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**URBAN SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE: PROJECTION OF POLITICS AND RACIAL OTHERING IN AMY WALDMAN'S "THE SUBMISSION"**

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**Abstract**

Design of an urban space is crucial as it provides certain cultural impression of that location. Urban space is a product of certain ideology and this built environment perpetually disseminates certain cultural notions through its urban fabric. Set in a prominent American city Manhattan, Amy Waldman's novel *The Submission* propounds a situation where a Muslim architect is selected for designing Ground Zero memorial and his Muslim name has remained unknown to the jury until they finalize his architectural plan. The news of the architect with Muslim name designing the memorial evokes furor among American journalists, politicians and religious groups. The novel draws the picture of struggle in designing urban space while disclosing the extent of racial othering involved in patterning of a cityscape.

**Keywords:** Urban Space, Architecture, Muslim, Memorial

As spaces are in general, urban space is not a passive element or an innocent container where all social activities take place. Instead, the urban space itself is a product and a producer of certain social narratives. It is a vibrant site of power, politics and segregation. Urban structures and symbols are examined in this study to decipher the underlying politics. Urban space is a predominant space of power politics in which it becomes a product of certain discourses and ideologies which promote some ideas and exclude certain others. Drawing on the views of Henry Lefebvre, Yiran Zheng says: "...all urban spaces are designed for specific purposes. Every single building, street, square represents the urban designer's expectation" (xii).

A building in a city not only represents the city, but also reflects nation and more. Competitions among nations, the capitalist modalities, and power-relations are more palpable in the case of buildings in the cities compared to other locales. As it is made clear by King: "It is the *building*, whose presence is usually mysteriously

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absent in every kind of social or cultural theoretical discourse..., in which the ideology of all ‘imagined communities’... [and] ‘imagined environments’ is contained, materialized and symbolized” (5).

Nations and organizations in competitions project buildings as signs of their progress and development. Building skyscrapers is used as a strategy by nations to attract international attention. It is clear that “In these competitive representations of architectural spectacle, ‘the world’ is, first and foremost, an imaginary or virtual world, constructed through the means of different media: the press, film, television, the web and diagrams in published books” (4).

Urban symbols are greatly employed by the state and urban architects in order to accomplish their wishes and meet their purposes. Deciphering the nature of urban symbols, it is made clear that “urban symbolism is much more than any mere reflection, as it is part of society and is used to shape and change social relationships”(qtd. in Nas283). Hence, some of the researches in urban space are headed towards scrutinizing urban symbols. Architectures in urban settings are the crucial components which convey certain ideologies and political messages. Urban building, “is, *already*, a signifier of some organization or ideology which, when

invaded, blown up or burnt down, takes on an additional level of signification”(King 5).

The spatial arrangement is done for serving specific purposes and accommodating certain groups. And this accommodation itself relegates certain other groups on the ground of race, ethnicity, and class difference. Michael Keith and Malcolm Cross make it clear that race “is a privileged metaphor through which the confused text of the city is rendered comprehensible” (qtd. in Kennedy 2).

Fear holds a crucial role in the production and re-production of modern cities. Tulumello explains the role of fear in the planning and structuring of the urban spaces. In his observation: “political economies of fear have become embedded in the micro-practice of planning policy—this being necessary to understand the enactment of the wider spatial restructuring of fears capes”(96). Politics and fear are intertwined in the production of urban space. All the built-environments showcase radicalization and exclusion of various modes. In the case of postmodern urban spaces this has become more evident. Liam Kennedy quotes Davis in order to delineate the nature of postmodern urban spaces. As he observes: “repression, surveillance and exclusion’ are the underlying relations of postmodern urbanism”(8). The present urban space is the center of social control, class segregation, racial discrimination, and privatization. New York is renowned as a

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white city whereas Harlem is the city of the black; this it testifies how cities are modeled after racial and class differences.

Construction and exclusion of other-categories are underlying features of almost all metropolitan cities of the world. Yat Ming Loo has made his study on Kuala Lumpur which unfolds the state's plan of appropriating urban spaces at the cost of other cultural traces and the counter attempts of Chinese immigrants in Malaysia. As an attempt to elucidate urban politics and other, the politics in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, could easily be seen. Loo's researches record the struggles of Malaysian Chinese in order to assert their cultural identity and voice for multiculturalism, as against the state's plan of homogenizing urban design. State's plan of urbanity is a mixture of Malay and Islamic cultural patterns. He argues that the state relegates the Chinatown. He observes that "the ethnic and identity differences are further enhanced by the urban layout, architecture and their representations"(Loo 36). Loo delineates the way Malaysian city had been in the process of transformation: "From the mid-1980s onwards, Kuala Lumpur had seen the formulation of the grand nation-building projects to nationalize the urban centre, to build a new landmark (Kuala Lumpur City Centre) and a new capital (Putrajaya)"(109).

Turning to America, the events in New York City after the fall of Twin-Tower demonstrate the vehemence of fear and racial other in urban space. Twin-Tower had emerged as a symbol and reputation of American capitalist-state in particular and the world capitalism in general. It is rightly viewed: "In the twentieth century, it was to become the paradigmatic statement, not only of American architecture and urbanism, but of the economic ideology, mode of production and ethos from which it was largely (if not entirely) produced: capitalist land values, speculative office development and big business materialism in the United States"(11). As the Twin-Tower was symbolic, its fall also became highly symbolic. Dealing with the symbolic importance of the Twin-Tower fall, Kay says: "The attacks on, and the falling of the twin towers, had enormous symbolic consequences...The reconstruction of these buildings and the choice for the eventual design would each carry their own, new symbolic meaning with them"(259). Kay terms New York as both "wounded city" and "resilient city"(259). He says that the history of these cities proves that they are rapidly recovering, and in this regard, New York is exemplary, as it has faced destruction on many occasions such as its burning in 1776 and 1835. He believes that it is a "creative destruction" as New York could revive and change timely due to these destructions. Kay brings the 2003 guideline for architects about the architectural designs

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and the directions for incorporating certain types of symbols titled as “A Vision for Lower Manhattan”. He demonstrates that the falling of the Twin-Tower is highly symbolic so that the reconstruction of the tower is also symbolic which leads them to think seriously on the re-construction of the building. In his view: “The attacks on, and the falling of the twin towers, had enormous symbolic consequences. The reconstruction process and the choices which were made in this framework are very symbolically charged” (259).

Kay illustrates Karl Popper’s disapproval of Plato’s notion of an organized city. Such organized view of city treats it as a body politic, which leads to fascistic endeavor to discard other elements from the city. Hence, people belonging to other categories, on the grounds of race, ethnicity, religion and class, are excluded and segregated. He also argues that there are some advantages for the notion of “body politic”, significantly at disaster moments; this notion enables people to encounter the disasters collectively. In his view: “New York City has been wounded by the events that happened on September 11th, 2001. The concern that how the city reacted to this event concurs with the idea of the city as ‘body politic’”(261).

Amy Waldman’s *The Submission* deals with the question of erecting a memorial for 9/11 victims and the design of the memorial-architecture becomes a bone

of contention. When the novel begins, the readers are drawn into the exchanges among the jury members who convene in order to decide the design of the memorial. From five thousand submissions, the discussion lasts to three hours and two voting processes have been staged as part of finalizing the shape of the building. Among the jury, there was a strong difference of opinion between Arian and Claire. Both of them take contradictory approaches towards the choices of the architectural design. Finally, the discussion mainly revolves around The Garden and The Void, the two propounded architectural plans.

Through the voting process, they select The Garden, an architectural design patterned by Mo whom they later recognize as a Muslim. The design of the memorial garden is introduced as follows:

The concept was simple: a walled, rectangular garden guided by rigorous geometry. At the center would be a raised pavilion meant for contemplation. Two broad, perpendicular canals quartered the six-acre space. Pathways within each quadrant imposed a grid on the trees, both living and steel, that was studded in orchard-like rows. A white perimeter wall, twenty-seven feet high, enclosed the entire space. The victims would be listed on the wall's interior, their names patterned to mimic the geometric cladding of

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the destroyed buildings. The steel trees reincarnated the buildings even more literally: they would be made from their salvaged scraps. (Waldman 4)

Paul, as the head of the jury, plunged into anxiety as news reporters faced him with questions about the winner of the architectural plan. The news leaks to the public and it becomes a sensational one, revealing that the man behind the spatial planning is a Muslim. Soon politics becomes involved and fear pervades in the issue. Golimowsko refers to the novel's recording of restless moments of America during the time: "the prejudice driven conflicts around the future of this new space within the city and the media discourse of paranoia, fear and smear campaigns reflected in the novel symbolically stand for the condition and general confusion of the American society at the time"(98).

The campaign of Muslim appropriation of the space invites public agitation against it. People started holding protests against the Muslim plan of spatial appropriation. Rather than taking his creativity into consideration, his opportunity is denied on the ground of his Muslim name.

In the wake of 9/11, Mo undergoes intense mental turmoil as he was expelled from his architectural profession for his Muslim name. The investigation, after his architectural plan got upper-hand in the jury

competition, treated him as terrorist on the sole reason of being a Muslim. After the Twin-Tower attack, he was mistreated for his Muslim name. His shift from his present job to the architectural duty in Kabul is a highly agonizing experience for him. Roi, Mo's employer, treats him as an asset as his Muslim name is worthy of projecting in Kabul.

Walden could maintain multiple perspectives as she was there in New York as well as in Kabul in the wake of twin tower fall. Hence she could observe the issues from American and Afghan angles. As she reveals it in her interview: "I was in New York for six weeks after 9/11, reporting for the *New York Times* very intensely on the aftermath and the grief and all of that, and then suddenly I was overseas in places like Afghanistan, where your perspective broadens out to include from how we as a country were reacting to it to the cost of the war we were waging"(Derbyshire 3).

Responding to the question whether the novel is written in the wake of Ground Zero Mosque issue, Walden makes it clear: "*The Submission* would have been a remarkable response to last year's Cordoba House/Park 51 debacle in America, with its Qur'an burnings, its editorials about the difference between what is legal and what is acceptable, its reminder that not all post-9/11 conflicts were taking place outside America. In fact the novel was conceived –

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and its first draft written – before the explosive arguments around the proposals for a Muslim cultural centre near Ground Zero”(Shamsie 1).Memorial is considered as a national symbol but “it’s almost like we fight over what we can’t settle in real life through these symbols. They’re our nation’s afterlife”(295).

Twenty years after, when Molly interviews Mo for a documentary purpose, the subsequent events in Mo’s life are dealt in detail. As his imagination and architecture were suspected on account of his Muslim identity, he leaves America for India which is a reverse journey of his parents. As in the novel, “his imagination was made suspect. And so he had traced his parents' journey in reverse: back to India, which seemed a more promising land” (293).

He is now a global citizen undertaking architectural projects in India, China and Arabian countries, an internationally renowned architect. Molly shows him videos of her interviews with American citizens who were associated with him during the controversial Ground Zero memorial of Mo. His present building designs are a mixture of Arabian, Greek and other architectural styles.

Finally, he shows Molly a garden that he has designed and suggests her to show the building to Claire. It was a garden he had designed for a Sultan or Emir after he had withdrawn from Ground Zero memorial.

Khan’s response to the question regarding its meaning was to “use your imagination” (298).The significance of memorial especially the buildings at the Ground Zero is expressed in its description in the novel.

The novel is thus a documentation of American mindset in the aftermath of 9/11 and the vortex of politics involved in the construction of architectures. Islam phobia, xenophobia, racial and religious exclusions are exposed in the novel in connection with the construction of the memorial. American concern over the urban appropriations showcases the instrumentality of multiple political, and religious factors in the construction and fashioning of architectural patterns.

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