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**The Calcutta Write-O-Some: A Study of the Presentation of the City of  
Calcutta in Selected Indian English Literature**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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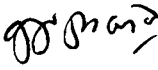
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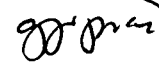
**CERTIFICATE**

This thesis titled "The Calcutta Write-O-Some: A Study of the Presentation of the City of Calcutta in Selected Indian English Literature", submitted by **Ms. Jhelum Biswas**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

This may be placed before the examiners for evaluation for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

  
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**DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE**

This dissertation titled "The Calcutta Write-O-Some: A Study of the Presentation of the City of Calcutta in Selected Indian English Literature" submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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## *Acknowledgment*

*In August 2002 I had arrived in Delhi leaving behind Calcutta. My city had disappointed me. But the longer I stayed out of it the more, I curiously, longed for it. It is during these days that I attended Dr GJV Prasad's course on Indian English Literature and read *The Shadow Lines*, the novel left me enthralled. Before that for me "good" English Literature had meant British English Literature. I realised that Indian English Literature too had much to offer and started reading more of it. To my surprise almost every third book that I read had some reference to my city. This intrigued me and finally convinced me to take it up for research. I thank Dr Prasad for introducing me to this genre and since then encouraging me to explore it. I am also thankful to Dr Saugata Bhaduri for encouraging me to experiment with my memories of Calcutta. And I am extremely grateful to both of them for tolerating my erratic chapter submissions.*

*I must thank my friends who have always provoked me by deliberately criticizing Calcutta and at the same time have been patient to bear my "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" about the city.*

*I thank Professor Bertram Da'Silva for his first class – which was on Keats. That class and sir made me fall in love with English literature.*

*And above all I thank my parents. It has all been for them.*

*July 2006  
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*Jhelum Biswas*

*FOR CALCUTTA.*

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Calcutta – you may call it the ‘City of Dreadful Night’ or you may call it the ‘City of Joy’ – has always oscillated between two extremes. In fact, as far back as in the nineteenth century when Rudyard Kipling visited the city as a newspaper correspondent, he wrote:

Thus the midday halt of Charnock – more’s the pity! –  
Grew a city  
As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed  
So it spread  
Chance-directed, chance-erected, laid and built  
On the silt  
Palace, byre, hovel – poverty and pride –  
Side by side... (10)<sup>1</sup>

These words about the city ring true even till this day. In Calcutta dichotomies continue to exist ‘side by side’ with an uncanny ease. While on the one hand there prevails the myth of a ‘great city’ – literature, songs, poems, discourses on it almost produced daily; on the other disillusionment looms large – lengthy discourse is produced on that too. To elaborate on this (I feel it necessary to) I will take the liberty of taking a short detour to a personal experience – the exact moment that triggered this research.

It was the summer of 2002 in Calcutta. More specifically 15<sup>th</sup> April 2002, in my home in North Calcutta or the erstwhile Sutanuti. 15<sup>th</sup> April – Poila Baisakh – Bengali New Year. But for me there was nothing “new” about this new year. Calcutta had nothing constructive to offer me. What stared me at face was strikes, unemployment, postponed examinations, pending results, suicides, poverty. Frustration filled me, I looked in anger, neither “back”, nor forth. Yet people seemed complacent. Jubilant it was new year! Oblivious to my angst there were women dressed in crisp tangail sarees and men in

starched *pajama-panjabi*. *Nandan*, the culture hub, had perhaps organised some film festival, a “*ganer onushthan*” at Academy of Fine Arts, some play or concert at Kala Mandir, Gorky Sadan, Nazrul Manch, Birla Sabhghar; some special Bengali programme at Calcutta Club and the traditional Bengali dinner by Sutanuti Porishod for its members – the old Bengali families of North Calcutta. On the one hand, there was this feeling of desperation in people like me, while on the other there were people who looked back at the glorious days of Bengal with misty eyes and sang –

Dhono Dhanne Pushpe Bhora

Amader Ei Boshundhora

Tahar Majhe Aachhe Desh Ek

Shokol Desher Shera

Se Je Sopno diye Toiri Se Desh

Sriti Diye Ghera

Emon Deshti Kothao Khunje Pabe Nako Tumi

Shokol Desher Rani Se Je Aamar Jonmobhumi...<sup>2</sup>

Which roughly means is that this nation is full of wealth, grains and flowers and within this nation is a land of dreams and memories. This is the queen of all lands and it is my land of birth – Bengal. It’s this disillusionment with the city which forced me out of it and which forces several people out of it every year. Yet once out of it, a sense of nostalgia grips you. The disillusionment, side by side, the voluntary immigration and the nostalgia – my research interest in the city took roots that day.

Dichotomy defines the city in every aspect. For instance the very name of the city. Calcutta or Kolkata – the argument continues... This research will introspect the divide that exists in the language of the city. The city operates in two languages – Bengali and English. Since its introduction, English has been cultured, nurtured and vehemently



criticised in Bengal. From the tenure of Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General (1774) of Bengal and a keen Orientalist, Bengali and English have shared a very curious “love-hate” relationship. In fact, a large number of the early Indian writers of English fiction like Toru Dutt, Romesh Chunder Dutt, S.K. Ghosh, S.B. Banerjee, were all Bengalis. For years English culture, language and literature has been drilled into the Bengali psyche. The “babu”, the upstart Indian, and the “sahib”, the English counterpart – these classes were but a result of this divide. While a section of the society assimilated the foreign culture, the other section forever opposed it. However, in spite of all oppositions, which carry on till date, English has woven itself into the “Bengali culture”, like the aloo-tikki burger. Under the CPI(M) rule, for more than a decade, English was not taught in primary school, Calcutta was rechristened as Kolkata, yet English was not supplanted from the Bengali psyche. In fact, I would not be wrong in saying that knowledge of English language and manners are an integral part of the “elite-Bengali culture”. If in doubt, one just has to read something like *The Elite* magazine of Calcutta Club. The 2003-2004 issue of this magazine contains twenty-three articles in English while only four in Bengali, and it supposed to be one of the “Bengali dominated” clubs. The convent schools and colleges in Calcutta teach and preserve pure “British English”. The University of Calcutta till late had only canonical British English literature as its syllabus at graduation level. Several Bengali households till date are staunch loyalists of *The Statesman* newspaper, because it’s considered to be the “pure” English newspaper. And yet a set question which many students of English Literature from Calcutta have to answer is “Why should one study English Literature in India?” Facing this question was a moment of crisis for me. It had never occurred to me that English is not my own. Having grown up with a fair dose of Enid Blyton and later romanced with Keats’ poems, I had adopted English as my own. However, this question forced me to re-define my relation with English literature. I realised that the world that I had known through English is not my world. It is the “English world” which I had mistaken for my own and like the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* (1988)<sup>3</sup> had started believing that “I’ve known the streets around here a long time...” We have grown up in Calcutta reading about London and assimilating it as our own. However, from Michael Madhushudhan Dutta to the twenty-first century, the English-educated Calcuttan has faced this crisis at some point of time in

their life. And due to this, it has always been believed that you may learn to read, write and speak in English but for expression of creativity it has to be Bengali. Thus we create in Bengali and document in English. This crisis/realisation was a major factor that triggered this research.

Due to the long heritage of English culture and studies Calcutta has produced many Indian writers of English fiction. But this literature has been very thin, has never been too popular, and apart from a few stray novels such as Bhabani Bhattacharya's *A Dream in Hawaii*, the novels have not been of much merit. The language is strained and pretentious. In short, there is a distinct sense of ill-ease while reading these novels. However, of late there has practically been a deluge of Indian English fiction based on Calcutta. For instance, *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996)<sup>4</sup>, *The Sin Of Colour* (1999)<sup>5</sup>, *The Blue Bedspread* (2000)<sup>6</sup>, *If You Are Afraid Of Heights* (2003)<sup>7</sup>, *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2002)<sup>8</sup> and *The Garden Of Earthly Delights* (2003)<sup>9</sup> – are to a large extent set in Calcutta. These seven novels have been written between 1988 and 2003. All the five novelists, Amitav Ghosh, Sunetra Gupta, Raj Kamal Jha, Ruchir Joshi and Indrajit Hazra, were born and brought up in Calcutta but interestingly none of them live in Calcutta any more. A special feature about these novels is that they are much at ease with the language of expression. When speaking about this generation of writers (I would like to call them the Ghosh generation for I believe it is Amitav Ghosh with his *The Shadow Lines* who had started this trend), Krishna Dutta writes –

Each of them deals with his or her experience of Bengal in a unique way but all have felt the compulsion to grapple with their relationship with the city and have found it a rich source material. Even Vikram Seth, not a Bengali but who was born in Calcutta, felt compelled to recreate the linguistic complexity of the city in his portrait of the Chatterji family in the novel *A Suitable Boy*. ? ( 209)

What is to be specially noted here is that the language and the style are very different from their predecessors. It's a language that Calcuttans speak in – a pastiche of English and Bengali with a touch of other Indian languages here and there. The city life and

culture is carefully woven into the stories. Some of the other distinguishing features about these novels are –

- 1) tremendous precision in describing the city.
- 2) Several contemporary and historical events are woven into the stories.

Due to these features the novels tend to have a very journalistic touch. And this is not surprising because most of these novelists happen to be journalists by profession. Raj Kamal Jha is in *Indian Express*, Indrajit Hazra is with *Hindustan Times*, Ruchir Joshi is a columnist with *Hindustan Times* and Amitav Ghosh was a writer with *New York Times* for several years. He began with *The Indian Express* and describes those days at length in *Countdown*. Before proceeding any further let us sample a few passages from these novels where the city looms large.

I shouldered my way back out to Chowringhee. The sun had gone by now but the streets were still jampacked. I went over to the S.N. Banerjee Road crossing, where all the buses stop, and waited for No. 49. One came and was so crowded that it went right past. Another appeared five minutes later. It had even more people hanging from it, *fanning out of the doors like kabab rolls spilling out of a Nizam waiter's hands*. (*The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, 21)

We had to inch forward near Gariahat, with Nityananda and Tridib hanging out of the windows, begging shoppers to make way. Near Sealdah it took us an hour to skirt around the *pandal that was jutting from the pavement, right into the middle street*. The car got hotter and hotter... The traffic came to a virtual standstill again near Dakhineswar. We crawled along till we reached the bridge, and then looked down in awe at the vast crowds circulating in the courtyard of the temple below. (*The Shadow Lines*, 44)

Rash Behari was thronged with its usual morning crowd of pedestrians, some hurrying towards Landsdown, some towards Gariahat... (*The Calcutta Chromosome*, 152)

In forty to forty five minutes, one hour maximum, if the wind blows in the right direction, you will reach Bowbazar, its *furniture shops*... above the Indian Airlines Building... Another half an hour and you'll be over Park Street and Chowringhee, the five star hotels... over the Grand Hotel ... (*If You Are Afraid of Heights*, 43-44)

Such descriptive passages about the city abound in these novels however; I have specifically chosen these four examples because in my opinion Calcutta is best expressed in these. The words in italics are to be taken as the key to the essence of the city. The first quote from Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* maps out what is commonly known as the "heart" of Calcutta. Chowringhee or Jawaharlal Nehru Road is the centre of the city. Joshi clearly outlines this area and along with it weaves in some of the peculiarities (the infamous traffic jams of Calcutta and overflowing public buses) and specialties (rolls - marinated and roasted chicken pieces rolled inside crisp *parathas* – an invention of Calcutta). In all these novels the authors very clearly identify the city. The quote from *The Calcutta Chromosome* depicts one of the busy "*Machher Bajar*" / fish market of Calcutta. The other two passages in a way complement each other. While the one from *The Shadow Lines* traces out a route from South Calcutta to North Calcutta, the other from *If You Are Afraid of Heights* traces out a parallel route but this is from North to Central Calcutta. The route traced out in Ghosh's novel is of special interest. It describes Calcutta at a particular time – the *pujas*. Durga Puja is an integral part of Calcutta and no description of the city is complete without the mention of this auspicious Bengali festival. The street names, food items, references to the infamous traffic jams, etc. brings the city alive in the pages of the novels. The presence of the city is most dominantly felt perhaps in Raj Kamal Jha's *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, where he devotes about twenty six pages (page 28 to 54) to describe the stretch between North and Central Calcutta. A distance that approximately takes thirty minutes in a bus. And

interestingly reading these thirty-four pages took me about thirty minutes! The streets, shops, landmarks etc are described with extreme precision and clarity. The description is visually evocative, one might say cinematic. Through these descriptions the city as it were becomes a character of the novel.

This leads to an intriguing question – Why are so many of the modern Indian English novels set in Calcutta? Is the atmosphere of Calcutta congenial for creativity? What is there in its environment that gives rise to this creativity? If the city induces creativity then why do the creative writers leave it? These are some the questions which I intend to explore in this paper.

It is to be noted here that it's not merely in English literature, but in every cultural aspect Calcutta has suddenly generated a lot of interest. Films, advertisements, television serials, websites, travelogues – everything seems to be talking Calcutta. It appears as if the city is re-inventing itself. But the question is why the need for this re-invention? And this question is another catalyst for this research. To answer this question it is essential to return to the city's past.

In 1690, Job Charnok, an agent of the East India Company chose this place for a British trade settlement. The site was carefully selected, being protected by the Hooghly River on the west, a creek to the north, and by salt lakes about two and a half miles to the east. There were three large villages along the east bank of the river Ganges, named, Sutanuti, Gobindapur and Kalikata. These three villages were bought by the British from local landlords. The Mughal emperor granted East India Company freedom of trade in return for a yearly payment of 3,000 rupees. Before the British, Calcutta was just a village, the capital city of Bengal was Murshidabad, around sixty miles north of Calcutta. In 1756, Siraj-ud-daullah, *nawab* of Bengal, attacked the city and captured the fort. Calcutta was recaptured in 1757 by Robert Clive when the British defeated Siraj-ud-daullah on the battle field of Plassey. In 1772, Calcutta became the capital of British India, and the first Governor General Warren Hastings moved all important offices from Murshidabad to Calcutta. Till 1912, Calcutta was the capital of India, when the British moved the capital city to Delhi. In 1947, when India gained freedom and the country got partitioned between India and Pakistan, Calcutta was included in the Indian part of Bengal, West Bengal. Calcutta became the capital city of the state of West Bengal. Since

the time it had been founded Calcutta has flourished as a seat of culture, tradition and innovation. It has been the city of great intellectuals like Raja Ramohan Roy, Vivekanada, Surendra Nath Banerjee, Chittaranjan Das, Pabindranath Tagore, Subhash Chandra Bose, Satyajit Ray, Amartya Sen, to name a few. Yet the city since partition has been under a spell of a downfall. The Naxalite Movement, which hit the city in the early 1970s, is in my opinion the first symptom of the growing frustration in the city. Hundreds of youths were arrested, deported, killed. The rebellion of the dissatisfied youth was crushed but the dissatisfaction lived on in their minds.<sup>10</sup>

The 1980s was perhaps the worst decade of Calcutta. Numerous strikes, lockouts, blackouts, growing poverty, declining job-market marked the last twenty years. The construction of the metro rail was started but the result was usurpation of personal property by the state, thereby leading to a growing discontent in the youth. What did the city have to offer its youth? Poverty, unemployment, corruption and “Bangla Bandh”? The city has been stagnating and decaying. Therefore, the dire need for the city to re-invent itself.

This process of re-invention has given rise to a dichotomy (a typical feature of Calcutta) in representation of the city. One representation lashes out at the decadence in the city while the other attempts to re-create the lost glory. This phenomenon will be best understood if one compares two films of the recent times – *Yuva* (2004)<sup>11</sup> and *Parineeta* (2005)<sup>12</sup>. While *Yuva* captures the frustration of the youth, *Parineeta*'s youthful romance attempts to highlight the glorious past. However, though the treatment of the city is different in the two films, the basic intention of both is the same – mythify Calcutta. With this let us turn to the literature that is now being produced about the city – the premise of this research.

Let us now see what these novels are about. *Evening Standard* judges *The Blue Bedspread* as “A ghostly, elliptical piece of prose of quite magical quality”. *The Calcutta Chromosome* claims itself to be a “Novel of Fevers, Delirium and Discovery”. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is about an insomniac- pyromaniac and describes itself “a novel about desire, captivity and destruction”. *If You Are Afraid of Heights* speaks about accidents, suicides, fears, child rape and post-mortem. The point to be noted from this is that all these novels in some form or the other speak about fears, anxieties and

psychological disorders. All the novels as it were hover about the line between nightmare and reality and there pervades a sense of sleeplessness. In fact two of the novelists, Raj Kamal Jha and Indrajit Hazra, have stated in their respective interviews that they themselves suffer from insomnia. Perhaps these statements are a kind of marketing strategy but if one were to believe in them then it appears that these novels are a creative side-effect of insomnia. A disorder, which seems to be induced by the atmosphere of this enigmatic city.

Hiren Bose, the protagonist of Indrajit Hazra's *The Garden Of Earthly Delights*, suffers from insomnia. is a pyromaniac who is responsible for the major Calcutta fires such as the Book Fair's, New Market's, Fipro Market's and is the murder of his girl friend. In a cold psychotic manner he says –

I burn things for pleasure. Simply put, I derive pleasure out of burning objects. I love gathering up things – paper, wood, furniture, books, garbage, anything- and love the way they first glow and curl, and then curl and grow brittle and black...gives me immense pleasure. I wont say its better than sex. But it is better than sex with any one I have ever met. (55).

Amir in *If You Are Afraid of Heights* has nightmares about

...a woman and a girl, curled up, pressed flat against the insides”, floating inside jars of water and calling out his name. He sees that they “crawl their way up through the water but so narrow is the jar that they get intertwined, their fingers scrape the glass, leaving thin scratches in their wake. The girl is crying, he can make out her tears in the water, on her face near her eyes, she is the first to drown, he can see her lying, her dress drenched, sticking to her body, like a drop of red paint stuck at the bottom... (88-89).

This nightmare keeps recurring to him and becomes a dark reality in the second part of the novel. In this part another character Mala has a more hellish nightmare of a fish market/slaughterhouse –

The only sound she can hear is that of her breath, of her lips as they part in fear because instead of the fish, she can now see that they are selling corpses, of men, women and children, all naked and dead. Except for a few babies. The size of mackerels, which thrash around in aluminium tubs... Instead of the scales and the gills on the floor, she can see clumps of hair and nails, some polished red... (148)

In *The Shadow Lines* what May had witnessed in reality, Tridib's death –

The mob had surrounded the rickshaw. They had pulled the old man out off it. I could hear him screaming. Tridib ran into the mob, and fell upon their back... Then the mob hit him. He vanished... It took less than a moment... I saw three bodies. They were all dead. They'd cut Khalil's stomach open. The old man's head had been hacked off. And they'd cut Tridib's throat from ear to ear (250-251)

becomes an everlasting nightmare for her, Robi and the narrator. The book itself in my opinion is the narrator's nightmare. The past and the present fuse, Tridib's life in way gets replicated in the narrator's life. All this adds on to the effect of the nightmare. And this is not peculiar to just this novel. Past, present, future, fiction, realities intermingle and diffuse in all the novels. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* treads the thin line between fiction and reality, slipping from one world into another with an eerie ease. Real life incidents like the various Calcutta fires are deftly linked with the fictitious characters. In an unnerving manner Hazra fuses the lives of his characters – Manik Basu and Hiren Bose. The fusion of their lives diffuses the difference between the creator and the creation. And in doing so the narrative acquires the quality of a nightmare. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* fuses the time span from the partition of India to the future 2030. *The*



*Calcutta Chromosome* as the cover of the book itself states is a “medical thriller, a Victorian ghost story, a scientific quest...novel ranges back and forth in time from an unspecified period in the future to the late nineteenth century search of the elusive ‘Calcutta Chromosome’” to 21<sup>st</sup> August 1995. In *The Sin of Colour* Niharika returns from England to Calcutta in order to forget her “past”. To do so she engages herself in writing about her uncle Debendranath who had mysteriously disappeared from Oxford several years back. Since untraceable Debendranath is considered to be dead but when Niharika starts writing about him, Debendranath “returns from the dead” to the ancestral house Madalay, which is in ruins and is now a “house full of ghosts”. Like Tridib and the narrator in *The Shadow Lines*, here too the lives of Niharika and Debendranath almost appear to be a mirror image of each other. This mirroring of life is best expressed in *If You Are Afraid of Heights*. The novel is reflexive in nature. The names of the characters (Rima and Amir; Mala and Alam) are mirror images of each other. So are the characters: one is Hindu, while the other is Muslim. To read the titles of each part of the book is to read the title of the book backwards, and the three stories can be read backwards too. The epilogue thus becomes the prologue. It too says, “Look at the picture on the cover...” The book, therefore, is a mirror image of itself. This replication, mirroring and fusion disrupt the linearity of time. It brings out a sense of anxiety and thereby constantly gives one the feel of a nightmare.

While on the one hand we have the novels expressing distortions, nightmares, violence and neurosis, on the other we have newspaper columns, magazines, websites and coffee-table books glorifying Calcutta. For instance, the official website of West Bengal [www.wbtourism.com](http://www.wbtourism.com)<sup>13</sup> describes Calcutta and its people as –

Kolkata is the home of the Bengalis – volatile in politics, sports lover, intellectual, romantic with a unique sensibility. To whom every activity is a commitment of passionate intensity – be it a religious festival, soccer matches, political demonstrations, music, art, poetry reading, eating or adda (chat sessions).

Kolkata breeds culture. Rabindranath Tagore gave Bengal new composite music, dance drama and literature. Sitar maestro Pandit Ravi

Shankar internationalised Indian Classical music. Jamini Roy revived folk painting. Uday Shankar created a new dance form. Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) introduced a new genre of performing arts. Ustad Allauddin Khan created a new orchestra and famous film maker Satyajit Ray's home and canvas was Kolkata.

While another website – [www.sarbhadihari.com](http://www.sarbhadihari.com) – lists a few salient features of the Kolkattans (I have listed below a few of them)

You're a true Kolkattan if.....

- Your Residential Address: 45B comes between 30 and 30A.
- Your answer is "Jani na dada", when somebody asks you for directions whether it's to Esplanade, Metro rail, Nandan or Gariahat.
- You are a universal bandh supporter.
- Office-goers are better traffic controllers - criticize Traffic police from the bus.
- Every time somebody gives you a piece of good news - you became frustrated and the first thing you ask them is, "Sotti? Ki bhabey holo?"- really? How did that happen?
- First day at the Book Fair you locate the important stalls like ARAMBAG'S CHICKEN and BENFISH.
- You call 11:00 A.M. as "Shokaal shokaal" You are 1 hour late and you feel you are on time.
- You look at the "Rs. 90/- Fixed Price" stand and still ask, "15 taka ar ek poisa beshi na! Deben to din..", and wait for his response. And at the end of 30 mins argument, you buy it for Rs. 85/-.
- You know the answers and ins & outs of everything on this planet but for some reason still want to be an NRI but don't quite know how to go about it.
- You know cricket better than Gavaskar, Science better than Einstein, Politics better than Marx and everything else better than everybody else.

- You think being either an engineer or a doctor is the greatest achievement in life because that's what your parents tell you.
- You think you are a great patriot because you quote media statements by politicians better than anyone else and because you think the noise and crowd of the Puja days is the most attractive cultural event ever. Even though you have no idea which year Tagore won the Nobel prize.

What is to be noted here is that though these documentations glorify Calcutta, they do so in spite of being aware of its follies. It's as if they revel in these short-comings, laugh at them and yet feel proud about it. On the other hand the novels describe the ugly side of the city but the city is romanticised in these descriptions and the end result is glorification of the city. Thus we see that both these forms – fiction and non-fiction – outcome is the same. The city is being re-imagined in a manner that it attracts.

Through the course of this dissertation my attempt will be to explore how these works re-invent the city and glamorise it. For this I will undertake a close reading of four contemporary novels – *The Shadow Lines*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Blue Bedspreed*, *If You Are Afraid of Heights* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Some newspaper columns such as “An Eye On Calcutta” (*The Telegraph*), certain websites and essays on Calcutta's culture will also be referred to. In the process I will try to seek answers to the age old question, best expressed by Anita Desai –

Can the English language convey thoughts, emotions and situations that are alien to the English experience? What about those that have grown out of the contact of the two languages, a contact which has infiltrated many English into Bengali (and a few vice versa, such as bungalow) where they have taken on a connotation and flavour very different from their usage in English?

The answer may not be definitive, for this genre is still very new and only time will decide its success. However, my attempt will be to critically analyse the literary merit of these novels, the tropes that they employ and whether it can at all be labelled as a

separate genre or school of writing. While analysing the novels I will juxtapose them with the non-fiction writing and compare the two to express the way in which they are working towards re-inventing the city.

The dissertation includes four more chapters. The next chapter will be a study of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Line* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. This chapter's main intention will be to discuss the new style of writing and explore how the city and its experiences are mapped out in fiction. The third chapter will include a study of Raj Kamal Jha's *The Blue Bedspread* and *If You Are Afraid of Heights* and the fourth chapter will evaluate Indrajit Hazra's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. These two chapters will also explore how the city is weaved into the narrative and in the process it will attempt to analyse how the trend started by Amitav Ghosh is being developed by other writers. The intention will be to seek whether they are unique in some way or are they merely formulaic. The fifth chapter will be the concluding chapter which will explore the way in which Calcutta is being re-invented – what is the image of the Calcutta that is being re-imagined and it will also be discussed how far this new fictional form of Indian English writing will be a success.

Anita Desai in her Forward to Krishna Dutta's *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History* says that to describe the "dramatic history" of Calcutta a guide is necessary. And this guide, she says, "cannot be a foreigner who does not know the city intimately from within, yet it cannot be a local citizen who knows no other and has no standards of comparison or breadth of vision." Similarly I feel that the relationship of Calcutta and English Literature can only be described by one who is familiar with both and is yet at a position to analyse the relationship between the city and the literature/language objectively. Having been born and brought up in Calcutta, I feel I am keenly aware of its nuances, yet having moved out of it for four years now I am at a position to see its follies and judge them with objectivity. This also enables me to see the city from the perspective of the novelists and thus perhaps understand their positions better. These tools I believe will equip me to do justice to this research.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Krishna Dutta. *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History*. Roli; New Delhi. 2003.

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- <sup>2</sup> Poem by Jibanananda Das
- <sup>3</sup> Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines*. Ravi Dayal; New Delhi. 1988.
- <sup>4</sup> Amitav Ghosh. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> Sunetra Gupta. *A Sin of Colours*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1999.
- <sup>6</sup> Raj Kamal Jha. *The Blue Bedspread*. London: Picador, 2000.
- <sup>7</sup> Raj Kamal Jha. *If You Are Afraid of Heights*. London: Picador, 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> Ruchir Joshi. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*. New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 2002.
- <sup>9</sup> Indrajit Hazra. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. New Delhi: IndiaInk, 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> Historical details compiled from *Calcutta: The Living City* (Volume I and II), edited by Sukanta Chaudhuri and websites – [www.calcuttaweb.com](http://www.calcuttaweb.com) and [www.banglaweb.com](http://www.banglaweb.com).
- <sup>11</sup> *Yuva*. Dir. Mani Ratnam. With Ajay Devgan, Vivek Oberoi, Abhishek Bachchan, Rani Mukherjee, Esha Deol, and Kareena Kapoor. 2003.
- <sup>12</sup> *Parineeta*. Dir. Pradip Sarkar. With Saif Ali Khan, Sanjay Dutt, and Vidya Balan. 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> "Calcutta". <http://www.westbengaltourism.com/Introducing>. As on 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2005.

## CHAPTER 2

### GHOSTS OF THE PAST *AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S VIEW*

In an interview<sup>1</sup>, to the question as to why Calcutta features so prominently in his works, especially *The Shadow Lines* (1988)<sup>2</sup> and *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996)<sup>3</sup>, Amitav Ghosh replied:

I spend a lot of time in Calcutta each year, so it is only natural that the city should figure prominently in my writing.

Perhaps it's as natural as Ghosh claims it to be. After all it's his birthplace and, as has been discussed at length in the previous chapter, Calcutta does leave an indelible influence on whosoever is or has been associated with it. Jug Suraiya says in his book *Calcutta: A City Remembered* (2005) –

Years ago a fellow guest at a party in Greenwich Village, New York, told me that when he visited Calcutta, Satyajit Ray showed him around the city. 'I bet I know your Calcutta better than you do', he said.

'No', I replied. 'You know Ray's Calcutta, not mine'. Anyone who has ever been there has his own Calcutta. All you have to do is listen to it, as I have listened to mine.<sup>4</sup>

So taking Ghosh's explanation at face value, this chapter will explore how Calcutta manages to seep into his text and in the process an attempt will be made to seek whether the presence of the city is as simplistic as Ghosh claims it to be? Is Calcutta a prominent presence only because Ghosh returns to it every year? Is Ghosh as unconscious of its presence seeping in as he claims? Or does he have a special agenda in weaving Calcutta into his works?

Let us, therefore, commence the discussion with *The Shadow Lines* and explore how Calcutta and its culture are present in it. *The Shadow Lines*, in very simplistic terms, is a novel about a boy growing up in Calcutta then moving to Delhi and London with a unique vision of looking at the world – a trait which was gifted to him by his eccentric uncle, Tridib. Through the story of the boy, Ghosh maps the histories, memories and politics of nations. For this purpose extensive description of the cities becomes important. John Steinbeck, in his novel *The Pearl* (1947)<sup>5</sup>, says that a city is like an animal, with nerves and veins; it has its psyche and idiosyncrasies. Let us sample here how the four main cities in *The Shadow Lines* – Calcutta, Delhi, London and Dhaka – take shapes of pulsating characters. The first extract is a description of Calcutta that occurs at the beginning of the novel. Note here how carefully Ghosh locates the narrator – where he grew up and how it has changed over the years.

When I go past Gole Park now I often wonder whether that would happen today. I don't know, I can't tell: that world is closed to me, shut off by too many years spent away: Montu (his childhood friend and neighbour) went away to America years ago and Nathu Chaubey, I heard, went back to Banaras and started a hotel. When I walk past his paan-shop now and look at the crowds thronging through those neon-lit streets, the air-conditioned shops filled with rickety stall and the tarpaulin counters of pavement vendors, at the traffic packed as tight as a mail train all the way to the Dhakuria overbridge, somehow, though the paan-shop hasn't changed, I find myself doubting it. At that time, in the early 'sixties there were so few cars around that we thought nothing of playing football on the streets around the roundabout – making way occasionally for the number 9, or any other bus that happened to come snorting along. There were only a few scattered shacks on Gariahat Road then, put up by the earliest refugees from the east. Gole Park was considered to be more or less outside Calcutta: in school when I said I lived there the boys from central Calcutta would often ask me if I caught a train every morning as though I lived in some far-flung refugee camp on the border. (7-8)

In this one paragraph Ghosh tells us that the narrator has stayed away from Calcutta for quite sometime and that he and his family might have migrated from Bangladesh. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the partition of Bengal in 1905, Hindus from East Bengal, now Bangladesh, started migrating to Calcutta, while the reverse migration happened with the Muslims moving from Calcutta to Dhaka. Till date the largest migration in the city consists of the Hindu refugees from erstwhile East Bengal. According to the 1951 Census, 33.2 percent of the Calcutta population was city-born. The rest were migrants; 12.3 percent from other parts of West Bengal, 26.6 percent from other Indian states and 26.9 percent had come from East Pakistan during 1947<sup>6</sup>. Then came an uncontrollable wave of refugees. In 1950 over a million immigrants arrived from East Pakistan. They included both the middle class and the poor, who had been forcibly uprooted. Inevitable the trauma of displacement scarred not only the migrants but also the host population, who considered the immigrants to be usurpers of the cityspace. And a gradual hatred towards them started building up which was magnified in the late fifties when the city had become a refugee relief centre. Krishna Dutta draws a vivid picture of this scene in the section titled “Refugees of East Bengal” –

The refugees were camping in the streets, scratching a living by setting up tea shops and tiny kiosks selling cigarettes and *pan*. Listless and bored, they spat the blood-red juice from chewing *pan* all over the city’s walls and pavements, not bothering with a spittoon. Lacking any kind of sanitation, they defecated in the open gutters. Babies were born on the railway platform and open streets without much ado, let alone medical treatment. The streets were alive with rats, cockroaches and flies, and scavenging dogs and vultures. (172)<sup>7</sup>

The ones who migrated in the 1940’s were the middle-class Hindus who already had family and business ties in Calcutta. They bought property from the Muslims moving to the other side of the border and settled in the southern parts of Calcutta such as Gole Park, Garihat and Ballygunge. These people were financially secure and settled down fairly well in the city. However, with the changing scenario in the city a mutual distaste developed between the West Bengali and East Bengalis in Calcutta. The Bengali race got



divided into *Ghotis* (West Bengalis) and *Bangals* (East Bengalis). The *Ghotis* held the *Bangals* responsible for ruining the city culture, while the *Bangals* always grudged the complacency of the *Ghotis*. The divide and hatred became so strong that it filtered into every walk of life, even in sports. The Mohunbagan and East Bengal war in Calcutta is a result of this divide. Whatever, the *Ghotis* believed in became the subject of disagreement for the *Bangals*. Thus, their dwelling places also got fraught with antagonism. Since the early immigrants lived in the southern parts of the city, the traditional *Ghoti* families of the North looked down upon them. This divide continues even now. The North and southern parts of the city are still much divided and city-dwellers from either parts make sure that they do not miss an opportunity to show off their superiority. For instance, people from North and Central Calcutta in the sixties treated the southern part of the city as a suburb. However, the present day's South Calcutta is fashionable and the southerners now raise their eyebrows on those living in the North. Interestingly, the divide is not just between the East and West Bengalis. There are differences among the just the East Bengalis depending upon the time that they migrated to Calcutta. Those who came to the city before the 1950's look down upon the later migrants as "refugees" and do not wish to be identified by them. This attitude gets reflected in the narrator's grandmother as well –

My grandmother, looking out of her window in amazement, exclaimed: When I last came here (Garia) ten years ago, there were rice-fields running alongside the road; it was the kind of place where rich Calcutta people built garden houses. And look at it now – as filthy as a babui's nest. It's all because of the refugees, flooding in like that.

Just like we did, said my father, to provoke her.

We're not refugees, snapped my grandmother, on cue. We came long before Partition. (131)

These dynamics of the city life is brought out by Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* through the subtle references to the divide and alienation that exists between the northern and southern parts of the city. However, though Ghosh critiques this attitude, perhaps he himself is not entirely free of them. It is perhaps due to this ingrained prejudice, that

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Ghosh does not mention a word about the Northern part of the city. The prejudice is well defined in Aparna Sen's film *Paromitar Ek Din* (2000)<sup>8</sup>, where the protagonist, Paromita, born and brought up in South Calcutta struggles to adjust to the worldview of her in-laws home in North Calcutta. The next extract maps Delhi. It's after the narrator learns about his grandmother's death. The city here becomes his consoler.

I wished desperately that day that Robi (the narrator's uncle), who had been gone for almost a year, was still in college. I could think of no one else I wanted to talk to, so I wandered out of the college, down the road to the Maurice Nagar bus stop. An empty 210 came along after a while and I climbed into it. I got the window seat and started out, watching the parks on Ring Road and the wall of the Red Fort go by. When the bus reached the Central Secretariat, I crossed the road and took another 210 back. At the Mall Road I decided to get off and walk. It was already dark then, the roads deserted, the whole university silent under the pall of the examinations. (92)



In the third extract the narrator is in London. He's going to Mrs Price's house for the first time, he is new to the city but he knows it so well in his mind that he says "I've known the streets around here for a long time..." Note here how detailed the description is. The descriptive passage reflects the extent of the colonial influence. So strong is the influence in us, that a city which is miles away from us, a city which we have not seen, is clearly imprinted in our minds.

When we came out of the tube station I stopped them and pointed down the road. Since this is the West End Lane, I said, that must be Sumatra Road over there. So that corner must be where the air raid shelter was, the same one that Robi's mother and your mother and your uncle Alan ducked into on their way back from Mill Lane, when one of those huge high-calibre bombs exploded on the Solent Road, around the corner... And that house, that one, just down the road, over there, on the corner of Lymington Road... (55)

The final extract is of Dhaka when the narrator's grandmother had gone there after decades to get her uncle. Note that this passage is not as detailed the previous three. This is slightly strange because Ghosh has spent several years in Bangladesh and so the place should have been more concretely mapped. More so because the place is very important in the novel – the place of Tridib's death.

A few minutes later they turned into a narrow lane that was linked with shops on both sides. Now my grandmother didn't know where to look, for suddenly the sights were falling into place like a stack of old photographs. She twisted and turned in her seat pointing at everything: that's where the boys used to play football, that's where Shyam Lahiri used to live, that's Rina's house, I met her the other day in the park, that's where Naresh-babu used to sit – behind the bars in that jewellery shop... (206)

Through these descriptions one might run the risk of essentialising, but stereotypes are useful in studying a city and the author's intention thereof. However, it can be subjected to deconstruction. Cities are manufactured in imagination, by popular discourse and writing. This point is elaborated by Tuomas Huttunen in his essay "Representation of London in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh"<sup>9</sup>. He cites Fredrick Jameson's discussion of the change from market to monopoly capital<sup>10</sup>, where Jameson detects "a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience". Carrying this argument forward into literature, Huttunen says that the immediate experience of an individual subject, which according to Jameson was previously the primary raw material of fiction, is now reduced to only one of the sectors in the social world. What is more, the way this sector of immediate sense-perception is realised does not necessarily coincide with its actual socio-cultural present. He elaborates his point by showing how in *The Shadow Lines*, the representation of the narrator's imaginary London is different from the lived experience of the other characters. Moving along the same argument, while discussing the representation of Calcutta in the novel, I will attempt to show how this representation of Calcutta differs from and excludes certain lived experiences.

While speaking of London in *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator says –

I wanted to know England not as I saw her, but in her finest hour – every place chooses its own and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in war (57)

If the London that Ghosh describes is the city in its finest hour, then the Calcutta that he speaks of is also the city in its finest hour – the 1960's Calcutta. A time when Calcutta was the most fashionable and also the decade that witnessed the tragic Naxalite movement. It's the Calcutta that many would want to know and several refer to with a deep sense of nostalgia. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Parineeta* (1914)<sup>11</sup> is set in early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural Bengal but Pradip Sarkar in his cinematic rendition<sup>12</sup> of the book sets it in the sixties of Calcutta. The transfer of place and time was done to enable the modern viewers to identify with the film. So if that was the case then why not the Calcutta of the present times? In an interview, Saif Ali Khan (Shekhar, the protagonist), says –

Not many know that we shot a modern version of *Parineeta*! That's true, we did a trial of *Parineeta* where the film was created in modern settings; among the scenes that were shot was the song 'Piyu Bole'. But I along with everyone else were convinced that it wasn't working out. The soul was somewhere lost. *Parineeta* comes alive only when it is told from its age. So sixties it had to be!

Pradeep is a grandmaster who thinks in terms of visuals. He along with our cinematographer Natragan, have done a fabulous job of capturing the mood and moment. The entire light & shadow play is stupendous. I don't think it would have been very interesting to tell *Parineeta* as a today story!

Kolkata has a lot of history to it which makes it fascinating! Kolkata as a city is an interesting place to be. It is lovely looking, extremely picturesque and has a lot of history to it which is what I think makes it a fascinating! What I realized during my shooting was that though it might

be dated, the Kolkata of the sixties was so rich in its culture and being that it could easily match up to any culture hotspot of those days. It was an extremely liberated place for those times.<sup>13</sup>

The comment and the success of the film reflects the popular fascination for the sixties Calcutta. However, interestingly though Ghosh describes much of the sixties Calcutta, he is silent about the Naxalite movement that rocked the city towards the end of the decade. It's a little strange that an observant and sensitive character like the narrator of the novel was not at all affected by this movement. One wonders why Ghosh chooses to keep silent about this issue. The movement left a permanent scar in the minds of the Calcuttans. Several of them would shy away from speaking about it. A memory they would like to forget. So does Ghosh, like several Calcuttans, wish to forget this incident? Is he intending to create a picture of Calcutta that is unmarked by the tragedy? The theme and essence of the novel does not hint at that. The clue to the answer might be taken from this observation made by the narrator –

So that is why I can only describe at second hand the manner of Tridib's death: I do not have the words to give it meaning. I do not have the words, and I do not have the strength to listen. (228)

This is what the narrator feels about violence. Before making this final statement he grapples with the banality of violence and why he has kept silent about it for so many years. So if we take the narrator to be Ghosh's voice then it seems that Ghosh's decision to keep silent about the act of violence is a way of protesting against the act. Therefore, he does not speak of the Naxalite movement perhaps simply because of the banality that marked it. Hundreds of young men were exterminated in the name of maintaining law and order. What meaning can one assign to that? The only weapon to counter that is perhaps to maintain an echoing silence. However, this is not to say that Ghosh's novel is censored of all violence. Rather it's a novel that exposes the face to brutality with ease. As discussed in the introductory chapter, there is predominant feel of a nightmare in the novel. May's lived experience of Tridib's death in the riots of Dhaka is a recurrent nightmare not only for her but Robi and the narrator too. The actual circumstances of

Tridib's death comes at the end of the novel but there is a slow build up to it. The climax being the narrator's – then just a school boy returning from school with his friends – experience of the 1964 riots in Calcutta. The incident is described within a span of eight pages (197-204). Interestingly very little action finds place in this description. Rather it is the stillness and silence that is described which amplifies the enormity of the violence. To exemplify I will quote a paragraph from the description –

Tublu shook my elbow and pointed at a rickshaw that had been pulled across the mouth of a narrow lane. The others saw it to and turned to stare. We couldn't take our eyes off it, even after we left it far behind. There was no reason for us to stare: we saw rickshaws standing at untidy angles in the streets every time we went out. And yet we could not help staring at it: there was something about the angle at which it had been placed that was eloquent of an intent we could not fathom: had it been put there to keep Muslims in or Hindus out? At that moment we could read the disarrangement of our universe in the perfectly ordinary angle of an abandoned rickshaw. (203)

Note here how Ghosh uses such harmless symbols such as an innocuous rickshaw – a regular feature on the Calcutta roads – to dramatise a scene of violence. With this let us move forward to exploring how other salient features of Calcutta has been used Ghosh to narrate his tale.

In her essay “Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Lines*”<sup>14</sup>, Meenakshi Mukherjee points out how cartographic imagination is an important aspect of the Bengali psyche – a topic yet untouched by research. Real journeys or even tales of travels have always fascinated the Bengalis – if surveyed the number of Bengali tourists outnumber travelers from any other region of the country. Mukherjee says according to publishers the sale of travel books in Bengali comes to a close second to the religious books. Bengali books abound in tales about far flung places – African forests, Arab deserts, Australian bushrangers and Himalayan glaciers. Interestingly most of the authors may not have set a foot outside Bengal and yet were capable of churning out convincing and enthralling tales about these places. Like Tridib they gave one the

“worlds to travel in and ... eyes to see them with”. The character of Tridib is reminiscent particularly of characters such as Ghanada – a creation of Premendra Mitra<sup>15</sup>, who we will discuss in greater details in the fourth chapter – who captivates a younger person’s imagination with his encyclopaedic knowledge. Tridib is not merely similar to such fictional characters. Characters such as him may be spotted in reality in any of the streets of Calcutta. The clue is to scan the (in)famous adda sessions, which though gradually disappearing, still remains a prominent feature of Calcutta culture.

Adda is a peculiar Calcutta phenomenon. Adda is almost synonymous with Bengali culture. It is often said that it is the lifeblood of Bengalis. It is the quintessential aspect of their culture. In fact, wherever there are Bengalis there is bound to be an adda. It’s a friendly, casual conversation at an informal gathering of like-minded people, who want to talk their hearts out as a means of relaxation during leisure hours. Pratap Kumar Roy, a former newspaper editor, has this most delightful of definition to offer: “It is a long talking session, commonly of a recurrent sort, among friends or co-activists. It is not simply a conversation or discussion, or debate or gossip and, yet, it is all of these. It ranges over a variety of subjects — war, theatre, Hindu philosophy, or why Bengali Brahmins eat fish. It is certainly not idle gossip, as the participants are usually well informed and witty. But what is it if not fundamentally idle or unproductive?”<sup>16</sup> this is what Ray has to say but there are several others even Amartya Sen who would differ from this opinion and state several instances in which addas have been productive. To put it simply it is believed that if you are a true Bengali you cannot be too busy to indulge in adda. When questioned about the unproductivity of adda Rotarian Gopinath Ghosh<sup>17</sup> gives of a list of names such as Sudhin Dutta, Satyajit Ray, Amartya Sen, Uttam Kumar, Soumitra Chatterjee, Sunil Gangopadhyay have all indulged in adda and they have not been idle men. Barry O’Brien in a column in *The Telegraph*<sup>18</sup>, “An Eye On Calcutta” said –

Unproductive it hasn’t been for me. Twenty years ago, a “meaningless” adda session with my cricket superior Mudar Patherya on which cricketers would make it to the Best Capricorn XI and which ones had played for more than one country, resulted in a leading publisher

producing a book edited by us, entitled *The Penguin Book of Cricket Lists*. Nine years ago, an “aimless” adda with colleagues in a staff room, on legendary teachers and courageous students, resulted in *The Telegraph School Awards for Excellence* seeing the light of day.

It is said that an easy way to spot your Bengali friend is to find out his addakhana or thhek, i.e., the place of adda. It may be a street-side tea-stall, it may be the football-club or the local-club of the para or neighbourhood, it may be under the tree, the parar rowk, or just about anywhere - from your drawing room to the famous Coffee House of Calcutta. In fact, Nirad C. Chowdhury has dedicated one whole chapter in his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* on this Bengali phenomenon of adda<sup>19</sup>. The famous Ghanada and Tenida of Bengali popular fiction are characters who are known for their art of adda. While Ghanada holds his adda sessions in his room on a terrace of a boys’ mess, Tenida joins the addas at street corners. Both of them spice up the sessions with tall tales about their addas. It should be noted here that one of the features of adda is the narration of tales of adventure, which are more often than not fabricated. In an adda the discussion is not just what happened at home, office or college, or who's going around with whom these days, but also very serious and far-fetched affairs ranging from the country's economic and political scenario to bilateral relations, from the latest in technology to the latest in football and cricket, from magic realism, ancient literature and little magazine to modern poetry, fusion music and jibonmukhi gaan and so on. Some of the famous places for adda are –

1. Coffee House (College Street )
2. Nadan/Rabindrasadan premises, now even Rabindrasadan Metro station.
3. Coffee House (Jadavpur)
4. Academy of Fine Arts
5. Rabindra Sarovar

When a Bengali speaks of Calcutta it’s difficult for him to exclude adda. Ghosh seems to be no exception. So when he describes Tridib he invariably places him in a



habitat which is most comfortable for a person like him. The narrator would seek him out in these sessions. He says –

But if I happened to hear that Tridib was around I would double back through the park and the back lanes. Someone would always be able to tell me where he was: he was a familiar figure within the floating, talkative population of students and would-be footballers and bank clerks and small-time politicians and all the rest would gravitate towards that conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park. (8)

The narrator expresses his surprise at finding Tridib interacting easily with this motley crowd. However, such abrasions are not odd in such set ups. Though generally adda groups are formed between like minded people, more often than not one will find a few odds. Perhaps it is due to this inclusion of a variety of people in the group that adda sessions encompass vast and varied topics. For instance, though Tridib was an apparent misfit in his adda group, it was his presence in the group that provided it with tales of far flung lands –

But occasionally, when he was in the mood and somebody happened to say something that made a breach in his vast reservoirs of abstruse information, he would begin to hold forth on all kinds of subjects – Mesopotamian stellas, East European jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the plays of Garcia Lorca, there seemed to be no end to the things he could talk about. (8-9)

Tracing this influence of Calcutta and its literature in *The Shadow Lines* is not to suggest that it is a Bengali novel written in English but as Mukherjee says –

...to emphasize the concreteness of the existential and emotional milieu in which Tridib and his reflected image – the unnamed narrator – are situated.<sup>20</sup>

She points out that despite his anonymity the narrator is very firmly placed. His family belongs to the class of the Bangali *bhadralok*. Ghosh carefully defines their values, beliefs and aspirations. For instance, note the narrator's career graph. He does his schooling from some good school in central Calcutta. Most probably a convent school. All this is revealed by simple comments made casually – from the description of the route taken by his school bus when returning home on the day of the riot reveals that his school is somewhere between Park Circus and Park Street, an area where most of the “good” English medium schools are located. Again his mathematics teacher is Mrs Anderson, an Anglo-Indian lady – a prominent figure in convent schools. From Calcutta he moves to Delhi for further education. Here too Ghosh carefully locates the college that the narrator goes to (Refer to the quote on Delhi in this chapter, earlier. A reference to stroll down the road to Maurice Nagar bus stop, clearly indicates the college that he's referring to. After Delhi the narrator leaves for London for further education). London is a dream destination for most Calcuttans – a residual effect of colonialism. The precision with which Ghosh charts out all these details can leave no doubt – this family can only be located in Calcutta. A class of people for whom education is foremost and where one receives this education is also of extreme importance. The values of this class – the Bengali *bhadralok* – is best revealed through the character of the grandmother. She is a stickler for time. Every moment has to be used constructively or else she feels it will rot and stink. She is extremely particular about her grandson's education. A fear is ingrained into the minds of the children that unless they perform well they'll end up as losers. And these losers occupy certain geographical spaces. Note in the passage quoted below the distaste and fear that the grandmother has for people occupying certain city spaces –

Part of the reason why my grandmother was so wary of him (Tridib) was that she had seen him a couple of times at the street corners around Gole Park where we lived. She had a deep horror of the young men who spent their time at the street-corner addas and tea-stalls around there. All fail cases, she would sniff; think of their poor mothers, flung out on the dung-heaps, starving...(7)

The fear of failure and its association with spaces is poignantly revealed when the narrator and his family go to visit his grandmother's relatives living in the humble dwellings in Garia –

It was true of course that I could not see the landscape or anything like it from my own window, but its presence was palpable everywhere in our house; I had grown up with it. It was the landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother's voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn't study hard I would end up over there, that the only weapon people like us had was our brains and if we didn't use them like claws to cling to what we'd got, that was where we'd end up, marooned in that landscape: I knew perfectly well that all it would take was a couple of failed examinations to put me where our relative was...(134)

Apart from studies, the other field in which a Bengali boy must excel is sports. In *The Shadow Lines* we see that the grandmother was as zealous about the narrator's performance in sports – which is yet another Bengali obsession – as she was about his academics. While most Bengali girls are taught music, dance or painting, most Bengali boys are trained to play cricket or football. This is as important as their education. Its importance is more pronounced in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Urmila's family is far more enthusiastic about her brother's modest career in sports than they are about her job which is the primary source of earning in the family. Even before her brother is given the First Division contract by the Wicket Club, the family is in the celebration mode. A casual phone call from the club informing that the secretary might come to visit the family for discussing the boy's prospect, is enough for the family to rejoice. To appease the secretary Urmila's mother insists that she prepare *islih* (Hilsa, a Bengali delicacy) before she leaves for work (111). With this let us carry forward the discussions further into – *The Calcutta Chromosome*<sup>21</sup>.

Here the very title of the novel reveals the importance the Calcutta holds in this novel. The Calcutta that Ghosh presents here is mainly the 1990's Calcutta – a period when the city is in a process of re-invention. A time when the city is realizing its

inadequacies and is desperately trying to re-create itself. And as in *The Shadow Lines*, here too the city is carefully mapped by Ghosh. When the character of Murugan is introduced he is placed in Calcutta. The quote below shows the precise location of Murugan. Anyone who is slightly aware of Calcutta roads will immediately visualize Murugan in his whereabouts –

Walking past St Paul's Cathedral, on his first day in Calcutta, August 20, 1995, Murugan was caught unawares by a monsoon downpour. He was on his way to Presidency General Hospital, on Lower Circular Road, to look for the memorial to the British scientist Ronald Ross. (20)

Such descriptions of the city abound in the novel. Quoted below are few randomly selected sections –

The torrential downpour had now thinned to a gentle drizzle.

Murugan made his way quickly out of the premises of Rabindra Sadan, to the traffic-clogged edge of Lower Circular Road. Ignoring the beleaguered policeman on the traffic island, he stepped into the flow and marched right through, holding up a hand to ward off the oncoming cars and buses, apparently oblivious to their screeching brakes and blaring horns. (33)

On Free School Street. I was walking past New Market, on my way home, when a guy came up to me and whispered in my ear. I guessed he was a pimp... It was irresistible. All I had was five rupees but that was enough. He led me down one of those thin alleys around Free School Street, just around the corner from the Armenian school, where William Thackeray was born. (237)

Walking past the pavement stalls on Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Road, Urmilla caught a whiff of the irresistible smell of fish cutlets and dhakai paratha wafting through the doors of the Dilkhusha Cabin.

‘I’ll die if I don’t eat soon’, she remarked to Murugan. She lost no time in propelling him into the eatery. Leading him to a curtained booth, she slid on to a bench and signalled to Murugan to seat himself opposite her. A waiter appeared almost immediately, with two limp menu cards in hand. (200)

In the sections quoted above we will analyse what aspects of Calcutta are woven in and what is not. In the first section the key elements are the torrential downpour and the manner in which Murugan crosses the street. One refers to the monsoons that mark Calcutta – this we will see in the later chapters, is an important feature in other novels as well – and the other highlights the infamous road and traffic sense of Calcuttans. A few days back I had gone out with a couple of friends when we spotted a man crossing the road oblivious of the traffic coming to a screeching halt. In a leisured pace he moved across the street with his hands held high gesturing the cars to stop and make way for him. My friends remarked “fresh from Calcutta”. This incident was almost a replay of the scene I witnessed with my aunt – she is a Canadian – in New York and she too had the same thing to say “He seems to have come from your city”. Be it in New Delhi or New York, a Calcuttan gives himself away when he has to cross the road. Years of living out of the city will definitely change that but once in the old habitat this old habit will invariably surface, as in the case of Murugan in *The Calcutta Chromosome*. The second quote depicts one of the red light areas of the city. It is to be noted that it is one of the few passages that depict the ugly face of the city. Ghosh is very careful about the picture of the city that he presents. Another point to be noted that as in *The Shadow Lines*, in *The Calcutta Chromosome* too, Ghosh doesn’t mention about the Northern part of the city. The whole action unfolds between Chowringhee, Alipore, Gariahat, Rabindra Sadan, Kalighat, Robinson Street and P G Hospital. The closest to North that the narrative goes to is Sealdah. There seems to be no other reason than the snobbery that the residents of the two parts of the city project on each other.

The third quote again takes us back to the phenomenon of addas. Dilkhusha Cabin on Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Street is a popular hangout for adda addicts and the favoured savouries being fish cutlet and mutton chop. The reference to this hangout will

make any “true” Calcuttan nostalgic. The sense of nostalgia is heightened by the way in which Ghosh spells the food items - dhakai paratha for instance – the true Bengali pronunciation. It is not only when he refers to food but even in several other cases Ghosh uses words that add a Bengali flavour to the Indian English. Some instances are – from *The Shadow Lines*: Jethamoshai (father’s elder brother), Shaheb (Bengali version of sahib), Mayadebi (instead of Mayadevi) and Robi (a very typical Bengali sounding version for Ravi). From *The Calcutta Chromosome* – Dharmotola (the place name is generally spelled as Dharamtalla but is pronounced as Dharmotola in Bengali), Baba (father), Phulboni (again a Bengali sounding name). Through all this – spellings, names, references to adda, Bengali literature and streets of Calcutta – Ghosh romanticises Calcutta. He picks images and words carefully to bring in the Calcutta touch and yet maintain a universal appeal. The image that he creates of Calcutta is his Calcutta where the north does not exist and interestingly it is only a Bengali Calcutta. More than 50 percent of the city’s population comprise of non-Bengalis but they hardly find place in Ghosh’s novels. In *The Shadow Lines* the only two non-Bengali Calcuttans are Mrs Anderson (the narrator’s school teacher) and Nathu Chaubey, the paanwala – quite forgettable in the entire scheme of the novel. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* there is only one non-Bengali Calcuttan – Mrs Aratounian. Murugan is from Calcutta but has lived long in New York. He is a character that cannot be localised as the other characters like Sonali and Urmila. The only reference to any migrant community is the Nepali workers at Romen Haldar’s construction site. This makes the representation of Calcutta hardly cosmopolitan and that is how most Bengalis would like to see. The depleting Bengali population is a threat to the community and a truth that they would like to violently deny. And the best way of denial is silence. That’s what Ghosh and several other writers adopt.

The romanticisation of the city helps in the re-invention of Calcutta but while doing so Ghosh fuels the Western imagination of the exotic Oriental other. *The Calcutta Chromosome* has been dubbed as a science-fiction however, there is more traces historical enquiry than science in the novel, it was the winner of *Arthur C. Clark Award*. The central concept is after all transmigration of souls. Ghosh vaguely refers to the fact that the exotic high-priestess like character of Mangala might have a chanced upon a chromosome that enabled her to transmigrate. But this explanation is hardly scientific.

The ceremony in which this happens – cymbals, incense sticks, chants, trance – all of it is uncomfortably similar to the mumbo-jumbo that the East is generally associated with. The powerful character of Mangala is reminiscent of Shakti – the female principle – but the way the West would see it. This might feed the Eastern exoticism but it's a let down for Bengali readers, especially those who were searching for a new and likeable image of Calcutta.

However, in spite of this drawback Ghosh sets the ground where a new genre of literature can develop – we may perhaps, for lack of a better term, call it the Calcutta English Novel. In the next two chapters we will explore how two other writers – Raj Kamal Jha and Indrajit Hazra – move forward on the path paved by Ghosh.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Quoted from [www.calcuttaweb.com](http://www.calcuttaweb.com)
- <sup>2</sup> Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1988
- <sup>3</sup> Amitav Ghosh. *The Calcutta Chromosome*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> Jug Suraiya. *Calcutta: A City Remembered*. New Delhi: Times of India Group, 2003.
- <sup>5</sup> John Steinbeck. *The Pearl*. 1945. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- <sup>6</sup> Information taken from “The East Bengal Refugees: A Lesson in Survival” by Nilanjana Chatterjee. *Calcutta: A Living City* ed Sukanta Chaudhuri. OUP, 1990; New Delhi. Pp 70-77.
- <sup>7</sup> Krishna Dutta. *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History*. Roli, New Delhi; 2003.
- <sup>8</sup> *Paromitar Ek Din*. Dir. Aparna Sen. With Aparna Sen, Rituparna Sengupta, and Soumitra Chatterji. 2001.
- <sup>9</sup> Tuomas Huttunen. “Representation of London in *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh”. *London Journal*. March 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991.)
- <sup>11</sup> Sarachandra Chattopadhyay. *Parineeta*. 1914. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005.
- <sup>12</sup> *Parineeta*. Dir. Pradip Sarkar. With Sanjay Dutt, Saif Ali Khan, and Vidya Balan, 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> “Saif Ali Khan spills *Parineeta* secrets”. <http://movies.indiainfo.com/interview/saif-ali-khan.html>. As on 10 July, 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee. “*Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in The Shadow Lines*”. *The Shadow Lines*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1988)
- <sup>15</sup> Premendra Mitra was a writer as well as a film director. Ghanada series captured the Bengali imagination of wanderlust in the 1940s and 1950s. Refer to this book for his stories: Premendra Mitra. *Mosquito and Other Stories : Ghana-Da's Tall Tales* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004)
- <sup>16</sup> An interview I conducted on August 10, 2005.
- <sup>17</sup> In an interview with me. September 2005.
- <sup>18</sup> Barry O'Brien. “An Eye on Calcutta”. *The Telegraph*. July 10, 2004.
- <sup>19</sup> Nirad C. Chaudhari. *An Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. 1951
- <sup>20</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee. “*Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in The Shadow Lines*”. *The Shadow Lines*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1988 (259)
- <sup>21</sup> Amitav Ghosh. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1997.

## CHAPTER 3

### SLEEPLESS IN SUTANUTI

#### *A JOURNALIST'S CROW-EYE-VIEW*

In this chapter we will discuss Raj Kamal Jha's depiction of Calcutta. Journalist and novelist Jha is the author of *The Blue Bedspread* (2000)<sup>1</sup>, which won the *Commonwealth Writers' Prize, 2000*, for Best First Book (Eurasia region) and was a *New York Times Notable Book of the Year*<sup>2</sup>. Jha wrote the chapters for his novel as separate units. He submitted his story to *Civil Lines*, an annual anthology based in New Delhi. This submission cemented his commitment to writing, and helped him to overcome his fear of rejection. Not long after the story's publication, Jha received a fax from a London publishing house, Weidenfield and Nicholson, indicating that they would be interested in publishing his collection upon its completion. With the added incentive of possible publication, Jha began to work on his novel during the added hours of wakefulness provided by the insomnia that has plagued him since childhood. A friend of Jha's referred him to Pankaj Mishra, an Indian publisher. After reading a few chapters, Mishra signed him and gave him a deadline to finish the novel. A year later, *The Blue Bedspread* was finished. The book was bought by Peter Straus of Picador Publishing, then sold to most of the leading international publishing houses. Jha received the largest advance (\$275,000) ever paid to a first-time Indian novelist. His novel is the second-fastest selling book in India, after Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Random House bought the American rights after an intense bidding war; rights to the novel have been sold in eight foreign languages. The details of publication place Jha in a context, and the politics of publication shall be discussed in the last chapter.

His second novel *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003)<sup>3</sup>, which was developed from his short story by the same title that appeared in *The Little Magazine*<sup>4</sup>, was a finalist for the Hutch-Crossword Book Award 2003. Both the novels are written as if by chroniclers. In the Introduction to this dissertation it was discussed that this budding genre is using a new style of writing – journalistic style – to bridge the language divide. Bengali has been believed to be the language of creativity, while English has



traditionally been used for chronicling. By using the chronicling style for creative works, the new generation of writers has perhaps found their idiom in English.

*The Blue Bedspread* takes place over the course of one night, in Calcutta. A man is awakened by a late-night phone call. He is informed that his sister has died during childbirth and he must come pick up the orphaned child until adoptive parents can be notified. While the baby sleeps in the next room, the man sets about writing down stories of his sister and their childhood. As memories are set down on the page, the man uncovers unsettling secrets of his past, and he seeks to come to terms with them, for his own benefit, as well as for the benefit of the sleeping infant. This novel is set in Calcutta but a surreal, unrecognizable Calcutta where snowfall is commonplace. Though the city is at times unrecognizable, there are instances where its flavour does slip into the narrative. For instance, frequent references to College Street, Medical College, Park Street and Durga Puja, impresses the presence of the city. It is a city teeming with people and allows no privacy. Such are the conditions that the only private place that lovers can find is the morgue of the Medical College. It is morbid and to add to this morbidity there are direct and cryptic references to incest and child abuse. It is a daring novel. Many have criticized it for its morbidity but exposing this dark side of the city life is what Jha intended, I feel. Topics which are silenced and repressed are thrown up in the novel. And while we grapple with these unpleasant realities the protagonist of the novel also comes to term with it – chronicling of the personal history acts as catharsis for him.

All these images and themes get replicated in Jha's second venture – *If You Are Afraid of Heights*. Rather they are to a certain extent magnified and more importantly, the presence of Calcutta is more pronounced here. Hence, instead of deliberating further on *The Blue Bedspread*, let us move on to *If You Are Afraid of Heights*.

Look at the picture on the cover, there's a child, a girl in a red dress; there's a bird, a crow in a blue white sky. And then there are a few things you cannot see (1)

This is how Jha leads the readers into his book. He intends to show his readers what they often "cannot see", or rather, choose not to see, but things that are there and can be seen

only from a height. Jha divides his book into three parts, each part apparently dealing with a different story involving a different set of characters. In the first, titled “Of Heights”, Amir, a man of “medium height, medium age, medium nose, medium eyes, everything medium” meets Rima *via* a road accident, and they fall in love. She takes over his life completely, but strangely walks out of the relationship, haunted by the cries of a child which she hears whenever Amir is around.

In “You Are Afraid”, Mala, a reporter from the city, comes to a town on the trail of a child-rape and murder story. She is helped by a man called Alam, who appears from nowhere and then disappears into nowhere. Mala is unable to unearth anything significant for her story. However, during her investigation, she is reminded of her own past from time to time; and she finally returns to the city without a solution – apart from having come to terms with her own past. Thus, the solution, if at all any, is there within her. This in no way is insignificant. Having faced oneself is a mammoth task to achieve. But one wonders whether the city itself, like Mala will ever be able to face its abuse. “If” is about a little girl who, disturbed by the suicides in her neighbourhood, begins to fear for her parents’ life and her own.

All the three stories can be read in isolation; yet Jha manages to subtly unite them. Each is preceded by a prologue where the narrator tells us something about the child in a red dress who appears on the cover and whose shadowy presence runs through the book. This is also the child of “If”, who cries apprehending her parents’ death. Perhaps it is her cry that compels Rima to leave Amir. She could also be Mala’s child, waiting for Mala to return. It could even be Mala. Or the child whom Amir had seen with her mother on the road. Or the child whose body was found in the canal.

The novel is reflexive in nature. The names of the characters (Rima and Amir; Mala and Alam) are mirror images of each other. So are the characters: one is Hindu, while the other is Muslim. To read the titles of each part is to read the title of the book backwards. The book, therefore, is meant to be read backwards as well. The mirror is not a palindrome but rather a *semordnilap* where a backward reading is possible, but with a different and deferent meaning. The epilogue thus becomes the prologue. It too says, “Look at the picture on the cover...” The book, therefore, is a mirror image of itself.

The novel intrigues one by its unique structure. It is open to several interpretations and it is difficult to get a grasp of it in one reading. However, on second or third reading the structural complexities clear out and one is able to see the larger scheme of things. Jha, it seems, has a well laid out and planned structure. He wants to speak about certain things and in a certain way. His novel speaks about the city and it is just no other city. It is Calcutta. Jha refers to it as “the city”, never names it but there is no mistaking. He lays down markers – Park Steet, Free School Street, Chittaranjan Avenue, Indian Airlines building, Maidan, the trams. He picks out the landmarks and then makes his characters chart out their little stories along these landmarks. Once seen in this way the novel becomes a story about the city – a story about Calcutta, Jha’s Calcutta.

The Calcutta that Jha sees is quite different from the Calcutta presented by Ghosh in his novels. Jha’s Calcutta is the late 90’s Calcutta, a dying city. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* Ghosh also presents the 90’s Calcutta yet the city is very different from what Jha presents. There is mobility in Ghosh’s city, there is a way out from it. But Jha’s city is like a quagmire from where there is no escape. The difference, perhaps, is because of their attitude. In an interview<sup>5</sup> when Ghosh was asked that does he feel that Bengalis are declining culturally and morally, he had replied –

I suspect that when you say ‘the Bengalis’ you’re actually referring only to one segment of the Bengali-speaking world. This is perhaps the real problem. It is true that ‘bhadralok’ West Bengalis often see themselves as being in some sort of decline. But I don’t think Bangladeshis see themselves in this way at all.

Perhaps the East Bengalis of Calcutta don’t, and perhaps that is why several of them step out of the city and move on. However, there are the others who don’t and these others are the ones who Jha presents in his novel. This difference makes one recall Jug Suraiya’s<sup>6</sup> observation, quoted in the previous chapter –

Anyone who has ever been there has his own Calcutta. All you have to do is listen to it

Again this representation will be different from other descriptions of the city and perhaps similar to several also. With this let us return to how Jha sees Calcutta. It is a city in which you can live only a mediocre life. Here can live a family of three – father, mother and daughter. The father will be an insensitive, authoritarian, frustrated man. Working in an ordinary office, earning a meagre amount and can hope for no better life. The mother will be a docile housewife, who may have had many dreams but could never express her desire to fulfil them. So she fills her day with household chores. Her dreams now long dead, she too has no hope for a better life. The daughter about eleven to twelve years of age also has no better life to look forward to. She cries, people hear but ignore it. Her budding dreams are crushed by harsh realities. This is an ordinary family in this city. It seems that they could have had no other life than they are living. There might be some alterations. For example, the father could have lived the life of Amir, the post-office clerk who writes letters for those who can neither read nor write. For a brief moment he could have met a person like Rima. But Rima is a misfit in his world and so she returns to her ivory tower. The mother could have been Mala but again she would have hardly had much success. She would always be hounded by memories of the past and all that she would ever be able to do is perhaps accept the past. So in either ways life of the common citizens is hopeless. But the girl child is not even given an alternative. Her plight remains the same. Her cries echo all around the city. People ignore it or they run away from it.

The symbol of the girl child is very interesting. As an eleven year old girl in a red dress and an easy prey in the insensitive society, she is reminiscent of the figure of Little Red Ridding Hood. Over the ages the tale of Little Red Ridding Hood has attained a mythic status and has been open to feminist debates<sup>7</sup>. The archetypal symbol fits in well into Jha's narrative. The rape and murder of the girl child in a red dress can be interpreted as the attack on Red Riding Hood in the woods. The city of Calcutta thus becomes the dark woods where lurks the predators like the wolf, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting victims.

The little girl can be interpreted as a product of the city or as the city itself. Female body, like land, has always been a site of contestation. As a product of the city

what she receives is neglect. In this context she is a representative of the children in the city who have nothing to look forward for, apart from fear. Their fears are never quelled. It's abused, they are abused and all of it is neatly tucked away under the garb of civility. In fact, the city refuses to acknowledge the atrocities on children by brushing them aside. This is best exemplified by the inspector's remark on the child-rape case. Mala questions him –

What about the rape? The report says there were signs of sexual assault.

To this the inspector replies –

These things happen in north India, where some think that if you have sex with a child, you get cured of your disease. You must have read about it, but in these parts we don't have that at all. People are much more cultured, so I think the injuries were caused when she fell down the canal, maybe some stones or something. (204-205)

This remark says it all. It also reveals the attitude that the city harbours towards the "outsiders" and the superiority complex that it suffers from, to the extent of becoming morbid.

If we see the girl as a symbol of the city, then her cries become the cries of Calcutta, urging its citizens to take notice of her. The city is like the abused child thrown in the canal to rot. The post-mortem report of the child becomes the description of the city – assaulted and left to perish. Like the child, there is no future for the city. This is the city that the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is made to fear<sup>8</sup>. A dark place that he sees only from a distance. A place far removed from his reality but one in which he can land up by virtue of just a few failed examinations. Jha takes us right into that place. His characters live, breathe and stagnate there. The quotes below bring alive these places in all its darkness, desolation and despair –

The child is between eleven and twelve years of age. She's standing on the balcony of a two-room flat in a building, from the street outside, looks

like a crying face. Its windows are the eyes, half-closed by curtains, smudged and wrinkled. Rain, wind and sun of countless years have marked the wall, streaking it in several lines two of which look like tears, one falling below each window. The mouth is the balcony, curved down under the weight of iron railings, rusted and misshapen. Like the stained teeth of someone very sad. (1)

This is how the dwellings look from outside. The next passage shows what the neighbourhood is like and the third quote takes us into the interiors of one of these homes. It is no particular home. It can be any home and every home in this city. This is because they all lead the same hopeless life.

....There is a cobbler who sits on the pavement, just in front of the hydrant, with a shoeshine box...

There are the two Shah brothers who run a snack shop and a telephone kiosk. They have a small TV set which they switch on whenever there is a cricket match so that people waiting in line to use the phone have something to watch while they wait.

'Das and Sons' is the sweet shop run by Mr Das himself who is always bare to the waist except from late November to February. He gets his children to work at the shop after school, the daughter folds the cardboard boxes, the son washes the earthen cups in which he sells curd. Amir sees both children in the morning, standing in line, usually behind him, at the Corporation tap.

Then there is Bomba. A ten year old boy, almost half Amir's height but double his weight, Bomba lives with his parents in the house upstairs. Every evening, Amir sees him drag his maid, a short, thin wisp of a girl, out to play cricket. He asks her to bowl to him and he keeps on batting, even when she bowls him out a dozen times or more. (30-31)

His toilet bowl is white, cracked in several places where his shit gets stuck so that even though he pours in half a bottle of acid every morning, the stains don't go away. When he first moved in, this made him angry, so angry that one day he poured in an entire bottle, splashing some acid on his hand...

Amir pays two hundred and forty rupees as rent every month thanks to the City Tenancy Act of 1912 due to which rates haven't changed in the last twenty years, forcing the house owners to strike back in their own petty ways.

Perhaps, that's why the pump that supplies water to his flat is switched off for most of the day and the light bulb in the staircase is rarely replaced. During the rain, water leaks through the broken panes in the windows, his cement floor is cracked like skin in winter, there is sparking in his switchboard since the fuse wire is too thin, it blows at least twice every week.

At nights there are other little problems. Cockroaches crawl out of the drain on his balcony... (25-26)

The representation of lower-middle class Calcutta life has a long tradition. Writers of the literary club called the Kallol group and many others after the 1930's tried their hand at this kind of fiction<sup>9</sup>. Several Bengali films have also been produced that shows the squalor of Calcutta life, the most recent one being Rituparno Ghosh's *Raincoat* (2004)<sup>10</sup>. It's an interesting film to bring into this discussion because it is not a Bengali film but it follows the tradition of Bengali film making. In those terms it is similar to the English novels about Calcutta. Both are attempts at universalising the angst of Calcutta and are attempts made in languages other than Bengali. Coming back to the point of representations, *Raincoat* and *If You Are Afraid of Heights* have certain commonalities – the incessant rains in the city which often makes life come to a stand still, the infamous power cuts, the tenant-landlord relationship and the image of the lavatory. In *Raincoat* there is a scene where Anu Kapoor, the landlord, is trying to collect the rent and the only pretext in which he gains entry is through his pleas of being allowed to use the lavatory.

Later, to break Ajay Devgan's (Manoj) illusion about Aishwarya Rai's (Neeru) comfortable life, he explains to Manoj that the lavatory of the house reflects the kind of life lived in it. In *If You Are Afraid of Heights* too, the detailed description of the lavatories is reflective of the life lived by the people, as shown in one of the quotes above. The rains that define the film are also a strong presence in the novel. They were also a constant presence in Jha's earlier novel, *The Blue Bedspread*. The rainy July evening recurs through the novel as it does in *If You Are Afraid of Heights*. The rains as it were throw up the filth of the city –

Until the rains come, children come here, without their parents, to slide down the canal's sides and play, hiding and seeking among the piles of garbage, rummaging to see if they can retrieve something, anything, to sell as scrap. During the monsoon, however, water collects, heavy and foetid, its stink enters the houses to sit on clothes, sometimes on bedsheets and wet towels. And since the air is humid, the water takes a long time to dry, the stench stays for days and days until the town gets used to it. Like a patient in a hospital bed who soon learns, without any effort, how to live with the smell of disinfectant, the doctor's gloves, the starch in the pillowcase, even her own sick breath, things she wouldn't have tolerated when she was healthy. (139)

The power cuts, better known as "loadsheddings" marked Calcutta in the 80's. Calcuttans passed snide remarks about the name of the Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, whose name meant light but ironically in his reign, large parts of the city remained in darkness. A chunk of *Raincoat* is shot in a dark room in Neeru's house. She tells Manoj that the culprit is the city's erratic power supply. She tells him a lie but the lie is not hard to believe because such power cuts were a regular affair in the city. The quote below shows how Jha presents these power cuts –

After a walk around the terrace for a few minutes, Mala knows this is a long power cut. She can make out when it's a short one, when it's a long



one. If everything's off, even the street lights, you know there's some hope because they can't have so much blackness sitting around for so long a time. But this is one of those unfair power cuts when one side of the neighbourhood has all the lights. This means either the voltage has tripped or one phase has blown or there's something wrong with the transformer. (212)

This is the same way in which Amir analyses the duration of power cuts. It is as if the citizens have attuned themselves to this pattern and have learnt to predict it. With the trope of these lengthy descriptive passages, Jha thus creates a character – the city of Calcutta – unique and unmistakable. However, what is to be noted is unlike other Indian writers Jha refrains from using the “chutney English”. To create the flavour of Calcutta he does not spice the English language with Bengali or Indian words. But interestingly his language does not cause a hindrance in expression. The Calcutta that he wants to depict comes forth despite the lack of linguistic localisation. Jha uses what one might call the “proper Queen's English”. A crisp and detailed style, the one that we would associate with newspapers. It perhaps helps because his narrative is to a large extent based on newspaper reports. Newspaper reports of a tram accident, a child-rape case and the epidemic of suicides add a realistic touch to the fiction. It allows him to give stark descriptions of the scene of crime. These bare descriptions create a sensation but it also moves the reader. For instance, Jha gives the details of the post-mortem report of the child who has been raped and murdered. It is an objective report but this objectivity about a deceased's anatomy can make even a lion heart shiver. Call it a sadistic streak in Jha, yet it does achieve what Jha intends it to achieve. The reader is forced to sit up and hear the screams of the child. If you are afraid of heights, the book will take you down to the depths to feel the pain seething at the ground level.

Another interesting factor in Jha's novel is the series of co-incidences. Read separately, each section can stand by itself as individual tales but it is through the series of co-incidences that Jha coaxes the reader to link them together. Every character, every symbol, every image is linked to each other. Co-incidences were also a prominent feature in *The Blue Bedspread* and referring to the importance of this in his novels, in an interview Jha had said<sup>11</sup> –

...we really underestimate the power of mere coincidences and stupid little accidents. I think they play a much, much bigger role in life, than large forces...what I really feel I connect with, is not the scene [in the novel], is the small accidents, when he or she bends down to pick something up that has fallen, in that mental frame, or when you look at his shoulder and see where the shirt is crinkled at the collar, or that small speck at the knee, I find these things important. How I don't know, but I feel that these accidents, these coincidences, matter.

The scenes and images of co-incidences of *The Blue Bedspread* spill over in *If You Are Afraid of Heights*. Child abuse, death, hospital – all are images from the previous novel. All these images coalesce to form the image of the little girl in a red dress. It is the strongest image in this novel but there are several others as well. For instance, there is a dog whose tail is like a stump and is gnawed at the end in Amir's neighbourhood. A similar dog is there in the child's neighbourhood. The image of the dog recurs. It even becomes a porcelain show piece on the window sill of the prostitute's room. It is almost as if cartography is projected on to the human condition, as if the maze of the city linked through the criss-crossing roads that inevitably meet are representative of human destiny. It is as if the city's and man's fate are inseparable. These co-incidences have a paradoxical effect. On one hand the repetition creates a monotone and enforces the fact that the lower middle class life in the city can be no different, and on the other hand it is eerie. Eerie because if one has faint memories of all the incidents that he is describing, historically, and yet one cannot pin point them. They are so recurrent and commonplace that it adds to the effect. After Jha's novel, the incidents have occurred again in the cities; as if these were defining traits of the city. Fourteen year old Hetal Parekh was raped and killed in 1990, and her murderer, Dhananjay Chatterjee, received capital punishment fourteen years later on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2004. It is an irony that there was a spate of suicides among children after the execution of this child abuser. The media sensation, the spectacle of death of the killer, made "phansi" a game of fantasy for children. One TV channel produced a one-sided serial dramatisation of the crime and

screened it several times. Several other channels followed suit with their own biased programs. The TV and newspapers attempted to whip up a hanging fever with detailed descriptions and illustrations of how the execution was to take place. I have quoted below a full newspaper report that was served to the Calcuttans on the morning of 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2004, the day after Dhananjay's execution. The report itself screams how the whole event was turned into a fine spectacle, something that is done quite often by the media now –

### Gallows march with music

#### A few feet from rope, convict sings

A STAFF REPORTER

**Calcutta, Aug. 14 (2003):** Thirteen long years for death to come, 40 brief seconds to get it over with.

At 6.30 this morning, the inspector general of police, jails, Joydeb Chakraborty, issued a brief written statement: "The execution of death sentence of Dhananjoy Chatterjee, alias Dhana, has been duly carried out at 4.30 hours."

Within moments, a hearse carrying Dhananjoy's body raced to Keoratala burning ghat where he was cremated by the Hindu Satkar Samity. A jail doctor said he had "hung for precisely 40 seconds, before life had ebbed out of him".

Dhananjoy's family stayed away, refusing to accept the reality of his death and his body.

Sentenced to death in 1991 for raping and killing 14-year-old Hetal Parekh, Dhananjoy sat up the night in his Alipore Central Jail cell, refusing to even lie down to try to sleep. "With death so near, I might as well stay up in my last hours," he told warders.

Head tucked in between his knees, all night he listened to songs sung by a section of the jail staff.

"We were singing Rabindrasangeet and popular songs of Kishore Kumar," said a warder. "Since Dhananjoy would not or was unable to

sleep, we thought the best thing would be to keep him distracted with songs he enjoyed listening.”

As the clock struck three, the countdown began. Jail officials entered Dhananjoy’s cell and told him it was time to get “ready”: bathe and put on the new pair of *pyjamas* and a *fatua* (vest) before taking the walk to the gallows.

Wash over, Dhananjoy prayed briefly, “drawing strength for the final moment”. Then he got up and told the officials he was ready to meet his fate. But the time was not right yet.

“Dhananjoy had drawn strength from the music and from the picture of Ma Kali on the cell’s wall,” a jail official said. “That’s why he suddenly got up and told us to lead him to the gallows, fearing his courage might betray him later.”

Dhananjoy had to wait another half-hour before his last journey down the corridors. As the minutes ticked away, he suddenly burst into tears, fearing not for himself but for his wife.

But he composed himself quickly and stepped out of the cell where Chakraborty, DIG (prisons) Ramapada Bhattacharya, jail superintendent Ranjit Mondal and other officials were waiting. Shaking hands with them, he asked forgiveness for anything he might have done in 14 years to trouble them.

Turning to Chakraborty, he made a final attempt to clear his name: “I will be gone but at least for the sake of my family please do something to clear my name; I am innocent.”

Putting his hands to his back, he next turned to the jailors and gestured that he be handcuffed. With two guards in front and two behind, he then began his last walk, stealing one last look at the cell that had been his home for 14 years.

Suddenly, he broke into song. “*Chalte, chalte, mere yeh geet yaad rakhna...*”, he sang as he walked, exhorting jail officials to sing with him. Many joined in.

By the time he finished, he was facing the noose. As a last wish, he asked that he be allowed to touch jail doctor Basudeb Mukherjee's feet. Then he handed himself over to Nata Mullick.<sup>12</sup>

This grotesque exercise tragically backfired with at least eight children, including six in West Bengal, dying in mock executions. The attitude of the hangman in this case who was interviewed and who showed how he treats his rope to milk every day is reminiscent of the Post-Mortem Man in Jha's novel. Even death is a commercial venture in an age of mass communication<sup>13</sup>.

The co-incidence theory forces me to take another detour here. The chain of suicides in the novel is an interesting sequence. Jha's view of suicide seems to be akin to Emile Durkheim's understanding of suicide. According to Durkheim, collective social forces are more important determinants for suicide than extra-social or individual factors. His theory does not take into account modern insights into risk factors for suicide, most importantly mental illness<sup>14</sup>.

And what is intriguing is the fact that while we discuss these fictional suicides in Calcutta, a spurt of suicides has taken hold of the psyche of Delhi. The towers of the District Centre have become towers of death of late. Newspapers, baffled by this, have sent correspondents to spend nights there to fathom the cause<sup>15</sup>. Perhaps in future one will write a novel about these suicides in Delhi.

Returning back to the main line of discussion – representation of Calcutta – one of the intriguing images in the novel is the Paradise Park. The towering skyscraper is a kind of anomaly in this sordid city –

Paradise Park went up right in the centre of the Maidan, which, in the language of this city, means a sprawl of empty land...

Now this is the only space there is in a city where people live, five or six to one room, fifty or sixty to a bus stop, more than a thousand to a neighbourhood, these numbers increasing everyday and every night. That's why people come here, slipping out of their homes, which is also the living room, which is also the dining room, away from the sound of a

child crying, get into buses, and with their clothes wrinkled, wet with the sweat of strangers, they walk across the Maidan to watch the sky above, feel the grass below...(19)

Standing tall, the building inspires a sense of awe and respect in the citizens –

...It was a special building, a building so special that if you stopped anyone on the street, man woman or child, hungry or well fed, half naked or well dressed, asked them, Excuse me, which way is Paradise Park? Right there, in front of your eyes, you would see them change. You would see them lower their heads in respect, their eyes in fear, look you over from head to toe. Do little things that would make you squirm. (13)

Between 2002-2006, Calcutta's landscape has undergone a major change. Flyovers, parks, highrise buildings and shopping malls have changed the way the city looked and with it has changed the way the citizens perceive it. The change had been creeping in since late 80's with the Metro Rail. In Bengali the Metro Rail is called the *Patal Rail* and for several years it was seen with suspicion. My grandmother had taken the term *patal rail* quite seriously. I vividly remember a childhood incident when she had called upon my father and my uncles to promise her that they would never use this ominous transport. Perhaps her fear was not completely unfounded. Apart from the traffic hazards, the construction of the Metro was a hellish reality for several families in Calcutta. Several Calcuttans' property fell within the plan of the Metro and was demolished for Metro rail construction. The compensation that was offered by the Government was practically nothing. Our own shop, in Chowringhee, a prime location in the city, had come within the plan of the Metro Rail. It was after decades of a court case that finally our shop was spared. However, not everyone was as fortunate as us. After fifteen harrowing years our shop still is with us but there are several other families whose homes and businesses have been sacrificed for the Metro Rail. To them it is no better than hell.

Thus, for long people did not believe that it would ever become a happy reality. They referred to it as *Raboner Sinri* – Ravana's legendary staircase to heaven that was

begun but never finished<sup>16</sup>. The idea of the underground railway was conceived as early as in 1949 by Dr Bidhanchandra Ray and the construction formally started from 1972. But it took decades to get completed. People had got used to living in a city dug up along its length in the name of the Metro Rail, a medium that would transport them from one corner of the city to another in just a few minutes. The memories of Calcutta streets that I have as a child are that of gaping holes, huge cranes, metal boulders and slush. No other city looked like this. So I had come to believe that Calcutta looked like a corpse waiting to be stitched up after a post-mortem. Hence, finally in 1994, when the Metro started plying from Dumdum to Tollyganj, it created a stir in the city. As already mentioned, the association with the *patal* created a little fear but soon its effectiveness inspired pride in the citizens. It was a phenomenon of sorts. But soon people went back to believing that, that was it there would not be any more changes in the city till suddenly from 2002 onwards the city was showered with swanky shopping malls and flyovers. And the awe that these structures induced in the Calcuttans is similar to what Jha depicts with Paradise Park in his novel. Compare a fictitious newspaper report on Paradise Park from the novel with a real newspaper report on the opening of a new mall in Calcutta –

Paradise Park is like a beautiful flower... dropped in a sewer, the sludge flowering past, its petals untainted. So strong is this flowers fragrance... that it overwhelms the stink, the rats and the waste, the rotting garbage that our callous authorities so loftily turn their noses up at. (22)

Marrying brand binge with bazaar buzz, cheek by jowl, emanating the zing and feel of a bustling downtown, with vibrant designs and a rich array of textures to entice the senses, and letting a butterfly sit on you... That's what City Centre, New Town promises to be. Set to be ready and running by the middle of next year, the sequel to the Charles Correa-signature City Centre Salt Lake will carry forward the fused-format concept, which works on the primary premise of blending branded and generic retail.<sup>17</sup>

The two reports echo similar sentiments. The line between reality and fiction collapses. While on one hand, there are these newspaper reports that rave about the “development” of Calcutta, there are others that see this “development” differently. These multiplexes, malls, cafes and flyovers are viewed as mere face lifts, which are at the cost of marginalizing the lower middle class and the poor. And there have been fictions written that give voice to this resentment. The resentment to this kind of development is understood but what is difficult to comprehend is the awe that it creates in the characters of Jha’s novel and in a large number of Calcuttans. In an interview, Jha explains this anomaly by saying –

One, there is a certain fatalism --- the fact that the rich stay rich, the poor stay poor and that’s the way it is, that’s the way it will be. Although over the last ten years in India, especially in the cities, this fatalism is also being laced with a certain sense of optimism. It’s tentative, it’s unsure, but there’s no escaping it.

Two, there is a very natural, breathless inquisitiveness about Paradise Park. This structure that looks like no other. We all have it in us, this need to stop and stare at something that doesn’t fit in the frame.<sup>18</sup>

It is true that as Jha explain we all have it in us to stop and stare at things that do not fit into our frame of things. The unknown and the other always intrigues. Yet interestingly though these shopping malls in Calcutta initially created curiosity and the masses felt alienated by them, gradually the situation is changing. The malls are now, like the Metro Rail becoming an every day reality. It is no longer the “other”, no longer a space which you could only see but never be a part of. Unlike Paradise Park where a person like Amir could have only been escorted into but could never have walked in by himself, in these malls anyone can step in. Yes, it is true that the swanky structures are imposing but they also dare the commoner to take a chance. I would like to substantiate my argument with a few real life examples. In May 2006 I visited the City Center mall in Salt Lake, Calcutta. It is now undoubtedly the most happening place in the city and the KFC outlet here is the major attraction. Even on a weekday the mall was thronging with people and



it had the feel of a carnival, or more appropriately, the bazaar. The structure resembled the Western malls but the feel was of the great Indian bazaar – something akin to McDonald's Aloo Tikki Burger. To get back to my point, what caught my attention was not this East meets West phenomenon but those who were sitting comfortably in KFC and happily munching away on a chicken burger. They were a couple of *bashonwalis/bartanwalis* (women ferrying utensils from door to door). I was taken aback by the ease with which they had settled themselves to the surrounding and had made it their own. Another interesting image was the groups of people dotting the steps and the sprawling lawns of the complex. They were no buyers, they were there just to hang around and chat – the addas have shifted the venue. From roadside tea stalls they have now moved into City Center. The point therefore is that the common Calcuttan has become comfortable in his new surroundings.

The above personal experiences are not to negate the overreaching, overwhelming effects of globalization. However, essentialising globalization is also some sort of academic hegemony. Personal ethnographic narratives may have a counter point to tell. The malls are vehicles of standardization where they flatten out local idiom, cultures and replace them with imported names, for example. However, despite its hegemony, its not a one way process. As shown, for example, McDonald's had to bring out an Aloo Tikki burger as well as lower its prices to stay in the market. The Calcutta malls have interpellated the adda mongers to their neon-light precincts. There is a fusion of sorts, and everyone is allowed to enter the malls unlike the five star hotels. This could be called the American way than the high-nosed British way that the have-nots have encountered till now. However, the replacement of local culture with standard products will affect the interests of local traders, as well as usher an era of conspicuous consumption that makes the middle class smug. This juxtaposed with the labour union rule in the State for almost three decades that had lots of promise, but resulted in sloth and decline of the industries, presents a peculiar problem for a Calcuttan. The so called welfare economy was used as a political vehicle, and the era which has come to replace it is hegemonic in its own form.

The era is coming, nonetheless, inevitable like the rest of the world. So the point is why is it going unnoticed by writers like Jha? Why are they still painting a picture of the

decadent city where the poor will always remain poor and the rich always rich? Interestingly the Metro Rail which has changed the way of life in Calcutta, finds no mention in the novels that I am discussing in this dissertation. Neither Ghosh, nor Jha or Hazra, mention a word about it. They speak about buses, trams, rickshaws, taxis, trains but never for once do they mention the Metro. *The Calcutta Chromosome*<sup>19</sup> meticulously charts out the area between P G Hospital, Chowringhee and Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Street – one of the busiest slots in the Metro route – but the Metro finds no presence in the novel. The linear narrative in *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, roughly follows the path of the Metro Rail, but the Metro is uncannily absent from the face of Calcutta even in this novel. It is true that a writer is not expected to write about everything but when the city is being mapped in such great details, then why this silence about a major part of the cityscape? And incidentally the Metro happens to be a popular site for suicides as well. Seventy nine people have tried to end their lives jumping down on the tracks of the Metro since its inception in 1984 and 36 of them (32 men and four women) died. In 2001, perhaps the time when Jha was writing this novel, 17 people attempted suicides on the tracks of the Metro. Yet, in spite of this the Metro finds no mention in Jha's novel<sup>20</sup>. The concluding chapter of the dissertation will therefore be an attempt to answer these whys. For now let us proceed with the discussion of representation of Calcutta in the novels and thus move to the last novel to be discussed in the dissertation – Indrajit Hazra's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2003)<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Raj Kamal Jha. *The Blue Bedspread*. Picador, London. 2000.

<sup>2</sup> "Raj Kamal Jha". [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raj\\_Kamal\\_Jha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raj_Kamal_Jha). As on 1 June 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Raj Kamal Jha. *If You Are Afraid of Heights*. Picador; London. 2003.

<sup>4</sup> "Raj Kamal Jha". <http://www.littlemag.com/2000/raj.htm>. As on 30 Oct 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from [www.calcuttaweb.com](http://www.calcuttaweb.com)

<sup>6</sup> Jug Suraiya. *Calcutta: A City Remembered*. New Delhi: Times of India Group. 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Oresnstein, Catherine. *Little Red Riding Hood Uncloaked: Sex, Morality, And The Evolution Of A Fairy Tale*. Basic Books, New York. 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Amitav Ghosh. *The Shadow Lines* (Ravi Dayal, 1988) 134

<sup>9</sup> For further information on Bengali literature based on Calcutta, refer to 'Calcutta In Twentieth-Century Literature' by Shubho Ranjan Dasgupta and Sudeshna Chakrabarti. *Calcutta: The Living City* Vol II ed Sukanta Chaudhuri, 1990. Oxford.

<sup>10</sup> *Raincoat*. Dir. Ritupomo Ghosh. With Ajay Devgan, Aishwarya Rai, Anu Kapoor, and Mouli Ganguli. 2004.

<sup>11</sup> "Raj Kamal Jha". <http://www.rediff.interview.rajkamaljha>. As on 1 Oct, 2004

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<sup>12</sup> "Gallows march with music". <http://www.telegraphindia.com/archives/archive.html>. As on 16th June, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> All information from *The Telegraph*.

<sup>14</sup> Durkheim, Emile. *Suicide*. 1897. New York: The Free Press, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Information based on articles from TODAY Newspaper, 14 July 2006.

<sup>16</sup> "The Calcutta Metro" by Tathagata Roy, *Calcutta: The Living City* Vol II ed Sukanta Chaudhuri, 1990. OUP.

<sup>17</sup> "Fusion malls eye new pasture". [www.telegraphindia.com/1060119/asp/calcutta/story\\_5740264.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060119/asp/calcutta/story_5740264.asp) - 31k -. As on 15 Jun 2006.

<sup>18</sup> "An Interview With Raj Kamal Jha". <http://www.curledup.com/intjha.htm>. As on 17 Jun 2006

<sup>19</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Ravi Dayal; New Delhi. 1997.

<sup>20</sup> "Kolkata's Pride, A Suicide Point?".

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2002/04/12/stories/2002041200310800.htm>. As on 17 June, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Hazra, Indrajit. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. IndiaInk; New Delhi. 2003.

## CHAPTER 4

### FRAMING THE FLAMES

#### A QUIZZOTIC VIEW

The co-incidences carry on from the third chapter. Indrajit Hazra and Raj Kamal Jha have quite a few things in common. They are both from Calcutta, both now live in Delhi, both are journalists in national dailies, both write fiction in English and both are two books old. There are more to this chain of co-incidences but we will discuss them later in the chapter. In this chapter we will discuss Hazra's second novel, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2003)<sup>1</sup> and the presence of Calcutta in it. However, before we do so let us take a quick glance at Hazra's first novel. Hazra's first creative venture, *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* (2001)<sup>2</sup> was quite an intriguing novel where he played with the theme of Reality versus Illusion and spices it up with references to music and other art forms. Prema Nandkumar describes the novel as a –

... a mix of J. Krishnamurthi's philosophy of *Freedom From the Known* and R.L. Stevenson's *The Wrong Box* baked by a psychosomatic in the kiln of neo-existentialism.<sup>3</sup>

There is a sense of Sartre's existential absurdity in the novel. Caught in situations where nothing seems worthwhile, Hazra's hero realises that he doesn't belong anywhere. The city is amorphous and the people that he encounters have a ghostly appearance. The line dividing reality and unreality collapses generating a feel of the macabre.

After a futile search for a girl whose identity is left vague, Max Saul finally returns to his wife and home to learn of his father's death several years earlier, and learn the fact that the girl never existed. Saul, caught in the vortex of other peoples' lives, is like a man thrown off a moving tram. His lack of focus is in keeping with the faceless homeless crowd of a vast city. Place names and time are left deliberately vague – it could be any city in the West. Compared to this, his second novel, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* apparently seems to be a contrast. It is clearly set in Calcutta, it cannot be just

any city in the West or anywhere else in the world. The city is carefully mapped and unmistakably recognised. Even the characters and events have a recognisable history, which we will discuss later in the chapter. Yet there is a lot of similarity with his previous work. Like *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* the predominant theme of this novel too is existentialism, in fact the theme is more pronounced in this novel. The theme chosen by Hazra fits well into the city of Calcutta that he chooses to depict in the novel. Apart from this, in this novel too, Hazra brings in several references to music, art and literature. One can understand Hazra's display of knowledge – there is a history to that too. One, he is a music and art critic, so influence is perhaps natural by way of name dropping and similar themes. And two, he is a Calcutta Bengali and like most Bengalis he prides himself in knowing all about culture and showing it too.

Indrajit Hazra's second novel *The Garden of Earthly Delights* was published by IndiaInk and released at the end of 2003 and by February 2004 almost all the leading newspapers and magazines of the country had rave reviews about it. Hazra was quoted stating sensational statements like his debut novel *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* had sold just 216 copies and that he is a compulsive liar. His new novel was packaged with a cover that turns the whole book into a giant matchbox and the spine as the striking surface. It also had his photograph which was so self consciously James Dean, with his hands behind his head and a cigarette dangling from a corner of his mouth, that it was difficult not to notice it the similarity. (All this and more marketing strategy and publishing politics will be discussed in the next chapter.)

The novel is fairly slim, and is an intriguing thriller. It is made up of two stories, which read like separate narratives; one told in first person narrative and the other in third person. The stories are told in alternating chapters named Hiren and Manik; which also happens to be the names of the stories' protagonists. Hiren's story is set in Calcutta, more specifically in Banamali Naskar Lane. The lane will be familiar for Bengalis because it is the same Banamali Naskar Lane of the Bengali author Premendra Mitra's creation. Hazra does not only borrow the setting from the Mitra but also the characters of his fiction – the inhabitants of 72, Banamali Naskar Lane. 72, Banamali Naskar Lane is a mess or a men's hostel in Pramendra Mitra's famous stories about a character called Ghanada. We will discuss about the phenomenon of the mess and other specialties of the

novel later in the chapter. Returning back to Hazra's novel, the protagonist, Hiren is an unemployed youth "whose education and family fortunes hovered between awful and miserable" (2). If one were to use Hazra's style to describe Hiren, then the descriptor would be something like – oh-so-very-much-like-the-good-for-nothing-guy-hanging-at-the-corner-of-the-street. Yet this ordinary man narrating his own story lives with the inhabitants of a fictional world of 72, Banamali Naskar Lane, then makes the "unusual decision" of "living together" with his girl friend, he suffers from insomnia, is a pyromaniac who is responsible for the major Calcutta fires like the Book Fair's, New Market's, Fipro Market's and the murder of his girl friend. After murdering Uma, which from his narration seems to be a result of his resentment against her, he moves back into the mess. He is again accepted back into the fold of the "family" of 72, Banamali Naskar Lane but at the end of the novel he is betrayed by these men and framed into a terrorist conspiracy.

The story of Manik Basu is apparently less intriguing. He is a famous writer who has signed a contract of five books in five years with the famous Kutir publishing house and has accepted the payment from them too. However, unfortunately his creativity seems to have temporarily dried up and as a result he has not been able to churn out even a single novel in five years. To avoid the publisher Ajit Choudhury, Manik Basu escapes to Prague on an invitation from none other than President Vaclav Havel. But Ajit Choudhury is not a man to be fooled. He is determined to extract the books from Basu's head, "if need be with tweezers". So he abducts Basu in Prague and keeps him locked first in a hotel room and later in a mansion owned by a lady called Irma. Basu is threatened at gunpoint to dish out a novel within a period of ten days only. Driven up the wall Basu completes the novel and within this period a sort of intimacy develops between him and Irma. However, at the end of the story when Basu hands over his manuscript Irma kills him. One is reminded of John Madden's film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998)<sup>4</sup>, the script of which was written by Tom Stoppard.<sup>5</sup> The writer of the play in the film is also commissioned and drawn up the wall; he too falls in love during the production of the play. Shakespeare's beloved Viola's name would stand out among his following plays, the film says. Hazra's story is dystopic, but the similarities are striking. Also, Stoppard's favourite theme of collapsing illusion and reality are played in Hazra's

novel also. The story of Manik Basu also draws the point that writing after all is not a Wordsworthian spontaneous act, or just an act of writing, or reflection of reality. The novel takes up the issues of monetary involvement in writing, the constructedness of writing, but the issues are not developed.

The two stories have no apparent connection, other than the fact that both Manik and Hiren end up being a part of the same day's news report in a TV channel. Some readers may also link the two stories by considering Manik to be the author of Hiren's story. As already mentioned, even in Raj Kamal Jha's *If You Are Afraid of Heights* there is a book that the girl child is reading in which the characters are alter egos of her parents. Her father might be Amir, whose "intended" Rima is in the book, as is Alam who might be the desired of Mala, who could be her mother. This interplay between life and literature is common to all the three writers that are being researched. The end of the Hazra's novel may be interpreted as the author and character being united by the media. As readers we always seek a clear resolution of a novel and that is the very thing that this novel avoids doing. Playing with co-incidences Hazra eggs on his readers to draw connections and identify, only to debunk them at every stage. A co-incidence again, quite like Jha's style of writing. Different narratives can be read separately yet are linked together by means of co-incidences.

Hazra's novel borrows its name from the famous 16th century painting – *The Garden of Earthly Delights* – by the Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch<sup>6</sup>. The name of the protagonist of the novel, Hirenmoy Bose, is reminiscent of the painter's name. In an interview<sup>7</sup> Hazra said that in 1997 he had visited the Calcutta Book Fair after the fire and had found a charred coffee table book with the picture of this painting on it. The charred image of the book stayed on in his mind. And from this image the novel is born. It takes its name from the painting. A protagonist in it gets his name from Hieronymus Bosch and the Calcutta Book Fair fire acquires an important part in the scheme of the novel. However, it would be useful to pause at this point and take a little detour to the land of Bosch. Hieronymus Bosch, (1450-1516) was a prolific Dutch painter of the 15th and 16th centuries. Many of his works depict sin and dabble with issues of morality. Bosch used images of demons, half-human animals and machines to evoke fear and confusion to portray the evil of man. The works contain complex, highly original, imaginative, and

dense use of symbolic figures and iconography, some of which was obscure even in his own time. He is said to have been an inspiration to the surrealism movement in the 20th century. Born to a family of Dutch and German painters, he spent most of his life in 's-Hertogenbosch, a town in the south of today's Netherlands. In 1463, some 4000 houses in the town were destroyed by a catastrophic fire, which the then about 13-year-old Bosch may have witnessed. This might have been a contributing factor to his obsession with Hell. He became a popular painter and even received commissions from abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Hazra's interview that he encountered the painting in a burnt book in a book fire, might be too much of a coincidence, considering that Bosch himself had encountered hellish fire in his childhood that informed his work. Reality and illusion merge in the publication and politics of promotion as well, Bosch's biography could be an insinuation at that. Besides, Heironymous Bosch was not rediscovered in literature by Hazra as the sensational coincidence of the writer might suggest. Heironymous Bosch is a fictional character created by Michael Connelly<sup>9</sup> inspired by the dark imageries of the painter. The series started in 1992, the novels are thrillers, the protagonist shares the interest in music with Hazra. The interplay of these texts and contexts is interesting. A 15<sup>th</sup> century painter is resurrected by an American novelist in the 1990s, the protagonist is Bond-like who is high on his work and low on social morality (as is the case with the surreal paintings of Bosch); the protagonist is a jazz lover; an Indian writer who's a jazz lover sees a burnt book in a book fair; the book has a painting by Bosch who also had been greatly influenced by a fire during his childhood; the Indian writer writes a book about a pyromaniac called Hirenroy Bose and names his book *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which is one of the most famous paintings of the 16<sup>th</sup> century painter. An extreme interplay of reality and illusion, and tough to sift the act of writing with the fiction or the reality represented in the book or in speech.

Other cultural references/ appropriations of Bosch can be found in a children's picture book called *Pish, Posh, Said Hieronymus Bosch*<sup>10</sup>, which tells the story of the painter and his girlfriend living in their house with many of Bosch's creature creations coming to life (this drives his girlfriend crazy, who temporarily leaves him). In Hazra's novel too, Hirenroy and his girlfriend have a live-in relationship. In a darker turn to the children's book just mentioned, the girlfriend Uma is killed by Hirenroy. Like the



characters coming alive in the children's book, Hazra's book also has characters coming alive from popular Bengali fiction.

In a direct reference to Bosch, the villain in the 1983 animated film *Twice Upon a Time* was named "Synonymous Botch", who invades the dreams of people with nightmares. The music video for "Until It Sleeps", from the album *Load* by Metallica, seems to have been inspired by Bosch paintings, especially *Hell*. "Until It Sleeps" is a song written by James Hetfield of Metallica appearing on the 1996 Metallica album *Load*. The song was an instant radio hit and marked Metallica's further departure from their previous thrash metal stylings into the realm of more alternative rock sounding music. The song itself is about cancer and how it killed both of Hetfield's parents. Being of the Christian Science faith, neither of them sought medical treatment. Believing that faith and God would heal them, both of Hetfield's parents succumbed to the disease. Several segments of the music video for the song were based on Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

After having seen Bosch's influence on surreal and dystopiuc literature of four centuries after his death, it would be useful to revert back to the Calcutta Book fair, which is again through a series of co-incidences. The first is that the metallica song is just a year before the book fair fire, and at a time when Rock music was a rage among the Bengali youth. As fire is an obsession with the pyromaniac of Hazra's novel, similarly bibliophilia is a rage among the people of Calcutta. At this confluence of these influences, I would like to discuss what the book fair means to a Calcuttan.

With the Calcutta Book Fair the city seeps into the novel. Having slipped in once the city develops into a predominant presence in the novel via a number of other images. However, before we discuss that let us first attempt to analyse why the image in Calcutta Book Fair became so important for the book.

The Book Fair is a very important event in Calcutta. Biswajit Matilal, in his essay, "The Calcutta Book Fair" writes –

*It would be simplistic to describe the Book Fair merely as a show. It is something more – 'larger than life', according to a publisher who participates regularly. The Fair is a time capsule of Calcutta's life and culture, the three-hundred-year-young city's tribute to itself.<sup>11</sup>*

The fair traditionally starts on the last Wednesday of January, and ends on the first Sunday of February. It was initially a week-long event but popular demand forced authorities to extend the duration to 12 days in 2005. Even though there is usually an extended holiday in Calcutta during the period of January 23 (Netaji's birthday) to January 26 ( Republic Day) the fair is held at the beginning of February to overlap with the payday of most Calcuttans. Most of the times the duration also includes the Saraswati Puja and in these ten days the fair it becomes a kind of pilgrimage spot for Calcuttans. Children hoard their pocket money through the year to spend it on books at the fair. The appeal of the fair is neatly palpable. As a child I remember that “A Visit to the Book Fair” would invariably be one of the essay topics in our final examinations in March. From standard II to X, I sometimes wonder how many essays on Book Fair I might have written. The information about the fair that I put down here comes automatically to me.

The enthusiasm for the fair was and still is gradually built up in the city. From December onwards small pieces of information about the fair is fed to the Calcuttans via newspapers and now news channels. The appetizers come in the form of the announcement of the fair dates, theme of the fair, number of stalls, major participants and the main attraction of the year. As an example, take a look at the passage quoted below from *The Telegraph*<sup>12</sup> –

Rattled by cries from various quarters against the plundering of the Maidan by fairs and rallies, the organisers of Calcutta Book Fair have planned significant steps to minimise the damage to the greens this year.

For one, the succulent kebabs, pan-fried chow mein and chicken drumsticks will be in short supply at the fair, starting January 24. The Publishers and Booksellers Guild, the organisers of the Calcutta Book Fair, has resolved to allow only half the usual number of food stalls at the fair to curb the amount of refuse produced by them.

The newspapers are flooded with pieces on the Book Fair for the two weeks that the fair runs and this frenzy reaches its crescendo on the last day of the fair. Anybody who has

not been able to make it to the fair earlier makes it a point to visit it before it closes for the year. It is a mad rush but the book lovers brave it, and perhaps they even enjoy it.

So how did it all begin? The first Calcutta Book Fair was inaugurated by the Publisher's and Bookseller's Guild in 1975. In the 1970's there was a slump in sales of books. Books had been reduced to inessential commodities. To reawaken the ardent bibliophile in the Calcuttans, some booksellers and publishers got together to organize this fair, which today has become a phenomenon of sorts. The fair is not just about books. It is a carnival. One could even call it a concentrated essence of Calcutta culture. From chicken roll and fish fry to adda sessions to cultural evenings injected with Rabindrasangeet, the Book Fair has it all. It is one of the identity markers of Calcutta and Hazra strategically weaves it into his narrative –

This was a book fair, the bigger sort where people turned into insects without having to wake up from uneasy dreams, and just spent their legs travelling round and round, entering stalls as if they were digressions or consultations to footnotes. And they bought books.

Whole families, halves of families, erratic splinter groups, friends and essentially single people visited this place for a fortnight, kicking up enough dust to unsettle the planet...

...the big stalls were located along with the bum artists and craftsmen and the completely inconsequential young people loudly singing Rabindrasangeet or "We shall overcome" while sitting in circles...

I could smell something... It was probably a roll shop. I turned a corner and, yes, it was a roll shop. After scanning the list of items painted on the planked-up kiosk – single mutton, single chicken, vegetable... I opted for a single mutton roll. (95-97)

Hazra does not speak about just any Calcutta Book Fair. He brings in the fair at a moment of crisis – the Book Fair fire. The Calcutta Book Fair fire on 3<sup>rd</sup> February, 1997 has left a lasting impression on the city. Almost a decade after the incident the fire is still

vividly remembered and every year a two minute silence is observed before the official prize giving ceremony, in memory of the sole victim of the 1997 Calcutta Book Fair fire Jiten Seal<sup>13</sup>. This elaborate detail about the Calcutta Book Fair was given here to highlight the significance of the fair in the city. Hazra in his novel capitalises on this importance. He shows his protagonist, Hiren, to be responsible for the fire –

I'll screech back again to the point when the thought of burning down the book fair took shape in my head. I dipped in three fingers... into my shirt pocket to take out the lighter. I stood in a relatively small corner of the fair inside a genuinely charming... (95)

This is the first instance where Hiren admits his desire to burn the Book Fair and a few pages later we witness him in action –

I rolled the metal roller of my precious lighter and let the tall flame catch the cloth that made up the walls of the book stall I was in. I knew that the next stall's wall was only a few feet away... I walked out and entered the other relatively empty stall next door.

I lit another corner of another stall. Then another. And then another, and another and yet one more, until one added them all up, the fires became collaborators in some grand scheme rather than puny individual entities doing their bit to go against the grain of breath...

The public address system lit up with a calm voice. "Do not panic. The fire-engines posted near the main office are coming to put out the blaze..."

The people had changed. The snake lines of men, women and children entering and exiting stalls had converted into surging pockets, like the hot air above the flames itself. The dryness of the heat had coaxed something out of them that was not calm, not civilized...

By now, the sheer size of the fire had created a breeze... that was hot, blistering and nearly liquid. This was when everyone realised that it

would be wise to leave the burning fair ground... As I pushed and heaved my way out, I heard shrieks and shouts. I also felt the supremacy – that's exactly the word I have in mind – of a big fire. (104-106)

This sequence of burning down the Book Fair, throws up the novel for various interpretations and speculations. Hiren's action and desire to burn reveals that he is a pyromaniac. Pyromania is an obsession with fire and starting fires in an intentional fashion. They start fires to induce euphoria<sup>14</sup>. Starting in 1850, there have been many arguments as to the cause of pyromania. Whether the condition arises from mental illness or a moral deficiency has changed depending on the development of psychiatry and mental healthcare in general<sup>15</sup>. There is little known about this impulse control disorder, except some research suggesting there is an environmental component arising in early childhood<sup>16</sup>. Few scientifically rigorous studies have been done on the subject, but psychosocial hypotheses suggest pyromania may be a form of communication from those with few social skills, or an ungratified sexuality for which setting fires is a symbolic solution. Children who are pyromaniacs often have a history of cruelty to animals. They also frequently suffer from other behaviour disorders and have learning disabilities and attention disorders. Studies in American Psychiatric Association have also linked pyromania to child abuse<sup>17</sup>. Most of Hiren's symptoms are those of a pyromaniac. He burns things up for pleasure –

I burn things for pleasure. Simply put, I derive pleasure out of burning objects. I love gathering up things – paper, wood, furniture, books, garbage, anything – and love the way they first glow... it gives me great indescribable pleasure. I won't say it's better than sex. But it is better than sex with anyone I have ever met. (55)

Pleasure and euphoria seem to be the only guiding force in Hiren to burn down things. There is no apparent revenge associated with it. This Book Fair fire was not the first instance. Hiren, as the character himself admits, had had his stint at it several times before. He had burned down his house with his girl friend in it, the school canteen room,

vacant slum rooms on the by-pass, letter box and a broken pile of rickshaws. Now Hiren is not the first fictional pyromaniac. There is a long tradition to this type too. There are several films, TV shows, comic strips and books based on pyromaniacs. For instance, the film *A Pyromaniac's Love Story* (1995)<sup>18</sup>. However, a detailed study of this tradition is beyond the scope of this research, so we will only discuss the literature that might have had an immediate influence on the book – Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*<sup>19</sup>. Guy Montag is a fireman who lives in a society in which books are illegal. His job is not to extinguish fires, but to light them. He burns books, and all the firemen wear the number "451" on their uniforms because that is the temperature at which books burn. But the role reversal of the firemen is not the only difference between present-day society and the world in which Montag lives. People of Montag's world take no interest in politics or world issues. The only point of life is pleasure. Montag's wife, Mildred, spends her time watching the televisions that take up three of the four walls in their parlor, or listening to the seashell radios that fit snugly in the ear. It isn't until Montag meets a young girl named Clarisse that he realizes that there might be more to life than the electronic entertainment that absorbs everyone. Clarisse makes him think about the world beyond the wall television and seashell radios; she makes him wonder about life. This newfound curiosity gets Montag into trouble when he takes an interest in reading the books that he's supposed to burn. When Captain Beatty, the fire chief, realizes that Montag has traded sides, he forces Montag to burn his own home. To save himself, Montag kills the fire chief and escapes the city. A manhunt ensues on live television, but when Montag eludes the authorities, an innocent man is killed in his place to appease the audience. Montag finds a group of educated, vagrant men who remember great novels so that when the world returns to an appreciation of literature, they will be ready to help out. He joins them. As they are walking away from the city, a bomb destroys the place that was once Montag's home. Knowing they will be needed, the men turn back to the shattered city to help rebuild a society that has destroyed itself. So if one were to draw a connection between Calcutta and Montag's society it seems that Hazra is hinting at the fact that Calcutta is a society which is at the brink of destroying itself. The burning of the Book Fair thus becomes the first destructive symptom of the city.

Book burning is a very important symbol. History has several instances of book burning. In 12th century AD, the Nalanda university complex was destroyed by Bakhtiar Khilji, a Turkish Invader. On 17 June, 1242 at the decree of Pope Gregory IX and King Louis, all copies of the Talmud are confiscated in Paris. Declaring that the reason for the stubbornness of the Jews was their study of the Talmud, the Pope called for an investigation of the Talmud that resulted in its condemnation and burning. Twenty-four cart-loads of Hebrew manuscripts were publicly burned. In July 1562, Bishop Diego de Landa, the second bishop of Yucatan had burned five thousand idols and twenty seven hieroglyphic rolls at Mani in the Yucatan because he felt that these books were inspired by evil<sup>20</sup>. This was not the only occasion that de Landa destroyed books; he is the main reason that so few examples of Mayan hieroglyphs exist today<sup>21</sup>. Such instances have carried on till the present times. Just in the last six years the world has witnessed at least twenty cases of mass book burning<sup>22</sup>. The growing number of these instances is reflective of the society –

Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings.

[Heinrich Heine, from his play *Almansor* (1821)]

Interestingly in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, we find both happening. Hiren burns down books and Manik is killed for the book. In any society this act is heinous but its significance becomes, perhaps just a little more magnified in a city like Calcutta. Krishna Dutta in her book *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History* (2003) has a section called “The Cult of the Book”<sup>23</sup>, where she explains the symbolic importance of books in the society of Calcutta. She points out that Bengalis are perhaps the only community to observe a ceremony for initiation into literacy – *hathey khodi*. In the chapter titled “City of Learning”, Dutta writes –

...The city is obsessed with getting qualifications; when its biggest English-language newspaper, *The Telegraph*, announces annual awards for the best school in Calcutta, it is an occasion for much competition and publicity. During rush hours, schoolchildren are ferried to school in a strange contraption like a tin box, approximately a cuboid, with two

facing benches, a roof and cut-out side-windows, all of which sits on two wheels and is pulled by bicycle. As the box passes by, you may hear its occupants chanting lists of spellings (Bengali and English) and multiplication tables... At arrival and departure times in the respectable primary schools, mothers and fathers can be heard nagging their children about homework carried in their heavy satchels crammed with books and papers. And as the time comes for a school's annual test, the entire household suspends its leisure activities so that the student can concentrate. When at last he or she passes the exam, it is customary to share with family and friends a box of milk-white or light-brown *sandesh*... (195)

Dutta's observation is quite true. However, I have a slight problem with one comment of hers and I would like to add on to her description with my own observations to give a better picture. I find her expression "respectable primary schools" problematic. What Dutta perhaps intended to say was well known schools. In Calcutta there is an obsession about the educational institution as well. Certain institutes are looked upon with great respect. For instance, St Xavier's College Calcutta was for me my dream destination. However, when I did not get through the college, for several months I felt my education was worthless. However, an educational institution cannot be, in my opinion, "disrespectable". Again this problem that I have maybe a reflection of the Calcuttan ingrained within me, who cannot tolerate any form of disrespect to education. We had got a sample of this obsession for education even *The Shadow Lines*. As we had discussed, the narrator's whole career graph was reflective of this obsession. Education is the only asset in life – this belief was drilled into him both by his grandmother and mother. Dutta, in her book, says that parents of primary school goers are obsessive about their children's education. Here too I would like to differ. It is undoubtedly true that the parents of the young children obsess about their ward's education but their obsession continues far beyond the primary school years. In college there was a girl in my class whose mother would come with her to college at ten in the morning wait outside the gates till four in the evening and then take her back home. In these long hours of wait,



the mother would neatly write down the notes taken by my classmate the day before. She would then ask us for our notes to add on to her daughter's. This is no exaggeration neither is it a peculiar case. Such scenes maybe witnessed in almost every educational institution in Calcutta. The scenes acquire a kind of frenzy during examinations when parents line up with tiffin boxes outside the examination centres. The guards generally have a tough time controlling the crowd dying to know how their wards have fared in the paper. At the interval one will see pockets of parents and children, with children pouring over their books for a last minute cramming and the parents trying hard to cram their children's mouths with home-cooked food and coconut water. Horlicks or Complan in flasks might also be taken. Apart from this tradition if one takes a closer look at Calcutta culture, several other aspects about the city's passion for books will be revealed. Take for instance the *Saraswati Puja*, though the puja is celebrated in many other parts of the country, it is not with as much zeal as it is in Calcutta. Books, therefore, have a unique importance in Calcutta culture. It is sacred and revered. Any insult to it is synonymous to an insult to the city itself. Thus, Hiren, in Hazra's novel is not an ordinary pyromaniac. He burns the Book Fair and this action of his maybe interpreted as his lashing out against the city and its culture. He therefore becomes an anarchist, a symbol of the frustrated youth of the city. Thus, this whole history of pyromania and book burning was drawn to interpret the significance of Hiren's act and to show the traditions from which Hazra draws his ideas. There are several other traditions that have influenced Hazra in writing this novel. The most apparent being the adda phenomenon and the works of the Bengali author Premendra Mitra.

This is the age of remixes, so one cannot really blame Hazra for being a product of the times. Even Shakespeare and our very own Rabindranath Tagore did and have been excused with the remark – fools copy, geniuses steal. So what does Hazra do? He picks up characters from popular Bengali fiction – Ghanada, and makes them a part of his own work. Hazra does not pretend to conceal this; rather he would want the readers to form the blatant association. He wants his work to draw its lineage from a particular tradition in Bengali literature. In chapter two on Amitav Ghosh, we had discussed the ancestry of a character like Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay "Maps and Mirrors: Co-ordinates of Meaning in *The Shadow Line*" has attributed it

to the cartographic imagination of the Bengali psyche. Ghanada, Tenida and Feluda, the popular characters of Bengali fiction are products of this phenomenon. They are these “paradigmatic fictional figures” who traditionally have a younger person held spellbound by their encyclopaedic knowledge. Premendra Mitra created the enigmatic character called Ghanada. A man full of imagination and always ready with some interesting anecdote to appease the curiosity of his loyal disciples. In line with Ghanada was another *dada*, Tenida, a more brotherly character created by Narain Gangopadhaya. And after them came along Satyajit Ray’s Charminar smoking, smart and suave Feluda, who had enthralled the children’s imagination in the early 80’s. Though Feluda continues to be popular among Bengali readers and off late his adventures are being translated into English, his popularity is falling. Today his tales have to compete with those of the young wizard – Harry Potter. These tales like several other Bengali cultural markers and traditions are losing popularity and so they need to be re-invented to regenerate an interest in them. Hazra tries to re-generate that interest by adapting Ghanada into his fiction of the present times. However, this Ghanada is not an endearing character and neither is he meant to entertain children. He is no longer the virtuous soul who is forever ready to save humanity from unethical and dangerous scientific discoveries. Ghanada is now evil. He is a terrorist of sorts and masterminds the chain of fires in Calcutta. His stories are no longer believable, they are clouded with Hiren’s suspicion from the start. In short, Hazra’s Ghanada is a dark character and who has been re-created for those who have grown up relishing the Bengali tales of Ghanada. He is for this class of readers to compare and contrast with the Mitra’s Ghanada. Hazra targets his book to a specific audience with a specific agenda in mind. His book’s primary targets are Bengalis of the 70’s and 80’s generation and perhaps settled out of Calcutta. Hazra’s intention is to arouse their curiosity about their hero’s new avatar and thereby generate a sense of nostalgia. His intention is akin to the filmmakers who turn classics into modern day cinema. The process not only generates an interest for the film but also whips up a fresh interest for the original text. Nostalgia sells, and that matters in popularizing and re-creating a dying culture. Hazra’s Ghanada is in keeping with the demands of the present times. Yet he maintains several of his old traits. For instance, he is still ever ready with his tall tales. Here are a few samplers –

And then, walking about in the dead of the night, smoking one cigarette after another, never bothering to offer me (Hiren) one of my own, he (Ghanda) strung the names of lunar landscapes like pearls: Sea of Showers, Ocean of Storms, Sea of Cold, Sea of Crisis...(52)

Before too long, Ghanada grabbed the occasion and began narrating... how he had once encountered a torrent of prawns dropping from the skies in a French town called Aix le Crevette. I'm not too sure whether anyone in the room actually disbelieved him, though. Shibu, for one, snorted in the beginning and told the man on his face that he should stop "talking nonsense".

I was a bit taken aback by Shibu's defiance. But sure enough, I realized that it was a ritual of sorts. Ghanada picks up a certain past adventure from his kitty which he linked to something immediate and to my mind, inconsequential (like fried prawns).

At the beginning, when the tale is still 'soft', Shibu grunts in with either a smirk or the introduction of a guffaw or a remark intended to set the narrator scampering back. But Ghanada would continue, filching a cigarette if not a whole pack, and go on his way to present to us yet another disbelief suspending story from the past. (54)

As mentioned the figure of Ghanada, Tenida, Feluda and then Tridib follow a certain prototype that has a long tradition not only in fiction but in Calcutta's culture. These figures have certain common distinguishing features – sharp wit, vast knowledge, charisma, love for travelling and loads of anecdotes. They are generally good story tellers and are very intelligent. In short they are mobile encyclopedias. Display of knowledge is their trademark but it is usually not a pompous show. Their stories are respected and yet taken with a pinch of salt. Interestingly they are more often than not pivotal for their group and are admired by the others yet they are always a little different from the rest. In real life you may spot such characters in the adda pockets and more

often than not you will discover that they are the ones who generally steer the direction of the adda sessions.

The inclusion of Ghanada in Hazra's novel, thus brings with himself several other typical Calcutta baggages. These are the concept of the mess and the male-bonding there in, addas, cartographic imagination and Bengali cuisine. The concept of the "mess" has now almost vanished from Calcutta, however earlier it was a strong presence and its references maybe be seen in several Bengali novels and films. A mess was actually a men's hostel of sorts. It was the lodging for those who worked in Calcutta but stayed in the towns and villages near Calcutta. It was a typically "male" space. Women, apart from those who cleaned the mess, were not allowed within it and were generally viewed as potential danger to the balance and brotherhood in the mess. An interesting example of this male-bonding being threatened by a woman's entry in the mess, is the film *74½* (*Shade Chuattor*) starring Uttam Kumar, Suchitra Sen, Tulshi Chakroborty, Bhanu Gangopadhyay and Johor Ray. It is a comedy which shows how the balance in the mess is disturbed by the entry of a woman – Suchitra Sen. Her entry creates a stir among the men in the mess and her romance with Uttam Kumar, one of the inmates, leads to his fall out with other inmates. However, as in all comedies, differences are sorted out and the film ends with the couple's marriage. Hazra's novel however, does not end with the "And then they lived happily ever after". 72, Banamali Naskar Lane – its setting and inmates are a lift from Premendra Mitra's fiction. It is the same mess with the familiar figure of Ghanada at the helm of everything. It is a male world and there is no female figure in the vicinity. But Hazra in his fiction introduces the femme fatal – Uma – in this world. Uma lives across the street but her entry into Hiren's life, jeopardizes the set up of this world. By letting Uma into his life, Hiren as it were rebels against the tradition of the mess. It is viewed as breach of the unsaid contract and so he has to pay for it. And from here begins Hazra's narrative. The mess is no longer a comic world and Ghanada is no more an endearing figure. It is now all hostile. Thus, the novel seems to suggest that if one goes against the city's tradition, the city will lash back with vengeance. It may also be interpreted as that times have now changed. The city of Calcutta is no longer a happy world. There are darker shades in it and no one can be trusted here. This seems to be the moral of Hazra's novel. Hiren's story ends with the moral- trust no one, which is also the

unsaid moral of Manik's story. There is nothing trustworthy in the narrative; all trust is subverted with ordinary men turning deceptive and dangerous. Even the structure of the novel constantly subverts the norms of writing by building up a thriller and breaking it. Many such structures are built up, like a novel about illusion and reality, a novel critiquing novel writing, etcetera and all such schemes are subverted by the writer. The writer himself is not to be trusted, as he does exactly those things, which he critiques in the book. He is a rock-music fan and gets photographed in a dopey look on the book-jacket and claims to be a conservative. He employs in his novel all the latest techniques of novel writing and novel selling and yet a Hindustan Times reporter, Namita Bhandare, reviewing his novel says, "In these days of five-star hotel book launches, celebrity managers and marketing hype, he's an anachronism." Incidentally the author himself is the editor to the editorial of this newspaper and it is this very newspaper, which had two articles on him and his novel on the same day (21<sup>st</sup> December, 2003). He confirms to all the norms of marketing but at the same time debunks it all through his work. Capitalist intervention is critiqued in the creative process in the book via Manik, and ironically the same techniques are used by Hazra himself to promote his book. The Barthesian idea of "death of the author" is quite well brought out through this interaction between fact and fiction. The author himself is conscious of this and in the novel Manik Basu is killed by his publisher so that his book may sell.

Hazra is a clever strategist. He draws inspiration from traditions but unlike Amitav Ghosh, he does not delve into further enquiry of his subject. For instance, if Ghosh were to write about the Calcutta Book Fair fire, the anthropologist in him would not have been satisfied by simply making a character responsible for it. His narrative would be supported by the whole tradition of book burning and Ghosh's stance would clearly be theorised. Hazra does not get into this. It is the reader who draws these connections. He uses them only as props to create his fiction.

The use of language by Hazra also makes for a very interesting analysis. He throws in Bengali words like *Beguni* and *Luchi* to add culture-specificity to his work. At the same time the servant, Bonoari, in the novel uses phrases like "a blasted day"...quite some coming of an age for a Bengali servant. This too is a good strategy and is done by keeping the target audience in mind. The readers who would relish reading about

Ghanada in his new avatar, would also appreciate a taste of Calcutta in the language. Seasoning the English language with a few Bengali words and phrases is an easy way localising it. In this manner his language does explore the ways to write "Indian English". For instance, the eunuchs assaulting Hiren say, "... You hang around here as if you can't flip a fried fish and eat it..." the original of which is "*bhaja machh ta ulte khete jane na*" and which means posing to be innocent. Translations such as these, I feel, are generally pulled off well by Hazra and gel well with the rest of narrative. Another feature of Hazra's language is the use of long hyphenated words. The attempt perhaps is at a signature style but at times it tends to get repetitive and thus loses its charm.

The use of language, strategies, traditions, culture and events, as mentioned earlier, reflects that Hazra is undoubtedly a clever craftsman. He employs every strategy that he can to ensure that his novel has all the qualities to turn into a best seller. However, this also reveals the streak of the Bengali *bhadralok* in Hazra. His novel is a display of his vast knowledge. From art to music to literature to geography – almost every aspect of learning is touched upon. He seems to take pride in the fact that he admits that Bengali culture is decadent. Hazra in some ways thus becomes like the character of the intelligent story teller. Like Ghanada, he too tells us a tale saturated with knowledge and at the end leaves us wondering how much of it to take and how much to let go.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hazra, Indrajit. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. IndiaInk; New Delhi. 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Hazra, Indrajit. *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul*. Ravi Dayal. New Delhi. 2001.

<sup>3</sup> "Surge of Fanciful Imagination". n pag. Online. Internet. Hinduonline. 16 Jun 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Shakespeare in Love*. Dir. John Madden. With Joseph Fiennes, Gwyneth Paltro, Colin Firth, and Geoffrey Rush. Miramax. 1998.

<sup>5</sup> The screenplay of *Shakespeare in Love* was co-authored by Marc Norman.

<sup>6</sup> "Hieronymus Bosch". n pag. Online. Internet. 17 Jnu 2006.

<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/B/bosch.html>

<sup>7</sup> Taken from Hindustan Times web edition 21 Dec 2003. Page now unavailable.

<sup>8</sup> Jos Koldeweij/Bernard Vermet/Barbera van Kooij: *Hieronymus Bosch. New Insights Into His Life and Work*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The Harry Bosch novels include –

*The Black Echo* (1992), *The Black Ice* (1993), *The Concrete Blonde* (1994), *The Last Coyote* (1995), *Trunk Music* (1997), *Angels Flight* (1999), *City Of Bones* (2002), *Lost Light* (2003), *The Narrows* (2004), *The Closers* (2005), *Echo Park* (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Nancy Willard. *Pish, Posh Said Hieronymus Bosch*. (1991)

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- <sup>11</sup> "The Calcutta Book Fair" by Biswajit Matilal. ed Sukanta Chaudhuri *Calcutta: The Living City*. New Delhi: OUP, 1999. Pg 341
- <sup>12</sup> "Fair Frown on Food Junk". [http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060116/asp/calcutta/story\\_5724109.asp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1060116/asp/calcutta/story_5724109.asp). as on 2 February, 2006.
- <sup>13</sup> Information taken from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calcutta\\_Book\\_Fair](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calcutta_Book_Fair), as on 10 July 2006.
- <sup>14</sup> Taken from <http://www.wordreference.com/definition/pyromaniac>. as on 15 July 2006.
- <sup>15</sup> Geller JL, Erlen J, Pinkus RL (1986). "A historical appraisal of America's experience with "pyromania"-a diagnosis in search of a disorder". *National Institutes of Health*. [http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list\\_uids=3542858&dopt=Abstract](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?cmd=Retrieve&db=PubMed&list_uids=3542858&dopt=Abstract). As on 20 June, 2006
- <sup>16</sup> "Psychiatric Disorders: Pyromania" [http://allpsych.com/disorders/impulse\\_control/pyromania.html](http://allpsych.com/disorders/impulse_control/pyromania.html). as on 17 July 2006.
- <sup>17</sup> "Impulse Control Disorders" [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_g2602/is\\_0003/ai\\_2602000316](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2602/is_0003/ai_2602000316). As on 26 June, 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> *A Pyromaniac's Love Story* Dir. Joshua Brand. With William Baldwin, John Leguizamo, Sadie Frost and Erika Eleniak. 1995.
- <sup>19</sup> Ray Bradbury. *Farhenheit 451*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1953.
- <sup>20</sup> <http://info.jpost.com/1999/Supplements/JewishHistory/today.cgi?mon=6&day=17>. As on 20 June, 2006.
- <sup>21</sup> [http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/abcde/delanda\\_deigo.html](http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/information/biography/abcde/delanda_deigo.html). as on 21 June, 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> <http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bookburning/21stcentury/21stcentury.htm>. As on 21 June, 2006.
- <sup>23</sup> Krishna Dutta. "Cult of the Book". *Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History*. New Delhi; Roli. 2003. pp 44-45.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

I had started the dissertation by tracing the roots of this research – the exact moment that had triggered the research. I had traced it back to my college days and the frustration that I faced then as a student of English in Calcutta. I had said that Calcutta had nothing to offer me but working through the dissertation I realised how much the city has given me. It is this realisation that made me re-evaluate certain things and it led to another realisation that the research was not triggered by frustration but arose from love. Love for English literature, which started from 1991. I was in the sixth standard in 1991 and my English teacher was Miss D'Souza. She was a young teacher and very popular among the students. I idolised her and it was her way of teaching English that made me fall in love with the subject. She left for Australia within a couple of years and with the passing years, I almost forgot about her, till I was reminded of her today. A coincidence again, but a bizarre one and one that demands this small anecdote. One of these days, on a webgroup of my school on the internet, one of the community members informed me that Miss D'Souza has passed away. The shocking news brought back her memories and made me realise that the seeds of this dissertation were sown by her. And while I write this I am again informed that it was wrong news, it is not Miss D'Souza our English teacher but Miss D'Souza the music teacher. I did not know how to react to this; someone pulled back from the dead, and someone departed as a replacement. It was a bizarre moment for me. However, this incident made me realise how important she has been in helping me appreciate English literature. It is she and later in college, Professor Bertram Da'silva who shaped my understanding and provoked my interest for literature and through it helped me understand my city. They like Tridib in *The Shadow Lines*, provided me with worlds to live in. For instance, Miss D'Souza encouraged us to seek out mysteries and help us believe in the world of Enid Blyton, while later Professor Da'silva sang Keats on his guitar to enable us to identify with the music of the English countryside. Interestingly both of them belong to the Anglo-Indian community, a community that is now fast disappearing from the city space.



More than a generation of the Bengali elite, perhaps all of these Indian English novelists, have studied in Anglo-Indian schools and acquired something of that way of life. If in doubt, the best example to look at would be Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* (1988)<sup>1</sup>. Agastya Sen's imagination is much informed by the Anglo-Indian schooling that he received in Darjeeling. So strong was the cultural impression that he had become apologetic about his Bengali lineage –

'Don't talk shit,' Dhruvo said and then added in Bengali, 'You're hurt about your mother tongue,' and started laughing, an exhilarated volley. That was a ten-year-old joke from their school-days in Darjeeling, when they had been envious of some Anglo-Indian boys who spoke and behaved differently, and did alarmingly badly in exams and didn't seem to mind, they were the ones who were always with the Tibetan girls and claimed to know all about sex... Agastya's envy had then blurted out, he wished he had been Anglo-Indian, that he had Keith or Alan for a name, that he spoke English with their accent. From that day his friends had more new names for him, he became the school's 'last Englishman,' or just 'hey English' (his friends meant 'hey Anglo' but didn't dare), and sometimes even 'hello Mother Tongue' – illogical and whimsical, but winsome choices, like most names selected by contemporaries. And like most names, they paled with the passage of time and place, all but August... (1-2)

The Anglo-Indian influence has been instrumental in shaping the worldview of the English-educated Bengali intelligentsia. Apart from education, the community is also responsible for popularising Western music and has contributed much to the Bengali passion for quizzing. The O'Briens – Niel, Barry and Derek – are household names in Calcutta<sup>2</sup>. However, the community barely finds any mention in the Indian English novels. They are referred to in *English, August* but in a disparaging manner, the intention being to evoke ridicule. The point is that the community which shapes much of our understanding of English Literature is ignored and forgotten by the literature produced

now. The silence about the Anglo-Indian community is not the only omission of an aspect of Calcutta. Apart from the Bengalis, practically all other communities are ignored in these “Calcutta English Novels”. However, to get back to the point, Anglo-Indians are, by the name itself, connotative of the cultural meeting of the East and the West. They are the links to the British legacy, good or bad, and to English language and literature which had tremendous bearing upon contemporary Bengali literature. To search for a right metaphor or moment, the literary renaissance is engendered in Bankimchandra’s funeral procession

Tapobrata Bose in his essay, “Literature and Literary Life in Calcutta: The Age of Rabindranath” writes –

Bankimchandra Chatterji, the monarch of nineteenth-century Bengali letters, died on 8 April 1894. As the news spread, crowds rushed to join the funeral procession as it went down College Street, Cornwallis Street and Beadon Street to Nimtala Ghat. Passers-by left their shoes in a shop and walked barefoot; watchers came down from the housetops, and rich men left their carriages. ‘Never before’, says Bankim’s biographer Shachishchandra Chatterji, ‘had Bengalis paid such homage on a writer’s death.’

Fifteen hundred people attended the condolence meet at the Star Theatre on 28 April.

The passage quoted above reveals the passion that Bengalis had developed for literature and learning from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Interestingly this passion was whipped via the help of tales about far flung lands. Most of Chatterji’s characters could have belonged to another land and age far removed from the contemporary Bengali life. Perhaps the roots of the “cartographic imagination” in the Bengali psyche, which I discussed in the second and fourth chapters of this dissertation, maybe attributed to the tales of Chatterji, which in turn maybe attributed to the Western thoughts that influenced his worldview. The aim of Chatterji’s works was to fire the spirit of nationalism in the Bengalis. It was Chatterji’s song *Vande Mataram* that became the inspirational slogan

for the Indian freedom movement and later became the national song of India. Incidentally, both the National Song and the National Anthem of our country are Bengali/Calcutta contributions. This is not said with the intention of establishing that Bengali culture is superior to the rest of the country, but to steer the argument in the direction that shows that these facts are not missed by Bengalis and it certainly panders to their ego. It creates a sense of smugness in the Bengalis for being the pioneers of culture. The smugness that is reflected in the attitudes of the die-hard Calcutta loyalists. To understand it better take a look at the following quote. Renu Roy, while commenting on the promising fashion industry of Calcutta, writes –

Like her, Sabyasachi Mukerjee cannot exactly be termed tradition, but he is the new face of Calcutta. A city that inspires thousands of poets who make their presence felt every year at the Book Fair, also inspires the new name on the national marquee. Is it ironic that the designer for *Black* is the child of a city dedicated to the Black Goddess? If his rise has been quick, certainly the surprise quality of his work has something to do with it. Even its strongest detractors will admit that Calcutta always has, and always will, think differently, whether it is on the Maidan with a flag in your hand or a slim volume of verse, or with scissors and measuring tape. Like a Joy Goswami, a Sabyasachi Mukerjee too certainly inspires the younger generation. Do we not have reason enough to be enthusiastic about the future? <sup>3</sup>

This smugness also peeps through the likes of Indrajit Hazra who critique this complacency but are not free of it themselves. Even Amitav Ghosh's comment, that I discussed in the third chapter, reflects the same pride –

I suspect that when you say 'the Bengalis' you're actually referring only to one segment of the Bengali-speaking world. This is perhaps the real problem. It is true that 'bhadralok' West Bengalis often

see themselves as being in some sort of decline. But I don't think Bangladeshis see themselves in this way at all.

This pride, I believe, arises from the passion for learning that Bengalis have always had. We had discussed about this passion at length in the preceding chapter. To recapitulate, Bengalis, one might say, have a penchant for learning and systems of knowledge. This fetish spills over in the form of their various passions. One being the passion for books. This in turn is reflected through phenomena like the Calcutta Book Fair, the celebration of Saraswati Puja and College Street. The characters like Tridib of *The Shadow Lines* and Ghanada in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* are results of this passion for knowledge. So what triggered this passion? There are no clear answers for this. One can only speculate. It is speculation that hints that perhaps the trigger was the English influence. Quizzing was introduced in the colonies by the British to enable the subjects to know more about England and the empire on which the sun never set. The activity created an appetite for knowledge among the Indians and its influence continues till date. Initially quizzing was not a game but a requisite. The Indian Civil Service examinations were basically quizzes and the tradition has carried on till the present time, the example being the pattern of the UPSC examinations. Quizzing still remains popular in Calcutta. In May 2005 Dalhousie Institute's Quizzing competition completed forty years. Quoted below is a newspaper report on the occasion. The quote highlights the importance that the sport holds in Calcutta.

From beer bottles and live ducks to jeans and shoes to laptops and foreign holidays... The bag of bounty for guessing it right has really grown over the years. What hasn't changed, though, is the special chemistry Dalhousie Institute (DI) shares with quizzing in Calcutta.

The basketball court and the lawns at DI's 42, Jhowtala Road campus still constitute the Wimbledon of open quizzing in town, almost a pilgrimage site for die-hard quizzers. The clock actually started ticking in a different arena back in 1967, when up the road, Christ The King Church's Parish

Club hosted the open quiz for the Eddie Hyde Trophy, named after the club president.

Neil O'Brien went to the UK on holiday the year before and discovered the joys of radio quiz shows. Back home, the entertainment committee of Christ The King Church's Parish Club was looking for novelty on the platter and quizzing fitted the bill. So the ball was set rolling with five Parish teams and winners were treated to ducks and beers.

The knowledge game gathered real momentum after the scene shifted to DI in 1970 and open quizzing offered competition to the Sayani brothers' iconic radio show, the Bournvita Quiz Contest. On the DI campus, the JS Lipton Quiz, presented by Sadhan Banerjee and Jug Suraiya, and the All-India Bata North Star Quiz, which kicked off in 1978-79, kept the DI Open company, while Alban Scott's Round Table Quiz also started.

"When Dalhousie Institute was founded, it was modelled as a meeting place for academicians and intellectuals, and the environment has always been conducive to knowledge-building. Over the years, the institution has nurtured the art of quizzing with compassion, and I very much look forward to it even today," says Neil, Calcutta's original quizmaster.<sup>4</sup>

This penchant for quizzing, as we saw, seeps into literature as well. Literature gets informed by this passion for knowledge. In the fourth chapter on Indrajit Hazra's works we saw how his storehouse of knowledge overflows into the pages of his fiction. There were numerous references to art, literature, music and history.

Knowledge and systems of learning fire the imagination of most Bengali writers. The authors that we have seen are keen on these methods, although each of them has a different set of beliefs. To build a metaphor, if Indrajit Hazra is a school quizzier revelling in trivia across subjects from across the globe, Amitav Ghosh is self-reflexive who wants to chart out the historical links of all these trivia and delve into their politics. Raj Kamal Jha, on the other hand is someone to whom the city speaks through its grime and crime. Apparently their narratives are different from one another and yet there is a common factor running through all – the memories of Calcutta. The memories are

different and the manner of dealing with them is also different – Amitav Ghosh negotiates with it as an anthropologist, Raj Kamal Jha with the objectivity of a journalist and Indrajit Hazra as an enthusiastic public school scholar. And yet from their divergent dealing, a common view about the city emerges through their writings – decadence.

In a casual reading of Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* or *The Calcutta Chromosome*, Calcutta may not appear as a decadent city but if one delves into it the subtleties will become clear. *The Shadow Lines*, as we discussed in the second chapter of the dissertation, presents the Calcutta of the sixties. But that one must understand is the city of the past – a glorious past that is remembered with a sense of nostalgia. And even the sixties of Calcutta that he presents is a picture of the 1964 riots. A time of violence and strife. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* he presents the 1990's Calcutta and there is no glaring image of decay in it but neither is it a very futuristic picture. It is a science fiction, a futuristic novel but the Calcuttans present in it are archaic. It is a city which still seems to be a city of the snake charmers with Mangala presiding over the whole mumbo-jumbo. There is a particular way in which Ghosh sees Calcutta. It is not that he only sees hopelessness. He sees the city as a stop-over or rather a stepping stone. A place from where you garner knowledge and then move forward to greener pastures. One may return to it from time to time but one cannot stay on there if progress is in mind.

It would be wrong to say that only Ghosh views the city in these terms. Most of us have similar opinions. In fact, Hazra has a very interesting adjective to describe the city. He says that the city is not decadent but it is "sterile"<sup>5</sup>. Sterile, stagnant, rotting quagmire – that's how the city appears in Jha's novels too. A dark picture of despair. I have discussed that at length in the preceding chapters. This image of the city is not new. It is an image that has been in circulation since the Black Hole tragedy of 1756. Frederic C Thomas is acutely aware of this canonised image of the city and in the Introduction of his book *Calcutta: The Human Face of Poverty* he charts out the history of this depiction

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Almost every book written about Calcutta begins with extravagant language describing the city's squalor and putrefaction. It is as though Calcutta has always had a perverse fascination as a dreadful place. As

early as the 1770s, the first Governor of Bengal, Robert Clive, called it “the most wicked place in the universe”. Nearly one hundred years later, one of his successors, Sir George Trevelyan, wrote: “Find, if you can a more uninviting spot than Calcutta... The place is so bad by nature that human efforts could do little to make it worse, but that little has been done faithfully and assiduously”... in 1963 V S Naipaul could only conclude that Calcutta was “an abomination”. (3-4)<sup>6</sup>

One perhaps cannot really deny that Calcutta after all is not a very pretty picture. The jostling crowd of people, the screams and cries of the pavement dwellers, the choking pollution, the clogged drains, the cramped bustees, crumbling old mansions, beggars, garbage dumps, diseased animals on the road. Scenes like these have made Calcutta into a cliché of squalor and despair. For years this image has been packaged and marketed and for years it has been selling. While some have blatantly criticised it, the others like Thomas have adopted a “human” approach but the agenda has been the same – study of the squalor of the city. The studies have been well funded and images have been romanticised to an extent that Calcutta’s poverty has become a tourist attraction. To put it more simply – misery of Calcutta sells.

. If the dark image of Calcutta has been such a pull, so has its picture of beauty been. Modelled on the city of London, the city has always been called the City of Palaces. The stately buildings in the Esplanade; the grand old traditional Bengali houses in the north; Trincas, Flury’s, Moulin Rouge on Park Street; New Market during Christmas; the races in the winter months; New Year Eve parties in clubs; gearing up for Durga Puja and the *pandal* hopping; Book Fair; Rabindrasangeet; Satyajit Ray; Uttam Kumar-Suchitra Sen pair; boat ride on the Ganga; politics; tea in *bhanr*; *phuchka*, chicken-roll, cutlet, *shingara*; cricket, football, hockey – all these are also common scenes from the city. And these too have been selling. On a given day if you walk into a bookstore like the Oxford Bookstore you might spot over twenty five books based on Calcutta’s culture and tradition. And around two to three copies sell everyday, that is the rate at which Calcutta is consumed by the culture vultures. So who are the consumers? A number of foreigners buy these books but several are people like us, who have physically

left the city but have not been able to leave it emotionally. It is a sense of nostalgia that keeps drawing us to the city and we consume whatever is catered to us about the city. Calcutta is nostalgia, everyone moves out of Calcutta, but Calcutta does not move out of them.

Sukanta Chaudhuri tries to wed the two images – the beautiful and the beastly – to present Calcutta as a “living city”, a “humane” city that is an amalgam of both the good and bad. In the Introduction to his book *Calcutta: The Living City* he says –

Calcutta has had more than her fair share of special afflictions as well, but these she has borne with heroic and almost suicidal silence. She is the ‘primate city’, the great magnet for survival-seekers from one of the poorest and most populous segments of the subcontinent...

The present generation of fiction writers from Calcutta have adopted Chaudhuri’s stance and that strategy is selling very well too. However, the problem is that they are but following a “strategy”. Most of their works cater to a trope which is saleable. Due to this they leave out several aspects about the city. One can argue here that a writer cannot write about everything but as we have seen through the dissertation, certain exclusions are glaring. However, that is not to say that they have not attempted at moving beyond the trope. While Raj Kamal Jha has given voice to silent suffering, Amitav Ghosh has maintained an echoing silence to combat violence. Yet there remains more to be explored. The genre in its present state is still largely formulaic. Thus, one wonders how long will this strategy work? Will it last the test of time? Will anyone of their novels be remembered as “real” representations of Calcutta, as Dickens’ works are remembered as representations of London? But then what is “real”? Who decides that? Who creates the canon? In the late eighties and early nineties very few knew about Amitav Ghosh. It was only after his texts were picked up as academic texts and circulated as a part of the curriculum that he has got canonized. Perhaps the others will be too. Perhaps these writers will be clubbed together as a “School”. But before that, I feel, there is a road to be travelled. A road which Mrinal Sen traversed at the turn of the millennium in a short piece titled “Kolkata Beyond Time”. On 29<sup>th</sup> December, 1999 his son, who lives in the



US had written to him about a pact that he had made 30 years back. They had promised to meet on the eve of the new millennium. It was a promise sealed with a glittering dream of the future. Sen writes –

But how does one select the meeting point? In 30 years, Kolkata would be nearly unrecognizable, they thought. (Their generation felt this, as much as we did 30 years ago, which is why we were addicted to *The Statesman's 100 Years Ago* column). They needed a meeting place 'that would not be bulldozed to make room for a brave new world'. Their unanimous choice was the north gate of Victoria Memorial, which, just like the deep-seated colonial legacy, 'would retain its shine'.

His son could not make it to Calcutta on the promised date due to the demands of his new job. So to keep his son's pact he ventured to the promised venue.

December 31, 1999. 5.30 pm. When the winter sun was just about to disappear behind a slate-grey sky, I made my way to the Victoria Memorial to honour an appointment and a 'pact' initiated by my son. I passed through an anonymous crowd and stood in front of them – quite a lot of them. Not all of them were locals, many of them were with their wives and some with their children. There were even two or three couples who are now divorced. All of them had come to keep a promise made in their youth, 30 years ago! I didn't say anything – there was nothing to say, there was no need for words.

Suddenly, I had the strangest thought. As I saw the group waiting under the evening light, realised that I had changed, that I had returned to my past. It was as if the clock had turned back 30 years. I felt young. And not quite strangely, they, the friends of my son, had grown older, older by 30 years.

As I took the road home, I was gripped by my experience, and the 'road' traveled that wintry evening. A journey astride an abstract time

machine in Kolkata – it's possible only here, in a city where the most ordinary of events is often a journey into the self...

This journey into the self is what the writers need to undertake. I will conclude the discussion by quoting the conversations that I had with two of the novelists – Raj Kamal Jha and Indrajit Hazra.

***RAJ KAMAL JHA IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTIONNAIRE ON CALCUTTA AND HIS NOVELS:***

Here's a note... I have taken this route rather than the Q and A since this addresses the key questions raised. Also, I believe very strongly in letting my work do the talking rather than me.

So I am not going to get into why I used this or why I didn't use that...why I said this, why I didn't say that etc etc. To be frank, even I don't know many of the answers and that, I guess, is why writing for me is a personal journey of discovery.

Yes, Calcutta is where my first two novels are placed but this is more a city of the mind, a Calcutta of memories and dreams rather than the geographical entity. Why did I choose this city? The simple reason: I know the city better than any other city (not know as in an expert's knowledge, there are still streets where I will get lost) but this is a city I grew up in and lived uninterrupted for 18 years and although I have spent more time now outside the city, I haven't been able to connect with any place more strongly than I do with Calcutta. And in the cities I have lived, I tend to see the Calcutta in each. As for Metro and malls, certainly they will appear in the story when they need to appear; they don't disappear or appear at my bidding.

Why is child abuse such a strong theme in my work? I don't know. Yes, I do plan my stories, plot the narrative but the stories take me to places I don't decide on, sometimes I don't even understand. What I do know is that child abuse, especially in my first two

novels, is at the core of the tension and the conflict of the story. A child being abused is about suffering in silence, it's about suffering when you aren't even aware of what suffering is and that's why it symbolises the most extreme form of violence that you can think of.

Sorry, I couldn't be of more help...

All the best,

Raj.

***IDRAJIT HAZRA IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTIONNAIRE ON CALCUTTA AND HIS NOVEL:***

1. *What is your idea about Calcutta and its representation...in all forms...literature, media, photography, discourses?*

Calcutta for me is a stitched entity: a personalised and romanticized notion of a city I no longer live in and therefore can safely form in my head. And by romanticized I mean through the romanticized notion of my own personal history with its corresponding 'Calcutta markers'. For me it's a petri-dish in which I was once a 'culture' (in the biological sense) specimen, but now I am able to 'take a view' simply because I am outside the 'experiment'.

As you rightly say, a city is also its depictions and its imaginative constructs. For me and many others, Calcutta is a picaresque city whose romantic decay is banal, not lyrical. It is a place, in fact, which has a bigger presence in what it's thought to be, rather than what it *is*. In my case, street names, as in Ghana-da (Banamali Nashkar Lane) or Teni-da (Potoldanga) or the quasi-romantic notions of Chitpur Road, Bishop Lefroy Road (Manik-da), Shyambazar Crossing (Netaji pointing towards Delhi), Red Road, Alimuddin Street (CPIM) headquarters, Ahiritolla (my father grew up there) etc make up the city more than any concrete notion of 'Calcutta' itself. These are all sub-stereotypes that interest me because they seem to have more 'situational' value (as in the possibilities of situations taking place in these locales) than a 'City of Joy'/cultural Mecca cliché. For

me, Calcutta, the city I know best because of obvious reasons of living there for a large part of my life, is a host of characters, and depending on the narrative/situation, I choose the 'street(s)/variations.

2. *How close to reality are these representations?*

There are many representations of Calcutta – mostly through life (and therefore memories, which by themselves are largely ‘false’), and through cinema and books. Your question is somewhat loaded as you consider that there is a fixed ‘real Calcutta’. I would say that the reality/ies are marked by these representations – whether it's ‘South Calcutta's boudi in the barandah’ (surely real!) or ‘pointless Coffee House discussionists (real again, so what if they are clichés)’. The representations *are* my Calcutta.

3. *How does this representation help in constructing the city?*

In my book, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (as well as in the next book that I'm writing), the city is part of the atmosphere and tone, rather than a geographical entity in which my characters inhabit. This Calcutta, for all I know or care, doesn't exist beyond my stories. So the representations are really a sort of foliage – perhaps a swaying, active kind at times – to the general landscape inhabited by the characters.

4. *What are your fondest memories of the city?*

My fondest memories are not really of Calcutta per se but of stock experiences that happened there: Lying in my mezzanine (above-the-garage) room in Belegkata while it's flooding outside. Pretending that I'm in one of the *Godfather* movies, as I get progressively drunk at Mocambo on Park Street. Having kochuri-thorkari breakfast in my Mamar-bari 'dalaan' when I was a kid. Not to forget ‘paara’ football every afternoon. Frankly, it's the people who made my Calcutta.

5. *What places come to your mind when the name Calcutta springs up?*

'Satya Narayan Mistanna Bhandar', strangely not a sweet shop but a cutlet-mughlai poratha, etc takeaway in Belegkata; Chhaya cinema on Maniktala (owned by my mother's family); Deb Lane on C.I.T. Road, where I used to drop in to meet my cousin and listen to music; Ahiritolla (incredibly romanticized area because of the incredibly romanticized notion of my father as a kid growing up there); Salt Lake Stadium (when empty); Maidan during Book Fair (as made obvious in 'The Garden...'), Park Street (an ossified stretch that's really a museum), and Ballygunge Phari (which I still think is the centre of the universe).

6. *What for you is the difference between Kolkata and Calcutta?*

None really. When I speak in Bengali I say 'Kolkata', when in English 'Calcutta'. It's as banal as that, I'm afraid.

7. *How has Calcutta shaped the writer in you?*

It's been a creative lodestone for me, a place from where I compare and contrast all other places and venues of fiction. If I grew up in Patna or Paris, I think the same would have applied. As far as the city shaping the writer in me, perhaps the slapstick -- the 'changraami' element -- I like to sprinkle in my writing is a (north-east) Calcutta rub-off. Pretentious 'athlami' is but a slip away from absurdist humour. Maybe this has less to do with Calcutta and more with me, but I am less attracted to description and more to situations. Baudelaire's 'Unreal city' has always been applicable for Calcutta for me.

8. *Apart from the city, what are the binding influences that pulled you to writing?*

The city didn't spur me to write; other things did: Proving myself to me (that I can do 'something') was one important catalyst; impressing people whom I respect(ed) (and they weren't/aren't restricted to people from/in Calcutta) and putting down

something that I would like to read. Expressing ideas and visions and posing to explain human behaviour through fiction, I guess, has been the biggest incentive to write.

9. *There is a popular belief that Bengalis think in Bengali for creativity and in English for other purposes, your comments -*

That's only partially true for me. There have been some cheap tricks I pull when I directly translate Bengali phrases into English, which somehow ends up sounding remotely 'Dada-esque'. The title of my first book, *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* for instance, was a private joke, pointless for a non-Bengali reader. 'Not able to flip a fried fish and eat it' – '*bhaja maach-ta ultey khethe parey na*' – is another. For me, it's actually quite the opposite. The English syntax, with its importance given to 'verbs' and its allowing variable sentence constructions, give me a better access to imaginative writing. It gives me the necessary spine that my kind of prose should have. Bengali is too close to the bone, immediate and therefore gives me away. So speaking – at home, with friends and even at work in Delhi – and writing say letters to my parents (which I rarely do these days) are the domain of Bengali. But I do have plans to translate my novels into Bengali. It would be interesting to 'carry coal to Newcastle' if for nothing else but to see how Bengali-understanding/Calcutta-living readers hopefully will react to certain elements that remain invisible to others.

10. *Why is it that writers still exoticise the city...they never write about metro and the malls, and all the changes that are happening in the city?*

Because writing – unless it's social realism of the Soviet kind – is mainly about 'changing the angle', whether of people or places. Fiction, at least my kind, hopes to sidestep the real, even if it may use the real as a prop. Even when one does write about the metro – as some writers have – or other 'contemporaneous' aspects of Calcutta, the story must allow them to be there, not the other way round. By the way, I find malls absolutely fascinating.

11. *What's the relation between Calcutta and music? How has this influenced you?*

Calcutta and music for me is like Calcutta and food, I just happen to have 'done' a bulk of both there. For me, it boils down to this: listening to my father's records (mostly Western classical) and records I bought (rock music from Free School Street or Bambino in Gariahat); and playing in the Great Elastic Rubber Band, which was around for some three-four years. Right now, that kind of music (barring a very few bands like Cassini's Division) in Calcutta is ossified with the same people playing the same music till Calcutta freezes over. There was a time when I was very much clued in to Hindi film music (thanks to my Chhaya cinema backgrounding!). But that's again something very much a part of my personal museum. And like opera, I am stone-deaf to Rabindrasangeet.

12. *Is the Metallica Album Load an influence on your Garden of Earthly Delights*

Now that's a surprise! No. Why? What made you think that?

13. *Why did you choose pyromania as a subject? Is it some kind of rebellion by the protagonist against the bhadrakok that wields its power by the book?*

I am attracted to fire in a very aesthetic way. Perhaps, you could trace it back to the Eighties' loadshedding years where I used to study in the kerosene lantern light – swatting mosquitoes and singing their bodies. But that's purely a psychoanalytic explanation which I think explains nothing. More seriously, I remember being impressed by the image of a burning house and flames in Tarkovsky's *Sacrifice* and – if I'm not mistaken – by the image of a burning man in *Nostalgia*. Truth be told Hiren, is an individual, not an archetype. So his pyromania is an affliction that has to do with my depiction of him having hidden wishes (of being an individual, and not just one of Ghanada's boys/or part of a social collective). It is a kind of social rebellion; but a rebellion that has not been identified by the rebel – and therefore, not a rebellion at all, as rebellions have to be *consciously* thought up and acted upon.

14. *Is Hieronymous Bosch's surreal or pre-surreal vision an influence on your work?*

Absolutely. Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych was commissioned by the Catholic Church. And yet, when anyone sees it, one wonders how he got away with what he painted – a critique (of humanity? Of the Christian world?) that was also a commissioned work from the Church! What I also love about the work is that despite each symbol having a meaning, the work itself works on sheer atmosphere –especially the part depicting Hell. To the modern eye, it's also very funny – a creature with a giant bird's head eating a sinner, people riding on fish – you almost expect Kafka's Gregor Samsa to be somewhere there. I like that (anachronistic on my part) mix of (visual) comedy and gravitas. By making a 'serious' situation funny, one can make it far 'graver'.

15. *Do you also see Calcutta as decadent?*

Calcutta is not decadent in the dandyish way that one likes to present it as, in the sense of overindulging and leading to decay. Being decadent is not the same thing as being sterile. And Calcutta, the place, is sterile. I think in my writings wherever I have Calcutta in them, I like throwing a few maggots into 'Calcutta'. It makes it do something that 'living' cities (using their own stereotypes) in fiction can't – play the role of a rattling ghost.

16. *What for you is Calcutta in one word?*

Unreal.

17. *What do you think about the extreme importance that is attached to education in Calcutta?*

It's good. It has made me less worried about failure in the real world that exists outside Calcutta. Its society never interested me.



18. *What are your favourite books?*

Kafka's collected short stories, Tagore's *Golpoguchcho* (Manihara, Khuditho Pashan, etc), Parashuram's (Rajshekhar Bose) novellas, Nabokov's *Lolita* and Jim Thompson's *The Alcoholics*. There are many more, alas, which could make this list go on and on.

**Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Upamanyu Chatterjee. *English, August*. Penguin, New Delhi; 1988.

<sup>2</sup> "The Anglo-Indians of Calcutta" by Kuntala Lahiri Dutta. *Calcutta: A Living City* ed Sukanta Chaudhuri. OUP; New Delhi; 1990. pp 67-69

<sup>3</sup> "Eye on Calcutta" by Renu Roy.

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<sup>4</sup> "Q & A Capital down the decades and generations".

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<sup>5</sup> In an interview with me on 1 July, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic C Thomas. *Calcutta: The Human Face of Poverty*. Penguin, New Delhi. 1997.

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