
Spatialising the Quarantined Camp in Lawrence Wright's *The End of October*

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Abstract

Stories about pandemic open up new possibilities of spaces. Traditional conceptions of space are metamorphosed into novel contours as we confront and combat a pandemic scenario. Along with human beings, physical spaces are also forced to explore new patterns and norms. The bewildering spread of pandemic highlights the significance of spaces through which a disease navigates. Beginning from quarantining an infected person to containing the spread to burying the dead, spaces play a crucial role in these trying times. The present study attempts to look into the spatiality in pandemic literature and how existing social spaces get reconfigured by analysing the recent pandemic novel *The End of October* (2020) by Lawrence Wright. The study throws light on how the quarantine center represented in the novel can be viewed through the lens of Giorgio Agamben's concept of the camp.

Keywords: pandemic, Agamben, camp, quarantine, state of exception.

Contribution/Originality: The study tries to trace the emergence of “naked life” as a result of the draconian measures to tackle the pandemic, thereby marking the onset of the ‘state of exception’.

Introduction

Human history is replete with natural disasters and human-made tragedies. Perhaps, it is only when we confront new outbreaks of epidemics and pandemics that we tend to look back at history and rely on it to frame our coping mechanisms. It becomes significant to examine how such past experiences of pandemics shape the present ones. Literature has revealed a proliferation of works that discuss past pandemic scenarios. By recounting human experiences, these pandemic narratives manifest deep-rooted fears and anxieties, and modifications in human behaviours. Some of them include Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1947), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of*

Cholera (1985), José Saramago's *Blindness* (1995), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and Ping Shepherd's *The Book of M* (2018). These works imagine their unique pandemic worlds, thereby, facilitating the readers to look upon these as a means of succour and solace in times of uncertainty. These narratives, by stitching together the shattered world, also enable the readers to recoup their losses and plant seeds of hope of a better future.

The selected novel bears a contemporariness in its handling of the pandemic situation. In Lawrence Wright's *The End of October*, one comes across a world where an unprecedented pandemic gets ignited from a refugee camp in Indonesia. The camp was meant to be a site of detention for persecuting homosexuals, of which majority have been contracted with HIV/AIDS. A contagion takes root in the human population and sweeps across the world. The protagonist of the novel, Dr. Henry Parsons, a microbiologist working under World Health Organization in UK who "understood the clever mechanisms of contagion" happens to get infected by the Kongoli virus through his visit to the camp on collecting a sample (Wright, 2020, p.53). The narrative switches to a thriller tone when Dr. Parsons realises that his driver Bambang Idris who accompanied him to the camp, contaminated with the virus, has gone on a Hajj pilgrimage. Consequently, we witness a scenario of quarantining three million pilgrims in Mecca, on hajj. While Dr. Parsons is on duty tackling the pandemic in Saudi Arabia, his wife Jill Parsons (a school teacher) undergoes a tough time dealing with their two children Helen and Teddy. The novel covers a whole range of trajectory beginning from naming the virus as 'Kongoli' to the conspiracy theories associated with the source of the virus to the discovery of a vaccine.

Space enjoys a fundamental role in designing the taxonomy of a virus. What is of primary importance in labeling a virus is the identification of the geographical location of its origin. On tracing the history of what goes behind the naming of a virus, there are enough shreds of evidence to prove that the place of its genesis functions as its label. Such a practice has had dire consequences on certain nations or communities leading to several phases of othering. At times, it has resulted in misnomers such as the instance of Spanish flu. Though Spain was not the site of origin of the virus, it was named so because its media happened to be the first to report on such a viral outbreak. Spanish media was the only source of information, and ultimately, the virus carried the name 'Spanish flu'. Whereas, cases of Ebola virus (named after its first occurrence in a village

near the Ebola river); Hendra virus (named after its origin in the Brisbane Suburb of Hendra); and MERS, after its first outbreak in Middle East countries, have shown the attribution of the name of the area to that of the virus. This can be seen in the naming of a virus in the selected novel *The End of October* as well.

Speculations about the origin of a novel virus in a camp in Kongoli, Indonesia drive Dr. Henry Parsons, a WHO health official to the camp. Later Kongoli becomes the epicenter of the virus in as much as the virus becomes identified with Kongoli, therefore, attaining the name Kongoli virus (Rossolatos, 2020, p.5). The virus carves its own spatiality as its origin migrated anew in the city of Mecca, not coincidentally, but through the infected driver Bambang Idris who accompanied Dr. Parsons. The city of Mecca was chosen by the virus as its new and powerful destination. While succumbing to the Kongoli virus, the religious city, where cultural practices are marked by gaining better health and salvation, soon gets transformed into a space of disease (Rossolatos, 2020, p.6).

In the age of pandemics and conflicts, the camp constitutes a “crucial spatial formation in the struggles over territories, borders and identities” (Ramadan, 2013, p. 65). The camp has been considered as a temporary space in which refugees enjoy humanitarian benefits and shelter till a probable solution can be found to their unfortunate condition (Ramadan, 2013, p.65). The study tries to draw links between the detention camp, later put under quarantine, in the novel *the End of October* and Agamben's reflections upon the camp and naked life. In spatial and institutional terms, the camp becomes part of ‘a tacit and unsatisfactory policy of containment’ which exempts the host state of its obligations towards the refugees (Hyndman, 2000, as cited in Ramadan, 2013, p.69). The camp stands for an ‘intervention from beyond’, and ultimately stands for a ‘space of exception’ (Elden, 2009, as cited in Ramadan, 2013, p.69). This space is produced as a result of a proclamation made by an external power operating within the existing state. This operates without challenging its territories, at the same time putting a limit to the sovereign power of that state (Ramadan, 2013, p.69).

Pandemic management involves draconian measures and constitutes a “post-modern, spatio-temporal paradox” in which people are under constant surveillance as the virus is cosmopolitan, virtually everywhere, but only actualised at a certain specific place at a particular

time (Patton, 2011, p.105). As “power everywhere and continuously refers and appeals to emergency as well as labouring secretly to produce it”, this sovereign power lies not in producing the rule of law which any force (police or health) acts out but in asserting the power to suspend the law, thereby resulting in a ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 2000, as cited in Patton, 2011, p.104). This aspect of sovereignty has become a stable characteristic of modernity, as Agamben exemplifies in the case of camp, a concept which he intends to consider literally as the “spatialisation of the state of exception for transitory incarceration to be managed by the police as an ‘emergency’” (Patton, 2011, p.104). In such spaces, it becomes almost impossible to breach any law due to suspension of the rules. However, the atrocities depend “on the civility and ethical sense of the police that acts temporarily as sovereign” (Agamben, 2000, as cited in Turner, 2009, p.313). What distinguishes the state of exception is the subjects' unwillingness to claim their basic rights against the sovereign state.

The status of an individual in a camp coincides with that of *homo sacer*, a figure in Ancient Roman law who is deprived of any rights and who could be killed by anyone (Schuilenburg, 2008, p. 88-89). The ambiguity inherent in this definition of the position of *homo sacer* is that such an individual has fewer rights than an ordinary citizen of a nation-state. This rules out the egalitarian principle applicable to the rights of all citizens as sentient beings. This does not imply that the individual is an entity *outside* the society, but assimilated within the society in a way the outlaw is considered always ‘in the law’ (Schuilenburg, 2008, p.89). The inclusion-exclusion paradigm is not a mere binary dichotomy. Such a set ‘inside- outside’ makes people part of a “homogenous and unifying whole that explains nothing in itself, but rather is constantly being redefined” (Schuilenburg, 2008, p.89). Agamben terms it as ‘inclusive-exclusion’ of bare life in relation to the *bios* (social form of life). The figure *homo sacer* is not, under any circumstances, supposed to reside in the city, and is pushed to the ‘black-holes’ of society, positioned far from the presence of ordinary citizens (Schuilenburg, 2008, p. 89).

The sovereign bears the authority to wield power not only to kill individuals in the name of *homo sacer* but, through rules of banishment, deprive them of their basic rights. Consequently, such a practice produces a reduced form of human being. There existed times when sovereignty prevailed in the figure of a monarch, and modern states are expected to improve upon such an

abysmal power control by restraining the arbitrary use of power through means of democratic checks and balances (Trilling, 2020). However, such a dehumanizing, sinister condition returns in the form of a concentration camp, a place where subjects are really outside the law, yet more accountable to the same law than anywhere else (Trilling, 2020). Regardless of the choice made by the *homo sacer* to act, such an individual stands little chance of bettering his or her position against the state.

It is compelling to view the camp depicted in Wright's novel *The End of October* as an expression of Agamben's camp as the "hidden matrix of modern political space" (Turner, 2009, p.312). In the novel, the Indonesian government puts the homosexuals in a temporary exceptional place, which is "at once inside and outside the law" (Turner, 2009, p.313). Nearly hundreds of people kill time in a clearly demarcated camp located far from the city. The camp in Kongoli, "full of immune-suppressed individuals who couldn't defend themselves against a novel infection", is not merely a negotiation between the heterosexual and homosexuals but "a lived, embodied experience of displacement and placelessness, insecurity and violence, marginalisation and otherness" (Wright, 2020, p. 67; Ramadan, 2013, p. 66). The camp is in a vulnerable condition as the extremists may attack these people at any time. They used to drop the gay men from buildings, and slaughter them. Though the government tries to protect the homosexuals by hiding them in such camps, as the rickshaw driver Bambang Idris nonchalantly remarks, everyone knows where they are kept. This camp is "under-protected, vilified and hated by some, always at risk of attack and erasure" (Ramadan, 2013, p.67). Agamben's political perspective helps place the Kongoli camp, and the figure of *homo sacer* at the heart of the machinery of modern politics. Here, in the camp, homosexuals (seen as the 'other') are exempted from society, denied all rights. Instead of taking stern actions against the extremists, the government strives to hide them in such camps.

There is little doubt as to how a virus took its genesis in Kongoli camp while looking into the unhygienic condition of the camp. It is assumed that the majority of the people in the camp are contracted with HIV/AIDS. Moreover, other diseases often ripped the camp due to poor sanitation and overcrowding.

The squalid camp had been thrown together whimsically, using cardboard and plastic bags and strips of canvas as building materials. Some of the roofs were tiled with crushed soda

cans. A duck on a leash floated in a puddle beside a hut. Set apart from the hovels was a blue Médecins Sans Frontières tent, with the MSF symbol emblazoned on the side. (Wright, 2020, p. 25)

When Dr. Parsons visits the camp to collect samples of the virus, he encounters a gaunt man approaching him. Having hair down to his shoulders, it was apparent that he was under incarceration for at least six months. The man was eager to know whether Dr. Parsons was from human rights as they have been petitioning the camp authorities for a considerably long time. While Dr. Parsons and the rickshaw driver Bambang were walking toward the infirmary, the former understands that many beds were occupied by corpses as the nauseating stench saluted their nostrils. Reflecting on the dead, Dr. Parsons observes that they have been deprived of their rights to a funeral and are reduced to *homo sacer*. Dr. Parsons knew that the people in the camp were “inside a hot zone and everyone was contaminated” (Wright, 2020, p.24). The authorities seemed indifferent towards the epidemic, and the sole concern they had made to the outbreak was a way to swiftly dig pits for mass burials in the camp.

Agamben's contemplations on bare life and *homo sacer* are central to our understanding of a pandemic-stricken world. The societal tendencies during pandemics resonate well with the appalling conclusions drawn from Agamben's work on *homo sacer*, the displacement and dehumanization (Ek, 2006, p. 363). Agamben's grand theory alarms the world that even modern societies, when hit by a catastrophe, have the capacity to raise concentration camps. His conclusion has been drawn upon by finding certain common patterns across specific societies at different historical moments (Trilling, 2020). Agamben introduces the concept of “naked life” arising from a distinction in Ancient Greek between *zoè* and *bios*. While *zoè* pertains to life, characteristic of all living entities in a biological realm, *bios* refers to a collective life in a political community (Ahmad, 2020). Though contrary to the naked life in the Nazi concentration camps established far away from the “normal” social living, it is possible to mark the onset of naked life right in the midst of society which eventually leads to the establishment of the state of exception in the wake of the battle against the virus (Ahmad, 2020).

A general understanding of an epidemic is that it is a condition which involves a scene of considerable bodily destruction (Patton, 2011, p.105). However, a distinct approach taken by

scientists is by describing it as a “hypothetical exception to a hypothesized norm, made real” (Patton, 2011, p 105). The exception is speculative because the hypothesis need not be completely valid, that is, there may invariably have been cases of a disease which are left unrecognized. What makes the hypothesized norm functional is the declaration of an epidemic because until and unless an epidemic is declared there can be no room for a review of the actual presence of a disease (Patton, 2011, p.105). Therefore, the hypothesized norm functions as the real from the instant the epidemic is declared (Patton, 2011, p.105).

The success of containing an epidemic or a pandemic relies much on its responsive measures. This task involves a suspension of basic rules, temporarily at the initial phases of a pandemic, which might result in creating camp-like quarantine centres. Moreover, one cannot overlook the possibility of such camps working under the tool of surveillance. The stringent protocol measures listed under public health laws systematically deny certain fundamental human rights. The procedures inscribed by public health laws might be disastrous because of their implications that the population will obey, without much resistance, and wish to be protected from infection. It is appalling to examine the ease with which our basic rights disappear under the aegis of disease control, often not to be restored even when the epidemic is gone, as though having had a disease renders afflicted bodies ever suspect (Patton, 2011, p.105). There is a supposition that people tend to surrender their bodily rights while encountering such unprecedented catastrophes. The focus of Agamben's reflections lies on how the array of regulations posited by the government to contain the spread of an epidemic has reduced human beings squarely to a mere 'naked life', in a manner, abdicating everything that is humane (Ahmad, 2020).

In Wright's *The End of October*, the attempt to reflect the apparatus of pandemic politics is evident in the exigency under which a government unprecedentedly declares lockdown in the city of Mecca and imposes a quarantine on three million pilgrims who have been on hajj. The bewildering rapidity with which a lockdown is announced was evident in the preparations made: “the National Guard called up, police reinforced, borders closed, sports and entertainment facilities shuttered, non-emergency cases discharged from hospitals, schools closed, public meetings postponed, and the government shut down” (Wright, 2020, p.134). The quarantine was imposed on the pilgrims to slow down the spread of the contagion. The holy city turns out to be “a kind of

space that begs questions about power, bio politics and sovereignty” (Turner, 2009, 312). Once the quarantine was imposed, the government took extraordinary measures without regard to the infringement of basic human rights. As he tries to explain the epidemic which had spread through Mecca, Prince Majid also embarks on controlling the pilgrims: “three million people were surrounded and held captive” (Wright, 2020, p.152). He announces,

It is our duty to prevent this thing, this terrible disease, from spreading. Remain calm. Your needs will be taken care of. Food will be supplied. Doctors and nurses will attend to the ill. We will protect you. But you must not try to leave. (Wright, 2020, p.153)

Earlier people had the privilege to walk out in any direction in the city of Mecca, but after the shutdown, the National Guard surrounded the “holy city with tanks and troops and shoot any Muslim who tries to escape” (Wright, 2020, p.141).

There is a presupposition that the pilgrims will surrender under such circumstances in their desire to protect their loved ones outside and to remain protected, against the propensity to infect themselves (Patton, 2011, p. 105). However, some of the pilgrims proved themselves to be active agents by resisting the harsh rules imposed upon them. While the Prince was proclaiming the quarantine protocols, a young pilgrim defiantly tried to escape through a way that had not yet been fenced. He was followed by a horde of other pilgrims. He refused to give up in spite of the soldiers warning him not to run. All of a sudden, the sight of the young boy's body ripping apart by the machine-gun fire made the spate of pilgrims come to an abrupt halt. This echoes how the government makes use of its draconian power to control the lives of people under quarantine, reducing them to ‘naked life’. Under the aegis of contagion control, each individual in the quarantined city is considered as “a suicide bomber” and their bodies as potential weapons (Patton, 2011, p.141).

Conclusion

As observed by Adam Ramadan (2013), such camps during pandemics were not “officially planned and organised spaces but grew organically” with the pressing situation to reduce the scale of the spread (p.74). However, these quarantined centres carry the potential to turn into “spaces of agency and struggle, not complete disempowerment” (Ramadan, 2013, p.74). There is a need to critique the assumption that “a pandemic is a natural phenomenon that requires exceptional

regulation to control” (Patton, 2011, p.109). There occurs a double suspension of rules once the pandemic is declared (Patton, 2011, p. 109). Mandatory quarantine and surveillance may give rise to repellant consequences in terms of basic human rights (Ek, 2006, p.363). Very often governments are reluctant to relinquish their power even after the pandemic ends.

The very declaration of a pandemic itself amounts to a “double suspension of rules”, and therefore it is pertinent to question the praxis of government's sovereignty which is cramped in casings of power and that often lie latent in its pandemic eye view (Patton, 2011, p.109). It is time we take heed to Agamben's urgent concerns regarding the “emergence of ‘camps’ as a realization of the permanent state of exception that underlies sovereignty” (Patton, 2011, p.110). Any attempts to explore pandemic novels as discourses of space shed light on the spatial transformations and the changing social relations. Every pandemic stricken space should be placed under scrutiny to examine the changing social behaviours and the ways in which physical spaces are modified. These aid our understanding on how the seemingly non-hegemonic spaces of disease are always already political in nature.

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