THE COSMOPOLITAN CITY AND ITS GESTURE OF REFUGE

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Mélange, hotch potch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world.

– Salman Rushdie, “In Good Faith” in *Imaginary Homelands*

Rushdie’s answer to the question he raised in *The Satanic Verses* about newness extends the idea of exile to understand it as a universal phenomenon, ‘a metaphor for all humanity’ and as the defining characteristic of one’s identity. His answer to the question about how newness enters the world turns the idea of newness into a situation that sneaks into one’s identity, because we are all immersed in exile. While moving on, and the resolve to move on, are significant gestures on the part of the individual, they do not reflect upon
the societies and institutions that continue to estrange writers, intellectuals or artists for thinking and acting differently. Perhaps, the cities of refuge as concepts, institutions and spaces could change that. This paper deals with a moment in what kinds of resolving, reconciliatory strategies the society and the writers per se have come up with in the increasing number of scenarios of persecution of intellectuals, artists, writers, and journalists. The specific text that this paper takes as its starting point is Derrida’s essay ‘On Cosmopolitanism’, an address to the International Parliament of Writers at Strasbourg in 1996. The short essay deals with the question of cosmopolitanism, rooted in the idea of tolerance, co-existence and refuge. But it also opens up greater references to the concept of theological (Judaistic) origins and the contemporary problems surrounding it.

In the essay ‘On Cosmopolitanism’, Derrida raises the question of cosmopolitanism vis-à-vis cities of refuge, an idea rooted in The Old Testament, which refers to the protection of those who escaped the vengeance of the people for unintentional manslaughter. It makes provision for six cities, neither too large nor too small to shelter those who accidentally killed someone and were now in danger of being attacked by the kin of the dead. Derrida takes this religious diktat, (as indeed do the International Parliament of Writers and other political institutions like the League of Nations and after
that deal with refuge, and asylum rights and institutions), and talks about the possibilities of making it applicable in contemporary reality. In such an established context, Derrida calls for a need to the address the specificity of different situations covered under it: the exiled, the deported, the stateless, or the displaced. He also calls for the need to rethink the modalities of membership thus granted to such individuals in the cities of refuge at one level and the need to rethink the sovereignty of such cities within the space of the nation-state, without which the duty of hospitality and the right to hospitality cannot be reformed. Derrida says, “If we look to the city, rather than to the state, it is because we have given up hope that the state might create a new image for the city” (6). This opens up the need to bestow greater powers to the being of the cities – more rights, greater sovereignty, something on the lines of a different politics of the city. With the constant interference of the state, the power and the right to grant asylum to the victims of persecution get hugely compromised. For instance, in certain situations, the person seeking the asylum has got to be financially independent and not expect economic benefits from the relocation. The cities, Derrida says, need to thrive and generate scope for network of places and language to ensure the safety of the asylum seekers. Instead, they tend to be interfered with by the electoral, political and police forces under the pretext of fighting ‘illegal’ migration, or migration for economic reasons. Not only
that, the cities of refuge are called so because the term connotes an ethic of hospitality – a tautological expression for Derrida because for him, ethics is hospitality. The idea is to welcome each and every one in need in the thus-created sanctuary. The debates surrounding such unconditional, ethical grant of hospitality date back to Kantian philosophy, which leaves some scope for limitations and state interference in the issue. The cities of refuge in the contemporary scenario are thus spaces of flourishing of new order of law and democracy.

Derrida’s essay leads towards larger question of urbanization of asylum, of cosmopolitanism, and of geography of freedom. What is this peculiar rhetoric of the city? How does it come into being in praxis of urbanization?

The question of the city and of its existence have become a given. That is a distance quite farther from the time when the Baudelairean handling of the city as an aesthetic object was something of a novelty and needed to be theorized upon. The urbanization of the question of dwelling, especially for those who are forced to move from one place to the other in the hope of living, is the intensely predicated upon a phenomenology of the concept of living. That a new politics of living together is being inscribed on the face of the city is a challenging tenet to think about. It is also the basic
ground for the democracy to come through the institution of cities of refuge.

This idea of the cosmopolitan city ought to be seen as a centre operating on the project of open borders. The cities of refuge figure in the discussion of the issue of migration as a solution to the problem. It is the cosmopolitan connections around these spaces that emerge around mid-twentieth century to address the increasingly growing and visible figure of the exile.

There are many angles to the discussion of the practice and possibilities of cosmopolitanism—the development of the cosmopolitan city transcending the concept of the nation-state, the coming of the “Stranger” and the ways in which his or her presence in handled, and the impossible possibility of unconditional hospitality, for instance. In theoretical discourses, cosmopolitanism and the city get foregrounded in discussions of hospitality and forgiveness.

What does the cosmopolitan city constitute? What are its problems? How does it address the practice of democracy? To begin with, the city works as a microscopic model of a democratic nation-state. Various studies in urban sociology point towards the relevance of cities in contemporary times. For one, they are microcosmic of world culture. Ulf Hannerz in ‘Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture’ explores the connections
between cosmopolitans, locals, cosmopolitans as intellectuals and world culture and remarks, “People like the cosmopolitans have a special part in bringing about a degree of coherence . . . . If there were only locals in the world, world culture would be no more than the sum of its separate parts” (249). As sites of coherence, such cities help bring a sense of continuity and stability to the understanding of urban experience.

As a twentieth century phenomenon intertwined with globalization, ‘cosmopolitanization’ is a phenomenon emerging out of mobility. So with its roots in the mythical cities of refuge, the idea of cosmopolitanism has come a long way from providing refuge to the half-guilty and half-innocent man-slaughterer to exile in general to the phenomenon of moving for occupational or other purposes. Thus these liberal cities, as they are sometimes called, become sites of world culture characterized by huge diversity across social and cultural phenomena. Ulrich Beck goes on to define cosmopolitanization as “internal globalization, globalization from within national societies” (17). In the process, it introduces the cities to everyday conflicts and differences in consciousness and identities. For Beck, it thus becomes “a methodological concept which helps to overcome methodological nationalism and to build a frame of reference to analyse the new social conflicts, dynamics and structures of Second Modernity” (18). Cosmopolitanism thus has the potential
to demonstrate and engage with dialogic imagination, transcending beyond singular perspective of the nation. Beck says:

The national perspective is a monologic imagination, which excludes the otherness of the other. The cosmopolitan perspective is an alternative imagination, an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other. It puts the negotiation of contradictory cultural experiences into the centre of activities: in the political, the economic, the scientific and the social (18).

The origins and practice of unconditional hospitality existed in primitive societies because of the presence of nomadic way of life; with the shift to settling down and belonging to one place, offering or withholding hospitality became a choice. New questions became pertinent about the identity of the foreigner, his/her/its intentions. These questions were not posed by the foreigner; on the contrary, the foreigner was these questions – he embodied them. Rooted in the perspective of modernity and the city is also the difference of the need for cosmopolitanism today:

The cosmopolitanism of our times does not spring from the capitalized “virtues” of Rationality, Universality, and Progress; nor is it embodied in the myth of the nation writ large in the figure of the citizen of the world. Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism’s upward mobility, and bereft of those
comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community. Too often, in the West, these peoples are grouped together in a vocabulary of victimage and come to be recognized as constituting the “problem” of multiculturalism to which late liberalism extends its generous promise of a pluralist existence (Pollock et al. 582).

The changed modernity, the changed political scenario and the phenomenon of globalization call for a different kind of cosmopolitanism. Sassen’s concept of the ‘glocal’ is very useful here. Its uniqueness also lies in the way in manages the idea of location in the concept of the glocal, in the way it handles “home and non-place, a nowhere place” (Beck 31). This nowhereness combined with the technology of the Internet and mobile phones situates the city better in the dialogic imagination mentioned earlier: “A cosmopolitan sociology should investigate not only presence and absence, but also ‘imagined presence’ . . . . Dialogic imaginations presuppose, among others, imagined presence of geographically distant others and worlds” (Beck 31). Such an understanding helps fashion a discerning view of the strategic advantages of the use of the city as a site of refuge. These kinds of sociological interventions in the study of the operation of cosmopolitanism foreground the particular nature of the city as a peculiar location of being. The way the city lends itself to the treatment of the heterotopic plane of a non-place or a place of
absence makes it an invigorating study of the cosmopolitan space. Thomas Claviez makes an interesting intervention in this idea of non-place by asking if such a place of Derrida’s unconditional hospitality can ever possibly exist or “does such an idea of hospitality represent a genuine utopia: a u-topos, a nonplace, in which, by definition, nothing can “take place”? (Claviez 3) It is interesting to note that discussions of place invariably invite the haunting of utopias and non-places. The existence of a place, of something ‘taking place’ is intertwined with nothing ‘taking place’. Claviez’s is an interesting take on Foucault’s heterotopia – he talks about a “heter-u-topia” that allows for such a simultaneity of differences to (co)exist. This heter-u-topia need not be a place of loss of identity and orientation; it need not even be an actual geographical location; it could be a space in thought itself, which comes with the larger possibility and responsibility of sheltering the other within one’s self since exile is the first experience of humanity, especially as beginning with the alienation under capitalism. The encounter with alterity is rooted in the very rubric of sociality: “... hospitality is no longer a private gesture but an issue for a whole society anxious to close its frontiers to illegal immigrants and refugees, the solicitants of this world” (Dufourmantelle 13). The non-place that Claviez suggests gets reflected in Anne Dufourmantelle’s thought: “To think is to invite, to offer a shelter to the other within ourselves, the other as the possibility to be(come) our-
selves” (Dufourmantelle 13-14). Applied in this sense, Derrida’s radical, unconditional hospitality “denotes an almost mystical experience, a borderline concept” (Dufourmantelle 16). In its existence and execution in the space of thought, there is a greater potential for the cosmopolis to materialize: “… should we not rightfully expect from political utopia a “placelessness” which opens the possibility of a human (cosmo)polis?” (19).

Yet there is another way of looking at the presence and absence of cosmopolitanism, at the ways in which the city deals with the presence of the stranger in the city. With a streak of phenomenology in their work, some sociologists have theorized the ways in which the society tries to look at the (‘invasive’, ‘invading’ – perceived to be so) being of the stranger, the ‘problem’ of the stranger. Zygmunt Bauman writes eloquently about the ‘making and unmaking of strangers’ : “All societies produce strangers; but each kind of society produces its own kind of strangers, and produces them in its own inimitable way” (Bauman 17). He records the coming of the Stranger as having an effect similar to the coming of an earthquake in that it unsettles and disrupts the value of order in a society and its ethic of ordering. His ways of being, in their difference, highlight the assumptions of the locals as assumptions and he thus turns everything – every practice, every norm in thought and deed – into a question. He thus takes away the givenness of the locals’ world and takes away
the very idea of the routine from them: “Strangers are no longer routine, and thus the routine ways of keeping a thing pure do not suffice. In a world constantly on the move the anxiety which condensed into the fear of strangers saturates the totality of daily life – fills every nook and cranny of the human condition” (Bauman 11). Because they disrupt the locals’ routine, the society seeks different ways of getting rid of them. This riddance is a continuous process and not a one-time situation.

In a way, the Strangers are not just the exiles or the displaced – they are just about anyone who does not feel at home in the city. In Adorno, the two coincide as seen in his critique of (American) society – it is not merely the case that he misses being in Germany and does not fit in America; he is also not at home in the violence of modernity in its consumerist and capitalist scenario. In other words, he is ‘cognitively ambivalent’: “In the harmonious, rational order about to be built there was no room – there could be no room – for ‘neither-nors’, for the sitting astride, for the cognitively ambivalent” (Bauman 18). The Strangers’ is a crisis in identity formation, discussed hugely in the context of roots, home, belongingness and hybridity in the literature and the criticism of the diaspora but what Bauman’s perspective makes a case for is the qualification of anyone feeling uprooted in the ever-present and ubiquitous state of “either-or” and includes everyone partaking of the
‘neither-nor’ position. The “self-perpetuating uncertainty” (Bauman 25) defines the being of the Strangers. If they give up the ambivalence of their situation and become agents of exoticism by selling a different cuisine, or by “promising unusual, exciting experiences to the taste-buds, [by] sell[ing] curious-looking, mysterious objects suitable as talking points at the next party, [by] offer[ing] services other people would not stoop or deign to offer or [by] dangl[ing] morsels of wisdom refreshingly different from the routine and boring” (Bauman 28), they participate in the either-or process of consumerist illusion of choice and thus no longer remain threatening or inimical to the locals. Since that is not the case in every situation, the modern city faces a greater question – how to live with alterity, for the Strangers are not a temporary inconvenience but a daily encounter: “At one pole, strangehood (and difference in general) will go on being constructed as the source of pleasurable experience and aesthetic satisfaction; at the other, as the terrifying incarnation of the unstop-pably rising sliminess of the human condition – as the effigy for all future ritual burning of its horrors” (Bauman 34). The city then needs to invent a different kind of ‘life politics’ to deal with this difference.

Martha Nussbaum’s answer to the question of cosmopolitanism involves the idea of a moral imagination. Her idea of loneliness experienced by the Stranger is contiguous with the cognitive ambivalence of Bau-
man’s Stranger but locates it in the figure of the citizen of the world and defines it vis-à-vis the patriot: “Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business. It is, as Diogenes said, a kind of exile – from the comfort of local truths, from the warm, nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own” (Nussbaum 15). For her, feeling beyond patriotism, thinking beyond the nation, thinking and practising cosmopolitanism is being an exile. Like Bauman (and Adorno, and Said), Nussbaum universalizes the experience of the exile. It broadens the need to implement cosmopolitanism not just in relation with the actual others but also at the level of emotion. In the concept of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism: “Cosmopolitanism and patriotism, unlike nationalism, are sentiments more than ideologies” (Appiah 23). The contrast with nationalism brings us again to Sassen’s de-nationalizing the nation and Beck’s notion of (world) cultures: “Culture … is a (power-ridden) negotiation of differences that always transcends – and historically always has transcended – national boundaries, and thus steadfastly subverts the homogeneity that a national(istic) concept of culture implies” (Claviez 2). So the nation-state is again, in Thomas Claviez’s argument, not a very fruitful way of approaching cosmopolitanism, and hence Derrida’s suggestion of greater empowerment for the cities and the need to think beyond the nation, towards the city.
Eduardo Mendieta has another very intriguing orientation and on that basis, he predicts a totally different future. In “Invisible cities: A phenomenology of globalization from below”, he looks at the contemporary world as existing in the collapse of the matrix of time and space and argues for the need to invent new matrixes to deal with new ways of being in the city – those of exiles, the displaced peoples or even cyber-nomads. This different urbanization implies “that otherness is not going to be a mere metaphysical, or even phenomenological category and concern. Under the reign of the city: Otherness has become quotidian and practical” (17, emphasis original). If the project of the cosmopolitan city in general, and not just the concept of the isolated cities of refuge, has to resolve the issue of the Stranger, the Foreigner or the Other, it needs to recognize its encounter with the Otherness in its real practical, everyday manifestation. Mendieta keeps emphasizing “. . . the routinization and de-metaphysicalization of otherness brought about by the hyper-urbanization of humanity” (19, emphasis original) and points towards the radical nature of the presence of otherness when he says, “Either everyone will be a stranger, or no one will be because we will all be strangers in a city of strangers” (20). This is a very innovative way of approaching the persistent need to build and encourage the practice of cosmopolitanism in the cities, especially in our age of de-nationalizing the national. Cities are the sites of unbundling of the
state thus are the new sites for the unbundling of a new life politics. The mini-nations found within the cities in the form of small Italys, Chinas, Japans add to the need to surpass the nation and focus on the local in the city, creating new cultures: “These places are where the centripetal and centrifugal forces of homogenization and heterogenization interact to produce new cultural formations” (22). In this quotidian experience of exile, “the condition of modernity after an extended experience with modernity” (103, emphasis original), as Peter Wagner puts it in his book Theorizing Modernity, one is forced to think about exile as an all-pervading condition, one that calls for thinking, experiencing, practising, and asking for resolving at multiple levels – individual, social, historical and philosophical. The exiled writer is only one example; the consciousness and the living of the precariousness of the situation of being forced to go away, and to be away perhaps haunt everyone in the similar manner:

To lose this place, in particular if one was or felt expelled rather than going voluntarily, has often been described as the loss of a kind of ontological security, of the confidence of the availability of the world as it was. In particular, the human condition threatened to be robbed of its existential temporality. Once the safety of that which is given was gone, that which was and that which could no longer be relied upon either (Wagner 103).

With this universal shattering of confidence, with the way the germ of doubt has penetrated the ontological
security of our lives, we increasingly get to see how pervasive (dis)location is in the times of modernity.

As Chris Rumford points out, “cosmopolitanism can provide us with the requisite conceptual toolbox with which to understand the novel spaces and borders emerging in Europe” (1). As a politics and practice of space, it makes for an interesting intervention in the way living in the cities, and interfering with living in the cities is debated today. More than jargon, it is a concept of hope, a “possibility of new ways of conceptualising spaces and borders” (2). What cities can take away from the concept is a set of qualities, preferences and practices that speak volumes about what it means to live together in ‘spaces of wonder’, a concept that Rumford uses to discuss opportunities and spaces that are interpreted in terms of threat and fear and are attempted to be controlled in the aftermath of 9/11.

Donald makes an attempt to discuss and contextualize cosmopolitan space and the need for it in our times when we find ourselves in a situation of being thrown together and poses this question: “How can we strop- py strangers live together without doing each other too much violence?” (147). His is the most lucid account of the question of cosmopolitanism, the need to deliberate on its praxis and the ways in which it can materialize in urban culture. At first, his thoughts might sound very commonsensical: “What makes living together
possible is rational deliberation . . . . It seems pretty self-evident that if we strangers are to live together in at least reasonably peaceful coexistence, then we need to talk about matters of mutual interest, and it seems sensible to seek non-violent ways of negotiating conflicts” (152). It is very refreshing to find such an insight amidst all the jargon about different names of modernity and various kinds of cosmopolitanism. It is one thing to look for answers to the questions of (lack of) cosmopolitanism in institutional implementation or to ask for separate cities of refuge. (The demand for the cities of refuge for the persecuted writers is of course valid as discussed in the context of Derrida’s essay.) It is another to engage with it at a personal level, in individual ways. The discussion here is about the larger practice of cosmopolitanism among the publics, regarding the ways in which strangers, aliens, foreigners, and migrants are perceived. In their potential of disrupting democratic rubric, these conflicts have a straightforward answer: “if you are interested in the formation of a democratic culture, then you have to understand and take seriously the texture and rhythms of living together: its spatial manifestations, its disjunctural temporalities, its ordinariness and its social complexity, as well as its political consequences” (Donald 151-2). And what are these “spatial manifestations”, “disjunctural consequences” and “political consequences”? The first could be the ways in which the city opens and unfolds into its streets, and its transport amenities, places of
recreations like parks and sites of buying and selling from the grocer’s shop to the shopping malls – the locations that Simmel spoke of as demanding the activity of the eye. The “disjunctural temporalities” that Donald refers to could be the contrast that the migrant or the exile specifically lives and lives in, in the way she experiences time in her new location. The “ordinariness” and “social complexity” of living together consists in the way we share our disjunctural temporalities and the anxieties and the insecurities around it. The political consequences emerge when each of these conditions are shared and understood successfully and ‘in good faith’, as Rushdie (in the essay of the same name) puts it: “What it requires is a moment of good will; a moment in which we may all accept that the other parties are acting, have acted, in good faith” (395). In fact, the disjunctions that Donald talks about echo Rushdie’s words from The Satanic Verses: “The modern city . . . is the locus classicus of incompatible realities. Lives that have no business mingling with one another sit side by side upon the omnibus. One universe, on a zebra crossing, is caught for an instant, blinking like a rabbit, in the headlamps of a motor-vehicle in which an entirely alien and contradictory continuum is to be found” (ch. 2). Donald draws from Rushdie, his novel and his defence of the novel in order to underline his idea of cosmopolitanism and the ways in which it can be a part of lived reality:
Gone is any idea of transcendent identity. Gone too is an ideal of virtuous citizenship. In the offing may be a thicker description of the openness to unassimilable difference, and so also a concern with the mundane, pragmatic but sometimes life-or-death arts of living in the city. These skills shade into and out of the virtues made possible by the great adventure of the city: politeness as well as politics, civility as well as citizenship, the stoicism of urbanity, the creative openness of cosmopolitanism (171).

The answer is bafflingly simple: “politeness as well as politics, civility as well as citizenship, the stoicism of urbanity, the creative openness of cosmopolitanism” (Donald 170). These are the conditions that entail the act of seeking refuge and giving it, more so in the way they can be extended to every human being because they are not exclusive to writers and intellectuals. The whole world is the diaspora world; the whole world is the migrant world. As the quotidian condition of exile comes to be seen as the universal condition, Rushdie puts it eloquently: “If The Satanic Verses is anything, it is a migrant’s-eye view of uprooting, disjunction and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity” (394). As “a metaphor for all humanity”, it calls for a set of life skills that conjure a way of negotiating conflicts, of being together, of being a little less “noisy neighbours” (the title of the chapter in Donald’s Imagining
the Modern City). To go back to Donald in order to situate cosmopolitanism and the conditions for the possibility of a cosmopolitan city:

The arts of living in the city are more demanding, more diverse, and more ingenious … they require a variety of skills: reading the signs in the street; adapting to different ways of life right on your doorstep; learning tolerance and responsibility – or at least, as Simmel taught us, indifference – towards others and otherness; showing respect, or self-preservation, in not intruding on other people’s space; exploiting the etiquette of the street; picking up new rules when you migrate to a foreign city. It is through this rougher urbanity, rather than the nice disciplines of ‘civil deportment’, that the modern urban self is routinely formed (168).

In The Satanic Verses that Rushdie created and that critics of cosmopolitanism have used to theorize about what it means to be cosmopolitan and what it means to create a cosmopolitan city, there is a celebration of the exile, in the newness it generates, in the newness it brings to light:

The Satanic Verses celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. …. The Satanic Verses is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves (Rushdie 394).
To be a mongrel and to recognize it one’s own self and identity are requisites for the creation of the city of refuge, the cosmopolitan city, and any city. It is a gesture that we as modern, urban inhabitants owe to each other, and to the great city that we see as places of dwelling, and as places that we live in and leave. It is a turn that global cities would need to take in order to generate and sustain spaces of cosmopolitanism. The solution of looking at cosmopolitanism as a way of reading the city, not merely for the sake of incorporating the stranger, but also for generating better environments for the thriving of cultures is, to some extent, a strategy for turning every city into a city of refuge. In its encounter and co-habitation with otherness, the city would acquire a new dimension of looking at things – conscious and at home along with those not at home, be it the flâneur observing the city, or the exile constantly on the move.

The cosmopolitan space – a ‘mongrel’ site of hybridity, fusion and conjoinings – stands for the ethic of hospitality assumed in the cities of refuge or the cosmopolitan cities, and since exile is both the ‘outside world’ and ‘inside world’, it is assumed in all the cities. Rushdie’s and Donald’s contribution to the possibilities that can let a cosmopolitan city emerge come from the same streak, from the recognition that one’s identity may be a given absolute, but what we do with it and how we invent it and choose to invent it contributes hugely to
the recognition and application of the life skills that help us deal with the so-called noisy neighbours. The cosmopolitan city in its encouragement of such values becomes the space for the exile, writer or not. It becomes a site of the in-between or the third space in its encompassing of here and there.
WORKS CITED


