive. Reproducing the discourse of criminality as intricately associated with poverty, the descriptive profiles of the criminals conjure crime essentially in the slums, streets, shanty town and underbelly of the city.

> There has been, in the past decade in particular, a rise in literary and cinematic representations of the "undercity", the slums and shanties that flank all the major Indian metropolises, especially those of Mumbai and Kolkata. A small but significant constellation of films and novels has taken on the burdens of representing the allegedly unrepresentable, and it is important to register the emergence of this genre at this juncture in India when economic liberalization and the forces of globalization have created a heretofore unprecedented spread of the middle-class.
>
> Aunpama Mohan, "Class, Subalterneity and Ethical Choice in Modern India".

In Tejpal's novel, the essentially noir elements of darkness, a black vision of despair, loneliness, dread and violence unfold in the shanty one-room apartments, the dingy slums and the filthy railway station that shelters the beggars and the street children and in the raw violence of the rural hinterland. In a striking difference with the spaces that stand for "privatopias and cathedrals of consumption" (MacLeod, p. 261), Tejpal describes the sordid "two bedroom second-floor flat in Punjabi Bagh" (164) which harbors criminals like Mr. Healthy and the dagger-wielding Chaaku. The spatial description is

detailed and clautrophobic:

> Built on a two-hundred-square-yard plot, the flat was dark and delerict, all sun and light cut off by the houses crowding it in. It had one bathing bathroom with a leaking brass top, and one Indian-style crap cubicle with an old style iron cistern strapped high on the wall…Even with all lights on it felt like a dungeon.

Scatological excesses add to the effect of abjection: “All the window sills and grilles were daubed with bird droppings, mostly pigeon”, while the entire space is rendered uncanny by anthropomorphic visages of inanimate objects: “the bathroom slats had nesting sprouting from them like tufts of hair from an old man’s ears” (164).The below mediocre quality of this flat stands in acute contradiction with the spaces of affluence and aesthetic appeal that the narrator describes in the other half of the city. Significantly enough, these localities marked by underclass residents also form the germinating spaces of crime and disorder. The lower middle class neighborhoods of Delhi also embody spaces of persecution, where religious minorities are oppressed and disciplined. As a Muslim tenant living in a Hindu majority neighborhood, Chaaku’s father inhabits a space that is both claustrophobic and emasculating, whereby attraction for a Hindu girl is treated as a blasphemous offense punishable with an act of public humiliation. A witness to the violent religious genocides during partition, Kabir’s father Ghulam desperately attempts to erase his son’s Muslim identity—which includes giving him a secular name, medically justifying his circumcision, giving him a convent education—to render him safe in India’s volatile religious milieu. Yet, as Kabir strays into petty delinquency, he is captured, tortured and branded as a dangerous criminal precisely for his “mussalman identity”. The police act under the instruction of the politically powerful officer whose son was targeted in a brawl over a common love interest, meting out severe “punishment” in the form of castrating Kabir and slapping sedition charges against him. The prolonged scene of police torture for an inconsequential issue like brawl is a grim reminder of the oppressive legacy of Indian police right from the colonial times. Emasculated and falsely implicated with terrorist charges like the Arms Act, Kabir is damaged for life and becomes a permanent ‘criminal’ outsider to the mainstream society.

Tejpal paints a darker picture of a more precarious space in the portrayal of the Paharjung railway station—a place that signifies the chaotic transitory space of the city, since the railway station serves as the gateway to the entry and exit from the city. The platform is a fecund space of chaos, consisting of several groups of the urban underbelly who find no place within the inner city space—the petty street vendor who sell “magic potions”, the homeless children, the beggars, the prostitutes, the criminals and drug dealers. Unkempt and disheveled, the platforms are no better than garbage dumps with the “debris of cracked tea kullads, stitched-leaf plates and rough napkins” (300) strewn all over the place. It is also perilous space that lurks with dangers and uncertainties, where the residents have to struggle for their daily lives and are frequently abused, raped and killed. It is a place where the homeless children train themselves in petty criminal acts as well as get involved in organized crime like drug peddling. In such

a place the police too break laws and torment the station dwellers, imposing a reign of terror through exhortations and sexual abuse. Teenagers like Gudiya are gang raped in the station and Dhaka, the young leader of the homeless children's group is found dismembered on the railway tracks due to a gang war. Tejpal's depiction of this space of darkness is both frightening and repulsive, and the detail with which he etches out the bleakness of this place evokes immediate comparison with the glitzy, secured, vast and beautiful spaces of the neoliberal city. In an evocative passage, Tejpal describes the temporary night shelter of the station children—the drainage gutter—with great visual minutiae that speaks of the immense deprivation of the station children:

> The band moved home again…and was now snugly ensconced in the gutter between platforms four and five…There was a trickle of sludge in the groove at the centre, but the boys had thrown old railway sleepers across it to bury its slime in deep. The iron cover of the manhole had been stolen and sold long ago, and now the entrance to their home was guarded by a cratewood trapdoor, the dozens of nail-heads in its flesh glinting in the midday sun (338).

Surviving in such inhuman living conditions, the station children can only be stunned when confronted with the city of opulence—resplendent with "dazzling glass-fronted shops and big glowing signs", magnanimous cinema halls and "roads where big cars shone like diamond" and inhabited by upper class elites "so beautiful, so sweet smelling" (356) that seem almost unreal.

Significantly enough, the core urban space of Delhi stands in contrast not only to its urban underbelly but also to the threatening geographical spaces of dark crime and underworld dealings that lie outside the borders of the urban landscape, on its fringes shared with UP and Haryana—like Bareily, Noida, the badlands of Meerut and Muzaffarnagar and the villages that are untouched by the urban restructuring. The suburbs and villages surrounding the core city Delhi are both impoverished and dangerous and like the railway station, signify the utter pandemonium that lies outside the safety haven provided by neoliberal urbanism. Cities in India, especially those like Delhi where a large part of the population consists of people who have migrated from the rural areas, have always had a connection with the villages. As Aditya Nigam points out, the postcolonial city has "been marked by a deep and organic connection with the village/countryside, which functions as its 'constitutive outside': what the city is, can only be understood with reference to the non-city, especially rural areas. For those who make their journey to the city, it represents the land of opportunity and promise, however much the realities of decaying urban existence may eventually work towards smashing that dream" (40).

In Tejpal's novel, the dichotomy between the city and the village is revealed in terms of their comparative orderliness. The city not only stands in contrast to the village in its amenities, Tejpal projects a picture of a rural life fraught with feudalism and violence—a dangerous place lurking right outside the borders of the modernized, orderly city. Tejpal projects the vagaries of a village life still running by the codes of an exploitative feudal order—where land disputes lead to fatal consequences,

honor killings are frequent, and where the feudal lords exert their "rightful" power over the peasant's families through extreme violence and oppression. However, what makes the rural landscape in the novel potentially more violent is the retaliation of the lower sections of the society. The power structures that divide groups along class and caste lines are highly volatile and the order of society is often disrupted. The crimes of both Chaaku and Hathoda Tyagi are extreme and yet are common occurrences in the turbulent atmosphere of rural violence. While Chaaku pays back his upper class-upper caste tormentors by slicing their entrails (131), his family is raped and butchered in retaliation from the landlords (147). Similarly, Tyagi's sisters are raped publicly by this rich, landowning relatives—an act Tyagi avenges by smashing the perpetrator's skull with his massive hammer (414). In a gruesome passage, Tejpal describes another instance of the extreme violence that commonly characterizes the class and caste strives in the villages:

> The Gujjar teenager had blown one nulli (barrel) each through both their (landlord's son) heart. Two days later, the thakur's brothers had picked up the boy's sisters and raped them repeatedly before decapitating them and hanging their heads on the palash tree. Only great terror can restore order. A week later, one brother had a hole blasted through his spine (404).

Tejpal's anonymous first-person narrator is corrupt, abusive, and emotionally stunted, incapable of sustaining any normal human relationship. He scans his utterly privileged universe with a streak of dark humour, exposing an irredeemable network of corrupt entrepreneurs, politicians, police, journalists, and godmen inhabiting a dystopian world of moral depravity and sheer meaninglessness of human endeavours. The very opening of the novel conveys a sense of desolation that constitutes the narrator's everyday reality. In a passage replete with images of tediousness and confinement, the narrator sums up the contemporary urban space:

> No dazzle was permitted in this enclave of the nondescript, of boxy colourless buildings and endless Maruti cars…The trees seemed stunted, throttled by a tourniquet of concrete. Every now and then an excitable-irritable family—mother, father, couple of sated, snotty kids going to fat—tumbled out of dark holes in the boxy buildings flaunting their Sunday best, scrambled into a car, slammed doors, and left (17).

Again, slipping away from a "darkened bedroom" from a wife whom he describes as a mere splash of a human figure that seems "squashed by a giant foot", the narrator ends up in his office that embodies a globally connected, yet Baudrillardian world of meaningless images: "Private passions were dead. Anger was an icon. Love an image. Sex an organ. Even god would finally be shrunk to size. No larger than the screen. No denser than a pixel" (6). This postmodern pastiche of human experiences defines the narrator's dysfunctional world that is at once depressing, meaningless, violent and comic, and probably best summed up by Hathi Ram: "nothing in this city is what it seems"(21). Tejpal's Delhi is

not only desolate, but is also a space of raw violence manifested in differential power equations. Power and violence in *The Story* is also historically informed across various layers of society, thus construing an urbanscape of the capital that is relentlessly bleak and in an incessant turmoil among conflicting groups that jostle for space and control in the capital city.

The Delhi projected in Tejpal's novel is an urban space that testifies the power of the state. The narrator evocatively describes the core of the city—the stately roads of Lutyens' Delhi, that curve with "an imperial assurance around imposing edifices of the National Stadium, the National Gallery of Modern Art and the India Gate, the taking the high road to Raisina Hill where the monoliths of North and South Block continued to be metaphors for the imperiousness and inscrutability of the state before finishing up inside the excessive sprawl of the presidential palace, an appropriate metaphor of shallow decorativeness" (74). The power metaphorically inscribed in this space is re-inscribed by patrolling police jeeps that continue to convince the state of "its power and purpose" (74). A candid representation of menacing state power, the police force navigate in the novel's fictional space as an all pervasive manifestation of violence. The first impression of the policemen relegated to protect the narrator is that of sloppiness and a cartoonish caricature—the self-proclaimed bahurupiyas—who are comically named as Hathi Ram (Hathi translates into Elephant), the sub-inspector entrusted with protecting the narrator is invoked in mutating-animal metaphors: "sometimes he was Chooha (mouse) Ram, or Lomdi (fox) Ram or Sher (tiger) Ram or Bakri (goat) Ram (20). However, at the same they are also disconcerting agents of constant surveillance, lingering as shadows, spying over the narrator's every move that gets reported and decoded. Calling them the "purveyors of petty power" (36) who needed their daily dose of fear from others to feel validated, Tejpal etches a dark world that runs on muscle flexing—both physical and metaphorical. It is primal and barbaric, where the more powerful unleash unmitigated violence on the less powerful. As the narrator puts it: "through the centuries, we had not only been mahaphuddus when vassals, but also had a track record for being barbaric mahaphuddus when in control" (36).

It is interesting to note how aesthetically designed spaces in Tejpal's novel ironically convey the inner rot of the system. The reader is reeled into a network of sophisticated crimes—of scams, corruption and money laundering—against the ridiculously opulent spaces of the luxurious private quarters of the rich and the powerful, as follows:

> There were water spurting Scandinavian marble mermaids with large Indian breasts, a topiary of dinosaurs, a swimming pool shaped like a flounced skirt…undulating manicured lawns with colourful steel birds poised for takeoff, lines of mast trees trimmed to precisely the same height flanking every pathway…a Yeats pond with the fifty-nine swans of Coole, a dining room in a mock stable with two handsome horses tethered in a corner (55).

Million dollar illegal deals are made in this lavish private farmhouse of the Frock Raja, described as "five acres of lala land" (55). Farmhouses, or what Soni calls as the "prized fiefdoms of the urban gentry" (77) that are essentially private sites of elite consumption also signal the irredeemable rot of the city and an overwhelming entrapment in corruption that is suffocating for the narrator. Again in another instance, the corruption of Kapoor Sahib and his transnational network of crime in illegal arms trade is visualized through his spatial opulence, projecting an urban space that Choon-Piew Pow aptly describes as "been meticulously planned and ordered to create a picturesque and pristine living environment" (372). Kapoor Sahib's façade is upheld by the luxurious emporia that trade the exotic local art at exorbitant prices: These outlets are gleaming affairs of sensory pleasure—glass fronted, wood paneled, air-conditioned, worked by elegant women in silk sarees. Not Indian shops but international showrooms, with big glossy books on art and culture, that piped Indian classical music and herbal tea…we looked around at the carpets, the ornate, richly polished furniture with inlays of stone." (274). Such decadent opulence replete with ornate details recurs in the novel as caustic reminders of normalized corruption.

A more distinct feature of Tejpal's noir city is the neoliberal violence. Set in 2000's Delhi, the novel projects Delhi as a post-liberalization city that bears the physical markers of India's economic globalization—the McDonald's joints, cable TVs telecasting American soaps and NBA, gated residential complexes and farmhouses, sports clubs, restaurants and all the other amenities of modern urban living. India's economic liberalization of 1991 has prompted a major makeover of its metropoles, most conspicuous in the surge in the real estate market of luxurious residential buildings, multination corporation offices and commercial centres of global retail brands, new spaces of entertainment and consumption like multiplexes and restaurants, and urban development through flyovers and new roads that have increasingly transformed the public space in the city into privation of spaces for the entrepreneurial elite. Consequently, the post-liberal Indian city has undergone a new, aesthetic facelift to attract the global capitalist class. Amidst such dramatic urban changes, Tejpal explores the sheer moral rot of the rich and the powerful is played out against the backdrop of a modernized city— an urban world that is cosmetically beautiful on the outside and yet has gone terribly wrong inside. Set in 2000, ten years after India's neoliberal turn, Tejpal's novel provides multiple visions of neoliberal urbanism at play. As Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell point out that recent urban development both promotes and normalizes the "growth first" motto of neoliberalism, which views a social-welfarist system based on paradigms of retribution and social justice as inimical to the growth of the competitive free market (47). Thus, Aditya Nigam's impassioned study of Delhi, which he calls a "postcolonial city with a first world desire" (40) reveals a restructuring of the city in accordance to neoliberal urbanism that aims to make Delhi into another "global metropolis". As xxxx points out:

> Consequently, the current Indian government has been quick to assimilate the neo-liberal urban planning vocabulary of the Global North in promoting investment

> hubs, cyber-cities and so-called "smart cities": urban regeneration programmes which include initiatives such as "Skill India" and "Digital India" designed to make cities "Engines of Growth". In Delhi's recent history, this entrepreneurial vision of the city has driven the development of commercial satellite towns like Gurgaon, and peripheral New Economic Zones such as the New Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA). It has also generated concerns over the appearance and infrastructural provision of the city, expressed most evidently in the clearance of informal settlements in preparation for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and the construction of Delhi Metro.

Outwardly, the city Tejpal etches is gentrified and aesthetically appealing, sustaining the bubble of his upper middle-class lifestyle—"office, home, sports club, lawyers, restaurants, movie hall. That was the universe" (34). Right beside the sports club is the equestrian enclosure where the rich kids are "brought there by their fair, painted-up mothers or by dark, tired domestics to play out their horse fantasies" (292). Several instances of India's post-liberalization embrace of girdle less consumption are strewn all over the narrative : in the endless choice of television channels—"American cafes, ornate quiz shows, thrashing crocodiles, goggled cricketers, striding golfers, bare-chested godmen, film stars…" (9)—that stand in sharp contrast to the pre-liberalization monopoly of India's nationalized channel *Doordarshan*; in the young boys whom the narrator describes as ones that "watched NBA games on cable television and were shod in Nike shoes…These were kids for whom India was just a vast amusement park, set up by some earnest geezers after kicking out some white men" (293); in the images of corporate globalization are complete with the narrator's description of the visual landmarks of globalization symbolized in the McDonald's outlets and in the huge billboards that flash the local retails of the international brands of merchandise. Delhi in the novel is a city of opulence and luxury, of consumption and capital flow that matches any other global city in terms of its glitz and amenities for the economically privileged.

However, though incredibly rich and powerful, the cityscape essentially exudes a dystopic feel even for the privileged narrator. In an evocative passage detailed with images of suffocation, Tejpal narrates a stifling urbanscape that is decaying inside: "In an excess of sprucing up, the city had been choked…Every pore blocked, every breath stemmed: the earth was given a hard, impregnable gloss…and then the stench of diesel fumes would stain the air, and the swelter would get under skins and fray the nerves, and the city would curse and scan the festering skies" (51). Snippets of sexual violence also add to darken the city's spatial connotations. Tejpal's world is monochromatically masculine with female characters virtually non-existent—violence also gets played out in terms of sexual abuse in his girlfriend Sarah's apartment. The narrator is an unapologetic sexual abuser, filtering out the episodes of his abuse in Humbert-esque manner as acts of mutual consent. In most sexist terms, Sarah's status as a single, independent, educated woman and social activist is projected as a testimony

of her sexual promiscuity, hence the narrator validating his rough sex with her. In a disturbing passage, the narrator describes his extra-marital escapades of love making as aggressive sexual acts, bereft of any romantic inclination: "I began to abuse her, relentlessly, in Hindi, in English,…street words, cheap porno phrases,…and with each crude volley…she became beautifully uncontrollable (14). Filtered through the narrator's perspective, Sarah is presented in solely sexualized terms—her empathy, anger, and frustration against the corrupt system construed as a passing fancy that must be indulged in to extract more sexual favours from her. Thus, beneath this sheen and glamour of the modern city Tejpal exposes an urban dystopia that offers no relief, either as a physical space or as a moral matrix where the characters operate. It is an unremittingly dark world that is both depressing and dangerous and seems virtually irredeemable.

Spatially, the two clearly demarcated halves of Tejpal's Delhi—the elite and the marginal—can be mapped out in terms of geographical co-ordinates. The elite half of Delhi is geographically concentrated in certain parts of South Delhi like Saket, Vasant Kunj and Greater Kailash, and the gated residential complexes in Dwarka of West Delhi. These are spaces which are essentially marked off by iron gates and private security, where access is limited and exclusive for the elites, and these spaces are distilled off the presence and sight of the unkempt and the poor. On the other hand, the lower classes and the marginal groups are confined to the geographical areas of northern Old Delhi and Kashmere Gate, the Pahargunj railway station and the congested colonies of Rohini and Punjabi Bagh—the wasteland suburbs in North-West Delhi. In sharp contrast to the "carceral city" spaces of inner Delhi, these spaces of poverty contain the impoverished and the marginal groups who do not fit as citizens of the neoliberal city. Significantly enough, much like in the real Delhi, the two differential spaces and their respective populations do not intermix in the novel's narrative geography. The urban underclass subjects hardly breach the boundaries of their assigned spaces and do not "contaminate" the elite spaces of the city. The dividing lines are clearly seen when the homeless children of the Paharjung station confess that their adventures to the main city are strictly limited and they have never gone beyond the congested slums, "the jhuggi-jhopdi colony" and the cheap flea markets of Sadar Bazaar—all of which characterize the low class ghettos within the inner city. Similarly, the rural miscreants like Chaaku and Hathoda, who escape to the big city from their villages, again do not make it to the urban spaces of the politically powerful and the economically affluent. Thus, poor remains confined within the spatial underbelly of the city; being constructed as dangerous and potentially disruptive populace, the city also implements tangible policies of urban governance that regulate the "misfits" and prevents such excluded citizens from permeating into the city space secured for the entrepreneurial class.

Tejpal depicts the dark underbelly of contemporary Delhi bred by acute economic disparity that lies beneath the its sheen as a global city—in the shanty one-room apartments and the slums and the filthy railway station that shelters the beggars and the street children. The same generalization is applied

when poor and marginalized groups are targeted in the neoliberal urban space, where entire groups of marginalized population are identified as potentially dangerous and disruptive. Consequently, they are rendered essential targets of correctional biopolitics and hence subjects of regulatory control. The novel exposes how neoliberal urban policies of aggressive quarantine and elimination policies for the poor constitute a key process of policing the undesirable underclass in the city space.

The Story thus works in a dual way as a noir fiction. Firstly, by revealing a bleak sage of multifaceted crimes, it replaces the euphoria of India's neoliberal progress with a milieu of corruption, violence and cynicism. Secondly, projecting a dark world of lawlessness at both the upper and the lower strata of the city, Tejpal's exposes a deeply flawed discourse of criminality in an era of neoliberalism that defines crime not by its illegality but by identifying and regulating a certain group of underclass "criminal" population who do not fit into the scheme of the neoliberal city. Challenging the vision of the sanitized city that is propagated by neoliberal urbanism, the city in Tejapal's novel is universally bleak at every level of the society. Thus, as much as exclusionary urban policies attempt to quarantine the poor at its fringes by branding them as criminals, the fictional world of the novel constitutes moral depravity as permeating through every strata of its decaying society, signifying a rot that blurs the boundaries between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. Significantly enough, the novel's redemptive ending—the final reinstatement of the narrator's empathy over violence and moral vacuity—comes through a small gesture of kindness from one of the assassins. The narrator's life is saved by Hathoda Tyagi's attachment to the stray mongrel who is treated kindly by the narrator's wife. At the end, while Tyagi gets killed for raising questions and posing a threat against the higher authorities, the narrator carries his legacy of empathy for a fellow living being and appears humane for the first time. *The Story* thus ends with a moral redemption only for its middle-class privileged narrator; the underclass assassins end up incarcerated and dead, reinforcing the abysmal darkness of the urban underbelly that lies like a festering sore beneath the glamour of the world class city.

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Notes

Note 1. Sassen defines "Global cities" as "the centers for servicing and financing of international trade, investment, and headquarters operations—wherever these might be located. That is to say, the multiplicity of specialized activities in global cities are crucial in the valorization, indeed overvalorization of leading sectors of capital today. And in this sense they are strategic production sites for today's leading economic sectors" ("Whose city is this"?)

Note 2. Taking its origin from the root ideology of nineteenth century "liberalism", which lays utmost importance on the concept of freedom, neoliberalism advocates for a freer, more competitive and equally unregulated market. Heralded mainly by economic reforms initiated by Thatcher and Reagan in 1978-80s, several other nations have adopted new monetary policies of free market and open trade. India also joined in the bandwagon of economic liberalization in 1991,when the then Finance Minister

Manmohan Singh made major changes in the economic policies, transforming the country from a proto-socialist, mixed economy to a neoliberal economy that allowed more Foreign Direct Investment and lesser regulations on global trade. Central to the neoliberal philosophy is the idea of capitalism on a global scale, whereby the contemporary globalization has often been associated with terms like "global capitalism" or "capitalistic globalization".

Note 3. Economic liberalization denotes the specific period of Indian history after major economic changes towards free trade, increased foreign investment, open markets and neoliberalism were implemented in 1991 by the then Finance minister Manmohan Singh. These economic policies officially marked the transition of India's economic and political system from a proto-socialist model conceptualized by Nehru, to a model that more prominently leans towards many capitalistic policies, if not a complete conversion to capitalism.