



BOOK FORUM

## ***Minding the Metropolis: Precarity, Urbanity, and Mental Conditions: A Response to Ankhi Mukherjee's Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor***

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### **Abstract**

This article situates psychoanalysis, urbanity, and precarity apropos of the material, affective, and memory economy of the mutable metropolis marked by visibility, velocity, and violence. Responding to Ankhi Mukherjee's *Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor*, the article examines the interplay of visibility and invisibility in a metropolis and how that is in close and complex correspondence to the politics of precarity and privilege. Drawing on historical as well as recent research in psychology, psychoanalysis, cognitive theory, and cultural studies across various geopolitical settings, this article, through a response to and reading of Mukherjee's book, aims to articulate and illustrate the unique relevance of literature and aesthetic education in a study of mental health conditions in the (un)seen city. It argues that such psychic and social situations may be uniquely encoded and addressed with ethics and empathy through the cognitive interiority and symbolic instrumentality afforded by the affective and liminal framework of aesthetic activity and fiction.

**Keywords:** mental health; metropolis; precarity; psychoanalysis; urbanity

The study of psychic lives of a city has been a complex subject of academic, cultural, and artistic attention since the eighteenth century, from William Blake's poetic musings and sketches of the precarious population in post-Industrial Revolution London to Zygmunt Bauman's treatise on liquid modernity and wasted lives in the twentieth-century metropolis. Engagements from Blake to Bauman reveal the city as a social structure characterized by asymmetric

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distribution of wealth and labor, which manifests itself in urban planning and mental health, evinced in Georg Simmel's study of urbanity and nervous conditions. The idea of the city as a layered landscape involving human-machine interfaces as well as a site of affective negotiations and mental conditions has attracted sociological and psychological research on minds and monuments. In such studies, the city often emerges as a policy-driven activity of territorialization and reterritorialization, which produces profound and complex impacts on economic and mental health conditions. The city may thus be described as a state of production as well as precarity, sometimes simultaneously. The precarity of production and the production of precarity characterizing a city has long-term as well as episodic and quotidian qualities in ways in which it affects lives of the poor, the invisible, and the unseen. Ankhi Mukherjee's book *Unseen City: The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor* offers a rich research on the globality of poverty across cities and the ways in which psychoanalysis, cultural theory, and literary studies may be adapted for a nuanced engagement with individual and shared suffering in the metropolis.

Andy Clark's notion of the *situated brain* is particularly pertinent here, for a cognitive-theoretical understanding of the ways in which memory, cognition, and mental health conditions emerge uniquely apropos of particular cultural and environmental situations. Such cognitive-studies framework espouses the embedded, embodied, enactive, and extended models of cognition with careful study of the subject and the environment in which they are situated. Recent research in cognitive and clinical psychology in the works of Antonio Damasio, Eleanor Maguire, and Joseph LeDoux also highlights the role of the environment in shaping synaptic structures and mental mechanisms related to stress, memory, and anxiety. Mukherjee's study of three continents that focus on urban India, New York, and London offers astonishing research on psychotherapeutic work on precarious communities in six cities, carefully situating the cultural and economic conditions in the backdrop of mental health. This incorporates an interdisciplinary research framework drawing on clinical case studies, cultural studies, critical theory, philosophy, and works in world literature that engage with mental health crises and precarity in cities. The literary works selected for this study are rich and varied, offering unique representations of illness, alienation, and deterritorialization corresponding to human and social movements, mobility, and vulnerability. The city in this study is a mutable palimpsest of iterations and identities, encoding and effacing the same across an asymmetric distribution of care and coercion. Mukherjee foregrounds the unseen spaces and faces in the city, highlighting how the politics of privilege operates in the complex equation between health and visibility and how the *unseen city* is an entanglement of denial and deterritorialization that operates through abandoned architectural projects as well as uncared mental health of the less privileged. This also opens up crucial questions about space and well-being, highlighting how the politics of privilege apropos of lived experience in a city corresponds to spaces shaped by governance, urban-capital investments or the absence and withdrawal of these elements.

Globalization emerges as a massive machine in this study, shaping the city as well as its psychic lives, accentuating instead of leveling away differences in

class, race, and social structures. Against this condition, Mukherjee's *Unseen City* situates a humanistic engagement with poverty and mental illness drawing on the narrative possibilities of literature, which becomes a vehicle of imagination, agency, and empathy. The call for a *situated psychoanalysis* in this book is profound and political, drawing on a rich research on Sigmund Freud and the legacy of Freudian therapy, while also locating the same in the context of contemporary urban poverty. The reading of psychoanalysis in Mukherjee's work is thus historical as well as futuristic, carefully and closely expounding the growth and evolution of psychoanalysis while also foregrounding its fault lines and understudied engagements, most notably with precarity and poverty. The book debunks the myth of psychoanalysis being an intervention for the privileged only, instead making compelling and elegant arguments about the adapted psychoanalysis for the poor, which may be merged with literary-humanistic interventions for an empathetic engagement with the unconscious corresponding to unique social situations. This, Mukherjee's book claims, is vital for any project to understand and address the mental health associated with the lived experience and reality of poverty, one that is often compounded by the shifting goalposts of globalization fueled by engines of multinational capitalism largely indifferent to the unseen subjects inhabiting urban precarity.

A redefinition of the Freudian uncanny (*unheimlich*) is particularly relevant here. Drawing on Dickens's London in *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* to the Bombay of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Mukherjee's *Unseen City* offers an original definition of the space of the slum inhabited by the urban poor as represented in literary landscapes. While the unhomeliness of the urban slum is a condition of economic precarity and vulnerability, it also highlights how the otherness emerges as a psychological as well as a spatial condition (outside the homely) in a mutable metropolis where capital operates in a vampiric velocity, often overriding human needs and classifying comfortable spaces and identities with power and hierarchy. Mukherjee's book highlights how the ontology of the non-space and the non-human are inextricably linked to the politics of privilege and access to care, apropos of urban identities shaped by discursive designs and policies of governance that determine who is worthy of humanness and space. In doing so, the book situates literature as a complex instrument that can claim an affective agency apropos of justice and ethics, often operating subversively against forms of sociocultural overdeterminism that deny dignity to subjects. Here Mukherjee's research opens up the parallels between psychoanalysis and literature, for both espouse imaginative reconstructions of reality, marked by metaphors, symbols, and digressions that can liberate and situate the subject outside of the discourses of the market, goals of governance, and violent swings of ideological and identarian resurgence. The aesthetic education advocated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak aligns closely to this, Mukherjee's study shows, particularly in sensitizing the subject to their equipment of experience, illustrated by works of literature that dramatize decolonization of knowledge, while also queering chrononormative constructs and reimagining categories insufficiently defined by psychoanalysis.

From Frantz Fanon's subversive psychiatry, which exposed the medial racism rampant in twentieth-century biomedicine to the treatment of supposedly

malingering Arab subjects, the uneasy collusion between coercion and cure has long been a subject of social science research. *Unseen City* offers a detailed historical account of Fanon, Mannoni, and the North African Syndrome in its deconstruction and exposé of dualisms that shape medico-political subjects and stereotypes. Such stereotypes are often territorial as well as cultural, as Mukherjee describes in her reading of Vishal Bhardwaj's film *Haider* and the uniqueness of the trauma of the Kashmiri subject, while also underlining the film's adaptation and reconstruction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The underlying and fundamental philosophical framework across the chapters is the politics of acknowledgment, recognition, and care apropos of mental health and treatment, which is distributed asymmetrically and unequally through various hoops and hierarchies that shape governance and policy. In its historical study of trauma, Mukherjee draws on Pierre Janet, particularly his expositions on narrative and traumatic memories. Of special significance here is Janet's description of memory as an action that tells a story that shapes the subject's personality and how that may be compared to Judith Herman's later study of trauma and traumatic memory as complex orders of embodiment that involve immobility and absence of agency. In this section, Mukherjee proposes and coins the concept of *psychomattering* to suggest ways in which psychoanalysis and psychotherapy can combine and facilitate a reorientation of the traumatic subject in order for the subject to *matter again*, to revive their sense of self and agency. Thus, the scope of this book becomes wide-ranging as well as deep, drawing on medical definitions and diagnosis of PTSD in different editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* while also engaging with the ontology of presence, indeterminacy, and spectrality in the philosophical frameworks of Schrödinger and Derrida. The core question in Mukherjee's book is political as well as existential: What does it take to be considered a human worthy of care, consideration, and recognition, particularly against the velocity and violence of all-consuming machine of expansion and territorialization?

Mukherjee's study places special importance on the birth and growth of Indian psychoanalysis, highlighting the life and work of Girindrasekhar Bose in Kolkata, his founding of the Indian Psychological Society in 1922, and the setting up of Lumbini Park, a hospital for the mentally ill in 1940. The culture-sensitive psychology of Bose, which was theorized and operated outside of the Freudian framework while also establishing a correspondence with Freud himself, may be seen as symbolic of the *situated psychoanalysis* that engages with specific contextual conditions rather than one all-inclusive umbrella of the unconscious. *Unseen City* is a study of multiple cities and multiple mental frameworks caused by myriad cultural conditions, and it offers its thesis with close readings of a series of literary texts and films, from Ritwik Ghatak's *Ajantrik* to Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*, from Faleiro's *A Beautiful Thing* to Siddhartha Deb's *The Beautiful and the Damned*. It underscores its engagements with mental health conditions among the urban poor in its case studies and depictions of free clinics across its studied cities. Having traced the journey of India's psychoanalysis paradigms, Mukherjee situates her book historically between the Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA) of the government of India in 2017 and its next edition in 2028 while also informing the inglorious current state of the Indian Psychological

Society which has only thirty-two full members and forty trainees. Similarly, in her chapter on New York and its precarious population suffering mental illness, Mukherjee juxtaposes clinical case studies with readings of selected literary texts including Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief* and Open City and Rawi Hage's *Cockroach* to offer a rich intersectional engagement with social divisions mediated by race, class, and geopolitical movements. Such readings reveal an interplay of spectrality, identity, and agency that also depicts the entanglement of psychiatry and colonialism, foregrounding the biopolitical hegemony that classify subjects as privileged, unworthy, or waste.

*Unseen City* is rich in information and metrics about mental illness in contemporary culture, through its detailed ethnographic data and attention to the implicit intent of governmental policies, which are often unpacked by the author. The book offers an elegant historical examination of psychoanalysis from its inception through meticulous references to its key and contesting figures, right down to the present day and case studies from mental health clinics across the cities it covers. But what makes it truly remarkable as a work in humanities is the manner in which it highlights the deep value of literature as a complex cognitive framework, one that is shaped by fluid forms of focalization, narrativity, and empathy. The imaginative reconstructions and metaphoric possibilities in literature are read as analogous to the engagement of psychoanalysis with human suffering, especially in subjects always already marginalized by metropolitan violence and velocity. The compassionate imagination advocated by Martha Nussbaum, Mukherjee argues, is perhaps most evident in the ethics of emotional narrative construction, which can be simultaneously empathetic and subversive, a valuable lesson also for psychoanalysis as it tries to treat vulnerable subjects in the dark underbelly of urbanity. The disparity and unequal distribution of care and capital in the contemporary city is the ironic fallout of the forces of globalization that accentuate discursively driven differences. Under these conditions, both psychoanalysis and humanistic education should be seen as supplementing each other in structural, functional, and, most importantly, ethical levels. Such ethics of engagement and care are needed now, more than ever, in a world of increasing psychological and political polarities we internalize and inhabit today.

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