

MONSTROUS URBAN SPACES AND VIOLENCE IN *THE SCATTER HERE IS TOO GREAT*

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates that The Scatter Here Is Too Great portrays Karachi as a monstrous space where conflicting identities collide and learn to re-negotiate. The theoretical insights from Monster’s theory are employed to investigate how the city (Karachi) has given birth to a monstrous culture that is only breeding broken identities and abusive relationships. The city and its monstrous cultural body incorporate “fear, desire, and anxiety” (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Karachi and its violent urban spaces just like a monstrous body are concomitantly corporeal and intangible, thus apart from offering violence demand from its inhabitants a radical rethinking of conventional boundaries of normality. In the novel, Karachi emerges as a violent monstrous space that depicts those conflicting ideologies and violent tensions that are plaguing the whole country (Pakistan).

Keywords: Monster, City, Culture, Urban space.

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1. Introduction

This paper will demonstrate that *The Scatter Here Is Too Great* portrays Karachi as a monstrous space where conflicting identities collide and learn to re-negotiate. The theoretical insights from *Monster's* theory will help us to investigate how the city (Karachi) has given birth to a monstrous culture that is only breeding broken identities and abusive relationships. The city and its monstrous cultural body incorporate "fear, desire, and anxiety" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Karachi and its violent urban spaces just like a monstrous body are concomitantly corporeal and intangible. These monstrous urban spaces apart from offering violence demand from its inhabitants a radical rethinking of conventional boundaries of normality. In the novel, Karachi emerges as a violent monstrous space that depicts those conflicting ideologies and violent tensions that are plaguing the whole country (Pakistan).

Cohen's book (1996) *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* deals with the idea of reading culture through the monsters it creates. He defines this theory as a "modus Legendi", a method of reading cultural and urban spaces through the monsters they generate (p.3). Monster theory questions two "sacred dicta" of the contemporary cultural studies that focus upon "historical specificity" and promote the notion that all kind of knowledge is "local". Monster theory argues that history is not "telos, the final determinant of meaning" (Cohen, p.3), but just another text that refuses to carry any specific meaning and can be interpreted in multiple ways. In the light of the basic tenets of the Monster theory, this research analyzes Karachi as a city with a violent culture that has produced various monsters that are engulfing its creator. The monstrous body of the city cannot be read as a unified body, it is "composed of a multitude of fragments, rather than of smooth epistemological wholes" (Cohen, p.3). Reading the city means, as Cohen argues, reading its multiple fragments. These fragments are collected from various places and combined to form an unassimilated body of the monster (Cohen, p.3).

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Jerome Cohen's (1996) *Monster Theory* is considered the very first collection of essays on monstrosity. It was assumed at that period that monster studies were not real scholarship, therefore, monsters were not worth studying. But Mittman and Dendle (2012) contradicted this claim in their book *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and Monstrous*, as they rightly point out the fact that there is no doubt that monster studies are "relatively new on the horizon, the most recent in a long series of

thematic fields from Women's studies to Transgender studies, from African Studies to Jewish studies" (p.1), but one cannot deny its growing demand in the global literary world. Cohen's theory is twenty-two years old now, as a wide range of scholarship on the monsters is available in the global literary Market. Monster Studies not only challenge the dichotomy between real and the unreal but also call into question the claim that fictitious and constructed subjectivities are not worth studying. According to monstrous studies, real and unreal do not exist in binary arrangements. As Cohen (1996) points out that those monsters exist in the difficult middle, thus, he has expanded the horizon of monster's theory by making it a "heterogeneous" or even "heterodox" word (p.9). Mittman and Dandle (2012) point out that monsters are usually known by their impacts and effects upon others, therefore, from that angle, all monsters are real, as "the monstrous does not lie solely in its embodiment nor its location, nor in the process (es) through which it enacts its being, but also in its impact" (p.1). Monsters have tangible effects upon the culture that produces them as well as on the later culture too. Thus, according to Freud, repressed past like the monster often follows people in both conscious and unconscious way, therefore, the existence of a monster cannot be denied in true sense. As Mittman and Dandle (2012) argue that humans are in the habit of cannibalizing others, tearing them again and again in order to stitch them together, therefore, they are continuously busy in the process of redefining the "parameters of the monstrous" (p.1).

This research attempts to understand the monstrous culture of Karachi with the help of seven theses offered by the Monster theory. These tenets include the following argument: (I) monstrous spaces can be defined as cultural bodies, (II) monstrous spaces are the product of certain cultural moments, (III) monstrous spaces are always difficult to sabotage as the monster is well versed in the strategy of escape, (IV) a monster is also the harbinger of Category Crisis, (V) a monster dwells at the gate of difference, (VI) monster polices the border of the possible, (VII) fear of monster is a kind of desire and the monster always stands at the threshold of becoming (Cohen, 1996, pp.4-20).

The Scatter Here Is Too Great (2013) is set in Karachi. The novel is based on a collection of short stories that are influenced by the real terrorist event that happened in the city of Karachi in December 2012. The bomb was planted near Cantt Station and this event took the lives of six people. Thus, Karachi appears as the most important character in the novel and is depicted through the metaphor of a "bullet-smashed windscreen" that is both "beautiful" and "broken" (p. 1). The inhabitants of Karachi

try to understand its reality by reading the monstrous scatter that the city has produced. In the novel, the reality of the city is depicted both through the broken voices and broken narratives. Interestingly, it is the common grief caused by violence that has been connecting people from the diverse social background. In order to survive in these monstrous spaces, as the novel illustrates, the inhabitants of Karachi have devised different survival strategies that help them to move ahead in life. Several narrative voices narrate different stories of the same city such as cartoonists, a young couple, a businessman, a teacher, a sister, a comrade, a child who is interested in listening bedtime stories and a writer who is making sense out of his existence in the city.

In this novel, Karachi is represented as a city with a violent history. It is a monstrous city whose history cannot be viewed as a “final determinant of meaning”; it is “composed of a multitude of fragments, rather than of smooth epistemological wholes” (2013, p. 1). The writer in the city collects different fragments to understand the city’s monstrous body. The narrative voice confesses in the beginning that the purpose behind writing the story of the city is “to name the streets and number the dead... and another is to give you this scatter I have gathered to make sense of the things, to go beyond appearances, and to read crystal design on the broken screens” (2013,p .1). The image of the crystal design stands for various dimensions and multiple perspectives through which city can be viewed. The writer confesses that there is “stiff skein(s) of voices” and to calm them, it is important to “yank out the threads and find the edges” (2013, p. 1). Cohen (1996) argues that monstrous city space can only be understood by understanding the monster it has generated. The city is the product of the certain cultural moment and these spaces are born at the “metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of certain cultural moments of a time, a feeling, and a place” (1996, p. 4). The city incorporates “fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” that give life and independence to the monstrous body which is the product of pure culture (1996, p.1). Its inhabitants are aware of the reality of the city: the man travelling in the local bus introduces himself as comrade Sukhansaz but the people laugh at him and cannot understand the mystery behind his name. Sukhansaz’s reality is rooted in some kind of history that has its roots back in the Zia regime. He is the outcome of a certain cultural moment, a product of the monstrous spaces of the city. In order to understand his reality one needs to comprehend the monster that has generated him. According to Cohen (1996), “the monster exists only to be read... the monstrem is etymologically, that which reveals and that which warns, a glyph that

seeks a hierophant like a letter on the page”(p.1). The novel draws our attention to the fact that most of the individuals of the city, hardly know the reality of these creatures; they are the product of some bygone period and call themselves comrades, as the narrative voice speaks, “There was a time when the comrades and Reds and lefties were a common breed you’d find on the streets, but that General Zia, the dog of CIA, he ate them all up. He liked that dog. Where else do you think all the Islam and Drugs and guns and bombs came into the city?”, the text further tells that General Zia was given money, guns and drugs by American that wanted Pakistan to fight against Soviets and “he fucked the country and this city for Jihad next door thank you, yes” (2013,p. 22). All the comrades hated Zia after experiencing torture at his hands (Zia regime used to humiliate its prisoners publicly). The comrades believed that Zia used religion to get his political ends and his political visions were most of the time based on his religious insights. He played a significant role in the creation of monstrous spaces and made the city a breeding ground for a different kind of emotional and psychic violence.

The monstrous spaces and the violence they generate sometimes seem beyond comprehension. The city body like the monstrous body is “(both) corporeal and incorporeal, its threat is its propensity to shift” (2013, p.5). The monster changes shape and every time appears in “(slightly) different clothing, each time to be read again the contemporary social movements or a specific determining effect”, thus, the monster theory concerns itself with “strings of cultural moments, connected by a logic that always threatens its shift”(Cohen,1996, p.6). Violence like vampire always returns and haunts the citizens of the city. It can also come in the form of two robbers who try to snatch bag from a Karachite who is walking all alone on the road. Even a small child defines Karachi as a city of “fears and shadows” (p.12). Shadows and violence are mercurial, sometimes they come in the shape of three thieves, as the child observes, “they all had shiny guns and their faces were covered with clothes” (2013, p. 14). The child in the bus hides himself behind his father and then “being in a shadow” he defines shadows as “empty spaces in things” and thinks “The colours of shadows are also black_ No one can draw shadows on the blackboards because shadows keep on changing” (2013, p. 12). The fear becomes corporeal when three thieves enter the city. As the child recalls one such incident of violence: how all the thieves had begun to shout in one voice and ordered the citizens to drop everything on the floor and seemed as if they were not even afraid to fire bullet through their heads without a thought. Soon, the three thieves left the bus with this warning “If somebody steps out,

we'll shoot straight in their head. NOBODY comes after us, NOBODY UNDERSTAN?" (2013, p.16). This incident has left indelible scar upon the child's mind. The monstrous spaces not only inflict violence upon its citizens but also teach them certain survival strategies to cope with this kind of violence. As Baba teaches his younger son never to fight back to the thieves; he mentions that "if something like this happens, just give them everything without saying anything" (2013, p. 17). Karachi appears to be the city whose dwellers are trapped within the monstrous spaces that are simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

Violence like monster changes its shape and comes in different forms, sometimes in the form of the bomb blast that snatches from its citizens the reason to live, that truly knows how to prevail and creep behind every corner. Once it even disrupts the path of the young couple that plans to go on a date and occurs at the very moment when the young couple is about to reach the destination. The young man recalls and defines it as a terrible explosion that shook the whole bridge along the car (2013, p.37). The couple examines how the blast has left its marks on the "rear windscreen" and splattered it "with tiny bits of blood" (2013, p.40). As the boy recalls the way he has cleaned the blood from the car's roof, its windscreen, and from the bumper (2013, p.14). The blast has changed the significance of the familiar zones, and suddenly all the topophilic places of Karachi become topophobic ones. The young boy is unable to take his mother to the hospital because of the fear of shooting outside. He thinks that the bomb blast is often followed by "shooting or another bomb blast" and sometimes by "stray bullets" (2013, p. 43) that are capable of penetrating the glass planes. Karachi as portrayed is a city of fear where inhabitants feel insecure and when exposed to violence, expect "something worse is sure to follow" (2013,p.43). As the narrative voices tell, "You don't know this but you always taste its fear. It tastes like a cold blunt knife in your mouth. It does not cut; the worse is yet to come" (2013, p. 43).

Cohen (1996) defines monster space as the one that refuses easy categorization by problematizing the clash of two extremes (p.6). Because of its "ontological liminality", as Cohen (1996) argues it also introduces a crisis by questioning the very logic of binary thinking. It also resists classifications based on hierarchy, demanding instead a system allowing polyphony. It allows differences "a (kind of) non-binary polymorphism" (Hogel 1996, p.161). The city breeds a class of individuals who deconstruct the traditional binaries, as their lives question the definition of normal existence. They make their laws and refuse to be defined according to the traditionally narrow categories of good and bad which they regard as alien and outlandish. The son

defines the life of his father, the poet, as an “irresponsible living” (p.57) He was a communist poet who perceived family largely as “an inconvenience” and disappeared from his son’s life by committing his whole life to the revolutionary cause. As the son recalls the way his father was prosecuted for being “a left-wing political activist”, thus he ended up quitting his job as a journalist but still he learnt to resist in his own way , sometimes by organizing workers or by writing resistant poetry (Tanweer 57). The son resents the father for his selfishness and for the pain he inflicted upon his family. The son often thinks that the individuals like his father and Sukhansaz do not live the kind of life other people live. Sukhansaz refuses to offer prayer and accept General Zia’s state policies to Islamize the country. Instead, he chooses to suffer in jail and face torture and remains true to his ideals. People like Sukhansaz and the father challenge the dominant conventional binaries that differentiate the good from the bad and allow what Hogel defines as “ a deeper play of differences, a non-binary polymorphism at the base of human nature”(qtd in Cohen, 1996, 161) . According to Cohen (1996), monstrous spaces “offer an escape from (the) hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, and interconnected method of perceiving the world” (p.7). Sukhansaz makes fun of the people who ask such kind of questions that, “Is Sukhansaz a Muslim name?”, he laughs aloud and replies that everything in this country is either Muslim or non-Muslim, and people always ask this kind of questions: Do your spoon and knife offer the prayers as well? (2013, p. 23).

The son comes to this conclusion that the artists, writers and activists are extremely idealistic people and hide their selfishness under the guise of philanthropy. Just like the other individuals, they too are the products of monstrous spaces but unlike others, they find the language that helps them to name the wounds. For them “wounds become their eyes” and thus for the “seeing outside becomes seeing inside” (2013, p. 69). The writer seems to argue that this kind of people become the only hope of the dying city. The father teaches his son how to look at life from different angles and asks him to look at the “bullet-smashed screen” from a new perspective. The son observes as if the bullet holes appear to be the “new territory” particularly the way they “crack new territories and new boundaries”, these bullets are not just the bullets but “maps of uncharted city” that narrate multiple stories (2013, p.162). The father teaches him “how to love the city” and tells him “a city’s all about how you look at it” (2013, p.162). Thus the father teaches his son many ways of looking at the city, as it offers more than what one imagines. The father advises his son that he must learn to look at it in multiple ways, so that if one worldview hurts then he can take escape in another one

(2013, p. 87). The sea in this context is portrayed as the only place in the city of Karachi that offers love and serenity to its people. Thus, when the son looks at the sea, he appreciates its beauty and confesses the desire of being surrounded by it, as he mentions several times that he wants to suspend himself “in the vast blue” (2013, p.92). The son recalls that his father and Sukhansaz challenge binary opposition and demand a system allowing “polyphony, mixed response and resistant integration” (1996, p.6). The monstrous spaces not only trap one within the familiar zones but also offer “an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world” (1996, p.7).

Monstrous spaces always guard the border of the possible, so is the city of Karachi which like the monster stands as a “warning against the exploration of its uncertain demesnes”, curiosity in the monstrous spaces is more often “punished than rewarded” (Cohen, 1996, p.12). Thus, Saqib warns his friend not to move freely in the unfamiliar spaces of the city. He thinks of Karachi as the city where one must learn to protect oneself “from getting fucked” (2013, p. 81). Both friends once come across a beggar who informs them about the presence of a whorehouse and also offers to fix them with a certain prostitute for some cheap rates. But Saqib knows that this may lead them to some danger, so he advises his friend to be careful (2013, p.81). Karachi has set certain limitations upon its inhabitant’s social mobility and to step outside those set boundaries mean bearing the risk of some monstrous attack or “to become monstrous oneself” (Cohen, 12). Saqib prefers to remain in the boundaries as set and decides not to “mess with them” (p.81). Similarly, during the Zia regime, the totalitarian state rejected all those differences that existed outside the system and people were forced to obey the set boundaries. The ‘monster’ does not tolerate the difference or any kind of resistance to the set order, so it often ending up punishing and silencing the resistant voices. The son confesses that his father is still haunted by the nightmares that he had while he was in jail, particularly, the way he watched his friends being tortured in the jail during the General Zia regime. The author informs that the writers and members of the intelligentsia who refused to obey the ‘monster’ were killed or tortured till they were ready to renounce their causes along with their kids and wives and all that lies in between (2013, p.179).

Monstrous spaces breed various kinds of monsters as Grixti defines monsters as “metaphors” for both unpleasant social and existential realities. Every society creates its monsters. In traditional monster narratives, monsters are mostly presented as feminine who are left with two choices, either to “subscribe to patriarchal order” by

risking their subjectivity or “challenge the order and risk being deemed transgressive and marginalized” (Tanweer 12). The women in *The Scatter Here is Too Great*, are also bound to conform to the social norms. The young boy’s sister, Appa is advised to behave in a certain way and as she has not allowed to study further because she already studied more than all the other women in the family or the extended family (2013, p.99). When Nani first time sees Appa not with books but romancing with a boy, she begins to treat her like an alien other. Tanweer draws our attention towards the existing patriarchal norms of Pakistani society where a smaller unconventional act on the part of a girl can change her destiny forever. Appa suddenly becomes an outsider in the house as Nani often cries and confesses that Appa’s honour is lost and nobody is going to marry her now. Nani informs her parents about her rebellious acts; Baba becomes angry whereas Mama begins to cry. Thus, he recalls even when the things become all right, Appa is not allowed to get outside the house without permission, and even the father stops talking to her (2013, p.115). Appa steps out of the boundaries and shows rebellion to social norms, therefore, her social life is completely circumscribed. She becomes as Cohen (2013) Soylla, Weird Sister, or Lilith.

In the city of Karachi history is “officially denied but survives as the repressed of society and culture _that vitally influenced body and space which in turn, results in the performance of monstrosity” (Hock _Soong Ng, 2004, p. 22). The suppressed or “the unconscious history” of the city create monstrous places in it and contribute to making people construct their self and identity. Bilal Tanweer’s Karachi has a troubled history, as its history is either removed or erased and no official documents are left to record it. The narrator in the novel is a mouthpiece of the writer and his writing about the city does not do justice to its complexity, thus, this whole process of creativity creates a strange kind of tension, “ that is made of fragments and yet is trying to convey a larger story” (Mushtaq, 2016, p.199). Karachi gives birth to the kind of spaces where colliding histories meet to resolve unfinished business. Monstrous spaces are the ones where the past always haunts the border of the present. The dwellers of the city are also haunted by the fear of the monstrous other.

Urban spaces are mostly represented through the metaphor of the body and Karachi is reflected as a city with diseased body that is marked by death, affliction and filth. As the narrative voice observes that the city is dying slowly because nothing around tells that it is alive. All the living beings including the birds and even the rats are leaving it (2013, p.156). To its dwellers, Karachi appears to be both disturbingly

unfamiliar and familiar. Like all monstrous spaces, Karachi carries double potential: it not only gives access to official and acceptable things but also offers acceptability to the unofficial and the terrible. Karachi offers pluralities of experience and affects its citizens in both positive and negative way by “encouraging those who live within it to confront their repressed fears/monsters” (p.43). Bilal Tanweer in *The Scatter Here is Too Great* represents Karachi as the breeding ground of monstrosity, a place where monstrous culture is continuously generating the monsters of violence that are becoming the reason for the city’s death. The monstrous spaces within Karachi make it a vulnerable city. But it is hard to kill the city and its monstrous culture because monsters dwell at the gate of difference and also live in the dark recesses of the human mind, from which they always return. The city and its monstrous culture challenge its dwellers and demand that they must re-evaluate their cultural assumptions about race, class, gender and time. The city’s monstrous culture carries certain charm within it, as Karachiites share a love-hate relationship with the city. They hate its monstrous culture but also envy its freedom and glorify its sublime despair.

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