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Reading the Urban Space: Representation of Mumbai and Literary Imagination

Abstract

Being tossed between the periodic names like names like ‘Manabi’, ‘Mambai’, ‘Mambe’, ‘Mumbadevi’ and many more, Bombay officially became Mumbai in 1995. Being far away from the community centric chronotope of Raja Rao, the individualistic setting of Salman Rushdie exploits the urban space of Mumbai in his novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995). Mention may also be made of Vikram Chandra’s *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002), Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004), Gyan Prakash’s *Mumbai Fables* (2010), Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* (2011) and Naresh Fernandes’s *City Adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay* (2013). In these texts the authors brilliantly show how the city, the socialized space turns itself into a stigmatized stage where the players are playing their parts continually. In my article discussions will be made on the fact that how, in the abovementioned texts, Mumbai is presented in three dimensions - a mirror, a mirage and a magnet which reflects the people’s lives, eludes the dreams of its people and attracts people respectively. Thus the city becomes a character – to be precise, the city becomes the protagonist round which the entire plot builds up.

Keywords: Urban, City, Mumbai, Space

Introduction

“In the city that never sleeps, crime also does not take a break. Lawlessness is a constant feature of the urban landscape; it touches the lives of ordinary people and makes their lives a living hell.” (Prakash 309)

The French critic Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1976), the French critic Michel de Certeau’s conception ‘practiced place’ in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and the American geographer Edward Soja in *Postmodern Geographies* (1991) have concentrated

on the analytical aspects of city space. From Baudlaire to Baudrillard, the historical evolution of city life has ensured the multifaceted dimension of culture. The cultural critic Peter Barry explains Baudrillard's oft cited phrase 'loss of the real' thus: "... the view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV, and advertising has led to a loss of the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result is a culture of 'hyperreality', in which distinctions between these are eroded." (87) The enchantress Mumbai city which critics like Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes in their Introduction to *Bombay: Meri Jaan* call 'an addiction' (xi) mingles these real and virtual spaces amazingly.¹

Representation of Mumbai in Literature

Many writes have focused on the urban space of Mumbai. In their edited book titled *Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writings on Mumbai* (2003) Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes capture forty six passages written about the cultural life of the city.² Sahitya Akademi award-winning novelist Amit Chaudhuri in his novel *The Immortals* (2009) has exploited the city space of Mumbai whereas Mahesh Dattani focused on the city by describing it as a 'big fat city' in drama of the same name in the year 2014; by surrendering to the streets of the city Piyush Jha wrote the crime thrillers *Mumbaistan* (2012) and *Raakshas: India's No.1 Serial Killer* (2016). In these texts Mumbai is presented in three dimensions - a mirror, a mirage and a magnet which reflects the people's lives, eludes the dreams of its people and attracts people respectively. The same impulse regarding the trajectory of urban life we find in Piyush Jha's urban implosion in his crime thriller *Mumbaistan* (2012):

Because of my in-depth knowledge of Mumbai, I didn't have to do any research on the cityscape, which perhaps a non-Mumbaikar would have to. I just researched police procedure and Medical pharmacology and toxicology. All the other things I made up ... I use every little experience that I've had to create the feeling of reality within my stories. I have walked all those streets that I write about, eaten the food, met the kind of people that I write about. Of course, I do make space for generous dollops of fictionalization without which all these would be dry and boring. (Jha 11)

Thus the city becomes a character – to be precise, the city becomes the protagonist round which the entire plot builds up.³

In Shanta Gokhale's *Avinash* (2002), a text on the urban space of Mumbai one character named Anu arguably maps out the imbrications of space-specific salient categories: "The environment has a lot to do with what people do and become." (Gokhale 102) In Gokhale's drama readers find a character to declare: "Life in Bombay has changed." (90) Sahitya Akademi award-winning dramatist Mahesh Dattani's *The Big Fat City* is snaking around three stories. The story of Niharika and Murli invites others' stories in their compact one bedroom-hall-kitchenette. The so-called urban plush flat becomes the microcosmic representation of the heterogeneous macrocosmic space of Mumbai. The titles of Dattani's dramas always carry with it the quintessence of the text and so here in this text where the title itself exudes the essence of a city the reader is very much expectant of confronting with a multidimensional space.⁴ The tautology in the title titillates the reader to think about the fatness of the city which invites like a mirage the people from other places to come to this metropolitan Mumbai to have a bite on this 'big fat' life. By peeping into the lives of the characters of this text the readers get to realize that the reality is visibly and risibly (as the drama is garbed under the genre of black comedy) different. But underneath the glamorous grand 'big' city lies a scar which continually oozes out the fetid fatness. City life offers Lolly the role of an actor to play throughout her life and extracts from her life the real role of a mother. Harjeet's words sum up the essence of the city and its role to play on the lives of others whether absently or presently: "All stories, no matter where you start them, end up in Mumbai." (Dattani 239) The people who come to Mumbai city enter into the city life with lots of aspiration glittering in their eyes. The dazzling ambition virtually blinds them totally. As in Niharika and Murli's case the city drives them back to their homeland but Niharika and Murli's longing lingering last look is reflected in his (Murli's) words:

LOLLY (*at the door*): I hope you come back.

Niharika looks at the painting.

MURLI : We will. We will come back. (Dattani 245)

Indulging oneself in this kind of drug peddling leaves one chased all the time. The giddy glitzy city space drives one out of their home space:

LOLLY. ... I can't go home because the cops, the drug mafia and the media are all after me! (Dattani 212)

In this fast city life the concept of home blurs out to a great extent and the home turns into hell inexorably: "This dazzling mélange of communities and tongues imparted an image of openness and promise to Bombay. The city teemed with industrialists, merchants, bankers,

brokers, shipping agents, shopkeepers, artisans, clerks, mill hands, dockworkers, and casual laborers ... With the toil and sweat of immigrant workers, the city's businessmen amassed great fortunes. Bombay became the city of gold. (Prakash 43) Niharika direly needs money to retain her small flat. Her attachment to the city is so much that she rents her small flat only to have money and grab a slice of this city life. At this point it would be relevant to mention Suketu Mehta's observation in the article "Mumbai" writes:

Land is to Bombay what politics is to Delhi: the reigning obsession, the fetish, the *raison d'etre* and the topic around which conversations, business, newspapers and dreams revolve. Property is the mania of island dwellers all over the world, and Bombay is washed by water on three sides. It regards the rest of India much as Manhattan looks on the rest of America: as a place distant, unfamiliar and inferior. (Pinto and Fernandes 336)

Niharika and Murli's departure from Mumbai goes in tune with Kamala Das's sensitiveness as expressed in the poem titled "Farewell to Bombay". Though Bombay impacted heavily on Das' nerves, she bids a touching farewell to the city: "I take leave of you, fair city, while tears / Hide somewhere in my adult eyes / And sadness is silent as a stone / In the river's unmoving / Core..." Pico Iyer rightly observes in the article "Bombay: Hobson-Jobson on the Streets" (1997):

Socially, the centre of the subcontinent's bright-lights, big-city dreams - home to the strenuous fantasies of 'Bollywood' and hunting-ground of mobsters and their molls - is at once the 'Capital of Hope', to which hundreds of thousands of newcomers flock each year, dreaming of making their fortunes, and a decidedly ruthless place, where more visitors find jobs than homes. (Pinto and Fernandes 3)

Though this big fat city has nothing big to offer its citizens, people drive towards this Mumbai mirage to make their own place in this heterogeneous city space. As Khushwant Singh in the article "Impressions of Bombay" (2002) writes:

Bombay is much the richest city of India. More than half of India's income-tax comes from this one city. Bombay is also India's most corrupt city: more than half of the black money in circulation is generated in Bombay. It has more millionaires than the other three metropolitan cities put together. It attracts an endless stream of outsiders who hope to make their fortunes here. (Pinto and Fernandes 25)

In an Interview to Antara Majumdar published in a Bengali daily *Ebela* (30 Oct 2013), Dattani asserts that *The Big Fat City* is the first black comedy in Indian theatre as in this text he has sarcastically portrayed the stylized lives of the city dwellers and their involvement in

socialization. Though there is no direct satiric comment or pungent remarks, the mellowed humour is injected in the speeches of the characters.

City's Impact on the Characters

People who come into this city with aspirations and who go back from here with shattered longings all want not only to have a big bite of it but also to connect with its 'nerves' which indicates it is not lifeless but people's methods to get life from this city are faulty.

The city is ... the setting for all aspects of the human drama: the highest learning colliding with the grossest ignorance, unimaginable wealth juxtaposed with the most abject poverty ... cities do not exist entirely by themselves. They are inextricably bound up with the larger societies of which they are a part. For centuries, the city has been the heart, the lifeblood, of various civilizations, the center of economic, political, and artistic events. In cities, we find both the triumphs and the tragedies of the human story. (Macionis and Parrillo 2)

The city space is composite of cultural space and social space in which the characters inhabit and inhabit.⁵ As a critic of the city rightly observes: "Mumbai's map is a jigsaw puzzle of distinct neighbourhoods marked by community, language, religion, dress, and cuisine. As a means of communicating across differences, the city has even concocted a hybrid but wonderfully expressive vernacular for everyday communication – Bombaiya." (Prakash 11) A recent Hindi film *City Lights* (2014) by Hansal Mehta depicts a dire economic condition of a family from Rajasthan. Deepak Singh, his wife Rakhi and their little daughter Mahi go to Mumbai with dreams of better life in their eyes. After going there Deepak and his family members are ensnared in numerous problems and adopt debilitating means to survive in the Mumbai city. Getting disposed to the harsh realities of city life and after her husband's death Rakhi and their daughter again come back to their homeland Rajasthan.

Conclusion

Being tossed between the periodic names like names like 'Manabi', 'Mambai', 'Mambe', 'Mumbadevi' and many more, Bombay officially became Mumbai in 1995. Being far away from the community centric chronotope of Raja Rao, the individualistic setting of Salman Rushdie exploits the urban space of Mumbai in his novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). Mention may also be made of Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002), Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay*

Lost and Found (2004), Gyan Prakash's *Mumbai Fables* (2010), Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2011), Naresh Fernandes's *City adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay* (2013) and S. Hussain Zaidi's *Mumbai Avengers* (2015). In these texts the authors brilliantly show how the city, the socialized space turns itself into a stigmatized stage where the players are playing their parts continually.

Notes:

1. Pico Iyer in "Bombay: Hobson-Jobson on the Streets" (1997) writes: "Like its kindred spirits, Hong Kong and Manhattan, Bombay is a street-smart, cash register-quick, anomalous hive- and an island ... " (Pinto and Fernandes 3)
2. "Bombay's always a struggle, but we're hooked on the thrill of daily combat." (Pinto and Fernandes xi)
3. Shobha De observes: "Bombay is an evil city but in a glamorous, romantic way. It's a ferocious city but that's its charm." (cited in Pinto and Fernandes 13) Similarly, ambivalence is the characteristic trait of Mumbai. As Sandeep Makhija textualises in his poetic lines on Mumbai in "Mumbai: The Dream City": "The city of dreams, / The city of screams. / The city of riches and poor, / The city of accidents and cure. / The lifestyle you can die to live, / Hotels, malls and night clubs give. / Tall buildings is the view you'll see here, / But taller are the dreams of people who live there. / ... The city dreams to be like Shanghai, / It is very popularly known as / 'AAMCHI MUMBAI'." (n. pag.)
4. Suketu Mehta writes in "Mumbai":
Bombay (now officially Mumbai) is a city with an identity crisis; a city experiencing both a boom and a civic emergency. It's the biggest, fastest, richest city in India. It held twelve million people at the last count-more than Greece-and 38 per cent of the nation's taxes are paid by its citizens. Yet half the population is *homeless*. (Pinto and Fernandes 330, my emphasis)
5. At this point it would be relevant to mention Ashish Ram's utopiac description of the city in the poem titled "Salaam Bombay":
Tell me of a city not built by its own,
Tell me of a city, which can stand alone.
Talk of a place where the land is scarce

Where people will share more than their own fare.
The common man is the strength of this city ...
No where in the world are people so selfless,
Call it the rudest city in the world, but not helpless.
What it lacks in Space, It makes up in Spirit ...
No city in the World like this,
Not Rome, not London, nor Paris,
Hats off to the Land of Dreams,
Salaam Bombay, I hear myself scream. (n. pag.)

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