

## THROUGH THE PRISM OF HYPERMEDIATION: REPRESENTATION OF SLUM IN BINA SHAH'S *SLUM CHILD*

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### **Abstract:**

*Slums occupy a significant position in the expanse of literary spaces. The voices from the slums despite their multiple sociological layers and multiple expressions are not subjected to serious academic exposition. These voices from the borderlands have always been refused entry into the established and recognized arena of articulation. Narratives on slum shed light on the power of place to constrain and oppress voices from the slums. Bina Shah's *Slum Child* presents a fascinating paradox: the convergence and mingling of stereotypes associated with the slum poverty and misery and an effervescent economic vitality, impelled by globalization. This paper is an attempt to articulate the much hypermediated representation of slum. Foucault's concept of heterotopia is employed in the backdrop to lend a prismatic reading to the ignored realms and outcasts. The attempt is to further explorations on the 'margins' distanced from the cultural centres' thereby focusing on the voices that have risen in consciousness, in dissent and resistance.*

**Keywords:** *Slum fiction, heterotopia, space, hypermediation, alterity.*

Slum fiction which gained popularity during the late Victorian period became a condition of England theme that engaged directly with the contemporary social and political issues with a focus on the representation of class, gender and labor relations. Discourses on slum emerged beginning from the Industrial Revolution. These spaces were described accordingly as destitute, inhabited by migrants who flocked the cities for means of livelihood. But with the growing popularity of slum literature, the term 'slum' encountered a transformation from merely denoting a topographic 'place' into a discursive topic of investigation and imagination for writers. The term slum is connotative of the urban impoverished areas which lack development and regeneration. Slum dwellers are semantically connected to the Victorian notions of lower class squalor and served as objects of both disgust and fascination (Krstic 45). This stereotypical representation of slum-dwellers is perpetuated even in current times.

However as Michael Wheeler observed, the significance of early condition-of-England novels lies in the fact that they began the process of educating middle and upper class novel readers, many of whom had formerly been quite ignorant of what was going on in the manufacturing areas of Britain (18). An enormous obstacle which stands in the way of slum fiction is its actuality. The men who write it and the men who read it are men of the middle classes or the upper classes - the educated classes. Hence the fact that it is the life as the refined man sees it proves that it cannot be the life as the unrefined man lives it. This paper is an attempt to uncover and articulate the power of place to constrain and oppress marginalized communities where the focus is on the slum in Bina Shah's *Slum Child*. The idea and materiality of place is a contested terrain which can be transformed from a site of oppression into a site of resistance and hope.

In the social sciences as well as in the humanities, notions of 'space' and 'place' and spatial concepts linked with these terms or others such as history, locality, wilderness, dwelling have taken on an increasingly significant role with respect to understanding our environment, social processes and the way we move in space. Theories of spatialization play an important role in the political agenda in which issues of identity, differentness and belonging form core elements. The term spatiality is used to draw attention to

the complex ways in which social life literally 'takes place' and to the ways in which social relations and subjectivities are constituted within space (Kuhlenbeck 2-3). Discourses on slums constantly characterize and feature the spatial and mental narrowness harboured by the dwellers. Several stigmatizing associations are continually conveyed in the process. As many theorists opine, slums are not only places of urban blight and utmost poverty, but at the same time 'conglomerations' of the outcasts of society, of the undeserving poor who stood outside of society and who could not expect any help from it (Petersen 2).

An increasingly important phenomenon in British literature is the representation of mixed race, hybrid or hyphenated identities which reflect the situation in a transnational world. Homi Bhabha has defined the margin as the exciting place from where creative subversion can be started and has attached the power of transgression and transformation to hybrid identities (251). The Pakistani writer Bina Shah's *Slum Child* is a poignant account of the life of Laila, the protagonist, who navigates issues of identity.

Shah is concerned foremost with the notions of identity and resistance in the backdrop of the slum dwellings in Karachi's poorest quarter, Issa Colony. The novelist through the psyche of Laila is aware of the complex tensions in postmodern conditions, where selfhood has become fragmented and unstable, and identities are continuously constituted performatively as, in the words of Judith Butler, "a stylized repetition of acts" (140).

Slum fiction is characterised by descriptions of grim circumstances, unhygienic environment and squalor and tales of unending misery. Laila lived in Issa Colony, the Colony of Jesus, one of the largest slums in Karachi occupied by Punjabi Christians. The pre-existing images of otherness have been wielded by Shah in the rendition of Issa Colony. Keeping aside the negatives and grotesque shades ascribed to life in slums, they are completely "self-sufficient: not symbiotic beings, but parasites that feed off their hosts for so long that they strengthen and grow into entire worlds that live within the world outside" (Shah 6-7). The few tenuous huts on the outskirts of the town quadrupled in size and volume, initiating the process of permanence, the way that the disenfranchised made their mark on the world that they owned (7). The concept of home denotes a "performative narrative construct that arise from the hybrid interactions and negotiations of interstitial cultural spaces" (Schulze-Engler 282). To Laila, her slum offers a sense of belonging and security unbridled by restrictions.

Right from a young age, being a Christian in a predominantly Muslim country, Laila was taught to fit into. They had to be nondescript without flaunting their faith outside the safety of the Colony. The cultural values ascribed by the society only helped to remain excluded from the ambit of the expression of their existential notions in the hierarchical order of the society. The revolt of man against dominance has been a continuing factor in history. The notion of power became an attractive and potent weapon for identity formation and assertion. The novel hints at the politics of representation where the nexus between looking and being-looked-at, voyeurism and exhibitionism are at hand. The colonial gaze perceives the slum as a *terra incognita* that has to be explored, classified and analysed (Krstic 44).

The grim circumstances of Laila's life are counter balanced by her energy, vitality and determination to survive. Shah's portraiture of Laila in a rural setting stands in direct contrast to her sprightly demeanor when she says, "It was a sense of doing something taboo, but too irresistible to deny. It was the first time I realized I was a girl who did not run away from danger, like my peers, but craved it like a drug" (16). But under the cover of darkness of ignorance, she was not only pushed and exploited but tied to multiple stakes. The hypermediated insignia of slum as 'other' does not endorse the emotional and psychological foreboding conceded by the dwellers.

For Laila growing up was like some disease in which she was unable to comprehend any sensory information. Her mind was made up of interlocking jigsaw pieces, which when seen as a whole, made up the world. While growing up she was also confronted with the notion that the truth was not a universal belief shared by everyone - different people could have a different version of the truth that was the complete antithesis of what she knew.

The deplorable predicament of life in the slums is further explicated in the incident where Laila and her family are taken to the beach by her stepfather. The image of the 'sea' is emblematic of hope and freedom to which Laila is exposed to for a fleeting period of time. Her feelings are voiced in the lines:

Oh the freedom! The absolute freedom, the feeling of being part of something wild and primitive, stronger than anything you've ever known before, that sensation of sea and salt and air that permeates your skin and your hair and stirs up all sorts of unruly longing in your soul this was the beach, I thought, as I ran up and down the sand, almost unable to contain myself. (31)

Here the space of sea is contrasted with that of the slum. The geographical location of the sea embracing vastness and freedom is perceived as an empty social space denoting an environment free of human intervention. The Issa colony thrives with people hindering possibilities of interaction and self-nourishment. In the slum, one can never feel truly free because one is always surrounded by buildings and people, hemming everyone in like "so many ants in an old jar. The very air has the quality of having been breathed in and out a thousand times by everyone who has lived there before you" (35). The sea may be conceived as a social space owing to its dangerous depths, the underwater world and the associated imaginations the apprehensions of what lurks behind and below the unseen depths of the sea.

The slum may be broadly included within the label of a 'placeless place' which appears to be here and not here, a social space other than and connected to other social spaces. It is here that Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia' as counter-sites come to the forefront. In heterotopias the focus is on textual space and can be extended to include the boundaries of slum. Foucault conceptualizes space as an instrument of resistance and social change; the doubleness and contradictions in heterotopia are linked with the postmodern valorization of alterity and thus have inflected its meaning with radical openness (Palladino 49). The slums have occupied a considerable position in literary spaces along with the space occupied by urban cities.

The image of the slum appears in a state of complexity: as nodes of creative and destructive energy, linked to notions of density and seen as spaces in the periphery (Ameel 1). The places do not come into consciousness unless their inhabitants experience them as distressed, as rapidly changing or as exceptionally beautiful. The depiction of slum as a locus diametrically opposite to the individuation of urban spaces, implied an anthropological hierarchy cultivated citizens and filthy nomads. Slum as a heterotopia with its doubleness continues to strike between the prospects of liberation and the crutches of oppression. Whether slums subvert or support social systems are matters requiring nuanced observation.

The place is not a static, empty backdrop for social relationships. It is a dynamic material form - a process that requires cultural interpretation and brings people together in particular relationships. The entity 'place' makes social structures endure, patterns activities; embodies cultural norms, identities and memories; expresses ecological values and plays a role in creating and sustaining people's sense of self. Historically dominant societies have imposed hegemonic conceptions of space and time; not only through force but also by controlling mental structures and material practices like naming, measuring and mapping the spatial world. The hegemonic spatial practices alienate disenfranchised communities while reinforcing negative stereotypes of race and class (Sutton 1).

Bina Shah contrasts Laila's life in slum as well as her life in the mansion soon after the death of her sister Jumana. Even though slum stood for depravity and squalor, it offered unbridled freedom and carefreeness. A sudden shift to the space of city, to the mansion where her mother worked as a maid, suffocated and curbed her spirit of wildness. Slums form the ignored realms and Laila's identity as a part of this marginalized space exposes her to the manifold forms of discrimination which she faces at the The Ansaris.

The slum as a space of contested terrain subjectivises the social identities and the discourses related to it interrogates the mainstream and its margins by also mapping what occurs in between. These spaces

form sites of resistance nodes which engage in forming a parallel world unaffected by the growing ethos of the urban space.

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