

A LITERARY COLLECTION OF ESSAYS IN *WRITING THE CITY LOOKING WITHIN, LOOKING WITHOUT* EDITED BY STUTI KHANNA

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Abstract:

This research article investigates the relationships of the authors with their cities. The book 'Writing the City Looking Within, Looking Without' is a Literary assemblage of essays that illustrates the similarities and the heterogeneity of urban spaces of modern Indian subcontinent. The writers open up the connections of their writings to location and extent from their personal experiences and in this way present the numerous methods in which urban spaces are originated in literary writings today. The discussion goes on about Edibles, education, traveling, childhood, architecture, reminiscences, political turbulence and great feeling of nostalgia appear in this anthology of essays to deliver graphic and vigorous descriptions of the authors' innovative trips to different cities. The fourteen authors who have contributed to the book are familiar names such as Manju Kapur, Saikat Mujumdar, SA Mr at Upadhyay, Siddharth Chowdhury, Sumana Roy, Tabish Khair and Zac o'yeah, Amitabha Bagchi, Anees Salim, Anita Nair, Anjum Hasan, Ankush SA Iki a, Chandrahas Choudhury, Cyrus Mistry.

Keywords: *Childhood, Geography, Homeland, Imagination, Nostalgia.*

Urban spaces always have an enchantment for city dwellers. City's dwellers or visitants Urban areas necessitate humans to fabricate and to transform them into high-spirited, energetic and multi-dimensional locations of many lives and encounters. This research article examines that all the fourteen authors take part in their city's geography in strange course of action and the cities acknowledge in proportional estimate by opening out themselves in all its striking to common having spatial and temporal qualities according to the pursuit of the authors. In this literary collection, all the essays have been written by celebrated authors of English and edited by Stuti Khanna. She took upon this task of collating the fourteen rich essays on memories of homeland, literary influence and the most important exploration of cities in the lives of these writers. These are celebrated Indian writers practicing in both within the country and outside. However, each one of them had a remarkable influence of India in their minds when they ventured into writing. By way of introducing the subject matter of the book, the contact through Georg Simmel's phenomenal book *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1902) has also been explored. Simmel attempts to scrutinize the influence of a great city on the intellect of a single person. He explores how the human mind gets developed, altered and perhaps refined based on the metropolitan life one is associated with.

This collection of essay also explores the lives in small towns. It is also mentioned that these small towns are small only by definition. However, the cultural inclination, tastes and literature, food, education supersedes the bounded of small towns and becomes metropolitan in its approach and in its mindset also. Siliguri, Banglore, Kolkata, Delhi. Mumbai, Kathmandu, Bihar all stand as epitome of modernization in twenty first century.

Moreover metropolitan or city life strikes an elaborated difference from that of the rural life variant dynamics of relationships, interactions and most importantly ends are quite different. The attitudes and the

behaviors of city dwellers are fundamentally distinct to the person who lives rural life. The mindset of the an urban area denizen thus displays as Georg Simmel outlines transformation and management according to environmental conditions and eventually reflects the structure of the city and characterizes the rustic life as an amalgamation of important correlations instituting overtime. These kind of connections cannot be set up in big cities for a lot of purposes like anonymity, and consequently a city inhabitant can only create an association with money, currency and a trade turns into a way inside that the city people invests their faith. Simmel talks about capitalist modernity and its influence on everyday's life and interactions between individuals which is that of superficiality calculations.

Authors from different timelines and geographical locations have used cities as backdrop influence and reference point their respective pieces of literature. Sketches of cities have undergone changes with time. Capitalists or industrialized society or later on the post industrial society has put on different kind of images of the city, E.g. she writes that Dickens' novel presents socio economic geography of the fractured, divided, but composite city space that is fundamentally intellect.

Class divisions have been fracturing city space be it in Victorian London and post liberalization Delhi. Authors like Gabriel García Márquez or Salman Rushdie have geographically located their respective novels within the physical territory of their homeland searches that of colonized Latin America, and post independent India. Despite the geographical and historical specificities, each of their literary works have found universal leadership where in the trajectory of time and geographical space floats to once imaginary space capturing realism through empathy. This unique collection of city writing successfully captures the city life based on personalized experience and how literature emanates from those domains of familiarity. Italo Calvino quotes, 'Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else'. (*Invisible Cities*, 1972)

Chandrasah Choudhary's chapter 'Bombay and Delhi: The Two Cities of My Life' expresses that how two of the Indian cities of Bombay and Delhi influenced and inspired his literary intellect. By exploring his recollections balancing between Bombay and Delhi, Choudhary says that Bombay is the metropolitan area where he was born and brought up while from Delhi he obtained his higher degrees. He writes in his essays how his memories of the city of Bombay have played a crucial role in him becoming a fictional writer developing his selfhood. His first novel was set out in Bombay in 1990 when the city was going in huge political turmoil. He is being able to draw comparison between two metropolitan cities, what he observed was the difference in treatment of people from differing socio-economic backgrounds between both of the cities. Bombay before it took the name of Mumbai has been his home city infested with innumerable memories of childhood and adulthood the changed journeys, the changing histories of Bombay, the subtler meaning of expressions on native's faces are all familiar to the author creating and building subjective identities of self. He says that he loves both the cities equally. He calls the city of Bombay 'a dialectical force' and 'stable poles'. He calls Delhi in two modes 'a pulsating energy' and 'profound exhaustion'. But still his association with Bombay city 'were too deep to be pulled out in one go'. 'I myself feel that the taproots and the deep structure of my artistic life come from Delhi. I am convinced that I would not be a Bombay writer without the distance from and perspective on Bombay provided by Delhi, as well as my literary education in Delhi and the intellectual culture and contrapuntal urbanity of Delhi itself'. (*Writing the city Looking within, Looking without*)

Cyrus Mistry in his essay 'The Times they are A-Changing. . .' is troubled by this predicament that If he had to depart from Bombay for an urban space which is unknown to him then what will he put in writing. At the one hand, he shares his fondness towards the city while at other utter hopelessness with regard to the political events in the country. He knows that Bombay is enriched with tales, so if he wants to write he should never withdraw from this city of Bombay which is an unlimited gulf of intellectual affluence and he

will be there by making Bombay his own. Choudhary puts up one in all occurrence in connection with other encounters and all cities in association with other cities. Mistry's pursuit is wrecked because the places of particular urban area also switch with alternating their persona, infuriating the object of a permanent rhizome. For his brother Rohinton Mistry, the draining of the reservoir of reminiscences of Bombay coerced him to cease writing, At the other side Cyrus's own choice to linger back couldn't assist greatly since the city shortly became a long distant from the metropolitan city of the 70s which he thought that it would always be a place to him. Zac o'yeah, Swedish detective author's chapter 'Cities are Made for Adventures', writes about banglore, and presents uncanny familiarity between the Indian city with his homeland Sweden. These two geographical places despite their territorial differentiations find commonality in the mind of the author. It is the mind that travels across time and place and it is authors' imagination that transforms the regular place to an extra ordinary one and thus Zac o'yeah builds his adventures based on those places taking queue of his autobiographical memory. Apala Saha's in her article "The Kolkata Imageries: Images and Imaginations of City Spaces" (2017) quotes, "A citizen builds up an image of the city principally because the city acts as one's home and workplace. The imagination of a city develops because one is able to construct a niche for oneself within the same. What imagination can therefore develop for an individual for whom the city has failed to serve as either? Only inhabitants can have imaginations, the homeless cannot because they are not inhabitants."(31)

Samrat Upadhyay writes in his chapter 'Dreaming of a Lost City in a Mad Country' that how the city has influenced the great deal and has influenced in his writings about Kathmandu. He explores concepts of detachment, spiritual awakening among people of his city and as the native of the place. He always found it to be extremely rewarding enough to have been able to be empathized with his characters.

In Siddharth Choudhary's essay 'The Tolstoy of the Biharis' on his roots in Bihar that how he found his literary influences in the heart of Bihar, How each and every memory both happy and sad leaves behind a lifelong impression within the minds of the dwellers. Siddharth Chowdhury bitterly narrates his blooming up in capital of Bihar with the intentions of being an author, and how did he assemble a literary heritage for Bihar, bringing out the works of Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Seth, and Arundhati Roy in peculiarity.

Author, Sumana Roy in Chapter 'Growing Up in the Chicken's Neck' very successfully captures several childhood scenes from her house in Siliguri. Once she met Tabish Khair, a historian of liliputian city, briefed her that "All small towns look the same, particularly when you are leaving them".(Living in Chicken's neck, 2018) All these essays intuitively inspects the quest of writing and the focus of the authors is only on their own trips to stay in a city and then moving to another one.

Tabish Khair in 'The Cosmopolitanism of Small towns' gets vexed against the cliché of small size cities' narrow mindedness by exploring Gaya's cosmopolitan origins. These little places were really undergone and lived by all the authors who have devoted to this book; therefore the authors quit going deep into their literary works by studying whatever they found, taking books and then going into the worlds of those books. A lot of authors remember the sensation when they are winged far away from the situations and go after their fancies. Samrat Upadhyay in 'Dreaming of a Lost City in a Mad Country' writes about Kathmandu and becomes attentive about locations that left the profound impressions upon him.

Calcutta plays a significant role in Fiction and essay 'Dying Modern' by Saikat Majumdar. He spent his childhood and early youth in Calcutta. According to him, Calcutta is not just a place but a time in one's life and a place he experiences when he was young, had a whole in him which is not comparable to anything experienced later on because experiences move us in a very strange powerful way. We are moved by things but don't understand it and due to this lack Calcutta exists for him. In his second novel *Firebird* the city came as fully alive.

In the first novel *Silverfish* his approach to the city was somewhat anthropological and but it lacked life but in *Firebird* which is the story of city's theatre seeing through a young boy's perspective on his mother who is an actress and how the different traditions of a decadent theatre taken in tradition which is linked to prostitution and enjoyment and a progressive Marxist traditions. In *Firebird* (2015) Majumdar quotes, "The theatre stood in the neighbourhood where Beadon Street cut through Central Avenue, a place where the dust of the city mixed with something ...a breezy fragrance, something strange and sweet. It was a place he passed daily on his way to school, a place barely off the main street and close to his home, less than five minutes on the school bus if the traffic flowed easily. Marking the streets were aged tracks along which doddering trams clanged their way west, all the way to Howrah station and the river at the edge of the city. But that was not why the neighborhood felt strange." The fascinating thing is that Calcutta symbolizes a kind of stalled modernity. It was the great hub of Bengal, dirty in the nineteenth century but somehow after independence it has quite progressed and those who grew up in Calcutta in the eighties has the memories of lord shedding, traffic jams and there was a kind of stalling of progress. So this is the city, kind of space where nothing happens. It is frustrating one to live in as a citizen but fascinating one for an artist to write about. There is nothing quite comparable to the intimacy of its culture. Bridge and Watson, in their book *A Companion to the City* (2000) quotes 'Cities are more than only material or lived spaces and that ideas about cities are not simply formed at a conscious level; rather, they are also a product of unconscious desires and imaginations'.

Manju Kapur in chapter 'Living in the Place of Your Imagination' thinks about different places like Amritsar, Lahore and Delhi. These places were more lavish because of being dragged through the chronicles. Anjum Hasan in 'In search of Anjum Hasan' presents distinct outlooks, sound voices exploring distinctive walks of life in contemporary India, very genuine, and the specific encounter which are universal. In Hasan's imagination, she seems to be in Shillong about which her tales and essays are written but she also talks about Bangalore community. Hasan's contemplative work and the one essay 'Sometimes a Hawk is Just a Hawk' by Amitabha Bagchi are noteworthy in their denial to handle their cities as 'a character' in their works. Delhi exists in Amitabh Bagchi's novels and essays but conveyed through the lives of city people.

In the same way, Stuti Khanna In her book *The Contemporary Novel and the City: Re-conceiving National and Narrative Form* quotes that the relationship between a city and the nation that encompasses and contains it is seldom an easy one. As bureaucratic and/ or commercial centre, the city is the public face of the nation, representative of its highest aspirations towards material and cultural progress. At the same time, paradoxically, it embodies much that is at odds with, and even contrary to, the self-image of the nation; it is decidedly more heterogeneous, polyphonic and impure than the nation would like (it) to be. The city, then, is the centre of national pride but may also be the dangerous other within. (City, Nation and the Politics of the Possible, 39, 2013). Most of the authors in this collection mention that it is not only their home cities or work cities that have shaped their literary mindset and helps them to wander throughout the path of their creativity. These authors have explored the unfamiliar world and made that world familiar to them.

Author Anees Saleem in 'Tales from the Nameless town' has preferred to put these inspirational places to be unknown. We get to know only about his experiences and anecdotes at not known the name of the place. It is so because in the mind of the readers, it's always one's interpretation. Unknown cities and places take it's own unique shape in the minds of the readers which may be different from the authors. However, It is the task of the author to help its readers to transport to a world which is imaginary and yet very much realistic.

A number of theories would assist in exploring and analyzing the elements of different cities and self's complexities and contradictions. The approach to the research will be intertextual. The study of city

narratives explored to be a serious field of study at present. Works of structuralism, sociologists and anthropologists provided grounds for it to establish its critique. Although study of Urban spaces and places is an interdisciplinary field of subject and does not owe its existence to any specific method. It rather works on research agendas and discourse analysis. The critiques and authors have turned to City in order to understand the relationship between individual and society. The theories reflect the importance of City and self in literature, how does the city emerge as a lens to see the micro and the macro spaces in a multicultural world. A study devoted to explore the place of city in literature in order to understand its character has some unique challenges and possibilities for an inquiry relating to society and individual. The study of city typically falls under the purview of sociology and anthropology, believing it has a mere material value, and is still not widely read or acknowledged from a literary point of view.

When a writer belongs to a certain city as in when he or she is able to empathize with the soul of the city and its people. There is no need to explore the nuisance of the city life separately by the author. However, when a author visits the city out of professional and personal reason, he or she feels the urge to know its pulse by meeting and interacting with the native and also visiting areas that best describes the soul of the city. Such an example has already been seen in Anita Nair's essay.

In the same way all authors in this collection presents the memories of their childhood, adulthood, professional and personal development as associated with respective city life. Each of the essays shows how the city becomes a character, inspiration and silent spectator in their individual works of literature. In conclusion, the book by Stuti Khanna *Writing the City: Looking Within, Looking Without* presents and informs with reference to the connections betwixt Urban spaces and artistic writings. These connections have been chewed over by a few sole essayists in enlightening the essay.

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