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## Book Review

**Title of the Book: The City and the City**

**Author: China Mieville**

**Publisher: Macmillan**

**ISBN: 9780345497512**

**Year: 2009**

**Pages: 312**

**Reviewed by:**

**Syeda Marium Zara**

China Miéville in his thriller novel *The City and The City* constructs not only two cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma but also a third city, Breach, despite it being considered an organization to have law and order, and no connections between the two cities. The novel takes the readers through two cities and their ever-present and never breach-able boundaries.

Miéville, in an interview with Tony Venezia, recalls that “At a conscious level I [he] was interested in questions of political borders, and national borders, and cultural borders, and so on, and their supposed hermeticism and in fact their regular porosity.” (Venezia) He tried to define the separateness of the cities through the space memory of his characters. Maurice Halbwachs, in “Space and the Collective Memory,” claims that a group of people living in a certain surrounding “not only transforms the space into which it has been inserted but also yields and adapts to its physical surroundings.” (2). Both the cities of Beszel, and Ul Qoma coexist, with their people living in their corresponding cities with their own laws, language, culture, and surroundings. None of these cities mirror one another. The spaces created by the author for each city stay limited to that city alone.

China Miéville, in his novel, constructs a space, cities that are not only inhabited by the people but also construct their identity through a space. The novel revolves around the character of Inspector Tyador Borlú as he tries to untangle the murder case of Ph.D. student Mahalia Geary. The story revolves around the case that defies the boundaries of both cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma and makes the citizens of both cities question what really lies "between the cities." (Miéville 151).

With complicated political ties to a wide range of underground organizations, Mahalia Geary had created several enemies on both sides of the "border." It was her controversial views on Orciny, a third city concealed between Beszel and Ul Qoma—a mythical place in the minds of reasonable people, a space of freedom from the 'unseeing' of the two cities that is the central element of the novel. The cities of Beszel and Ul Qoma both possessed histories that defined how they produce a space, however, even the people residing in them are never sure of their own history. As one reads the novels, one cannot help but notice that both the cities are so similar yet so different that their differences are all spatial and constructed. A similar concept is highlighted when Tyador explains the history of the cities:

“It may or may not have been Beszel, that we built, back then, while others may have been building Ul Qoma on the same bones. Perhaps there was one thing back then that later schismed on the ruins, or perhaps our ancestral Beszel had not yet met and standoffishly entwined with its neighbour.” (Miéville 51)

Looking at the description of the cities' history, and the space they produce highlights the very limited and singular narrative they possessed which led to the fascination with Orciny, which is termed as “A secret colony, a city between the cities, its inhabitants living in plain sight,” in the novel (109) making the readers wonder whether there really lies a hidden third city.

The novel, *The City and the City* moves the narratives in a very systematic fashion, first from Beszel to Ul Qoma, then from Ul Qoma into Breach. Miéville highlights the urban spaces in both the cities, as well as in Breach through Tyador's murder investigation, as well as his breach from one city into the other. Throughout the first part of the novel, Tyador 'unsees' Ul Qoma and anything that might be associated with it. For instance, when he is walking by “the statue of King Val,” he keeps “unseeing others with care,” or when he goes to the unif and “had to unseeing dodge many smart young businessmen and –women.” (Miéville 16, 55). Similarly, when he is in Ul Qoma, he 'unsees' everything that has to do with Beszel. For instance, when Tyador goes to Ul Qoma as an advisor on the case, he keeps “unseeing all their familiar environs, where we [he] lived the rest of our life, and seeing the buildings beside us [him] that we had spent decades making sure not to notice.” (Miéville 160). As can be seen, in both the cities, he goes through the motions of “seeing” and “unseeing.” It is as if his brain has been systemized to be that way. However, when

he breaches at almost the end of the novel, he enters into a space that defies the rules of both cities. That is the instance where we can see the hidden, the invisible, and the middle in between cities. He can see and move about, or between both the cities. This is the urban space that is not governed by either of the cities, it has its own laws and regulations, a way of living which we later when Ashil teaches Tyador that to survive in the invisible, is to learn to be a part of it. This can be seen when Tyador is walking with Ashil, "I lifted my foot in Ul Qoma, put it down again in Beszel, where breakfast was." (Miéville 303) He walks in between the cities, in a space that is of the Breach. Then would it be foolish to assume that by giving qualities to the liminal space in between Beszel, and Ul Qoma, Miéville creates a third city?

Every page of *The City and the City* bears the weight of the novel's unique urban planning ideas. Amidst the novel's odd political and geographic conundrums, even the most mundane acts become loaded with danger and complexity. Cities are more than just geographically planned urban areas. There are multiple factors that influence the urban planning of a city and how it functions in society. Miéville creates cities that are not only governed by strict rules and regulations but also have power over the minds of the inhabitants.

Throughout the novel, Tyador highlights how he constantly "unsees" Ul Qoma while he is in Beszel, and how he 'unsees' Beszel when in Ul Qoma. However, when he is in Breach, he is in a social space that defies the laws of both the cities, a disputed city present in between the cities, with its own rules and regulations, a system of walking and living in-between the cities. Breach can be recognized as a third city, Orciny, since it is present in between the cities, existing neither in Beszel nor in Ul Qoma, while simultaneously, existing in both; "Between the cities, Breach watched." (Miéville 151).

The rest of the book beautifully captures the creation of space by Breach. Both the cities are unable to identify the space that Breach acquires. Breach seems to occupy an abstract space in the minds of the Besz and Ul Qoman. It is as if there is an invisible organization, with its invisible people, present between the cities. However, Breach is more than just an "abstract space". When Tyador is walking in between the cities with Ashil, he realizes "As the two cities had grown together, places, spaces had opened between them, or failed to be claimed, or been those controversial *dissensi*. Breach lived there." (Miéville 307) Miéville throughout the novel tries to

make his readers believe that Orciny, which is claimed to be the third city does exist through different characters. However, it is at the end that the readers realize that the third city is nothing but a belief. Yet, even in this knowledge resides a contradiction that comes forth as Breach. A real and very active organization in between cities. After this realization, Tyador understands that there is no Orciny, the myth of the third city that many believed in, rather there is Breach, existing and living in between cities,

“Look at this,” I said. “You’re evidence this could all be real.” The interstitiality which made Orciny so absurd to most citizens of Beszel and Ul Qoma was not only possible but inevitable. Why would Breach disbelieve life could thrive in that little gap? The anxiety was now rather something like *We have never seen them*, a very different concern. (Miéville 307)

Realizing that Breach is the gap between the cities, the entity that resides in the place of Orciny, gives a very climactic ending to the novel.

Miéville in his novel constructed a space that was highly influenced by political and spatial inclinations. Throughout the novel, the spaces of Beszel and Ul Qoma are seen to be crossed from one another. Both the cities and their spaces coexist without any hindrance or hinging into one another. The belief of the third city is what lays havoc over the mundanity of the twin cities. Miéville through his skill of mystery makes the readers think there are only two cities Beszel and Ul Qoma. It is through a critical lens and thought that it can be assumed that there may lie an invisible city in between the two cities, Breach. A city with no name, with its invisible occupants living neither in Beszel nor in Ul Qoma, while simultaneously living in both.

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