



Re-envisioning the Spatial Praxis of Bombay: A Critique of Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Dastak*

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Abstract

The research article explores the concept of space in Rajinder Singh Bedi's film *Dastak* (1970) through the philosophies of heterotopia and utopia. It challenges conventional hierarchies of space by extending reality towards utopia in a place devoid of hegemony. It looks at the city of Bombay as a thirdspace, where negotiations between utopia and dystopia occur. The film follows the struggles of Salma and Hamid as they navigate the boundaries between their intimate home and the public bazaar, symbolizing the clash between their idealized domestic life and the harsh realities of society. The past of the space influences its present, with voyeuristic male gaze and the role of music serving as critiques of modernity. The film highlights the inversion of spatial meanings, where the city becomes a refuge for the couple, reminiscent of similar contours in *Pyasa* (1957). It examines how the couple's aspirations for dignity and livelihood are undermined by the commodification of their lives in a society driven by the pursuit of modernity. Conclusively, *Dastak* intertwines social issues with human sentiment and offers a critique of capitalism, ultimately presenting a hopeful yet ambiguous portrayal of the complexities of space and society.

Keywords: Space, Cinema, Heterotopia, Bollywood, Utopia, Dystopia

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself,

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a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault 23)

Micheal Foucault, in his essay, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias" challenges the conventions of defining and classifying the concept of Space in hierarchies of "the sacred and the profane, protected places and open, exposed places, urban and rural places" (22) and refers to heterotopia to describe the extension of reality towards utopia in a place where exists no hegemony. This heterotopia, which functions at every level in every culture, is either a physical approximation of the unattained utopia— also occupying mental space, or is a parallel constitution of objectionable elements in a space, the elimination of which makes utopia a possible perception. It departs towards utopia, but never arrives at it, defined by the actions and things and thoughts placed in the space.

The research paper attempts to analyze spatial dynamics of Rajinder Singh Bedi's film *Dastak* (1970) through the body of the Female, and critiques the narrative from the vantage point of its spatial axis. The City, in relation to the 'Other' that the rural is, is usually regarded as a space affixed with the notion of utopia modernity—where dreams are realized and struggles come to a definite end. In "Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory", Edward Soja states, "Thirdspace is a call to creative practice, to finding ways of combining the strengths of spatiality and sociality, of place and politics" (38). This liminal thirdspace, also evoked in the deprived lives of the characters in city-based Bollywood films like *Dastak* and *Pyaasa*, theorizes the nature of heterotopia as a space that can essentially be understood beyond the binaries of utopia and dystopia. The City, then, becomes a kind of thirdspace, where the negotiations, tensions, contestations and resistance between the binaries can be mapped.

The Cityscape

There is a heavy price an individual pays to achieve the privileges that the City offers, a price for extending the reality towards a utopian simulation. These ‘real’ cities with their own share of flawed systems and dangers are presented as sites with the ‘pull factor’ that fulfill the deprived man’s hopes and dreams, specifically Bombay of the independent India, often employed as the idealistic metropolis in Indian Cinema— the city that never sleeps. With post independent economic developments that saw the emerging industries of textiles and construction, Bombay of the 1960s and ‘70s had begun to be increasingly commodified—often trading the integrity, and even claiming the lives of the lowly class, with meager amounts of money, perfectly captured by Majrooh Sultanpuri in the song *Ye Hai Bambai Meri Jaan* from the 1956 film *CID*, as Johnny Walker advises a little boy in a comic demeanor,

*“Kahin building, kahin traame, kahin motor, kahin mill,
Milta hai yahaan sab kuchh, ik milta nahin dil.
Insaan ka nahin koi naam-o-nishaan,
Zaraa hatt ke, zara bach ke, ye hai Bambai meri jaan..”*
(*CID* 27:44-28:00)

Additionally, the opening credits of *Dastak* are backed with the montage of a beach, the Gateway of India, the Churchgate Railway Station, the hustle of daily life and ends with a shot of the high-rise buildings after which the camera moves on to the slum located in the same area. This is perhaps suggestive of the coexistence, if not peaceful, of the various classes that the city of Bombay embraces. The city slum as viewed through the large glass windows of such buildings by the elite constructors looks like a vacant place to construct and directors like Bedi choose to put the elitist and the victims of their own circumstances in a shared frame.

The city of Bombay is regarded to provide for everyone who comes to its bustle from all walks of life and spaces. And as a result, affordable housing is still a dream for many even today. Albeit, feeling fortunate upon finding one, the house that Hamid and Saleem inhabit was once courtesan Shamshad Begum’s abode, and the past of the ‘private’ space of the house continues to permeate in its

present, and the courtesan's past casts its shadows over the couple's marital bliss. Begum's patrons would knock Salma's doors, while also parallelly knocking the doors of the space's past. The constant struggle, the price that Salma and Hamid pay for their *sharaafat* (civility) unfolds with it the nuances of spaces and simultaneously, these spaces consciously and subconsciously conspire to shove the Muslim couple below their uprightness, both at home and in office. The space of the house remains the same, but its meaning changes across the temporal axis. A given space is widely defined by the action that takes place in it. But rather in this locale, the past of the space defines the present of this space, and the action that unwittingly takes place in it. Heterotopia can serve as a paradigm for one to understand 'otherness' of a space they are inhabiting. The film *Dastak* illustrates the tensions and contestation between the utopian home and dystopian bazaar in relation to the same space. While Hamid and Salma desire to make it their home, they are constantly challenged by the values of bazaar, and voyeuristic male gaze is a part of this dynamic.

Permeation of the City in the Home

The door essentially serves as a boundary between the intimate space of the Home and the figurative and metaphorical 'baazaar' that it is located in. The first *dastak* (knock) introduces the viewers to the dynamics of this domestic space and when Salma begins to doubt the meaning that the walls carry with them, Hamid pacifies her with, "*Sab dhuhwa lenge Salma, safedi karva lenge. ... Jahaan Allah ka naam lenge aur namaazein padenge, vo jagah paak ho jaayegi*" (*Dastak* 1:02:00-1:04:00), (We will get all the walls white-washed. And where we will take Allah's name and offer him prayers, that place will become pious). But it is the element of public gaze and scopophilia that characters like the Panwala (betel leaf seller), the neighbor and Shamsad Begum in the garb of their '*sharaafat*' eventually, yet forcibly, reduce the *grahast* (household) to a *kothaa* (brothel) for the course of the narrative. Additionally, music plays a fundamental role in the film and the larger context of changing meanings of art—thus serving as a critique on modernity. Salma has a beautiful voice, and unaware that the gazers in the baazaar and the walls of the house have been conditioned to listen to the music of

courtesans that once inhabited this house, she would sing melodiously through the day, and often crave to hold the tanpura in her hands— once regarded as the instrument of the brothel. Upon learning that her singing had further led people to believe that she indeed was a courtesan under the garb of ‘civility’, Hamid forbade her to stop indulging in expressing herself through her music— further imposing the gaze of the outside to lurk in the intimate space of the Home. The song *Baiyaan na Dharo*, sung by a nearby courtesan was earlier sung by Salma’s father Ustaad Dajaan Khan too, a former renowned classical singer, but in a different composition. The courtesan culture of pre and post-independence Bombay affected classical music and art— thus was the ‘*ustaad*’ now reduced to be known as ‘*miyaan*’ and the ‘*bai*’ now regarded as a ‘*gaanewali*.’

Human emotions and misery need space for articulation. And it is music in the narrative, extended from the psychological space of Salma, which becomes a dais for the expression of her concupiscence. Salma struggles through the confines of patriarchy when she sings “*Na tadapne ki ijaazat hai na fariyaad ki hai, ghut ke marr jaaun ye marzi mere saiyaad ki hai..*” (1:48:00-1:49:00). The song *Maaeri* captures Salma’s covert sexual desires extended to Laura Mulvey’s theorization of Male Gaze and Scopophilia, as she sings “*pee ki dagar mein baithe maila hua ri mera aanchra.*” (2:03:20-2:03:24). The fabric of the garment, while waiting for the beloved, has been stained—stained with the gaze of the Unwanted—the Other, by the labeling and the accusation of those wearing stained garments themselves. The song *Maaeri* liberates Salma of her psychological imprisonment for she was curtailed to sing or play the tanpura. The beach, the maze and mounts are open spaces across which Salma runs but never reaches anywhere, to anyone. These open spaces define, in an ironic series of shots, Salma’s claustrophobic state confined in the house. She attempts to break her silence and sings towards the end of it, only to be defined further by the neighborhood as a courtesan, a public property— in her own domestic space. The film’s cinematic genius lies in the *mise-en-scene* that reinforces the spatial opposition between the domestic and the public: close-up shots are employed in the confined space that the home is, and long shots, like the beach and the woods. An individual, more so a family, finds recluse in the bricked ensemble what they call ‘home’

from the dangers of outer space. As Hamid and Salma seek to resolve the intrusion of patrons at their home at odd hours of the day, they step out of the boundaries of the intimate and begin to spend their nights on the roads of the city that never sleeps. It is in the subtext of the film that Bedi employs inversion of the meanings attached to these spaces and the beach and village become escapist routes for the couple to flee from the daily *dastak* and quarrel, like in Guru Dutt starrer *Pyaasa* (1957), where Vijay finds his ultimate recluse not in his home or within his family but at the *kothaa* (brothel) of Gulaab Bai, played by Waheeda Rehman. Both *Pyaasa* and *Dastak* serve as critiques of modernity, and it is with time that Salma and Hamid are put under constant gaze of the police and Zohra respectively. Also, the *mainaa* Salma had released from the cage finds its eventual death back in the house—the *mainaa*, or the character that the bird signifies, may be set free from the ‘cage’ but the freedom is momentary.

This film is not merely a narrative of a couple being pushed to the mercy of courtesanship, but is a major comment on the struggles of the urban poor to retain their dignity and also earn livelihood in a society that flags the idiom of modernity. The film draws a parallel between the struggles of Salma and Hamid, where his submission to corruption after a long battle with his circumstances commodifies him in the same ‘bazaar’ as Salma’s, blurring the line between the struggles of the domestic and the public space. The song “*hum hain mataa-e-kuchaa bazaar ki tarah*” doesn’t only comment on the space of the bazaar of flesh but also on the utopia they had tried to conceptualize through their heterotopia. The song is an addition to (and an extension of) the *nazm* by Sahir Ludhianvi from *Pyaasa*,

“*Ye purapech galiyan, ye badnaam bazar*
Ye gumnaam raahi, ye sikko ki jhankar
Ye ismat ke saude, ye saudo pe takrar
Jinhe naaz hai hind par vo kaha hain...”
 (Pyaasa 2:00:50-2:02:07)

The moment of downfall, when Hamid gets ready to be bribed and Salma agrees to sing as a courtesan, both for money, is juxtaposed with their hope that the child would bring—the space oscillates

between being defined as a brothel and a home. There is hope in resistance, hope in breaking the tambura and in the constant contestation between the social imposition by the economically hungry society and the couple's retaliation against them, concluded by Muzaffar Warsi in the lines, "*Meri tasveer mein rang kisi aur ka toh nahin, gher lein mujh ko sab aake, main tamasha toh nahin.*" (2:57:09-2:57:18).

Consumeristic Gaze and the Female

The very concept of 'woman', Simone de Beauvoir argues as he states "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (301), is a concept from the vantage point of the Male: a Woman is always the 'other' because the male is the 'seer': he is the subject and she the object – the *meaning* of what it is to be a woman is also affixed by men. This dichotomy of Otherisation further extends at various levels of the society where the individual gets deceived at every crossroad, where the politics of power is layered with the nuances of resistance. These forces of power are what allow people in a society to put on a mask and play certain roles. Thus, these 'forces of power' are defined and depicted in the realm of the phallocentric world, where a woman's space is restricted, as allotted to her by the male. Even if she chooses to step ahead and cross the boundaries, she still remains in the confines of patriarchal structures. She falls prey to scopophilia, voyeurism, male gaze, power politics and ego gratification of the masculine world. Women are defined in terms of what 'men' are not– stuck in a continuum of interpellation, the female becomes the one who always, and certainly, 'lacks.' *Dastak* gives its viewers the insight to a life lived by a female whose space is defined not alone by her husband but also by the society she lives in. The desolation, desperation and frustration which Salma and Hamid go through are being nuanced by a semi-realistic prism. Salma's claustrophobic condition is depicted by the director through the caged bird, symbolizing the once cheerful bride, running helplessly as the walls closed on her. As acting, singing and dancing were associated only with prostitution and courtesanship, the film is also suggestive of the same through the neighborhood *paanwala's* dialogue upon hearing Salma's melodies, "*Maine kaha tha na hai to gaane wali hai*" (*Dastak* 1:46:07-1:46:13) (She is a courtesan, I told you so) and her

husband Hamid's apprehension upon seeing her sing, albeit in her home, but its heterotopic approximation in the locality of courtesans, he says, "*Janti ho log iska kya matlab lenge?*" (1:51:08-1:51:11) (Are you aware of what people might say on hearing you sing?)— afraid that the people would consider his wife to be only an inheritor of the abode's legacy— that of Shamshad Begum.

Both Salma and Hamid are entrapped in the hypocritical realm of the society. On one hand, Hamid is portrayed trying to protect Salma by confining her in the boundaries of the house, society, on the other hand, is relentlessly trying to intrude in the boundary. Where Salma is stuck inside those restricted walls, Hamid is equally confined with his naivety in the deviousness of the society. Certain members of the society, specifically the *panvaadi*, Shamshad Begum and others at Hamid's office form rules for the 'Otherised' members of the society— the ones who inhabit Bombay not as an heirloom but as a fruit of aspirations. They circumscribe the Other, thus forming an inherent hierarchy, the continuum of which regulates across the patriarch and its victim. The process of consumerism goes beyond associating the Female as a commodity, and is further epitomized by the character of *panvaadi* who helps Hamid in acquiring the house for his sole selfish motive of fetching an incentive in his business. He, along with the other members of the neighborhood, is constantly seen interfering in their private space and convincing people that Salma and Hamid are disguised as husband and wife, whereas, in reality, Salma is a prostitute with Hamid as her patron. The stain of the property continues; with *panvaadi* realizing that all his attempts of intrusion went in vain he utters in sheer frustration, "*dhanda chaupat ho gaya hai. Shamshad Begum rehti thi to 2-4 paan bik jaya karte the. Makaan ka makaan gaya aur paan bhi nahi bikte.*" (1:56:39-1:56:44) (Business is now ruined. At least with Shamshad Begum around, I would sustain it a little. The house has gone out of my hands and so has the business.)

Not only the male characters, but the females too play a major role in reinforcing a woman's space. The relationship between Salma and her sister Zora evidently displays a woman classifying herself within an intimate space, based on the constraints imposed on her by the patriarchal elements of the society. Nowhere in the narrative does

the character of Salma empathize with her sister , instead, she becomes the one to lay emphasis on getting her married as soon as possible. Zora, in order to expedite her sister getting wed off, says, “*Bachi tumhe dikhai deti hai, meh to abba se kehti hu, ki koi sa bhi ladka dekh k daffa karein*” (2:14:58-2:15:05) (She looks like a child to you, but I have been imploring father to get her married and be done with her at the earliest.) The film is a perpetuity of women defining a space, and the space defining its women. Shamshaad Begum defines the space she lives in. The present and the past of each space that she inhabits becomes a brothel, stained with the patrons’ betel spits on the walls of the space.. Whereas in the case of Salma, spaces (of the house, the dim lanes of Bombay, and the beach in the dream sequence) define her. As the film proceeds through its course, each space attempts to modify her character and mold her into the structured confines of patriarchy and aligns her existence with the discourse of masculinity. The whole journey of Salma’s resistance to follow the rules laid by the society unearths the plight of women subjugated by men in our society. The song *Maaeri* depicts the loneliness of her existence. Salma sings the song to herself to combat the misery of life in the big city:

*Meri tasveer mein rang aur kisi ka toh nahi,
Gher lein mujh ko sab aa ke, main tamasha toh nahi
Zindagi tujh se har ik saans pe samjhauta karun,
Shaunk jeene ka hai mujh ko, magar itna toh nahi.”*
(2:06:55-2:07:38)

Conclusion

In the end, she ultimately fails to sustain her strength and sings for her patrons. Ironically, the space which they thought and hoped to be their rescue from the world eventuated to be the place which hounded them, the moment they stepped into it, as she sings “*Hum hai mataa-e-kuchaa-o-bazaar ki tarah, uthi hai har nigaah kharidar ki tarah*” (3:18:24-3:18:30). The film is a blatant and despairing comment on the freedom of women in the post-Independence nation, their aspirations, hardships and meek sustenance. It is in the end, that she falls in the feet of her husband and weeps after singing to a former patron of Shamshaad begum, that she truly becomes what society

terms as a ‘woman.’ *Dastak*, a film that closely weaves the social issues of the Indian society of home and capitalism with human sentiment, ends on a rather ambiguous yet hopeful note. “*Ye duniya kitna bhi bada, kaisa bhi randi ka ghar sahi, hum yahin rahenge... ladenge, marenge...*” (3:32:22-3:32:27) (This world may be an enormous brothel, but we will stay here, live here, fight, and die..) says Hamid, which serves as a major critique on capitalism—the city of Bombay, once a reflection of post-Independent idealism, had now been reduced to a brothel—thus its ‘half truth’ unfolded.

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