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Who Owns The City? Spatial Violence and Migrant Precarity in Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine As Light*

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Abstract

This research paper examines Payal Kapadia's film *All We Imagine as Light* to reveal the spatial violence that characterizes capitalist urbanism. The study employs the theoretical lens of Henri Lefebvre's concepts of the spatial triad, production of space, and the right to the city to reveal how the city of Mumbai is produced, controlled, and contested. Furthermore, the paper employs David Harvey's formulation of "accumulation by dispossession" to reveal how urban development perpetuates exclusion and spatial violence. The research also interrogates the contradictions between the symbolic ideals of urban life and the material conditions of the marginalized. By doing so, the paper exposes the myth of Mumbai as the "city of dreams" and reveals the systemic inequalities embedded in the city. It also sheds light on the precarious existence of the migrants. The interdisciplinary approach, combining film analysis and urban studies, highlights the urgent need to rethink spatial rights in the rapidly transforming urban landscape of the Global South.

Keywords: spatial violence, spatial triad, accumulation by dispossession, right to the city, migrant precarity.

Introduction

Today's age is marked by increased global migration with the hopes of enhanced security and better living conditions. Under such circumstances, urban cities offer hope of prosperity and success for the migrant workers. One such hub for migration is the city of Mumbai. Often described as "the city of dreams," Mumbai epitomizes the vision of upward social mobility and economic prosperity. Yet, for many migrant workers, the city offers its harsh reality, which is shaped by precarity, exclusion, and dispossession.

This paper undertakes an interdisciplinary inquiry into the film *All We Imagine as Light*. Written and directed by Payal Kapadia, the movie traces the lives of three migrant women workers who navigate the city of Mumbai. Two of the protagonists, Prabha and Anu, are nurses

who have migrated from Kerala. The third protagonist is Parvati, a cook, who has migrated from a coastal village. The paper tries to analyze the spatial violence experienced by the characters by positioning them as representatives of the migrants and the marginalized. The paper also examines how capitalism thrives by exploiting the labour and resources of the marginalized and tries to expose the structural violence associated with neoliberal urbanism. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the production of space and the right to the city, and David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession, the paper interrogates the contradictions between the symbolic ideals of urban life and the material conditions of the marginalized. Through close reading of the selected film, the paper highlights the tension between spaces as it is planned and imagined and space as it is inhabited and contested. By combining urban studies and film analysis, the research sheds light on the spatial injustices embedded in neoliberal cities and the need to develop new security paradigms for migrant workers and the marginalized.

Several researchers have tried to analyze the plight of migrant workers in Mumbai. Jha and Kumar, in their work "Homeless Migrants in Mumbai: Life and Labour in Urban Space," locate the experiences of homeless migrants in Mumbai within the framework of the neo-liberal envisioning of Mumbai as a global city. Their study reveals how the informalization of labour in urban cities has resulted in restricted access to basic facilities like affordable housing and social welfare. Another social critic, Taukeer, highlights the challenges related to the socio-economic and political identity formation of migrant labourers in Mumbai and emphasizes the need for them to develop a shared cultural identity to adjust to the urban landscape. Weinstein focuses on slum clearance campaigns and demolition drives and reveals how they are part of contestations over authority and sovereignty in governance. In addition, Kucha examines the alienation felt by the inhabitants of the city, and Chalana undertakes a comparative study of the areas Dharavi and Girangaon to stress the need for alternative redevelopment approaches.

The film *All We Imagine as Light* has also been analyzed by various critics. Chauhan and Chaturvedi see the film as an embodiment of the growing sense of sisterhood in Indian cinema. They also argue that the film resists patriarchal narratives and tries to analyze the impact of cinematic narrative on social change. In a similar vein, Poojashree and Bhadoria examine the relationship of the three women protagonists against the backdrop of the fast-moving city. Their study also highlights how the film presents a female gaze and resists systems of othering imposed on them. Praveen, in addition to analyzing the interior lives of the characters, describes the movie as "an ode to the city and to its outsiders, who just can't call it home but can't leave it too." Dargis sees the film as a depiction of Mumbai's "vibrant and darkly alienating churn," whereas Nehru views it as an exploration of female intimacy.

Research focusing on urban studies has also surfaced in recent years. Analyzing Lefebvre's ideas, Molotch argues that humans create and shape the space in which they live. He also focuses on how globalization creates a worldwide confrontation of diverse values and ideas and how there is a "trial by space" (888). By the phrase "trial by space," he refers to how different social groups and ways of life are tested for their ability to shape and inscribe

themselves onto space. Gottdiener sees space both as a medium of social relations and a material product that can affect social relations. He further argues that, similar to other commodities, the production of space under capitalism also involves fragmentation and homogenization. While Batou studies the enduring role of primitive accumulation and examines how it functions as a part of broader capital accumulation, Giavarotti critiques David Harvey's theory of accumulation by dispossession by revisiting Marx's concept of primitive accumulation and linking it to contemporary land-grabbing and capitalist crises. Chacko and Price reveal the precarious existence of migrants in urban cities around the world using empirical evidence. They also demonstrate how many migrants employ individual and collective agency to resist their categorisation as disposable and transitory workers.

Existing research in urban studies has analyzed the socio-economic struggles of migrant labourers in Mumbai, and the film *All We Imagine as Light* has been analyzed as an embodiment of sisterhood and female intimacy. However, there is a gap in scholarly attention paid to the plight of the migrants in contrast to the idealized, conceived notions of urban cities as spaces of opportunity and progress. There is a lack of scholarly engagement with contemporary texts through the lens of Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory and David Harvey's idea of accumulation by dispossession. By bringing together film analysis and urban theory, this study provides an interdisciplinary perspective on spatial injustice and the everyday struggles of marginalized groups in urban cities.

Lefebvre's spatial triad is a powerful framework for analyzing the representation of space in the film *All We Imagine as Light*. In his work *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that space is socially produced. It consists of three interrelated dimensions: perceived, conceived, and lived space. He says, "the fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social (11). Here, the physical space is understood in terms of "perceived space" or "spatial practice." It consists of the material world, including natural landscapes and built environments. The second aspect is the mental framework regarding the space. It corresponds to "conceived space" and "representations of space" in Lefebvre's terminology. This is the domain of ideas and conceptual models about the space created by the people, urban planners, and intellectuals. The last dimension is the "lived space" or "representational space." This is the dimension of space that is inhabited by the citizens, and it is shaped by their experiences and social interactions.

The portrayal of the city of Mumbai in Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* can be understood in terms of Lefebvre's spatial triad. The film clearly captures the tangible aspects of Mumbai's urban landscape. Scenes depicting crowded trains, bustling streets, and the daily routines of the protagonists highlight the city's physical environment. Their commutes through crowded trains and their cramped living quarters also constitute their spatial practice.

In the film, Kapadia depicts the conceived or representations of space through the anonymous voices of migrant workers. As Lefebvre notes, the conceived space encompasses the dominant ways in which space is conceived, planned, and represented. The migrant

worker's voice, "every family in the village has at least one person in Mumbai. In Mumbai, there is work and money. Why would anyone want to move back?" reveals this dimension (00:03:24). It reflects the dominant narrative about Mumbai as a site of economic opportunity and upward mobility. This aligns with the idea of the "American Dream," where cities are presented as spaces of possibility and where anyone can succeed if they work hard. Similarly, Mumbai is conceived as "the city of dreams," which draws migrant workers with the illusion of success. However, this myth often obscures systemic inequalities of Mumbai, which is structured for the wealthy. Hence, the migrant workers and marginalized groups struggle to navigate and claim space within the city.

The reality of the city of Mumbai is evident in the dimension of the lived space or the representational space. The film, through the depiction of the lived reality of the migrant workers, reveals the deep contradictions within the city's conceived space. The lines, "there's an unspoken code in this city: even if you live in the gutter, you're allowed to feel no anger. People call this 'The Spirit of Mumbai,'" capture the paradox of the lived space in Mumbai (01:07:11). It reveals how the inhabitants are expected to silently endure the challenges and hardships that living in the city entails. For migrant workers, the city's conceived space promotes an illusion of progress and inclusivity, while in reality, their lived space is marked by precarity, alienation, and systemic neglect.

Furthermore, the lines, "some people call this the city of dreams. But I don't. I think it is the city of illusions. You have to believe the illusion, or else you'll go mad," reveal how the city's branding is merely an illusion (01:08:23). Lefebvre's spatial triad reveals how the ideological and economic forces that shape conceived space contrast with the harsh realities of lived space, especially for migrants and working-class individuals. In *All We Imagine as Light*, the protagonists Prabha, Anu, and Parvathy navigate a city that offers them little stability or emotional fulfilment despite their aspirations. The lines point to how the inhabitants must participate in the collective delusion to endure its hardships. In addition, the economic insecurity experienced by the working class is reflected in Anu's lament, "my salary is never enough" (00:22:09). Hence, the film, by focusing on the everyday struggles of its characters, exposes the gaps in the illusion and reveals how the "city of dreams" is a city built on contradictions.

The illusion of Mumbai as the "city of dreams" is sustained through processes that actively marginalize and displace its most vulnerable inhabitants. As Lefebvre argues, "space has taken on, within the present mode of production, within society as it actually is, a sort of reality of its own, a reality clearly distinct from, yet much like, those assumed in the same global process by commodities, money and capital" (*The Production of Space* 26). The lines suggest that in the present mode of production, space is no longer just a neutral setting where social interactions occur; it is actively produced, controlled, and traded as a commodity. In contemporary capitalism, space is bought, sold, and controlled much like any other commodity.

The idea of the commodification of space also aligns with David Harvey's idea of "accumulation by dispossession." Harvey argues that in capitalist urbanization, dispossession

is necessary for accumulation. This appropriation of existing resources often involves the displacement and exclusion of the marginalized classes. The quote, "I've lived here maybe twenty-three years. But I feel afraid to call it home. There's always the feeling I'll have to leave," highlights the precarious existence of vulnerable groups in the city of Mumbai (00:02:48). It reveals how the inhabitants are constantly under the threat of displacement despite having lived there for over two decades. By presenting a city where even long-term residents feel alienated, the film exposes how Mumbai's conceived space (the dream of urban prosperity) is in direct conflict with its lived reality (a landscape of exclusion and forced displacement).

Parvathy's forced eviction in *All We Imagine as Light* is a direct example of Harvey's ideas of "accumulation by dispossession," where working-class communities are uprooted to make way for capitalist developments. Despite having lived in Mumbai for twenty-two years, Parvati is forced to leave her home because of the construction of an apartment. Parvati's displacement reflects the capitalist developmental logic where land is continuously appropriated for capital gain. Furthermore, it reinforces Lefebvre's argument that space is controlled, circulated, and redefined by economic interests. The advocate's statement, "the problem is you don't really have a case. Because there is no proof that you have lived there," underscores how Mumbai's urban development framework systematically erases those who do not fit into its economic structures (00:37:39). Her lived experience is not valued because space, as Lefebvre argues, has been commodified by ownership and capital. Parvati's realization that "you only seem to be real if you have papers. You could just vanish into thin air and no one would even know" exposes the exclusion and invisibility experienced by marginalized communities in urban spaces (01:02:13). The fear of "vanishing" reflects the condition of many urban poor who, despite contributing to the city's economy, remain socially and politically unrecognized.

In addition, the billboard kept in front of the apartment under construction reads "luxury living redefined. Class is a privilege, reserved for the privileged." The statement highlights the exclusionary nature of capitalist urban development. The billboard explicitly frames access to quality housing not as a right but as a privilege reserved for the wealthy. It serves as a reminder of the widening gap between the haves and have-nots and of who the city is being designed for and who is being excluded.

In the article "Excavating Lefebvre: The Right to the City and Its Urban Politics of the Inhabitant," Mark Purcell explains Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city." He argues that "the right to the city stresses the need to restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting control away from capital and the state and toward urban inhabitants" (102). Here, he sheds light on Lefebvre's emphasis on the importance of giving the right to shape urban spaces to those who inhabit the city rather than to economic and political elites. His call to "restructure the power relations" points to the need to challenge the forces that dictate who get access to housing, public spaces, and urban resources. He emphasises that urban planning should serve people's needs, not economic profit.

On a similar note, the film *All We Imagine as Light* reveals Mumbai's gentrification and showcases how urban space is produced for capital. Parvati's forced eviction illustrates how control over urban space is concentrated in the hands of the privileged. It also reveals how marginalized urban inhabitants are denied agency over the spaces they live in. Instead of being active participants in shaping the city, they are pushed to the peripheries or erased altogether. Hence, the film highlights the need to reclaim spaces and aligns with Lefebvre's ideas.

Lefebvre argues that "the right to the oeuvre, to participation and appropriation" (clearly distinct from the right to property), are implied in the right to the city (*Writings on Cities* 174). The line emphasizes how the concept of the right to the city extends beyond mere legal ownership to accommodate the right to participation and appropriation. It involves the right to the oeuvre (to create), to participate (democratic involvement in urban planning), and to appropriate (use and inhabit urban spaces, regardless of legal ownership).

To counter the alienation brought about by capitalism in urban spaces, there is a need to reappropriate spaces. Purcell argues, "Lefebvre sees the right to the city as a struggle to "de-alienate" urban space, to reintegrate it into the web of social connections" (Possible Worlds 149). In *All We Imagine as Light*, the defiant quote, "Why should I leave my place? Threaten me all you want, I won't leave my place. Over my dead body!" captures Parvati's resistance against displacement (00:10:18). The subsequent dialogue, "I've lived there for twenty-two years, what do I need papers for?" challenges the legal mechanisms used by capitalist systems to justify accumulation (00:10:25). It also links Lefebvre's idea of how space belongs to its inhabitants and not to the owners.

Through the lines, "We built their buildings. We cleaned their gutters, cooked their food, and did all the work they refused to do themselves. But when we ask for a home near theirs, they can't stand it. We have to unite and make them understand that ours are the hands that built this city," the marginalized classes clearly articulate their right to the city (00:59:03). The lines challenge the spatial inequalities experienced by them and highlight the key role the marginalized play in the creation and functioning of the city. The scene in which Parvati and Prabha throw stones at the apartment hoarding can also be read as an attempt to resist spatial violence.

However, Parvati soon realizes that she has no way to reclaim her space from the capitalist forces and decides to go back to her village. Her words, "at least in my village I have my own home," highlights the precarity of urban spaces and the security provided by rural spaces which are not under capitalist control (00:58:27). Hence, in the Lefebvrian sense, Parvati's return to her village points to a failed right to the city and reveals the inability of marginalized classes to participate in shaping and claiming urban space.

To conclude, in an age of increased global migration for enhanced security and living standards, this analysis reveals the precarious existence of migrants in urban spaces. The study undertakes an interdisciplinary approach and combines textual analysis and urban studies to examine how lived experience in cities is shaped by forces of capitalism, exclusion, and resistance. The study also showcases how conceived spaces differ from lived spaces. The

research exposes how the luxury and comfort promised by urban planners are restricted to the wealthy and the powerful. In addition, the study highlights the importance of Lefebvre's idea of "the right to the city" and takes a stand against the spatial violence inflicted on marginalized groups by capitalist systems.

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