

## Exploring Karachi's Landscapes of Memory and Urban Ecology through Saeed's *The Year of Sound and Heat* (2022)

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### ABSTRACT

*This study presents Karachi as a layered South Asian urban landscape where politics, memory, and ecology intersect, each shaping the city's literary imagining, as depicted in Saeed's novel The Year of Sound and Heat (Saeed, 2022). It studies the representation of Karachi's urban landscape from the perspective of literary urban imaginaries. For this purpose, it explores landscapes of memory present within Karachi's urban landscape from a political context, drawing on De Nardi and Drozdowski's (2019) integrated notions of the politics of place and landscapes of memory. Furthermore, it traces the interrelation between Karachi's urban landscape and ecology through Cassar's (2019) notion of landscape ecology. The findings reveal that Karachi's political past is deeply intertwined with its existing urban landscape, which is portrayed in the novel through the narrator Jogi's recollections. Jogi's recollections of the past reveal a persistent cycle of violence in the city by evoking images of neglect, repression, and marginalization inscribed in Karachi's urban landscape. Furthermore, the novel presents two prominent landscapes of memory situated within Karachi, i.e., the old coffee shop and Karachi's graveyard, evoking the city's decay. These landscapes of memory portray Jogi, Natasha, and Disco's memories associated with violence and urban insecurity in Karachi and its impact on the characters' lives by mapping the politics of place. They also underscore the vulnerability of Karachi's ecological systems due to unchecked urban expansion. It conveys how literature intertwines politics and memory with environmental degradation to depict Karachi's shifting physical and symbolic landscape.*

*Keywords: landscapes of memory; violence; environmental degradation; Karachi; South Asian urban literature*

### INTRODUCTION

The urban form of a city embodies a complex dynamic where the physical and non-physical features integrate to shape the urban experiences of the city inhabitants (Fleischmann et al., 2021). The physical features of a city include its landform or geography; public spaces such as libraries and airports; grey infrastructure such as roads, streets, and buildings; and green infrastructure such as parks and gardens. On the other hand, the non-physical features of a city include its underlying social fabric, constituting the social, political, cultural, and economic processes; and ecological processes concerning the city's ecosystem (Ameel et al., 2019).

The geopolitical significance of South Asian cities such as Mumbai, Karachi, Dhaka, and others is shaped by their strategic locations; social, political, and economic conditions; and historical contexts. Moreover, the ecological impact of rapid urbanization in South Asia has become a major concern globally. This makes the issues concerning South Asian cities a compelling subject for research (Afjal, 2023).

The role of urban theory is to focus on a broad range of concepts concerning the city's urban form, such as how city dwellers perceive the physical world of their cities, and how the urban inhabitants carve their political, social, and cultural identities based on their experiences in those cities and urban spaces existing within those cities (Taubenböck et al., 2020). Such intricate notions constituting mental and symbolic representations of the city's urban form are termed urban imaginaries (Harris, 2018). Work by Lindner and Meissner (2020) highlights that the two notable urban theorists from the twentieth century, Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, are regarded as the founding figures in the field of urban imaginaries. They emphasized the relation between the mechanisms of urbanization and mental processes, which provided an impetus for future research in this field.

Moreover, this field deals with conceptual discussions about the urban spaces existing within a city. It conceptualizes the city's urban form from diverse and novel perspectives and provides a framework for social critique, thus promoting social change and urban transformations (Schnell, 2022). One such fresh perspective within urban imaginaries is reimagining the city from the perspective of urban landscape, focusing on the natural and built features of the city's urban form (Waldheim, 2016). The term urban landscape refers to the urban environment of a landform or a geographic setting comprising the physical and non-physical features of a particular geographic setting (Atha, 2019).

Similarly, the field of literary urban imaginaries takes insights from literary and urban studies to study the representation of cities in the works of fiction and poetry, such as in the classical novels of Dickens and Joyce, and classical poetry of Thompson and Baudelaire, or any contemporary piece of urban literature (Bridge & Watson, 2000; Levy, 1978). Recent studies on literary urban imaginaries (Amran, 2024; Anand & Tripathi, 2022; Sur, 2022) explore diverse themes concerning the fictional representation of urban landscapes, particularly focusing on the spatial representation of urban spaces and the ecological challenges faced by cities.

South Asian urban literature significantly engages with the social, political, and ecological forces that inform the spatial imagination of South Asian cities (Sur, 2022). Although Karachi is often discussed in relation to political instability and violence (Hussain & Shelley, 2016; Nafees, 2012), its literary imagining as a dynamic urban landscape shaped by varied contexts has received little critical attention. The novel *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) provides a compelling site for addressing this problem. It is written by a Karachi-based Pakistani author, Zain Saeed, who offers a powerful, imaginative account of Karachi and its complexities. The novel evokes an atmosphere of decline by depicting Karachi's urban life amidst political instability, violence, and environmental vulnerability. It portrays how characters like Jogi, Natasha, and Disco navigate Karachi's fractured urban life while remaining haunted by memories of the city's past. The rationale for selecting the novel lies in its powerful literary engagement with Karachi's deteriorating urban landscape.

The current study, therefore, investigates the textual representation of Karachi's urban landscape in the light of the novel, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022). It utilizes the theoretical framework of literary urban imaginaries, drawing on De Nardi and Drozdowski's (2019) interrelated notions of the politics of place and landscapes of memory and Cassar's (2019) notion of landscape ecology. This study argues that *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) presents Karachi as a layered and contested urban landscape that reveals itself through the overlapping dynamics of spatial politics, memory, and ecological degradation. It highlights the role of South Asian urban literature in shaping the readers' understanding of fragile socio-political

and ecological urban systems of South Asian cities, fostering socio-political and environmental awareness among South Asian citizens.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How does the politics surrounding Karachi's urban landscape connect the city's past and present?
2. How do the landscapes of memory within Karachi's urban landscape inform us about the politics of place and the city's ecological degradation?

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

This section briefly provides the usefulness of literary analysis in exploring fictional representations of cities through the lens of urban imaginaries. Moreover, it focuses on the exploration of the concept of urban landscape in recent critical urban studies on South Asian cities. Afterward, relevant literary studies conducted on the representation of South Asian cities in literary writings through the lens of literary urban imaginaries have been cited. Finally, relevant studies on the selected text have been cited to uncover gaps in existing literature.

#### LITERARY ANALYSIS THROUGH THE LENS OF URBAN IMAGINARIES

Contemporary urban literary works manifest a thorough involvement with the structures and processes of urbanization. It focuses on the peculiarities of urban life and its interrelation with the city's urban form, particularly its landscape. This enriches the urban inhabitants' understanding of their cities and shapes their perceptions regarding the city's evolving landscape (Ameel et al., 2019). This makes urban literature a suitable subject for deeper literary analysis as it provides a refined and comprehensive critical perspective on the complex challenges associated with contemporary urban life (Ammah-Tagoe, 2019). This literary representation of the city is dealt with in the field of literary urban imaginaries.

Recent studies in the field of literary urban imaginaries (Amran & Termizi, 2020; Khaidzir et al., 2022; Sur, 2022) explore cities as lived and contested landscapes. These studies provide critical perspectives on the literary representation of embodied experiences of diverse individuals and groups. Moreover, they explore the ideologies, power relations, and cultural meanings that compete to shape the urban meanings embedded within the urban landscapes. Amran and Termizi (2020) study Yap's novel *Where the Sunrise is Red* (2018) to examine gendered subjectivity in urban strolling through the protagonist May Anderson's experience as a flâneuse – a woman navigating the streets of Kuala Lumpur. Similarly, Khaidzir et al. (2022) extend this focus by analyzing the selected poems about Kuala Lumpur city written by Malaysian poets through the concept of psychogeography – the city dwellers' engagement with an urban landscape. Through this concept, the study highlights that the poets' emotional attachment to their city reflects their lived experiences. Moreover, the poems also highlight the city's evolving urban landscape by presenting a clash between modernity and history. This presents Kuala Lumpur as a contested space.

### IMAGINING URBAN LANDSCAPES IN SOUTH ASIA

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, critical urban scholarship (Nijman, 2007; Robinson, 2002; Roy, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2013) witnessed the “ordinary cities” turn in the field of urban imaginaries that stresses the need to move beyond comparative studies. It rejects the universalism of Western-generated urban theory by contending that non-Western cities can be studied without taking the Euro-American cities as reference points (Peck, 2015). With this in view, the current study focuses on the textual representation of Karachi as a prominent South Asian city.

The urban landscape has emerged as a central site of collective memory, historical transformations, political dynamics, and power structures in recent critical urban studies on South Asian cities (Desai, 2017; Naeem, 2017; Sen, 2017). In these studies, memory sites function as catalysts for collective memory. Moreover, collective memory is inseparably tied to the historical and political forces that define the South Asian urban landscape. Desai (2017) develops this focus by positioning Banaras city as a contested urban space whose centuries-old architecture and religious practices embed collective memory of its inhabitants. However, the shifting power dynamics of the city determine which traditions are preserved, transformed, or marginalized. Similarly, Naeem (2017) presents Shikarpur city as a historic urban landscape that once embodied a vibrant cultural legacy upholding collective memory. However, the city is presently under the threat of heritage erasure due to political agendas and a lack of urban planning and heritage conservation policy. While critical urban studies integrate varied contexts surrounding South Asian cities, there remains limited attention to how South Asian cities are imagined in fiction. Keeping this in mind, engaging with the diverse contexts surrounding the fictional representation of South Asian cities becomes necessary. This can help in understanding the South Asian urban landscapes in a better light, which is the focus of the current study.

### LITERARY URBAN IMAGINARIES OF SOUTH ASIAN CITIES

South Asian literary writings represent the urban landscape not merely as a physical backdrop but as a dynamic space that is simultaneously lived and contested. In recent years, studies (Akhter & Islam, 2024; Anand & Tripathi, 2022; Bhattacharya & Hiradhar, 2022; Pramanik, 2020; Umer & Zahra, 2023) explore how literary writings represent and reimagine South Asian urban spaces in literature. These studies foreground the diverse dimensions of South Asian urban life, placing urban landscape at the core and intersecting themes unfolding around it. Some of the overlapping themes include memories shaping subjectivity and urban life, environmental issues in South Asia, political agendas, and hierarchical power structures.

In this regard, Anand and Tripathi (2022) study Patna city in Amitava Kumar’s literary writings by drawing on Bachelard’s (1968) concept of topoanalysis that explores the idea of space in literary works. The study approaches Patna not merely as a geographical location but as a layered urban landscape that is shaped by different memory sites or landscapes of memory located within its physical city space. This helps to uncover the socio-political realities and urban complexities in the city of Patna. In the same manner, the present study portrays Karachi’s urban landscape through the fictional representation of landscapes of memory.

Extending these concerns, Akhter and Islam (2024) explore the issues of rapid urbanization and ecological imbalance in Kolkata city in the light of Lahiri’s novel *The Lowland* (Lahiri, 2013), utilizing urban ecocriticism as the theoretical approach. The findings reveal that environmental degradation in Kolkata is linked to physical, social, and cultural transformations in the city’s urban

landscape. The study advocates for sustainable urban development in Kolkata that would help to restore ecological balance in the city. Similarly, Umer and Zahra (2023) study Akhter's poetic collection *Lahore, I Am Coming* (Akhtar, 2017) through the notions of collective imagination presented by Cinar and Bender (2007) and urban ecological heterotopic spaces given by Sur (2022) by carrying out a corpus stylistic analysis. The study sheds light on the growing environmental concerns, such as the issues of climate change and ecological imbalance, faced by the city of Lahore. Similarly, the current study focuses on delineating the issue of environmental degradation in Karachi in the selected text, utilizing Cassar's (2019) notion of landscape ecology.

A further thematic concern is offered by Pramanik (2020) in his psycho-geographic study of the novel *Kolkatta* (Basu, 2015) written by an Indian novelist, Basu. The study focuses on the workings of hierarchical power structures and capitalism behind the rapid urbanization of Calcutta. It examines Calcutta's urban landscape in the light of the socio-historical context to delineate marginalization and urban exclusion faced by non-Bengali people in the city. Similarly, the current study explores the political context surrounding the fictional representation of Karachi's urban landscape in light of the selected text.

#### SAEED'S *THE YEAR OF SOUND AND HEAT*

The novel, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022), was published relatively recently, so there is only one research study available on the selected novel. Shamsie (2022), in her study, discusses the novel in the context of Pakistani literature. Her study highlights the significant themes portrayed in the recent Pakistani Anglophone fiction. It underscores that Saeed has effectively presented Karachi in the novel *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) as a city full of contradictions where inhabitants' love and fear of the city coexist in a life surrounded by violence and disorder.

The current study explores the urban landscape of Karachi in the backdrop of the city's shifting political dynamics, urban ecology, and landscapes of memory. It must be stressed that none of the previous studies conducted on *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) have examined the text from this particular perspective.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for the present study draws upon De Nardi and Drozdowski's (2019) interconnected notions of the politics of place and landscapes of memory, and Cassar's (2019) idea of landscape ecology. The following section elaborates on the theoretical framework, structured around these key concepts.

#### THE ROLE OF PLACE IN THE REPRESENTATION OF MEMORY

De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019) have studied the concept of memory from a spatial dimension by emphasizing the role of place in the representation of memory. For this purpose, they have focused on two interrelated concepts, i.e., landscapes of memory and the politics of place, to highlight the representation of memory in urban landscapes. Furthermore, they have emphasized the experiential quality of urban landscapes and termed inhabitants' engagement with the landscape as an embodied experience where all their senses, for example, vision, hearing, and



kinaesthetic, respond to the landform. This also corresponds to the inhabitants' deep sense of connection and intimate knowledge about the landscape that they inhabit and consider home.

According to De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019), memory is a process of remembrance that is materialized in an urban landscape by things, places, and other physical entities that are easily recognized by our perceptual senses. De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019) have borrowed the concept of landscapes of memory from Kosher (2000) to interlink the material and symbolic elements of memory and landscape. This includes physical objects or memory sites that can be seen, heard, or touched, such as monuments, historical sites, city buildings, and others. It also consists of the intangible/ mental construction of a landscape in terms of the 'sense of place' that is often influenced by emotions and emotional responses. These memory sites exist within the urban landscape as permanent parts of everyday life and are termed landscapes of memory (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019).

According to De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019), memory is fluid, which not only impacts but is also impacted by the temporal and spatial contexts. In other words, the temporal context works alongside the spatial dimension to represent memory in an urban landscape. This means that the political, social, cultural, and historical past cannot be fully erased and continues to impact the present and future, encompassing an urban landscape. In this way, memory can be interpreted as an essential symbolic component of the ever-changing urban landscape.

The spatial positioning of memory in an urban landscape helps to determine, describe, and evaluate the relationship between people and the landscape and how this relationship builds, maintains, and evolves with time (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019). Landscapes of memory in this way become sites of politics and contestation between opposing ideas and struggles for representation by uncovering the politics of place. This is done by acknowledging the political and social contexts surrounding the representations of memory emplaced in an urban landscape (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019). These explorations surrounding the landscapes of memory rely on an intimate knowledge of the urban landscape and indicate the absence and/or presence of these memory sites positioned in the intangible past and/or the tangible present (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019).

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN URBAN LANDSCAPE AND URBAN ECOLOGY

Cassar (2019) studied the notion of landscape ecology by foregrounding the relationship between urban landscapes and urban ecology. It focuses on the dependency of spatial contexts on the ecosystems surrounding them (Cassar, 2019). Moreover, it highlights the unhealthy dynamic between the people and the natural environment. It proposes that natural ecosystems have increasingly been compromised as a result of the processes of rapid urbanization and exploitation of natural resources. This has occurred due to keeping up with urban ways of living, particularly as a result of the absence of environmentally sustainable urban practices.

According to Cassar (2019), the term landscape ecology was first used in the 1930s by Troll, who was a German biogeographer. Landscape ecology is dealt within a larger landscape framework and focuses on the spatial concerns related to ecology by linking together nature and humans. It emphasizes the need to establish healthier socio-ecological systems in contemporary urban spaces to combat ecological imbalance and adverse damage to natural ecosystems (Cassar, 2019). Furthermore, it explores the changes in the landscape patterns concerning environment/ecology in response to the multitude of interactions among various natural and material elements of the city's urban form, constituting a particular urban landscape.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Studies (Cinar & Bender, 2007; Lindner & Meissner, 2020; Shi & Zhu, 2018) have stressed the utility of the urban imaginaries framework for literary analysis to study the representation of cities, urban spaces, and urban environment in literature. In this regard, the current study utilized the urban imaginaries framework to examine the urban theoretical concepts that fall under the broader landscape framework, such as the politics of place and landscapes of memory presented by De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019) and Cassar's (2019) notion of landscape ecology. For this purpose, it carried out a textual analysis of the selected South Asian novel, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022), written by Saeed. Additionally, the selected novel was studied in detail utilizing the close reading technique to gather the relevant information, meaning, and context. Following this technique, only those textual instances – including short phrases, extended quotations, and paraphrased descriptions – were selected from the novel that were best suited for analysis in the light of the above-mentioned urban theoretical concepts, particularly focusing on Karachi's urban landscape and ecology. These text samples were then quoted and analyzed in detail in the analysis and discussion section. Taken as a whole, the methodology adopted in this paper aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of how the selected novel, by means of its language, narrative structure, and thematic patterns, offers a fictional representation of Karachi's urban landscape and articulates its intersections with politics, memory, and ecology.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section is organized into two parts that analyze Saeed's novel *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) in the light of the selected theoretical framework. The first part examines the spatial politics underlying Karachi's urban landscape. The second part of the analysis explores the overlapping dynamics of Karachi's memory-laden urban landscape, its ecological dimensions, and place-based politics.

### THE POLITICS SURROUNDING KARACHI'S URBAN LANDSCAPE

The close reading of *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) reveals its portrayal of Karachi as a city marked by political instability, violence, and urban insecurity, which shape the city's urban landscape and the lives of its inhabitants. The narrative follows three friends, Jogi, Bilal Hussain, known as Billoo, and Natasha Ali living in Karachi, which is told from Jogi's perspective as both narrator and protagonist. Opening in 2017, the novel repeatedly returns to 2007, the year of Billoo's murder, thereby linking the past and the present. The novel's title, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022), also signals this return to the past – marked by violence and chaos in the city. This juxtaposition of two temporal frames – 2007 and 2017 – reflects what De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019) describe as the role of context in connecting the past and present experiences of urban dwellers in an urban landscape. Drawing on this, the novel positions 2017 as the narrator Jogi's present, from which he recalls the political turbulence and violence that happened in Karachi in the year 2007. This temporal shift is central to how the narrative foregrounds the spatial politics underlying Karachi's urban landscape and the lives of characters inhabiting it.

In the novel, Jogi looks back at the turbulence of 2007, when Karachi was engulfed in violence and insecurity. He recalls how in 2007, the city's inhabitants coped with this situation in the following words: “A game we used to play with ourselves, a game we played all of that year:

convincing our ears that all the gunshots we heard were actually fireworks” (Saeed, 2022, pp. 24 – 25). Jogi’s reflections from 2007 reveal the resilience shown by the city’s inhabitants in the following words: “Too much, too much – the citizens of my city might be tenacious, but I have learnt that they are also incredibly fragile...there are millions like me, of that I am sure” (Saeed, 2022, p.139). This reveals that in 2007, although the city’s inhabitants appeared resilient on the surface, they were deeply depleted by persistent violence in the city. Through these recollections, the narrative conveys the atmosphere of fear and insecurity that permeated the urban life of characters such as Jogi and his friends during that time. This further suggests that the novel portrays political turmoil as a defining aspect of Karachi’s past, which is preserved in the consciousness of these characters and is reflected through their everyday engagement with Karachi’s urban form (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019).

The novel foregrounds Karachi’s persistent political instability and social unrest by charting the politics of place (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019), thereby linking the violent events of 2007 with the persistent challenges of 2017. Through this mapping of the politics of place across two temporal frames, the novel reveals the persistent imprint of urban insecurity on Karachi’s landscape across time. The political context surrounding Karachi’s contested political sphere shapes the lived experiences of characters in the novel. A pivotal event is Billoo’s murder in 2007, an incident whose circumstances remain unclear, as Jogi narrates, “there are at least three stories of what could have happened” (Saeed, 2022, p. 183). This reflects the absence of effective law enforcement in the city. Jogi also suggests that Billoo’s engagement in the city’s social movements may have contributed to his murder. In a similar harrowing episode in 2007, Jogi recalls Billoo and his encounter with the severed hand of an anonymous man shot on the roadside, in the following words:

We finally emerged about a foot away from a hand on the ground. I’d notice the absence of police tape in my city years later. The hand belonged to nobody we knew... He’d been shot through the head, and at points on his upper body which made his blue shirt purple... “They’re saying he was standing here waiting to cross the street,” I heard someone say, “two men came on a motorcycle, shot him, and ran.

(Saeed, 2022, pp. 26–27)

This textual instance presents normalization of violence in Karachi’s urban life, where an anonymous victim is casually reduced to a story by bystanders. The missing “police tape” signals a lack of police intervention and their failure to respond to violent incidents in Karachi. It conveys the climate of political turmoil permeating the daily lives of Karachi’s citizens. Through this, the novel presents death due to criminality as an ordinary feature of Karachi’s urban landscape. De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019) emphasize that the inhabitants’ engagement with an urban landscape is an embodied experience that reflects their deep connection to the city. They maintain a conscious awareness of their evolving urban environment by cognitively perceiving, processing, and responding to symbolic and material changes that occur in that landscape over time. In the same manner, Jogi’s recollections of these episodes from 2007 in the novel depict that the city’s political past remains deeply entangled with its present, shaping the consciousness and experiences of characters and the city’s urban landscape.

While the novel fictionalizes Karachi’s urban insecurity, its portrayal resonates with the city’s actual political climate, where factual reports similarly document recurring violence and lawlessness during this period. For instance, a report by The International Crisis Group in 2014 outlines urban insecurity and violence as key challenges that defined Karachi’s past three decades. Furthermore, a research report by Nafees (2012) highlights that approximately 5,500 people lost their lives in Karachi between the years 2003 and 2011, owing to different forms of urban



insecurity and violence, such as target killings, terrorism, extortions, and kidnappings in the city. This is mainly caused by the conflicts between political parties, ethnic and sectarian groups, drug mafias, and criminal gangs in the city. Owing to a poor law and order situation in the city, these different groups continue to exert their power and influence on the citizens of Karachi (Hussain & Shelley, 2016; Nafees, 2012).

The novel further portrays how recurrent violence in Karachi has cultivated public apathy among citizens. In the episode from 2007 where Jogi and Billoo encountered a severed hand, the surrounding responses from the bystanders revealed a disturbing desensitization to brutality. Jogi recalls:

I put a hand on Billoo's heaving back as three policemen across from us, dressed in their usual black shirts and khaki trousers, shared a joke over cigarettes. The ambulance driver was leaning against the front of the van, scratching his armpit...The crowd grew tired of insulting us and began to talk animatedly about the kind of gun that must've been used, the party affiliations of the criminals and the victim, and the cricket score.

(Saeed, 2022, p. 27)

This textual instance illustrates how direct and indirect exposure to urban violence in Karachi has shaped the lived experiences of Karachi's citizens. Policemen are shown casually "sharing a joke over cigarettes," the ambulance driver indifferently "scratching his armpit," while the crowd shifts among topics from "insults" to "party affiliations" and "cricket score". Such details reveal how violence is absorbed into everyday life, fostering indifference rather than outrage.

This temporal shift in the narrative between the past and present – 2007 and 2017 – conveys the lasting impact of unresolved violence on Karachi's urban landscape. In 2017, Jogi and his friend Natasha encountered a mutual friend, Disco. Disco, who was once active in Billoo's 2007 social movement, was now found living in poverty and isolation on the streets. His decline from activism to invisibility exposes both the administrative neglect and a pervasive culture in Karachi that systematically suppresses and erases non-conformity. Jogi narrates, "...it passes unspoken between us, a slight chill at the prospect of what we would find in the rest of the city if we chose to look beyond the shinier covers of a progressive decade" (Saeed, 2022, p.128). The phrase, "beyond the shinier covers of a progressive decade," is crucial in this context. The so-called "progressive decade" (2007 – 2017) in the novel was marked not by stability, but by recurring violence and political unrest that led to the loss of countless lives. By invoking this image, it is portrayed that while the city projects an image of progress, beneath its surface lies a persistent cycle of violence, neglect, and repression.

In the same episode, Disco fails to recognize Jogi and Natasha at first owing to his drug addiction and deteriorating mental health. Jogi narrates that when Disco momentarily regains his sense of recognition, he "looks at me, and he smiles again, his gummy grin, and I think he finds it somewhere on my face: memory, his past, our past, the old city that was perhaps kinder to him than the new one" (Saeed, 2022, p.129). This textual instance contrasts the city's past and the present through the phrase "finds...on my face: memory, his past, our past". Through an articulation of shifting temporal frames – 2007 and 2017 – the narrative presents Disco's personal downfall to Karachi's broader decline. The phrase "old city...kinder than the new one" underscores that the narratives of the city's progress in the last decade (2007 – 2017) conceal persistent instability, critiquing that Karachi's shifting political climate has reshaped the city into a harsher, more exclusionary urban landscape.

This presents Karachi as a contested urban landscape that resonates with De Nardi and Drozdowski's (2019) idea of the politics of place, where urban landscapes embody lasting imprints of power, marginalization, and resistance. By moving between 2007 and 2017, the narrative reveals that Karachi's urban landscape is shaped by both past and present events. It conveys that the city's unresolved political turmoil, rooted in the city's violent past, continues to shape the city's present. In the novel, the city's present is depicted as hostile and segregated, thus disrupting the everyday lives of its citizens, such as Jogi, Natasha, and Disco.

#### KARACHI'S LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY, URBAN ECOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE

In the novel, the spatial representation of the politics of place, encompassing the past and present of Karachi's urban landscape and its ecology, is brought into focus through the city's landscapes of memory, which reveal their interconnected significance. De Nardi and Drozdowski (2019) argue that the city's material spaces retain traces of its past, carrying emotional significance and functioning as sites of memory for its inhabitants. The novel illustrates this dynamic in 2017, when a political party organizes a rally in Karachi to commemorate Billoo's social movement from 2007. Natasha, a mutual friend of Jogi and Billoo, who had left the city after Billoo's murder, returns a decade later to attend the event.

On the day of the rally, Jogi and Natasha revisit memories of 2007. Their decision to visit Billoo's grave before attending the event highlights the characters' physical and symbolic engagement with Karachi's memory-laden urban landscape. On their way to the graveyard, they make a brief stop at a café for coffee. Jogi narrates:

The old coffee shop, outside of which we'd seen the protest a decade ago, is no longer there, replaced instead by a whole line of new multi-purpose cafés and appliance stores. The carts of the sherbet waalas and the pan waalas are all gone...Natasha is silent as I park the car outside a new café – she senses it, the history of the place, hasn't forgotten a thing.

(Saeed, 2022, pp. 101–102)

In this textual instance, the absence of "the old coffee shop" evokes Natasha and Jogi's memories, recollecting not only their personal past in Karachi but also the city's collective past. The reference to a "decade" marks the time span from 2007 to 2017, linking the city's past and present. The novel portrays "the old coffee shop" as a landscape of memory within Karachi's urban landscape. This memory-laden urban space is tied to both the city's shifting politics and ceaseless urban expansion. It conveys the politics of place through its recognition of Billoo and his advocacy group's efforts to promote social reform in the city. In 2007, this coffee shop served as a central hub where Billoo, Natasha, and other social activists planned initiatives to promote reform in Karachi. Following Billoo's murder that same year, his advocacy group disbanded, highlighting that the loss of influential individuals operating in volatile urban environments disrupts the course of urban activism.

Further exploring the old coffee shop as a landscape of memory, the novel draws a parallel between Billoo's absence in 2017, following his murder in 2007, and the disappearance of the old coffee shop. Its replacement by "multi-purpose cafés" and "appliance stores" not only marks the impermanence of memory-laden urban spaces in Karachi, as evoked through Jogi and Natasha's memories, but also reflects broader patterns of unsustainable urban development in Karachi over the decade (2007–2017). This juxtaposition of past and present temporal frames – 2007 and 2017 – depicted through the disappearance of a memory site in the novel conveys the city's ecological imbalance (Cassar, 2019). The novel's portrayal of ecological disruption in the city aligns with

empirical research on Karachi's uncontrolled urban development. For instance, a case-based study conducted by Qureshi et al. (2010) indicates that since the beginning of the twenty-first century, environmental degradation has become a concerning issue in Karachi. The disruption of Karachi's ecosystem shows the destructive impact of unchecked urban expansion on the city's environment, leading to a loss of green spaces, worsening air and water pollution, depletion of natural resources, and an increased risk of urban flooding (Qureshi et al., 2010).

In the episode from 2017, when Jogi and Natasha accidentally run into Disco, Jogi narrates his unkempt physical appearance and life on the streets of Karachi in the following words:

It is indeed him, Disco, the provider of oblivion, of escape from the city. But his wide, toothless grin is without life. One of his eyes is clouded over, there are scratches on his face, on his hands, on his bare feet that he rests on the sunbaked road. His kurta is not dark blue but turquoise turned black by the breath of the city.

(Saeed, 2022, p. 127)

In this textual instance, Jogi recollects Disco's previous life in Karachi. Through this recollection, the novel presents a contrast between the city's past and the present (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019). The phrase, "Disco, the provider of oblivion, of escape from the city," recalls his role as a drug supplier in 2007. A decade later, in 2017, he is portrayed as a homeless drug addict, his body scarred and his "bare feet" resting on the "sunbaked road". The image of his kurta "turned black by the breath of the city" symbolizes both his personal decline and the broader decay of Karachi's urban landscape over the last decade.

The novel frames Karachi's urban landscape through this decay, highlighting both its symbolic and material dimensions. Symbolically, this decay points towards the prevalence of violence, disorder, and urban insecurity in Karachi, shaping the lived realities of marginalized figures like Disco, thereby charting the politics of place. Materially, it reflects the city's environmental degradation, marked by Karachi's polluted roads due to vehicular emissions and construction debris, inscribed upon Disco's "kurta" in the novel. Taken together, Karachi's decay, portrayed through the memories of characters like Jogi, Natasha, and Disco, revives the city's past and sets it in contrast to its present state. This presents the intricate entanglements of politics, memory, and ecology within Karachi's urban landscape in the novel (Cassar, 2019; De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019).

A comparable pattern of urban decay can be observed in Akhter and Islam's (2024) study of Kolkata through Lahiri's novel *The Lowland* (2013). Akhter and Islam (2024) discuss that Kolkata's unplanned urban expansion has caused significant ecological damage and decay in the city. This is highlighted through the novel's depiction of contaminated rivers, vanishing wetlands, and depleted green spaces. This comparison also highlights how South Asian literary works like *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) and *The Lowland* (Lahiri, 2013) portray cities like Karachi and Kolkata as sites of environmental decline and decay, drawing attention to neglected, crumbling, and effaced urban spaces in South Asian landscapes.

In the novel, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022), the graveyard where Billoo is buried emerges as more than a burial site. It operates as a crucial landscape of memory within the city's wider urban landscape, which is representative of both its past and present (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019). In 2017, the narrator Jogi drives Natasha and Disco to the graveyard where Billoo was buried. He narrates their visit to Billoo's grave in the following lines:

The earth on his grave has been freshly watered. There are flowers all around, cigarette butts which were probably joints once upon a time, forming a heap right over where his feet must be. The maintenance staff collect and remove them every month, but the filters return with the ones who smoke them, the ones he changed, the lovers of the city, devotees to his legend.

(Saeed, 2022, p. 156)

This textual instance presents Karachi's graveyard as a contested urban space, revealing the politics of place. Through Jogi's narration, the text recalls Billoo, the murdered activist of 2007, remembered by his "devotees" for a social struggle that changed many lives in the city. This reveals how memory, politics, and space intersect in the novel, inscribing traces of the city's past onto its decaying landscape in the present (De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019).

The novel draws attention to the city's socially excluded groups, such as drug addicts like Disco, living on the streets of Karachi. This social exclusion is evoked through the images of "cigarette butts", "filters", and "smoke" around Billoo's grave that the "devotees" regularly visit. These remnants not only point to the city's debris but also indicate the erasure of people who are confined to the peripheries of the city. Billoo's grave symbolizes Karachi's lost future, as his vision of 2007 to empower these marginalized groups was silenced through his murder by an unidentified group.

In the novel, the graveyard emerges as a discarded and abandoned site that has become a repository for Karachi's waste, suggesting an absence of graveyard maintenance and waste management systems throughout the city. Through this, the graveyard becomes a symbol of the city's deterioration and ecological degradation. Its depiction as a landscape of memory symbolizes the pervasive neglect and decay permeating Karachi's urban landscape.

Similarly, Umer and Zahra's (2023) study of Lahore's heterotopias in Akhtar's poetic collection *Lahore, I Am Coming* (Akhtar, 2017), highlights how South Asian literary works foreground urban decay and ecological degradation as key to understanding the spatial dynamics of South Asian cities. The poet revisits Lahore, the city of his birth, and recalls his childhood memories. He presents the Mall Road of Lahore as a prominent heterotopic site. This heterotopic site reveals the tension between Lahore's present, marked by dust and construction debris scattered along the Mall Road, and Lahore's multi-layered heritage, preserved in its decaying buildings. Umer and Zahra (2023) highlight that heterotopias in Lahore are ecologically compromised spaces littered with construction debris. They are also presented as neglected spaces where the city's heritage buildings suffer from a lack of preservation. This underscores how memory, politics, and ecology converge to shape Lahore's urban landscape.

In the graveyard episode, Jogi narrates Disco's disjointed conversation while standing on Billoo's grave. Disco says, "Building building building but people cannot buy...Who lives in houses? Not me. Bad people badder people. No place for the nowhere man but here" (Saeed, 2022, p. 158). In this textual instance, Disco's insistent repetition of "building" not only presents his fractured memory but also highlights the city's ceaseless expansion through urban construction. Disco's remark, "no place for the nowhere man", reveals how rapid changes in Karachi's urban landscape due to the city's uneven development are responsible for the erasure of spaces for the city's marginalized people like Disco. Thus, the depiction of Karachi's graveyard as a landscape of memory highlights the city's shifting urban landscape by contrasting the city's past with its present condition. It underscores how Karachi's urban decay, driven by the collapse of its political and ecological systems, shapes the memories and lived experiences of its citizens, such as Jogi, Natasha, and Billoo (Cassar, 2019; De Nardi & Drozdowski, 2019).

The novel's depiction of landscapes of memory, i.e., the old coffee shop and Karachi's graveyard, through the layering of past and present, presents an erasure and decay of the city's urban spaces in the backdrop of political instability. This framing resonates with Anand and Tripathi's (2022) representation of Patna's eroding sites of memory in Amitava Kumar's literary writings. Anand and Tripathi (2022) discuss in their study that Kumar's childhood memories of Patna extend beyond mere recollections of his past. They also reflect his contemporary perceptions of the city, even when he no longer lives there. His family home in Patna and the neighborhood streets are recurrently recollected in his writings. Moreover, his representation of decaying memory sites, such as public spaces and local landmarks, reveals the contrast between Patna's past vitality and its present deterioration. Taken together, these portrayals of Karachi and Patna trace how South Asian cities are imagined in literature through the intersections of politics, memory, neglect, and decay.

## CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the South Asian urban novel, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022), depicts Karachi as a contested urban landscape marked by place-based politics, memory-laden urban spaces, and ecological decline. The findings reveal that Karachi's prevailing political instability is intertwined with the city's violent past. This is articulated in the narrative through an interplay of past and present temporal frames – 2007 and 2017. Through the politics of place, the novel highlights that Karachi's violent past has left a lasting imprint on the consciousness and experiences of characters such as Jogi, Natasha, and Disco. Jogi's recollections from 2007 present harrowing images, such as Billoo and his encounter with a severed hand of a murdered man on the roadside. Through these recollections, the novel presents the normalization of violence in Karachi. Such episodes in the novel also highlight that the persistence of unresolved violence in Karachi has turned brutality into a routine experience for its citizens. The novel also portrays the city's present urban landscape as hostile and segregated, concealing underlying realities of violence, repression, and neglect. Moreover, *The Year of Sound and Heat* (Saeed, 2022) portrays Karachi's two prominent landscapes of memory, i.e., the old coffee shop and graveyard, contrasting the city's past with its present condition. These memory sites shape the lived realities of the city's marginalized citizens, like Disco in the novel, in the backdrop of Karachi's shifting political climate. They present erasure and decay of the city's urban spaces, exposing the city's ecological decline due to ceaseless urban expansion and sustained neglect. The novel sheds light on the role of the city's political turmoil and environmental vulnerability in shaping Karachi's deteriorating urban landscape. It further highlights South Asian literature's role in making these layered entanglements visible in the literary imaginings of South Asian cities, cultivating socio-political and ecological awareness among its readers.



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