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Crossing of Boundaries: A Spatial Reading of Transgression in  
*Mirza Ghalib's Delhi*

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Abstract

Delhi has been a city of continual historical and spatial transgression and Mirza Ghalib, one of its most ardent poets, has captured this often-tumultuous metamorphosis in his writings comprised of Ghazals, Letters, and Diary entries. The study focusses on Ghalib's vast oeuvre of letters to map the transgression of boundaries. The theory of Geocriticism, proposed by Bertrand Westphal, has been utilized to understand the concept of transgression in Ghalib's writings. Delhi in the 1800's was a site of hegemonic control, and the confusion and poignancy experienced by the inhabitants of the city is minutely captured in the writings of Mirza Ghalib. The transformations undergone by the city, as power got transferred from the hands of the Mughals to the Britishers, are evaluated in the current study.

**Keywords:** Transgression, Geocriticism, Ghalib, Metamorphosis, Hegemony.

Introduction

The contemporary space is known for the constant motion it is subjected to. Westphal questions "is there now a permanent state of transgression, of boundary crossing – a transgressivity that would make space fundamentally fluid?" (Westphal 6). Robert M. Tally in a review of *The Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2009) states that the norms guiding Geocritical theory are helpful in the surveyal of a territory which can further the road of understanding the conditions of a human mind. Space leads to multiple meanings which can be taken up as separate discourses. The real and imagined are a category that shape-shifts so often.

Abstract boundaries of space are mentally constructed along with tangible and non-abstract physical demarcations of separation. The cross-overs that space is subjected to is vividly constructed by Ghalib in his portrayal of Delhi. The Space of Delhi is forever transgressed by Ghalib through the defining and redefining of territories and boundaries. Crossing of space is a practice that defines the many instances of Ghalib's eventful life. The varied transgressions carried out by the authorities in power and the construction of intimate and social spaces and prominently, the city space of Delhi is carried out through the writings of Ghalib.

The very instance of Ghalib's birth in a migrated land is an example of a crossing over. Ghalib was born in Agra on 27 December 1797. Ghalib's forefathers bore a Turkish ancestry and came from "Transoxiana- beyond the river" (Russell 29). Ghalib's paternal grandfather had migrated to India seeking fortune in the Mughal army. Ghalib in a letter written on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1867 writes about his family history, "I am of Seljuk, Turkish stock. My grandfather came to India beyond the river in Shah Alam's time" (32). Migration was an integral part of the life in Delhi. Many people from different nationalities left their homelands seeking greener pastures crossed borders.

After his childhood years, when he was about thirteen years of age, Ghalib had to relocate to Delhi, which would then become his permanent home. Leaving for Delhi, he bid a permanent goodbye to his childhood home in Agra, aware of his innate sense of poetic talent that made him meditate constantly on the instability and transience of human life. The initial longing for his birth city is captured in his early letters.

Ghalib in his youth witnessed different clans warring over the city. The enemies of the Mughals who continuously waged battles were the "Rohilla chiefs, the Marathas, Rajputs and Jats, French-led disciplined troops and the British and their allies" (267). The army officers were changing sides with great rapidity and the soldiers were willing to go to a side that paid them well. The spaces of Delhi were chaotic and uncertain and a transgression of boundaries and deterritorialization was witnessed constantly in Delhi. People shifted allegiance frequently which meant the continual shifting of the allied spaces. The presence of a transgressing and unstable cities aided the cementing of a British India with greater ease.

### **Transgression After the Revolt**

The transgression of space is visible with the shifting of power structures. The British who had held a very small area in Delhi prior to the mutiny of 1857 began to extend the visible lines of power by holding over larger territorial spaces. The exhibition of power through the holding of space is evident in their ruthless and large-scale execution of all who opposed them. "For two or three days every road in the city, from the Kashmiri Gate to Chandni Chowk was a battlefield" (120). The fleeing of residents from their own intimate spaces portrays another aspect of displacement. Men and women fled from their homes with whatever they could gather.

The homes that are left behind are again spaces of desolation. The space that was once intimate and lived in became deserted. The "houses stretched in a long line, threshold to threshold, roof to roof, on both sides of the lane" and many of Ghalib's close friends and learned men of Delhi lived there (122). In a city space, people are the living form and its very life rests on the people who inhabit its spaces. The fleeing citizens and the vacant houses all portray a lifeless city, signifying the demise of a city and its deterritorialization.

In a letter to Hussain Mirza, Ghalib's confidant, dated 9 November 1859, Ghalib narrates the resettlement of people after two years of banishment with even the rent being fixed by the government. Ghalib narrates the agonizing state of Delhi in a letter to Majruh, his close friend, on 2 December 1859. Ghalib states that the five things that kept Delhi alive, which were the fort, the crowds that gathered in the Jama Masjid, the walks to Jumna River, and the fair of the flower-men, have all gone.

In a letter dated 2 December 1859, Ghalib writes to Majruh to visit him. The strangeness of the metamorphing Delhi is explained by Ghalib poignantly:

If you are coming, come along. Come and see the new road through Khan Chand's Lane. Come and hear how Bulaqi Begam's lane is to be demolished and an open expanse cleared to a radius of seventy yards from the Jama Masjid. Come and see Ghalib in all his despondency. And then go back.... (166)

The confiscation of houses by the British at the end of the revolt is narrated to Husain Mirza in a letter dated 29 December 1859. The British soldiers occupied most of the houses. A row of shops and the main gate were pulled down and what remained was sold in auction. The proceeds were "sent to the treasury" (167). Ghalib in a letter to Sayyah, written on 11 June 1860, is filled with anger. Ghalib complains that elsewhere in the world destruction is succeeded by creation. In Delhi he finds that "destruction is not followed by creation and the work of destruction goes on all the time" (179).

The transformation of the City Space continues to be a pivotal topic of discussion in the letters written by Ghalib. In a letter to Sarur, his friend, written on September 1860, Ghalib writes of the demolishment of the biggest and the most famous bazaars of Delhi, the "Khas bazaar, Urdu Bazaar, and Khanam ka bazaar" which were extremely popular and oft-frequented that they could independently be proclaimed as small towns (182). Not even a trace of the shops is left and the "householders and shopkeepers cannot point out" where their shops stood (182). Ghalib mockingly states that the cheapest commodity available to Delhiites is death. In a letter to Majruh written in 1861, Ghalib compares Delhi to a desert with all sources of water drying up. The features that made Delhi unique like the Fort, the bazaars, and watercourses were fast disappearing.

The whole face of the demolished city is etched by Ghalib in his letters. Ghalib writes, "the gate to Bara Dariba has been demolished. The rest of Qabil Attar Lane has been destroyed. The mosque in Kashmiri Qatra has been levelled to the ground. The width of the street has been doubled" (231). The British forces with the gaining of power began to transgress the intimate spaces and social spaces of the city dwellers. Everything familiar about the city was lost to the inhabitants who were thrown off guard with the rapid transformation of their beloved city. Every aspect of the city that was central for their recognition was altered and the atmosphere created was strange and alienating.

### Conclusion

Ghalib portrayed the city of Delhi as he had experienced it. Tuan states in "Place: An Experiential Perspective" that "to know a place is to know the past" (164). The text of Ghalib by becoming historiographical narratives explains the past of the city. Westphal states that "representation reproduces the real or, better, an experience of the real.... Any work, no matter how far from sensed reality, as paradoxical as it seems, is part of the real- and, perhaps, participates in forming the real" (Westphal 90). Delhi as it existed with its spaces being transgressed in the 1800's is sketched by the narratives of Ghalib through his Letters, Ghazals and Diary entries.

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