

Paper prepared for
The 7th Euroacademia International Conference
Identities and Identifications: Politicized Uses of Collective Identities

Lucca, Italy
14 – 15 June 2018

This paper is a draft
Please do not cite or circulate

The “Other” City—Varanasi and the Reintegration of Western Identity

Vinita Teresa
Department of English
University of Hyderabad

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to read the novel *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* (2009) by the English writer Geoff Dyer through the lens of waste studies, spatiality and the psychoanalytical idea of the “abject” as expounded by Julia Kristeva in her seminal work *Powers of Horror* (1982). My central thesis is that in the novel, which is narrated in two parts set in the cities of Venice and Varanasi, respectively, the psychological topography of the protagonist Jeff Atman gets exteriorized in the surroundings in which the actions take place. In other words, I would like to argue that the Varanasi, seen as the holiest place in the world by the Hindus and notorious for being highly polluted becomes the alter ego of Venice, considered the epitome of renaissance high culture and European sophistication. I would like to extend the argument further and analyse the ways in which the “abjected” space of Varanasi results in a spiritual and organic transformation of the protagonist’s self. I also try to find a common ground between Western psychoanalytic theory and the Hindu philosophy of Maya—both of which talk about the constructedness of the self and see how it can be employed to study the representation of the city-spaces in the novel as well as the protagonists interior space.

Keywords: Venice, Varanasi, abjection, space, self, death, Maya, Kristeva

This paper is an attempt to read the novel *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*ⁱ (2009) by the English writer Geoff Dyer through the lens of waste studies, spatiality and the psychoanalytical idea of the “abject” as expounded by Julia Kristeva in her seminal work *Powers of Horror*ⁱⁱ (1989). My central thesis is that in the novel, which is narrated in two parts set in the cities of Venice and Varanasi, respectively, the psychological topography of the protagonist Jeff Atman gets exteriorized in the surroundings in which the actions take place. In other words, I would like to argue that the Varanasi, seen as the holiest place in the world by the Hindus and notorious for being highly polluted becomes the alter ego of Venice, considered the epitome of renaissance high culture and European sophistication. I would like to extend the argument further and analyse the ways in which the “abjected” space of Varanasi results in a spiritual and organic transformation of the protagonist’s self.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the text, it is necessary to give a brief description of the Kristeva’s theory of the Abject. She expands Lacan idea of the self and the object to state that the “abject” is different from the object which becomes source of desire for the self, abject is what threatens to destroy the self, it forms the boundary between the carefully constructed ordered self and the chaotic, primordial, meaningless and formless state of life which is beyond language and any order of meaning. However, the self is implicated in the abject, its alter ego which fascinates as well as disgusts it. Kristeva terms this horror-tinged fascination *jouissance* which makes it impossible for the self to completely repress and forget the meaninglessness and ambiguity which highlights its vulnerability. The idea of the abject has intimate linkages with the concept of waste since both constitute a threat to order and the construction of the self and both evoke visceral disgust and horror in the self. At this juncture, it is important to clarify that this philosophy of the self is primarily concerned with the modern Western idea of the individual and self and need not be equally true for conceptions of the self in other civilizations. The implied structure of the self and the abject other, the inside and other, the included and excluded points towards the spatial dimension inherent in this concept. David Sibleyⁱⁱⁱ opines that Kristeva’s idea of the abject can also be extended to the realm of region and geography to constitute what he terms the “geographies of differences” which can be a useful framework for studying the representation of spaces of abjection and terror.

Another concept pertinent to my argument is the idea of the post-human which aims to destabilise the notion of the human as the central ordering principal of the world and attempts to envision a more democratic world where

agency is distributed among human and non-human entities, living and non-living beings and humans are irrevocably embedded in space and place. In this paper, I interpret the idea of the post-human to signify a blurring of the boundaries of the self which are based on the ideas of the superior modern man and the formation of more organic linkages with the environment which includes other cultures and non-human actors.

Having made the theoretical basis of the paper clear, it is very important to give a brief synopsis of the novel for a better understanding of the line of reasoning used in the paper. *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi* is narrated in two parts. The first part “Jeff in Venice” revolves around the character of Jeff Atman, a London-based freelance journalist who dislikes his job and is in the grip of ennui and the decadence of the media-saturated world he lives. He is fully aware of the pettiness of his existence and the dispensability of his own self as a journalist in the career that he has chosen for himself. He is assigned the work of reporting the Venice Art Biennale for four days. Jeff spends the four days in all forms of hedonistic pleasure—getting caught in a swirl of innumerable inconsequential parties, petty conversations, booze, drugs and having sexual intercourse with a woman whom he meets at one of the parties. In between, in his reflective moments, he is haunted by visions/premonitions of another city which seems like a wasted and ruined version of Venice. As his days in Venice come to an end and his sexual companion departs, Jeff Atman is left feeling spiritually and emotionally empty and immensely lonely. The second part of the novel commences with the protagonist travelling to Varanasi, India for a journalistic assignment. Though there are no direct references to the first part of the story and the character is not explicitly identified as Jeff, the narrative makes the continuity between the two persons clear (and for the sake of brevity, I will refer to the unnamed character as Jeff). He is initially appalled by the chaos and mayhem in the congested lanes of Varanasi and the extent of dirt and squalor around him. However, he experiences a strange sense of affinity for the place and decides to extend his visit and ends up postponing his return home indefinitely. Over the course of his engagement with the sacred-profane space of Varanasi, he experiences a spiritual transformation and deeper insight into human existence. Thus, the story straddles two cities located in different continents where the latter is strangely reminiscent of the former and seeps into each other.

To understand the complex interplay of spaces and places in this novel, it is essential to be briefly acquainted with the specific socio-religious trajectories of the imaginations within which these cities are situated. As mentioned before, notwithstanding the antiquity and the status of being riverside cities, Venice and Varanasi have been shaped by different epistemological imaginations. Venice is seen as symbolizing the quintessence of European progress, culture and art. The popular representation of the city in images and writings highlight the sublime watery beauty of the city. Varanasi on the other hand has a different kind of visual and spatial geography associated. Located in the Northern part of India, on the crescent-shaped stretch of the River Ganga (Ganges), Varanasi occupies the topmost position in the hierarchy of the Hindu pilgrimage places. Much of its divinity is derived from the Ganges which is considered as Goddess/Mother Ganga who has the divine power to purify the sins of the devotees who bathe in her waters and anybody who dies in Varanasi is believed to receive moksha/salvation from the repetitive cycle of births and rebirths. The origin of Varanasi is shrouded in Hindu mythology and the place is seen as elevated from the materiality of the Earth and is seen as the tirtha (crossing over) space to heaven. However, the sacred imagination of the city is offset by the environmental discourse surrounding the city which exclusively talks about the dangerous levels of pollution in the city and the river. Westerners who travel to the city in vast numbers are struck by the happy coexistence of dirt and devotion and the general unsanitary nature of spaces that are considered divine and pure. This essential dichotomy can be explained only in terms of the civilizational differences in attitudes towards cleaning, purity and dirt. The medical modernity which focuses on the pathogens and germs as carriers of diseases envisions a kind of modern sanitation based on the containment of processes which lead to the thriving of germs while in the Indian context, holiness and purity are, more often than not, perceived by the means of metaphysical-spiritual imagination. Hence, purity does not necessarily imply absence of dirt and germs.

It is in this context that the juxtaposition of the two cities in the novel creates interesting complexities and engagements. As mentioned before, the paper tries to argue that in the story, Varanasi forms the Real, chaotic reality which the self tries to actively repress and abjectify and in which it is implicated. According to psychoanalytic theory, the repressed pre-lingual realities of our being often surface as events and experiences which are strangely defamiliarized. In the novel, while in Venice, Jeff is occasionally struck by flashes of premonitions of Varanasi which is positioned as a more ancient watery city by the side of a rubbish-strewn river. In such moments, when he falls through the gaps of his conscious, Varanasi looms large as the disquieting abject other of the almost magical Venice and Jeff is confronted with fragile precarity of his own being. For example, the first night in Venice he dreams that he has become a corpse being chewed upon by dogs by the side of a wasted

canal (12). In the dream he realizes with horror that his arms are missing and later in Venice, on meeting a friend with an injured arm, he is seized with panic that he might also lose his arm. Quite mystically, in Varanasi, a dead body being chewed upon by dogs become a source of perverse appeal to some of the tourists, including Jeff (201). This series of psychological reactions highlight Jeff's subconscious fear of death and disintegration and the mixed horror and fascination for the corpse. Kristeva states that the corpse and death are some of the most abjectified entities since they signify the loss of the self and complete surrender to chaos and meaninglessness (10). Here, repressed fear and anxiety gets exteriorized in the space of Varanasi.

Similarly, among the banality of Venice Art Biennale, Jeff undergoes rare and fleeting moments of sublimity when he is faced with art which somehow emphasize on waste and gives him mystical premonition of Varanasi. Some examples include the Finnish boat art installation which showcased a still boat slowly filling with water standing on still water made of debris from glass factories (20) which turns out to be very similar to his experience of travelling in a leaky boat in the polluted Ganga. Also, the artwork called the "Blue Room" where one is induced to feel as though being immersed in endless blueness of the cosmos is akin to the experience of feeling the vastness of the world while immersing in the Ganga (31). Thus, the psychological landscape of Varanasi— exotic, ancient and debris-strewn always simmers below the surface of the Art Biennale, omnipresent like the abject repressed below the surface of the conscious.

The spectral, undifferentiated Varanasi that is present in Jeff's spatial experience of Venice is all the more intensified by the apparent insubstantial and elusive quality of the latter city. This has an important bearing on the analysis of the text since this city makes the conception of the city analogous to the psychoanalytical concept of the self. As detailed before, the self exists based on a precarious cordoning-off of the Real, primordial qualities and impulses and the ego which is based on the false identification as the mirror image as the self, makes the idea of the self even more treacherous, magical and illusory. In different points in the text, Jeff points out the dream-like state of Venice, its elusiveness. His point is further buttressed by references to Turner's paintings of Venice which was well known for delicate colours which lend a magical quality to the landscapes (22). Also, on a more material level, many a time, Jeff gets lost in the labyrinth of alleys, often feeling that the places are not located where there are supposed to be, highlighting the elusiveness and playfulness of the cityscape. The idea of the treachery of the self or the limitations of our perceptions of reality finds parallels in the Hindu concept of "maya" which can be roughly translated as "illusion" and ignorance which let one perceive the world only through the veil. Thus, Jeff's self can be seen as being suspended in a state of maya, cemented and complemented by the dreamlike state of Venice.

The ability to see through maya, or to lift the veil of maya which prevents us from seeing the truth/reality. In psychoanalytic terms, this act of lifting the veil is quite impossible as far as the modern Western psyche is concerned since the "Real" is always beyond language and hence inaccessible. However, Hinduism envisages a scope for this ideal, perfect knowledge when the individual self collapses and becomes one with the universal spirit. In Jeff it is possible to see this trajectory—the journey from the petty, insecure self to a more detached, expansive self which he arrives at after commencing his indefinite stay in Varanasi. In the first part of the novel his divided self is exemplified in the way he sees himself in the mirror and finds his image quite alien from the image he sees. The mirror here is both physical as well as the image of Jeff which is perceived by the outsider. Hence, when he sees a younger looking image of his self after he dyes his hair, he feels that it is a moment of untruth (8). Similarly, he sees himself through other's eyes and imagines that he if were an outsider, he himself would want to be like Jeff even though he is displeased and with and tired of his life. However, after an extended stay in Varanasi, in a telling incident, Jeff gazes into the eyes of a holy man. Initially he zooms in on his reflection in the man's eyes, but gradually, he zooms out and sees that he is merely a speck in the iris and the entire face of the man dominates Jeff's vision (250). Symbolically, this can be seen as the beginning of a journey where the self is seen in perspective without clouding the vision and is seen as being embedded in a larger vision of the world.

The second part of the novel begins with the self of Jeff "straying" (a term used by Kristeva) into the region of the abject, i.e., Varanasi. Like any other average Western tourist, he is assaulted by the frightening traffic, the narrow streets, pollution and the crowd. The ambassador car that he is travelling in, a vestige of Western progress and development offers little protection for his self which is assuaged by the disorder which threatens annihilate his self any moment. In a similar, and more unsettling incident, Jeff's autorickshaw again "strays off" the main road, into a dilapidated side road and the vehicle is attacked by a group of street children, extremely poor and hostile-looking whom Jeff describes as being feral, hardly human and amorphous (224). Again, the well-ordered, disciplined and affluent self gets threatened by the danger of being assaulted by beings from another part of the world who

symbolize violence and terror. Thus, it is possible to see the Real unconscious as a spatial realm with respect to Jeff's experience in violently uncontrollable landscape of Varanasi.

Similarly, the daily contact with diseased and dying humans and animals which inhabit the ghats leading to the river serve to point to the materiality and precarity of the human condition. There are graphic descriptions of mangy dog with almost human-like skin, men with infected testicles and ulcerous feet, and most important of all—graphic description of the cremation of dead bodies. The belief that the Hindus who die in Varanasi and get cremated in the cremation ghat by the side of the River Ganga will attain salvation makes it a divine and most auspicious place to die. The Hindu custom of cremating the dead body instead of burying it makes the deterioration and disintegration graphically visible for the public to see. This becomes a great source of dark and perverted attraction the non-Indian tourists who flock around the cremation ghats to view the body disintegrate and melt into the fire, resulting in a twisted fascination at having witnessed the material frailty of the human body. Thus, for a self which is based on the active repression of the material decay and wasting of the human body, death forms of the greatest terror and fascination and Varanasi, which sustains a sacred ecology of death proves to source of grotesque attraction. The contrast in the treatment of death in Western culture is evident in the scene where Jeff and his friend visits the cemetery in Venice containing the tombstones of many famous artists (56). The dead artists, even in after their mortal remains have vanished from the earth, continue to retain their persona and the physical space of the cemetery is animated by the tokens of love that their fans has left behind and in a sense, they still hold sway after the material world.

The shore of the river opposite the city is variously perceived by Jeff as a dry desert, a formless mystic mass of land, and so on. After many days he makes his journey to the bank to find it rubbish strewn, and the a corpse being eaten by the dogs. A wave of sleepiness comes over him and when he wakes up, he feels like a newly-born foal, with unsteady legs (270). The sleeping and forgetting can be seen as the opening the conscious to a truth which was beyond the realm of knowledge, beyond, maya. This, he undergoes a transformation in the rubbish strewn shore, an experience of sublimation which hand in hand with the feeling of abjection. After being constantly assailed by germs, dysentery and other bodily ailments which successively broke down his body and blurred all the fixities of his life gradually makes him increasingly detached from his worldly self, letting go of external markers of regional and cultural identity. In a very symbolic piece of narration towards the end, Jeff sees himself as a newly born kangaroo, travelling in the pouch of a semi-divine animal-human creature which named Ganoona (291)— a combination of the word Ganesh (the Hindu god with an elephant's head) and Kangaroo. The name itself does not mean much, rather its significance is derived from its apparent meaninglessness and dis-affinity with the autonomous human identity. Thus, Jeff Atman (Atman is the Sanskrit word for soul) grows and travels beyond his limited self and conscious to forge linkages with a more expansive and democratic sense of being and the regions he crosses over and the abject regions he encounter —both literal and psychological —become crucial to development.

ⁱ Dyer, Geoff. *Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi*. Random House India, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. Cambridge University Press, 1982.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sibley, David. "Creating Geographies of Difference." *Human Geography Today*, edited by Doreen Massey et al., Polity Press, 1999, 115-128