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## Book Review

### **Place: Intimate Encounters with Cities**

by Ananya Vajpeyi

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Vajpeyi's *Place: Intimate Encounters with Cities* (2026) unfolds gradually, revealing cities through interwoven strands of memory and imagination. Spanning over 25 years and 13 cities, the collection resists easy categorisation: neither pure autobiography nor strict scholarship. Each piece builds around how moments shape places and how locations shift within us just as we move through them. Locations take on feeling and structures turn into narrative. As attention remains fixed on duration and presence, cityscapes transform less into maps and more into traces of living.

What drives Vajpeyi's work is a view of space as something built up over time, filled with traces of lives once lived. Her vision of cities holds many times at once—each pressing into the next. Through her observations of cities such as Delhi, Venice, and Istanbul, architecture reveals how history piles upon itself. Monuments do more than stand still. They carry layers, shaped by those who move among them. Though tombs, churches, and mosques belong to earlier ages, they stir again when touched by memory or meaning made fresh. Her idea of space leans not on maps or measurements but on what it feels like to be there, over time. Where one stands is never just a point—it is thickened by presence, duration, and return. Vajpeyi's spatial imagination aligns with a phenomenological understanding of place, where space is shaped through lived experience rather than abstract cartography.

Inside Vajpeyi's storytelling, time refuses a straight path. It bends instead around feeling. A current dialogue pulls forth a moment long past, folding one into the other. When today's thinkers speak, echoes rise from childhood exchanges at home. This shapes how experience builds across decades. What feels like progression often turns out to be return. Past and present tangle, each feeding the shape of the next.

This recursive temporality is most powerfully articulated through the theme of loss, which functions as a central organising principle of the text. When Vajpeyi writes about losing her parents, the past stops feeling fixed. Instead, it shifts beneath each recollection. That absence alters movement through places once known with others. Familiar streets take on unfamiliar weight when walked alone after years of walking together. Without those bonds, location loses its anchor. When those who once shaped one's connection to a place are absent, the essence of that site shifts. Vajpeyi suggests that perception of space relies heavily on ongoing human bonds across time.

Loss extends beyond the personal. Vajpeyi ties her thoughts to worldwide and nearby acts of violence, pointing to moments like the Partition of India, the Second World War, alongside present struggles in Gaza. Urban spaces appear shaped by past waves of ruin, forced movement, and deep wounds. Where memory lives, private sorrow meets shared pain and blurs lines between the intimate and the political.

Vajpeyi's engagement with political temporality is not merely descriptive but also critical. Her attention turns toward cities altered by today's ideologies, especially within India's shifting landscape. Delhi, for instance, appears as a place remade quickly, sometimes abruptly, pulled by pollution, dominant-group rule, and rewritten histories. Time here feels stretched, sped up, and broken as changes unfold rapidly. Cities risk burying what came before. Vajpeyi's writing captures this tension between continuity and discontinuity, highlighting the fragility of historical memory in the face of present-day pressures.

Vajpeyi reconfigures the notion of space through an emphasis on intimacy and embodiment. Cities appear not as distant ideas, but unfold via touch, movement, and dialogue. Walking down alleys, noticing routines, exchanging words—all contribute to shaping how place becomes real. Rather than a fixed backdrop, location emerges alongside those who move within it. Through closeness, Vajpeyi unsettles standard travel narratives fixated on sights rather than deeper experience. Her approach draws people into urban spaces felt through recollection and lived experience, not just seen.

This emphasis on intimacy also allows Vajpeyi to explore the dialectic of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Shifting between these states, urban environments hold both at once, rarely settling into one. As Vajpeyi shares, routine sights carry an oddness in Istanbul, whereas unknown elements somehow feel seen before. Such reversals unsettle clear lines between fitting in and feeling apart. Instead of stable categories, place emerges through movement and context. Over time, the city insists on reshaping how people see themselves and their surroundings.

Another significant aspect of Vajpeyi's spatial imagination is the notion of the city as a living intellectual archive. Her essays are densely intertextual, with references to writers and thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Orhan Pamuk, and Rabindranath Tagore. Instead of distant icons, these thinkers seem to accompany her as she moves through urban landscapes. Through such engagements, Vajpeyi demonstrates how intellectual traditions intersect with lived experience to produce layered meanings of place. She gestures toward a subtle insight: language itself does not fall short; rather, it is human beings who struggle to communicate across difference.

Despite its many strengths, the book is not without its limitations. Some essays drift off course, packed with layered nods to thinkers who might be unknown to certain readers. Though the flow follows themes closely, it occasionally disrupts the storytelling rhythm. Additionally, the integration of political commentary, particularly in the postscripts on Gaza, at times appears somewhat disjointed from the more intimate reflections. This raises a question: does private experience sit well alongside public critique? At times, the balance feels uneven.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not detract significantly from the overall achievement of the book. Vajpeyi's prose, marked by lyrical precision and intellectual depth, sustains the reader's engagement even in its more demanding moments. Her ability to weave together personal memory, historical reflection, and philosophical inquiry results in a work that is both deeply introspective and analytically rich.

In conclusion, *Place: Intimate Encounters with Cities* reshapes how we see time and space within city life. By centring recollection, absence, and historical struggle, Vajpeyi turns cities into layered moments of unfolding meaning. Though often seen as static points, her writing shows they breathe with personal and collective pasts. While rooted in geography, these spaces shift through emotional weight and inherited stories. Each essay deepens our sense of where we are. For scholars of urban studies, memory studies, and phenomenologies of space, this work provides a rich and thought-provoking contribution.

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