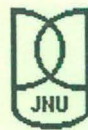# UNEARTHING THE POSTMODERN CITY NARRATIVE IN RUCHIR JOSHI'S *THE LAST JET-ENGINE LAUGH*

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

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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Centre of Linguistics and English
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi – 110067
India
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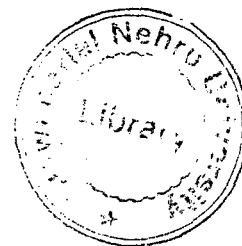
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify the dissertation entitled "**UNEARTHING THE POSTMODERN CITY NARRATIVE IN RUCHIR JOSHI'S** *THE LAST JET-ENGINE LAUGH*", submitted by Saugata Mukherjee, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. Vaishna Narang

(Chairperson)

Prof. G J V Prasad

(Supervisor)

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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled "UNEARTHING THE POSTMODERN CITY NARRATIVE IN RUCHIR JOSHI'S *THE LAST JET-ENGINE LAUGH* ", submitted by me for the award of the degree ofMaster of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or degree or diploma of any University.

Saugata Mukherjee

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Contents

for my father,
Sadhan Mukherjee (1935 – 1992);
remembering those walks together and the debates we
never had.

Introduction

A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification.[1]

– Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

I have, through the following chapters, tried to demarcate and logically analyze the extremely contested space of the postmodern city using Ruchir Joshi's novel *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* as the fulcrum for all my theoretical stances and formulations. The three chapters – (i) 'Decanonizing the Mind', (ii) 'Imagi(ni)ng the City' and (iii) 'Writing the City' – try to sum up the idea of the postmodern city as well as discuss the underlying politics that is innate to all postcolonial texts. I have tried to discuss the different stratas within the construction of the 'city', territories marked out by different theorists, raised a number of questions regarding the idea of the city and have sought explanations for most.

In this introductory chapter I will bring in certain concepts onto which I have based my arguments, which will follow in the later chapters, but have not been able to explain them entirely or have left certain gaps for the reader to fill up. Here I will try to discuss what 'postmodernity' really connotes and how it has been used as a tool for our understanding of the city. I will also briefly discuss the idea of the 'canon' and the forces that actually work behind the construction of each.

Postmodernism/Postmodernity

John Barth finds the term postmodernism

> awkward and faintly epigonic, suggestive, less of a vigorous or even
> interesting new direction in the old art of story telling than of something
> anti-climactic, feebly following a very hard act to follow.[2]

It has also been argued that the term itself does not make any sense – because if 'modern' means 'pertaining to the present' then 'postmodern' should mean 'pertaining to the future' which then means fiction that has not been written! Different theorists have tried to define and explain the term in their own ways. For Frank Kermode postmodernism is only the persistence of modernism into a third and fourth generation, thus can be deservingly called 'neomodernism'; John Barth's postmodernism is the literature of replenishments; Charles Newman's postmodernism, the literature of inflationary economy; Lyotard's postmodernism, a general condition of knowledge in the contemporary informational regime; Ihab Hassan's postmodernism, a stage on the road to the spiritual unification of humankind.[3] Fredric Jameson, on whose theoretical framework my understanding of 'postmodernism', to a large extent, rests writes–

> Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is
> complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world
> than the older one, but one in which 'culture' has become a veritable
> 'second nature'. Indeed, what happened to culture may well be one of
> the more important clues for tracking the postmodern.... [I]n
> postmodern culture, 'culture' has become a product in its own right; the
> market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity
> as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still
> minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort

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to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.[4]

Despite the ambiguity regarding the term, the imprecision it suffers from it definitely has the merit of directing our attention towards the nature of cultural change. It sensitizes us to the variability of culture-society relationship and the metahistorical status of culture.

Understanding postmodernism, therefore, demands that we adopt a degree of reflexivity in which we acknowledge the double-role of symbolic specialists and cultural intermediaries. In the first place their capacity to innovate and adopt avant-gardist strategies becomes heightened under conditions of the demonopolization of symbolic hierarchies, the opening up of sealed-off enclaves of cultural goods to wider markets coupled with more general tendencies towards cultural declassification, which help to create a more critical attitude towards the rationale for the existing canon (high culture, modernism) and its exclusions (popular culture, mass culture), while still maintaining the overall status and societal valuation of culture and cultural capital. Secondly, they are involved in an interpretive role in terms of making sense and articulating new experiences and cultural signs with which to fashion new cultural goods in various media which have relevance as mean of orientation for particular audiences and publics.

Going by the definitions of postmodernism we find an emphasis upon the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and a playful mixing of codes. Jameson further explicates this point –

> The postmodernisms have, in fact, been fascinated precisely by this whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader's Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature, with its airport

paperback categories of the gothic and romance, the popular biography, the murder mystery, and the science fiction or fantasy novel: materials they no loner simply 'quote', as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their substance.[5]

Thus we can draw up a postmodernité in the lines of Baudelairean modernité (an experience of modernity, the shocks, jolts and vivid presentness captured by the break with the traditional forms of sociation) through shifts in cultural experiences and modes of signification. While most of the signifiers are resultants of image production by the media and consumer culture but also can be discerned in the descriptions of the contemporary city. Here the emphasis is not only on the type of new architecture specifically designated postmodern, but also on the more general eclectic stylistic hodge-podge which one finds in the urban fabric of the built environment. We have to also make note here that a de-contextualization of tradition and a raiding of all cultural forms to draw out quotations from the imaginary side of life are found among the new-age 'de-centred subjects' who enjoy experimentation and play with fashion and the stylization of life as they stroll through the 'no place' postmodern space.

Defining 'place' and 'space'

A very important distinction that we need to comprehend (as I have used both the words repeatedly in the later chapters) is the much contested concept of the 'space' and 'place'. Our understanding of the city and its imagination relies quite heavily on both these terms and I have made use of Michel de Certeau's formulations regarding both, coupled with my observations which I shall try to explain here.The difference between these terms is to a large extent a matter of propriety. Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* writes –

The law of the 'proper' rules in the place; the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own 'proper' end, distinct location, allocation it defines.[6]

Because each element in a place rests in the position which it belongs, place implies an indication of stability. Space on the other hand

Exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.... Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.... In contradistinction to the space, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper'.[7]

Space thus cannot be 'proper' because it is a product of action and movement. 'In short', writes Certeau, 'space is a practiced place.[8] Again, while commenting on the construction of space and cartographic imagination, which lies in the core of my reading of the postmodern city, he writes –

The organization that can be discerned in stories about space in everyday culture is inverted by the process that has isolated a system of geographical places. The difference between the two modes of description obviously does not consist in the presence or absence of practices (they are at work everywhere), but in the fact that maps, constituted as proper places in which to *exhibit the products* of knowledge, form tables of *legible* results. Stories about space exhibit on the contrary the operations that allow it, within a constraining and a non-'proper' place, to mingle its elements anyway, as one apartment-dweller put it concerning the rooms in his flat: 'one can mix them up.'[9]

What we find in Joshi's novel is this reconceptualizing of these 'proper' faces. The protagonist is enmeshed in the 'murky intertwining daily behaviors' but he refrains from constructing a 'utopian city' about which again Certeau says –

> the creation of universal and anonymous subject which is the city itself: it gradually becomes possible to attribute to it, as to its political model, Hobbes' State, all the functions and predicates that were previously scattered and assigned to many different real subjects – groups, associations, or individuals. 'The city', like a proper name, thus provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties.[10]

Beyond the Canon

I have tried to discuss, in the first chapter, certain categories in today's literary as well as theoretical domain. Contextualization of any text allows us a peep into the latent politics that are inherent and for any postcolonial text this contextualization becomes even more important since a plethora of forces act on it from all possible directions. Hence I have attempted in this chapter to briefly address a few of the core concepts that seem to bother us – 'postcoloniality', 'internationalism', 'new literatures' etc. I have tried to argue in the chapter how 'postcolonial literatures' have found their way into the western canon and what were the types of resistances that were faced and are still subjected to. Aijaz Ahmed writing specifically on the issue takes an overtly Marxist position and views it as a phenomenon emerging out of a hegemony that the west perpetuated on the third-world –

> By the time a Latin American novel arrives in Delhi, it has been selected, translated, published, reviewed, explicated and allotted a place in the bourgeoning archive of 'Third World Literature' through a complex set of metropolitan mediations. That is to say, it arrives here with those processes of circulation and classification already inscribed in

its very texture. About this contradictory role of imperialism which simultaneously unifies the world, in the form of global channels of circulation, and distributing it into structures of global coercion and domination.[11]

In spite of the hegemony and the domination of the western critical idiom, the last few decades have seen a major rupture in the literary consciousness of the world. Literature from the third-world, especially the commonwealth countries, can no more be brushed aside by simply considering them as literatures from the margins, lacking the quality needed to be a part of the dominant discourse. As far as Indian Writing in English is concerned, there has been a definite shift in the focus of the new-age writer (arguably a post *Midnight's Children* phenomenon). Indian Writing in English has attained a much more global appeal and its writers have become saleable names even to the western readership. Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Amit Chaudhuri today are sought after novelists and are rated alongside their western counterparts. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* also got an MNC publisher and was a remarkable debut novel in the United Kingdom (though not quite in India).

In my second chapter I have tried to demystify the concept of the city and city culture. I have made use of certain theoretical frameworks to read the city in the novel. Here the cityspace (of which I have already written quite a bit here) is closely studied in order to map the changes in culture and power visà-vis the novel and its context. This I have done by unearthing the ensemble of motifs that remain strewn all over the novel, but rather unassumingly. Though I have read deep into the hyperspace that the novel draws, we have to also keep in mind that postmodern urban landscape does not only imply only new constructions but also refers to the restoration and redevelopment of older locales, their abstraction from a logic of mercantile or industrial capitalism, and their renewal as up-to-date consumption spaces behind the red-brick or cast-iron façade of the past. Sharon Zukin writes–

Space both initiates and imitates this ambiguity. The specific locales of the modern city are transformed into postmodern *liminal spaces*, both slipping and mediating between nature and artifice, public use and private value, global market and local place.[12]

Calcutta also suffers from this identity – Joshi's novel traces through this cognitive reorganization that the city of Calcutta goes through.

The city of Calcutta historiographically is about 300 years old. Having been the power seat of the entire nation and being the trade capital, it soon emerged as one of Asia's most highly developed cities in the early 20ᵗʰ century – modelled on the city of London. This also resulted in the construction of the 'Calcuttan' and this identity formation was in keeping with the modernism that was ushered in by the people, courtesy the English education they received due to the colonial rule. I have discussed this identity (the Bengali-Calcuttan) formation in the second chapter but would like to share a few observations that did not find space there. Geoffrey Moorhouse in his book *Calcutta* writes –

> Encircled by this maze of migrants are the Bengalis, the only natives of this strangely beloved Kalkata *(sic)*. These are the Basus, the Boses, the Mitras, the Sens, the Duttas, the Chowdhurys, the Chakrabortys, the Roys, the Majumders, the Banerjees, the Chatterjees and the Mukherjees of the city.... The Bengalis have distinctive personal habits.... They have a Bengali way of declaiming, either in the theatre or in politics, a rhetorical style of pumping out words and phrases on a rising intonation to a final explosion, which mesmerizes in the theatre but which can make a Communist party meeting sound alarmingly like a Nuremburg rally.[13]

I have also tried to locate the stereotypes about the construction of the 'Calcuttan', especially the middle-class office-goer who raises storms in coffee cups. An aspect

that I have overlooked in the second chapter but think is immensely important for the understanding of the 'Calcuttan' is the concept of *adda*.[14] It has been variously discussed by many theorists, and as for me, I believe that it has become an intrinsic part of the character of the city in spite of it being ridiculed to a certain extent. Nirad C. Chaudhuri writes –

> What the native of the city lacked in sociability he made up in gregariousness. No better connoisseur of company was to be found anywhere in the world, and no one else was more dependent on the contiguity of his fellows with the same incomprehension of his obligation towards them. The man of Calcutta found the company he needed so badly and continuously readily assembled, without any effort on his part, in his office, or in his bar-library, or in his college, which were no less places for endless gossip than for work.[15]

Paresh also falls prey to such *addas* in *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* with Kalidas and Anirban during their regular visits to the run down bar at Park Street. The problematic aspect that the phenomenon can be placed under is that all such *addas* do valorize the tenets of 'domination' and 'exclusion' which in turn gives rise to different discourses. But for Calcutta this grew as an offshoot of high modernity and later resulted in the formation of a shared public culture. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh,* however, goes beyond the realm of modernity and into a hypperred existence complicating the entire discourse.

The chapters that will follow this introduction will aim at deconstructing the idea of the postmodern city through my reading of *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* and will try to string together the different facets that I have already mentioned here in brief.

Notes

[1] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 6.

[2] John Barth, ' The Literature of Replenishment', as quoted by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction*, (London & New York : Routledge, 1987), p. 4.

[3] I have tried to briefly summarize here the different ways in which theorists have defined the term through my readings of Kermode's *Continuities*, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Hassan's *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* and McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*.

[4] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p. ix-x.

[5] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (London & New York: Verso, 1991), p. 2-3.

[6] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.

[7] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.

[8] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.

[9] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 121.

[10] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 94.

[11] Aijaz Ahmed, *In Theory:Classes, Nations, Literatures*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 45.

[12] Sharon Zukin, 'Postmodern Urban Landscapes: Mapping Culture and Power,' in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity*,(Cambridge USA: Blackwell), p.222.

[13] Geoffrey Moorhouse, *Calcutta*, (London: Orion Books, 1998; first published 1971), p. 193.

[14] For a comprehensive study of the *adda*, Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay 'Adda: A History of Sociality,' in his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* can be looked up.

[15] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, (New York: Macmillan, 1989; first published 1951), p. 382.

Chapter- I

De-canonizing the Mind

Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is
the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried
to embrace it.[1]

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands.*

In this chapter I would try to deal with certain key issues that are intrinsic to the
understanding of any text produced from the postcolonial world. As I have already
mentioned in the introduction to this thesis that the core problematics of my work
finds space in the second chapter but for the overall understanding of the genre that I
have selected, a detailed study of the relevant issues that plague as well as enrich it,
becomes necessary. This chapter would deal with the concept of post-coloniality
(*The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* is very much a post-colonial novel), the formation of
new literatures in English, the defining characteristics of a post-colonial novel and
the major debates shrouding it. I will further discuss Indian Writing in English in
particular, delineating its history and discussing some of its major players. The
chapter is mainly focused at locating the text that I am dealing with in my thesis vis-
à-vis my post-colonial identity.

Defining the post-colonial

The word post-colonial has been an area of serious debate over the last few decades.
The debate lies in two parts: about the 'post' and about the 'colonialism'.

'Colonialism' comes under debate because the word is already predicated within a concept of 'imperialism', a concept which is itself predicated within larger theories of global politics and which changes radically according to the specifics of those larger theories. Wolfgang Mommsen tells us that –

> the original meaning of 'imperialism' was not the direct or indirect domination of colonial or dependent territories by a modern industrial state, but rather the personal sovereignty of a powerful ruler over numerous territories, whether in Europe or overseas.[2]

For Vladimir Lenin, on the other hand, imperialism meant a late stage in European capitalist expansion, a stage in which capital accumulates domestically, profit-taking slows, and so Europe seeks out foreign markets and foreign sources of labour.[3]But none of these two meanings really echo the general meaning of imperialism that predominates the literary critical arenas. Said, for instance, uses imperialism to mean 'the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory.'[4]But whatever they actually mean by the term, however, the post-colonial theorists in the humanities generally think of imperialism as constituting the larger political force that drives specific acts of colonialism (the direct rule a the nation or people by another nation or people) or colonization (the establishment of settler colonies in foreign lands). But without a specific theory of how imperialism drives these acts, it remains unclear how 'colonialism' operates politically, economically and culturally, and how 'colonialism' and 'colonization' are related.

Thus these fissures within the meaning of 'colonial' pose a problem for the 'post' part of the 'post-colonial.' According to some theorists, after sustained anti-colonial struggle brings about a national or 'flag' independence in colonial locations through the process of political decolonization, a new kind of state formation comes into being. This new formation is the post-colonial state, or the 'post-colony': a state thought to be at least institutionally free of foreign control, and one now possessing a greater measure of political autonomy than it did under the colonial yoke. The post-

colonial nation-states develop new forms of international relations and self constitutions as they proceed. And the oneway traffic of the imperial centre to the colonial periphery is reformulated as a genuine circulation of peoples, so that members of various cultural and national backgrounds, ethnicities, religions and languages move more freely across international borders than they used to and in the process developing new structures for group identification and collectivity.

Hence we find that the very basis of defining the term 'post-colonialism' rests on extremely subjective points of view and thereforeare problematic. Anne McClintock writes –

> [T]he term post-colonial...is haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle. Metaphorically, the term post-colonialism marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from 'the pre-colonial' – an unbidden, if disavowed, commitment to linear time and the idea of development ... metaphorically poised on the border between old and new, end and beginning, the term heralds the end of a world era but by invoking the very same trope of linear progress which animates that era.... If post-colonial theory has sought to challenge the grand march of Western historicism and its entourage of binaries (self-other, metropolis-colony, centre-periphery, etc.), the term post-colonialism nonetheless reorients the globe once more round a single binary opposition: colonial-postcolonial.... [I]t does not distinguish between beneficiaries of colonialism (the ex-colonizer) and the casualties of colonialism (the ex-colonized). The post-colonial scene occurs in an entranced suspension of history, as if the definitive historical events have preceded our time and are not now in the making.... [T]he singularity of the term effects a recentering of global history around the single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance.[5]

Debating the Post-colonial

The study of post-coloniality too has taken a different dimension today and the earlier literary models no more suffice to comprehend the inner dynamics of the subject. Today the new models of discourse analysis and textuality, in which the literary text is seen as only one kind of document in the larger archive (the total body of material by which we designate and investigate an event or cultural phenomenon), are used in studying the post-colony. Nonetheless the literary text still holds a lot of importance even while using the tools of discourse analysis– it can still be viewed as crucial evidence, since writing, literacy, and the control of the literary representations are vital in determining how the colonizers and the colonized established or renewed their claims to a separate and distinctive cultural identity.

If we take Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as the starting point of Postcolonial literary study, it will be travesty not to look into the works of figures like E.K. Braithwaite, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Raja Rao who had discussed issues like the creolization of culture, universalism, language and culture and crosscultural recovery and suppression of indigenous traditions. But it was certainly with Said's work that Post-colonial literary theory really started shaping up and a coherent body of critical work started getting produced under the academic umbrella provided by it.

'Said's concern is the relationship between textual representations and social practice'[6] – writes Gareth Griffiths. His influential analysis of the emergence in European thought of the concept of the Orient and the mode of knowledge (orientalism) to which it gave rise in *Orientalism* provided a model for considering how peoples and cultures could be partly coerced and partly persuaded into defining themselves by the stereotypes offered by a dominant alien culture. Said insisted that knowledge and power always exist in a close relationship, and applied this Foulcauldian conjunction to an analysis of European imperialism's control of the

world it discovered during its phase of colonial expansionism. Combining this theory with self/other dichotomy, whose roots were in Hegelian thought as developed by Jean Paul Sartre, Said argued that colonialism was non-mutual and hierarchic relations in which the colonizer was always the Self to the marginalized Other of the colonized. If we bring in here the argument put forth by a historian of the Subaltern school, Dipesh Chakrabarty, we find that he echoes something quite similar –

> I have a more perverse proposition to argue. It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is 'history' as a discourse produced at the institutional site of a university – is concerned, 'Europe' remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian', 'Chinese', 'Kenyan', and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'.[7]

Thus when it came to the domain of literary studies, modernization became synonymous with the promotion of cultural values of the colonizer, and the development of the so-called civilization. This written text became the central tool in the process, becoming as Homi Bhabha subsequently has characterized it, 'a sign of wonder'[8] whose power far outstripped its objective content. The indigenous culture which continued in invaded cultures to exist alongside this new construction was not expunged by this process, but it was metaphorically 'silenced', in so far as its voice ceased to be heard in the arenas of power, and its value ceased to be privileged or even recognized in the new hierarchy of control except under such labels as the exotic or the traditional, concepts which were viewed as opposed to the more dynamic formulations of the pragmatic and the modern.

Said's argument shows how this whole process is given an aura of philanthropic generosity on the part of the colonizer – bringing/educating the 'native' through newer knowledge. But even among the nexus of cultural control through political and economic domination, indigenous cultures survived though with an increasing

tendency to generate new hybrid forms within the colonized culture, usally in modes which reinforced their subordinate position in the newly emerging power structures.

Though it has been argued variously by different critics like Said, Jameson and Ahmad – the new literatures, especially Indian Writing in English has definitely seen such a deluge of new authors and styles because perhaps this was the country where fusions in culture occurred in an inordinate scale. Ahmad represents a sophisticated version of the notion that contemporary criticism privileges European textuality and the colonial period over the continuity of the precolonial and the cultural diversity of the post-colonial world. It is warning which has been echoed by other critics of post-colonial societies, especially those who have not relocated to metropolitan universities. Formulations of study of such cultures which concentrate on English language texts are, from this perspective, seen as distorting the reality of these societies' self-representations by excluding the texts which continue to be produced in the indigenous languages, or the very least, by privileging those produced in English and, it is sometimes asserted, directed at the outside world as much as to the audience of the post-colonial world itself.

The future study of new literatures appears assured as it is difficult to see how a canon can be restored in a form which excludes such literatures, their concerns, and the theoretical problems they raise. Nevertheless, the theory of the construction of the field, as it has developed in recent years has had both positive and negative effects. It has been positive in recognizing that merely accreting literatures and literary texts onto a unified model of English studies, even one which accepts plurality of differences, does not ensure genuine equality of cultures and diverse reading and speaking positions.

The institutional power of post-colonial discourse theory has, however privileged the views of the metropolitan academics over the actual concerns of the societies on whose behalf it claims to speak. It has also had a negative effect in that many other

developments in the general field of literary theory there has been a tendency to substitute philosophical and critical issues for the exegesis and analysis of the literary texts themselves. This has been doubly unfortunate in a field where the literary text has been a prime site in which to articulate such vital issues as language change and linguistic variance, cultural representation and culture clash, and issues of value construction and transformation.

Commonwealth Literature Studies

Perhaps the earliest and still one of the most substantial corpus of work that brought into focus post-colonial studies in the academy was what was termed 'Commonwealth Literary studies'.

We can trace back its roots formally in the 1960s, though much of the literature between the wars also is taken into account and appropriated under this mantle. Part of what brought this field into being was pure instrumentality: a number of writers and critics from Commonwealth nations happened to be in England at this time, many of them on Commonwealth academic scholarships, and they came together at a conference for literary study (the first conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) at Leeds. The academics here shared their new literatures from different parts of the globe and the common concern that dogged each one them was the anglo-centric domination of the English departments in all of their home nations. They argued in favour of introducing new literatures from the Commonwealth countries into all such departments breaking the monopoly of the English canon. This resulted in collectivizing all such literary texts under the larger banner of 'Commonwealth Literary Studies', thus creating a space for all such literatures which were willfully ignored by the West prior to this endeavour stating them simply as works which were of very low calibre.

This collectivization had quite a lasting impact such that new courses in Commonwealth literatures came into being in universities all over the globeand ignited a whole lot of academics and scholars to write prolifically on the subject and unearth the latent politics beneath the western hegemony as far as literary studies in English was concerned. This, in the process, tended to shade much of the field construction of Commonwealth literary studies towards patterns of similarity across various Commonwealth national literatures, sometimes at the expense of the many differences between these literatures. 'The search for identity', 'a coming of age', 'the absence of sentimentality' – these were just some of the early avowals of thematic and modal patterns of similarity across Commonwealth national literatures, but behind each of these was the idea that such pattern could provide a useful location for comparing the Commonwealth literatures with one another.

Only with this internationalization of these new literatures the whole texture of English literature started taking a new shape. This internationalization was almost a counter revolution to stem the internationalization of British literatures which began as early as the seventeenth century. The internationalization of the British canon between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries finally found its challenge by the more rapid and extensive spread of new marginal and oppositional literatures in English since the Second World War. The successful internationalization of these new literatures in the postcolonial period has similarly transformed the reading and the readers. The cultural diversity brought in by all the new generation writers has produced a renewed desire in the reading public. But there have been negative responses as well. Said observes –

> Surprised, and often alarmed, metropolitan Europeans and Americans....now confront large non-white immigrant populations in their midst, and face an impressive roster of newly empowered voices asking for their narratives to be heard.[9]

Indian Writing in English – the term

A burgeoning body of 'Indian' literature, quite young by the standards of its other celebrated Indian counterparts (both classical and modern), was accredited 'Indo-Anglian' literature. Initial critical works like Edward Farley Oaten's *A Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature* (1908) and Bhupal Singh's *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction* (1934) subsumed all peculiarities of Indian Writing in English under the umbrella term 'Anglo-Indian', without making any difference between, let's say, Kipling or Romesh Dutt. The designation demanded careful execution since a large-scale need was felt soon to distinguish it from an already established body of literature, Anglo-Indian. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his *Indo-Anglian Literature* (1943) and *The Indian Contribution to English Literature* (1945), first argued in favour of a distinct tradition and a defining terminology[10] – Indo-Anglian – distinct from Anglo-Indian. And a critical plea in this direction was convincingly reiterated by V. K. Gokak in his *English in India: Its Past and Future* (Bombay, 1964), where he postulated a strict disciplinary boundary between these two. Further, Gokak distinguished three internal categories of Anglo-Indian writing (which covered writers as diverse as E. M. Forster, L. H. Myers and Rudyard Kipling), and two of Indian writing in English – 'Indo-Anglian' and 'Indo-English', the latter one set to include works like Romesh Dutt's paraphrases of the epics or P. Lal's *Mahabharata*. It would, however, be quite wrong to assume an unproblematic universality for Iyengar or Gokak's proposition, even within the early generation of critics[11] Even though the body of literature under question gained vitality as well as scope after its hesitant inauguration, the adequacy of the defining term soon came under severe scrutiny – partly because of its strong attestation of the colonial past, and partly because of its visible failure to account for the *desiness* due to its foregrounding of the largely unwarranted sense of hybridity.[12] Among the problematic areas, however, English as a language with its necessary ideological baggage emerged as the most obdurate one. Even in a very common-sensical way, it would have been quite naïve

to theorize English as merely *another* language, given the historical and political backdrop of its advent in India. Meenakshi Mukherjee, in one of her early works, *Twice Born Fiction*, voiced this 'common sense' view:

> In the complex fabric of contemporary Indian civilization, the two most easily discerned strands are the indigenous Indian tradition and the imported European conceptions. ... This cultural conflict –or synthesis, as the case may be – has for some reason always assumed a vital significance for the Indian novelist who writes in English. As early as 1909, Sarath Kumar Ghose wrote a novel called *The Prince of Destiny* dealing with this inter-cultural theme where the hero, the prince of a native Indian state, has to choose between the love of a English girl and marriage with an Indian princess. And as late as 1960, J. M. Ganguly's *When East and West Meet* shows that the East-West motif has not yet exhausted itself.[13]

This centrality of language and its ideological connotations can be interpreted as another postcolonial appropriation of an otherwise poststructuralist position, but in a very practical sense the question of language becomes crucial for our understanding of the historiography of Indian Writing in English as it adumbrates the reality of Indian English narration.[14]

A different approach to this critical impasse seemed to free English from its immediate territorial allegiance (here India) and the necessary historicity that such a spatial allegiance would enforce. In other words, the practicality of this move wanted to break free of a particular locality of language in order to link the literary creativity in it with a 'tradition' that spreads across national boundaries. In due course, the earlier designation yielded place to a newer one: Commonwealth Literature or Third-World Literature[15](discussed briefly already in this chapter). The interesting thing about this new move was the attempt to link this Indian body of literature in English with a vast geographical area – hugely amorphous, and therefore without any specific location – with the subsequent (though implicit) idea of bestowing a degree

of legitimacy by linking it with other similar bodies of literature. In both cases the designations betray a certain sense of politics. In the case of Indo-Anglian, as I have already argued, what had generally been stressed was a typical *foreignness* of writing. On the other hand, later designations – Commonwealth or Third World – emphasised a typical *international* writing community, engaged in their respective ways to negotiate a shared sense of history and literary creativity. It can safely be said that such nomenclatures engaged themselves with the 'secondary' attributes and thus hinted at different areas of concern that cannot exclusively be accommodated within the disciplinary boundaries of literary criticism, at least in its conventional sense.[16]

What needs to be emphasised vis-à-vis Indo-Anglian literature is not a simple case of novelty that a cross between the Indian content and English language was able to produce successfully. Neither is it a case of only conquering the foreign language – a claim that has often been laced with a patriotic naiveté and has further been simplistically linked with anticolonial resistance. The question, rather, is a political one – it is perilously linked with the pre-emptive nature of the English language in the Indian context. It needs little imagination to understand that 'language' here does not enjoy an ahistorical innocence which it could have mastered in a more traditional environment of literary criticism. The necessary baggage of language, even in a very structuralist sense, makes it impossible to concede the designations 'Indo-Anglian' or 'Commonwealth/Third World' as merely neutral, or 'productive', nomenclature and further explicates the profound political claims that underlie such 'descriptive' terms.

Indian Writing in English – The Initial Years

Before we move onto the recent trends in Indian English writing I would like to discuss very briefly a few key figures whose works can be called antiquated today but whose importance in the genre cannot be neglected. Prof. M.K. Naik opens his *A History of Indian English Literature* thus –

Indian English literature began as an interesting by-product of an eventful encounter in the late eighteenth century between a vigorous and enterprising Britain and a stagnant and chaotic India.[17]

Though the quote completely negates the post-colonial politics that we have discussed thus far, I would still use it simply because the initial writings that emanated from India were necessarily imitations of the British canons.

But before we enter the domain of discussing the literatures that followed the initial years it would be travesty not to discuss Raja Rammohun Roy's (1772 - 1833) endeavour to bring English education into the country. It was almost his single-handed efforts that paved the way to English education in India. In his letter to the Governor General, Lord Amherst in 1823, he writes –

If it had been intended to keep the British nation in ignorance of real knowledge, the Baconian philosophy would not have been allowed to displace the system of schoolmen, which was the best calculated to perpetuate ignorance. In the same manner, the Sanskrit system of education would be best calculated to keep this country in darkness if such had been the policy of the British legislature. But as the improvement of the native population is the object of the government, it will consequently promote a more liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing ... useful sciences, which may be accomplished by employing a few gentlemen of talents and learning educated in Europe and providing a college furnished with the necessary books...[18]

Here we should also keep in mind the importance of Macaulay's Minutes (1835) which in spite of its messianic tone and entirely domineering attitude also helped a great deal in bringing English education in India. Though reading the Minutes today it simply comes across as an emphatic claim of the colonizer, yet the far reaching impact it had had on education in India can never be ignored –

> The question now before us is simply whether, when it is in our power
> to teach this language, we shall teach languages in which by universal
> confession there are no books on any subject which deserve to be
> compared to our own....[19]

In the formative years of Indian English writing, the few figures that we cannot overlook are those of Henry Louis Vivien Derozio, Toru Dutt, and Bankimchandra Chatterjee. The former two were poets who tried to mingle the Indian into their poetry while the latter wrote the first novel by an Indian in English.

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But it was not until the 1930s that serious literature in English stared issuing forth from India. Though there were figures like Gandhi, Aurobindo Ghose and Nehru writing prolifically on different issues ranging from politics to philosophy to spiritualism to history but nothing worthwhile was being produced as far as fiction was concerned and because the aim of this chapter is to map the world of fiction in English in India, I'll leave these figures out. It was during this period that three figures burst into the scene of Indian English literature who were to give shape and take the genre into maturity— Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao.

Mulk Raj Anand (1905-....) was perhaps the most prolific of these writers and wrote a huge number of books in a career that spanned almost half a century. Born in Peshawar and having travelled all around the globe, Anand had picked up socialistic leanings very early on his life. Though he suffered from a kind of ambivalence about his stance on India and its politics but his acute sensitivity resulted in his works trying to amalgamate both his western beliefs along with his cherished traditions. He tried to bring in universalism through his novels because he felt that he 'had the double burden on (his) shoulders, the Alps of European tradition and the Himalaya of (his) Indian past.' His works were scathing criticisms on the foibles of the caste system and the sociological ordering per se. In most of his works he strives to create

an egalitarian society, an almost utopia not dogged by false beliefs and superstitious ideas. *Untouchables* (1935), *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and Bud* (1937) – three of his major works – deal with the problems of social stratification. The works also echo a deep understanding of the Gandhian ideology as well as try to feel the pulse of a country which is trying to etch out a politics of its own. Some of his other works include *The Big Heart* (1945), *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), *The Road* (1963) and *Morning Face* (1970). About his style Naik mentions –

> His style, at its best, is redolent of the Indian soil, as a result of his bold importation into English words, phrases, expletives, turns of expression and proverbs drawn from his native Punjabi and Hindi.[20]

The next in the trio was R. K. Narayan (1906-2001) whose style was quite in contrast to Anand's bold prose. He was subtle and his prose gentle trying to weave a fantasy world into the world of the real. His construction of imaginary locales and creation of characters from everyday life were the markers of his fiction. *Swami and Friends* (1935) was his first novel, which was later shot into a tele-serial of immense popularity almost after half a century of it being written. This in itself shows how much Narayan's works have stood the test of time. The novel is about schoolboy Swaminathan's escapades in a small, lazy town called Malgudi. Malgudi is the archetypal south-Indian small town, away from the bustle and din of city life and the characters too are normal people engaged in normal work. A place that can be simply forgotten. But Narayan's eye for the details and his exquisite sensitivity towards relationships makes Malgudi almost the ideal place almost a place situated in dreamtime. His other major works include *The Bachelor of Arts* (1937), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The Financial Expert* (1952), and *The Guide* (1958). Narayan's works do not moralize to the degree that Anand involves himself in but his works are intrinsically woven in a moral imagination. He has no great heroes or heroines nor does he write in order to bring in social changes yet his novels linger in our memory perhaps due to their simplicity. And as far as impact in the literary map of the world

is concerned he was definitely the most popular Indian English author for a long time with his books running into numerous reprints.

Raja Rao (1908-....) may have been the least prolific of the triad with respect to the number works produced but certainly he has been the most political. His *Kanthapura* (1938) set in a small south- Indian village was the first attempt to write about issues concerning national identity. The novel tries to toy with the idea of nationalism which later on became the most challenging plot onto which many novelists set the co-ordinates of their novels. The idea of nation-state as well as that of the 'imagined community'[21] that Rao uses in the novel gets problematized more in the much later works of Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh. Thus we find that Rao's works cannot really be pushed aside as simply antediluvian masterpieces and the contemporaneity as far as the politics is concerned is rather striking. His some other works include *The Serpent and the Rope* (1963), *The Cat and Shakespeare* 1965) and *Comrade Kirillov* (1975). As we discuss Raja Rao here we must also make a note that he was the first Indian writer who spent considerable effort in creating an English that could be called intrinsically Indian and the linguistic turn that Indian English took and which has remained a stamp of all literatures produced from India started with Rao's endeavour. In his foreword to Kanthapura which has become almost a classic piece defending Indian English literature, he writes –

> We cannot write like the English. We should not. We can write only as
> Indians. We have grown to look at the large world as a part of us. Our
> method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will someday
> prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American.
> Time alone will justify it. [22]

The brief mention of these authors here is to point out also the fact that Indian Writing in English had still not become obsessed with the idea of the city. The authors however much cosmopolitan they were wrote about small towns, sleepy towns –.a Malgudi, a Bulandshahr or a Kanthapura The issues that they dealt with

were also of common concerns and not simply a metropolitan rendition of India. The India that they sketched was definitely a nation-state in its formative years where the city was still viewed as the great 'corrupter' and which borethe legacies of our colonial dominance. Maybe these authors were conscious of this particular aspect and felt it better to imagine an India without assimilating anything that the west brought into the cultural milieu. The cities wee no less than being markers of the western domination. The 'city' to finally become a part of the imagined India took a fair deal of time and it was not until the early eighties that a serious corpus of work started emerging with the city as being the centre of the discourse. Hence when authors like Amitav Ghosh or Amit Chaudhuri or Salman Rushdie or even Ruchir Joshi write today their novels are logically set in the Indian cities – cities they know well and they do not seem at all bothered by their metropolitan character. For thse authors the cities again are the markers of India's post-Independence success. These authors have left the colony far back and what they try in their works is to construct an India as more global. The boundaries for them are not important and there isa constant urge seen in their works to transgress the set boundaries.

Between the 50s and the 80s there were a number of talented authors who penned several works – Bhabani Bhattacharya, Sudhin Ghose, Manohar Malgaonkar and the first generation women writers from India – Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Kamala Markandeya, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sehgal. But one author who needs a special mention in spite of having written a single novel was G.V. Desani.*All About H. Hatterr* was the first novel Indian English literature that experimented with the language and form and created an almost irreverent style without any qualms of corrupting queen's English. A host of writers from Indian English literature later on expressed their indebtedness to Desani. Salman Rushdie in his 'introduction' to*The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997* writes –

> Hatterr's dazzling, puzzling, leaping prose is the first genuine effort to go
> beyond the Englishness of the English language. His central figure 'fifty-
> fifty of the species', the halfbreed as the unabashed anti-hero, leaps and

capers behind many of the texts of this book. Hard to imagine I. Allan Sealy's *Trotter Nama* without Desani. My own writing, too, learned a trick or two from him.[23]

Indian Writing in English – The Recent Years

It has been in the last two decades, post *Midnight's Children* (1980), that Indian writers in English have started receiving inordinate amount of attentionthe world over and quite a few of them command a success that was previously unheard of. But just as the genre has been burgeoning so have been the criticisms regarding the politics of the writers and their identities. Critics have raised doubts about the *Indianness* of most of these texts and also of the 'anxiety in English' that transpires. And recent debates over Indian Writing in English and other regional languages, fashionably termed 'bhasha literatures' have problematized the genre even more. This has almost divided the Indian academy into two camps – the Indian writing in English lovers and the Indian English bashers! Rushdie retaliating against the criticisms meted out to the practitioners of the genre says –

> ...Indian critical assaults on this new literature continue. Its practitioners are denigrated for being too upper-middle-class; for lacking diversity in their choice of themes and techniques; for being less popular in India than outside India; for possessing inflated reputations on account of the international power of English language, and the ability of western critics and publishers to impose their cultural standards on the East; for living, in many cases, outside India; for being deracinated to the point that their work lacks the spiritual dimension for a 'true' understanding of the sound of India; for being insufficiently grounded in the ancient literary traditions of India; for I'm sorry to report, for suffering from a condition that one sprightly commentator, Pankaj Mishra[24], calls 'Rushdie-itis ... (a) condition that has claimed Rushdie himself in his later works.[25]

The other literary figures who have, over the last couple of decades, almost brought in a revolution in Indian Writing in English are Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Amit Chaudhuri, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arundhati Roy, Mukul Kesavan, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee to name a few.

These authors, maybe, because of their metropolitan education have been constructing their own Indias which again might be argued as an imagined space. Ghosh tries to re-write the nation in *Shadow Lines* while Chaudhuri paints a picture of Calcutta in the *New World*, both the novels being set in a city; but this city is no more incongruous to the rest of the country. Again when Chatterjee sketches a Madna in *English, August* we find the way the small town has changed over the years. It can be argued that the authors of the 'empire strikes back' generation are a much more marketplace conscious breed who have got the pulse of the global business. But this might just be a fallacious or a flimsy argument since most of these authors indeed write a politics that they have grown up in and however much they are cosmopolitan they are also busy constructing a new India.

Ruchir Joshi happens to be one of the latest figures to join the impressive list of Indian Writers in English. His maiden novel *The Last Jet Engine Laugh* (2001) can once again be criticized on the grounds of being a work mainly delineating a cosmopolitan/metropolitan kind of literature. He can be regarded as a by-product of 'coca-colonization' but that does not stop the novel from being lauded as one of the most original pieces of literature from the genre in the recent years. And because my thesis is aimed at something specific that the novel tries to narrate, I shall keep myself away from digressing from the subject. Thus, what I have tried in this chapter is to situate the novelist/novel through the different critical positions which are taken while reading any text produced from the postcolony and more specifically India.

Notes

1 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homeland* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 394.

2 Wolfgang Mommsen, *Theories of Imperialism,* trans. P.S. Falla (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 3.

3 Kofi Buenor Hadjor, *The Penguin Dictionary of Third World Terms* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 150.

4 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 9.

5 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) p. 10-11.

6 Gareth Griffiths, 'The Post-colonial Project: Critical Approaches and Problems' in Bruce King (ed.), *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 165.

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 27.

8 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi', *Critical Inquiry,* 12/1(Autumn 1985), p. 144-165.

9 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 11.

10 Iyengar justified his use of the term mainly on technical grounds. Of all possible combination of the two words English and India, he argued, Indo-Anglian lends itself most comfortably as an adjective or a substantive. Anglo-Indian, he thought, bore too strong ethnic connotations to be used as a literary terminology. Meenakshi Mukherjee, however in *Twice Born Fiction,* points out that, 'Professor Iyengar accepts the responsibility for giving the term currency but denies having invented it, because it was first used as early as 1883 to describe a volume printed in Calcutta containing "Specimen Composition from Native Students". However, Chalapati Rao has claimed (in *Illustrated Weekly of India,* May 26, 1963) that it was James Cousins who gave this name to Indian writing in English'.

11 One symptomatic case might be H. M. Williams who observed: 'The terms "Anglo-Indian" and "Indo-Anglian" have alone gained wide currency. They can still be used with profit in spite of some confusion over areas of relevance such as whether the novels of R. Prawer Jhabvala should be

considered "Anglo-Indian" or "Indo-Anglian". There are inevitably writers who do not fit into historical-literary categories. The terms, however, are tentative and clumsy as well as ambiguous, and there are temptations to abandon them in favour of one overall term (Anglo-Indian) or to substitute phrases like "English Writing in India" and "Indian Writing in English" for the two broad areas. If, however, the distinction is still needed – and this would seem to be so – and periphrasis is to be avoided, then the neat hyphenated labels remain indispensable.' (Williams 1976: 2-3)

[12] A brief overview of the titles (including the critical corpus) published in the first few decades after independence would suffice to highlight this conceptual muddle: P. Lal and K. Raghavendra Rao (eds.) *Modern Indo-Anglian Poetry* (Calcutta, 1960), K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* (Bombay, 1962), P. Lal (ed.) *Modern Indian Poetry in English: An Anthology and a Credo* (Calcutta: 1969), Gauri Deshpande, An Anthology of Indo-English Poetry (Delhi, n.d.), V. K. Gokak (ed.) *The Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry 1828-1965* (Delhi:1970), Pritish Nandy, *Indian Poetry in English 1947-1972* (New Delhi, 1972).

[13] Writing about modern Indian poetry in English as late as 1987, Bruce King reiterated similar position: 'Unless some new radical change occurs, Indian social and economic progress is linked to the same processes of modernization which, for historical and political reasons, have become wedded to the spread of the English language and the evolution of an English-language culture alongside Hindi and the regional languages.' (King, 1987: 3)

[14] Tabish Khair cogently puts the logic in the Introduction of his study of what he calls '*Babu*fiction': 'In our case, we can say that the English language not only constitutes Indian English literature but also Indian English realities and narratives.' (Khair: xi)

[15] It, however, goes without saying that the names did not appear in a strictly serial order, or they did not cease to exist with the advent of a newer one. In fact, both these terms are still in circulation; in several universities, both in India and outside, courses are being offered under such defining names. I have adopted the serial nature here only for the sake of conceptual clarity.

[16] Srinivasa Iyengar, for example, while lauding the achievements of the Indian poets writing in English, acknowledges this dichotomy obliquely: 'The best Indo-Anglian poets have given us

something which neither English poetry nor any of our regional literature can give; in other words, they have effected a true marriage of Indian processes of poetic experience with English formulae of verse expression.' (Quoted in Mukherjee 1977: 5) He evidently carves out a niche for Indo-Anglian poets both outside English and regional literatures. But at the same time the emphasis on 'true marriage' also hints at larger questions, especially because of India's past as a colony of Britain, which could, and in fact has, affected the conjugal bliss in several discrete socio-cultural terms. Consider, for example, the following statement of "Masti" Iyenger, the father of modern Kannada short story, who once proclaimed: "Write in English, write in Spanish, in any language you like; I have no quarrel. But I shall fight tooth and nail if you do it at the cost of your mother tongue" (Quoted in Mukherjee 1977: 8).

[17] M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), p. 1.

[18] As quoted in M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), p. 11.

[19] As quoted in M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), p. 12.

[20] As quoted in M.K. Naik, *A History of Indian English Literature* ((New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), p. 160.

[21] A phrase that I have used from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

[22] Raja Rao, *Kanthapura* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks; first published 1938), p.6.

[23] Salman Rushdie, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.vii.

[24] Mishra has himself joined the bandwagon with his novel *The Romantics* which was criticized along the same lines and reportedly which made him richer by $75000!

[25] Salman Rushdie, *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.viii.

Chapter - II

Imagi(ni)ng the City

In the center of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another, it had not become what we see today. In every age someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructed his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what had been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe.[1]

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

This chapter would try to rigorously ascertain and valorize the 'concept' of the city – through its construction, historiography as well as theorization. Though my thesis tries to intrinsically understand the city of Calcutta[2], this particular chapter will also attempt to place the city in question according to the theoretical framework that I will try to develop.

For any kind of understanding of the city of Calcutta it becomes imperative for us to have a brief historical overview of the city.[3] And this history will certainly enhance the comprehension of the deep structures that we shall unearth later in the chapter. In 1690 an English merchant named Job Charnok[4] arranged to lease three villages (namely Kalikata, Gobindapur, and Sutanuti) by the river Hoogly in order to set up a trading post. In 1698 Fort William was established by the river for defence purposes, and a large open area was cleared around the fort for military engagements. The Fort and the open area (called *Maidan*) formed the core of the city that emerged rapidly. The English traders' territorial expansion brought them into conflict with local rulers,

and a decisive battle in 1757 at Plassey (about 120 km to the north of Calcutta) left the victorious traders in sole control of the Bengal region. In 1793, a large area comprising of Bengal (which includes present day Bangladesh), Bihar, and Orissa, was placed under the control of Fort William, or the territorial domainof Calcutta. In 1780 work began on building a marine yard and dock in Kidderpore, but the effort was abandoned temporarily but taken up later. By this time Calcutta had become a significant trading centre, and in 1794 the Governor General of Bengal province, Lord Cornwallis, decided the official delineation of the city boundaries.

In 1895 industry began in the Calcutta region, butnot in the city: the first jute mill was established in Rishra, a suburb (for lack of a better term) Jute, used for making bags, carpets, and low cost clothing, became the mainstay of the regions' economy till the middle of the 20th century. Other jute mills were established along the west bank of the river, towards the north of the city. Thus, industry in Calcutta began in the suburbs and continued to locate in the suburbs through another 100 years of colonial rule and 50 years of independence. In 1854 the Howrah station was built on the 'correct' side or west of the river and in 1880 steamships began arriving at the now complete Kidderpore docks. By the end of 19th century Calcutta was a powerful metropolitan centre, and the British capital of India (often called the second city of the Empire) – a city of palaces and hovels. In 1911 the capital was shifted to Delhi, and a period of stagnation began for Calcutta and Bengal. Some engineering industry (medium scale metal and iron works) owned largely by British, did start locating in the industrial belt along the river, but the world demand for jute products was on the decline and hence was the economic de-escalation of the region.

Independence in 1947 was especially traumatic for the city of Calcutta. The riots that followed the partition scarred the city – geographically, economically as well as psychologically. The religious strife led to massive migration of Hindus from the newly-formed East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to the city; there was Muslim out-migration too though in a much smaller scale. In the economic front, a significant portion of Calcutta's hinterland (mainly the jute growing region) now became a part

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of a different country, a hostile country. But the city still survived even though with hitches. There was a definite downturn as far as the economics of the region was concernèd and the city's position as the commercial capital of the country too took a nosedive (on the political front Delhi had already usurped the position in 1911).

The Spatial Structure of the City

The Colonial City – The Postcolonial City

At its inception, the cartographic structure of the city was very clear. It was to be built as simply the trade centre and hence everything had to be centred around the fortress. But with growing trade even residential enclaves started sprouting, mainly for the Europeans – the traders and administrators. In the nineteenth century, the spatial structure was very clearly divided – the colonizers and the natives.

The English town started growing south south-west of Park Street, an area of Eurasian and mixed marriage residences (an Anglo-Indian ghetto) while immediately to its north and east, the natives resided. It is interesting to note here that the phenomenon has only taken a partially different contour post independence. The southern part of Calcutta still remains the posh (more western) part of the city with shopping malls, expensive enclaves, and multicuisine restaurants, a place definitely suited to the upwardly mobile.

But the partition and the sudden influx of refugees brought the city's elite face-to-face with the urban problems that had been brewing for a long time. In the first place, unlike previous migrants (labourers form Bihar and Orissa), who were clearly subalterns; the typical displaced families were vocal and considered it a political right to be gainfully resettled in the city. They belonged to the same cultural background as the city's intelligentsia and certainly made enough brouhaha so as to be heard. They settled very close to the posh south Calcutta locations/neighbourhoods: Behala

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and Chetla bordered Alipur while Jadavpur, Kasba and Dhakuria were adjacent to Ballygunge and Gariahat where the brown sahibs resided.

The Calcuttan

For my .thesis this understanding of the 'cityman' holds a lot of importance. As I have stated already, the city had become refuge for people from all spheres of society and regions courtesy of the city's economic importance. Though the 'natives' remained in the northern part of the city, a heady city culture emerged due to the assimilation/osmosis of western as well as Indian traditions. This was the time when the 'city-man' started emerging, empowered with the English education. These *bhadraloks* became the torchbearers of modernity but alienated themselves from the rest of the populace. Even here there were categories – the suave, English speaking brown sahibs and the unsophisticated vernacular educated petty clerks of the city. They were the government pawns, the 'office-goers' – the *keranis* – in the Writers' Building (where all important offices of the state are still housed) quite like the 'common man' in Laxman's cartoons –

> The clerks are dozing on their way from office; their faces worn out by
> hard work throughout the day...many of them will find that there is no
> oil, salt or coal at home to work with...and yet their wives nag them
> for ornaments.[5]

These *keranis* of the city, who were basically the clerks in most government offices became a breed who would be contributing immensely to the nature of the enlightened metropolitan man whose margins of knowledge far outstripped his position in society. The English word 'clerk' fails to connote who a *kerani* really is and his importance is not simply grounded in his societal standing. The *kerani* writes poems, follows football in the maidans exuding nationalist feelings, follows cricket at Lords as well as Eden Gardens, knows about the upswings in economy (knows of both the Wall and Dalal Street), runs little magazines and is politically

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active always posing questions for the state –yet he is a spectacle of an unfulfilled, wasted life. Tagore in one of his later poems called *Bansi* sketches the life of a*kerani* – Haripada *Kerani* – without a formal caste surname attributing his identity being governed simply by his vocation that of pointless slaving in a run down office.

The construction of the *bhadralok,* the associations that it carries along with it today, also needs to be understood vis-à-vis the shaping up of the city. Through the entire Bengal renaissance, it has assimilated in it a cultural connotation with strong undercurrents of a latent politics of identity The Bengal renaissance and modernity as it arrived through art and literature had a huge impact on the overall character of the metropolis, though it was very strongly grounded in the hegemony of colonial education. The *bhadralok* has been a part of the educated lot of the city, a connoisseur of arts and literature; the *bhadralok* is the eternal thinker and also holds key positions in the society. Their elitism which is indeed starkly different form the subalterns and the middle-class has been through the kind of education that he has received; he is powerful because he has mastered the language of power.If we take an intrinsic look at the seats of education as well as the markers of intellectual praxis we can easily gauge the extent of colonial influence and their elitist nature – the Presidency College, the University of Calcutta, St. Xavier's College, La Martiniere School, St. Thomas School, Lady Brabourne College still reflect the colonial past. And though one might argue that the nature of these institutes has changed after the Independence it has to be agreed that the change has been only minimal – they still remain elitist to the core.

The last couple of decades have seen a lot of academic activity in trying to ascertain and unearth the true nature of the city. There has been some serious objective study in the recent years, carried out by historians and sociologists without the typical parochial nature that the renaissance had almost injected into the Bengali psyche. Sumit Sarkar in his essay 'The City Imagined' writes –

And, twentieth century nationalism, Left politics, and Satyajit Ray apart, the 'renaissance' today provides the major justification for recalling the history of the city – as was done with much pride a few years back, on the occasion of its tercentenary in 1990 – for Calcutta has been otherwise a quintessentially colonial foundation.

This standard middle-class view of the city's cultural history has received some hard knocks in recent years, and most intellectuals who would like to consider themselves radical and sophisticated no longer share it. I had done a bit of debunking myself, of our renaissance myth, some twenty years back, but have increasingly come to feel theneed to get beyond what has become now a rather stale controversy.[6]

Maybe the controversy has really become 'stale', as Sarkar puts it, and perhaps the city today seems more open to attaining a global character. This gets reflected in the cartographic change in the spatial structure of the city the politics within the state and even cultural make up – it is trying hard to look beyond the renaissance. Though this has led to a constant debate, trying to ascertain the true identity of the place.

Plotting the Novel and the City

Unlike Sumit Sarkar who takes a look at the writings on and about the city in the nineteenth century, my thesis takes a look at the writings on the city at present and about its possible future. While Sarkar's essay relies heavily on the corpus of work present during the time period he researches, I have chosen Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* as the fulcrum to plot my postmodern Calcutta.

As far as Indian English fiction is considered quite a number of writers have rendered their own representations of the city of Calcutta. Amit Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song*, *A Strange and Sublime Address* figure prominently as do Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* and *The Calcutta Chromosome*. Their representations borrow, naturally, from

the city-history and their constructions are very much a re-telling of the time lost in public memory – an amalgamation of fiction of history with fiction or memory. But the novel that I have chosen to base my arguments on, takes us a step further into the realm of the hyperreal from the Eliotesque 'unreal.' The noveldelineates a futuristic city quite contrary to the idea of Calcutta as a 'slumbercity.' He plots the novel on such very loose co-ordinates that the travelling back and forth in time becomes rather easy.

Getting back to the kind of literature produced around the city and how it has been portrayed/featured we can locate an inherent politics in each phase. Early nineteenth century had a considerable amount of literature written on the city albeit from the 'centre' – European writings in form of biographies, reminiscences and handbooks. But all of that entirely subverted the Indian presence in the city while upholding the British achievements – works like H.E.Busteed's *Echoes from Old Calcutta* (1899), S.C. Hill's *Bengal in 1756-57* (1905) and H.E.A. Cotton's *Calcutta Old and New: Historical and Descriptive Handbook to the City* (1907). Their focus never dithered from the British part of the city and they hardly ever took a look at the city in its entirety. As Sarkar writes –

> The focus, then, of this entire British corpus of writing about Calcutta
> was on the 'White Town' or *saheb para,* the domain of the Europeans:
> less than ten thousand in number, according to the 1901 census, in a
> total city population of 577,066. Its heart was the European business-
> cum-administrative centre of Dalhousie Square, the headquarters of
> highly capital-intensive, globally connected commercial firms, as well
> as of the governments of Bengal Presidency and (till 1911) British
> India, an area populous by day but deserted by night. From here it
> extended southwards through the impressive façade, glittering shops
> and massive public buildings (mostly neo-classical, with a dash of
> Victorian Gothic in the High Court and New Market built in the
> 1870s) of Esplanade and Chowringhee that faced the open green

expanse of Maidan, down to Park Street and the comfortable bungalows, parks and pools that marked the main European residential area to its south. Further to the south-west and south lay the still more fashionable outlying areas of Alipur and what in twentieth century would come to be called Old Ballygunje, to distinguish it from the adjoining new Bengali middleclass suburb of the same name.[7]

Hence what we have is literature of no-conflict where the latent politics – both cartographic as well as spatial is brushed aside if not negated.

What Dickens did for London, Dostoevsky and Chekhov for Moscow, Baudelaire for Paris or Joyce for Dublin, Tagore could hardly do for Calcutta. The great renaissance-men of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay hardly tried to construct the city in which they spent a considerable amount of time. They completely overlooked the need for a literature for the straight forward celebration of Calcutta. The sense of power, of the sovereignty over a spatial and material world that comes with a strong sense of political and commercial power is never seen in the early modern writings about Calcutta as a city. Literature in Bengali did not really have much to talk about the city as such, apart from considering it as the great ruiner – the epicentre of all evil and corruption; it was indeed the 'other' world. Tagore struggled with Calcutta as an aesthetic problem. He wrote repeatedly and intermittently on Calcutta in great variety of poetic forms, trying to capture the poetic essence of the city and never quite finding it. Some of his poems are slightly humorous written apparently for children, like the famous one about a dream in which Calcutta like a lugubrious train is moving forward in great comic confusion of collisions and displacements. But when it came to writing in novels, Calcutta hardly found any space – only portions of *Gora* and *Ghare-Baire* *(Home and the World)* have some scope for city narration.

For a culturally, politically active city like Calcutta it was not until mid-twentieth century that serious city-centred literature/fiction started being conceived. The IPTA, the Naxalite movement and the post- Independence disenchantment and a nostalgia of the colonial twilight started getting depicted in fiction in Bengali. Shankar, Samaresh Basu, Premendra Mitra started writing the city the way it was done never before. The rhetoric of Calcutta spread even into cinema; Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen started shooting the city and were trying to unearth the character about this marvellous metropolis. Ray's city trilogy – *Simabaddha (Company Limited)* (1971), *Pratidwandi (The Adversary)* (1970) and *Jana Aranya (The Middle Man)* (1975), not to mention *Mahanagar (The Great City)* (1963) tried to bring out the nature of the city, its latent follies as well as its innate qualities. His cartographic imagination reflects the city as almost the exact replica of the city in longing on the one hand as well as its modernist decay on the other. Ray's work might not be 'postmodern' in most ways, in all these films, but they definitely do not portray the high culture that is innate to modernism. The first three films deal with the individual relationships vis-à-vis the commodification of the world, a realistic portrayal of the urbanized individual. *Pratidwandi* does remind one of a Stephen Daedalus, transported into the 60s-70s Calcutta, but the construction of the character of the protagonist, the manner in which Ray gives him a shape, unveils the disoriented Calcutta youth, confused quite as much as the city itself. *Mahanagar*, on the other hand brings in focus the economic nosedive the city has taken and how a couple copes with it. The middle-class Bengali sentiments, the latent sexual politics, all come to the fore in the movie. But in all these movies the important thing for us to note is the way Ray uses the markers of city life, Calcutta in focus. The office *para* (meaning 'area' in Bengali) of Dalhousie square, the Grand Hotel, the cabaret pub, the posh enclave in South Calcutta, the trade union leader smoking branded cigarettes – all images of Calcutta signify a certain turn in the aesthetic identity of the city. It is true, however, that Calcutta has not produced a J.G. Ballardwho could do an exposé – an 'atrocity exhibition' for the city; nothing quite in the lines of a Bonaventura Hotel[8] has yet sprung up, and Calcutta still lacks in an icon of

'postmodernity'. Nonetheless the heterogeneity that the city offers is itself interesting as well as difficult for us to negotiate and comprehend.

As I try to get into the problematic of imaging/formulating the city there remain certain questions which I myself fail to negotiateor rather comprehend. (1) Why do I fail to ascertain contemporaneity in the literature issuing out of Calcutta? (2) Why has canonization of any sort not happened as far as literature from/on the city is concerned? (3) Why has there been not enough depicton of the way of experiencing urban space in human consciousness – could Calcutta not be internalized?(4) Is it, to an extent, an alien city even to its inhabitants?

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Theorizing the City

'The city is a state of mind,'[9] wrote Robert Park. In that case there is no such thing as the city! But cities cannot simply be mental constructs – of course there are real cities. Each city has its own location and climate, its own history and architecture, its own spatial and social dispositions, its own cacophony of languages, its soundtrack of traffic, trade and music, its own smells and characteristic tastes, its own problems and pleasures. On the other hand simply reducing the cities to their *thingness* or their *thingness* to a question of bricks and mortar also belittles the city. States of mind have material consequences. They make things happen.

My understanding of cities is as much in cartographic realities as in abstraction. But what particularly interests me is this power of the city as a category of thought. This category designates a space produced by the interaction of historically (hence I started the chapter trying to historically align the city) and geographically specific institutions, social relations of productions and reproductions, practices of government, forms and media of communication, and so forth. By calling this diversity of the city, we ascribe to it a coherence or integrity. One way of thinking that coherence would be to treat the category of the city as a representation. But the

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concept of representation, although in the end it is indispensable, may raise more problems than it solves when we try to think about both the *thingness* of the city and the city as a state of mind. It is true that what we experience is never the real city, 'the thing itself.' It is also true that the everyday reality of the city is always a space already constituted and structured by symbolic mechanisms.[10]But representations do not quite get the measure of the relationship between those two realities, for it implies that one reality must be a model for the other, or a copy of it. More to the point, maybe, is Ihab Hassan's invocation of *the immaterial city*, which, he suggests, has 'in-formed history from the start, moulding human space and time ever since time and space moulded themselves to the wagging tongue.'[11]The City of God, the republican *polis*, the *Ville Radieuse*, the city as a public sphere: none of these is just or quite a representation, nor has any of them ever existed as a real (in the sense of physical) place. Rather, these immaterial cities are ideas or ideals that have played a powerfully important role in shaping the spatial organization and architectural design of cities. What such images point to is a social and even spiritual element invested in space, a material and so inevitably unsuccessful embodiment of the will to create relations between people that transcend the animal or the tribal: the will to community.

If it is not quite a representation, maybe (taking the imagined community of the nation as an analogy)[12] it would be more accurate to think the city as an *imagined environment*. This environment embraces not just the cities created by the 'wagging tongues' of architects, planners and builders, sociologists and novelists, poets and politicians, but also the translation of the places they have made into imaginary reality of our mental life. Victor Burgin writes –

> The city in our actual experience is *at the same time* an actually existing physical environment, *and* a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a city seen on television, a city in a comic strip, a city in a pie-chart, and so on.[13]

It would be indeed worthwhile here to take a deep look into what Simmel had to say regarding his theorization of the city. Though Simmel was locating modernity in 1900s and trying to further his understanding of the city as a state of mind. In his famous 1903 lecture on ' The Metropolis and Mental Life,' Simmel offers a prescient attempt to grasp the uneasy urban space between physical and imaginary produced by the destabilizing dynamic between subjective space, the outside world and social life.

> An enquiry into the inner meaning of specifically modern life and its
> products, into the soul of the cultural body, so to speak, must seek to
> solve the equation which structures like the metropolis set up between
> the individual and the supra-individual content of life. Such an enquiry
> must answer the question of how the personality accommodates itself
> in the adjustments to external forces.[14]

Unlike Dickensian realism what Simmel does is to understand the metropolis as the conceptual location of a split between subjective culture and objective culture produced by the money economy and the division of labour—

> [t]he individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization
> of things and powers which tear from their subjective form into the
> form of a purely objective life. It needs merely to be pointed out that
> the metropolis is the genuine arena of this culture which outgrows all
> personal life. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the
> wonders and the comforts of space-conquering technology, in the
> formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the
> state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and
> impersonalized spirit that the personality, so tospeak, cannot maintain
> itself under its impact.[15]

Though in Simmel there is a dearth in cataloging in reflecting the newness in the making of a metropolis, we find exactly that in Benjamin who gives a documentative account – new technologies of gaslamps, arcades, trains, telephones, and telegraphy, new forms of mass spectacle and mass entertainment, sport and cinema. More recently, post-Foucault, historians have shown how institutions of the state both responded to and helped to shape the reality of the great cities.

In order to determine the 'city-ness' of Calcutta, therefore, I tried to work through the historiography of Calcutta and delineated the major ruptures within it so as to shape the reality of this great city. But since my thesi is more focused towards 'unearthing' the postmodern city through the novel, it becomes imperative for us to take a deeper look into the contemporary city as well as try and understand the latent postmodernity that Calcutta envisages.

We have to realize that the panoramas of the advanced capitalist societies have increasingly become metropolitan and that even a (post)colonial city like Calcutta could not really be singularly left out from that phenomenon. Not that we all live in a city but in this global village the city somehow percolates within our very system. What we have to remember is that we live in a network, or, better still, an electronic topology in which the apparent has been transformed into the immediacy of the transparent and face-to-face contact supplemented and increasingly displaced by the interface of the screen. Calcutta too like many other great cities of the word emerges from these panoramas – from the nineteenth century urban spectacle of gigantic canvases of battles and historic events, through photography, cinema, television and the computer screen, to the complete aesthetic invasion of space – we discover visualscapes, soundscapes and imaginaryscapes, together with their technologies and culture, that provide ways of looking simultaneously into our everyday experiences and into nature.

Whether to simply denigrate the postmodern city by calling on the 'invasion of space' would be all that correct , is a question that can be debated because such

'invasions' are the benchmarks of postmodernity. And Joshi's novel underlines that in toto.

In mapping the construction of the city the other voice that we cannot undermine is that of Michel de Certeau. His account of the 'urban space'(a concept that I have dealt with in my introduction to this thesis) in the chapter 'Walking in the City' in *The Practice of Everyday Life* adds a different paradigm to the study of cities. There he offers a dual perspective of mapping urban space –he first describes the New York cityscape visible from the World Trade Center. This leads him to meditate on the temptation inherent in such a panorama.

It offers the perspective of a *dieu voyeur,* the promise of a 'concept city' to be found in 'utopian and urbanistic discourse.' This representation is the fantasy that has motivated planners and reformers in their desire to make the city an object of knowledge and so a governable space. They dream of encompassing the diversity, randomness and dynamism of urban life in rational blueprint, a neat collection of statistics, and a clear set of social norms. Theirs is an idealized perspective, which aspires to render the city transparent. The city would become as Certeau puts it, *'un espace propre,'* its own space and, and a purified, hygienic space, purged of all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it. It would be the city of benign surveillance and spatial penetration. Institutions like hospitals, schools and prisons, carceral and pastoral at the same time, would provide constant oversight of its population. Its dwellings and settlements would be designed on therapeutic principles. Its lungs and arteries would be surgically opened up to allow the controlled flow of air, light, waste, traffic, and people.[16]

Against this panoptic representation de Certeau poses a representational urban space – what he calls the fact of the city. The city that people inhabit is a labyrinthine reality that produces an anthropological, poetic and mythic experience of space. In the recesses and margins of the city, people invest places with meanings, memory and desire. We adapt the constraining and enabling structures of the city to an

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ingenious or despairing rhetoric. 'Beneath the discourse that ideologise the city the city,' writes de Certeau, 'the ruses and combinations of powers that have no readable identity proliferate; without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer.'[17]

For de Certeau then, the city figures the labyrinth as well as transparency Rather as Simmel drew a distinction between the 'enormous organization of things and powers' and the 'forms of motion' in mental life, de Certeau attempts to gauge the material consequences of the projection of that motile inner life:'a migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.'[18]

What I have tried here, in this chapter, is to assimilate some theoretical tool to understand the innate character of the city, *per se* – its reality, its transparency. Though the focus still remains the city of Calcutta, I have tried to work through the studies of Simmel, Benjamin and more recently that of de Certeau and have attempted to problematize the very concept of the city – whether at all it is simply a state of mind.' Though most of the works that these theorists have churned out have been hatched in the laboratories of the west – Berlin, Paris, New York – but as far as creating a city/ mythifying a city is concerned, the tools do not vary to an enormous degree due to its postcolonial situatedness.

Joshi's Calcutta is the real, mythical as well as the hyperreal city. While it talks of the pre-Independence colony, the post-Independence disenchantment as well as a futuristic metropolis, it also encompasses the innate character of a city in development, a city in non-fixity– a constant flux. Thus it forms a unique case study for the concept of the city – on the one hand, where as, there is a permanence of a present on the other there is the emergence of a (perhaps) fictionalized dwelling, almost as in a sci-fi thriller. The latter part of this thesis tries to attain a synthesis of the cartographic/real imagination through a close study of the text.

Notes

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[1] Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver, (London: Vintage, 1997; first published 1974), p. 32.

[2] I shall continue to call the city Calcutta throughout my thesis though it has been re-christened as Kolkata in the year 2000. The novel also mentions it as Calcutta. The name also carries a colonial baggage, something that I have questioned in my work.

[3] For this historical overview I have drawn on a number of books but Geoffrey Moorhouse' *Calcutta* (1971) and Nirmal Kumar Bose's *Calcutta: A Social Survey* (1968) have been my prime sources.

[4] The Calcutta High Court has recently (June 2003) passed a verdict not to celebrate Calcutta's birth year as 1690 and to regard Job Charnock as its founder. The judgment was passed after this was challenged by the Chowdhuris of Behala, one of the zamindars who owned Kalikata partly during those times.

[5] Durgacharan Roy, *Debganer Marte Agaman(A Visit of Gods to Earth)*, (Calcutta: NP, 1889). I have quoted this from Sumit Sarkar's essay 'The City Imagined: Calcutta of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries' in *Writing Social History*,(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.159.

[6] Sumit Sarkar, 'The City Imagined: Calcutta of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Writing Social History*,(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.160.

[7] Sumit Sarkar, 'The City Imagined: Calcutta of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Writing Social History*,(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.162.

[8] I have mentioned this just to bring into focus the picture that Fredric Jameson draws of the 'postmodern city' through while theorizing on it in his book *Postmodernisms, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.*

[9] Robert Park *et al.*, *The City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967; first published in 1925), p. 1.

[10] The argument I am making here echoes Slavoj Zizek, *Mapping Ideology,* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 20-21.

[11] Ihab Hassan, 'Cities of Mind, Urban Words', in Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (eds.), *Literature and the Urban Experience*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1981), p. 94.

[12] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1983).

[13] Victor Burgin, *Some Cities*, (London: Reaktion Books), p.48.

[14] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*,(London: Sage, 1997), p. 175.

[15] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*,(London: Sage, 1997), p. 184.

[16] I have tried here to develop on Certeau's ideas as mentioned in The *Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[17] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 95.

[18] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 93.

Chapter – III

Writing the City

In the previous chapters I have tried to locate the novel in a literary genre, discussing the dominant theories that have dogged the genre as well as have raised questions regarding the theorization of the *city* as it has taken shape over the years. The city that the novel discusses (though the novel also has the presence of certain other cities but to a much lesser extent) and which I am going to analyze putting it in the framework that I have already drawn is, *Calcutta*. I shall attempt in this chapter to discern the dominant images, the textual fissures within the novel and using them as tools for my understanding of the postmodern city. The entire focus will hinge on problematizing the subject taking Ruchir Joshi's novel as the pool of signifiers that I will choose from.

Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* is a novel of immense maturity where the author tries to pick out a number of ideologies that have plagued a nascent nation like India. But the novel, keeping in unison with the postmodernist trend, is more a kaleidoscope rather than one which marks out a definite territory of its own. The one feature that I, as a reader first and as a critic later, found extremely interesting is the obsession of the book with the concept of a city and its subsequent development. Joshi toys with the idea of Lyotardian postmodernism and makes an attempt to naturalize 'postmodernism' within his work. We can define postmodernity, keeping in mind the way Joshi uses it in the novel, as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives',[1] whether classical (grounded in appeal to referential truth) or modernist (grounded in appeal to effective communication). Second, postmodernism revalues the aesthetic as a site for the invention of little narratives. Finally, in the political sphere the resistance of political minorities in such 'little narratives' is opposed to the totalizing narratives proposed by capital on one hand and the

'Revolutionary' party on the other. Bill Readings writing on 'Postmodernity and Narrative' comments –

> Postmodernity is generally a more or less confused or confusing sense that the stakes have changed once we recognize that politics, art, history and knowledge don't fit together any more within the patterns of temporal succession and rational discourse established by the Enlightenment. And it has something to do with narrative: a rhetoric of narrative that will no longer be confined to instrumentality but that is *both* constitutive and disruptive of the possibility of narration. The rewriting of politics, aesthetics and epistemology in terms of a troubling effect of narrative is a crucial aspect of Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern condition.[2]

Lyotard·has discussed postmodernity in terms of a 'crisis of narratives'[3] where he means that we can no longer tell a new story and that our understanding of the place of narrative is itself in crisis because we no longer believe in metanarrative. And the complete dissipation of the origin or a telos further negates any possibility of a grand-narrative. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* is plotted on such a map where the origin and a telos (universal emancipation) is completely lost and the novel runs quite like a documentary film – seen through the eyes of the cinematographer and where every shot is a little-narrative.

But because my thesis is not aimed at simply discussing the novel as an example of postmodernist fiction, I will not digress from my focus – that of narrating a postmodern city, albeit it is difficult to carve out only portions of a novel to suit such a purpose. Joshi has intertwined different strands within the novel in such a manner that it becomes difficult to separate them and study each strand singularly. As I have already mentioned that the one city which circumscribes all events and brings in a kind of coherence into the text is the city of Calcutta. But it should also be noted here that Joshi's novel is pre-occupied by the concept of a place where time mingles with

each other and where the 'space' he sketches is a space out of time on one hand while it is also marked through a history on the other.

The Novel

Joshi's narrator is seventy year old Paresh Bhatt, a photographer who is living out his old age in Calcutta which has chaotically survived into a postnuclear holocaust world. A prodigal son, Bhatt has returned to the city where he spent his childhood and his adolescence. His memory wades through different countries (cities) and peoples, capturing images from the past and takes us into the únreal city' – the hyperspace that Calcutta develops into. Like Joshi himself, Bhatt is a Gujarati who has grown up in the Calcutta of the 60s and 70s – a city which then dwelled in the idioms of the radical left while fast losing its jaundiced colonial charm. Much of the city he describes, going into its oneiric depths, we can recognize: the streets, the schools, the cinemas, the restaurants, the music. This is where he also juxtaposes the story of two other characters – those of his parents – Mahadev and Suman Bhatt. Not only does Joshi try to narrate their lives but also manages a kind of peep into the politics that nurtured these lives – through the freedom struggle and into the independence. The minor crises and the struggles of day to day existence through Paresh's growing years gets delineated through what can be termed as a mélange of history and individual/personal memory.

The defamiliarized territory that the novel subjects thereader to comes through the life of Para (Paresh's only daughter) who grows up playing games based on computer simulations and later becomes an ace fighter pilot with the Indian Air Force trying to fend off Pakistan's perennial attacks. She fights an almost hypperreal war with gadgets that can only find place in Science Fiction thrillers. Joshi in this portion of the novel gives a typical shock of 'estrangement that is very much the heart of Sci-Fi thrillers. I will deal this particularaspect of the novel later in this chapter. But first let us try to·locate the importance of the city which forms the core of my thesis.

The Fictionalized City

Over the years city, which can be regarded as one of the most impressive human achievements, has become an 'object' in the world of nature. Cities are a plural phenomenon – there are many of them but though each one has its individual history, they all seem to exemplify similar patterns. The most basic of these is the interpenetration of past and present and for a city like Calcutta, this holds immense importance and more so for the city that Joshi imagines in *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*. On the one hand there is the visible city of streets and buildings, frozen forms of energy fixed at different times in past and around which the busy kinetic energy of the present swirls. While on the other hand there are subconscious currents arising in the minds of the city's living inhabitants from this combination of the past and the present. *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* readily delves into the past and the present – the individual memory reflecting the city through its past and the present.

Paresh Bhatt sitting in a futuristic Calcutta imagines the Durga Puja. Though he is in a different world altogether, his imagination is plagued by a city that he has breathed for years, the kinds of things that he describes reflect what the city has taught him to imagine.

> Puja light. Even the shuttles fly by more quietly, even their ghadghad seems more respectful of the light. The JadavpurBehala route copters, public here calls them 'Koptaar', have a new look. This year Boroline's gone on this massive Puja nostalgia trip and pulled out all their old ads, 1950s onwards, '80 years of Relieving Bengal's Wounds!' – *bhoonds* as they say here, or *whoonds* if you're slightly higher class, and wrapped them around the helicopters, so when I wake up and look out from my terrace, this thing, this *ekta jinish* passes in front of my eyes, this tube of ointment, Boro-calendula, with mini-jets attached, crowned by spinning rotor blades – ' The One Mother Trusts.'[4]

Here Joshi brings in certain markers of the city life – post independence. He tries to bring in focus the consumer (albeit not from the higher class)consciousness of the city of Calcutta something akin to what Marx described as 'commodity fetishism'. The two brands of ointment *Boroline* and *Boro-calendula* are trademark Calcutta companies. They serve the middle-class, lower middle-class families and are inherent parts of the Bengali consciousness. It is also interesting for us to note that both these companies have been associated with the Puja celebrations in form of sponsorsfor many years. Even the choice of the locales 'Behala' and 'Jadavpur' have a latent politics working for the author. Both these places border the elite and posh part of the city (part that I have discussed earlier in the previous chapter), and using them hints at the cartographic imagination that the author has for a future Calcutta. To put it simply, his imagination is nothing more than an extrapolation of the present. Joshi sketches his Calcutta – a city stuck in the whirlpool of mediocrity and a past which it cannot outgrow. Northrop Frye writes that

> the culture of the past is not only the memory of mankind of mankind,
> but our own buried life, and study of it leads to a recognition scene, a
> discovery in which we see, not our lives, but the cultural form of our
> present life.[5]

The city is, and as we find in Joshi's novel, a curious artifact compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled.

If we take a closer look at literature we can easily discern that the city has been used as a rhetorical topos throughout the history. But it has another aspect as well, whose referent seems to be a deep-seated anxiety about man's relation to his created world. The city crystallizes these conscious and unconscious tensions which have from the beginning characterized the city. Only such crystallization can explain man's pre-occupation with the city– be it Troy or Baghdad, Carthage or Pataliputra.

The image of the city has always stood in grounds suffering from certain ambivalences – at times myths. It embodies a complex of contradictory forces in both individual and collective terms. The idea of the city seems to trigger conflicting impulses, both positive and negative, conscious and unconscious. At a very deep level, the city seems to express our culture's restless dream about its inner conflicts and its inability to solve them. On a more conscious level, this ambivalence expresses itself in mixed feelings of pride, guilt, love, fear, and hate toward the city. Technically speaking, the city emerges as a very important tool in hands of the novelist. It enables him to bring together in a plausible network of extremely diverse characters, situations, and actions. Ruchir Joshi uses this tool to perfection in *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*. The characters in the novel – be it Paresh Bhatt, or Mahadev, Kalikaku (Kalidas) or Para – epitomize all the variety that a city has in offer. Even the relationships that Paresh forges through his adolescent years and his years of maturity allow us a look into the cosmopolis that he is writing about. The novelist, here, also employs the technique of spreading the novel in three different timeframes vis-à-vis three different generations – Mahadev, Paresh, and Para. And as he leads us into his fictionalized dwelling into a futuristic Calcutta where helicopters ferry people around the city, the reader has already internalized its past– the colonial glory and the post independence decay.

The complexity that a city offers also poses problems at times with the narrator losing him/herself in the labyrinth in spite of his/her familiarity with it. This is because he/she cannot view the labyrinth at once, except from above, when it becomes a map. Hence his/her impressions of it at any given moment are fragmentary and limited: rooms, buildings, streets. These impressions are visual but involve other senses as well, together with a crowd of memories and associations. The impressions a real city makes on an observer are thus both complex and composite in a purely physical sense, even without taking into account his/her culture's pre-existing attitudes. In *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* too we come across this phenomenon often. The novelist gives us an account of Calcutta through its streets, restaurants and localities. Even the Delhi he draws can be imagined through

the places he describes – Jangpura, New Friends Colony, Lajpatnagar, Andrews Ganj *et al.* While for Calcutta it is Park Street, Chowringhee, Lake Gardens, and Rashbehari Avenue.

It must be, however, remembered that Joshi like most other authors of city narratives (though Flaubert, Hugo, Balzac an Dickens have been praised for realistic urban descriptions in their novels, close examination shows that they typically create in their fictions the Paris or London of a time considerably before the actual time of writing) sketches a city which is more like a palimpsestic impression–

> I shouldered my way back to Chowringhee. The sun had gone by now but the streets were still jam-packed. I went over to S.N. Bannerjee Road crossing, where all the buses stop, and waited for a No. 49. One came and was so crowded that it went right past. Another one appeared five minutes later. It had even more people hanging from it, fanning out of the doors like kababrolls spilling out of Nizam waiter's hands.[6]

This Calcutta reflects the 70s Calcutta, a shot out of Satyajit Ray *Mahanagar* or one out of a Mrinal Sen movie.[7] And the city of the present has definitely undergone certain changes which the author consciously (perhaps) overlooks. The nuances latent here go amiss to the reader whose knowledge about the city is limited while they can be easily discerned by a reader who knows the city well. From the above extract, for instance, one needs to know that buses no more stop at the Chowringhee crossing and Nizam's rolls are no more as hot as they used to be! But pointing out such discontinuities between the empirical city and its fictionalized counterpart is not to suggest that by using these images the author has in mind a secret, coded maning which is the reader is challenged to decipher. That would make the city too symbolic, though its function is primarily emblematic and to act as an archetype. Hence these have various and more diffused associations and resonances than merely a symbol can signify. However the city-image may function, it always brings into the text a

power of its own; it may be more accurate to say that the writer harnesses this image rather than he creates it.

Like most city-novels, *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* also reflects many displacements in the social structures mostly through the escapades of Paresh and his friends. The 'city-man'(a concept I have already discussed in the previous chapter) in Joshi's novel is in a constant flux and the different relationships that he narrates only qualifies this. Paresh is not someone who shares his values from the past; very unlike his parents, he leads a life which in very loose terminology can be called bohemian-the development of his character, perhaps, occurs quite in keeping with the changing faces of the metropolis. We must keep in mind here that cities have been (in fiction) places witness to the growing loss of shared conventions and values with consequent weakening of the social fabric. This weakening leads to the development of weak characters/ protagonists like Paresh or Prufrock. Their demands are more bourgeois than aesthetic. These weak heroes and artists are intensely involved with cities. Their creators use the city thematically to represent the isolation or alienation of the individual within the culture. Joyce (Stephen Daedalus and Leopold Bloom) and Kafka (Joseph K) for instance, present isolated individuals moving within the cities which for most of the other characters are communities. The characters (which is what happens with Paresh in *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*) are excluded from these communities as inferior or ignorant. Here we may draw an oblique reference fro Eliot's *The Wasteland*. It is truly the epic of dissociated urban life in the earlier part of the twentieth century. The 'unreal city' is the poem's central organizing metaphor, the centre of imaginative and mythic power in an exhausted culture. When we come across the rantings of Kalidas or Anirban Dey or Bhowmick in Joshi's novel, we are certainly reminded of that exhausted culture. In *The Wasteland*, the denizens of the city lead encapsulated, enervated lives. The poem's disembodied voices seem to emanate from one mind, but they all speak a bleak despair, from the voice which intones 'unreal city' to the sing-song tune from the nursery, 'London bridge is falling down.'

Pike Burton in his book *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* while discussing Kafka's *Trial* writes –

> In Kafka's *Trial,* the city reflects the same vaporization of significance of the individual as do Eliot's poems, but in different terms. In this novel the city consists of its institutions rather social encounters and cultural memories and fantasies: bank, boarding house, quasilegal bureaucracy, cathedral. All these institutions belong together in some shadowy scheme of things, but they are completely unrelated to each other in the novel's sphere of everyday life. Joseph K. defines and measures himself completely in terms of these institutions, and not at all from some integral sense of himself as a person. Above all he seems to apply the model of the hierarchy of the bank, with which he is most familiar and most identified, to everything he is confronted with: an institutional model of subalterns and superiors, of venality, corruption and arrogance.[8]

Thus if we draw a comparison to *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, we can once again notice that Joshi tries to narrate a few devitalized individuals inhabiting almost an 'unreal city.' They are represented as incoherent fragments and are randomly perceived. The characters of Paresh, Bhowmick, Kalidas, Viral, Sandy all seem to inhabit a *wasteland* and somehow through their fragmented selves narrate a postmodern world in a mosaic-like structure.

The Urban-Postmodern Landscape

Sharon Zukin in her essay 'Postmodern Urban Landscapes: Mapping Cultures' writes –

The conjuncture of social, cultural, and spatial changes that has so excited those to write about cities in recent years is loosely gatheredin the term 'postmodern urban landscape.' While no clear understanding separates modern from postmodern cities, we sense a difference in how we organize what we see: how the visual consumption of space and time is both speeded up and abstracted from the logic of industrial production, forcing a dissolution of traditional spatial identities and their reconstitution along new lines. Postmodernity in general exists as both a social process of dissolution and redifferentiation and cultural metaphor of this experience. Consequently, the social process of constructing a postmodern landscape depends on an economic fragmentation of older urban solidarities and a reintegration that is heavily shaded by new modes of cultural appropriation. The genius of property investors, in this context, is to invert the narrative of the modern city into a fictive nexus, an image that a wide swathe of the population can buy, a dreamscape of visual consumption.[9]

The novel in discussion is set, as I have already mentioned, in three different time frames – recent past (post independence) the present (almost), and a fantastic future. This leads the reader, especially the informed, to imagine a cityscape in three entirely different modes. Calcutta of the 60s and 70s, when the Park Street, the *firang* street of the city was flanked by old restaurants and bars on both sides of the road – Waldorf, Olympia, Peter Cat, Kwality, Bar-B-Q etc. An almost present Calcutta where Park Street still nurtures these traditional joints but with faded glories but where new-age joints dot the place – Baristas and Pizza Huts. And lastly into a futuristic city with helicopters and computer simulated structures creating a hypperreal world. Hence the cartographic structure conceived by the author enables us to imagine an entirely postmodern world, irreverent and chaotic. But an interesting aspect that we should also keep in mind is that these changes that I have mentioned are not only structural or visual, they reflect a change within the man inhabiting the place as well.

The City as in a Science Fiction

One of the major aspects of the novel which, I feel needs to be discussed thoroughly in order to determine its postmodern character, is Joshi's use of Science Fiction in his work. It would be fallacious to call *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* a Science Fiction novel quite in the same lines of Amitav Ghosh's *Calcutta Chromosome* but the elements of Science Fiction that he uses right through the novel cannot be ignored. Supriya Chowdhury in her review of the book in the *Hindu* writes –

> Joshi's technique in the novel is to graft the recognizable on to the alien, producing that shock of estrangement that marks our entry into the future just as it proclaims, as in all good science fiction, that the future is unknown and one way of imagining it is as good as another.[10]

Darko Suvin has defined Science Fiction as 'literature of estrangement'[11] (by 'estrangement', he means very nearly the Russian formalists' *ostranenie*, but specifically ontological *ostranenie*, confronting the empirical givens of our world with something not given, something from outside or beyond it, a strangenewness, a *novum*). By qualifying this estrangement as 'cognitive', Suvin means to eliminate purely mythopoeic projections that have no standing in a worldview found on logic, reason, positive science. Robert Scholes, Suvin's disciple further explicates this –

> Fabulation ... is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront the known world in some cognitive way.... Speculative fabulation (i.e. SF) ... is

defined by the presence of at least one clear representational discontinuity with life as we know it.[12]

This definition of Scholes is rather interesting. Any fiction, as we know of any genre involves at least one 'novum' – a character who did not exist in the empirical world, an event that did not really occur– and very likely involves many more than one. In case of Science Fiction, however, the occurrence of this 'novum'is not at the level of story and actors but in the structure of the represented world itself. In Science Fiction, it is not the occurrence of a single 'novum' but the projection of a network of innovations, with their implications and consequences, in other words, the projection of a world different from our own yet, which lies cental to the genre.

Joshi follows similar kind of fabulation in *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh.* The Calcutta of 2030 that he sketches is speculative withhelicopter depots and high speed railway tracks that can take one to Dhaka in two hours. The acute shortage of water, the pollutants that have created havoc all hint at the complete environmental wreckage that the world heads towards –

(i)   For bathing I first put on the special mask. The eyeband fits tight over the eyes but you can sort of see through the lenses.There is a special breathing net for the nostrils which allows air to go in and out but blocks off the water.... Along with the mask you also have to put on the crotch-patch which seals off your downstairs, talk about bodybags, and if you have any cuts or open wounds then each has to be sealed by the special bath bandaids.[13]

(ii)   Well, if you have diarrhoea or dysentery then you go down to the local centre and plug yourself in – their pipes are better, 'professional quality'.... Every now and then someone will come around with water tablets and rehydration pills and if it's really

bad then they have doctors who can inject you with whatever you
need.[14]

The extracts read like an Asimovian text where after the decimation of the entire eco-system human life survives only on electronic gadgets – its survival dependant completely on technology. Though Joshi does not really do the UFO act by bringing in aliens from outer space but leads the reader to a post-nuclear holocaust world with entire cities destroyed, maps rewritten and the world under the control of robots. The letters, e-mails which Para sends to her father, Paresh, are fragments of information and the reader can easily imagine a picture of airfights technologically far advanced from those carried out by today's F-16s and Sukhois. But if we take a closer look we can easily gauge that all of this is simply extrapolation of the present situation, only that the technologies are far superior. Gary Wolfe in his theorization of Science Fiction has discussed the distinct iconography that is inherent of all such works. He identifies five icons – the spaceship, the city, the wasteland, the robot and the monster.[15] Joshi uses only one among the list – the *city*. His imagination of a futuristic Calcutta adds to the chaos of human relations that he narrates. Postmodern relationships in a postmodern city.

Memory and History

The Last Jet-Engine Laugh is a novel which re-invents cultural history through individual memory. There are patches where Joshi uses certain signifiers that arouse certain types of readings of the text. Sometimes the markers are innocuous while at others they hold a lot of importance the entire episode of Netaji's death in Gulag, the conscious use of Bhopal and Union Carbide association, the depiction of Marwaris controlling the economy of Calcutta and a character like Anirban Dey who reminds the reader of the late Gautam Chatterjee[6]– all add to the mosaic-like structure he draws in the novel. All of these images have the potency to incite questions and

throw open arenas that remain problematic. As far as these images, visà-vis the city which he narrates most in the novel – Calcutta, are concerned, allows the reader a scope to mark out a distinct cultural space. And the author takes the reader through the modernity of this city into a postmodern state –irreverent and almost uncouth.

Notes

[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Bennington and Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) p. xxiv.

[2] Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991) p. 64.

[3] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Bennington and Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) p. xxiii.

[4] Ruchir Joshi, *The Last Jet Engine Laugh*, (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2001) p. 102.

[5] As quoted by Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.4.

[6] Ruchir Joshi, *The Last Jet Engine Laugh*, (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2001) p. 21.

[7] Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen, the master film-makers from the city have tried to sketch their imaginations of the city of Calcutta in more than a couple of films. While for Ray we have *Mahanagar, Aranyer Din-Ratri, Pratidwandi* and *Simabaddha* for Sen *Calcutta 71, Ekdin Pratidin, and Akaler Sandhane* bear testimony to such imagination.

[8] Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 104.

[9] Sharon Zukin, 'Postmodern Urban Landscapes: Mapping Culture and Power' in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity*,(Cambridge USA: Blackwell), p.221.

[10] Supriya Chaudhuri, 'The Laugh at the End of the World', *The Hindu*, August 2001.

[11] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.4.

[12] Robert Scholes as quoted by Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, (London & New York, Routledge, 1989), p.87.

[13] Ruchir Joshi, *The Last Jet Engine Laugh*, (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2001), p.269.

[14] Ruchir Joshi, *The Last Jet Engine Laugh*, (Delhi: Harper Collins, 2001), p.267.

[15] This formulation is drawn up by Gary K. Wolfe in *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction,* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979). I have used the formulation here in order to show the post holocaust Calcutta emerging into a hyperspace.

[16] Gautam Chatterjee can easily be named as the founder of the urban folk music (which has completely metamorphosed into the kinds of music created by the new generation Bangla Bands), in the late 60s, early 70s. He wrote songs regarding social concerns and reflects the post Naxalbari movement disillusionment among the youths of the city. Chatterjee was a gifted musician of western tradition as well and his music had a lot of influence of country, jazz and blues.

Conclusion

The City is an ideogram: the text continues.[1]

— Roland Barthes

The entire focus of my thesis has been to examine the concept of the 'city' through literature using some theoretical tools and to a certain extent even a historiographic analysis. I have tried to keep each of the chapters precise, discussing only a certain number of points so as to facilitate the reader's own formulation while reading. Tried hard, as I have, lots of gaps still mar my description/theorization/comprehension of the idea, and a few remain amorphous.

My attempt here has been not to read the city simply as an aestheticized symbol but to find out the territorial culture. This has become particularly difficult today because while the earlier city was a discrete geographical, economic, political and social unit, easily identified in its clear-cut separation from rural space, the contemporary metropolis is fast trying to draw that 'elsewhere' into its own (though this phenomenon is more western but even postcolonial cities seem to follow it; hence satellite towns like Bidhannagar, Rajarhat for Kolkata and Gurgaon and Noida for Delhi).[2] The countryside and suburbia, linked up via the telephone, the television, the video, the computer terminal, and other branches of mass media are increasingly the dispersed loci of a commonly shared and shaped world. This semiotic extension in details, resulting in a simultaneous loss in focus has made it doubly difficult to define the city and the earlier separation between an obvious 'natural' exterior and an 'artificial' urban interior is fast giving way. The city no more is the 'actual' city but an image of it that has been conceived. Literature, cinema, television, video, and advertising have accustomed us to environments that are no longer geometrically organized by streets, buildings, parks, boulevards and squares. The media, and the

images of the metropolis they offer, provide us with a city that is immaterial and transparent: a cinematic city, a telematic hyper-space.

Baudrillard writing on the overload of information provided by the media, which now confront us with an endless flow of fascinating images simulations so that 'TV is the world' states that in this hyperreality the real and the imaginary is confused and aesthetic fascination is everywhere, so that 'a kind of non-intentional parody hovers over everything, of technical simulating, of indefinable fame to which is attached an aesthetic pleasure.'[3] The end of the real and the end of art moves us into a hyperreality in which the secret discovered by surrealism becomes more widespread and generalized. Baudrillard remarks–

> It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist. Surrealism's secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that are still nevertheless connected with art and the imaginary. Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety – political, social, historical and economic – that from now on incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere already in an 'aesthetic' hallucination of reality.[4]

It has been difficult to draw the city through a single novel that too only a very recent one. But discussing various works lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. Hence I have not really been able to draw on various other texts to supplement my argument. I have, however, tried to order my arguments and have dealt with a few topics comprehensibly. The introduction to this thesis is simply an outline to the project that I have undertaken. Here I have also given space to certain concepts and ideas which I have not been able to explain thoroughly in the chapters though have used them repeatedly. In the end the introduction can be seen as another separate chapter explicating the theoretical stances that I have taken.

The first chapter deals with the construction of the canon and how new literatures have made their way into the orthodox curriculum of English studies. I have also dealt in details about the contestations in the postcolonial space. I found this necessary simply because of the origin of the novel, the city it describes and genre it belongs to. The various debates in the academic world regarding the politics of postcoloniality is dealt with in this chapter. The express purpose of discussing briefly the 'big three' of Indian Writing in English was to delineate the emergence of the 'present' metropolitan writings as against their literature of the small town. These writers were trying to sketch a nascent nationstate and the India that they delineate lies somewhat in contrast to the present generation who are obsessed with the literature of the Indian city – the journey from a Malgudi to Mumbai, from Kanthapura to Kolkata.

The second chapter remains the core of my thesis where I have dealt with the multiple readings of the city. The chapter is focused primarily on the understanding of the city of Calcutta. The historiography that I have given in the opening section of the chapter is simply to buttress our understanding of the city that I discus. I found it necessary since the construction of the idea of Calcutta without its history would be rather difficult to ascertain. I have tried to trace here the 'cityspace' through a cultural analysis and the modes that I have relied mostly on have beenliterature and cinema. I feel this chapter, through all the theoreticaltools that I have used is an honest effort at deconstructing the idea of a postmodern city and Calcutta in particular.

The third chapter of my thesis is the one where I have attempteda textual analysis of the novel that I have chosen. I have tried to fit the novel according to the paradigms that I have drawn in the initial chapters and also have tried to take a look at the novelistic artifices that the author uses.

Ruchir Joshi's novel is plotted on the realms of both the 'real' and the 'imaginary' and the city he draws, employing his aesthetic dimension, is a hypperreal space.

Diverse images, he draws, of the place thereby making it difficult to chain them together to form a coherent formulation – the intensity of the signifiers defy systematization and narrativity. I have entirely based all my arguments on the images that he draws of the city because the novel as such does not talk about the city. The overwhelming presence of Calcutta needs to be unearthed through careful reading of the signifiers he uses. Ruchir Joshi, having been born in the city but having left it in his college years retains a certain picture of Calcutta, a very personal one which is marked by a certain cultural tutelage. The city 'proper' has changed in the last couple of decades and the novelist is able to paint the manner in which the changes have altered the identity of both Calcutta and the Calcuttan. And for Joshi the process of this change is continuous – it seems he tries to create for himself a *megalopolis 3000*, a computer simulated world quite in the lines of the video game played by young Para, Paresh's daughter in the novel. But again, this is the world that survives a holocaust and this is where Paresh Bhatt spends his old age not in the capitalist west, which for Joshi is but ' a concentration camp of the mind ... a zone that is very difficult to get out of.'[6]

Notes

[1] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), p. 31.

[2] These satellite towns like Bidhannagar or what is better known as the Salt Lake City in Calcutta (the region used to be a marsh land but was taken on by the government for development because of its proximity to the city) generally house the working, educated middle/upper-middleclass families and have attained an elitism of its own.

[3] J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 148.

[4] J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, (New York: Semiotext[e], 1983), p. 148.

[5] This is the video game that Para enjoys in her childhood in the novel.

[6] Ruchir Joshi, *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 151.

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