



An Interrogation of the “Cosmos” in Tariq Jazeel’s *Spatializing Difference beyond Cosmopolitanism: Rethinking Planetary Futures*

Saptaparna Saha

Assistant Professor,
Bidhan Chandra College, Rishra,
University of Calcutta,
West Bengal, India.

In his paper, *Spatializing Difference beyond Cosmopolitanism: Rethinking Planetary Futures*, Tariq Jazeel engages into an interrogation of the boundaries and limitations of space and he insists that the lines we draw and the contours of our geographical imaginations are not “innocent signifiers”. What we consider as given and certain needs to be reconsidered and seen in a new light in the context of new cosmopolitan theories that emerge every other day. Cosmopolitanism has been analysed from a variety of perspectives. It has taken the shape of a political project, a moral philosophy, a way of being, and a post-colonial disposition and has also acted as a methodological approach to the social sciences. Yet, Jazeel argues that we have never been able to step out of the appeal that the “cosmos” holds for us. His aim in the paper is not to add to the plurality of the meanings of cosmopolitanism but to decenter the domination of the Eurocentric perspective in this field and free cosmopolitanism from the shackles of one “singular” vision. This different perspective is attempted through the understanding of cosmopolitanism through its geographical implications and also in turn includes the criticism of the “emblematic cosmopolitan vision”. Kant had also attempted a geographical explanation of cosmopolitanism but then Jazeel states that the problem of that geographical analysis is how Kant’s geographical contours were fixed according to his racial and ethnic prejudices.

He provides the readers with a critical history of the development of cosmopolitanism in the recent times and explains how the different range of meanings that we associate with the word “cosmopolitan” has turned it into an indeterminate signifier. We are not even sure anymore what cosmopolitanism refers to. Jazeel observes that one thing has always dominated the scene throughout the variety of associations of the word, i.e. the attempt to “feel beyond the local



towards the scale of the planetary”. The problems with the normalization of this kind of universalization is that it builds up as an extension to the Eurocentric idea of modernity and this is not what living together beyond the local is supposed to signify. His aim is to provide alternate geographical imaginations which engage in a system where people attempt to live together without creating a mandate for assimilation and the world should become a space where ontological differences are recognized and understood.

He discusses Gilroy’s concept of “cosmopolitanism from below” which believes in embracing the differences, extending the hopes of a local culture where the “local” is not at once given up but only eventually opens up its horizon to become a part of the global culture. The idea of “cosmopolitanism from below” is not supposed to pressurize from an elevated standpoint where everyone who wants to be part of the global culture goes through the imperative to assimilate. This version of cosmopolitanism is supposed to accommodate the perspectives of the “other” who have been excluded previously. Jazeel observes the example of the famous vision where the planet Earth is viewed from the spacecraft of Apollo 17 of 1972 and how this picture was circulated and discussed by Gilroy as the frame of the ideal cosmopolitan world that needs to be achieved:

This planet is the ground that unites humankind, a geo common to all, but one that can only be glimpsed through moments of willing transcendence of that ground. (Jazeel 80)

This planetary image which was conceived as an opposition to the limitations of the nation state or cultural constraints instead turns into a “cosmo-ethical imperative” and according to Jazeel this echoes the claims of the Stoics about how human beings are insignificant in comparison to the vastness of creation. This planetary yearning is impossible to transcend like the boundaries of race and nation state. On the other hand, this is the stage that is achieved after one is able to transcend all these boundaries. Yet, this does not indicate a shift from the Eurocentric “Apollonian gaze” that Jazeel finds problematic. The circulation of this picture as the ultimate mode of transcendence therefore becomes an example of another attempt at world domination which Cosgrove interrogates in his book *Apollo’s Eye*. Rather than setting up a different mode of living together which goes beyond the cultural, racial or ethnic presumptions,



this vision provides a power to instruct how universality should be viewed and set up the standards that need to be achieved. The outer space becomes a domain where world powers play a race which decides who controls the global ideas of universalism.

Jazeel notes that the absence of human presence in this picture helped the objective view of the planet that was intended with no possible distractions. This view offers a perfect imagination of the planet as a place where the possibility of the idea of a collective culture and harmony becomes effortless. Jazeel comments:

Its techno- prosthetics bring into vision an apparently perfect and unarguably spherical, singular, real and material earth. (Jazeel 83)

Examples such as these do not criticize the idea of “cosmopolitanism from below” but indicate the problems of making an attempt at universalization. The power play between the “us” and “them” cannot be undermined while normalizing cosmopolitanism as a universal. Drawing an analogy with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s concept about “political modernity”, Jazeel reiterates that the academic and intellectual discourse based on cosmopolitanism keeps rotating around its Eurocentric predecessors, however hard academicians try to colour it in Subaltern shades. The difficulty lies in conceptualizing this space i.e. the “cosmos” as the “container for difference”. Such worldviews are applicable in philosophy, politics as well as cultural theory. In the most general terms, cosmopolitanism assures that human beings are assumed to be part of a single global community rather than particular nation states or cultures. The call for such people who will be citizen of the world go back to ancient ages of Diogenes and Sinope. Common humanity is emphasized upon local identities. Eurocentrism on the other hand is constantly criticized for being too cosmopolitan in nature. Traditions and norms are applied universally and of course they lack proper contextualization.

Jazeel further interrogates the methods of recognizing or measuring difference because they always fall back on the Eurocentric standards and categorizations which have been circulated from ages. “Tolerance” itself becomes a problematic term because behind it subtly hides the “tolerating” I, who carries difference as a burden. The concept of hospitality goes back to Kant’s tenets where as long as a stranger “peacefully occupies his place, one may not treat him



with hostility”. Yet, no one has the right to demand the privilege of being a “permanent visitor”. Kant further explains why the temporality of such a visit is the best and men have only the right of a “temporary sojourn”. Derrida, on the other hand, adapting Kant’s arguments, traces a cultural history where he analyses the laws set by various cities regarding the hospitality meted out to the stranger. Hospitality and hostility thus turns out to be “interlaced” and the ambivalent gap between them always remains even after the visitor is accepted. By explaining Derrida’s concept of “conditions to unconditional hospitality”, Jazeel shows how aptly the double imperative applies to cosmopolitan laws that control the space that the “other” is offered and eventually the differences are “violently translated by the center”. The world is at a stage where we always keep on aspiring for a higher and better stage of cosmopolitanism and never does these aspirations guarantee a “non-assimilatory sphere for the emergence of, and cohabitation with, alterity”. For alterity, it is important to recognize the presence of the “Other” and it involves an ethical responsibility towards those who are different.

In the last part of his paper, Jazeel suggests some alternative geographical imaginations which are more flexible and can be more plausible attempts at living with difference. This is where his analysis of Spivak’s proposition of “planetarity” comes up as an approach which intends to decolonize the preconceived notions of boundaries. Differences cannot be measured with a certainty and neither does the particular get translated by the terms of the universal. According to Spivak in the *Death of a Discipline*, if we imagine ourselves as “planetary creatures” rather than global entities, the “other” encompasses everything from the universe out there:

The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say “the planet, on the other hand.” When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition. (Spivak 3)

Planetarity puts up the constant effort to decenter the given ways of understanding differences and “otherness” because there cannot be a simple unproblematic complete way of understanding the “other”. Therefore, Jazeel assures that “planetarity” is better equipped to



handle the multiculturalism than cosmopolitanism has been seen to offer. An understanding of the nonwestern texts has to be attempted without placing them across under the larger features of Orientalism or compiling them as a comparison with the Western ways of knowledge production. These processes result largely into “effacements of hegemonic knowledge”. “Planetarity” eventually goes on to step into a culture and attempts to provide a perspective from the inside and for that it needs to shed off its singular, rational and normalized Eurocentric terms according to which usually the “other” is viewed:

Planetarity itself demands that kind of persistent introspection over the objects we take-as-given in both the social sciences and humanities; a constant and humble decentring of the masterful gazes we cast over the things we think we know with certainty. (Jazeel 89)

Jazeel here defines “unlearning” as a necessary step to execute the aspirations of “planetarity”. This process of going through a transformation where one empties out the preconceived notions of the self to successfully be part of the “other” has been iterated previously by Hassan who provided a new meaning to the religious reference of “kenosis”. The need to revert back to Christianity to conceptualize the “cosmopolitan” man accepting the culture of the “other” further justifies Jazeel’s problems with the academic discourse of cosmopolitanism where the origin of each cosmopolitan understanding ends up in Eurocentric terms. As Nikos Papastergiadis also mentions in his criticism of the term “kenosis”, the comparison of the “cosmopolitan” man with Jesus who goes through the process of “emptying out” immediately elevates the position of the “cosmopolitan” man rather than fulfilling the expectation of making him one with the other’s culture:

By turning to this mystical concept of transubstantiation, Hassan risks dropping deeper into the older traps of idealism and caricaturing the effects of public intellectuals who engage in cultural politics. (Papastergiadis 5)

The process of “unlearning” in this comparison stands out as a simple process which initiates the project of embracing the “ambivalences of the planet” when seen as a whole. Jazeel makes an appeal that an attempt should be made to resist cosmopolitan approaches which coerce us into the illusion of totality and the geographies of the planet must put up a space for the



plurality that exists. He agrees that the concept of “planetarity” still remains an abstract theory and its application in the practical everyday life needs to be worked upon and discussed. The problem of “place” and geographical boundaries cannot be ignored while we are dealing with the idea of living together. The mapping of spatial politics becomes important in this context because the relations between space and the global market have constantly been reconstituted. In reference to Lefebvre’s idea of “production of space”, Stuart Elden argues that:

In order to make progress in understanding space, we need to grasp the concrete and the abstract together. . . Space is a mental and material construct. This provides us with a third term between the poles of conception and perception, the notion of the lived. (Elden 110)

The spatial language that is used to keep the flow of cultures intact needs to be dynamic and progressive according to the rising needs. This potential for progress has been somehow hindered because of the presence of the European dominating discourses which stops the flow of cultures. This initializes the needs to protect the “container of culture” and create a surveillance to filter what flows in and what flows out.

Drawing upon Doreen Massey’s spatial critique, Jazeel notes that:

The value of Massey’s work is the alternative language and spatial imagination she develops for thinking about places that, instead of bounded static, and walled, might more progressively be thought as relational, constellatory and ‘thrown together’ (Jazeel 92)

The imagination of a place, no matter how local or particular is incomplete without placing it in relation with a wide range of narratives that originated across the border. The idea of living together is initiated by the understanding that the idea of a place is never constrained but on the other hand it is this dynamic feature which keeps on evolving and becomes an intersection for all mobilities. Place, hence, for Jazeel becomes an ongoing event. This idea sets up an opposition to the problem of place being the construction which is geographically bounded and at peace before the interference of the “other”:

Through all these configurations and developments of place as inherently relational, place itself emerges not as a logical and local counterposition to the global scale. Place is not



opposed to the planet. It is instead an ongoing assemblage, constellation, and agonistic coming together of narratives and trajectories that are in themselves insufficiently conceptualized as either local or global. (Jazeel 92)

Jazeel's argument therefore interrogates the limitations of cosmopolitanism and intends on increasing the openness of the cosmopolitan space. He provides plausible geographical conditions where the idea of living together can be imagined also if we step out of the "cosmopolitan shadows". Living together does not necessarily need to be synonymous with the tenets of cosmopolitanism. These new concepts do involve restructuralization which indicates that we have to step out of our comfort zones and live with differences which can even be unimaginable. Rather than imagining the planet as the site of a homogeneous culture, we should understand it as a "differentiated political space". His project makes a contribution in conceptualizing the futures of cosmopolitanism and the necessary stages that might help it to become a better postulation. The future of cosmopolitanism depends on the acceptance of this social theory in the dominant discourses and everyday debates and discussions.

Works Cited

- Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Elden, Stuart. "Henri Lefebvre and the Production of Space." *Elden, Political Space*. Department of Government, Brunel University, UK, n.d. Web.
- "Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace"" *Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace"* N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Nov. 2016.
- Jazeel, T. "Spatializing Difference beyond Cosmopolitanism: Rethinking Planetary Futures." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28.5 (2011): 75-97. Web.
- Papastergiadis, Nikos. "Cultural Translation, Cosmopolitanism and the Void." *Translation Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–20. doi:10.1080/14781700.2011.528678.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003. Print.