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# Between the Epic and the Ordinary : locating the Politics of Contemporary Indian Urban Writing in English (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata)

Marianne Hillion

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SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ  
ÉCOLE DOCTORALE IV (ED 020)  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND  
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le 22 octobre 2021 / *on 22nd October 2021*

**BETWEEN THE EPIC AND THE ORDINARY:  
LOCATING THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN  
URBAN WRITING IN ENGLISH  
(DELHI, MUMBAI, KOLKATA)**

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I dedicate this work to my grandmother, legendary adventurer and *proofreader extraordinaire*, whose strength and style are an enduring source of inspiration.

## **DECLARATION**

This thesis has been composed by myself and is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is also submitted to the university of Sorbonne Université in support of my application for the degree of Docteur de l'université Sorbonne Université, as per the agreement of joint thesis sponsorship signed between the University of Warwick and Sorbonne Université.

Marianne Hillion

July 2021

## **ABSTRACT**

While the city has been central to the Indian novel in English since the 1980s, the profusion of urban novels, essays and literary reportages published since the 2000s reveals important formal and thematic shifts in the literary discourse on Indian cities. At the crossroads of literature and urban studies, this thesis locates this literary phenomenon in the context of India's embrace of global capitalism in the 1990s, which has resulted in the accelerated expansion and transformation of Indian cities, notably based on the model of the 'world-class city'. Drawing from a corpus of fictional and non-fictional texts on Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, I study the development of a critical urban imaginary which expresses the contradictory experience of this urban metamorphosis through the interplay between two major aesthetic modes, and challenges both orientalist and nationalist discourses on the Indian city. These texts oscillate between the epic mode, which defamiliarizes urban modernisation and amplifies the collision between antagonistic social forces in the city, and the ordinary mode, which explores this historical process at the scale of the locality through the lens of everyday life, obliquely shedding light on structural violence but also on tactics devised by urban outcasts to reclaim urban space. These two modes are considered as the two faces of a political literary approach of the city, which rests on the strong historical consciousness of the writers. Their works unveil the multiple layers of a fragmented urban history which contemporary urban planning endeavours to erase.

## ABBREVIATIONS

I have used the following references for in-text citations of the primary texts:

C: *Capital*, Rana Dasgupta

CAL: *Calcutta, Two Years in a City*, Amit Chaudhuri

DL: *Dirty Love*, Sampurna Chattarji

DM: *Diksha at St Martin's*, Siddharth Chowdhury

DS: *Day Scholar*, Siddharth Chowdhury

FM: *A Free Man*, Aman Sethi

FS: *Freedom Song*, Amit Chaudhuri

IF: *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, Raj Kamal Jha

M: *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy

MC: *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta

MSH: *My Seditious Heart*, Arundhati Roy

PMS: *The Patna Manual of Style*, Siddharth Chowdhury

PR: *Patna Roughcut*, Siddharth Chowdhury

SS: *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Amit Chaudhuri

SW: *She Will Build Him a City*, Raj Kamal Jha

This thesis uses the referencing norms of the MHRA Manual of Style, recommended by the University of Warwick.

Parenthetical page references to Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Freedom Song* in the running text and footnotes will be to the 2000 Vintage edition (*Freedom Song, Three Novels*), which features the author's three first novels in one volume. Page spans for each individual novel can be found in the list of works cited.

The same system is used for Siddharth Chowdhury's *Day Scholar*, *Diksha at St Martin's*, and *Patna Roughcut*, collected in the 2016 Aleph edition (*Ritwik and Hriday, Tales from the City, Tales from the Town*).



## INTRODUCTION

There will soon be more people living in the city of Bombay than on the continent of Australia. URBS PRIMA IN INDIS reads the plaque outside the Gateway of India. It is also the Urbs Prima in Mundis, at least in one area, the first test of the vitality of a city: the number of people living in it. With 14 million people, Bombay is the biggest city on the planet of a race of city dwellers. Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us. (Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City*, p. 3)

This spectacular sketch of an overcrowded Mumbai opens Suketu Mehta's landmark literary reportage on the city by the sea.<sup>1</sup> As readers open the book, their curiosity aroused by the arresting title and the colourful cover (featuring, depending on the edition, a crowded train or a panoramic nocturnal view of colonial buildings and congested traffic), their expectations of a riotous, excessive urban space are perhaps satisfied by this sweeping prophecy, which establishes the exceptionality of Mumbai as a global icon of accelerated development and urban catastrophe. In fact, Mehta's rewriting of the colonial Latin motto of the city – originally flaunting its large population as a sign of prosperity –, both expands its scope and turns its meaning upside down: Mumbai is now the first city on a planetary scale rather than on a national one, but its exponential demographic growth is deemed a curse rather than a blessing. This tension between exceptionality and exemplariness, which I propose to investigate in this thesis, is at the heart of most Indian anglophone writing on contemporary Indian cities and reveals their entangled local, postcolonial and global dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> The fluctuating names of Indian cities encapsulate their multi-layered histories, their multilingualism and their contested political identities. I generally use the names of Mumbai and Kolkata (which respectively replaced Bombay and Calcutta in 1995 and 2001) to refer to the contemporary cities, while using Bombay and Calcutta to refer to the colonial period. Yet I have tried to be faithful to the writers' use of toponyms, which explains fluctuations over the course of the thesis. The fraught origins of the name 'Mumbai' will be scrutinised in Chapter 2.

Mehta's inflated rhetoric draws on the trope of the teeming crowds of South Asian cities, looked upon with fascination and anxiety by travellers and commentators, and praised as sources of infinite stories by Salman Rushdie: 'In Bombay you live crushed in this crazy crowd, you are deafened by its blaring horns of plenty, and [...] your own story has to shove its way through the throngs'.<sup>2</sup> More than fifteen years after the publication of *Midnight's Children* (1988), which celebrates the perpetual self-reinvention of Bombay, Mehta's 'blockbuster city-biography' follows in the footsteps of Rushdie's portrayal of the city as a crowd of jostling stories and excessive ambitions.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Mehta's prophetic tone is perhaps closer to Rushdie's darker representation of the city in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), in which the collisions between classes and communities are more palpable and threaten to break the city apart. Shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize, *Maximum City* received significant critical and popular acclaim, and was described by reviewers as bursting with the energy of this booming city.<sup>4</sup> Published in 2004, this investigation into Mumbai's transformations paved the way for a new wave of nonfiction writing on the contemporary Indian city: literary essays or reportages on Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, by Rana Dasgupta, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitava Kumar and Aman Sethi thus followed, hinting at the emergence of a flourishing literary genre. At the same time, the city and its fast-paced metamorphosis in the 1990s have been at the core of a growing number of Indian novels in English, such as Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight* (2005), Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* (2011), Raj Kamal Jha's *She Will Build Him a City* (2014) or Arundhati Roy's latest novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017).

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<sup>2</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) (New York, Vintage, 1997), p. 128. See V.S. Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness* (London: Deutsch, 1964), p. 46; *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (London: Heinemann, 1991), p. 1. See also Radhika Subramaniam, 'Urban Physiognomies', in *Sarai Reader 02: The Cities of Everyday Life*, ed. by Ravi S. Vasudevan and others (Delhi: Sarai SCDS, 2002), p. 8: 'Certainly crowds, whether cast as the teeming millions of a growing population, as the citizens of the largest democracy, as the violent mobs stoked to communal hatred, or even as a source of annoying fascination for the tourist, occupy center stage in any account of India'.

<sup>3</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'After *Midnight's Children*: Some Notes on the New Indian Novel in English', *Social Research*, 78.1 (Spring 2011), 222.

<sup>4</sup> 'Like Bombay, *Maximum City* swarms with a jostling, heaving crowd of narratives, each story as riveting as it is emblematic of the city in which it is rooted'. (Soumya Bhattacharya, 'A Tale of Two Cities', review of Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City*, *Guardian*, 5 February 2005, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/feb/06/travel.features>> [accessed 7 May 2021]); 'If the book sometimes feels sprawling, then that's just a reflection of its topic – and the reason, moreover, that it succeeds so brilliantly in taking the pulse of this riotous urban jungle, conveying the essence of a place that could never be captured by a linear narrative.' (Akash Kapur, 'Bombay Confidential', review of Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City*, *New York Times*, 21 November 2004, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/books/review/maximum-city-bombay-confidential.html>> [accessed 7 May 2021]).

## 1990s-2010s: The Global Metamorphosis of Indian Cities

The starting point of this thesis is the rise of the city as a major literary concern in Indian writing in English in the 1990s. This ‘emergence of an urban aesthetic’ has been noted by a number of commentators, who primarily relate this development to the social background of Indian anglophone authors as well as to the wider context of urban transformations in India.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the growing interest in Indian cities needs to be understood within a wider context, as the result of a variety of historical and literary mutations.

A brief historical overview of global urbanisation immediately reveals the radical changes at work in the past forty years, the number of urban centres over 1 million inhabitants jumping from 16 at the turn of the twentieth century to 480 in 2011, with 31 cities above 10 million. In 2008, the global urban population superseded the rural population, with 51% of people living in cities.<sup>6</sup> This accelerated expansion has primarily impacted cities of the global South, sometimes considered as the ‘cities of the future’ owing to their extremely rapid growth and the formation of gigantic urban corridors or regions.<sup>7</sup> In fact, this process of accrued urbanisation has been accompanied by a change in the functions and forms of cities around the world, as Saskia Sassen’s seminal work on global cities underlines. Sassen maps the changes at work in the geographical organisation of the world economy since the 1980s, and argues that ‘the combination of spatial dispersal and global integration has created a new strategic role for major cities’, turned into command centres for the world economy.<sup>8</sup> She also addresses the increasing social inequalities which characterise these ‘global cities’ and scrutinises the intense competition at work within this transnational urban network.<sup>9</sup> The very notion of ‘global city’, in particular its geographical restriction to a few elect urban centres (London, New York, Tokyo), its economic focus and its use as a means

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<sup>5</sup> Alex Tickell, ‘Introduction’, in *South Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations*, ed. by Alex Tickell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 7. See also Rashmi Varma, *The Postcolonial City and its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay* (London: Routledge, 2012); Roshan G. Shahani, ‘Polyphonous Voices in the City: Bombay’s Indian-English Fiction’, in *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*, ed. by Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 99-112.

<sup>6</sup> Hervé Marchal and Jean-Marie Stébé, *Les grandes questions sur la ville et l’urbain* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2011). According to the United Nations, it will probably reach 70% in 2050 (See World Urbanization Prospects 2019, <<https://population.un.org/wup/> [accessed 20 June 2021]).

<sup>7</sup> See *Global City-Regions: Trends, Theory, Policy*, ed. by Allen J. Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Saskia Sassen, *The Global City* (1991) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Saskia Sassen, *A Sociology of Globalisation* (New York: Norton, 2006); *Globalization and Its Discontent: Essays on New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The New Press, 1999).



to legitimise socially harmful policies, has raised many theoretical and political objections.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the economic, political and cultural centrality of cities in the global capitalist system remains unchallenged.<sup>11</sup>

Indian cities loom large in this landscape of global urban explosion: with a population of 1.2 billion, India has two of the most populated cities in the world (Mumbai and Delhi, respectively 19 million and 25 million inhabitants in 2011), and the last decades have witnessed an unprecedented level of urbanisation and migration within the country.<sup>12</sup> This expansion was largely triggered by the 1991 liberalization reforms, which opened up the Indian economy to foreign investments, restricted trade licences, and drastically reduced the role of the public sector in the economy. This ‘New Economic Policy’ was part of the structural adjustment reforms required by the IMF and the World Bank in order to solve the country’s crisis in balance of foreign payments.<sup>13</sup> If these reforms were consistent with policies implemented by earlier governments, they firmly marked India’s transition to neoliberalism and heralded its new position as a dynamic market in the world capitalist system.<sup>14</sup> This newfound position of national power, underpinned by a rapid economic and demographic growth rate, has profoundly altered the Indian urban landscape, in material and cultural terms.

India’s embrace of neoliberalism at the turn of the century after decades of state control and planned economy has had a deep influence on the physiognomy of Indian cities, with the sharp decline of manufacturing, superseded by finance, services and real estate speculation as the main urban economic engines. Anthony King underlines the consumer-

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<sup>10</sup> Doreen Massey, for instance, scrutinises the geographical imaginations of the global city which are mobilised to legitimate the increasing dominance of these powerful metropolises in *World City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). See also Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> I will use both ‘global capitalism’ and ‘late capitalism’ to refer to the post-1970s stage of capitalism. See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991). This periodization is justified in note 55.

<sup>12</sup> The 2011 Census of India data revealed that the overall growth rate of urban population had superseded the rural, increasing from 28% to 31% of the national population. Even though the majority of the country is still rural, the outpacing of urban population means that 377 million people live in cities in India today (2011 Census of India, <<https://censusindia.gov.in/>> [accessed 2 April 2021]).

<sup>13</sup> Alex Tickell examines the contorted rhetoric of the finance minister’s budget speech for 1991-1992, which attempted to present these reforms ‘as a continuation and development of the political trajectories of the past’ rather than a break with the economic principles of the Nehruvian era (‘Introduction’, in *South Asian Fiction in English*, p. 38).

<sup>14</sup> With David Harvey, I understand ‘neoliberalism’ as the economic and political regime established in the wake of the 1970s oil crisis, characterised by the globalization and financialization of the world economy and by the new role of states as facilitators of private investments, notably in urban development (see David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development* (London: Verso, 2005).

oriented expansion of Delhi and other Indian metropolises in the post-liberalization era, indicated by the proliferation of shopping malls, business centres, luxury hotels and gated housing, and powered by foreign investments in urban real estate.<sup>15</sup> This new orientation of urban development corresponds to the new role of the urban middle-class consumer as the archetypal citizen of ‘New India’.<sup>16</sup> Partha Chatterjee also stresses the shift in attitudes towards cities in the 1990s, when ‘the idea of the new post-industrial globalized metropolis began to circulate in India’ and elicited dreams of turning Indian cities into ‘world-class cities’, implying large-scale infrastructure projects and campaigns of urban ‘beautification’.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the ‘world city’ has become an iconic image of economic success, a powerful construct used by urban planners, developers and politicians to attract investors, notably diasporic or ‘Non Resident Indians’ (NRIs).<sup>18</sup> Yet urban studies scholarship emphasizes the socially detrimental influence of the world-class city model on urban development and planning in India.<sup>19</sup> This compressed transformation has been sharply uneven, as the slanted growth of the Indian economy spawned a growing middle class but also intensified already stark socioeconomic inequalities. To put it boldly, development has entailed the increase of malls and slums alike, the latter hosting the immense reserve of cheap labour upon which the thriving of these new cities depends.<sup>20</sup>

These material alterations have been accompanied by a new role for the city in the Indian public imagination as a shorthand for the nation’s shifting relationship with the world. As showcases of a global prosperous nation, cities have been part and parcel of the narrative of India’s ‘awakening’ or ‘arrival’, aiming to transform India’s image from a third-world nation associated with deprivation and slow growth into a global player and a new territory of profit opportunity.<sup>21</sup> The packaging of India as an economic success-story, taken up by

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<sup>15</sup> Anthony D. King, ‘Colonialism and Urban Development’ in *Cities of the Global South Reader*, ed. by Faranak Muraftab and Neema Kudva (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Leela Fernandes, *India’s New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Partha Chatterjee, ‘Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?’, in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> I take the terms ‘world city’ or ‘world-class city’ throughout the thesis to refer to the construct elaborated by urban scholars and appropriated as a desirable horizon by urban planners, municipalities and the media, implying the building-up of an urban image of economic, technological and cultural leadership (see John Friedmann, ‘The World City Hypothesis’, *Development and Change*, 17.1 (1986), 69-84). The term ‘global city’ refers to the city as it is integrated into and affected by the processes of contemporary global capitalism.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Véronique Dupont, ‘The Dream of Delhi as a Global City’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, 36.3 (2011), 523-554.

<sup>20</sup> The proliferation of slums around the planet is analysed by Mike Davis as a consequence of a ‘slanted growth’ or a ‘jobless growth’ (Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006). See Chapter 1.

<sup>21</sup> Ravinder Kaur and Thomas Blom Hansen, ‘Aesthetics of Arrival: Spectacle, Capital, Novelty in Post-reform India’, *Identities*, 23.3 (2016), 265-275.

international media, reverberates on urban planning and development, fuelled by the transformation of the image of Indian cities into expanding centres for profit accumulation.<sup>22</sup>

The position of cities at the forefront of India's modernisation is a remarkable novelty. Vyjayanthi Rao argues that the experience of modernity in India, with its associated promises of freedom and equality, was explicitly associated with the nation rather than with the city, as was supposedly the case in the West, explaining the ambivalent attitudes of Indian society towards the city.<sup>23</sup> Both Gyan Prakash and Partha Chatterjee examine the paradoxical absence of the city from post-Independence Indian imagination despite the urban background of most nationalist leaders and the location of nationalist activity in great cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.<sup>24</sup> Gandhi's romanticizing of the village as a site of cultural authenticity and his repudiation of Indian cities as places of colonial alienation, ironically based on the arguments used by Victorians to condemn cities as sites of corruption and individualism, have left a deep imprint on Indian national consciousness.<sup>25</sup> India's first Prime Minister, Nehru, exalted the modernity of the city, yet he still considered the village as the site of the authentic soul of India. Apart from the national symbol of Chandigarh, designed by Le Corbusier, the regeneration of the independent nation implied the modernisation and industrialisation of rural areas rather than the rethinking of urban space.<sup>26</sup>

This long-standing fault line between the city and the country (and their associated antithetical values) has had a tremendous influence on the ambivalent attitudes of the middle class towards the city.<sup>27</sup> The 1990s shift, marked by the new omnipresence of the city in public discourse, thus implied the relative relegation of the village to the margins of the

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<sup>22</sup> Llerena Guiu Searle evokes 'a collective narrative that recast Indian society as a rapidly globalizing frontier of capitalism and as a market for new buildings' (Llerena Guiu Searle, *Landscapes of Accumulation: Real Estate and the Neoliberal Imagination in Contemporary India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Vyjayanthi Rao, 'Slum as Theory: The South/Asian City and Globalization', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 30.1 (2006), 225-232.

<sup>24</sup> Chatterjee, 'Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?', p. 40; Gyan Prakash, 'The Urban Turn', in *Sarai Reader 02*, pp. 2-8.

<sup>25</sup> For a glimpse of the Nehru-Gandhi debate on India's cities and villages, see M.K. Gandhi, 'Gandhi-Nehru Dialogue', in *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, ed. by Anthony J. Parel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 143-153. See also Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India* (1997) (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 107-150. Stuti Khanna and Rashmi Varma both argue that Nehru and Gandhi shared an antagonistic vision of the city and the country, which rather need to be thought of as 'interlocking and mutually constitutive spaces' (Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 8). See also Stuti Khanna, 'Postcolonial Politics of the Possible: City and Nation in the Fiction of Salman Rushdie', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 45.4 (2009), 401-413.

<sup>26</sup> 'The fundamental problem of India is not Delhi or Calcutta or Bombay but the villages of India... We want to urbanise the village, not take away the people from the villages to towns', Jawaharlal Nehru, cited in Ravi Kalia, *Chandigarh: The Making of an Indian City* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Chatterjee, 'Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?', p. 141.

national imagination.<sup>28</sup> If post-independence leaders had overlooked cities, the contemporary rulers think about the Indian city as the preeminent space of the present and the future. The Smart City project, launched in 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, heralds the advent of a technologically-driven urbanism, with an environment-friendly façade, aimed at foregrounding India among the leaders of urban development. Another facet of the public focus on cities is the wave of city renaming, which rose in the 1990s. If the renaming of cities or states partakes of an indigenizing endeavour, it is sometimes underpinned by a broad project of Hinduisation of the history and geography of Indian cities, as evidenced by the recent renaming of Allahabad (the historical Mughal name) into the sanskritised Prayagraj.<sup>29</sup> These two processes also suggest the paradoxical double ambition of turning Indian cities into global cities and of ‘provincializing’ them as primarily Hindu.<sup>30</sup> They capture the specificity of India’s global development, which is entangled with Hindu right-wing nationalism, both processes ‘fused in a single predatory organism’, in Arundhati Roy’s terms.<sup>31</sup> The integration of Indian cities into the global economy as well as the global success of Indian anglophone literature prompt me to re-situate Indian urban writing within a global analytical framework.

### 1990s-2010s: Contemporary Shifts in the Indian Literary Landscape

Literature incorporated the ideological tensions between the country and the city, and one can observe that the early Indian anglophone novels, which contributed to the popularity of Indian literature abroad, drew on this urban-rural binary, idealising the village as a site of simplicity, innocence and community life, pitted against the corrupting influence of urban centres, as in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* (1936) and Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938).<sup>32</sup> R.K. Narayan’s fiction, spanning five decades before and after Independence (from 1935 to 1985) is well-known for creating an enchanting fictional small town in the South of India, Malgudi,

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<sup>28</sup> See Ashis Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in Indian Imagination* (New-Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Alok Rai, ‘Allahabad, c’est-à-dire Prayagraj. Une politique d’effacement’, *Critique*, 872-873 (2020), 92-104.

<sup>30</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, ‘Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai’, *Public Culture*, 12 (2000), 627-651.

<sup>31</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘Democracy’s Failing Light’, in *Listening to Grasshoppers: Field Notes on Democracy* (Delhi: Penguin, 2009), pp. VIII, XII.

<sup>32</sup> Shahani, ‘Polyphonous Voices in the City’, p. 99.

at odds with colonial and postcolonial megacities.<sup>33</sup> Tickell and Ranhasina underline that ‘these equivocal projections of the city continued into the 1970s and 1980s, facilitated by commentators as diverse as Nirad C. Chaudhuri, V.S. Naipaul and Dominique Lapierre, all of whom presented the Indian city as a sign of negative, chaotic excess’.<sup>34</sup> Yet the fast-paced transition to neoliberalism, which has transformed urban life in India, has triggered notable transformations in the literary discourse on Indian cities. The growing number of works of fiction and nonfiction dedicated to Indian cities and their wide popularity need to be located within the wider context of the global ‘boom’ or ‘hype’ of Indian anglophone literature since the 1980s but also within more recent shifts in the Indian literary landscape.

The publication of *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, which was awarded the Booker Prize, is generally acknowledged as a turning point for the freshly minted category of ‘Indian Writing in English’, which ‘put the novel from (and of) India firmly on the global literary map, paving the way for a generation of novelists to follow’.<sup>35</sup> Just as Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is steeped in the urban atmosphere of Delhi, post-independence Bombay constitutes the touchstone of Rushdie’s now canonical novel, which is emblematic of a larger literary preoccupation with the city. This growing imaginative concern with Mumbai and other Indian cities implies that they have become key locations for the writing of the postcolonial Indian novel and that contemporary Indian literature has infiltrated the global literary market through urban writing and urban writers.<sup>36</sup> Roshan Shahani thus states that

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<sup>33</sup> See for instance R.K. Narayan, *The Painter of Signs* (London: Heinemann, 1976) which also registers changes in Malgudi in the 1970s because of a hydro-electric project. With Rashmi Varma, I will use ‘postcolonial’ city without a hyphen to mark the persisting impact of colonization over these cities across time periods.

<sup>34</sup> Alex Tickell and Ruvani Ranasinha, ‘Delhi: New Writings on the Megacity’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.3 (2018), 299.

<sup>35</sup> Priyamvada Gopal, *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 91. The growing international success of Indian literature since the 1980s is evidenced by prestigious literary prizes (Arundhati Roy’s, Kiran Desai’s, and Aravind Adiga’s novels were awarded the Booker Prize respectively in 1997, 2006 and 2008), literary magazines special issues on India (*The New Yorker* in 1997, *Granta* in 1997 and 2015), the incorporation of Indian novels in university curricula, and the publication of several anthologies of Indian writing by international publishers (*Mirrorwork: Fifty Years of Indian Writing, 1947-1997*, ed. by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (New York: Holt, 1997); *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, ed. by Amit Chaudhuri (London: Picador, 2001)). See Alexis Tadié, ‘Introduction’, ‘Écrire l’Inde, romanciers et poètes contemporains’, special issue of *Études Anglaises*, 62.3 (2009), 258.

<sup>36</sup> More than an Indian, Anglo-Indian or American writer, Rushdie primarily identifies himself with cities such as New York, London or Bombay, and defines himself as a ‘writer of urbanity’ (See Salman Rushdie, ‘Combattre l’extrémisme n’est pas combattre l’islam’, Interview with Philippe Coste, *L’Express*, 22 July 2015, <[https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/salman-rushdie-combattre-l-extremisme-n-est-pas-combattre-l-islam\\_1700597.html](https://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/salman-rushdie-combattre-l-extremisme-n-est-pas-combattre-l-islam_1700597.html)> [accessed 12 April 2021]). See also Alexis Massery and Marc Porée, *Salman Rushdie* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1996).

the growth of Indian fiction in English in the 1980s is intrinsically linked to the demise of post-independence national promises and to the growth of an urban middle class in India.<sup>37</sup>

The socio-economic shift of the 1990s has intensified this literary interest and renewed the forms through which urban India was represented. Identifying consistent trends in the very recent literary production may prove challenging, yet several remarkable mutations in the Indian literary landscape can be observed. First, in the last decades, the portion of Indian anglophone literature written by ‘resident’ or ‘foreign-returned’ Indian writers has greatly expanded, contrasting with the alleged predominance of diasporic Indian writers in previous generations.<sup>38</sup> If the writers studied in this thesis, such as Arundhati Roy, Raj Kamal Jha, Siddharth Chowdhury or Sampurna Chattarji, live in India permanently, others chose to return to India after living abroad, namely Amit Chaudhuri, Aman Sethi or Rana Dasgupta – thus giving rise to the flourishing subgenre of urban return narratives. Their works thus stem from their location in or relocation to the city: rather than distance from and nostalgia for a lost home, their imagination is fuelled by the material and cultural texture of the city in the throes of metamorphosis. The 1990s and 2000s have also seen a geographical widening of the Indian urban literary imagination, mitigating the centrality of cosmopolitan Mumbai, as more and more texts explore Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, and Ahmedabad, among others.<sup>39</sup> The third major fact that needs to be stressed is that Indian literature in English is less and less restricted to an international audience and has met a substantial local readership (although limited to an urban middle-class elite), resulting from the expansion of English literacy, triggering the growth of a local anglophone publishing industry.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Educated in India and abroad, with English as their first language, writers such as Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Sunetra Gupta, and Kiran Desai are part of an urban elite, with ties in India and abroad, their novels refracting ‘an upper-caste, liberal-cosmopolitan sensibility’ (Shahani, ‘Polyphonous Voices in the City’, p. 101).

<sup>38</sup> The ‘dislocation’ and deterritorialization of Indian writers (at least of those who received international attention) around the globe had been much commented (see Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); William Dalrymple, ‘The Lost Subcontinent’, *Guardian*, 13 August 2005, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/aug/13/fiction.arundhatiroy>> [accessed 3 April 2021]. About the newfound fame of resident writers, see Kathleen McCaul, ‘Subcontinental Shift’, *Guardian*, 13 February 2007, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/feb/13/fiction>> [accessed 3 April 2021].

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Anjum Hasan, *Neti, Neti* (Delhi: India Ink, 2009), Tishani Doshi, *The Pleasure Seekers* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), or Mahesh Rao, *The Smoke is Rising* (London: Daunt, 2014).

<sup>40</sup> If only 260 000 people declare English as their first language, almost 11% of the population claim English as their second or third language (2011 Census of India, ‘Table C-17 Population by bilingualism and trilingualism’, Delhi: Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2018, <[https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language\\_MTs.html](https://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/Language_MTs.html)> [accessed 26 June 2021]). Books in English represent a little more than 20% of the market (see Tadié, ‘Introduction’, p. 259). The thriving anglophone book market is evidenced by the creation of new literary journals, such as *The Bombay Review* (created in 2014), or *The Mithila Review* (created in 2015, specialised in science fiction and fantasy), literary prizes (such as the JCB prize, created in 2018), and literary festivals (Jaipur Literary Festival, Mumbai Kala Ghoda festival,

The changing readership has also implied the diversification and democratization of Indian writing in English, as indicated by the emergence of genre fiction, such as ‘chick-lit’, crime fiction (both genres being essentially urban), and the growing success of urban graphic novels, but also of nonfiction and translation from vernacular languages, a variety of forms which ‘challenges the older dominance of an Indian English canon’.<sup>41</sup> Despite the overemphasis on the novel in the critical reception of Indian anglophone writing, the recent rise of Indian nonfiction (essay, literary journalism, memoir) has been noted by several critics.<sup>42</sup> In her panorama of post-Rushdie Indian writing, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan connects this development with globalization: ‘Anglophone Indian fiction has a colonial genealogy it cannot disavow, but the new nonfiction is the product of a different formation, loosely called globalization, in which English has a more demotic dimension’.<sup>43</sup> If a large portion of Indian English nonfiction aims at deciphering the contradictions and complexities of India’s embrace of global capitalism, they also seem drawn towards the city, as suggested by the development of urban nonfiction, whether in the form of ‘city biographies’, anthologies or literary reportages, which also suggest that this interest is homegrown.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, writers such as Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Amitav Ghosh or Amitava Kumar constantly move between fiction and nonfiction, writing novels as well as political essays, journalistic pieces, literary reviews, memoirs and travel writing. Their works also

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Kolkata historic Book Fair and Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival). In addition to the now autonomous branches of Penguin, Bloomsbury, HarperCollins and Hachette, and to the established commercial publisher Rupa, new publishers have emerged, such as Yoda Press, Aleph, Juggernaut, Speaking Tiger (created between 2004 and 2014). See Arpita Das (independent publisher), interview with the author, Delhi, 22 March 2018; Rashmi Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); ‘Contemporary Indian Literature in English and the Indian Market’, Open University Research Project, <<http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/ferguson-centre/projects/archive-projects/contemporary-indian-literature/documents>> [accessed 27 April 2021].

<sup>41</sup> Tickell, ‘An Idea Whose Time Has Come’, p. 55. See for example the crime fiction anthology *Delhi Noir*, ed. by Hirsh Sawney (New York: Akashic, 2009); successful urban graphic novels include Vishwajyoti Ghosh, *Delhi Calm* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010) and Sarnath Banerjee, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016); *The Greatest Bengali Stories Ever Told*, ed. and trans. by Arunava Sinha (Delhi: Aleph, 2016).

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Nilanjana Roy, ‘Untold Stories: India’s Non-Fiction’, *Business Standard*, 26 April 2011, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/nilanjana-s-roy-untold-stories-india-s-non-fiction-111042600110\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/nilanjana-s-roy-untold-stories-india-s-non-fiction-111042600110_1.html) [accessed 28 June 2021]; William Dalrymple, review of Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, *Guardian*, 22 June 2012, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jun/22/beautiful-forevers-katherine-boo-review>> [accessed on 28 June 2021].

<sup>43</sup> Rajan, ‘After *Midnight’s Children*’, 222. Examples of recent critically acclaimed nonfiction include Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman* (London: Hurst, 2013) and Sujata Gidla’s *Ants Among Elephants* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

<sup>44</sup> For an example of nonfiction about India’s globalization, see Akash Kapur, *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* (New York: Penguin, 2012). Urban nonfiction works include, among others, *The Unhurried City: Writings on Chennai*, ed. by C.S. Lakshmi (Delhi: Penguin, 2004) (part of a series of anthologies on Indian cities); Indrajit Hazra, *Grand Delusions: A Short Biography of Kolkata* (Delhi: Aleph, 2013) (part of a series of ‘city-biographies’) and the very recent collection of essays, *Writing the City: Looking Within, Looking Without*, ed. by Stuti Khanna (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2021)

blur conventional generic boundaries, as is the case of Rana Dasgupta, acclaimed as a novelist, who draws on the resources of fiction in his literary essay on Delhi, or of Arundhati Roy, whose fictional and nonfictional works are closely intertwined. The permeability between their novels and essays prompts us to scrutinise how these writers rework the genre of the novel even as they engage with urban transformations.<sup>45</sup> The rise of these new literary forms and their blurring the lines between fact and fiction also seem to be symptomatic of global literary transformations, such as the literary turn to factual or documentary narratives to represent and decode contemporary social processes.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the earlier ‘narrative turn’ of ethnography and history had already redefined the frontier between social sciences and literature, paving the way for the emergence of hybrid literary objects, to which Indian urban nonfiction belongs.<sup>47</sup>

As evidenced by the works of Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Nagarkar, and by the poetry of Arun Kolatkar, Nissim Ezekiel or Amrita Pritam, the city had been shaping Indian anglophone writing much before the liberalization of the country’s economy.<sup>48</sup> Yet I believe that the post-reform material and cultural changes which have affected Indian cities, the formal and thematic shifts in the contemporary literary production, as well as the evolution of the literary market and readership, constitute a new formation which needs to be investigated. In fact, the proliferation of fictional and nonfictional texts which focus on the experience of frantic urban development in India prompts us to reflect on the formal, thematic and political specificities of this post-1991 urban literature. How can we characterise and map these anglophone urban novels and essays which capture the global modernisation of Indian cities, and what are the analytical instruments available to study them?

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<sup>45</sup> Roy thus repeatedly claims the permeability between her fiction and nonfiction, which are inseparable from one another: ‘Some of the essays in this volume have been written through the eyes of a novelist and the universe of her novels. Some of them are about how fiction joins the world and becomes the world.’ (Arundhati Roy, ‘Introduction’, in *Azadi* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 1).

<sup>46</sup> See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996) and ‘The Artist as Ethnographer?’, in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 302-309. On the contemporary thirst for testimonies, memoirs, investigations, see Laurent Demanze, *Un nouvel âge de l’enquête* (Paris: Corti, 2019).

<sup>47</sup> See Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>48</sup> For recent work on Bombay poetry, for instance, see Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); Manon Boukroufa-Trijaud, ‘Bombay, “ville-paysage”, dans la poésie anglophone de la ville des années 1950 à nos jours’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Sorbonne Université, 2021).



# I. From the Spatial Turn to Postcolonial and World-Literature Theory, a Theoretical Itinerary

## 1. The City in Spatial Literary Studies

If early works of cultural history in the 1960s and 1970s engaged with literary representations of urban space, the study of the city as an object of literary criticism has intensified over the last twenty years.<sup>49</sup> In the wake of the ‘spatial turn’, a wide range of critical scholarship on the city in literature has been published in the last decades, and provides methods and concepts with which to examine Indian urban writing.<sup>50</sup> The ‘spatial turn’ is in itself the product of an interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation which reinserted space as a relevant category of analysis across the humanities and the social sciences, in the wake of Foucault’s well-known claim that space, as a multi-layered, dynamic, social and symbolical construct, had superseded time as our main theoretical concern.<sup>51</sup> The idea that space is constructed materially and discursively, rather than a pre-given category of our experience or a geometrical set of fixed coordinates, has spread in literary studies, through the works of critical geographers such as Edward Soja or David Harvey. The latter draws on Henri Lefebvre’s work and theorizes the way space is continuously being constructed by powerful material and social forces, embedded in the capitalist dynamic and its contradictions, an approach which he refers to as ‘historical-geographical materialism’.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations and its Prospects* (London: Harcourt, 1961); *The Victorian City: Images and Reality*, ed. by Harold James Dyos and Michael Wolff, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1973); Alan Trachtenberg and others, *The City: American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>50</sup> Among numerous works on the subject, the most relevant to my approach of the city in literature are: Carol Bernstein, *The Celebration of Scandal: Toward the Sublime in Victorian Urban Fiction* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Peter Brooker, *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, the New Modern* (Harlow: Longman, 1996); Christophe Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004); *(Re-)Mapping London: Visions of the Metropolis in the Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. by Vanessa Guignery (Paris: Publibook, 2008); Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Kim Duff, *Contemporary British Literature and Urban Space: After Thatcher* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (Spring 1986), 24. The examination of situated, subjective *lived* space and of man as a spatial being by phenomenology also anticipated the spatial turn (see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso Press, 1989); David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience*, 1985, p. XIV. Lefebvre argues that literature and culture produce ‘representational spaces’, i.e. spaces which are directly lived through their

Spatial literary studies thus investigate the dialectical relationship between space, scale and text, by wrenching out space from its status as mere canvas upon which a plot unfolds, to be discussed as one of the crucial structures of the narrative, shaping and being shaped by writing.<sup>53</sup>

Within the study of imagined geographies, cities have had a prominent place, in particular in their relation to modernism, an artistic current which reflects a temporal but also a spatial re-orientation. David Harvey's and Fredric Jameson's seminal works on the subject, based on a historical-materialist understanding of space and culture as produced by and expressing the different stages of capitalist development, will help us think through the articulation between the social context of late (or global) capitalism in India and literary forms arising from it. Under the influence of Baudelaire's writings, of Benjamin's theorisation of the flâneur as the creature and recorder of urban modernity, and of Simmel's exploration of the psychological effects of the modern metropolis, Paris, London, Berlin and New York have been considered as the archetypal cities of modernism, while the fragmented collage urbanism of Los Angeles has been hailed as the urban archetype of postmodernism.<sup>54</sup> The palimpsestic nature of urban space, whose multiple historical layers are uncovered by literature, and the critical potential of this literary recovery, have also been scrutinised by literary urban studies.

However interesting these forays into urban literature are, their scope is often restricted to Euro-American cities and their categories of analysis are deeply rooted in these spaces.<sup>55</sup> Rashmi Varma points out that 'postcolonial cities produce a proliferation of subjects and collectivities difficult to categorize within the terms deployed in modernist and postmodernist discourses'.<sup>56</sup> One may indeed question the limits of these spatial analyses when confronted with the specificities of urban literature in a South Asian context. To what

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associated images and symbols, overlaying physical space (Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1974), trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Blackwell, 1991), p. 39).

<sup>53</sup> See Robert T. Tally, *Literary Cartographies: Spatiality, Representation, and Narrative* (London: Palgrave, 2014); Bertrand Westphal, *La géocritique. Réel, fiction, espace* (Paris: Minuit, 2007); Michel Collot, *Pour une géographie littéraire* (Paris: Corti, 2014). For a synthetic overview of the spatial turn in literature, see *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. by Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964); Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999); Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 103-110; Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> Thus, only one chapter deals with 'postcolonial cities' in *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature* (ed. by Kevin McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)).

<sup>56</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 1.

extent is invoking Dickens's representation of London, Benjamin's flâneur, or the disorientation triggered by the urban sprawl of Los Angeles, useful to analyse contemporary Indian cities? What do we gain and lose from these cross-cultural comparisons? This thesis sets out to scrutinise such frameworks of literary urban comparisons and their ideological implications. Among them, postcolonial theory first provides adequate lenses through which the historical, cultural and geographical specificities of urban modernity in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata can be analysed in-depth.

## 2. Indian Cities in Postcolonial and Urban Studies

Foucault's announcement that space was to become the principal category of critical thinking was taken up by scholars associated with postcolonial studies, from Edward Said's concept of 'imaginative geography', which was central to his investigation of orientalism, to Homi Bhabha's analysis of the imagination of the nation and his notion of 'thirdspace'.<sup>57</sup> The examination of postcolonial literatures through the prism of 'imaginative geographies' has taken two major directions, which frame our inquiry into Indian urban writing. The first insists on the power of these literary geographies to 'write back' to imperial representations of space and, above all, to blur fixed socio-cultural and political boundaries, whether colonial or postcolonial.<sup>58</sup> These critical works insist on the 'displaced' perspective and 'split perception' of postcolonial writers, whose texts 'undermine purist representations of the world which have endured from colonial times' through cross-cultural or transcultural spatial imaginations.<sup>59</sup> John Thieme thus pits literature's unsettling force against the notion of place as 'site of authenticity', disrupting the hegemony of colonial and nationalist cartographies.<sup>60</sup> This emphasis on dislocation and the focus on diasporic writers partake of

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<sup>57</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) (Delhi: Penguin, 2001); *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994); 'Invention, Memory and Place', *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (2000), 175-192; Michael C. Frank, 'Imaginative Geography as a Travelling Concept, Foucault, Said and the Spatial Turn', *European Journal of English Studies*, 13 (2009), 61-77; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). About the fraught relationship between place and identity in postcolonial literatures, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> See for instance Supriya Chaudhuri, 'Translating Loss: Place and Language in Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie', *Études Anglaises*, 62 (2009), 266-279.

<sup>59</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 236.

<sup>60</sup> John Thieme, *Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 27. See Rachel Trousdale, 'City of Mongrel Joy: Bombay and the Shiv Sena in *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 39 (2004), 95-110; Vanessa Guignery, "'Step across this line": Edges and Borders in Contemporary Indian Literature', *Études Anglaises*, 62.3, (2009), 305-316.

a larger postmodernist discourse which has been deemed more or less complicit with ‘globalism’, or the celebration of globalization and mobility. This framework has been criticised for its abstraction from social conflicts, its overlooking of uneven material conditions of displacement, and its oversight of the awareness of cultural and political conflict which surfaces in literary texts, and more broadly, its detachment of modernity from capitalism.<sup>61</sup>

The second theoretical direction consists in investigating the enduring ‘imperial geography’ or ‘re-orientalism’ at work in postcolonial writing, publishing and criticism, which would contribute to the fetishization of India as an exotic commodity to be consumed by a metropolitan audience.<sup>62</sup> These works interrogate the anglophone writers’ relatively distant position *vis à vis* the social reality they describe and their use of the former colonial language to represent a multilingual society.<sup>63</sup> Sarah Brouillette’s and Graham Huggan’s insights into postcolonial writers’ embeddedness in the global cultural marketplace prove relevant to my inquiry into Indian urban writing, which is one of the successful segments of this global literary market.<sup>64</sup> Rana Dasgupta and Suketu Mehta, for instance, scrutinize the global aspirations of Indian cities while being formally part of the globalization of Indian English writing.

Building up on those two approaches, this work sets out to locate literary geographies of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata in the history of cultural representations of Indian cities, to examine their transcultural aspects, but also to interrogate the ways in which they are shaped by the positions of Indian anglophone writers in the global literary landscape. I will question the relation of Indian urban writing to hegemonic discourses on Indian cities, be they Eurocentric visions of riotous, uncontrollable spaces, nationalist rewritings of urban space,

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<sup>61</sup> Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of Nation* (London: Macmillan, 1989); Simon Gikandi, ‘Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality’, in *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. by Janet Wilson and others (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 22-35; Benita Parry, ‘Aspects of Peripheral Modernism’, *ARIEL*, 40.1 (2009), 27-55.

<sup>62</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992); Tabish Khair, *Babu Fictions: Alienation in Contemporary Indian English Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Om Prakash Dwivedi and Lisa Lau, *Re-Orientalism and Indian Writing in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>63</sup> ‘In summary, postcolonial migrant literature can be described as a literature written by elites, and defined and canonized by élites. It is writing which foregrounds and celebrates a national or historical rootlessness.’ (Boehmer, *Migrant Metaphors*, p. 233).

<sup>64</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001); Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave, 2007). In the Indian literary context, see also *Postliberalization Indian Novels in English: Politics of Global Reception and Awards*, ed. by Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan (London: Anthem Press, 2014). For an application of ‘re-orientalism’ to urban writing, see Ana Cristina Mendes, ‘The Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 45 (2010), 275-293.

or global capitalist utopias of Indian ‘world cities’. However, since both the postcolonial and the ‘re-orientalist’ critical current tend to focus on diasporic writers and on displacement, their arguments need to be revisited, considering the diversification of both readership and authorship of Indian literature, the writers’ location in the city, as well as the recent reconfiguration of nationalist discourses, which are more closely aligned with global capitalism than in the previous era.<sup>65</sup> I contend that the fundamental connection of my texts with space and spatiality requires us to reterritorialize the study of Indian writing in English and to ground the analysis of their political urban imaginaries in a material context as well as a discursive one, expanding our theoretical scope to *postcolonial urban studies*.

Caroline Herbert underlines that postcolonial studies have been relatively slow in taking their ‘urban turn’, and Rashmi Varma recalls that, despite the key role of urbanism in the configurations of colonial power and postcolonial citizenship, colonial and postcolonial cities have been underexamined in urban studies, often appearing ‘in margin notes, as spaces of radical alterity and backwardness, or as the predictable product of the nightmarish teleology of capitalist development’.<sup>66</sup> However, alongside the criticism of the celebration of global mobility and rootlessness in postcolonial and diasporic studies, a certain branch of urban studies has responded to the emphasis on global inter-urban flows, flexible citizenship and the focus on a small number of elect ‘global cities’, through a widening of the scope to postcolonial cities, which partakes of a re-assessment of the ‘still persistent boundedness and materiality’ of cities around the world and of their uneven participation in global capitalism.<sup>67</sup> Anthony King’s pioneering work thus considers all colonial and postcolonial cities as *spaces of global culture* because of their integration in and their modelling by the various historical forms of global capitalism, including colonialism.<sup>68</sup> This understanding of global cities will help me scrutinise the archaeological gesture of Indian urban writing, which sheds light on the continuities between colonial and postcolonial urbanism. Jennifer Robinson’s endeavour to deconstruct the ethnocentric norms presiding over the discourses of urban modernity and development and to provide a new form of comparative urbanism,

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<sup>65</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>66</sup> Caroline Herbert, ‘Postcolonial Cities’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, p. 200; Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, pp. XIII. Raymond Williams dedicates a few pages to the empire, arguing that imperialism and the control over oversea territories extended the division between country and city, making of colonial spaces the country of the imperial centre. He identifies similarities in terms of exploitation, dependence, and romanticizing (*The Country and the City* (1973) (London: Vintage Classics, 2016), pp. 401-414).

<sup>67</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Anthony King, *Spaces of Global Culture: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

also allows me to interrogate the ways the literary geographies of Indian cities are embedded in larger discourses on cities of the global South, and to examine the cross-cultural lines they draw between cities around the world.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, a number of works discussing the literary representations of postcolonial metropolises have recently emerged.<sup>70</sup> If early studies emphasized urban ‘imaginaries’, city myths and fables, underpinned by the idea of the city as fiction,<sup>71</sup> more recent scholarship has engaged with the imbrication of the symbolical, social and material production of space, exploring the literary representations of the postcolonial city as a contested terrain, a stage where oppression is both enacted and contested. Following Rashmi Varma’s examination of the issue of gender, race and class in London, Nairobi and Bombay, the collective volume *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts* looks at the writing of exclusion in South Asian cities, focusing on the experience of minorities and incorporating literatures in vernacular languages.<sup>72</sup> Boehmer and Davies’s research project on ‘infrastructural violence’ also explores literary imaginations of colonial and postcolonial domination as they are entrenched in urban planning and development, an approach I will use in my discussion of Indian urban writing.<sup>73</sup>

However, if the geo-historical specificities of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata as postcolonial cities stand out, the contradictions of their development, captured by contemporary Indian literature, exceed the frame of postcolonialism and seem connected with dynamics belonging to world capitalism at large. In line with criticisms of the ‘culturalism’ of postcolonial theory and its overlooking of systemic economic, social, cultural and historical relationships on a world scale, I argue that these texts are best understood through the imbrication of capitalism and imperialism, implying that cultural

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<sup>69</sup> Following her lead, several cross-disciplinary contributions have endeavoured to ‘bracket[ed] the northern transatlantic cities’ and to expand the corpus of cities under scrutiny: *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Global World*, ed. by Andreas Huyssen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); *Worlding Cities*, ed. by Ananya Roy and Aihwa Ong (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>70</sup> See ‘Tracing the Urban Imaginary in the Postcolonial Metropolis and the “New” Metropolis’, ed. by Ines Detmers and others, special issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47.5 (2011); ‘Reevaluating the Postcolonial City’, ed. by Claire Chambers and Graham Huggan, special issue of *Interventions*, 17.6 (2015); ‘The World of Bombay Poetry’, ed. by Anjali Nerlekar and Laetitia Zecchini, special double issue of *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1-2 (2017); ‘Delhi: New Writings on the Megacity’, ed. by Alex Tickell and Ruvani Ranasinha, special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.3 (2018).

<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Raban, *Soft City* (London: Hamilton, 1974); *Les imaginaires de la ville, entre littérature et arts*, ed. by Gilles and Hélène Menegaldo (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007); Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables: A History of an Enchanted City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>72</sup> *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts: City Margins in South Asian Literature*, ed. by Madhurima Chakraborty and Umme Al-Wazedi (London: Routledge, 2017). See also Stuti Khanna, ‘Writing the Margins (in English): Notes from Some South Asian Cities’, in *South Asian Fiction in English*, pp. 103-118.

<sup>73</sup> *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

practices are never insulated from social relations of production.<sup>74</sup> This is even more important when one looks at urban space, as Chambers and Huggan recall: ‘it surely bears repeating that cities are not just assemblages of cultural practices – if they are also that – but economic engines for development and productivity’.<sup>75</sup> With Rashmi Varma, I would contend that postcolonial readings need to be articulated in the context of world-system analysis, which implies a change of analytical scale.<sup>76</sup> World-systems theory enables us to acknowledge the specific kind of violence at work in Indian cities, which occupy a distinct space in the world economy, while thinking of them as part of the same world-system as Johannesburg, St Petersburg or Chicago.

### 3. Indian Cities in the Literary World-System

Can Mehta’s emphasis on the swarming crowds of Mumbai, which he construes as symptomatic of a global urban condition, be connected with the modernist motif of the urban crowd, which embodies the shock of life in the metropolis? Or is the experience and representation of the crowds in Indian cities too historically specific (as ‘Indian’, or as ‘postcolonial’) to be aligned with 1850s London, 1890s Paris or 2000s Johannesburg? Can we thus study Mumbai or Delhi as part of a singular but unequal world-system and what do we gain from this large-scale reading? If this dissertation is concerned with the writing of three twenty-first-century Indian cities, I believe that literary world-system theory can help us grasp the contradictions of their development and the heterogeneity of their representations, by conceiving them as semi-peripheries in the capitalist world-system and devising a comparative framework which escapes both particularism and the flattening out of differences between distinct urban and cultural forms. This world-scale comparative literary analysis, which aims to identify ‘likenesses among the many peripheral modernisms, these understood as the aesthetic forms generated beyond capitalism’s cores’, helps me pose

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<sup>74</sup> For an overview of the criticisms made to postcolonial theory, see Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (2004); *Interdisciplinary Measures: Literature and the Future of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Graham Huggan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008). More recent discussions have emerged in the wake of the growth of decolonial studies, which tackle the theoretical approach of postcolonial studies and their disconnect from politics, and advocate a more radical decentring of knowledge production (Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018)).

<sup>75</sup> Chambers and Huggan, ‘Reevaluating the Postcolonial City’, 787.

<sup>76</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 2.

my argument about the literary forms arising from and *refracting* the globalization of Indian cities.<sup>77</sup>

The attempt to capture the emergence, development and decline of literary forms in context, that is, according to their geo-historical positions in the world-system, characterises Franco Moretti's literary geography. Moretti examines world literature in the light of Wallerstein's history of the economic world-system, which holds that the capitalist system is fundamentally one (combined or global) and unequal (uneven), divided between core, semi-peripheries and peripheries that 'are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality'.<sup>78</sup> Drawing upon Moretti's theory and Benita Parry's work on 'peripheral modernisms', the Warwick Research Collective understands world-literature (with a hyphen) as the literature *of* the world-system, or as 'the literary registration of modernity under the sign of combined and uneven development'.<sup>79</sup> What literature registers is the experience of heterogeneous yet overlapping social realities from different historical moments that constitutes modernity.<sup>80</sup> Arundhati Roy's sharp prose illuminates the contradictory experience of modernity in India:

India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow we manage to progress and regress simultaneously. As a nation we age by pushing outward from the middle – adding a few centuries on to either end of our extraordinary CV. We greaten like the maturing head of a hammerhead shark with eyes looking in diametrically opposite directions [...]. In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road gangs of

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<sup>77</sup> Parry, 'Peripheral Modernism', 27. Drawing on Jameson's conception of 'refraction' (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981)), I will often use the term 'refract', which aptly captures the non-mimetic relation between the text and social reality and the specific figurative or symbolical work of the text. The metaphor of refraction is also indebted to Bourdieu's theory of fields (See Gisèle Sapiro, 'Champ', *Politika* (2017), <<https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/champ>> [accessed 1 May 2021]).

<sup>78</sup> Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures on World Literature', *New Left Review*, 1 (January-February 2000), 56; Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). 'Semi-peripheries' are peripheral in relation to cores (industrialized capitalist countries with strong state institutions, which control and benefit from the global market) and central in relation to peripheries (less developed countries, dependent on cores). Benita Parry and the WReC understand peripheries and semi-peripheries as all societies that have been 'co-opted or coerced into capitalism's world system' through imperialism (Parry, 'Peripheral Modernism', 30). Cores and peripheries are not rigidly identified with geographical zones but understood as moving, dynamic, heterogeneous 'clusters of internally differentiated nation-states' (Parry, 'Peripheral Modernism', 27).

<sup>79</sup> WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 17. For an overview of the debates around the notion of 'world literature', with key-thinkers such as Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Emily Apter and William Damrosch, see WReC, pp. 4-10. For critiques of Moretti's fusion of evolutionary and economic methods, see Francesca Orsini and others, 'Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies: For a Ground-Up and Located Approach to World Literature', *Modern Languages Open*, 1 (2018), 19 < <http://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.190>>; Aamir Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

<sup>80</sup> See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).



emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles.<sup>81</sup>

Roy aptly shows that the juxtaposition of heterogeneous temporalities in the city defines the cultural manifestations of the capitalist system as such more than belatedness or 'Indianness'. Positing that these temporal contradictions are more intensely tangible in the (semi-)peripheries, the WReC argues that 'the work of representation in (semi-)peripheral contexts seems to require a supplementation or heightening of what [...] we might call the ideal-type of realism', which they call 'peripheral irrealism'.<sup>82</sup> They thus underscore the distinctive experiences and expressions of modernity in the global peripheries and semi-peripheries (such as Brazil, India, Eastern Europe, or Nigeria) while locating them within a singular colonial/imperial and capitalist world-system.

The literary world-system provides an organising principle for literary comparisons which enables us to think of Indian literatures and Indian cities not just in relation with the 'West' but in relation with the world at large, thus renewing our conception of Indian literature.<sup>83</sup> In this framework, as we'll see, the writing of 2010s Delhi can be illuminated by that of 1850s London or 1910s Chicago, insofar as these are conceived of as 'discrepant literary subunits and social formations of the world-system [...] at congruent conjunctures in the recurring rhythmic cycles of capitalism', arising from similar conjunctures or crises, without aligning with trajectoirist visions of social, urban and literary development.<sup>84</sup> Proposing that the heightening of realism (or 'peripheral irrealism') emanates from the experience of uneven modernity also allows us to focus on the way literary *forms* capture this experience, avoiding the thematic approach which sometimes burdens postcolonial studies.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'The Ladies Have Feelings, So... Shall We Leave it to the Experts?' (2001), in *My Seditious Heart*, pp. 106-107.

<sup>82</sup> WReC, p. 68. The notion of 'peripheral irrealism' derives both from Parry's 'peripheral modernism' and Michael Löwy's 'critical irrealism', a term used to describe an aesthetic which is founded on a logic of imagination, composed of fantastic or supernatural elements, yet which is critical of social realities. Michael Löwy, 'The Current of Critical Irrealism: "a Moonlit Enchanted Light"', in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Michael Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 193-206.

<sup>83</sup> Caitlin Vandertop thus uses world-system theory to frame her argument on the modernist writing of colonial cities, including Bombay, arguing that 'the uneven, asynchronous modernity witnessed in metro-colonial spaces came to influence a range of writers associated with modernism' who 'incorporated the divisions, dislocations, incongruities of everyday life into the formal texture of their work' (Caitlin Vandertop, *Modernism in the Metrocolony: Urban Cultures of Empire in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 5).

<sup>84</sup> WReC, p. 68. See also Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro, 'World-Culture and the Neoliberal World-System: An Introduction', in *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent*, ed. by Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro (London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019), p. 11.

<sup>85</sup> Taking heed of this criticism, a number of recent publications have 're-routed' postcolonial inquiry towards aesthetic concerns (see *Postcolonial Poetics: Genre and Form*, ed. by Peter Crowley and Janne Hiddleston

The assumption upon which this work rests is that locating the rise of Indian urban fiction and nonfiction in its local and global historic-economic context of emergence (that is, the new position of India in the world-system and the uneven urban development it entails), enables us to understand better these heterogeneous literary forms. In fact, what happens when one confronts the category of ‘peripheral irrealism’ with Indian urban writing in English? What would be the specific manifestations of this aesthetics as it meets the local reality of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata? A comprehensive reading of contemporary Indian urban writing, encompassing short-stories and nonfiction, prompts us to revise and expand the category of peripheral irrealism, to probe further into its affinity with the semi-peripheral condition, to scrutinise the aesthetic interweaving at work between realism and irrealism, and to construct categories which are specific to Indian urban writing. Positing a connection between literary forms and the contradictory experience of global capitalist modernity in India, I intend to map the heterogeneous forms which have emerged from and refract this context.

## II. Presentation of the Corpus

In order to explore the variety of contemporary Indian anglophone urban writing, I have chosen to study ten main texts, written by seven Indian anglophone writers (Amit Chaudhuri, Siddharth Chowdhury, Rana Dasgupta, Raj Kamal Jha, Suketu Mehta, Arundhati Roy and Aman Sethi). The reading of this main corpus will be enriched by comparisons with an extended corpus of texts (such as Sampurna Chattarji’s short-story collection and Sonia Faleiro’s literary reportage on a Mumbai dancer), which illustrate the extent of the literary interest in post-liberalization cities in contemporary Indian writing in English.<sup>86</sup>

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(Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011)). Elleke Boehmer aptly questions the possibility and limits of defining a ‘postcolonial aesthetic’ in her essay ‘A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating upon the Present’, in *Rerouting the Postcolonial*, pp. 170-181.

<sup>86</sup> The seven writers will be fully introduced in the course of each chapter, and so will the history of the three cities examined in this dissertation. Three maps accompany this literary analysis, two of which are taken from works of the corpus. They are only included as means of locating the various areas of each city which are mentioned in the texts. To these texts could be added other novels, such as Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* (Delhi: Penguin, 2012), Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games* (London: Faber, 2006), Neel Mukherjee’s *A State of Freedom* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2017), and Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011). The exclusion of the first two from the corpus stems from the fact that their urban geography is not primarily determined by post-1991 transformations. In the case of Adiga, the abundance of critical works

The corpus consists of novels, literary essays and reportages which were published between 1991 and 2017 and explore urban mutations in the three major cities of India: Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. These metropolises have distinct geographies and histories and are all shaped by their entanglement with capitalism and colonialism.<sup>87</sup> If Mumbai has been at the heart of Indian urban literature, more and more writings on Delhi have emerged in the last two decades, reflecting the shift in the position of the city in the national and global landscape. One of the contributions this work hopes to bring is thus an extensive analysis of the imagination of Delhi as a global city. Over the short period of time covered in this thesis (about fifteen years), the effects of the economic liberalization have become more and more conspicuous. I will thus address the continuities and discontinuities between the early texts of my corpus (in particular Amit Chaudhuri's first novel, published in 1991) and the latest ones, such as Raj Kamal Jha's and Arundhati Roy's novels, published respectively in 2015 and 2017.

If Suketu Mehta's, Amit Chaudhuri's, Arundhati Roy's, and Rana Dasgupta's works have been scrutinised by literary criticism, no comprehensive reading of their works of fiction and nonfiction has been carried out. The city appears as the structuring principle of their narratives, which are characterised by their critical representations of the effects of India's embrace of global capitalism on Indian cities. Yet these writers' intimate connection with the city, and the way it thematically and formally shapes their writing, are also underexamined by literary scholarship. By reading fiction and nonfiction together, I hope to shed light on the ways in which contemporary Indian literature redefines generic boundaries, in particular when it comes into contact with the city. Studying these internationally acclaimed writers jointly with Aman Sethi, Raj Kamal Jha, Siddharth Chowdhury (who is only published in India), who, although enjoying critical success, have not been examined in a similar way, enables me to bring to light a diversified corpus and to enlarge the scope of the discussion of Indian writing in English.<sup>88</sup>

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on the urban geography of his novels prompted me to chart other literary territories, even though I will frequently allude to his works.

<sup>87</sup> While the city of Delhi has a long pre-colonial history, principally as the capital of the Mughal Empire from 1639 onwards, Bombay was primarily developed as India's main commercial centre by Portuguese and British colonizers (who acquired the city in 1661 through the marriage of Catherine de Braganza and Charles II). Similarly, Calcutta was 'founded' in 1690 by Job Charnock out of three villages. An object of intense colonial competition between Dutch, French and British companies, it was won by the East India Company in 1757 at the Battle of Plassey, and developed as an important industrial and commercial centre, as well as a cultural and intellectual vibrant city. It became the capital of the British Empire in 1772, before being demoted from its status in 1911 when the capital was moved to Delhi.

<sup>88</sup> Scholarly works on Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri and Rana Dasgupta will be discussed in each chapter.

### III. The Two Entangled Modes of Indian Anglophone Urban Writing

In a famous 1999 essay, the writer and critic Amit Chaudhuri twists Henry James's notorious reference to nineteenth-century novels as 'loose-baggy monsters', to write: 'since India is a huge baggy monster, the Indian novels that accommodate it have to be baggy monsters as well'.<sup>89</sup> He sets out to debunk this enduring *topos* of literary criticism, which mimetically connects a supposedly chaotic country with formal aspects of its literature, and dismisses delicacy, nuance and irony as foreign. This assumption, he argues, is based on several metonymic fallacies, among which the notion that the Indian novel in English has to represent India as a whole, and that Indian writing at large is encapsulated by Rushdie's capacious epic novels, perpetuating the myth of an overabundant subcontinent.<sup>90</sup> In Chaudhuri's view, this dominant aesthetics of plenty and excess also participates in the triumphant narrative of the literary emergence of India, which is co-opted in the discourse of India's 'arrival' and in celebrations of globalization.<sup>91</sup> Contrary to this huge baggy monstrosity, which would be complicit with both orientalism and global capitalism, he identifies an alternative 'miniaturist' lineage, consisting in writings in English but also in regional Indian languages (Bengali, Kannada), foregrounding ellipsis and irony, focused on local rather than national realities, which he endows with critical force.<sup>92</sup>

The political implications of monumental and miniature literary forms are also addressed by Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie, who reclaim capaciousness and excess as having critical value. Rushdie locates his own writing in the line of *Tristram Shandy* or *Tom Jones*, and sees the Jamesian category of the monstrous as a positive quality, stating that his novels 'have been attempts to be everything books', literary equivalents to the 'multitude' of India.<sup>93</sup> Arundhati Roy connects the unruly form of her colossal novel, *The Ministry of*

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<sup>89</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, "'Huge Baggy Monster': Mimetic theories of the Indian Novel after Rushdie' (1999), in *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2008), p. 114.

<sup>90</sup> This 'metonymic fallacy' is theorised by Huggan (p. 81) and debunked by Rushdie himself (see "'Commonwealth Literature" does not exist', in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London, Granta, 1991), pp. 66-67).

<sup>91</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, 'Beyond "Confidence": Rushdie and the Creation Myth of Indian English Writing' (2006), in *Clearing a Space*, p. 309. Note that Chaudhuri distinguishes Rushdie's writing from its distorting reception (*Ibid.*, p. 310). See also Amit Chaudhuri, 'Notes on the Novel after Globalization' (2007), in *Clearing a Space*, p. 208.

<sup>92</sup> Chaudhuri, 'Huge Baggy Monster', pp. 114-115. See also Amit Chaudhuri, 'The Emergence of the Everyday, Kipling, Tagore, and Indian Regional Writing' (2011), in *The Origins of Dislike* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 235-254.

<sup>93</sup> Salman Rushdie, 'Salman Rushdie talks to Alastair Niven', *Wasafiri*, 13.26 (1997), 55.

*Utmost Happiness*, to the fight for political freedom, through the Hindi word *azadi*: ‘a novel can be endlessly complicated, layered, but that is not the same as being loose, baggy, or random. A novel, to me, is freedom with responsibility. Real, unfettered Azadi – freedom’.<sup>94</sup> Her vindication of an undomesticated form thus indirectly responds to Chaudhuri’s hasty equation between globalization and the novel form, in particular the prolix novel.<sup>95</sup> Far from being easily consumed and ingested by ‘global readers’, Roy’s second novel shows the ways in which the novelistic form can be reworked from within. Where Chaudhuri identifies a ‘rhetoric of excess’ and narrative inclusiveness as forms of cultural complicity with globalization, Roy precisely foregrounds them as weapons against global capitalism, a political opposition which will be scrutinised throughout this thesis.

Based on the comparative reading of ten main texts, I intend to question the strict opposition established by Chaudhuri between hugeness and minuteness, complicity with and critique of global capitalism and orientalism, which, in my view, are fundamentally intermingled in Indian English writing on the city. By scrutinising these two aesthetic modalities, I hope to question the simple division between hegemony and subversion at work in these texts. Drawing on the conceptual and methodological apparatus I have delineated, my work thus sets out to discuss the following hypothesis: to a singular context of urban material and cultural mutations, the literary response offered by Indian anglophone writers is defined by the interplay between two main representational impulses or modes, the *epic* and the *ordinary*, which refract the contradictory experience of urban late-capitalist modernisation.<sup>96</sup> The thesis thus seeks to delineate a literary tradition which, through the interweaving of these two modalities, offers a critical vision of India’s position in the world-system. In fact, although one mode is often predominant over the other in the texts under study, what I want to explore is the interpenetration of the two in each text, and the way in which this interplay allows them to formulate critiques of uneven development, social

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<sup>94</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘Introduction’, in *Azadi* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 1. Widely used in freedom movements across the world, the term is particularly associated with the struggle for Kashmir’s independence.

<sup>95</sup> ‘It would be a novel, but the story-universe would refuse all forms of domestication and conventions about what a novel could and could not be. It would be like a great city in my part of the world in which the reader arrives a new immigrant [...]. The only way to know it would be to walk through it, get lost, and learn to live in it. Learn to meet people, small and big. Learn to love the crowd.’ (Roy, ‘The Language of Literature’, in *Azadi*, p. 88).

<sup>96</sup> The formulation of an opposition between two impulses draws on Fredric Jameson’s formulation regarding the ‘two oppositional representational impulses’ which animate late nineteenth-century realist novels, the narrative impulse and the impulse of affect. See Fredric Jameson, *Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013).

exclusion and erasure of urban history. The two impulses or modes, which are not understood as fixed forms but as movements within the texts, are used as coordinates to explore the heterogeneous multiplicity of Indian urban literature.<sup>97</sup> I will now attempt to sketch the formal and thematic characteristics of these two modes, as well as their particular use of scale.

Scale has recently come to the fore as a category of literary analysis, notably through geocriticism, which examines the significance of representational scales and their linkage with aesthetic and political concerns.<sup>98</sup> As will be developed in Chapter 4, the insights offered by micro-history also enlighten the effects of scalar variation on the representation of the city. Tanya Agathocleous's discussion of the antithetical scales used by nineteenth and early-twentieth century writers to represent London as a world-city illuminates 'how texts use verbal and visual versions of the sketch and panoramic mode to produce alternately distanced and close-up perspectives that turn the space of the narrative into that of a global whole'.<sup>99</sup> The connection she establishes between this scalar variation and the 'globalization' of London in the wake of the imperialist enterprise helps me analyse the interaction between microscopic and telescopic views, the miniature and the gigantic, as part of the same impulse to capture the globalization of Indian cities, to construct a 'detailed, realistic sense of local geographies' while creating a sense of global totality.<sup>100</sup> Her reading across genres and literary currents, defying the distinction between realism and modernism, arguing that 'generically disparate texts' may use 'similar formal juxtapositions' of panorama and sketch, substantiates my reading of fiction and nonfiction together.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> I consider the epic and the ordinary as aesthetic *modes* rather than literary *genres*, to suggest that they are two different approaches or methods of representation of urban space, which run across generic boundaries. My purpose is not to classify texts but to show how they dynamically oscillate between one mode and another. These two terms provide one reading map of these texts, allowing to identify major tendencies in contemporary Indian urban writing without claiming to exhaust all the aesthetic characteristics of these texts. Like Michael Lowy's definition of realism and irrealism as 'ideal-types', the epic and the ordinary modalities are understood as epistemological constructions, which are always present in an impure form in empirical literary texts.

<sup>98</sup> *Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael T. Clarke and David Wittenberg (London: Palgrave, 2017); *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*, ed. by Andrew Herod and Melissa W. Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Nirvana Tanoukhi, 'The Scale of World Literature', *New Literary History*, 39.3 (2008), 599-617.

<sup>99</sup> Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12. The parallel she draws between literary forms and visual culture (the sketch and the panorama) could be revisited in the light of contemporary visual culture, binding together spectacular urban writing and satellite views of cities, for instance, this technology being used in cinema's panoramic aesthetics. It is no coincidence if Hari Kunzru's speculative short story portraying an improbably high and exuberant tower in a dystopian Indian city is entitled 'Drone' (Hari Kunzru, 'Drone', *Granta*, 130 (Winter 2015), 15-31).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIX.

## 1. The Epic Mode

The first mode of apprehension and representation of contemporary Indian cities is defined by an amplifying movement, based on the use of an inflated rhetoric, which intensifies the shock of the fast-mutating metropolis and the unsettling contradictions of urban development. Combined with this ‘rhetoric of excess’, to use Chaudhuri’s terms, is a thematic focus on conflicts, ruptures and confrontations. The city is imagined as a space where extremes constantly come into contact, these collisions enhancing the exceptional and spectacular undersides of urban development. The narratives in which this mode prevails are often structured by episodes of urban violence, whether fictional or historical. They also tend to locate contemporary urban transformations within a long-term timeframe, which allows them to identify rise and fall cycles and to prophesise the future of these cities. Finally, and this is part of the new reading methodology I would like to try in this work, these formal and thematic characteristics are connected with a dominant (though not exclusive) macroscopic scale of representation. As suggested by the opening lines of *Maximum City*, the enlarging movement of the epic mode is intensified by panoramic views of Mumbai, Delhi, or Kolkata, wide perspectives which attempt to encompass cities in their entirety, revealing a totalizing ambition. Of course, the texts which are primarily animated by this impulse also probe into the minute details of urban life and scrutinise the sensory individual experience of the city, yet these details are always metonymically connected with the city as a whole, and, further, with a global urban condition.

Considering the rhetoric, thematic, temporal and scalar traits identified above, I will refer to this first aesthetic response to the urban environment of twenty-first-century India as the ‘epic mode’. If the term ‘epic’ has conventionally been associated with ancient narrative poetry celebrating the foundation or the rebirth of an integrated society, I contend that it is attuned to one aesthetic mode of contemporary Indian prose writing, which excoriates the ‘rebirth’ of India and exposes the fractures of the globalizing nation.<sup>102</sup> In fact, Lukács’s hard opposition between the epic and the novel, which associates the former with a past, homogeneous, stable society with which the epic hero is attuned, has come under

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<sup>102</sup> India has a great epic literary tradition, embodied by the two major Sanskrit texts of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Yet Claudine Le Blanc argues that the ‘epic’ is a Western, learned category which has been applied to yet cannot account for the generic multiplicity of Indian texts, with rich oral traditions coexisting with the great epic tradition. (See Claudine Le Blanc ‘De l’épopée comme genre *moderne*, réflexions sur les traditions épiques orales dans l’Inde contemporaine’ in *Épopées du monde, pour un panorama (presque) général*, ed. by Ève Feuillebois-Pierunek (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012), pp. 133-141).

revision in recent scholarship.<sup>103</sup> Franco Moretti thus regards the epic as the representative genre of modernity, using *Faust*, *Ulysses*, or *Moby Dick* as study-cases. The world-system requires the totalizing impulse of the epic, yet it cannot be fully captured by it because of its fundamental heterogeneity and its historical non-synchronicity. Moretti confronts the ‘discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world’, which entails the use of distinct literary devices to represent and to counterbalance this fragmented reality (polyphony, allegory as well as myths and commonplaces, etc.).<sup>104</sup> The interest of Moretti’s approach lies in his conception of the epic as a form which transcends national cultures to refract the entire world-system, and in his foregrounding of the key roles of semi-peripheries in the making of these ‘world-texts’.

The resurgence of the epic form in contemporary literatures has also been noted, particularly in postcolonial literatures, which reclaim the genre from its imperialist and nationalist origins in order to refract the fractures of identity and to imagine other forms of political community.<sup>105</sup> My understanding of the epic, which I use as a mode rather than a genre, will thus draw on the notion that modern epic forms encompass the contradictions and crises of the societies they represent. Thus, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* has been read as ‘the first Indian epic-novel in the English language’ but also as an ‘anti-epic’ or an ‘epic of failure’, expressing the contradiction between the ‘national longing for form’ and the irreducible conflictual multiplicity of India as a ‘nation of fragments’.<sup>106</sup> The novel’s exposure of the fissures of the nation resonates with more recent texts, which use the codes of the epic (such as the surpassing of realism, heroic characterisation, thematic focus on

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<sup>103</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1920), trans. by Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). For a gloss of Lukács’s opposition between the epic and the novel from a spatial literary viewpoint, see Robert T. Tally, *Spatiality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 62-63. See also Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1941), trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>104</sup> Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. by Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1996), p. 5.

<sup>105</sup> See in particular Sneharika Roy, *The Postcolonial Epic: From Melville to Walcott and Ghosh* (2018); *Épopées Postcoloniales, Poétiques Transatlantiques*, ed. by Inès Cazalas and Delphine Rumeau (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2020); ‘Époque épique’, ed. by Thomas Conrad and Dominique Combe, special issue of *Fixxion*, 14 (2017). The privileged place of the epic in Western literary history has to be acknowledged as a determining factor in my own theoretical framework.

<sup>106</sup> Khanna, ‘Postcolonial Politics’, p. 402; Michael Reder, ‘Rewriting History and Identity: The Reinvention of Myth, Epic, and Allegory and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*’, in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. by M. Keith Booker (New York: Hall, 1999), pp. 225-249; John T. Su, ‘Epic of Failure: Disappointment as Utopian Fantasy in *Midnight’s Children*’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, 47.4 (2001), 545-568; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). In terms of contemporary use of the epic genre in Indian literature, one may think of Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (New York: Arcade, 1991).



struggle and violence, and collective trajectory) to explore the fragmented totality of Indian global cities.

Florence Goyet, who considers the epic as the genre of crisis *par excellence*, conceptualises the ‘epic work’ as what allows the reader to glimpse at a solution to a political crisis through the confrontation of incompatible worldviews within the narrative, embodied by characters who are engaged in antagonistic relationships.<sup>107</sup> The ability of the epic to refract crises through structural oppositions and its anticipatory dimension tie in with the ‘epic’ mode of writing Indian cities, which gives voice to contradictory political visions and represent cities as harbingers of the future.<sup>108</sup>

‘The category of epic is not, of course, without its defects. But it has fewer than others’, claims Moretti.<sup>109</sup> In fact, I will discuss the affinities of the epic with other categories used to account for urban writing (such as the sublime or dystopia), yet I argue that the notion of ‘epic’ constitutes a heuristic concept, notably because it captures the antagonisms structuring these texts, their totalising dimension and their magnifying movement, often exceeding the limits of realism, thus tying in with the notion of ‘irrealism’. It conveys the way in which an excessive rhetoric and large-scale perspectives are used to counter spectacular narratives of India’s modernisation on their own terrain, offering a dark spectacle of neoliberal India.<sup>110</sup>

## 2. The Ordinary Mode

Reading across contemporary Indian urban writing reveals that these texts are animated by a deflationary or downsizing representational mode. The contours of Indian cities are thus also perceived through a small-scale perspective, often restricting the narrative

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<sup>107</sup> Florence Goyet, ‘Narrative Structure and Political Construction: The Epic at Work’, *Oral Tradition*, 23.1 (2008), 15; *Penser sans concepts: fonction de l'épopée guerrière. Iliade, Chanson de Roland, Hôgen et Heiji monogatari* (Paris: Champion, 2006). Goyet also insists on the necessity to contextualise the production of the epic, in order to forsake Lukács’s optical illusion that the society in which epics such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* were stable and homogeneous, and that epics consolidated a social order.

<sup>108</sup> Reference works on the epic include David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993); *Epic Tradition in the Contemporary World: The Poetics of Community*, ed. by Margaret Beissinger and others (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); John Miles Foley’s online journal *Oral Tradition*.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2. For an analysis of the ‘epic’ novel as the aesthetic form of capitalist totality, see David Cunningham, ‘Capitalist Epics: Abstraction, Totality and the Theory of the Novel’, *Radical Philosophy*, 163 (2010), 11-23.

<sup>110</sup> Despite the difficulty to delineate the contours of the notion, two of the characteristics that stand out in definitions of the ‘epic’ are indeed its ‘all-inclusiveness’ or its ‘grand scale’ and its surpassing of the limits of realism. See John Merchant, *The Epic* (London: Routledge, Methuen, 1971), p. 71; John Cuddon, *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 239.

scope to one neighbourhood or one street, and focusing on the banality of everyday life in Indian megacities. Far from casting the development of India's showcase-cities as a spectacular triumph or catastrophe, this mode of apprehension and representation undermines the very idea of advent or rupture through its anti-dramatic tone and its focus on the continuities of daily life in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. Texts in which this impulse is dominant are characterised by understatement, which tones down the shock of urban transformations and conveys a sense of familiarity with the city, contrasting with the defamiliarizing movement of the urban epic. I will thus examine the ability of this mode to engage with long-term crisis and the 'slow violence' of uneven urban development, manifested, for instance, through the daily labourer's constant search for a new contract (Aman Sethi) or petty crimes of broken students (Siddharth Chowdhury), rather than eruptions and spectacular events.<sup>111</sup> Always in interaction with a larger scale, the dominant 'street-corner' focus or microscopic scale of representation seems to have an affinity with a subdued tone or a 'minor' mode, sometimes tinged with dark humour, which deflates rather than inflates its object.

I thus propose that the notion which best translates these rhetoric, temporal, thematic and scalar features is that of the 'ordinary'. If conventional oppositions pit the epic against the novel, realism against irrealism (or modernism), I contend that we need more specific terms to address the question of Indian urban writing.<sup>112</sup> This dissertation will thus contribute to enriching the field of literary criticism through the use of a term derived from urban studies, such as 'ordinary', which stems from Jennifer Robinson's work on 'ordinary cities'.

Drawing on Amin and Graham's theorisation of the 'ordinary city', Jennifer Robinson aims to deconstruct the exceptionality of cities of the global South, arguing that all cities are best understood as 'ordinary' rather than as divided between 'Western' and other kinds of

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<sup>111</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 2. We will also show in Chapter 2 and 5 how it resonates with Veena Das's understanding of the infiltration of the everyday by traumatic violence (Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006)). Building upon Cavell's theories, she places the concept of the ordinary at the centre of her anthropological world (see 'Ordinary Ethics' in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. by Didier Fassin (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 133-149, and her latest book *Textures of the Ordinary* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020)).

<sup>112</sup> The two modes I identify enable me to overcome the dispute over the aesthetic and political merits of realism and modernism (or irrealism). See Georg Lukács and others, *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. by Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977)). I will draw on Levine and Beaumont's arguments on the self-reflexivity, experimentation and reflection on the difficulties of representation at work in the realist novel, too often narrowed down to a naively positivist representation of reality (George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981); *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Joe Cleary, 'Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012), 255-68).

cities or as incommensurable with one another.<sup>113</sup> The ‘ordinary’ is thus taken as a critical category to rethink urban theory against ‘colonial and neo-imperial power relations that remain deeply embedded in the assumptions and practices of contemporary urban theory’, deriving universal theories and guidelines from a small number of urban experiences, therefore reducing the complexity of urban phenomena.<sup>114</sup> Representing Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata as ordinary thus does not imply the consolidation of a *status quo*, nor does it preclude politically transformative ambition.<sup>115</sup> Robinson’s call for a reterritorialization of the imagination of urban studies around the individual city and its concrete urban reality chimes with the emphasis on the local displayed by the ‘ordinary’ impulse, which marginalises a global overarching perspective and even provincializes Indian global cities, by highlighting their affinities with small-towns. Yet I will discuss the extent to which these texts overcome the particularism of Robinson’s approach through their transcalar perspective, maintaining a relation between the local and the global. The opposition Robinson draws between ‘global cities analysis’, which describes global cities as ‘dual cities’, fractured between well paid labour force and unskilled poor immigrant workforce, and what she intends to do, that is, to explore the gaps between these extremes, may be used to describe literary endeavours as well. One of the arguments I develop in the thesis is that the epic mode sheds light on implacable socio-economic forces and stark oppositions between social classes, whereas the ordinary mode muddies these divisions or shows ways around them.

The value of the concept of the ‘ordinary’ lies in the connections it enables between literary criticism and urban theory, as well as in its semantic combination of mode, theme, and rhythm. As a quality, the ordinary is defined by Liesl Olson as that which escapes our attention or is deemed unworthy of it.<sup>116</sup> The ordinary, or the infra-ordinary, is what is so familiar and regular that it remains unquestioned, unthought-of, it refers to the ‘endotic’ which Georges Perec intends to pull out from its shell.<sup>117</sup> This unnoticed dimension chimes with the representation of Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata as familiar, unexceptional cities, as well as with the focus on the habitual. In a piece on the ordinary and the exotic, Tabish Khair

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<sup>113</sup> Ash Amin and Stephen Graham, ‘Ordinary City’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22.4 (1997), 411-429; Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Understanding cities as ordinary, it will be argued, opens up new opportunities for creatively imagining the distinctive futures of all cities.’ (*Ibid.*, p. 1).

<sup>116</sup> Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>117</sup> Georges Perec, ‘Approaches to What?’ (1997) in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. by Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 177-178.

underlines that ‘the novelty of the ordinary has formed the very basis of the novel genre’.<sup>118</sup> The common usage of realism associates it with the documentation of middle-class everyday life in all its trivial details, and of commonplace events, the ordinary referring here to familiar practices and objects.<sup>119</sup> Yet the ordinary is also central to modernism (understood as the specific literary movement), which is pulled towards the banality of the everyday and turns it into the extraordinary, but also because of modernism’s commitment to ‘ordinary experiences that are not heightened’.<sup>120</sup>

This foregrounding of the ordinary partakes of a larger movement in the social sciences of re-assessment of the common, the everyday and the vernacular as sources of critical thinking and political transformation. As Michael Sheringham underlines in his work on Perec, Lefebvre, Certeau and their followers, the ‘everyday’ has come to the fore as a site of inquiry both in literature and in urban studies.<sup>121</sup> Lefebvre’s argument that everyday life is the domain which has been most ‘colonised’ by capitalism, and needs to be reclaimed, has triggered numerous reflections, and so has Certeau’s exploration of everyday practices as tactics of subversion of dominant structures. Their understanding of reclaiming urban space from below will thus enlighten my reading of the literary emphasis laid on everyday practices and on their ambivalent political implications.

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<sup>118</sup> Tabish Khair, ‘Foreword: Exotic / Ordinary’, in *Thinking with the Familiar in Contemporary Literature and Culture ‘Out of the Ordinary’*, ed. by Joel Kuortti, Kaisa Ilmonen, Elina Valovirta and Janne Korkka (Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2019) <<https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004406742/front-7.xml>> [accessed 11 June 2021].

<sup>119</sup> As Agathocleous underlines, realism is commonly associated with ‘truth of observation and a depiction of commonplace events, characters and settings’, yet often related to social, natural or moral laws transcending the particularities to reach a general level (Agathocleous, *Urban Realism*, p. 13). George Levine also underlines the ‘shift of focus from the large to the small, from the general to the particular, and a diminishment of dramatic extremes, as from tragedy to pathos’ in realism, yet claims that it also attempts to give ‘to the particular and ordinary the resonances traditionally to be found in the universals of an earlier philosophy and literature’ (Levine, p. 13), hinting at the same interaction between the totalising and the narrowing down impulses.

<sup>120</sup> Olson, p. 4. On peripheral modernism and its relationship with banality and boredom, see also Saikat Majumdar, *Prose of the World: Modernism and the Banality of the Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>121</sup> Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The term ‘everyday’, though fecund, lays the emphasis on temporality, while ‘ordinary’ allows me to foreground a *mode* of apprehension and representation of reality, as well as the spatial dimension, because of its connection with urban studies.

## IV. From Tumultuous to Familiar Literary Geographies: Approach and Outline

This work stands at the crossroads between literary and urban studies, a position which, I hope, helps to open up literary criticism, holding that the city is neither an abstract concept nor only a myth but has a palpable, contradictory, social and material reality that literature approaches in various manners. This historical-materialist approach prompts me to analyse aspects of urban imagination which actually exceed the limits of classic literary studies, such as the global city, the ordinary city, or the construction of locality. David Harvey's 'historical-geographical materialist' understanding of urban space (in particular his concept of 'urban entrepreneurialism') also proves critical to my understanding of Indian urban writing. Secondly, deploying concepts from urban studies for literary analysis also brings to light the way the specific aesthetic work of literature *refracts* the contradictory process of urban modernisation at work in contemporary cities, while often complicating or challenging the concepts and observations from the social sciences. The influence of the social sciences on my research is also tangible in my consideration of the writers' discourses on their own works and on their relationship to the city at large, gathered through the interviews I conducted over the course of three research stays in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata.<sup>122</sup>

As stated earlier, contrary to Chaudhuri's dichotomy between two lineages of Indian writing, what I want to highlight throughout this work is that Indian urban writing is defined by the fluctuation between the two modalities rather than by their strict opposition. The paradigmatic case of interplay between two modes is Arundhati Roy's writing, which occupies a central place in this dissertation. Defined by the writer as 'both epic and intimate', her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* intensifies the shock of urban transformations, and this epic energy overlaps with Roy's acclaimed ability to probe into 'small things', her enlarging of the microscopic movements of the body, her exploration of the forgotten corners of the megacity, and her disclosing the micro-politics of surviving and making do in the cruel metropolis. This perpetual fluctuation between heightening and subduing, macroscopic and microscopic scales, eruption and long-term crisis, which justifies the presence of Roy across the chapters, substantiates my assumption that Indian urban writing is energised by

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<sup>122</sup> Interviews with Raj Kamal Jha, Rana Dasgupta, Kiran Nagarkar, Sampurna Chattarji, Naresh Fernandes, Jerry Pinto, Sandeep Roy, and Nilina Deb Lal, conducted in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata in 2017 and 2018.

these two antinomic modes. Arundhati Roy's fluid use of fiction and nonfiction is also paradigmatic of contemporary Indian writing.

The ten major texts I have chosen constitute a profuse material through which to explore the literary imagination of twenty-first-century Indian cities, and could be approached and connected in various manners. I have chosen to structure my literary cartography along the lines of the two aesthetic impulses I have identified, thus reflecting the primacy given to formal concerns in this work, which will thus move from one representational mode to another rather than following a thematic or geographic organising principle. The thesis is not structured as a succession of arguments on each author but attempts to sketch an overall logic which I hope will provide critical landmarks in this rich and diverse literary landscape. My comparative reading method also discouraged a geographical distribution of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata into three different sections. My purpose is to draw lines between the three metropolises, which have had a prominent place in the Indian cultural imagination, while attending to their particularities. Thus, all the chapters include the three cities, with various emphases. In addition to restoring Delhi to view, one of the contributions brought about by this work is also to study these three cities together. Comparativism brings to light common features which, I believe, characterise other Indian cities, including 'secondary cities', whose growth, noted by geographers, will also certainly spur the imagination of more writers in the future.<sup>123</sup>

The spatial focus of my inquiry is intimately connected to the exploration of time and memory in these three Indian cities. The presence of the multiple historical layers of the cities permeates these urban narratives, which are concerned with the present yet betray a profound historical consciousness. They all attempt to uncover the multi-layered history of Indian cities, still palpable in the built and cultural environment, under a spectral or a fragmentary form. This historical consciousness is part and parcel of these writers' critical vision of India's narrative of arrival and of its neoliberal policies, aiming to wipe out whole segments of Indian urban history. These erasures, conducted in the name of modernity and globality, are underpinned by Hindu supremacist narratives, which infiltrate history textbooks, rewriting and flattening the complex history of India as a Hindu nation, attempting to 'recover' its past glory, tarnished by centuries of invasions. History is thus

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<sup>123</sup> See *Subaltern Urbanisation in India: An Introduction to the Dynamics of Ordinary Towns*, ed. by Eric Denis and Marie-Hélène Zerah (Delhi: Springer, 2017). I will also draw connections with the writing of 'small-town India', from the canonical Malgudi novels of R.K. Narayan to literary texts by Siddharth Chowdhury and Amitava Kumar, which reflect the new assertiveness and ambition of these towns.

definitely a battleground and writers take it as such, struggling against selective oblivion and active wiping out.

Divided into six chapters, the analysis progresses from the most prominent to the less examined mode of representation of Indian cities, moving from the monstrous, exceptional, spectacular city to the familiar, ordinary, banal one, from totalising to fragmentary perspectives, from hyperbole to euphemism. Drawing on what was said about the two entangled representational modes, this overarching division between chapters is to be understood as a framework providing clear landmarks within which fluctuations can be accounted for. The delineation of the contrasts between the two modes serves as a hermeneutic tool meant to highlight how they interact in each text. It serves to disentangle the two modes, while the sections within each chapter will shed light on the ways in which the texts fluctuate between the epic and the ordinary.<sup>124</sup>

Chapter 1 thus focuses on the writing of urban development as a crisis through a cataclysmic imagery which intensifies the destructions that this metamorphosis entails. Shifting the focus to urban direct and infrastructural violence, Chapter 2 examines the collisions and conflicts at work in urban space even as the city becomes a showcase of New India's economic dynamism, conveying the sense of a divided or splintered city. Chapter 3 takes a step back and interrogates the urban political imagination underpinning the epic impulse, the emphasis placed on tumult suggesting both the exceptionality of Indian cities and their being symptomatic of a global condition. Chapter 4 then turns to the ordinary impulse, and underlines the key role of scale, as the narrow scope and the microscopic lens through which urban mutations are approached contribute to *provincializing* the global city. The same movement is studied in Chapter 5, this time on a temporal level: the narratives in which the ordinary mode dominates tend to side-step great historical narratives of deflagrations of urban violence, and to refract these outbursts through their muffled impact on the characters' daily life, while drawing attention to an everyday violence that has acquired the status of normalcy. My final chapter explores the way the ordinary mode implies an urban political imagination which is based on the grounded exploration of local practices aiming to reclaim urban space, and stresses contingency and individual agency.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Within each chapter, the sections are often structured around one or two major texts, which is enlightened by parallels with other texts, including texts from my extended corpus, which will be summoned to strengthen my argument or to provide additional counterpoints.

<sup>125</sup> The thesis allows for cross-reading between chapters, since Chapter 2 resonates with both Chapters 5 and 6 as all three dwell upon the question of representing urban violence, from direct confrontation with it to circling

Thus, this thesis aims to shed light on the intimate relation between contemporary Indian literature and urban transformations, and to foreground the ways in which literary texts enable us to grasp the complex process of accelerated urbanisation in India as a symptom of the contradictions of capitalist modernity.

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around it, from sharp unnegotiable social divisions to the stealthy crossing of walls and barriers. Chapters 3 and 6 are connected as they draw conclusions regarding the writers' political conceptions of the urban and their position in the literary urban landscape.





# CHAPTER 1

## WRITING THE CRISIS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

For Bombay forgets its history with each sunset and rewrites itself anew with the coming of the dawn [...]. In those days of upheaval the ground itself seemed uncertain, the land, the physical land, seemed to cry out for reconstruction [...]. We all have to deal with the uncertainty of the modern. The ground shivers, and we shake.<sup>1</sup>

Perpetually rewriting itself, torn down and built up overnight, Rushdie's Bombay is an eruptive land which provides no stable ground to the urban-dweller. The anthropomorphising of the city and the geological image of the shivering ground both suggest a daily cycle of erasure and rebirth, conveying the frantic pace of urban transformations. Through Rushdie's excessive prose, Bombay seems caught in an endless process of tumultuous change which makes its past inaccessible and illegible — hence the nickname given to V.V. Merchant, 'the Digger of Bombay', whose life-ambition is to excavate the city's lost history.<sup>2</sup> A passage from *The Satanic Verses* connects the cyclical forgetfulness of Bombay with its accelerated development, evoking skyscrapers sprouting 'like giant weeds, or, let's say, like tombstones marking the sites where the torn corpse of the old city lay [...]'.<sup>3</sup> The double analogy pictures new colossal edifices either as parasitic growths quickly covering up and swallowing the ground, or as funeral monuments embodying the city's death, thus connecting urban development with a process of ruination rather than self-regeneration as was the case in *Midnight's Children*.

If this accelerated process of creative destruction is particularly palpable in contemporary Indian cities, Rushdie relates it to the 'uncertainty of the modern', turning Bombay into an archetype of the ever-shifting modern city, 'the tectonic instability' being

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<sup>1</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath her Feet* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 67.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988) (New York: Vintage, 1998), p. 12.

‘one of the defining aspects of life’ in modern cities.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the ‘days of upheaval’ referred to in the first passage allude to a specific context from which his writing arises, that of 1990s Mumbai, a city in eruption because of its growing economic globalization and its concurrent ‘provincialisation’ or ethnicisation, torn apart by intensifying intercommunal violence.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the sense of instability and disorientation pervading Rushdie’s text echoes numerous literary accounts of urban modernisation, from Baudelaire’s melancholy after the rapid destruction of ‘the old Paris’ under the assault of Haussmann’s modernisation (an influence acknowledged by contemporary writers such as Rana Dasgupta or Amit Chaudhuri), to Orhan Pamuk’s feeling of *hüzün* elicited by the lost glory of Istanbul, or again to Iain Sinclair’s mournful psychogeography of late twentieth century corporatized London.<sup>6</sup> However, as suggested in the introduction, these continuities in the writing of urban modernisation across time and space must not conceal the differences between the modernist and late-modernist city, as well as the literary specificities stemming from an idiosyncratic urban context.<sup>7</sup> How, then, is the tumult of urban mutation in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata demultiplied through the epic impulse animating Indian Anglophone writing?

Despite the many differences between Rushdie’s novels and the texts studied in this chapter, one can see a similar naturalisation of urban metamorphosis as an uncontrollable organic process based on decay, death and erasure in Arundhati Roy’s, Rana Dasgupta’s and Raj Kamal Jha’s representations of Indian cities. More than self-regeneration, they emphasize a sense of perpetual urban self-destruction. If the inflated rhetoric of natural catastrophe runs throughout urban literature at large, what does its use imply in the context of twenty-first-century Indian cities? How does this rhetoric, coupled with the use of antithetical scales of representation, erode the narrative of India’s global emergence?

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<sup>4</sup> Vassilena Parashkevova, *Salman Rushdie’s Cities: Reconfigurational politics and the Contemporary Urban Imagination* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Appadurai, ‘Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing’, and Rashmi Varma, ‘Provincializing the Global City: From Bombay to Mumbai’, *Social Text*, 81 (2004), 65-89.

<sup>6</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Cygne’, *Les fleurs du mal* (1861) (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 125-127; Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber, 2006); Iain Sinclair, *The Last London: True Fictions of an Unreal City* (London: Oneworld, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> If the term ‘modernism’ has conventionally been associated with artistic forms which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, I understand it more broadly as referring to cultural expressions of ‘modernity’, conceptualised by Marshall Berman and Fredric Jameson as the lived experience of the disorientation brought about by capitalist modernisation, running from the late-eighteenth to the twenty-first century, and premised on relations of colonialism. Within this periodization, I distinguish modernity from late modernity, referring to the lived experience of late (or global) capitalism.

This chapter sets out to explore the ways in which the amplifying movement of the epic mode, often surpassing the limits of realism, shapes the writing of material and cultural transformations at work in Indian ‘global’ cities. It will examine the networks of images used to convey the sense of an urban melting down, shedding light on processes of destruction, exploitation and erasure, mitigating the novelty of India’s successful ‘new cities’. I suggest that these narratives, through their large-scale panoramas of mutating urban space and their cataclysmic imagery, *dramatize* the creative destruction involved in urban development. In fact, they turn this historical process into a *spectacle* to be witnessed by the reader.

I will first examine the overarching cataclysmic metaphor of the ‘eruption’ of the city, which suggests rise and fall but also takes on its full meaning through the texts’ close description of the changing physiognomy of the city. This uncontrollable, destructive process gives rise to counterfeit new cities, gleaming showcases of ‘new India’ which imperfectly conceal the systemic unevenness on which their development is based. Thus, in the light of Rob Nixon’s work on ‘spatial amnesia’ and of urban studies works on global cities, the second section will look at the texts’ focus on the spectacularisation of urban space, showing the importance of image and imagination in the making of ‘world-class’ cities, intertwined with a process of erasure of disenfranchised sections of population from the urban imagination. The trope of cities haunted by the ghosts of the human and nonhuman casualties of urban development, used by all of these writers, conveys the marginalisation of certain citizens from India’s urban aspirations, as well as the unachievable project of utter erasure, pointing to the critical power of this ‘irrealist’ aesthetic. The porosity between the epic and the ordinary impulses will be highlighted throughout the chapter, as shown for instance by Sampurna Chattarji’s Mumbai short stories, which constantly oscillate between the dispassionate writing of day-to-day crises and fantastic visions of the mutating city, or Amit Chaudhuri’s occasional shift to the epic mode in his writing of the metamorphosis of Kolkata.

# I. The Cataclysmic (Re)Birth of Indian Cities

## 1. In the Eye of the Storm: The Eruption of the City

Rana Dasgupta's 2014 essay on millennial Delhi, entitled *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi*, examines the metamorphosis of Delhi from an administrative capital into a global city through the metaphor of the eruption. This text provides a stimulating starting point as it unfolds the multiple potentialities of this geological and physiological imagery, heightening the unexpected, uncontrollable bursting out of the city from its limits through a chaotic process of creation and destruction. Studying these texts in the light of Marshall Berman's work on urban modernity as perpetual melting down allows me to show the ways in which this metaphor appropriately dramatizes the duality of creative destruction at work in Indian cities in the latest phase of global capitalism.

Oh, moon of Alabama  
We now must say goodbye  
We've lost our good old mama  
And must have whisky, oh, you know why.<sup>8</sup>

This mournful song lamenting the destruction of Mahagonny, drawn from Brecht and Weill's operatic play *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, is used as an epigraph by Dasgupta, thus setting the tone of his literary mapping of Delhi. Mahagonny is a city of pleasure built from scratch in the desert, fuelled by gambling, drinking and fighting. It is the archetype of the capitalist city, ruled by money and entirely submitted to its fluctuations. Threatened not by an eruption but by a hurricane which ultimately spares it, the city eventually burst into chaos, destroyed by its inhabitants' discontent. Dasgupta writes his essay under the aegis of Brecht, theoretician of the 'epic theatre', and thus invites the reader to perceive Delhi's unbridled embrace of capitalism in the light of this modern Babylon, suggesting the allegorical dimension of Delhi in his text, and emphasising the condensed trajectory of the rise and fall of Delhi between 2000 and 2010.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930), trans. by W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman (Boston: Godine, 1976), p. 34, quoted in Dasgupta, *Capital*, p. VII.

<sup>9</sup> Brecht defines the 'epic theatre' as a political dramatic form which puts forward unresolved tensions and conflicts in order to create a defamiliarizing and distancing effect on the spectator. It thus provides a relevant reading prism for Dasgupta's defamiliarizing writing of capitalist urban development, used as a means of social critique.

Indeed, Dasgupta's narrative is built on the intersection between a national and a personal trajectory, between the tangible effects of economic deregulation on urban space and the writer's individual journey. The turn of the century acts as a narrative pivot, symbolised by the opening of the Delhi Metro in 2000, which was welcomed with optimism as a sign of the capital city's successful modernisation. Yet this glorious ascension abruptly ended with the 2010 Commonwealth Games, as the international sports event came to epitomize the disastrous outcome of colossal infrastructure projects. Aimed at turning Delhi into a 'world-class city', the event was tarred by the corruption and inefficiency of the municipal government.<sup>10</sup> These two landmarks thus stand for the beginning and the end of Dasgupta's narrative of rise and fall, suggesting the structural importance of historical events in his narrative of urban modernisation.

The year 2000 is also when Dasgupta settles in Delhi. While his family is Indian, his father left India for the United Kingdom as young man, and Dasgupta had always lived in the United Kingdom and the United States (working as a marketing consultant) before moving to Delhi. His description of the national capital is shaped by his position as a newcomer, which he claims is a useful vantage point into the city's complexities and into its denizens' psychological turmoil.<sup>11</sup> Although based on sharp ethnographical work and documentation, the accelerated rise and fall of Delhi between 2000 and 2010 is also certainly tinged with his initial enthusiasm and subsequent disillusionment with the city.

Indeed, Dasgupta's apocalyptic narrative of urban development chimes with the widespread catastrophist representation of 'urban breakdown' in Delhi that Ravi Sundaram identifies, but it also betrays the author's initial fascination for the great upheaval of the city.<sup>12</sup> The essay starts with a lyrical evocation of the transient utopian atmosphere which suffuses the city in the early 2000s. He initially stresses the productive aspect of Delhi's turbulent rebirth, the opening up of the economy triggering a general loosening of constraints and a blooming of artistic creativity in the city, 'for Delhi was erupting, too, with new culture' (C 42):

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<sup>10</sup> Urban studies scholars identify international sports events as an integral part of a city's becoming global (see Dupont, 'The Dream of Delhi as a Global City'; King, *Spaces of Global Culture*).

<sup>11</sup> 'I think the positive aspect [of not speaking Hindi] is more important, at least for my project, one because for the kind of people I wanted to interview it was important that I didn't go to school with them, I wasn't part of their network, and I'm not part of their gossip world, they thought I was a neutral space, an outsider kind of place where it was possible to discuss certain things.' Rana Dasgupta, Interview with the author (Skype), 31 March 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ravi Sundaram, 'Imaging Urban Breakdown: Delhi in the 1990s', in *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, ed. by Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), pp. 241-260.

For in 2000, all that was comfortable and settled in the places I had lived before was here in turbulent preparation, and the city was a vortex of prophecy and possibility. I had fallen, by pure chance, into one of the great churns of the age and, without ever planning to do so, I stayed [...]. *The old was dying, the new was in preparation, and we were living in the in-between*, when nothing was resolved, everything was potential. Everyone was trying to absorb, to imagine, what the city – and their own lives – might become. (C 36-39, my emphasis)

The uncertainty and agitation heralding the arrival of a new era appear exhilarating, and the author's thrill is reinforced by his paraphrasing of Gramsci's definition of the interregnum of the crisis of liberalism, which interestingly omits the last part of the sentence about the 'morbid symptoms'.<sup>13</sup> The inflated rhetoric, relying on hyperboles and abstractions (the old, the new, everything, nothing, everyone), amplifies the tremendous upheaval shaking up the city, and the epic mode conveys the sense of a foundational moment in which a society takes a new turn. In his portrayal of the burgeoning art scene of Delhi and of its global success, Dasgupta draws an analogy between the craze for monumentalism in art and their context of production, referring to 'steel and marble sculptures whose massive scale seemed to speak of the epic circumstances from which they sprang' (C 42-43).<sup>14</sup> His optimistic prose conveys the city's bustling energy, which initially enwrapped him. Delhi is thus perceived as a space about to give rise to new, non-Eurocentric yet globally-relevant forms of art and knowledge (including cultural and economic models), as expressed by the italicized prophecy of an undefined utopian collective voice: '*What will happen here will change the entire world*' (C 40).

Nonetheless, the thrill generated by this regeneration is soon overshadowed by the untameable destructive aspect of the eruption, which abruptly narrows down the horizon: 'a decade later, this utopian clamour was no more' (C 45). The urban renewal of the 2000s is immediately followed by decline, and enthusiasm gives way to disillusionment in the face of urban violence, crass materialism and an unbridled market economy further deepening the class divide, epitomized by mushrooming shopping malls.

The mall itself, moreover, had arrived as part of a rapacious economic torrent that had turned everything upside-down, destroying things human and divine, scattering objects and energies, and setting down alien needs and rituals in the rubble. Global capitalism

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<sup>13</sup> 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.' (Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 275-276).

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Subodh Gupta's spectacular sculptures, described with a satirical eye in Arundhati Roy's novel.

might have appeared serene and civilised in its ancient heartlands but this was not how it felt when it suddenly burst in somewhere new. (C 95-96)

This apocalyptic vision is one of the many instances of eruptive landscapes which symbolize the spread of global capitalism as a natural disaster, a flood wreaking havoc on Indian society and cities.<sup>15</sup> The abstractions he uses express the sense of an elemental disorder, a cosmic disruption that leaves nothing unharmed, and they dramatize the thorough annihilation of anything that is not subsumable within the capitalist system. They also hyperbolise the ad-hoc urbanism at work in Delhi, the unplanned growth reflecting the imperatives of a neoliberal model of economic development, hostile to any planification. This naturalisation evidences Dasgupta's panoramic analytical scale, locating the catastrophic development of Delhi within the larger frame of the territorial expansion of global capitalism.

The apocalyptic metaphors inevitably bring to mind those used by Marx to describe the material and spiritual upheaval set off by the advent of capitalism:

There followed on the birth of machinism and modern industry in the last third of the eighteenth century, a violent encroachment like that of an avalanche in its intensity and its extent. All bounds of morals and nature, of age and sex, of day and night, were broken down [...]. Capital celebrated its orgies.<sup>16</sup>

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men.<sup>17</sup>

The formal homologies between Marx's and Dasgupta's prose, both symbolising historical processes as gigantic natural forces, hint at the influence of Marx's understanding of capitalism as a system based on perpetual creative destruction on Dasgupta, an affinity which

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<sup>15</sup> Christopher Den Tandt's work on the 'oceanic sublime' in American naturalist novels, used to convey the way the bustling modern city defies our powers of perception and representation, provides an interesting parallel (*The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 38-50).

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (1867), trans. by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887), p. 184, quoted in Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 3rd edn (London: Verso, 2010), p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 38-39. On Marx's contribution to literature, notably his incorporation of gothic tropes, see S.S. Praver, *Karl Marx and World Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976). About the 'cacophony of voices' of *Capital*, see Daniel Hartley, 'The Voices of Capital: Poetics of Critique Beyond Sentiment and Cynicism', in *Understanding Marx, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Mark Steven (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 74-85.



also explains his conception of Delhi's turmoil as a typical crisis brought up by the contradictions of the capitalist system itself.<sup>18</sup>

The cosmic scope of this melting down is also emphasized by Marshall Berman in his exploration of capitalist modernity as the experience of perpetual creative destruction, to which Dasgupta's cataclysmic writing is indebted.<sup>19</sup> Through a comparative analysis of the contradictions of urban development as they are grasped by literature (ranging from Baudelaire to Dostoevsky, from 1850s Paris to 1870s St. Petersburg and 1970s New York), Berman's seminal work scrutinises the local expressions of this endless process of transformation and disintegration that defines modernity, condensed in the above-quoted phrase, 'all that is solid melts into air'.

To be modern, I said, is to experience personal and social life as a maelstrom, to find one's world and oneself in perpetual disintegration and renewal, trouble and anguish, ambiguity and contradiction: to be part of a universe in which all that is solid melts into air. To be a modernist is to make oneself somehow at home in the maelstrom, to make its rhythm one's own, to move within its current in search of the forms of reality, of beauty, of freedom, of justice, that its fervid and perilous flow allows.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Berman's description of European urbanisation in the wake of the emergence of the world market is characterised by an amplifying rhetoric: 'vast numbers of the uprooted poor pour into cities, which grow almost magically – and cataclysmically – overnight'.<sup>21</sup> A harsh critic of the development of New York under the omnipotent rule of Robert Moses between the 1930s and the 1970s, Berman, like Dasgupta, was equally fascinated by the restlessness of modernity.

Carol Bernstein has shown how Victorian urban writers invoked gigantic natural forces as metaphors to wrest some meaning from the city's overwhelming physical presence, a trope which modernist writers used as well to convey the metropolis' onslaught of stimuli on human consciousness. Nonetheless, more than the city's staggering whirl of impressions,

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<sup>18</sup> In addition to the reference in the title, Dasgupta quotes Marx in the epigraph to Chapter 13 (C 258) as well as in interviews (see Chapter 3). What Dasgupta and other writers are interested in is the eruptive condition of Indian cities as symptomatic of the *cyclical and developmental crises* which are inherent to capitalism. However, one may also argue that the crisis depicted is also that of 'the era of catastrophe', as Dasgupta puts it (C 372), regarded as a momentous *epochal crisis* of the early twenty-first-century, singular in the intensity of over accumulation cycles, and ecocidal effects (for a helpful synthetical view on the two types of crises, see Treasa de Loughry, *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis: Contemporary Literary Narratives* (Cham: Palgrave, 2021), pp. 10-11).

<sup>19</sup> The term was popularised by Schumpeter's theory of capitalism's creative destruction (see Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942) (London: Routledge, 1994)) but is used here in a broader sense. Dasgupta also cites Berman in *Capital*.

<sup>20</sup> Berman, p. 345.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

the natural forces invoked by Dasgupta convey the delirious mechanisms of capitalism. Using naturalization in this way, he twists the ‘rhetorical inflation’ that Manu Goswami identifies as one of the signatures of the Indian ‘neoliberal genre of emergence’, a literary form which enthusiastically narrates the eruption of money in India.<sup>22</sup> Far from celebrating the ‘natural wonders of market capitalism’, he shows them as monstrous calamities. Dasgupta’s rhetorical excess is also underlined by Boehmer and Davies, who emphasize how ‘adrenalin-fuelled’ his reportage is, and examine Dasgupta’s use of the trope of the city as a living organism ‘expanding, contracting, spluttering on the fumes of incessant traffic’, illustrating the insatiable appetites of capitalism.<sup>23</sup> They shed light on Dasgupta’s writing of the untameable energies of the capitalist city: ‘the physical manifestation of cyclical capital accumulation resembles a kind of relentlessly multiplying bacterium as seen through a microscope’.<sup>24</sup> However, I would argue that Delhi relentlessly self-destructs rather than self-multiplies in *Capital*, or at least that the city’s self-destruction overshadows its creative impulses.

## 2. Cities Under Construction, Landscapes of Devastation

Delhi’s millennial development is thus narrated as a short-lived deflagration. Yet the ‘eruption’ also assumes a material dimension, as Dasgupta, along with Jha and Roy, delineate landscapes of frantic demolition and construction induced by the building boom of the 2000s. The scalar oscillation of their texts, hovering between close-up scrutiny and panoramic vistas, intensifies the way the city is materially transformed by globalization, changing in physiognomy and scale (both in terms of buildings’ height and of urban sprawl).<sup>25</sup>

Dasgupta emphasizes the speed of this transformation, fuelled by the skyrocketing of land prices and the privatization of state-owned land, resulting in the sweeping away of the

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<sup>22</sup> Manu Goswami, ‘American Dream Outsourced: India and the Genre of Growth’, *Public Books*, 12 December 2012, <<https://www.publicbooks.org/the-american-dream-outsourcedindia-and-the-genre-of-growth/>> [accessed 6 May 2021]. Examples of this subgenre include Kapur’s *India Becoming*; Pico Iyer’s *The Global Soul* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001); Anand Giridharadas’s *India Calling* (New York: Holt, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies, ‘Literature, Planning and Infrastructure: Investigating the Southern City through Postcolonial Texts’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51.4 (2015), 408.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>25</sup> About the change of scale at which the urban process is imagined and carried out in the current conjuncture, see David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), pp. 7-15. Note that Delhi’s ‘sprawl’ is an ancient historical phenomenon, as the city was repeatedly displaced through the centuries, creating a scattered urban layout (See Chapter 3).

rich architectural history of Delhi (C 117). The metaphor of the eruption also expresses the oddity of new satellite cities suddenly rising from the ground, built from scratch on the outskirts of Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata, and erected upon agricultural land and villages doomed to disappear. One such case is the corporate city built in the late 1980s in Gurgaon (now Gurugram), a locality situated on the southern rural fringes of Delhi.<sup>26</sup> This new city is managed by DLF, a company of private developers. Heralded as the future of India in both celebratory and excoriating terms, Gurgaon has become a central financial and technological hub, part of the sprawling National Capital Region. Its landscape mostly consists of high-end shopping malls (no less than eighty in 2021), hotels, gated residential complexes and office towers housing the most important international corporations.<sup>27</sup> It has been considered as a ‘microcosm of Indian dynamism and dysfunction’, with commentators underlining its galloping growth as well as its critical lack of planning, made obvious by the absence of a citywide sewer or drainage system, and of reliable electricity or water as late as in 2011, turning it into ‘a patchwork of private islands more than an interconnected city’.<sup>28</sup>

The fantastical aspect of Gurgaon, a hypertrophic landscape of glass and steel rising from the dry plains of Haryana, is underlined by Raj Kamal Jha and Rana Dasgupta. In the chapter devoted to this new urban space, Dasgupta first describes it as a futuristic space directly coming out of a fictional universe: ‘An expanse of fields until thirty years ago, Gurgaon’s looming apartment blocks and steely towers now look as if they have emerged from a computer game set in some super-saturated future’ (C 3-4). The videogame comparison expresses the fantastical and artificial dimensions of this new city, which foreshadows the urban future: ‘This is where the future comes from’ (C 69).

When I first visited Gurgaon in 2001, it was a bizarre and thrilling scene of huge, glinting skyscrapers rising improbably from the dust of the Haryana countryside and being crowned, finally, with the banners of some of the world’s largest economic entities: Microsoft, IBM, Ericsson. It was not just corporations that set up there. DLF proclaimed a better lifestyle, a ‘new Singapore’ of gated communities, golf courses and shopping malls [...]. Gurgaon quickly became the largest private township in Asia, a

<sup>26</sup> See the map of Delhi in appendix.

<sup>27</sup> Sumit Malhotra, ‘Shopping Malls in Gurgaon’, *Stay in Gurgaon*, 28 May 2013, <<https://stayingurgaon.com/shopping-gurgaon/shopping-malls-gurgaon/shopping-malls-gurgaon.html>> [accessed 6 May 2021]. On the development of Gurgaon, see also Sanjay Srivastava, ‘The Unsmart City: Gurgaon Remains a Tragic Case Study in How not to Urbanise’, *Scroll.in*, 31 July 2016, <<https://scroll.in/article/812853/the-unsmart-city-why-gurgaon-remains-a-tragic-case-study-in-how-not-to-urbanise>> [accessed 6 May 2021]. Romi Khosla describes Gurgaon as a ‘chic-urban Disneyland’ mostly meant to fulfil the desires of Non-Resident Indians (Romi Khosla, ‘The City as an Idea’, in *The Idea of Delhi*, ed. by Romi Khosla (Mumbai: Marg, 2005), p. 20). Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, along with Chetan Bhagat’s best-selling novel *One Night @ the Call Centre*, are among the first novels to be set in Gurgaon.

<sup>28</sup> Jim Yardley, ‘In India, Dynamism Wrestles with Dysfunction’, *New York Times*, 8 June 2011, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/world/asia/09gurgaon.html>> [accessed 21 March 2021].

dusty, booming expanse of hypertrophic, high-security apartment complexes which looked down on a landscape of pure commerce. (C 364)

Once more, eruption is part of a defamiliarizing rhetoric, used to convey the incomprehensible birth of Gurgaon as a futuristic space entirely generated by the global capitalist system.

Similarly, Jha's novel *She Will Build Him a City* (2015), which narrates the intersecting itineraries of three nameless characters from various strata of Indian society in the course of one night in the city, describes the construction of New City as the genesis of an alien space, a natural disaster assuming supernatural dimensions. Jha's novels, which are all set in Indian cities, evidence the writer's architect and urbanist eye, as they acutely depict the 'lived space' of the city, the ways in which human consciousness responds to the volumes and surfaces of the built environment, and the way human bodies move across the city, whether in Delhi, Kolkata or Ahmedabad. Upon arriving in New Delhi from Kolkata in 1994, Jha first settled in the south of the city, before moving to Gurgaon.<sup>29</sup> He has witnessed the tremendous changes undergone by the young city and its increased pull over migrants from across the country, thus becoming a growing crucible of aspirations and frustrations.<sup>30</sup> His profession as a journalist and chief editor of one of the most important Indian national newspapers, *The Indian Express*, connects him with the everyday reality of the city, a material which evidently fuels his fiction.<sup>31</sup>

The generic name of 'New City', denoting abstraction and unreality, certainly draws from Gurgaon's actual futurism. Several depictions highlight the city's standardised aspect, an effect heightened by the generic place-names (The Mall, the Hotel, Apartment Complex),

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<sup>29</sup> Raj Kamal Jha, 'We Journalists Are not the Stories', Interview with Mayank Austen Soofi, *LiveMint*, 10 January 2015, <[https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/boKAWisoKEuQ3MoYujtXbM/Raj-Kamal-Jha-We-journalists-are-not-the-stories.html#box\\_1540694294276](https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/boKAWisoKEuQ3MoYujtXbM/Raj-Kamal-Jha-We-journalists-are-not-the-stories.html#box_1540694294276)> [accessed 18 February 2021].

<sup>30</sup> 'In the last ten to fifteen years [Delhi] has really become a magnet for people coming for a better future from across the country. It has become a kind of a hub for new jobs [...]. If you have so many young people, you have at the same time a lot of impatience, a lot of restlessness. To me the most important thing was what happens when that hope does not move into reality. If you have so many young people and they are despairing, what does that mean? So my novel grew as a result of that.' (Raj Kamal Jha, Interview with the author, Delhi, 6 March 2017).

<sup>31</sup> 'I would not have been a writer if it had not been for my life in the newsroom. Every night there are these hundreds of stories that come and you have to decide what gets into the paper and there are so many stories that are not told and I think that feeds my fiction', Interview with Kate Evans, *ABC*, 4 December 2015, <<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/booksandarts/she-will-build-him-a-city-interview/6910950>> [accessed 6 May 2021]. See also Raj Kamal Jha, 'The Mission Statement is in Italics', *Literary Activism*, 23 February 2021, <<https://www.literaryactivism.com/the-mission-statement-is-in-italics/>> [accessed 6 May 2021].

which give dystopian contours to the setting.<sup>32</sup> Jha claims that the toponym itself is an oxymoron and prompts one to wonder whether a place without a history can be called a city.<sup>33</sup> The common noun deprives the place of history and from the singularity given by proper nouns, which, in Michel de Certeau's words, 'semantically order the surface of the city'.<sup>34</sup> It might also ironically hint at the traditional use of the adjective 'new' to mark the foundation of colonial cities, openly displaying its founders' grandiose ambition, that of creating a city from scratch, heralding the advent of a new era. This fictional toponym, which also echoes the generic name 'CyberCity' (the name of one of Gurgaon districts), reflects Gurgaon's belonging to the tradition of Delhi builders: razing down and starting from scratch instead of incorporating new elements to an existing city. It is also reminiscent of the ethereal and artificial aspects of New Delhi, the imperial capital erected ex nihilo by the British in 1911, which have been repeatedly underlined by writers and scholars.<sup>35</sup> The name invites us to see the fictional New City as a showcase of 'New India' meant to promote post-reform India as an investment-friendly territory. The mere name of this fictional place thus sheds light on continuities between colonial and neoliberal symbolical practices.<sup>36</sup>

Jha's polyphonic novel, made up of fragmentary chapters alternating between three main points of view, first describes the genesis of the city through the perspective of the old Ms Violets Rose, an inhabitant of the village razed down to build New City, now secretly settled in the city's multiplex:

She watches cranes and excavators trundle in to gouge out holes in the earth so big they look like they have been made by something that's come hurtling down from space. Each hole then becomes a home to a foundation, which, in turn, props up an entire building [...], each room like a cell in this creature called New City that grows bigger and bigger with each hour, day, month and year. (SW 215)

Through the eyes of this first-hand witness, the reader is made to visualize the cataclysmic birth of the city: the process of urban creation is imagined as a mutilation of the earth, the

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<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the anonymity of the major characters of the novel, referred to as Man, Woman, Orphan, conveys the sense of an abstract world, a device Jha uses in other novels, as shown in *If You Are Afraid of Heights* (2003) (London: Harcourt, 2005), in which Kolkata, though recognisable, is never named. See also *The Blue Bedspread* (London: Picador, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> Raj Kamal Jha, Interview with the author, Delhi, 6 March 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 259.

<sup>35</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> Véronique Dupont shows the multiple meanings attached to the naming of high-end residential complexes in Delhi, often referring to a Western model and style (Malibu Towne, Beverly Park) or to other large Asian cities (Sentosa City), translating aspirations for global connections (Véronique Dupont, 'The Idea of a New Chic through Publicity Hype', in *The Idea of Delhi*, pp. 78-94).

scale of the excavations (foreshadowing the gigantic towers) being so large that they seem to result from a meteor fall.<sup>37</sup> Its erection similarly appears as magical growth through the time-lapse effect conveyed by the writing: the different steps of the process are rendered through an accumulation of clauses which condenses the time of construction, suggesting the frantic pace of urban development.<sup>38</sup> The spectacular effect of this emerging landscape also stems from the chosen representational scale, the whole city being described in an all-encompassing view. New City is then imagined as a monstrous organism, a growing creature whose cells seem to replicate spontaneously, registering the inevitable urban sprawl of Delhi through the canonical trope of the monster-city.<sup>39</sup> The lexicon and harsh sonorities used in the excerpt ('hurtling', 'excavators trundle in to gouge out holes') also express the multifaceted violence embedded in the city's infrastructure. As will be developed in the second part of the chapter, the violence on which the urban process rests assumes both environmental and social dimensions, as the environmental plunder is accompanied by the displacement of local farmers (Ms Rose, CR) compelled to sell their land and turned into spectres in Jha's novel.

The scalar variation used to render the tumult of urban development, from a microscopic to a macroscopic view, comes out in the first description of 'New City', seen through Man's eyes:

There are 20 million bodies in this city and then there is the heat. Each body softened, warmed through the day in a marinade of its sweat and odours, hair oil, dust thrown up by diggers, cement mixers, earth movers, dumptrucks. All tearing down, building up. New station, new flyover, new apartment block, new mall, new street, New City. Where everyone rubs against you, stands so close you hear their blood flow, skin crawl, hearts pump. Like the sounds of trains at night. You see remnants of meals lodged in teeth, trapped under nails stained yellow; cellphone screens smudged with wax from ears, flecked with flakes of dead skin. (SW 6)

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<sup>37</sup> This celestial or extra-terrestrial birth in the middle of a desert plain is reminiscent of the genesis of Las Vegas, nicknamed 'Zeropolis' by the French philosopher Bruce Bégout, drawing from Tom Wolfe's writing of this city: 'Tel un morceau de comète encore incandescent qui vient de se fracasser au sol, Las Vegas brille au loin dans la nuit du désert de Mojave. Avec ses milliers de lueurs multicolores et saccades, elle illumine la voûte céleste qui, à comparaison, fait pâle figure' (Bruce Bégout, *Zéropolis* (Paris: Alia, 2002), p. 15). The passage emphasizes how the city's artificial lights outdo the stars, a sense we also get from Jha's novel.

<sup>38</sup> Time-lapse is a technique used in photography which creates an acceleration effect resulting from the succession of a large series of shots of the same place at regular intervals, allowing to observe the changes of the place. Processes that would normally appear subtle and slow to the human eye, e.g. the motion of the sun and stars in the sky or the growth of a plant, become very pronounced.

<sup>39</sup> Note the upsurge of the trope of an alien city in recent (dystopian) fiction from the global South (see Tade Thompson's *Wormwood Trilogy* (New York: Orbit, 2016-2019); Nnedi Okorafor's science fiction novel *Lagoon* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014). The construction of the Delhi metro is represented in similar terms in Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (p. 157).

Moving back and forth between panoramic views of the city under construction and vertiginous close-up views of bodily matter, the passage renders the new sensorial regime of the city under construction, in particular the way the body is permeated by the dirt and dust of the city, as though it absorbed the bustle of its transformation.<sup>40</sup> The accumulation of terms refracts urban development as an incoherent juxtaposition of isolated ‘new’ fragments: station, flyover, apartment block, mall, street. In turn, the bodily frictions induced by public transportation trigger Man’s freakish anatomising of his fellow urban-dwellers’ bodies as a set of isolated microscopic fragments (blood, skin, hearts), foreshadowing his cannibalistic fantasies. The strikingly cinematographic close-up on bits of remnants of organic matter littering the passengers’ bodies and possessions, captured by his clinical consciousness, reflects his heightened perception, stimulated by the crowded space of the metro. The character both relishes and abhors this anonymous company of bodies, wavering between the exhilaration of meddling with the crowd and the abjection of the imperfections and dirt he obsessively spots. Throughout the novel, he is indeed primarily portrayed as a body trapped by its almost superhuman sensitivity, especially by its extreme awareness of other bodies. As Ragini T. Srinivasan puts it: ‘the novel’s macabre aesthetic renders presence itself a form of acute vulnerability to others and risk to oneself. Man, fastidious and compulsive, is the most sensitive to the presence of the bodies of others’.<sup>41</sup>

The overwhelming train crowd and the porous bodily surfaces are also emphasized by Suketu Mehta in his literary reportage on Mumbai, eliciting outbursts of disgust and panic in the author-narrator as he ‘absorb[s] the city through [his] pores’ (MC 29).<sup>42</sup> However, the loss of distinction between the self and the world, induced by the physical intimacy with a moving crowd, elicits neither self-protective indifference nor panic in Jha’s character but gruesome fantasies of violence, cannibalism and rape, revealing the character’s psychopathic tendencies and making the novel tip over into the macabre register, redolent of gothic or crime fiction: ‘Deep gashes scour bare stomachs and thighs like mouths of brown bags slit

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<sup>40</sup> Jha’s close depiction of Man’s metro rides across Delhi contrasts with Rana Dasgupta’s focus on *driving* as the ultimate experience of Delhi’s tumultuous development.

<sup>41</sup> Ragini T. Srinivasan, ‘Devouring Coolie Bodies’, review of Raj Kamal Jha, *She Will Build Him a City*, *Post45 Contemporaries*, 23 November 2015, <[www.post45.research.yale.edu](http://www.post45.research.yale.edu)> [accessed 6 May 2021]. The geography of New City seems directly descended from Ayi Kwei Armah’s depiction of Accra as divided between the city of waste and the gleaming city of the rich in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), also featuring a scatologically-oriented nameless ‘Man’, obsessed with the detritus littering the city, who struggles to reconcile himself with the reality of post-independence Ghana. See Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 46-79, and Jed Esty, ‘Excremental Postcolonialism’, *Contemporary Literature*, 40.1 (1999), 22-59.

<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 2.

open' (SW 5). The quotation of Gieve Patel's canonical poem 'On Killing a Tree', which immediately follows this horror vision, strengthens the sense of murderous threat carried by the character.<sup>43</sup> As will be shown in Chapter 2, both Dasgupta and Jha suggest a connection between the tremendous violence underlying urban development and individual brutality unfolding across the city.

Published a decade earlier, Jha's novel *If You Are Afraid of Heights* is another nocturnal urban novel, set in Kolkata (the city is not named but its location in West Bengal and its buildings' names are recognizable). Through interlocking fragmentary chapters, it narrates the encounter of Amir and Rima, as the former, living in a working-class neighbourhood, is hit in a tram collision and rescued by the latter, thus spending several days of recovery in her spacious apartment on the highest floor of a building. The tram accident operates as the narrative crux of the novel as it makes various other individual trajectories collide, hinting at the author's interest in the narrative potential of public transport. Unlike the Delhi metro, embodiment of the city's rebirth, the ancient rickety tramcar symbolizes Kolkata's disrepair. In two chapters entitled 'Long before they even met' and 'Paradise Park: a brief history', the novel describes the apparition of the tallest building of the city, heralded by the media's hyperbolic praise. The text emphasizes the spectacular dimension of its construction as well as its monstrousness.

Then came Paradise Park.

It was like nothing the city had seen before.

Angry adjectives vanished from protesting newspapers as if they were printed in disappearing ink. Reporters broke into poetry, sought similes, mixed metaphors. Magazines ran photo-features on the construction machinery that worked through the night: hydraulic excavators and bulldozers, loaders and lifts, trucks and cranes, crushers and heavy earth-movers. All painted a bright yellow and a brighter red, sparkling under the glare of high-wattage lamps, lighting up the hills of sand and cement that made the site look like a desert, a mountain, a movie set, all of the above.

Cranes hummed the whole day, lifting all kinds of rods and buckets. Excavators kept chomping at the ground, gulping the grass and the earth, gargling slurry and stone, spitting tons of mud and concrete and then washing everything down with tar and cement. (IF 21-22)

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<sup>43</sup> Gieve Patel, 'On Killing a Tree', *Poems* (Bombay: Nissim Ezekiel, 1966) <<https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/on-killing-a-tree/>> [accessed 9 June 2021]. The anthropomorphism of the poem, which is taught in Indian high schools, resonates with the episode of tree-plucking in Jha's novel (see Chapter 2) and with the prologue of Roy's novel. Patel was a medical practitioner, playwright and painter and the centrality of the body to his poetry and painting suffuses the characters' clinical description and obsession with bodies (see, for instance, 'Battered Man in the Landscape', a painting which scans a dead man's skeleton and organs).



The novel stresses how exceptional this building is, standing out in the landscape of ‘this dying city’ (IF 20, 23, 24), as opposed to the proliferation of new spectacular towers in the New City of Jha’s 2015 novel. Yet both novels lay the same emphasis on the scale of the construction process and the heavy spectacular machines it requires. The construction site is both naturalised and derealized (as a movie set), underlining the sense of unreality which emanates from it. The last paragraph anthropomorphises the powerful machines, pictured as monstrous bodies mutilating and digesting the earth, thus intensifying the surreal vision of a building emerging from the ground and the frantic pace of the destructive creation at work.

The spectacles of devastation depicted in both Dasgupta’s and in Jha’s texts echo the ‘sublime, spectacular ruins’ of Berman’s childhood neighbourhood in the Bronx, destroyed on account of New York’s redevelopment in the 1950s.<sup>44</sup> Just as the New York writer and cultural critic betrays his fascination for these precocious ruins of capitalism, Jha’s futurist landscapes of urban birth elicit both terror and wonder. The naturalisation of this artificial construction process contributes to rendering the dislocating experience of late-modernity, the shock of the new, and the awareness of its destructive temporality.

The unfinished aspect of buildings under construction also brings out nightmarish hallucinations in Sampurna Chattarji’s writing, which expresses her fascination with Mumbai, a city she had adopted as her own in 1995. Published after a first novel and several collections of poems, her 2013 short-story collection *Dirty Love* is devoted to this shapeshifting urban space, in an attempt to ‘preserve the materiality of a vanishing city’.<sup>45</sup> Evincing an acute alertness to the multiple temporal and social layers of Mumbai, the twenty-nine stories attend both to the banality of everyday urban disasters and to the extraordinary dimension of urban life, with uncanny visions departing from strict realism. They explore the city through various voices, from the detached daydreaming voice of a woman whose house is flooded to the anguish-stricken voice of a migrant.

The latter is the narrator of seven stories, among which ‘Seeing Things’, which consists of a kaleidoscope of vistas of Mumbai, the city being seen from high and low

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<sup>44</sup> Berman, p. 293.

<sup>45</sup> Sampurna Chattarji, Interview with the author, Mumbai, 5 April 2018. Formal similarities may be noted between Raj Kamal Jha’s *She Will Build Him a City* and Sampurna Chattarji’s dark debut novel *Rupture* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010), which takes place over a twenty-four-hour time period, during which nine characters across five cities face internal and civic breakdown. The tight time frame, the mosaic of fragmented narrative units, the dream-like sequences and the experimentation with typography, among other aspects, echo Jha’s aesthetic choices.

standpoints. These spectacular sights give rise to journeys back in time, as the narrator is imaginarily transported into the past of the city, hearing horses in the stables in the Metro cinema, and then swimming in Colaba Causeway (one of the main roads in the southern part of the city, which was built to connect two of the original seven islands of the city), which has returned to its original swampy state (DL 160).<sup>46</sup> The whole city is pervaded by a sense of unrest, which culminates in the terrifying vision of half-built edifices perceived through the character's eyes as wounded creatures, destroyed even before they have been achieved.

Buildings... I say slowly, as if the words were being drawn out of me with hooks. The ones still unfinished, midway, perhaps abandoned. Exposed and unfinished. The iron rods sticking out like ribs. Like gaping untreated wounds the hollow spaces where the rooms will come. Nothing more than walls and floors. I can sense the roughness of the unfinished walls and pitted floors against my skin. As if I were ill with it. At night it's worse. I cannot stop looking, as if I were being called. The hollows remind me of something so ghastly I want to die. A great foreboding fills me. These buildings are not stationary they move. They reach the end of their irreversible journey. This is it, their ruination. Inside, death squats, infinitely patient. I feel afraid. (DL 165)

The vision of these unfinished mutilated structures, recalling the craters of Jha's New City, elicits great distress, yet the character is also drawn to these monstrous protuberances, which are haunted by death and by frightening memories of his own past. The anthropomorphism creates a nightmarish vision of suffering structures, and amplifies their connection with the character, as though these rough surfaces were pregnant with devastation. This physical and psychological intimacy with buildings is placed under the sign of an unbearable dislocation, at odds with the eroticism of architecture depicted in Jha's novels, which focus on (powerful) characters' harmonious identification with gleaming towering buildings. The character seems to have forgotten where he comes from, irredeemably attracted by 'useless, deformed, abandoned' things, destroyed pieces of junk' (DL 166). These new buildings are paradoxically haunted by fragmentary memories of his lost hometown, alluded to as a broken derelict place ('everything burnt or broken remind me of where I came from' (DL 166)). The incongruous association of nascent buildings with death and dereliction, which also characterises Roy's and Jha's writing of urban development, dramatizes the entanglement of urban construction and devastation. Through the eyes of an outsider, urban transformation

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<sup>46</sup> The image of a Mumbai returned to its original state, fostered by the regular monsoon floods, is also to be found in Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* and in Jeet Thayil's latest novel *The Low* (London: Faber, 2020). Amitav Ghosh imagines the city being hit by a cyclone in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). These images partake of the natural disaster imagery fostered by the epic mode, which are also grounded in actual disasters, such as the 2005 Maharashtra flood, which literally devastated parts of Mumbai and resulted in more than one thousand casualties.

is defamiliarized as a nightmarish vision reflecting death rather than growth, eliciting distress rather than thrill. As the author suggests in an interview, the final hallucination, that of moving buildings, may refer to the migrant workers' transient presence in the city, moving from one unfinished building to the next, unable to witness the achievement of the edifices they erect, out-of-place in the city they build.<sup>47</sup>

Arundhati Roy's long-awaited second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, is a polyphonic narrative which follows several intertwined threads, one of which is the story of Anjum, born Aftab, a hijra from Old Delhi, who takes shelter in a derelict graveyard at the edge of the city. Anjum gradually transforms the graveyard into a guest house, bringing together the living and the dead. One of the prominent residents of Jannat Guest House is Tilo, a secretive South Indian woman whom 'nobody seemed able to *place*' (M 154), ceaselessly moving from one place to another, until she finds a home in the cemetery. Mostly set in Delhi, with incursions into the contested territory of Kashmir, the novel also pays close attention to the materiality of the building boom in India: like Chattarji, Roy adds the human presence of workers to the technological landscapes of demolition depicted in Jha's and Dasgupta's works. A chapter narrated through Tilo's viewpoint describes migrant workers settling in for the night on the grass near a highway intersection, with gigantic steel-sculptures looming over them.

The men were tired from their day's work on the building site, their eyelashes and lungs pale with stone-dust from cutting stone and laying floors in the multi-storey shopping centres and housing estates springing up around the city like a fast-growing forest. They spread their soft, frayed *gamchhas* on the poky grass of sloping embankment dotted with dogshit and stainless-steel sculptures – public art – sponsored by the Pamnani Group that was promoting cutting-edge artists who used stainless steel as a medium, in the hope that the cutting-edge artists would promote the steel industry. The sculptures looked like clusters of steel spermatozoa, or perhaps they were meant to be balloons. It wasn't clear. Either way, they looked cheerful. (M 256-257)

Echoing the close-ups on human bodies in Jha's novel, the text zooms in on the workers' dust-covered bodies, clearly pitting the human damage against the spectacular organic growth of a 'forest' of shopping malls and gated communities. The naturalisation of the construction process enhances its apparently uncontrollable frantic pace and echoes the

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<sup>47</sup> 'It is possibly a way of expressing the migrant presence in our city' (Chattarji, Interview with the author, 2018). On migrant workers' key role in the construction of Mumbai, see Narayan Surve's famous poem 'Bombay', which includes this powerful line: 'for it was my father who sculpted your epic in stone' ('Bombay', in *The Oxford Anthology of the Modern Indian City*, vol. 1, ed. by Vinay Lal (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 141-145).

parasitic ‘weed’ covering up the ground of Bombay in Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. The following page amplifies the way urban growth rests upon the exploitation of workers and the damaging of their bodies, evoking the stone-dust-induced disease afflicting many builders: ‘when people died of stone-dust, their lungs refused to be cremated. Even after the rest of their bodies had turned to ash, two lung-shaped slabs of stone remained behind, unburned’ (C 258). The poignant image of petrified lungs, preventing the funeral ritual from being performed and imprisoning the deceased soul (C 257), points to the irreparable marks of exploitation ingrained into the workers’ bodies, even after their death.

The dusty workers are then pitted against the shining surfaces of gigantic public sculptures looming over them as they find a spot near the crossroads. Roy draws together the crushed workers, epitomizing human exploitation, and gleaming public art, underlining the tragic irony of this jarring proximity. The incongruity of this juxtaposition is made even more powerful by the out-of-place gaiety of these sculptures, epitomizing the ‘toxic positivity’ attached to capitalist growth, the happiness permeating India’s success story.<sup>48</sup> Roy’s scathing prose targets the enmeshment of artists and city governments with corporate interests, as the structures appear as nothing but promotion for a construction company. These sculptures also hint at the importance of image-building in Delhi’s remaking as a ‘world-class’ city. The shape of these gigantic steel sculptures, although indeterminate, is compared with that of spermatozoa or balloons, suggesting either growth or swelling, Roy’s irony transpiring in these grotesque analogies, which only slightly distort the intended symbolism of these works. Indeed, these joyous spermatozoa are easily identifiable to anyone familiar with Delhi as the ‘Sprouts’ adorning the lawns of the AIIMS hospital road intersection. Almost forty-feet high, the sculptures were commissioned by the Chief Minister of Delhi in 2008 in preparation for the Commonwealth Games, and were meant to signify India’s growth, development, and progress, as well as the rise of Delhi as a ‘world-city’.<sup>49</sup> Roy’s incorporation of these landmark elements of urban landscape and their immediate juxtaposition with the workers suggests a critique of the debasement of art as advertisement, part and parcel of the spectacularisation of urban space, and of art’s complicity with the

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<sup>48</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>49</sup> Designer Vibhor Sogani conceived the installations as sprouts, inspired by the one-line brief given by Chief Minister of Delhi: ‘From walled city to world city’: ‘the objective was to create a landmark through a series of installations signifying growth, development and progress’. [no author], ‘Sprouts- India’s Largest Site-Specific Art Installation Designed by Vibhor Sogani’, *The Architects Diary.com*, 25 April 2018, <<https://thearchitectsdiary.com/sprouts-indias-largest-site-specific-art-installation-designed-vibhor-sogani/>> [accessed 6 May 2021].

damages engendered by capitalist urban development. Her text thus twists the natural symbolism invested in these hypertrophied imitations of sprouts, suggestive of the organicity of India's growth, showing how fallacious this association between capitalist urban growth and organic growth is.

This nocturnal scene resonates with another episode in the novel, in which one of the characters is hired as a security guard to watch over a gigantic stainless-steel sculpture made in the image of a banyan, 'with stainless steel aerial roots that hung all the way down to the ground, forming a stainless-steel grove' (M 75). Made up of mass-produced everyday tools (buckets, pots and pans) and erected on the lawns of the National Gallery of Modern Art, the multi-limbed glaring tree eventually singes the character's eyes, since he is not allowed to wear sunglasses: 'it was like being asked to keep an eye on the sun' (M 76). The mythological undertones of the sentence only heighten the absurdity and inequity of a system which damages human bodies in the name of world-class aesthetics.<sup>50</sup>

This cruel fable is yet another instance of Roy's tackling of contemporary art as a direct emanation of India's neoliberal turn, all the more as the sculpture is identifiable as Subodh Gupta's *Dada*, a surrealist work which has circulated across global cities, illustrating, as Dasgupta suggested, the taste for the monumental in the global art market. Roy's politics of scale surfaces as the story sheds light on an invisible micro-crisis triggered by the gigantic spider-like structure, which echoes the juxtaposition of the invisible deaths of the migrant workers with gigantic steel sprouts.<sup>51</sup> If the subjugated workers' bodies are suggested by the utensils forming the tree branches, the narrator's voice scathingly exposes the aestheticisation of labour involved in this work: 'It had stainless-steel buckets, stainless-steel tiffin carriers and stainless-steel pots and pans hanging from its branches. (Almost as though stainless-steel labourers had hung up their stainless-steel lunches while they ploughed stainless-steel fields and sowed stainless-steel seeds)' (C 76). The cynical parenthesis, completing the accumulation which mimics the aggregation of kitchenware, brings us back to the materiality of agricultural labour which had been erased by the spectacular.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> It is worth noting that the sculpture features in the 'Incredible India' tourism campaign video clip on Delhi (See 'Destination: Delhi, India', Incredible India Campaign, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, online video, Youtube, <<https://youtu.be/AoLiXe05-Z8?t=150>> [accessed 6 May 2021]).

<sup>51</sup> On Roy's politics of scale, see next section of this chapter.

<sup>52</sup> On Subodh Gupta's work, see Subodh Gupta, *Everything is Inside* (New Delhi: Penguin Studio, 2014). See also Brigupati Singh's essay on Gupta, which confronts Arundhati Roy's critique and her own complicity with the capitalist system she denounces: 'Cleverness notwithstanding, perhaps the author did not notice that the Saddams of contemporary India [...] are singed and smarting more by their lack of access to the English

Among the works in which the *ordinary* mode dominates, Amit Chaudhuri provides an interesting contrast with these epic representations of urban transformations. A self-avowed anti-epic writer, departing from the extroverted prose of the great narratives of national arrival or demise, he still places the transformation of Kolkata at the heart of his writing, which sometimes gives way to large-scale vistas of the city's perpetual melting down and rebirth. The motif of omnipresent dust is emphasized in his novels, yet it does not partake of a spectacular account of earthly eruptions, gigantic excavations and petrified lungs. His fascination for this 'city of dust' is palpable in his first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, told through the point-of-view of a child visiting his family in Calcutta which sometimes gives way to authorial digressions.

Calcutta is a city of dust. If one walks down the street, one sees mounds of dust like sand dunes on the pavements, on which children and dogs sit doing nothing, while sweating labourers dig into the macadam with spades and drills. The roads are always being dug up, partly to construct the new underground railway system, or perhaps for some other obscure reason, such as replacing a pipe that doesn't work with another pipe that doesn't work. At such times, Calcutta is like a work of modern art that neither makes sense nor has utility, but exists for some esoteric aesthetic reason. Trenches and mounds of dust everywhere give the city a strange bombed-out look. The old houses, with their reposeful walls, are crumbling to slow dust, their once gleaming gates are rusting. Dust flakes off the ceiling in offices; the buildings are becoming dust, roads are becoming dust. At the same time, dust is constantly raised into startling new shapes and unexpected forms by the arbitrary workings of the wind, forms on which dogs and children sit doing nothing. Daily, Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust, and daily it rises from dust again. (SA 14-15)

Extending the scope of the novel beyond the family neighbourhood, this passage evokes the daily self-disintegration and re-creation of Calcutta as a general process of dissolving into dust. This phoenix-like city quietly rising from its ashes is far from the flamboyant shapeshifting Bombay of Rushdie or the spectacular rebirth of Delhi in Dasgupta's words, the neologism 'unwhispering' indicating how unnoticed this process goes. The dusty contours evoke a city in ruins, yet the text emphasizes the aura of strangeness suffusing it even as it disintegrates. Urban development is first de-materialised as a process of mysterious metamorphosis, liberated from the necessity to mean or to serve a purpose, the city assuming new abstract forms every day 'for some esoteric aesthetic reason'.<sup>53</sup> The

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language in which she writes. And perhaps she forgot that literature too traffics in fame' (Brigupati Singh, 'The Very Opposite of a Hunger Artist', in *Adda / Rendez-Vous* (Paris: Skira, 2018), p. 50).

<sup>53</sup> The image of the city as an experimental work of art also harkens back to Walter Benjamin's and Asja Lacis's description of Naples as a 'porous' city, where buildings in progress stand side by side with dilapidated ruins, and where streets appear as settings where numerous dramas are improvised (see Walter Benjamin, *One*

alternative reasons given for the roads being drilled strengthen the apparent arbitrariness of the whole enterprise, as the construction of the Kolkata metro is balanced by the ironic hypothesis of an absurd never-ending process of replacing irredeemably flawed pipes by others.<sup>54</sup>

The stress laid on uselessness and arbitrariness is characteristic of Chaudhuri's fetishization of failure as having critical power in a neoliberal society worshipping success, purpose and development. The fleeting mention of sweating workers digging and drilling discreetly registers the material dimension of construction, yet the chiasmatic reference to children and dogs 'doing nothing' on the mounds of dust reflects the writer's paradoxical emphasis on loitering, inactivity, and stasis in an account of urban transformation, the musical effect created by the repetition suggesting a form of permanence in the midst of the overall dissolution of matter. Chaudhuri interestingly construes Calcutta's decrepit outlook as a sign of its being disconnected from the national embrace of global capitalism, whereas, in line with our reading of other contemporary Indian writers, it could actually be interpreted as clear evidence of its abrupt integration into the global capitalist system. Chaudhuri's identification of Calcutta as the epitome of the modern city, and his understanding of cities as perpetually 'unfinished spaces' can be thus be enlightened by Berman's understanding of modernity as a never-ending melting down.<sup>55</sup> Reading Chaudhuri's literary geography of decline against the grain evidences Calcutta's case as a specific local expression of the global phenomenon of urban development. Highlighting its affinities with *epic* geographies of Indian cities also shows the permeability between the two modes.<sup>56</sup>

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*Way Street. And Other Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1997), pp. 170-171). Svetlana Boym argues that this 'porosity' is more palpable in cities in transition, suggesting the link between the unfinished aspect of the city and modernity (Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 77).

<sup>54</sup> The Kolkata Metro was planned in the 1920s but construction started in the 1970s, with the first line opening in 1984.

<sup>55</sup> Chaudhuri deliberately twists Naipaul's claim that third-world cities are 'half-made' to show that unfinishedness defines any modern city for him. Amit Chaudhuri, 'The Here and Elsewhere', Hillingdon Literary Festival, Brunel University London, online video recording, Youtube, 14 November 2016, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YH0yiCYLGXY&t=478s>> [accessed 10 February 2021]. 'Unfinishedness' is a notion he also frequently returns to, epitomising what drives him aesthetically: 'It was the urge towards leaving things incomplete – to not finish projects (including life itself) properly – that led Woolf to write a very particular kind of fiction, and that led both her and Benjamin to the essay, the perennially unfinished form.' (Amit Chaudhuri, 'Travelling Between Genres', *Guardian*, 4 October 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/04/amit-chaudhuri-travelling-between-genres>> [accessed 10 February 2021]. See also Sovan Chakraborty and Nagendra Kumar, "'Unfinished Modernity'" and Postcolonial Urban Space in Amit Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Afternoon Raag*', *The Atlantic Literary Review*, 16.2 (2015), 87-113.

<sup>56</sup> Aman Sethi's reportage, *A Free Man*, is another interesting parallel to Roy's lambasting of the construction industry, as it focuses on the life and work of a migrant construction worker, documenting the harsh working

### 3. All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Masquerade of Urban Renewal

Chaudhuri's metaphor of the all-encompassing dissolution of urban matter into dust is another form of naturalisation of urban development, which resonates with that of eruption, both suggesting how urban process under capitalism not only annihilates what precedes it but also what it produces. Yet eruption suggests a more uncontrollable, rapid, non-gradual spectacular process than crumbling. This section thus looks at the emphasis put on the perpetual melting down of urban matter and on the resulting impression that nothing is real in the city.

In fact, Dasgupta insists on the rapid decline of new infrastructures built in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games, a significant allegory of the systemic crises inherent to the capitalist system, which operates through constant self-destruction.<sup>57</sup> Dasgupta writes: 'Like so much of the rest of the city's infrastructure, these gap-toothed flyovers look ancient even when they have only just been built' (C 23). From the city's new yet crumbling highways and the dilapidated state of the Commonwealth Games buildings, Dasgupta derives a general sense of impermanence, as though the city was doomed to be destroyed as soon as it was reconstructed.

Time in Delhi is macabre: it is a fast-dissolving time that makes bus stops leak and apartment blocks crumble even before they are finished [...]. To be here is to exist in that kind of time in which everything is old when it is new, in which everything is always already lost to decay and obsolescence.

Nothing endures: everything is passing away before one's eyes [...]. (C 23)

Through the elevated style of the epic mode, the passage underlines the paradoxical experience of urban modernisation in which the new is the old, urban regeneration is pervaded by decline. As will be developed in chapter 3, Dasgupta's interpretation of these conspicuous contradictions oscillates between a local and a global analytical scale: beyond the *topos* of the meditation over time, the crumbling roofs and collapsed walls epitomize both Delhi's particular history, made up of repeated destructions, and the self-annihilating logic of global capitalism. The 'new' city built in the 2000s is perceived as a simulacrum, a surface without substance, threatening to disappear overnight.

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conditions through a spared-down prose, contrasting with Roy's fierce writing and with panoramic views of the city's morphing.

<sup>57</sup> Infrastructural decline is also read as a typical sign of urban crisis in the advanced metropolitan centres by Ravi Sundaram ('Imaging Urban Breakdown', p. 242).



The sturdy, well-equipped city that the middle class had dreamed of never arrived: instead there arrived a kind of temporary plaster facsimile of such a thing which, in the end, bore no resemblance to the computer-generated images with which the whole decade-long endeavour had been sold. (C 401)

The ‘dream of Delhi as a global city’, object of much fantasy, projection and speculation, never materializes.<sup>58</sup> The gap between the imagined city and the one provided by developers, which comes forth as a ‘cardboard cut-out version’ (C 402) or facsimile, is perceived here as the discrepancy between two fictions or simulacra: the new city as a pure image is pitted against its flawed double, which is as unreal as the former.

The frailty of the new built environment also appears in Jha’s novel *She Will Build Him a City*, notably in a chapter entitled ‘wall collapse’, which narrates, through a television report style, the fall of a five-floor building under construction during a storm, owing to the poor-quality material used and the addition of an illegal floor, resulting in the death of five construction workers. The chapter reads as a transcription of a television report: ‘We have breaking news coming in’, announces Priscilla Thomas to the soundtracks of cymbals clashing, drums rolling, a globe spinning across the blue screen, the map of India scattering stars in its wake’ (SW 106-107). The rendering of the spectacular visual and aural aspects of the opening credits evidences the satire of the media craze around such events and of the aggrandizing rhetoric which amplifies the sense of urban crisis.<sup>59</sup> The text thus represents the catastrophe of urban decay, but also distances itself from the focus on spectacular collapses as it pits this highly-mediatised breaking down against an overlooked ‘minor one’ which is nonetheless a pivotal moment in the story. The unexplained collapse of a wall in a small orphanage allows an infant (‘Orphan’) to escape with a dog and to embark on a nocturnal journey across the city, which will lead him to his new home.

Dasgupta connects this sense of unreality to the fact that the rapid economic growth of Delhi is primarily based on financial and real estate speculation, the city being ruled by a ‘shadowy cabal’, ‘a backroom elite’ who secretly manages the city’s wealth, creating the collective sense of ‘living in a kind of fantasy’ (C 400). His analysis of the financialization of the economy and of ‘jobless growth’ through the prism of fantasy and mystery illustrates the amplifying movement of the epic mode, which intensifies the dislocations created by

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<sup>58</sup> Dupont, ‘The Dream of Delhi as a Global City’.

<sup>59</sup> See Sundaram, ‘Imaging Urban Breakdown’, pp. 254-255. For an example of Arundhati Roy’s consistent critique of Indian media, see ‘Peace is War: The Collateral Damage of Breaking News’ (2003), in *MSH*, pp. 227-241.

capitalist urban development. It may also be analysed as partaking of the formal freedom allowed by literary nonfiction, which easily moves between discrete registers. This romancing of urban growth is stretched even further: not only is Delhi doomed to self-annihilate, but its very reality comes to be doubted by its inhabitants.

Everything seemed to be an optical illusion created by Mephistophelian magicians to mask their own dark purposes [...]. Delhi became a surreal place to live, because as time went by people lost their faith that the purported nature of anything was the true one. They knew their society not through what they could see and read but through what they speculated or dreamt on fevered nights. (C 405)

Directly descended from Berman's analysis of Goethe's *Faust* as an embodiment of the contradictions of capitalist modernity, the reference to Mephistopheles suggests that this transformation is a deception resulting from evil bewitchment. In line with Dasgupta's anthropomorphism of the city as a monster progeny, this supernatural and moral reading of development hints at Dasgupta's humanist sensibilities, lamenting the human tragedy underlying modernisation.

The image of a counterfeit rebirth giving rise to a sham new city that is only made up of glittering surfaces also shapes Arundhati Roy's writing of Delhi in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, yet the imagination of development shifts from cataclysm to cover-up. Rather than disintegration, the dominant motif is that of the counterfeit city, the old masquerading as the new. The third chapter of the novel, aptly entitled 'Nativity', narrates both the miraculous appearance of a baby in the middle of the night on the pavement in Jantar Mantar, and the disastrous rebirth of Delhi as a magnet for tourism and foreign investment. Echoing Jha's contrasting a minor and a major building collapses, the juxtaposition of these two incommensurable events evidences Roy's politics of scale. The baby, surrounded with waste and ailing animals but heralded by 'a million stars' (M 95), a symbol of frail hope in the midst of India's protesting outcasts', contrasts with the colossal mutating city, imagined as an old woman being dressed-up. The interplay of scales only heightens the monstrous aspect of the transformation, from a mythical urban landscape to a grotesque spectacle.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Alex Tickell reads Indian neoliberal urbanism through the lens of Ash Amin's concept of 'telescopic urbanism', a form of urban planning which is 'largely numb to the interests of the increasingly disenfranchised and poor majority city'. The image of the telescope, which connects a distanced view of the city with the oblivion of the poor, resonates with the astronomical and optic imagery unfolded in Roy's novel (Ash Amin, 'Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor', *City*, 17.4 (2013), 479, quoted in Alex Tickell, 'Writing the City and Indian English Fiction: Planning, Violence, and Aesthetics', in *Planned Violence*, pp. 200-202).

Around her the city sprawled for miles. Thousand-year-old sorceress, dozing, but not asleep, even at this hour. Grey flyovers snaked out of her Medusa skull, tangling and untangling under the yellow sodium haze. Sleeping bodies of homeless people lined their high, narrow pavements, head to toe, head to toe, head to toe, looping into the distance. Old secrets were folded into the furrows of her loose, parchment skin. Each wrinkle was a street, each street a carnival. Each arthritic joint a crumbling amphitheatre where stories of love and madness, stupidity, delight and unspeakable cruelty had been played out for centuries. But this was to be the dawn of her resurrection. Her new masters wanted to hide her knobby, varicose veins under imported fishnet stockings, cram her withered tits into mauve padded bras and jam her aching feet into pointed high-heeled shoes. They wanted her to swing her stiff old hips and re-route the edges of her grimace upwards into a frozen, empty smile. It was the summer Grandma became a whore.

She was to become supercapital of the world's favourite new superpower. (M 96)

The anamorphic city is first presented as both exhausted and sublime, with her Medusa skull conjuring at once her formidable petrifying power and her loss of vitality. Her entangled flyover hair is reminiscent of the innumerable branches of the steel banyan tree sculpture which blinded Saddam Hussain, and of Tilo's hair, growing and crumbling at the same time (M 214). Above all, the furrowed, wrinkled skin and the damaged joints of the majestic city bursting at the seams resonate with descriptions of Anjum, pictured as a suffering yet unflappable tree in the small graveyard at the beginning of the novel, a regal matriarch ruling over the realm of the suffering and the dead (M 3).

The old sorceress is then forcibly rejuvenated to herald the advent of a makeshift 'new India', her body dressed-up, corseted and violently exposed. The passage shifts from one canonical trope, the city as a maternal protective figure ('Grandma'), to another, the prostitute city, usually associated with the Victorian fear of cities.<sup>61</sup> The process of transformation is then abruptly condensed in a brief cutting sentence, the proximity between 'Grandma' and the abusive term 'whore' reinforces the incongruous dimension of this transformation, this summary expressing the author's fierce anger. However, Roy turns the trope of the alluring city on its head as the city is no longer imagined as a temptress having a nefarious influence on its dwellers but a victim of its 'new masters', debasing the refuge maze-like city into a pathetic object of exhibition and consumption. The text draws on the connection between the city and artificiality, but shifts the connotation of the image from conservative morality to anti-capitalist politics, revealing Roy's reverence for the rich history of the ancient city, and her anger when faced with its destruction by neoliberal urbanism. Thus, while both Roy and Dasgupta stress the city's recent superficial making-

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<sup>61</sup> On Victorian cultural representations of cities as dens of vice, self-interest and depravation, see *The Victorian City*, and Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).

up, she shatters the Victorian trope of the new Babylon that he consciously plays with (C 206).<sup>62</sup> Roy's personification of the city as an old sorceress expresses a deeply sympathetic view of the city as a wounded figure and a victim of the endless appeal of the new which characterises the capitalist dispensation.

The particular time and setting of the scene weigh on this spectacular overview of the city, which ends with a prediction: 'She was to become supercapital of the world's favourite new superpower'. Indeed, Jantar Mantar is an open-air observatory built by Maharaja Jai Singh II under Mughal rule, which was meant to predict the movement of celestial bodies. This architectural trace of the multi-layered past of the capital is used by Roy as the site from which this sweeping prediction is made, satirising the overwhelming public discourse of India's 'arrival', the forward-looking ideology of neoliberal India, ready to sweep its past away. The final sentence ironically points to the role of cities in the global capitalist utopia. Yet the rest of the chapter insists on the crises triggered by the staggering transformation of Delhi, from corruption scandals and massive anti-corruption protests to the collapse of buildings and the upsurge in urban violence: 'In this way, in the summer of her renewal, Grandma broke' (M 99).

The city's accelerated growth is thus stylized as a delusive rejuvenation concealing exhaustion and depletion. Yet the motif of masquerade actually runs throughout the whole chapter, which tackles the 2011 anti-corruption protests in Delhi as a giant fraud, thus refracting the 'grand spectacle of historical events' through a satiric gaze.<sup>63</sup> These pages evidence Roy's writing strategy in order to engage with the contradictions of urban development, using both an oblique allegorical mode and an interventionist narrator, who directly comments on contemporary social issues. Thus, the narrative voice portrays Anna Hazare's hyper-mediatised fast as a 'circus', led by 'a tubby old Gandhian, former-soldier-turned-village-social-worker' (M 101). She also underlines the mystification at work in the campaign: 'like a magician at a children's birthday party, he performed tricks and conjured gifts out of thin air' (M 101-103). The clear reference to the anti-corruption activist, whom Roy also portrays as 'a freshly minted saint' in a 2011 opinion piece, excoriates the media frenzy around his populist movement which overshadows more pressing political struggles,

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<sup>62</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>63</sup> Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 7

as well as the activist's dubious nationalist affiliations and funding.<sup>64</sup> Through the narrator's ironic, castigating voice, Roy's satirical eye spares no one, uncovering the scam of anti-scam protests and the uneven power relations at work within the activist sphere. As will be developed in Chapter 6, her writing makes room for the myriad activists who gather at Jantar Mantar to raise their voice, from Kashmiri mothers to Maoist guerrilla fighters, showing determination in their desperate struggle, invisibilised by the media craze around Hazare's hunger strike. Hazare's caricature as an 'old man-baby', with a 'gummy Farex-baby smile', heralded by right wing Hindu leaders as 'a sign from the gods' (M 103-104), offers a grotesque contrast to the miraculous yet unnoticed appearance of the baby in the middle of the night which opens the chapter.

If Anjum is fascinated by the anti-corruption commotion, her friend Saddam Hussain is suspicious right from the start: 'it's the motherfucker of all scams' (M 107). The text openly satirizes the pastoral utopia painted by the leader, described as an all-inclusive 'Happy Meadow' (M 105) which is open to any opportunistic political coalitions and thus deprived of any political substance: 'his dream of a society free of corruption was like a happy meadow in which everybody, including the most corrupt, could graze for a while' (M 102). The allegory resonates with the 'rustic rhetoric and earthy aphorisms' of the village activist (M 102), thus strengthening the burlesque treatment of politics. The satirical tone is interesting with regards to the enduring antagonism between the city and country in the Indian public imagination, since, despite Roy's indictment of the urban bias of public policies and of the media showcasing 'new' Indian cities, she does not idealise the village as a utopian space providing a model for a better society either, departing from a Gandhian vision of village India.<sup>65</sup> The text meticulously details the taking over of this anti-corruption struggle by media corporations and young media professionals, cleverly orchestrating the spectacle of politics.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'I'd rather not be Anna' (2011), in *MSH*, pp. 612-617. Anna Hazare (born 1937) is an Indian social activist who led movements to promote rural development and investigate and punish corruption in public life. He started a hunger strike on 5 April 2011 to exert pressure on the Indian government to enact a stringent anti-corruption law, The Lokpal Bill. The fast, reminiscent of Gandhi's tactics, led to nationwide protests in support. It ended on 9 April 2011, a day after the government accepted Hazare's demands, before drafting a flawed bill. Hazare has been criticized for his alleged links with right wing Hindu activist group RSS, his support of BJP leader now Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and his views on caste.

<sup>65</sup> This satire of village-India is consistent with her condemnation of Gandhi's politics and his glorification of the village as the heart of 'authentic' India in her long introduction to B.R. Ambedkar's *The Annihilation of Caste* ('The Doctor and the Saint', in *MSH*, pp. 668-785).

<sup>66</sup> Tabish Khair's noir short-story, 'The Scam', also uses Jantar Mantar as its backdrop and emphasizes the media craze around a few protesters, ironically referring to Arundhati Roy as a conspicuous presence which draws the media in (Tabish Khair, 'The Scam', in *Delhi Noir*, ed. by Hirsh Sawney (New York: Akashic, 2009), pp. 255-267. Ebook).

These two distorted nativity scenes, opposing a plump politician and an actual baby, embody Roy's poetics of small things as the text clearly pits the orphan's tiny, vulnerable yet luminous presence against the swelling rumour surrounding the opportunistic activist, propelling him to 'instant stardom' (M 102). This contrast also encapsulates Roy's imagination of the city as the meeting point of the extremes of the social spectrum, the most vulnerable and the most powerful. Her cynical debunking of powerful figures (such as Anna Hazare, Narendra Modi, or Manmohan Singh) as mere frauds echoes Suketu Mehta's satirical treatment of right-wing leader Bal Thackeray and film star Amitab Bachchan in *Maximum City*, both writers conveying their opposition through a downsizing rhetorical strategy.<sup>67</sup> The juxtaposition of Delhi's metamorphosis with the account of the 2011 summer highlights how inextricably connected the spectacularisation of urban space and of politics are.

## II. Writing Spatial Amnesia

### 1. Urban Space as Spectacle

The mock-resurrection depicted by Roy intensifies the counterfeit rebirth of the city that Dasgupta highlights and hints at the omnipotence of images in the new global city, epitomized by the woman's 'frozen, empty smile' (M 96). The transformation flattens the multi-layered urban body into a two-dimensional advertising billboard, as ridiculously cheerful as the above-mentioned giant steel sprouts. Roy's feminisation of the city, whose body is meant to be exhibited and advertised, refracts the *rule by aesthetics* which has defined the development of Indian cities since the 2000s, turning the city into a showcase to satisfy the eye of both tourists and foreign investors.<sup>68</sup> The invasion of urban space by a

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<sup>67</sup> See chapter 3. Filippo Menozzi examines the representation of violence and the blend of fiction and nonfiction in Roy's novel and argues that this critical overview of contemporary Indian politics, resembling an essayistic analysis, is not external to the narration but belongs to Roy's 'digressive realism', testifying to Roy's 'engagement with deeper ethical impulse of realism to represent meaningfully a conflictual and fragmented reality' ("Too Much Blood for Good Literature": Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and the Question of Realism', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55.1 (2019), 20-33).

<sup>68</sup> I borrow the term from D. Asher Ghertner's *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). This issue is also addressed by Lalit Batra (among others): 'This new-found

proliferation of images promoting India's 'superpower' is mediated by Roy in the following passage:

*India! India!* The chant had gone up – on TV shows, on music videos, in foreign newspapers and magazines, at business conferences and weapons fairs, at economic conclaves and environmental summits, at book festivals and beauty contests. *India! India! India!*

Across the city, huge billboards jointly sponsored by an English newspaper and the newest brand of skin-whitening cream (selling by the ton) said: *Our Time is Now*. (M 96-97)

The excerpt, which depicts the media craze around the alleged 'advent' of 'New India', is striking in its condensation of the multiple facets of global capitalism.<sup>69</sup> It captures the paradoxical yet intimate connection between globalization and the rising rumour of triumphant nationalism that Dasgupta also underscores: 'they felt that this was *their moment*' not only in a local but in a global sense' (C 398). The sense of national advent, displayed by huge billboards, is significantly fostered by an 'English newspaper' and a brand of 'skin-whitening cream', hinting at the enduring imperial relationships involved in this newfound economic power. Roy's essays also tackle the underlying subservience to former colonial empires implied by India's economic liberalization: 'Is globalization about "eradication of world poverty", or is it a mutant variety of colonialism, remote controlled and digitally operated?' she asks in a 2001 piece.<sup>70</sup> The billboard announcing the 'arrival' of India belongs to a network of triumphalist visual messages disseminated across the city that the three writers observe, all signifying novelty, rebirth, transformation. 'We Are building New India', announces a billboard sponsored by an Emirati construction firm in Jha's novel (SW 86). Dasgupta humorously explains his initial misreading of the advertising message 'Change Keeps Boring Away' as referring to 'boring' or drilling holes, before grasping its

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urge to be a world class city, a city which is financially, infrastructurally and visually appealing enough to be recommended by credit rating agencies to be put high on the global investment map, necessitates remapping, packaging and advertising the city in such a way that it is able to realize monopoly rents.' (Lalit Batra, 'Deconstructing the World Class City', *Seminar*, 582 (February 2008), <[http://www.india-seminar.com/2008/582/582\\_lalit\\_batra.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2008/582/582_lalit_batra.htm)> [accessed 12 February 2021]).

<sup>69</sup> 'Our time is now' echoes the final words of finance minister Manmohan Singh's budget speech delivered in 1991, inaugurating the New Economic Policy: 'But as Victor Hugo once said, 'no power on earth can stop an idea whose time has come.' I suggest to this august House that the emergence of India as a major economic power in the world happens to be one such idea. Let the whole world hear it loud and clear. India is now wide awake. We shall prevail. We shall overcome' (Manmohan Singh, *Budget Speech of 1991-1992*, <<https://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/lsdeb/ls10/ses1/1924079101.htm>> [accessed 1 April 2021]). In Roy's novel, Tilo's refusal to teach the insurrection song 'We Shall Overcome' to her pupils in the graveyard reinforces the refutation of this triumphalist nationalist rhetoric (M 397).

<sup>70</sup> Roy, 'The Ladies Have Feelings', in *MSH*, p. 114.

actual (though ungrammatical) meaning, that of boredom, expressing the city's worship of speeded-up mutation (C 26).<sup>71</sup>

Roy, Jha and Dasgupta all critically reconfigure what David Harvey calls 'urban entrepreneurialism', a doctrine tied up with the neoliberal turn, which conceives of the city as a spectacle and a commodity, a magnet drawing in investors and tourists rather than catering to urban-dwellers' needs.<sup>72</sup> Harvey argues that in the late capitalist era, the increasing inter-urban competition is primarily waged through marketing and spectacle: 'Above all, the city has to appear as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or to visit, to play and consume in'.<sup>73</sup> The creation of an attractive urban imagery is notably based on the production and consumption of spectacles, events, and investments in places of 'conspicuous high consumption' such as giant shopping malls, waterfronts, sports stadia.<sup>74</sup> Through the example of the alleged 'renaissance' of Baltimore, Harvey stresses the urban deterioration that this image of prosperity conceals, conjuring up the circus as an echo to Roy's masquerade: 'the circus succeeds even if the bread is lacking. The triumph of image over substance is complete'.<sup>75</sup> If this is true of most projects of urban redevelopment around the world, the remodelling of Indian cities assumes geographical and historical specificities, such as their ongoing uneven relationship with former metropolises.

As Partha Chatterjee shows, in post-liberalization India, urban development is more and more indexed on aesthetic criteria, the aim of public and private developers being that of turning Indian metropolises into world-class cities.<sup>76</sup> Ghertner convincingly demonstrates the way in which the development plan of Delhi in the last decades has been dictated by *images* of 'global' cities visions of the future rather than actual statistics and data. Searle also examines the way Indian real estate promoters in Jaipur use the 'Mantra of growth', based on projections of future social mobility rather than precise figures, in order to draw foreign investors in the increasingly financialized real estate market.<sup>77</sup> Thus, if this chapter

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<sup>71</sup> The idea that the form of the city is gradually more and more determined by a network of images (billboards, television and mobile screens, films) is encapsulated by Ravi Sundaram's notion of 'media urbanism' (Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>72</sup> David Harvey, 'From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism', *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 71 (1989), 3-17.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 9.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. The ubiquitous shopping malls crystallise the focus on spectacle and entertainment, as well as the discriminatory logic at work in urban development, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>76</sup> Chatterjee, 'Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?'. See also Delhi Master Plan for 2021: 'Vision-2021 is to make Delhi a global metropolis and a world-class city' (Delhi Development Authority, 7 February 2007, p. 1, <<https://dda.org.in/planning.aspx>> [accessed 29 June 2021]).

<sup>77</sup> 'Rather than signs that Indian society is rapidly globalizing, new buildings are predicated on *forecasted* social and economic changes. Concrete and steel obscure the stories about India's growth that fuel



focuses on Delhi, the economy of appearances, involving the commissioning of spectacular infrastructural and structural projects and ‘beautification’ campaigns, encompasses numerous megacities in India, such as Mumbai, Bangalore, or Chennai.<sup>78</sup> Mahesh Rao’s novel *The Smoke is Rising*, which imagines the concurrent launching of the first Indian spacecraft to the moon and the development of a giant theme park based on a Hindu temple in the quiet town of Mysore, captures the city’s meteoric global development, resting upon technology, spectacle, entertainment and the commodification of heritage.<sup>79</sup>

Raj Kamal Jha’s *She Will Build Him a City* uses multiple viewpoints to capture the multitude of lived experiences of a new city, from a nurse living in a slum to a wealthy businessman, from a middle-class widow to a group of street-dwellers settled under the highway. What stands out is the representation of the businessman’s fascination with the glittering surfaces of the nascent city, and the pleasure he takes in moving, unhampered by material obstacles, from one new building to another, such as the Mall and the Hotel. He is a member of the hypermobile economic elite whose lifestyle is defined by profit-making, high-end consumption and entertainment, sealed from the city’s other social classes. The novel intensifies the eroticism of steel and glass architecture, as its aesthetic purity and its symbolisation of economic power elicit the character’s desire and pride, his sense of ownership indicated by the repeated use of the possessive pronoun ‘his’ to refer to the city.<sup>80</sup>

If the erection of New City is first described through the eyes of Ms Rose as a tragic earthquake, it is depicted through Man’s mesmerized viewpoint as the birth of a perfect urban creation, their respective experience reflecting their asymmetrical positions in the city.

He will show her his city.

New City, that’s still not ready, that’s being built as they watch, freshly laid tar on its streets gleaming, all its buildings scrubbed and polished [...], as if all the parts of the

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construction’ (Searle, p. 2); ‘Indeed, I argue that representations are not incidental to real estate practices – they do not just stand in for something else that is more real – rather, they *constitute* attempts to construct new markets’ (Searle, p. 12).

<sup>78</sup> See Naresh Fernandes’s essay, *City Adrift: A Short Biography of Mumbai* (Delhi: Aleph, 2013) and Pushpa Arabindoo, “‘City of Sand’: Stately Re-Imagination of Marina Beach in Chennai”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35.2 (2011), 379-401. This is also true of ‘secondary cities’ (see *Subaltern Urbanisation in India*).

<sup>79</sup> Another example would be the Akshardam Temple in Delhi a ‘theme park temple’. See Sanjay Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism. Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> About the use of monumental architecture as a direct index of a country’s power, in particular in ‘developing nations’, see Leslie Sklair, *The Icon Project: Architecture, Cities, and Capitalist Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

city have been bought in a box, from a shop that sells cities, and is now being unpacked, the different pieces laid out across what was once a thousand villages. (SW 64)

Here the genesis is not imagined as an organic phenomenon but as an entirely artificial and standardised one. The gleaming city that the character contemplates seems all the more perfect as it stems from a mechanical production process, giving birth to a flawless commodity. Knowing the paramount place of shopping in this ‘landscape of pure commerce’ (C 634), the metaphor of the city as commodity sold in a shop creates a vertiginous *mise en abyme*, underlining the commodification of urban space. What elicits the character’s thrill is also the immaculate aspect of this new, untarnished space in which to start from scratch, a perfect embodiment of the global capitalist utopia. The unfinished aspect of the city fuels the character’s fantasies, allowing him to project himself in the future of this gleaming environment: ‘he will show her his city’.

In fact, the entire novel is structured by prolepsis: not only is the basic plotline announced at the beginning of the novel in a metafictional fashion (‘He is going to kill and he is going to die’ (SW 4)) but the fabric of the plot is also mostly made of the characters’ anticipations, projections, dreams and nightmares, from Man’s imaginary travels around world cities and his gruesome fantasies of cannibalism and rape, to Woman’s anticipated dialogue with her sleeping daughter and her dream of being carried by a giant woman across the city (SW 12-14). Man creates a fantasy around the little girl selling balloons in the street, whom he has abducted, and with whom he imagines his future life in the city throughout the novel. From the title to the final prophetic sentence of the novel (‘And that is why, once you wake up, we will build him a city’ (SW 339)), the city is represented as a product of each character’s imagination. The switch between pronouns (from ‘she’ to ‘he’ to ‘we’) hints at various versions of the city of the future, from a landscape of pure commerce to a collective creation meant to sustain and protect its dwellers. In a utopian move, all characters have the power to shape the city according to their desires fuelled by the luminescent landscape which each of them admires. Their desires can involve walking in a cinema screen to join the universe of the film (Ms Rose), magically opening the doors of all the shops in the mall (Orphan), stopping all motion in the city except one’s own (Man). In fact, the chapter ‘Freeze Frame’ consists of one of Man’s daydreams in which he is the only one able to move in a petrified space, betraying his tremendous desire of control over urban space.<sup>81</sup> If we follow

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<sup>81</sup> ‘That’s what Balloon Girl says he should do, that’s why Balloon Girl helps, she makes the entire world stop so that he is the only one who can move, so that the crowds don’t slow him down [...]. He’s walked into a painting whose canvas is limitless, stretches from sky to sky, glass to glass.’ (SW 249).

the writer's claim that a city is a collection of hopes, i.e. of stories created everyday by urban-dwellers, the centrality of projections in the novel and the blurred boundary between reality and potentiality merely intensify this constant production of fictions at work in any city.<sup>82</sup> The omnipresence of projections also stems from the futuristic dimension of New City, in which everything is yet to come. This young city is a hypertrophied version of future-oriented neoliberal Indian cities, in which images, spectacles and projections are paramount.

The character's passion for this beautiful, clean, spectacular space is expressed through panoramic nocturnal views of the city. Seen from the heights of a skyscraper, the city becomes a landscape of pristine surfaces, a network of geometrical patterns and a moving web of reflections and artificial lights.

He loves New City. Especially at this time in the night, especially from this height, because then he cannot see a single imperfection. It spreads below him, dark and flowing, like the sky itself, dotted with stars on the ground, lights, the diffused glare of the traffic below, points of light that move, and, in between, a wisp of smoke rising, from an oven in the slums across the metro tracks. (SW 64)

The character looms over this upside-down sky illuminated by constellations of headlights and traffic lights, as though the picture-window of his apartment conflated natural and artificial lights. If elevation smoothens the surface of the city (see also SW 221), the final detail of the smoke rising from the fissures of the city, in between the moving star-like headlights, comes to disrupt the perfect geometry of this technological spectacle. The passage connects these two jarring elements, suggesting that the archaic fire from the slums is produced by the same late capitalist system as the cars and the skyscrapers, a sign of 'simultaneous yet non-synchronized ways of being'.<sup>83</sup>

This vertiginous spectacle elicits the character's fantasies of flying over the city, which denote both his fascination for the city and his desire to escape it (SW 95, 122, 129, 332). This experience of the city from above echoes Certeau's description of being 'lifted out of the city's grasp' as he gazes upon New York from above, momentarily immobilising the urban agitation, echoing Man's 'freeze frame' fantasy.<sup>84</sup> Man's totalizing gaze stems from

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<sup>82</sup> Jha, Interview with the author, 2017. This argument is developed in Chapter 2.

<sup>83</sup> Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments: Nature, Culture and the Contemporary Indian Novel in English* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 89.

<sup>84</sup> 'To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic [...]. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching

his dominant position as a member of the economic elite of the city, which is constantly contrasted with the other characters' pedestrian journeys. The character seems insulated from the gritty materiality of the streets, secluded as he is in his apartment or in the anonymous space of the Hotel. Certeau's comparison with Icarus flying above waters is materialised by Man's fantasies of flying over the fluid ocean of the city, which end up in a fatal fall to the ground.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the latter tragedy, told in a chapter entitled 'Falling Man', strikingly echoes Don DeLillo's 2006 eponymous novel, which also explores the protagonist's intimate relationship with architecture. The eroticism of spectacular architecture is at the heart of Don DeLillo's writing of New York, in particular in *Cosmopolis*, which closely portrays the protagonist's passion for the building he owns, perceived both as monumental and immaterial, belonging to the future.<sup>86</sup>

The ecstasy felt when watching the smooth, immaculate glass walls of the buildings, showcases of a 'new', 'world-class' urban India, is also closely described in Jha's earlier novel *If You're Afraid of Heights*. The unique new building in the 'dying city', which is aptly called Paradise Park, elicits collective rather than individual awe, and the text insists on its much-commented presence in public space as a sign of the city's modernisation. Paradise Park is described as incommensurable with other buildings by virtue of its scale and its fantastical dimension (IF 14). Like New City's Mall and Hotel, Paradise Park is characterised by its circular shape, its perfectly regular surfaces, and its apparent limitless height, escaping the grasp of human perception. The disorienting experience of watching a landscape from the heights is intensified through a fantastical story that is peddled around the city, turning the building into a magical optical machine. The rumour is that people are able to see the waves crashing in the Bay of Bengal from the highest floors, the glass wall acting as a telescope: 'you could even see, if you were lucky, little crabs left behind by the water flailing their legs' (IF 15). This surreal telescopic view allows the viewer to be both

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world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more.' (Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, p. 233).

<sup>85</sup> The analogy between the landscapes of New City and New York is also strengthened by Certeau's description of the latter as a city turning its back on its past, throwing itself into the future: 'Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding.' (Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, p. 91).

<sup>86</sup> 'They looked empty from here. He liked that idea. They were made to be the last tall things, made empty, designed to hasten the future. They were the end of the outside world. They weren't here exactly. They were in the future, a time beyond geography and touchable money and the people who stack and count it.' (Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York, Scribner, 2003), p. 36). The dislocated psyche of DeLillo's characters (in *Cosmopolis* and *Falling Man*) also resonates with Jha's, both writers refracting how crushing the capitalist urban environment is.

inside and outside the city. If the novel identifies Kolkata as the ‘dying city’, the resonances between Jha’s two novels, from the architectural gaze to recurring motifs (such as the obsession with flying) and narrative structure all point to Kolkata as being caught in the same process of ‘spectacular’ urban development as other Indian cities, offering an alternative to Chaudhuri’s melancholy vision of the city, which constantly stresses its disconnect from global capitalism.

The adoption of aesthetic architectural standards of the ‘world-class city’, such as colossal glass buildings (which many commentators consider as unsuitable for the Indian tropical climate), also involves the ‘beautification’ of Indian cities, which entails the cleansing of the city from its poorest dwellers. Arundhati Roy describes this process in a passage from a 2007 opinion piece, evoking the Supreme Court’s decision to authorise the demolition of squatter colonies and the removal of unlicensed street vendors in Delhi, which resonates with her account of Delhi’s development in her novel.

Even as Delhi was being purged of its poor, a new kind of city was springing up around us. A glittering city of air-conditioned corporate malls and multiplexes where multinational corporations showcased their newest products [...]. Prices shot up. The mall business boomed, it was the newest game in town. Some of these malls, mini-cities in themselves, were also illegal constructions and did not have the requisite permissions. But here the Supreme Court viewed their misdemeanours through a different lens.<sup>87</sup>

The rebirth of the city is here not depicted as a cosmetic cover-up but as the swift eruption of a gleaming landscape of commerce based on the concurrent eviction of the city’s poor. The interweaving of the two events in the passage points to the political and legal double standards of urban planning, as public authorities working hand in glove with corporations to cleanse the city from all sign of poverty, displacing thousands of informal housing dwellers. It thus captures the way these new beautiful cities, displays of ‘Shining India’, are deeply rooted in plunder.

## 2. Cities Built on Plunder

The epic narratives of uneven urban development dramatize the ways in which the sudden emergence or rebirth of glittering Indian cities rests on plunder and devastation. I argue that they intensify both the process of accumulation by dispossession (as theorised by

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<sup>87</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘Scandal in the Palace’, in *Listening to Grasshoppers*, p. 122.

David Harvey) and the ‘politics of forgetting’ implemented by the Indian state, conveying their material and symbolical aspects, writing against the destruction of people’s living spaces and against their erasure from the concerns of Indian society. In fact, the aspiration to turn Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata into mirrors of a new global India has led to an urban development based on what anthropologists Yeoh and Lee call the ‘politics of forgetting’.<sup>88</sup> Leela Fernandes develops this concept in relation with globalizing India, explaining the ways in which the post-reform redefinition of citizenship along urban middle-class consumer lines has only strengthened existing socio-economic hierarchies and marginalised the underprivileged majority of the country, left out as embodiments of the country’s past: ‘It is this shift from the identity of the middle classes as workers to that of consumers which captures the politics of forgetting in liberalizing India’.<sup>89</sup>

Roy’s imagination of the politics of dispossession is multi-faceted, but the antithesis of light and darkness, which runs throughout her writings, captures the way city-lights both embody and eclipse the plunder of natural resources and the attacks on subaltern people’s rights. The following passage is told through Tilo’s viewpoint, as she rests at night in her room, having rescued the miraculous baby from the pavement. It exemplifies Roy’s constant shuttling between macroscopic and microscopic scales, alternating between distanced views of the city and close-ups on urban spaces and bodies.

She could hear her hair growing. It sounded like something crumbling. A burnt thing crumbling. Coal. Toast. Moths crisped on a light bulb. She remembered reading somewhere that even after people died, their hair and nails kept growing. Like starlight, travelling through the universe long after the stars themselves had died. Like cities. Fizzy, effervescent, simulating the illusion of life while the planet they had plundered died around them.

She thought of the city at night, of cities at night. Discarded constellations of old stars, fallen from the sky, rearranged on Earth in patterns and pathways and towers. (M 214)

The scalar expansion is here particularly spectacular since the text follows the character’s meandering trail of thoughts and sensations, hinting at her obsession with death. The passage details her synesthetic perception of intangible bodily growth, which paradoxically evokes

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<sup>88</sup> Integral to globalization processes, the politics of forgetting is defined as a strategy ‘where forgetting and remembering – the rendering of people ‘in’ and ‘out’ of place – are fluid but intentional acts intimately threaded into power struggles among different classes of actors’ (Yong-Sook Lee and Brenda S.A. Yeoh, ‘Globalisation and the Politics of Forgetting: Introduction’, *Urban Studies*, 41 (2004), 2300).

<sup>89</sup> Leela Fernandes, ‘The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India’, *Urban Studies*, 41 (2004), 2428. This resonates with Rob Nixon’s notion of excluded ‘unimagined communities’, regarded as ‘what disturbs the implied trajectory of unitary national ascent’ (Nixon, p. 151).

decay ('a burnt thing crumbling').<sup>90</sup> The macabre amplification of organic rhythm recalls the protagonist's listening to people's 'blood flow, skin crawl, hearts pump' in Jha's novel (SW 6), all the more as the character identifies her body with a corpse. Through a vertiginous distancing effect, the infinitesimal signs of posthumous vitality are related to the cosmic phenomenon of light generated by dead stars. The stellar metaphor brings to mind satellite views of the earth which show light pollution around the globe, megacities standing out as luminescent constellations in the darkness. The unexpected material comparison between human corpses and celestial bodies distorts the usual metaphysical association of death and heaven, expressing not so much the belief in an ethereal afterlife as the notion of a spectral life.<sup>91</sup> If the city's fall from the sky is not dramatized as in Jha's novel, cities are still imagined as graveyards of fallen stars, made of 'rearranged' dead cosmic matter. At odds with vitalist depictions of the city as a growing organism, the text draws on the trope of the necropolis.<sup>92</sup> It exposes the city's vitality and luminosity as a mere simulacrum of life that conceals the vast-scale depletion on which it is based, echoing the masquerade of urban rejuvenation described earlier.<sup>93</sup> Yet the cemetery-city is not only macabre: it takes on a new literal meaning as the protagonist Anjum and her marginal friends find a home in a derelict graveyard on the fringe of Old Delhi, dwelling between the living and the dead and providing a utopian if humble alternative to the sham of the shining global city. This community of urban outcasts, doomed to be hidden or forgotten, thus appears as a reflection of the 'discarded constellation of old stars'.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> The enlarging movement of Roy's writing, which amplifies bodily sensations, explores what Bachelard describes as the power of the magnifying glass, shifting the emphasis from sight to sound. With the example of the botanist's magnifying glass, the philosopher argues that aggrandising minuscule elements opens up new worlds, from which 'images beg[i]n to abound, then grow, then escape', 'liberated from dimension'. Tilo's magnifying inner ear makes images abound (coal, toast, moths) and the minuscule is freely connected to the great. However, Bachelard's association of the miniature world with the 'fresh eye' of youth on the world is twisted as Roy's micro-scale writing generates images of decay, related to loss and mourning (Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 154-155).

<sup>91</sup> The life-in-death of these cities echo the tombstones-skyscrapers spreading through Bombay in Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which also symbolise a macabre urban growth.

<sup>92</sup> About urban vitalism, see Christophe Den Tandt, 'From "Web of Life" to Necropolis: An Ecocritical Perspective on Urban Vitalism in Late-Nineteenth and Early-Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Poetry', *Comparative American Studies*, 7.2 (2009), 98-110.

<sup>93</sup> The direct connection between urban lights and environmental plunder that Roy establishes brings to mind McDuffie's discussion of cities as energy systems and of the fictionalisation of energy in Victorian culture and literature (see Allen MacDuffie, *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>94</sup> I will use the term 'urban outcast' in the thesis in reference to Madhurima Chakraborty and Umme Al-wazedī's definition: 'those on the receiving ends of exclusionary practices' for multiple reasons, including contemporary acts of marginalizing and practices of social, economic and political exclusion entrenched in the Hindu caste system in India (Madhurima Chakraborty, 'Introduction: Whose City?', in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts*, p. 3).

Another nocturnal passage connects the illusory nature of the city lights with the blurry boundary between life and death, growth and decay.

Harsh neon light masquerading as the moon streamed through the window. A few weeks ago, walking across a steep, over-lit flyover at night, she eavesdropped on a conversation between two men wheeling their bicycles. 'Is sheher mein ab raat ka sahaara bhi nahin milta.' In this city we've even lost the shelter of the night. She lay very still, like a corpse in a morgue.  
Her hair was growing.  
Her toenails too.  
The hair on her head was dead white.  
The triangle of hair between her legs was jet black.  
What did that *mean*?  
Was she old or still young?  
Was she dead or still alive? (M 297)

The overheard conversation identifies the night as yet another resource which the city's artificial lights take away from these men, probably migrant workers. Here the 'politics of forgetting' is hinted at by the detail of the bicycles, wheeled on a lit elevated road which epitomizes the new city's dedication to car-owners, the urban plan being oblivious of other urban-dwellers. If night may symbolically signify disempowerment, it is also imagined as a precious resource in Roy and Jha's writing. Darkness fosters the character's ability to bend the harsh rules of the city, as shown by the nocturnal gatherings at Jantar Mantar, the festivities led by the hijra community, the 'slow goose-chase' through the 'forbidden city' or the underground operations led by the Kashmiri activist Musa.<sup>95</sup> The protective dimension of the night is also confirmed by the quiet comforting presence of two bulls outside Tilo's house, which are 'the colour of night. The stolen colour of what-used-to-be-night' (M 298).

The resonances with the above-quoted excerpt evidence the character's obsession with posthumous organic growth and its association with urban transformation. Tilo's conflictual consciousness of her own organism is heightened by the poetical aspect of the passage, owing to the disposition of the short sentences on the page and the play on sounds. Reminiscent of Roy's distinctive use of typography and of her extreme attention to the sounds of words in *The God of Small Things*, the series of brief observations, based on parallelisms and antitheses, expresses the fragmentation of her body into different parts, which evolve either accordingly or discordantly, thus amplifying the contradictory entanglement of growth and degeneration at the scale of her body and of the city. It suggests that Tilo's bodily life is intimately connected to that of the city, since both are caught up in

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<sup>95</sup> These passages are more precisely examined in Chapter 6 of this dissertation.



a disorienting process of macabre growth which embodies the contradictions of uneven development.

City lights overshadowing the dying planet constitute a recurrent motif in Roy's writings. This delusory luminosity illustrates India's lopsided growth, based on the exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of urban areas:

Skyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were bottled and sold in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles. Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees. Everyone was happy. Away from the lights and advertisements, villages were being emptied. Cities too. Millions of people were being moved, but nobody knew where to. (M 98)<sup>96</sup>

The eruption of cities is accompanied by a general commodification of natural resources, conveyed through the incongruous foreshortening image of a direct conversion and compression of entire rivers and mountains into bottles and missiles.<sup>97</sup> Amid this landscape of all-encompassing capitalist accumulation which supposedly satisfies 'everyone', electricity-generating dams play a central role. Megadams partake of the heroic geste of India's postcolonial development, heralded by Nehru as 'the temples of modern India', emblems of the country's new independent power.<sup>98</sup> If the principles of a socialist planned economy have gradually been relinquished by the following governments, the emphasis on gigantic infrastructure has not, and the construction of megadams (which has become 'a kind of national performance art') has been going on in spite of their acknowledged environmental damages.<sup>99</sup> This is one of Roy's long-standing political concerns: building up on her Booker Prize celebrity to defend the rights of local people and to raise awareness of endangered ecosystems, she has been waging a tenacious struggle against the transnationally funded Narmada river valley hydroelectricity project for twenty years, documenting the

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<sup>96</sup> The resonances between this passage and an excerpt from Roy's essay 'Power Politics' are striking: 'When all the rivers and valleys and forests and hills of the world have been priced, packaged, bar-coded, and stacked in the local supermarket, when all the hay and coal and earth and wood and water have been turned to gold, what then shall we do with all the gold? Make nuclear bombs to obliterate what's left of the ravaged landscapes and the notional nations in our ruined world?' ('Power Politics', in *MSH*, p. 80).

<sup>97</sup> Roy's representation of the parasitic growth and counterfeit modernity of Indian cities brings to mind the rhetoric used by anticolonial intellectuals, such as Gandhi and Tagore, although it clearly departs from Gandhi's anti-urban bias (Rabindranath Tagore, 'City and Village', in *Anthology of the Modern Indian City*, vol. 1, pp. 112-125).

<sup>98</sup> *Modern Temples of India: Selected Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru at Irrigation and Power Projects*, ed. by C.V.J. Sharma (Delhi: Central Board of Irrigation and Power, 1989), pp. 40-49, quoted in Roy, 'Power Politics', in *MSH*, p. 92. India is the third most prolific dam builder in the world (Nixon, p. 154).

<sup>99</sup> Nixon, p. 157.

struggle of Narmada Bachao Andolan movement.<sup>100</sup> The scandal of villages drowned because of dam projects is also alluded to in the novel, when a man working as a watchman in Delhi dreams of his village before it was drowned by a dam.<sup>101</sup> The comparison of the cities with Christmas trees ('Massive dams lit up the cities like Christmas trees') strengthens the spectacularisation of urban space under neoliberal urbanism, cities being conceived as shining display-windows, meant to dazzle and entertain. The case of dams, generating light for cities at the expense of rural inhabitants and environment, evidences how Roy's metaphors are always grounded in the materiality of capitalist development.

Indeed, the dams, among other infrastructural projects, also entail the exodus of evicted rural people, deprived of their land in the name of urban growth. The shortcut connecting dams to cities shows how Roy conceives of the urban and the rural as inherently interconnected. As Rashmi Varma argues, the inextricable relation between the country and the city was elided in anti-colonial nationalist discourses, which regarded the city as a foreign intervention and romanticized the village as constitutive of national consciousness, resulting in the overlooking of urban issues in the postcolonial development project. The country and the city actually 'occupy overlapping spheres', in material and cultural terms.<sup>102</sup> This is even more the case in the era of globalization, which Roy also designates as a blinding but selective spotlight leaving Indian rural areas in the dark:

I think of globalization like a light which shines brighter and brighter on a few people and the rest are in darkness, wiped out. They simply can't be seen. The lobotomy in the West is that you stop seeing something and then, slowly, it's not possible to see it. It never existed and there is no possibility of an alternative.<sup>103</sup>

The metaphorical antithesis of light and shadow is used as an allegory and conveys the unevenness of global capitalist development, consistent with the idea that cities hold the light at the expense of the countryside. The writer's repeated indictment of the neglect of the countryside underlines her awareness of the disproportionate focus of public discourse on cities. The comparison with excerpts from the novel suggests that fiction enables the author

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<sup>100</sup> On this subject, see Arundhati Roy, 'The Greater Common Good' (1999), in *MSH*, pp. 25-75. The NBA resistance is cited by David Harvey as one of the grassroots local movements resisting accumulation by dispossession, along with the tribal organisation against the set-up of Special Economic Zones in Nandigram, in West Bengal (Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 19). On the dispossession of the rural community of the Narmada Valley, see also Orijit Sen's graphic novel, *The River of Stories* (Delhi: Kalpavriksh, 1994).

<sup>101</sup> 'In his dream his village still existed. It wasn't at the bottom of a dam reservoir. Fish didn't swim through his windows. Crocodiles didn't knife through the high branches of the Silk Cotton trees. Tourists didn't go boating over his fields, leaving rainbow clouds of diesel in the sky.' (M 113).

<sup>102</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 124.

<sup>103</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Dam Buster', Interview with Madeleine Bunting, *Guardian*, 28 July 2001, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jul/28/fiction.arundhatiroy>> [accessed 19 February 2021].

to move away from a simple allegorical antithesis towards a more paradoxical relationship between light and death. The image of starlight may be construed as a variation on the cosmic imagery already identified in Dasgupta's and Jha's writing, unfolded to convey the deeply unsettling mechanisms of capitalistic development in the city.

Just as the imagery of light is grounded in the materiality of urban development, Dasgupta's use of 'eruption' as a metaphor is enriched by its association with the environmental devastation entailed by the development of the capital city. The last chapter of *Capital* assumes the form of a walking journey along the Yamuna river which runs on the east of Delhi, exposing the damages of urban growth on the ancient water body. It also brings the reader back to the prologue, in which the author-narrator visits an opulent villa on the outskirts of the city. In this instance, the text engages with the issue of water use in Delhi and describes the intricate irrigation system developed by the Mughal and its later depletion. As he walks along the polluted stream, guided by a city historian and activist, the author sheds light on the disquieting effects of capitalism on the river, and the eruption ultimately becomes literal: 'The water is black and chemically alive: it heaves muddily with bubbles erupting from its depths' (C 424). This simple sentence grasps and, once more, naturalises the disorder engendered by global capitalism, an uncontrollable process which makes the river convulse, bringing up a monstrous life spawn by pollution. The eruption does not highlight any organic process but is triggered by toxic substances, and is thus a direct reminder of the neoliberal exploitation of natural resources and mishandling of waste, partaking of what Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence'.<sup>104</sup> The bubbling river, which is a familiar phenomenon, suddenly tips over into eeriness, highlighting the ways in which global capitalism and its offspring not only disturb the socio-economic and cultural order but also upset the biosphere.<sup>105</sup>

Along with environmental destruction, Dasgupta tackles the 'accumulation by dispossession' at work in twenty-first-century India, in which a tiny ruling class gradually concentrates wealth through the dispossession of rural workers, a process which, as David

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<sup>104</sup> The notion refers to forms of environmental violence which escape the range of perception, both in time and space, notably the imperceptible yet devastating effects of global capitalist development on people and nature: 'by slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.' (Nixon, p. 2).

<sup>105</sup> About the destruction of the Yamuna and other commons in Delhi, see Amita Baviskar, *Uncivil City: Equity, Ecology and the Commons* (Delhi: Sage, 2020).

Harvey shows, is inherently linked to urbanisation.<sup>106</sup> Chapter 13 of *Capital*, which significantly opens with a passage from *The Communist Manifesto* about the advent of free trade and its destruction of all other ties between men, focuses on the dispossessed of neoliberal India, the expropriated rural workers and the exploited cheap labour who are eclipsed from the picture yet who form the basis of this spectacular growth.<sup>107</sup> The author significantly traces the vast operations of land grab back to colonial policies, the appropriation of land by corporations protected by a legal apparatus dating from the British rule such as the Land Acquisition Act of 1894: ‘and indeed the rampage of Indian elites in their own country bore a significant resemblance to that of nineteenth-century Europe imperialists in other countries’ (C 259). The colonial legacy of such practices is confirmed by Anita Soni’s works on the ‘internal colonialism’ at work in Indian peri-urban regions, where the urban rich colonize the rural fringes, turning farmers into unemployed and casual labour, simultaneously depleting groundwater tables.<sup>108</sup> More broadly speaking, Dasgupta’s account refracts in an eerie way the connections between capitalism and imperialism which have been theorised by David Harvey, capitalism being defined as essentially based on the search for territorial expansion and thus on dispossession.<sup>109</sup>

The process of concurrent environmental plunder and human dispossession, documented by Dasgupta in his essay, is also delineated in Jha’s 2015 novel through a supernatural lens. The novel represents the conversion of rural workers into cheap labour servicing the rising middle class through the portrayal of the watchman or of Kalyani’s brother, but it mostly refracts the appropriation of resources through the spectral presence of the dispossessed. New City is indeed haunted with the ghosts of the casualties of development, such as Ms Rose, who has taken shelter in the corners of the mall multiplex, the invisible guardian of the place which sits on the rural land she once inhabited.

For this is her home long before The Mall is even a drawing on a sheet, long before glass and steel begin to line up in the sky. This is her home when it is all farmland here, when wheat and mustard grow on either side of dirt-tracks, hard and unbroken, under a

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<sup>106</sup> ‘A process of displacement and dispossession, in short, also lies at the core of the urban process under capitalism. This is the mirror image of capital absorption through urban redevelopment.’ (Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 18).

<sup>107</sup> The beginning of the chapter describes the local manifestation of primitive accumulation as defined by Marx (see WReC, pp. 69-70).

<sup>108</sup> Anita Soni, ‘Urban Conquest of Delhi: Beneficiaries, Intermediaries and Victims’, in *Delhi: Urban Space and Human Destinies*, ed. by Véronique Dupont and others (Delhi: Manohar, 2000), pp. 75-96.

<sup>109</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

constant cloud of dust kicked up by a scorching summer wind that blows in from across the desert to the west. (SW 214)

The analepsis, which precedes the description of the eruption of new city, revives the pre-history of New City: Ms Rose's life was shaped by the constancy of dust, earth, the wind and the sun, ruled by the constraints of a rural desert environment, and utterly disrupted by the advent of new city. She is not the only remnant of the rural past of New City in Jha's novel. One of the characters is a cockroach, the reincarnation of a farmer's son who protested in vain against his father's forced selling of his land to developers. The swimming pool which he inhabits was carved out of his father's land, and this Kafkaian creature constitutes a residual presence of the city's suppressed past.

So special is this creature that it even has a name: CR, for 'cock roach' [...]. like Emaar, the construction company whose huge neon sign near the airport is the first thing you see as your plane beings to descend [...]. We Are Building the New India, the sign reads. 7 malls. 6 Special Economic Zones. 3 Villa complexes, Andalusian, Mediterranean, American. 2 Greg Normal golf courses. Once they start construction, there will, inevitably, be cockroaches. (SW 86)

The phonetic affinity between CR and Emaar enhances the contrast between this nearly invisible sign of the past and the hypertrophic sign of the construction of a new prosperous India. The transcription of the billboard messages, just like the reproduction of the shopping mall advertising blurb (SW 167) and of news tickers (SW 186-190), intensifies the abundance of written messages disseminated throughout urban space, all conspicuously expressing and performing the globalization of the city. Yet, the 'glorious red' (SW 89) colour of the cockroach and the fact that he is given a name (even a contracted one), unlike many of the novel's human characters, suggest it is not utterly erased by the neon signs of New City. The drawing together of the small creature and the giant advertising board shows how Jha's writing also plays on scalar variation, symbolically connecting the tiny remnants of a destroyed world with the construction of a nightmarish 'New India'. The enduring, if spectral, presence of the past is also alluded to at the end of the excerpt, foreshadowing the inevitable crawling cockroaches haunting New City. The reference to the crawling creatures, perceived in a rather sympathetic manner in the novel, echoes the 'thousand villages' destroyed to build New City, evoked at the end of Man's contemplation of the nascent city (SW 64). These final reminders of the erased past suggest the reduction of people to a residual presence, but also the impossibility to erase the history of a place and of its

inhabitants, which remains embedded in the fabric of the city.<sup>110</sup> The next section examines how these epic narratives render the exclusion and invisibilisation of the poorest part of the population through spectrality, this form of critical irrealism exposing the contradictions of a rebirth founded on destruction.

### 3. Countering The ‘Project of Unseeing’

Roy’s, Dasgupta’s, and Jha’s writings dramatize the damages triggered by accelerated urbanisation outside the city as well as within it. As Lalit Batra argues, slum-clearance is part and parcel of the endeavour to build a ‘world-class city’, envisioned by and for the middle class, who considers slums as signs of underdevelopment that must be wiped out.<sup>111</sup> The attempt to remove any sign of poverty from the city (from slum-dwellers to street vendors to homeless people, who have been under similar attacks since the 2000s) may be located within the politics of forgetting, defined earlier, implying the political and symbolical erasure of a significant part of the country’s population. These disenfranchised people, whether Muslims, tribal people, or Dalits, are the object of what Arundhati Roy calls ‘the Project of Unseeing’. Fiction, according to her, is the best way to challenge this scheme, because of its capacity to accommodate an infinite number of individual stories.<sup>112</sup>

If the colonial legacies of the categorisation of certain spaces as ‘slums’ have been amply demonstrated, the contemporary waves of slum-clearance can be more directly traced back to the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi (1975-77), during which an authoritarian state ‘beautified’ Delhi by systematically destroying long-lasting squatter colonies, as echoed in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*.<sup>113</sup> Particularly important waves of slum-

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<sup>110</sup> In a less hyperbolic manner, Amit Chaudhuri also evokes the destruction of the wetlands lying east of Kolkata because of the construction of new satellite towns such as Rajarhat. This complex ecosystem plays a vital ecological role in the city, serving as an exceptional natural drainage system to the whole city, and is getting gradually encroached upon by new constructions. New Town described as ‘emerging on flat expanses of horizon and land on which the sun had been setting and rising without anyone taking note, except for straggly peasant families who could now be pushed aside with impunity, or appropriated as labour for the planned offices and residential tower blocks’ (CAL 207).

<sup>111</sup> Batra, ‘Deconstructing the World Class City’.

<sup>112</sup> ‘Sometimes I feel [...] that fiction is uniquely positioned to do this, because fiction has the capaciousness, the freedom and latitude, to hold out a universe of infinite complexity [...]. I mean fiction that attempts to recreate the universe of the familiar, but then makes visible what the Project of Unseeing seeks to conceal.’ (Roy, ‘The Graveyard Talks Back’, in *Azadi*, pp. 167-168). See Chapter 6.

<sup>113</sup> On the colonial categorisation of slums, see Eric Denis and Véronique Dupont, ‘Identifier et dénombrer les slums dans les villes indiennes. De la genèse coloniale à la multiplication des mesures depuis l’Indépendance’, *Histoire et Mesure*, 34.1 (2019), 185-214. Similar destructions of working-class households in Kolkata have

clearances occurred in the 2000s, in particular in the lead-up to the Commonwealth Games of 2010, which resulted in the demolition of informal settlements along the Yamuna riverbank in 2004-2005 and in the partial relocation of the inhabitants on the outskirts of the city, far from their employment. The advertised project was to turn it into a riverside promenade, marketed as a tourist attraction, exposing once more the prioritising of spectacle-driven consumption in urban planning.<sup>114</sup> Ashraf, the protagonist of Aman Sethi's literary reportage, was one of the slum-dwellers who was evicted and whose precarious home was destroyed in the Yamuna Pushta demolition campaign, which triggered public outrage (FM 38-39).<sup>115</sup>

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* stresses the interwoven material and symbolical erasure involved in the process of slum demolition.

There were too many of them to be killed outright. Instead, their homes, their doors and windows, their makeshift roofs, their pots and pans, their plates, their spoons, their school-leaving certificates, their ration cards, their marriage certificates, their children's schools, their lifetime's work, the expression in their eyes, were flattened by yellow bulldozers imported from Australia. (Ditch Witch, they were called, the 'dozers.) They were State-of-the-Art machines. They could flatten history and stack it up like building material. (M 99)<sup>116</sup>

Roy's depiction of this forced displacement and annihilation opens with a cynical statement voicing the opinion of an excessively ruthless urban planner, using eviction as a substitute for a more final solution. The totalizing logic of the catalogue, which conflates the material and the immaterial, renders the comprehensive erasing force of global capitalism as it blows down habitations, possessions and lives, echoing Dasgupta's 'rapacious torrent'. Displacement goes hand in hand with the wiping out of people's pasts. The last sentence also encapsulates the broader erasure at work in the eviction process, that of the city's history. The text conflates the literal power of the machines with a symbolical erasure and

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been documented and analysed, see Ranu Ghosh's documentary film *Quarter Number 4/11* (Streamline Stories, 2011).

<sup>114</sup> About the connection between the globalization of Indian cities and the massive destruction of informal housing, see Gautam Bhan and Kalyani Menon-Sen, *Swept Off the Map: Surviving Eviction and Resettlement in Delhi* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2008); Lalit Batra, 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Slum Dwellers in "World-Class" Delhi', in *Finding Delhi: Loss and Renewal in the Megacity*, ed. by Bharati Chaturvedi (Delhi: Penguin, 2010) pp. 16-36.

<sup>115</sup> Similar processes have been at work in Mumbai, in the wake of the 1995 Slum Rehabilitation Act, which was used as a mechanism for transferring into private hands the public land on which many slums stood. See also Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum* (London: Granta, 2012).

<sup>116</sup> The echoes with Roy's essay 'Scandal in the palace' are striking. See above.

captures the all-encompassing mechanisms of capitalism: under this dispensation, even history can be destroyed, ‘flattened’ and commodified. The piling up of words mimics that of the rubble of history, meant to be stacked and re-used, their meaning destroyed, just like the debris of houses are used to accomplish a neoliberal urban scheme.<sup>117</sup> Just as Indian rivers are bottled and fish tinned, people’s history and homes can be contracted, absorbed and packaged into something ‘beautiful’, usable within the capitalist system. Once more, Roy’s writing hints at the global ramifications of the local politics of obliteration through the allusion to the imported bulldozers, highlighting her global understanding of urban transformations.<sup>118</sup>

The image of sight and blindness captured by Roy’s notion of ‘the project of unseeing’ is redolent of Rushdie’s metaphor of ‘city eyes’, or blindness to urban poverty, which is developed in *Midnight’s Children* and echoed by the notion of a ‘city visible but unseen’ in *The Satanic Verses*.<sup>119</sup> It is unfolded both literally and symbolically in Roy’s, Jha’s and Dasgupta’s works, as shown by this excerpt from *The Ministry*, using the choked roads of the megacity as the stage of a never-ending confrontation between the well-off and the others:

The newly dispossessed, who lived in the cracks and fissures of the city, emerged and swarmed around the sleek, climate-controlled cars, selling cloth dusters, mobile phone chargers, model jumbo jets, business magazines, pirated management books... The passengers looked out of their car windows and saw only the new apartment they planned to buy, the Jacuzzi they had just installed and the ink that was still wet on the sweetheart deal they had just closed. They were calm from their meditation classes and glowing from yoga practice. (M 100)

The passage, drawing on an emblematic scene of Indian urban life, dramatizes the intense proximity of the two opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, as well as the invisibilisation of the ‘dispossessed’ through the two antithetical lists, contrasting the small

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<sup>117</sup> About the commodification of urban history, see Ajay Gandhi, ‘Delicious Delhi: Nostalgia, Consumption and the Old City’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 23 (2016), 345-361. A. Gandhi examines the selective nostalgic recreation of Old Delhi (purged from its popular masses) as a cultural symbol and an object of consumption by the ruling classes, either through its use as a setting for national events such as the Republic Day parade or through its marketing in a food company implanted in shopping malls.

<sup>118</sup> The reference to Haussmann’s Paris by the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi reveals the continuities with imperial practices: ‘Paris was a slimy area before 1870, when all the slums were removed’ (M 98). Haussmann remains a ubiquitous controversial reference in public and theoretical discourses on urban modernisation (see David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003); Mike Davis, ‘Haussmann in the Tropics’ in *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 95-120).

<sup>119</sup> ‘When you have city eyes you cannot see the invisible people, the men with elephantiasis of the balls and the beggars in boxcars do not impinge on you, and the concrete sections of future drainpipes look like dormitories. My mother lost her city eyes and the newness of what she was seeing made her flush, newness like a hailstorm pricking her cheeks.’ (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, p. 99). See also Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, p. 241.



commodities circulating in informal economy networks with the luxurious visions of leisure, business and consumption held by the car passengers. As we will see in Chapter 2, Jha and Dasgupta similarly stress the use of the interstices of the city as a home by migrant workers, their constant friction with the middle classes, notably on the road, and their erasure from the cultural and political landscape of twenty-first-century India. Indeed, Dasgupta insists on the decision *not to see* migrant workers unfurling in the city, economic refugees who must flee the depleted countryside to find underpaid work in cities which make no provision for them.

The hundreds of millions of their country's poor were dazzlingly absent from their world, not only as a matter of individual obliviousness but as a matter of policy. Delhi's official urban strategy was to not *see* those millions of people, to treat them as ghosts who periodically contributed their labour to the feast, but who did not themselves require food or shelter or anything else. (C 273)

The blinkered perception is connected with spectrality, heightening the ruling classes' exploitation and erasure of the working classes, pictured as dehumanized ghosts. The writer insists on the symbolical-political aspect of this erasure or spectralisation, as he claims that, through the deliberate absence of construction of worker housing, the migrant workers are prevented from 'imagining' their belonging to the city. The constant threat weighing upon their settlements, their works, their existence, forbids them from claiming any 'right to the city', trapping them in an unstable existence.<sup>120</sup>

This blatantly unequal right to the city also characterises other cities, as evidenced by the hurried destruction of workers' quarters to build elite commercial and housing spaces in Mumbai, a project driven by 'a desire on the part of civic officials and property-developers to wipe clean the slate of Mumbai's working class history'.<sup>121</sup> In her correspondence, Sampurna Chattarji narrates the disorienting experience of driving through Girangaon, the former mill district of Mumbai, getting lost in the 'warren of lanes', where 'multi-storied towers [...] stand where once mill chimneys rose'.<sup>122</sup> Her short-story 'Memory of an Ancient

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<sup>120</sup> The right to the city is a notion first used by Henri Lefebvre (1968) and recently taken up as a call to action to reclaim the city: 'To claim the right to the city in the sense I mean it here is to claim some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamental and radical way' (Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 5).

<sup>121</sup> Mariam Dossal, 'From Mills to Malls: Loss of a City's Identity', review of Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon, *One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices, the Millworkers of Girangaon, Economic and Political Weekly*, 40.5 (2005), 367.

<sup>122</sup> Sampurna Chattarji, 'Port/Folio I-IV', in *Elsewhere Where Else*, Sampurna Chattarji and Eurig Salisbury (Mumbai: Poetrywala, 2018), pp. 143-144. About the history of the textile mills in Mumbai, and the workers' violently repressed protests against their dismantlement in the 1980s, see Neera Adarkar and Meena Menon,

Pillage' encodes both the erasure and the recollection of Mumbai's history of violence. Narrated by the same outsider voice as 'Seeing Things', the text conveys the similar impression of a city haunted by its past: 'it's an ancient memory of pillage. the land does not forget' (DL 188). As an antithetical echo to the 'project of unseeing' denounced by Roy, the narrator seems to be the only one to *see* the violence upon which the city has developed, that is, to see beneath the surface of the contemporary city and to grasp its multi-layered violent past, embedded in a history of colonial and capitalist exploitation. The beginning of the story reads as a compressed narrative of the history of the city, its layers unfolding in front of his eyes. The 'delicious thrill' as he walks in the area of the Fort and revives its fortified past, peopled with sentries and cannons, 'ghosts showing themselves' (DL 185), soon gives way to the 'chill' of slavery, racial segregation and exploitation. These visions of the industrial past of the city are not the source of any nostalgic re-enchantment of urban space but of overwhelming fright and horror.

Claustrophobia, suffocation, pouring in, more and more people, settling in, settling down. The stretch of leather, the clang of workshops, an inhuman din, metal upon metal, ships being built, dyes being poured, chemicals seething in enormous vaporous vats, filling the lungs with sickness, the nauseous reek of kerosene being tinned and packed, the racket of metal being stamped, trunks being hammered into shape, locks, knives, forks, spoons, reams of paper, gallons of oil, trams, trains, docks, a terrifying rhythm, cutting, grinding, crushing, infernal, vital industry, the sound of the spinning mills, the sound of the weaving mills, hundreds and hundreds of mills, thousands and thousands of workers, Girangaon, the village of mills, the village of hope, of bounty, spreading like a song, lifting, rising, changing hush-sha-hoosh-sha-we-all-fall-down.  
The city is built on a scream. (DL 186)

The run-on sentence defies syntactic conventions and piles words upon words, mimicking in its chaotic accumulation the 'infernal, vital industry' fuelling the city's growth, its restless activity, the waves of migrant workers coming in and settling in claustrophobic *chawls* (working-class cramped housing). The plethora of harsh plosive consonants, the final onomatopoeia as well as the use of the continuous aspect contribute to dramatizing the life of the mills, reconstituting its soundscape and rhythm, reviving the colossal process of production at work through synaesthesia. This fragmented periodic sentence intensifies the dislocating experience of the city's industrial development and is redolent of Roy's or Dasgupta's torrents of words which echo the destructive outpouring of global capitalism in

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*One Hundred Years, One Hundred Voices: the Millworkers of Girangaon: an Oral History* (Kolkata: Seagull, 2004); Vanessa Caru, *Des toits sur la grève: le logement des travailleurs et la question sociale à Bombay (1850-1950)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); Naresh Fernandes 'Urban Fabric', in *Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writings on Mumbai*, ed. by Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes (Delhi: Penguin 2003), pp. 73-83. See also Ranjit Hoskote's poem, 'Passing a Ruined Mill' written in memoriam Nissim Ezekiel.

India. The industrial past of the city, erased by the recent restructuring of the city, is thus brought up as a history of alienation and exploitation.

In another passage from the same story, the narrator's trans-historical vision is triggered by the sight of a mill chimney in the middle of a shopping mall compound (DL 189). The chimney belonged to the Phoenix Mills, later turned into Phoenix Mall, and has been preserved thanks to a movement led by mill-workers. As an incongruous symbol of the vanished industrial life of the city in the midst of a temple of consumerism, it embodies the superseding of the worker by the consumer in the definition of Indian citizenship, described by Leela Fernandes. The narrator's vision reaches beyond the 'corporate peninsulas' of malls to resurrect the mills: 'I see the chimneys, and the mills they belonged to, the vegetation crawling along broken walls [...]. I see the narrowness of the road once it enters the mill compound, Todi, Sun, Raghuvanshi, Sriram, all the names intact, and everything else fading' (DL 190).<sup>123</sup> The chimney, along with the names of mill districts, appears as one of the solid elements remaining in a disintegrating landscape, fissuring the surface of the 'new' city of Mumbai.

These residual material and symbolical elements are, according to Certeau, the 'ghosts of the city': 'heterogeneous references, ancient scars, they create bumps on the smooth utopias of the new Paris. Ancient things become remarkable. An uncanniness lurks there, in the everyday life of the city. It is a ghost that henceforth haunts urban planning'.<sup>124</sup> These 'ghosts' are thus endowed with the power to disrupt the even surface of the new city. In the passage, the incantatory anaphora 'I see' culminates with the transfiguration of the drab drawing of a phoenix on the chimney into the majestic mythical bird rising from its ashes, suggesting that the chimney triggers the narrator's hallucinatory vision of Mumbai's past, bringing out the ghosts of urban planning.<sup>125</sup> Pitted against everyone else' blindness, the

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<sup>123</sup> The metaphor descends from the actual name of a business park in Mumbai, 'Peninsula Corporate Park', located in Mathuradas Mill Compound in Lower Parel, but also evokes the geography of Mumbai at large.

<sup>124</sup> Michel de Certeau and others, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, trans. by Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 133. These residual signs may also be read in the light of Walter Benjamin's notion of 'superposition', glossed by J.M. Gurr as follows: 'Thus, "superposition" refers to both temporal layering and to the ability to perceive it. According to this understanding, different historical layers superimpose themselves onto the same space if only an observer is in the right state of mind to perceive them. It is important to note that this type of perception is possible even if the space no longer offers any points, traces or clues to which these layerings can be anchored' (Jens Martin Gurr, *Charting Literary Urban Studies: Texts as Models of and for the City* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 89).

<sup>125</sup> The chimney also looks as the perfect 'tomason', an object which was functional in a system which has disappeared and which remains despite its uselessness, theorised by Japanese artist Genpei Akasagyma and refashioned by Ivan Vladislavic in his portrayal of Johannesburg to refer to urban leftovers: 'The natural habitat of the tomason is the city street [...]. Tomasons thrive in the man-made world, in spaces that are constantly being remade and redesigned for other purposes, where the function of a thing that was useful and necessary

narrator's perception is haunted by the city's past, lurking behind its new gleaming corporate surfaces.

Nowhere is the entanglement of accelerated urban development and erasure more visible than in *The Ministry's* prologue, which dramatizes the general amnesia at work in contemporary Indian cities, brushing away their past as they thrust themselves forward. Shifting between lyricism and gritty realism, Roy powerfully connects environmental depletion and the erasure of history as two facets of the same process of uneven urban development.

*At magic hour, when the sun has gone but the light has not, armies of flying foxes unhinge themselves from the Banyan trees in the old graveyard and drift across the city like smoke. When the bats leave, the crows come home. Not all the din of their homecomings fills the silence left by the sparrows that have gone missing, and the old white backed vultures, custodians of the dead for more than a hundred million years, that have been wiped out. The vultures died of diclofenac poisoning. Diclofenac, cow-aspiring, given to cattle as a muscle relaxant, to ease pain and increase the production of milk, works – worked – like nerve gas on white-backed vultures. Each chemically relaxed, milk-producing cow or buffalo that died became poisoned vulture-bait. As cattle turned into better dairy machines, as the city ate more ice cream, butterscotch-crunch, nutty-buddy and chocolate chip, as it drank more mango milkshake, vultures' necks began to droop as though they were tired and simply couldn't stay awake. Silver beards of saliva dripped from their beaks, and one by one they tumbled off their branches, dead. Not many noticed the passing of the friendly old birds. There was so much else to look forward to. (M 1)*

In this italicized passage, the city moves from one guise and one rhythm to another, the evening landscape abruptly morphing into a vista of frantic consumption. The initial (literal) bird's-eye view of the city delineates a harmonious scenery lined by fluid nonhuman movements, following the biological rhythm of birds and bats as they fly over the city, a cycle that belongs to ancestral time. This image of regular commuting from and to the graveyard is disrupted by the subsequent acceleration of time, the staggering pace of consumption leading to the rapid extinction of vultures, significantly associated with the protection of the dead. The death of vultures makes the text tip over into a technical account of the lethal effect of diclofenac on the birds, connecting their disappearance to the transformation of the city itself into a monstrous consuming machine, gorging itself on ice

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may be swept away in a tide of change or washed off like a label [...]. As my eye becomes attuned to everything that is extraneous, inconspicuous or minor, that is abandoned or derelict, the obvious, useful facts of the city recede and a hidden history of obsolescence comes to the surface' (*Portrait with Keys: Joburg and What-What* (Johannesburg: Random House, 2006), pp. 175-176). See also Philippe Gervais-Lambony, 'Le tomason: un concept pour penser autrement les discontinuités et discontiguités de nos vies citadines?', *Espaces et sociétés*, 168-169 (2017), 205-218.

creams and milkshakes, using the trope of the city as a gigantic belly — the harsh sounds (butterscotch crunch, nutty buddy, chocolate chip) conveying the sensorial aspect of a city swallowing food.<sup>126</sup> The metaphor and the accumulation of flavours literalise and thus amplify the way urbanisation is used by the capitalist system to *absorb* the surplus products it perpetually produces.<sup>127</sup> The accelerated development of the city into a global consumerist space and the parallel degeneration of the venerable birds are underlined by the accumulative sentence (the anaphora of ‘as’ rendering the simultaneity between consumption and extinction) and the image of the sagging birds.

Set in an old graveyard, the prologue thus exposes the passing away of these ancestral creatures as casualties of capitalist development, revealing its structural destructiveness. The melancholy tone is contrasted with the cheerful anticipation of the nation’s development, a thrill which is totally oblivious to the collateral damages of industrialisation and which, as I stated earlier, largely defines the public imagination of contemporary India. The trenchant irony of the final lines (‘There was so much else to look forward to’) satirises the ruling classes’ thrilled projection of themselves into a bright future, also embodied by the slogan: ‘our time is now’ (M 97). Within their examination of the trope of India’s ‘arrival’, Kaur and Hansen closely analyse the national publicity campaign ‘Incredible India’ launched in 2007 and the subsequent heralding of a ‘New India’:

The very sign of India was now no longer representative of deprivation and dystopian collapse, but a signifier of a new world of affluence, enterprise, techno-mobility, consumption and fresh market opportunities that an economic stagnant Western world is in search of. Thus re-signified, the ‘new’ India seemed to have arrived on the global stage, propelled by a breathless rhetoric of ascent, escalation and acceleration.<sup>128</sup>

Kaur also contends that this New India is ready to jettison the country’s multi-layered past and to erase large swathes of the country’s people in favour of the frozen image of an ancient Hindu civilisation, paradoxically combined with the notion of hyper-modernity.<sup>129</sup> This is what Roy tackles in the final lines of the prologue, associating the unnoticed disappearance of the vultures with the cheerful excitement about India’s global becoming, pitting the

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<sup>126</sup> The exploitation of animals as ‘dairy machines’, producing more and more milk, evokes an anecdote which Tilo narrates to Dr Bhartiya in a letter, regarding the existence of a genetically modified ‘giant trout’ to feed more and more people, triggering the question ‘who will feed the giant trout?’ (M 299), pointing to the unthought-of absurdity of the nature-engineering dictated by the consumerist capitalist system. To the gigantism of capitalist development, ridiculously embodied by the giant trout, Roy opposes small events and unnoticed gestures.

<sup>127</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 5.

<sup>128</sup> Kaur and Hansen, 266.

<sup>129</sup> See Ravinder Kaur, ‘Post-Exotic India: on Remixed Histories and Smart Images’, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 23.3 (2016), 307-326.

‘friendly old bird’ against the aggressive consumption patterns of neoliberal India. The prologue thus encapsulates the indictment of the great ‘Project of Unseeing’ at work in Hindu India, wiping out, literally and symbolically, those who go against the current of nationalism and neoliberalism. The passing of the friendly old birds resonates with Roy’s writing of the disintegrating Muslim community of Delhi, gradually marginalised as alien in the city, as their long-lasting presence, etched into the very walls of the Old City, is erased by the Hindu right -wing government.

Chapter 6 will further examine the active struggle against oblivion waged in Roy’s fiction and nonfiction and the centrality of ghosts in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. As in Chattarji’s and Jha’s writings, the recurrent motif of spectrality is used to refract the violence exerted against the disenfranchised, and gestures towards the larger ‘spatial amnesia’ at work in Indian cities. Conceptualised by Nixon as the material and symbolic removal of a group of people from national space and narrative, spatial amnesia is entangled with developmental narratives, and has intensified in the era of late capitalism. The novel actually opens and closes in the small ruined Muslim graveyard (or *kabristan*) mentioned in the prologue. Set on the edge of Delhi, this is where Anjum takes shelter after a traumatic experience, and where she finds a funeral parlour and a guest house, gradually peopled by other broken creatures, living in between life and death. The centrality of the cemetery in Roy’s novel indicates the writer’s concern with the dead, ruins and forgotten layer of the city’s history, as well as with the marginalised of the city’s remaking, all the more as in a country in which the Hindu majority gets cremated and not buried, the graveyard is inherently a minoritarian place.<sup>130</sup>

Anjum herself appears as a spectre in the aftermath of anti-Muslim riots, in which she witnessed her friend’s being murdered while she was spared by Hindu mobs owing to their superstitious belief that killing a hijra brings bad luck. Her first months in the graveyard are depicted as a secession from the world of the living. This spectral form of life is described in the prolepsis which opens the novel, a variation on the prologue:

She lived in the graveyard like a tree. At dawn she saw the crows off and welcomed the bats home. At dusk she did the opposite. Between shifts she conferred with the ghosts

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<sup>130</sup> The novel draws a constellation of graveyards, connecting the small cemetery of Old Delhi with a myriad shrines and mausoleums, objects of popular veneration in South Asia yet contested as heretical practices by fundamentalist currents of Islam. ‘The Muslim graveyard, the kabristan, has always loomed large in the imagination and rhetoric of Hindu nationalists. “Mussalman ka ek hi sthan, Kabristan ya Pakistan!” Only once place for the mussalman, the graveyard or Pakistan – is among the more frequent war cries of the murderous, sword-wielding militias and vigilante mobs that have overrun India’s streets.’ (Arundhati Roy, ‘The Graveyard Talks Back’, in *Azadi*, p. 151).

of vultures that loomed in her high branches. She felt the gentle grip of their talons like an ache in an amputated limb. She gathered they weren't altogether unhappy at having excused themselves and exited from the story. When she first moved in, she endured months of casual cruelty like a tree would – without flinching. She didn't turn to see which small boy had thrown a stone at her, didn't crane her neck to read the insults scratched into her bark. When people called her names – clown without a circus, queen without a palace – she let the hurt blow through her branches like a breeze and used the music of her rustling leaves as balm to ease the pain. (M 5)

The running metaphor of the tree alludes to the loss of human form and sensitivity, suggesting that she has become impervious to the exterior world, including to the cruelty which is inflicted upon her. Yet a sense of frail harmony emanates from this passage, as she seems to be at one with the nonhuman world. The extinct vultures described in the prologue are part of her world and the passage hints at their enduring, albeit ghostly, presence in the city. Her affinity with these ghosts roosting on her branches enhances her old age, her experience, and her belonging to the community of the forgotten of the 'brand new nation'.<sup>131</sup> The tree metaphor also expresses her entrenchment in the rich soil of the cemetery and her mission as a guardian of the dead.<sup>132</sup> The graveyard is thus the space in which her desolation can fully unleash itself, turning Anjum into a ghost: 'For months Anjum lived in the graveyard, a ravaged, feral spectre, out-haunting every resident djinn and spirit, ambushing bereaved families [...] with a grief so wild, so untethered, that it clean outstripped theirs' (M 63). The text insists on her physical degradation and her indifference to it, which, in her case, symbolizes a form of self-hatred (M 63-66). Yet she is not completely cut off from society, and her visitors, humans and nonhumans alike, bring her back to the real world: 'Gradually the Fort of Desolation scaled down into a dwelling of manageable proportions. It became home; a place of predictable, reassuring sorrow – awful, but reliable' (M 66). Contrary to the 'project of unseeing', she is unable to 'un-know' the traumatic memory of surviving her friend's death, but learns to live with it or *in* it, the metaphor of the fort taking elegiac hues and expressing the idea of inhabiting one's grief, making room for the dead (M 258): 'Only Zakir Mian, neatly folded, would not go away. But in time, instead of following her around, he moved in with her and became a constant but undemanding companion' (M 66).

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<sup>131</sup> I borrow this term to Ravinder Kaur's book, *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>132</sup> Her scratched bark echoes the tree-shaped scar on Sethe's back in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* a symbol of mistreatment and of the burden of slavery, in a text which also explores the fractured memory of a woman and her troubled relationship with motherhood. See Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987).

As the living memory of ‘unnoticed’ disappearances, Anjum resembles Ms Rose in the mall of Raj Kamal Jha’s novel, both aging characters living a spectral life in the interstices of the city, discreet custodians of the city’s past. In fact, the mall and the graveyard are drawn together in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the former being imaginarily turned into a mausoleum, haunted by the city’s history of violence. The end of the novel depicts the group’s visit to a shopping mall on the edges of Delhi to celebrate Saddam Hussain and Zainab’s engagement. Yet the glittering mall stands on the site of Saddam’s father’s brutal death, beaten to death by a mob of enraged Hindu fundamentalists. The location is thus haunted by the spirit of yet another victim of Hindu supremacism.<sup>133</sup>

‘My father’s spirit must be wandering there, trapped inside this place’  
Everybody tried to imagine him – a village skinner, lost in the bright lights, trying to find his way out of the mall.  
‘This is his mazar,’ Anjum said.  
‘Hindus aren’t buried. They don’t have mazars, badi Mummy,’ Zainab said.  
*Maybe it’s the whole world’s mazar*, Tilo thought, but didn’t say. *Maybe the mannequin-shoppers are ghosts trying to buy what no longer exists.* (M 412)

The intrusion of the Urdu word *mazar* (meaning mausoleum or shrine) conveys the metaphorical conversion of the global consumerist space into a giant memorial and funeral site. Echoing the haunted Phoenix Mall, the mall is embedded in a history of violence through the memory of Saddam’s father, turning it into a paradoxical trace of what it has erased. Tilo’s subsequent enlarging of the scope, as the zombie-filled mall becomes the world’s mausoleum, endows the space with a gothic eeriness, emphasising the amount of destruction entrenched in the frantic restructuring of the Indian city.

The political dimension of this gothic urban imagination becomes clear as the continued presence of (human and nonhuman) ghosts that Anjum, Tilo, and ultimately Roy, try to highlight, disrupts the smooth surface of Delhi as a global city. ‘The ghosts of all of these walk among us’ replies Arundhati Roy to a journalist asking her about the atrocities which her novel are strewn with. The idea of ‘walking with’ the ghosts resonates with Roy’s 2011 essay *Walking with the Comrades*, documenting the writer’s months spent with people’s rebel guerrilla movement in the forests of Bastar in east-central India, which also

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<sup>133</sup> This episode refers to the Dulina station Dalit lynching, which happened on the fringes of Delhi in October 2002. Coming back from the festival of Dussehra (a Hindu festival celebrating the triumph of Ram over the evil Ravan, celebrated each year ‘with greater aggression and ever more generous sponsorship’ (M 86)), a mob brutally killed a group of Dalit leather workers who had been taken to the police station on charge of cow slaughter. The consumption of beef and skinning of cows, considered impure in a brahmanical system of beliefs, have been the object of growing controversy in recent years, with several attacks against castes associated with skinning.



alluded to through Comrade Revathy's letter at the end of the novel. This echo underlines the link between remembrance and radicalism, as the writer contrasts this 'walking with' the ghosts with the little room which is made for them in the aftermath of atrocities: 'In this era of atrocity analysis on TV, of body count and human rights violations, you are not allowed to look at the aftermath of that, except as a legal appendage'.<sup>134</sup> This is related to the short attention span of the media as well as to the eradication of these atrocities from official Hindu-right history, part of the 'Unseeing' project.

Dasgupta also emphasizes the general amnesia spreading around Delhi, fuelled by the constant maelstrom of capitalist development. He uses the shopping mall as an emblem of this spatial forgetfulness, quickly integrating alien elements in the perpetually changing landscape.<sup>135</sup> The spectral metaphor interweaves the expunging of the working classes from the picture and the burying of the city's history.

Delhi's mall began small and late, but as the 2000s wore on, they sucked up more and more of the city's resources and attention. Great amounts of public land were released to private developers, who built frenziedly – quickly covering up, for instance, the ancient ruins they came upon as they went – and by the end of the century's first decade, several great air-conditioned consumer strongholds had been added to the thousand-year catalogue of palaces built on this plain. (C 117)

Through a syllepsis, the passage incongruously draws together ancient palaces and these contemporary fortresses of consumerism, underlining both continuities and discordances in the history of the city. The malls are imagined as symbols of Delhi as a centre of political and economic power (which it has been since the thirteenth century, and above all during the Mughal Empire), new versions of the luxurious palaces of the powerful. At the same time, these new palaces, delineating a new city thoroughly defined by the demands of global capitalism, cover up the ruins of the ancient ones.

Nonetheless, describing one of the luxurious villas mushrooming on the outskirts of the city, he reflects on the ghostly presence of the past, ready to rise from this shifting ground.

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<sup>134</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Fiction Not Being Real Undermines Fiction', Interview with Charmy Harikrishnan, *Economic Times*, 2 June 2017, <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/interviews/fiction-not-being-real-undermines-fiction-arundhati-roy/articleshow/58968051.cms>> [accessed 22 February 2021].

<sup>135</sup> 'Shopping malls are very foreign interventions into Delhi space and a lot of people felt uncomfortable with shopping malls being built and slums being cleared out. But the fact is as soon as the shopping mall appeared, it became easily integrated into Delhi life and people could not even remember anymore what was there before.' Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017.

In this landscaped compound, every attempt has been made to carpet over the land. But in the nearby woods and wastelands, by the sides of all the roads hereabout, ornate tombs, palaces and mosques press up from the obstinate past – and, waiting here in the gathering night, I sense, even through the hard crust of twenty-first-century cement, ghosts rising from the earth [...]. Just here, where these mute paths now run perfectly level, on this soil now sealed with emerald lawns. (C 4)

The multitude of Mughal monuments disseminated throughout the city turns Delhi and its surroundings into a gothic setting, in which spectres are waiting in the ‘gathering night’, the hypallage enhancing the sense of an imminent outburst. The text’s metaphorical network emphasizes the attempt to cover up the past, to silence and bury it under the perfectly manicured lawn. Yet the systematic erasure of the multiple histories of cities (either to build a homogeneous narrative of Hindu cities or of capitalist progress) stumbles upon the resurfacing of the ‘obstinate past’ (C4) under a spectral form, threatening to disrupt the level surface of these new gleaming constructions. The spectral metaphor expresses both the ‘unseeing’ project of political and corporate power and the enduring, albeit residual, presence of the casualties of urban development.

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These fictional and nonfictional texts thus refract the accelerated expansion and restructuring of Indian cities at the dawn of the twenty-first century through the lens of natural disaster, which enables them to dramatize the creative destruction at work in Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, i.e. the processes of social, environmental and historical depletion upon which ‘new’ India is being built. Contrary to what has been said about the ‘urban sublime’, these writers’ rhetoric of cataclysm does not convey capitalist urban development as an inevitable ‘natural’ cycle but rather defamiliarizes its processes.<sup>136</sup> In fact, the naturalisation of this historical upheaval, through the motifs of the eruption, the meteoric fall, the cataclysm, the flood, or the eclipse, intensifies the devastation which accompanies unbridled urban development, and thus reshuffles the trope of the perpetual metamorphosis usually associated with the modern city. The spatial amnesia involved in the urbanisation process ultimately belongs to a larger movement of erasure of certain portions of history, which the writers tackle through spectrality, suggesting that the clean-slate logic of neoliberal urbanism generates the ghosts who *walk among us*. Through this spectral motif, the annihilation of the city’s past and the obliteration of the country’s poor from the national

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<sup>136</sup> See Chapter 3.

picture are shown as two intimately connected facets of the structural violence of uneven development as it unfolds in Indian cities.

The importance of images and imagination in contemporary urban development, based on beautification and triumphant futuristic projections, strengthens the crucial roles of literary antagonist imaginaries. I would thus argue that these epic narratives perform their oppositional role through the creation of a catastrophic imaginary which challenges the false utopia of the new Indian world-class city and uncovers the contradictions of late global capitalism as it develops in India. A historical-geographical materialist reading of this urban imaginary, to use Harvey's terms, is consistent with the political agenda of these aesthetics of shock, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

What characterises these epic narratives of urban development is also the oscillation between macroscopic and microscopic scales of representation, with a predominance of the former. The metaphor of cosmic catastrophe and the panoramic apocalyptic landscapes reveal the ambition to grasp a historical process in its totality. The texts also give flesh to these changes through their zooming in on the sensorial regime of these cities perpetually under construction, scrutinising infinitesimal organic growth and decay. The acute description of the sensations generated by new or unfinished buildings, whether related to awe or distress, materialises the dislocations generated by rapid modernisation. On the contrary, the *ordinary* narratives of contemporary Indian cities engage with these transformations through a myopic lens, as they focus on uneventful lives in a circumscribed locality and counter the 'utopia' of India's global cities through an anti-spectacular prism. If *ordinary* narratives tone-down or circumvent violence, *epic* ones directly confront it and represent the city as an antagonistic space, its concentration of power and wealth making it an arena of struggle. Thus, if we probe further into the landscapes of devastation previously sketched, we will see that the contradictions of uneven urban development also assume the form of human conflicts, frictions and collisions. Chapter 2 will thus examine the ways in which the texts dramatize the shock of violence at work in the metropolises, from psychological and physical violence to 'planned violence'.

## CHAPTER 2

### CITIES OF CONFLICT

‘The wars of the twenty-first century will be fought over parking places’ (MC 28). This prophetic statement excerpted from Suketu Mehta’s reportage on Bombay evinces the author’s heightened rhetoric, using war as a metaphor to express the scarcity of space in overcrowded Bombay. Yet Mehta merely intensifies the actual conflict over space and the increasing volatility of urban life in twenty-first-century Indian cities. Contemporary Indian urban writing emphasizes the fraught relationship between the city and its subjects, manifested in material as well as symbolical battles. As urban history and theory show, the modern capitalist city is a space in which capital and power are concentrated, where capital is produced and its surplus absorbed. It is thus inherently a space of competition and conflicts. The symbolical association of the city with success also magnetically draws in people, whose aspirations come into contact and collide, more or less violently. In the contemporary conjuncture, as David Harvey claims, ‘we increasingly live in divided, fragmented, and conflict-prone cities’.<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai notes that the unequal distribution of space and resources is blatant in all growing megacities of millennial India, all the more as disparate classes live cheek by jowl. Even more than parking spaces, the street has become the object of a ceaseless battle between the municipality, private developers, pedestrians, drivers, street-vendors, street-dwellers.<sup>2</sup> We will see that frictions also arise because of communitarian conflicts which take urban space as their battleground.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Appadurai, ‘Spectral Housing’. See also Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, ‘Street Hawkers and Public Space in Mumbai’, *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 41.21 (27 May 2006), 2140-2146; Hansen, *Wages of Violence*; Baviskar, *Uncivil City*. The struggle for space in Mumbai is also turned into fiction in Aravind Adiga’s novel *Last Man in Tower*, which revolves around an old middle-class teacher resisting the pressures of developers, brokers, mafia dons and other owners to sell his share of the old residential building where he has always lived. See Tickell, ‘Writing the City in Indian English Fiction’; Lisa Lau and Ana Cristina Mendes, ‘Urban Redevelopment, the New Logics of Expulsion, and Individual Precarity in Kleber Mendonça Filho’s *Aquarius* and Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*’, *Cultural geographies*, 271.1 (2020), 117-132.

How, then, is this battle over space, heightened by the recent mutations of Indian economy and society, refracted in Indian urban writing? This chapter interrogates the representations of individual antagonisms and collective collisions at work in Indian cities, as well as the emphasis on direct and spatial violence which seems to dominate the writings of Raj Kamal Jha, Suketu Mehta, Rana Dasgupta, and Arundhati Roy. How do these texts amplify the conflictual dimension of urban life in India? And how does this intensification of antagonisms serve to expose the fault-lines of India's global emergence?

The thematic focus on conflict and the rhetoric of excess may be located first in a specific literary field, that of writers *of* India for a global audience. In fact, Mehta's and Dasgupta's use of the quest mode to present their return to Bombay and Delhi, stressing the hostility of the city and their experience of alterity, borrowing codes from travel-writing but also from the *Bildungsroman*, may be read in the light of Graham Huggan's notion of 'strategic exoticism' or of Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan's work on 'passing' and 'slumming'.

Yet, as per the intrinsic collective dimension of the 'modern epic', a form which allows the confrontation between opposite worldviews, these narratives are not only structured by a protagonist's individual struggle against the city but by a multiplicity of battles.<sup>3</sup> The writers display their own shock upon re-encountering the metropolis, but also focus on the incessant collisions at work in the city, conveyed through the oscillation between a realist and an 'irrealist' aesthetics, which I will analyse through the lens of the WReC's study of 'peripheral irrealism'. Jha and Dasgupta both explore the aggressive ethos of predatory businessmen and the psychic deformations entailed by urban modernisation, while Mehta's graphic writing of spontaneous and organised violence seems to turn it into a *spectacle*, oscillating between ethnography and sensationalism, and Roy's novel enhances the traumatic aspect of public collective violence. If none of these texts qualify as historical novels, they do include historical deflagrations of violence, such as the 1992-1993 Mumbai riots and the 2002 pogroms in Ahmedabad. The deconstructed chronology of political events in Roy's novel and Dasgupta's essay evidence their interest in the psychological wounds left by violent events rather than in the unfolding of events themselves.

Beyond the representation of crime, police violence, riots, and aggressiveness, these texts also shed light on the way conflict is woven into the spatial form of these cities, through infrastructural or planned violence. Their irrealist aesthetic heightens the fantastic dimension

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<sup>3</sup> At odds with ancient epics, the modern epic narrates the itinerary of a collective subject rather than an individual hero, a community which is reflected in the multitudinous voices of the novel (Moretti, *Modern Epic*). See also Goyet, *Penser sans concepts*.

of the self-sufficient fortified spaces created by the elite to sever themselves from the city, and thus intensifies the effects of the increasing polarisation of urban resources, fracturing the neoliberal utopia of homogeneous global cities. Through a series of brief counterpoints, I will underline the contrasts between the magnifying rhetoric of these texts and the rhetoric of understatement which characterises the ordinary mode of Indian urban writing.

## I. Quests Through the Urban Jungle

This thesis is concerned with Indian writers' direct confrontation with the city rather than with the reinvention of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata from afar as 'imaginary homelands'. In twenty-first-century Indian urban writing, this immersion is very often represented as a struggle of the individual against the city. It is even more the case with 'returnee' writers, who start writing about the city upon returning from abroad to Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Rana Dasgupta and Suketu Mehta, the nonfictional writing of the city as a space of conflict is undoubtedly (but not only) framed by their diasporic trajectories, which foster a global perspective on Indian cities, and imply a global readership.

If the quest in literature harks back to medieval chivalric romances implying an expedition and the achievement of exploits by knights, I will base my scrutiny of Dasgupta's and Mehta's use of this motif on Tim Young's definition, in the context of his work on travel-writing: 'the protagonist embarks on a mission, encounters impediments, removes them (more often than not), attains his or her goal and sets out on the return voyage, having increased his or her (usually his) own worth through the successful completion of the objective'.<sup>5</sup> The quest, connecting *Maximum City* and *Capital* with travelogues but also with education novels, is used by the writers both in a serious and an ironic way, hinting at their self-reflexive posture and at variations within the epic imaginations of Indian cities.

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<sup>4</sup> The case of Amit Chaudhuri stands out as he started his first novel, set in Kolkata, while living in Oxford and London. Chaudhuri was born in Kolkata but his parents quickly moved to Mumbai, where he grew up until he was sixteen years old, visiting Kolkata during holidays. He then moved to England before moving back to Kolkata in 1999, where his parents had already moved back. He now divides his time between Kolkata and England, where he teaches at the University of East Anglia. His 2013 essay, *Calcutta: Two Years in a City*, is an account of his return to the city.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Young, *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 46. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'quest' as 'a search or pursuit in order to find something' but primarily as an 'inquest, inquiry, investigation', which thus connects the quest mode with the investigative quality of return-writing ('Quest, n.2.' *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156332>> [accessed 10 March 2021]).

## 1. The City as Antagonist

Both *Maximum City* (2004) and *Capital* (2014) share the same narrative starting point: that of the writer's returning to or arriving in an Indian city he has chosen. Yet the differences between the writers' trajectories are numerous. Contrary to Dasgupta, whose migratory path was described in Chapter 1, Suketu Mehta grew up in Bombay, where he returned in 1998, aged thirty-five, after twenty-one years spent in New York. He wrote about his experience as a diasporic Indian in New York in a novella, as well as in a nonfiction piece entitled 'Towers of Scrabble', and in his recent essay *This Land is Our Land* (2019).<sup>6</sup> However, his most popular book so far remains *Maximum City*, a literary reportage on Bombay, or as Rashmi Varma puts it, an 'auto/biography of Bombay' merging his personal trajectory with that of the city.<sup>7</sup> Mehta comes back to Bombay in 1996 with the intention of writing a book investigating the aftermath of the 1992-93 intercommunal riots in the city. Yet his larger project is also 'to update [his] India' (MC 38), a city 'lost and found' (subtitle of *Maximum City*), before moving back to New York two years later.<sup>8</sup>

Reviewers of Suketu Mehta's 'auto/biography' of Mumbai stress how meticulous and vivid his investigation of urban lowlife is, and often emphasize its resemblance with fiction while praising its quality as a work of ethnography.<sup>9</sup> Mehta's listener skills, his ability to capture local speech inflections and his visionary account of Mumbai as a glimpse of the world's future are also highly praised.<sup>10</sup> Hinting at the monumental scale of Mehta's book, the comparison with Dickens and Balzac often surfaces, also suggesting its in-depth exploration of various social environments and the framing of the city as a space of survival

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<sup>6</sup> Suketu Mehta, *What is Remembered* (Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016); 'Towers of Scrabble', in *Nonstop Metropolis: An Atlas of New York City*, ed. by Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Shelly-Schapiro (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), pp. 195-198.

<sup>7</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 130.

<sup>8</sup> If Mehta's book may be read as a 'return of the native' narrative, as he goes back to a city he grew up in, Rana Dasgupta had never lived in Delhi when he moved there from the United States in 2000, making of his narrative an account of 'ancestral return' (or ethnic return), to use Ruth Maxey's terminology. Ruth Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014). In addition to Chaudhuri's and Dasgupta's essays, see for instance, Amitava Kumar's *A Matter of Rats: A Short Biography of Patna* (Delhi: Aleph, 2013), or Kushanava Choudhury's *The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Kapur, 'Bombay Confidential'; Amitava Kumar, 'The Enigma of Return', review of Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City*, *Nation*, 30 September 2004, <<https://www.thenation.com/article/enigma-return>> [accessed 29 April 2021].

<sup>10</sup> Nilanjana Roy, 'The Poets of the Mean Streets', *Business Standard*, 21 September 2004, <[https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/nilanjana-s-roy-the-poets-of-the-mean-streets-104092101094\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/nilanjana-s-roy-the-poets-of-the-mean-streets-104092101094_1.html)> [accessed 6 May 2021]; Peter Heinegg, 'I Have Seen the Future, and it Stinks', review of Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City*, *CrossCurrents*, 55.1 (Spring 2005), 134-136.

and conquest. As Ananya Roy writes: ‘Suketu Mehta’s book *Maximum City* (2004), which itself redraws the line between fiction and ethnography, is an uncanny shadow history of the real Mumbai’.<sup>11</sup> This section sets out to examine this tension between ethnography and fiction in Mehta’s account of the city as a conflictual space.

Ragini Srinivasan’s work on ‘urban return writing’ (a term she coined) reads this subgenre through the lens of ‘affective labour’: the diasporic writers foreground their estrangement from their hometown, the mix of lure and repulsion they feel towards the city, as well as their attempt to overcome the marginal position they occupy upon returning.<sup>12</sup> I concur with the analysis of the return-writers’ representation of the city as a challenge, yet I would argue that the quest narrative that these writers construct does not only stem from their effort to fit in. Their projected conflictual relationship with Mumbai or Delhi and their intensification of alterity might express their difficulty to earn their place back in the city, but also stem from their literary conception of the city and their addressing a global readership.

Mehta’s stress on the homecoming ordeal appears as a narrative and rhetoric device: he uses the narrative pattern of the quest to shape his exploration of the city, thus projected as a space to be symbolically retrieved and mastered. The significance of the quest is underpinned by the author’s acknowledgment of his ‘emplotment’ of events,<sup>13</sup> which he ascribes to the influence of V.S. Naipaul’s writings on India: ‘So I read him for his techniques of interviewing people and then to imbue those interviews with the right balance of personal history and turn the product into an interesting narrative. Something with an arc, a beginning and an end. *Something with a quest*’.<sup>14</sup> Mehta does not project himself in the text as a nostalgic *émigré*, bemoaning the demise of a golden-age Bombay, but as a writer determined to focus on the present geography of the city. Yet his initial question, ‘can you

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<sup>11</sup> Ananya Roy, ‘Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35.2 (2011), 225.

<sup>12</sup> Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, ‘The Rhetoric of Return, Diasporic Homecoming and the New Indian City’, *Room One Thousand* 3 (2015), 309-335; ‘Unmoored: Passing, Slumming and Return-Writing in New India’, in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts*, pp. 95-109. For a detailed discussion of urban return narratives and their social and literary contexts, see my article ‘The Enigma of Return: Diasporic Epic Narratives of the Indian City’, *DESI*, 4 (2020), 81-98.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Emplotment’ is a notion used by Hayden White (*Metahistory*, p. 7).

<sup>14</sup> Suketu Mehta, Interview with Karan Mahajan, *The Believer*, 1 February 2008, <<https://believermag.com/an-interview-with-suketu-mehta/>> [accessed 29 April 2021] (my emphasis). Naipaul’s curt yet vivid writings on India appear as a great source of inspiration for Mehta: beyond the quest pattern and the techniques of oral history, the impossible reconciliation with his ‘homeland’ Naipaul’s irritability is almost parodied by Mehta in his account of an exhausting Bombay. See also Kumar, ‘The Enigma of Return’.



go home again?’ (MC 3), reopens the Naipaulian dilemma, and he stages his return as an initiation path fraught with obstacles, oscillating between the epic and the mock-epic modes.

The book is framed as such by two autobiographical chapters tracking his profane pilgrim’s progress through the city. Amitava Kumar associates *Maximum City* with a ‘narrative of discovery’. In fact, the first chapter puts forward the author-narrator as a foreigner, unable to decipher Bombay codes: ‘India was the new world for me. And Bombay was landfall’ (MC 13). In an ironical gesture, he identifies with the colonial traveller landing at India Gate, eager to leave this threshold-city to discover the wonders and horrors of a supposedly authentic India (MC 14). The self-conscious use of orientalist stereotypes stresses how close the author’s position is to that of a foreign traveller despite his Indian origins, thus foreshadowing the challenge set by the city and hinting at his ‘strategic exoticism’.<sup>15</sup>

The war of the individual against the city is symbolised as inadequate distance, the city being either ungraspable or dangerously close. In the opening chapter of the book, the city is at once an excluding and an absorbing force. Inhospitable, it rejects the expatriate as an organism would eject an exogenous body:

It is a city hostile to outsiders or nostalgia-struck returnees. We can muscle our way in with our dollars, but even when the city gives in, it resents us for making it do so [...]. So it makes life uncomfortable for us by guerrilla warfare, by constant low-level sniping, by creating small crises every day. All those irritations add up to a murderous rage in your mind [...]. (MC 23)

The language of warfare and resistance is used throughout the chapter, which amplifies the numerous prosaic nuisances assailing the returnee. The city’s exclusion of the newcomer is crystallised in small domestic disasters, comically narrated as apocalypses and insurmountable obstacles (MC 22). His exhaustion in front of an infuriatingly complex system brings to mind Naipaul’s grappling with the city’s bureaucracy, corruption, heat, and dirt: ‘To be in Bombay was to be exhausted’.<sup>16</sup> The trials and tribulations of the *émigré* to find a home are a recurrent trope of return narratives, epitomizing the struggle to ‘home’ oneself in the city, as Avtar Brah puts it.<sup>17</sup> Mehta describes his settling in Dariya Mahal (a frayed building which is close to his childhood home in the posh area of Malabar Hill) as a hassle: ‘the flat we have moved into was designed by a sadist, a prankster, or an idiot’ (MC 20), and the lengthy contract negotiation for the second apartment he moves into (in

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<sup>15</sup> Huggan, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p. 19, 48.

<sup>17</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 16.

the northern suburb of Bandra) as the signing of a war treaty: ‘we go over every line, every word, like arm negotiators scrutinizing a ballistic missiles treaty’ (MC 253-254).<sup>18</sup> The piling up of ‘small crises’ ultimately elicits a fantasy of cataclysm and destruction in Mehta’s narrative: ‘This fucking city. The sea should rush in over these islands in one great tidal wave and obliterate it, cover it underwater. It should be bombed from the air’ (MC 30). The author-narrator gives free rein to his irritation against the city through this fantasised obliteration, which would brutally bring the city back to its aquatic origins.

Amit Chaudhuri’s return narrative also expresses the writer’s intuition of the city’s hostility: ‘I also had some inkling that neither India nor Calcutta, my birthplace, was the sort of nation and city to receive their returning sons emotionally, with open arms’ (CAL 47). The understatement, characteristic of the ordinary representational impulse, is at odds with Mehta’s hypertrophied anger. Chaudhuri’s permanent homecoming in 1999 made him realize that he didn’t really belong to the city (‘I possessed neither the credentials nor the friends to pass for an authentic member of the community’), and that it was ‘too late to convincingly insinuate [himself] into the fabric of Calcutta’.<sup>19</sup> Chaudhuri relates his complex relationship with his chosen hometown to the condition of other outsiders coming to Calcutta, primarily a city of migrants.<sup>20</sup> His novels are peopled with migrants from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), and the towns of Sylhet or Shillong are always in the back of the characters’ minds. His piece on ‘domicile’ then mentions the centrality of exile in the writings of the metropolis, as is the case of the Bengali writer Buddhadeva Bose, originally from Dhaka.<sup>21</sup> Like Mehta’s ambivalent identification with ‘restless’ people in Mumbai, Chaudhuri thus connects his own ambiguous feeling of intimacy and alienation towards the city with that of other migrants.

The intuition of the city’s hostility also echoes Rana Dasgupta’s portrayal of Delhi’s animosity, which he ascribes to the city’s unique warlike and feudal spirit: ‘But Delhi is a place where people generally assume – far more, say, than in Bangalore or Mumbai – that the world is programmed to deny them everything, and that making a proper life will therefore require constant hustle – and manipulation of the rules’ (C 19). This is in line with

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<sup>18</sup> See the map of Mumbai in appendix.

<sup>19</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, ‘Stories of Domicile’, in *Clearing a Space*, p. 190. On hospitality as an ambivalent discourse of inclusion and exclusion in Chaudhuri’s essay, see Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Lau, ‘Hospitality and Re-Orientalist Thresholds: Amit Chaudhuri Writes Back to India’, *South Asia*, 41.4 (2018), 705-722.

<sup>20</sup> ‘In what way does the outsider, the person with strong but often inexplicable ties to the place, relate to Calcutta? We forget, sometimes, that it’s a city of visitors, refugees, migrants, some of them crucial to the city’s self-conception, some important to others’ conception of it.’ (Ibid., p. 191).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 192-193.

commonplace descriptions of Delhi as a hostile and an ‘unloved city’.<sup>22</sup> Yet the singularity of Delhi’s animosity and consequent ‘survival mode’ (C 19) is undermined by Mehta’s use of a similarly inflated rhetoric of hostility and struggle. In Mehta’s case, Bombay’s antagonism towards newcomers is a small-scale version of the whole country’s rebuff:

India is the Country of the No. That ‘no’ is your test. You have to get past it. It is India’s Great Wall; it keeps out foreign invaders. Pursuing it energetically and vanquishing it is your challenge. In the guru-shishya tradition, the novice is always rebuffed multiple times when he first approaches the guru. Then the guru stops saying no but doesn’t say yes either; he suffers the presence of the student [...]. India is not a tourist-friendly country. It will reveal itself to you only if you stay on, against all odds. The ‘no’ might never become a ‘yes’. But you will stop asking questions. (MC 18)

Using once more the language of conquest, the passage hastily connects the challenge set by the country to the outsider with the guru tradition, reinforcing the initiation narrative pattern Mehta is building up. Steering clear from a historical-materialist explanation for India’s supposed enmity towards the returnee or foreigner, Mehta locates it within a cultural-religious ethos, which would foster endurance and resistance. It points to his own teleological narrative of the quest for the city, this time enhancing spiritual awakening rather than empowerment. The direct address to the reader seconds the argument of an intended global audience, meant to discover the city along with him.

Yet, far from being unreachable, the city sometimes sucks the individual in, dissolving the boundaries between inside and outside, private and public spheres. The whole book revolves around this motif: ‘The Battle of Bombay is the battle of the self against the crowd’ (MC 539), and draws again on Naipaul’s fear of being swallowed up by the urban masses, itself a legacy of colonial literature.<sup>23</sup> This fear stems both from the psychological contradictions of being both an insider and an outsider, but can also be materially traced to the congestion of Bombay and the uneven distribution of space and resources, as explained earlier.

The metaphor of contamination pervades *Maximum City*’s first chapter and the fear of the collapse of boundaries between the self and the others finds a literal expression in the dramatization of the impact of pollution on his health and that of his son. First, Mehta’s housing building is depicted as a sick organism: ‘the arteries of the building are clogged,

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<sup>22</sup> See Véronique Dupont and others, ‘The Alchemy of an Unloved City’, in *Delhi: Urban Space and Human Destinies*, pp. 15-25.

<sup>23</sup> Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p. 46. He also describes his ancestral return as a ‘delirium of seeing certain aspects of myself magnified out of recognition’, suggesting both identification and bewilderment (Ibid., p. 98). For an analysis of the experience of Bombay crowds and the logics of identification, dissimulation, risk and safety, in the aftermath of the Bombay Riots, see Subramaniam, ‘Urban Physiognomies’.

sclerotic. Its skin is peeling' (MC 23). The actual diseases affecting the writer are (over)construed as signs of harmful porosity between his body and his environment: 'Even when I am not walking the streets, riding the trains, or talking to anybody, I absorb the city through my pores and inhale it into my throat, causing granules to erupt all over it' (MC 29).<sup>24</sup> This overplaying of fear, flaunting the author's subjectivity (but also exposing it to analyses), becomes conspicuous when he dwells on the topic of illness and excrement, also one of Naipaul's obsessions when he visits India.<sup>25</sup>

The food and the water in Bombay, India's most modern city, are contaminated with shit. Amebic dysentery is transferred through shit. We have been feeding our son shit [...]. There is no defense possible. Everything is recycled in this filthy country, which poisons its children, raising them on a diet of its own shit. (MC 29)

Amitava Kumar's analysis of this passage as 'hysterical realism', mixing panic and exaggerated irony in a self-conscious way, is illuminating.<sup>26</sup> His reading of *Maximum City* as a self-conscious text suggests Mehta's 'strategic' use of exotic tropes that he deconstructs through empirical observation. In fact, Mehta's overstated obsession with excrement is juxtaposed with a minute investigation into urban sanitation and pollution issues (MC 127-129), thus intermingling the journalistic inquiry codes with those of travel writing and autobiography.

As the quest pattern requires, his return ultimately leads to reconciliation and re-familiarization with the city. The beginning of the first chapter contrasts with its end, pervaded by placation, compromise and mastery of Mumbai's languages. Casting off its mock-epic tone, the last chapter of the book closes on the author-narrator's epiphany amidst the crowd at Churchgate Station, leading up to a fusion between the self and the multitude:

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<sup>24</sup> The author-narrator's insistence on skin and body reaction, which appear as physical manifestations of a larger annoyance with the city, could be read in the light of Sianne Ngai's analysis of irritation. As one of the amoral, noncathartic 'ugly feelings' she studies, irritation is 'an affect that bears an unusually close relationship to the body's surfaces or skin', and is characterised by a blend of distance and bodily friction, which corresponds to Mehta's orientation towards the city, emphasising his repulsion towards substances he inevitably brushes against. His enduring annoyance with the city, which seems disproportionate and almost inadequate considering his privileged socioeconomic position, appears as a perfect illustration of this 'weak or inadequate form of anger', which elicits the readers' distance rather than empathy. It contrasts with the overall eagerness and sentimentality of the text (Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 35).

<sup>25</sup> Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, pp. 74-76. On this subject see Mike Davis 'Living in Shit', in *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 137-142, and Renu Desai, Colin McFarlane and Stephen Graham, 'The Politics of Open Defecation: Informality, Body and Infrastructure in Mumbai', *Antipode*, 47.1 (2015), 98-120.

<sup>26</sup> 'The hysterical realism of this passage, its mix of panic and exaggerated irony, is not unselfconscious. It doesn't simply reflect the tourist's nervous response to the sight of a man defecating in public in India. Rather, Mehta notes the obvious [...] and as a good journalist he goes and talks to people who can tell him more'. Kumar, 'The Enigma of Return'.

‘They are me, they are my body and my flesh. The crowd *is* the self, 14 million avatars of it, 14 million celebrations. I will not merge into them; I have elaborated myself into them’ (MC 540). Despite the overall anti-Naipaulian tone of this sentimental vision of the crowd, Amit Chaudhuri underlines the ‘Naipaulian, anti-democratic glitch’ of Mehta’s enduring self-distinction from the crowd, preceding the final ‘Whitmanesque wonder at free movement and free mingling’.<sup>27</sup> The superseding of anxiety by wonder at the end of the book is even more striking since Mumbai trains are the archetypal allegories of the struggle for space in the Indian city, involving ‘the Darwinian conflict among people scrambling to get a seat, and the contradictory, incongruous human impulse to give a fellow commuter a hand’.<sup>28</sup>

However, this spiritual sense of belonging is not the actual end of the trajectory since Mehta’s return is only ephemeral. As planned, the writer goes back to the United States after two years of exploration, thus twisting the quest pattern, or perhaps fulfilling it, if we follow Tim Young’s definition, which evokes a ‘return voyage’ after the subject’s completion of his mission. If Mehta knows from the start that his stay in Mumbai is transitory and determined by his writing project, he nevertheless gives another arc to his journey, adding an existential touch to a pragmatic decision. Far from staging his ultimate departure as the failure of his re-initiation to Mumbai, he interprets it as the fulfilment of the Mumbai ‘spirit’ itself. He constructs a teleology of departure, as though he left the city because he was doomed to perpetual displacement. Yet he does not link this ‘hypermobility’<sup>29</sup> to his diasporic identity but to Mumbai itself as the homeland of the uprooted, a city on the edge of the continent, a threshold that always prompts one to leave.

The identification of the city with movement and dislocation resonates with Ashis Nandy’s analysis of the city as ‘the location of homelessness’ but also with Rushdie’s imagination of Bombay, in particular as it is portrayed in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Mehta oscillates between two explanations for the ceaseless struggle of life in Mumbai: he either connects it to his own position as an insider-outsider or to the city itself. The second explanation takes on more substance when one looks at the way all the characters in the book are shaped as ‘strugglers’ or ‘strivers’, suggesting that urban life is essentially made of struggle and confrontation. This interpretive frame enables him to relate his own

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<sup>27</sup> Chaudhuri, ‘The View from Malabar Hill’ (2006), in *Clearing a Space*, p. 185.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>29</sup> V. Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Nandy, p. 25.

struggle to that of other urban dwellers, however distant he is from them on the socio-economic spectrum. This identification with all Mumbai ‘strugglers’ may be construed as the use of struggle and instability as mere tropes to seduce a global readership, an appropriation which would occlude his own elite position. Yet Mehta’s self-consciousness also suggests an awareness of his privileged experience of the city. The same oscillation characterises Rana Dasgupta’s account of his experience of Delhi, narrated as a metaphorical struggle to wrench out meaning from the chaotic hostility of the city.

Rana Dasgupta’s *Capital* similarly emphasizes the antagonism between the writer’s *persona* and the city. However, Dasgupta narrates a hermeneutic quest rather than an existential one. Faced with the city’s turbulence which offsets any attempt to make sense of it, he intends to give it a meaningful form. The writer thus elaborates a geography of the illegible and the fragmentary, which triggers his quest for meaning. If Mehta takes the reader on a personal journey, Dasgupta is less prone to displays of subjectivity, and his deciphering quest makes his work closer to the genre of the essay than of the travelogue. Rather than the agonistic relationship between the outsider and the city, his work rather enhances the city’s general aggressive ethos.

Recounting his first impressions of the tumultuous capital, he describes a chaotic jungle that even the inhabitants themselves cannot fully grasp, either visually (because of its multi-directorial urban sprawl) or cognitively (because the built environment is constantly being torn down and rebuilt again, as was shown in Chapter 1). Dasgupta imagines the way in which a painter would represent Delhi and this pictorial *mise en abyme* interrogates the very possibility to represent the city, strengthening the idea of a magma of amorphous data, a jerky flow of motley images:

There would be no dwelling, like the Impressionists, on details of costume and gesture, no slow rendition of café light falling on pedestrian faces, no capturing of the almost unnoticeable interactions that happen between strangers in a public space. No, it would be a strobe-lit succession of unrelated glimpses: [...] and a host of impressions of other, unformed characters, animal and human, whose identity it is difficult to discern. (C18)

What follows is an enumeration mimicking this accelerated vision of urban landscape, an anarchic collection of whirling fragments. The first part of the passage delineates the features of an urban ethos which Delhi would want. The negative structures suggest a slower rhythm and chance encounters enabled by ‘democratic spaces’: there emerge the defining characteristics of a fantasised ideal city as a continuous space of social interaction and free

mingling.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, the end of the passage insists on the experience of Delhi as a succession of fragmented images, which paradoxically resonates with the ‘rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions’ which define the modernist city.<sup>32</sup> The unorganised yet organic movement of street-walking is hindered in Delhi, first and foremost because of its lack of walkable pavements, which precludes any feeling of being at home on the streets and enhances the notion of a city at war with its denizens:

The first thing one notices here, perhaps, is that little allowance is made for walking. Delhi is sometimes compared to Los Angeles because of the highway-like thoroughfares that have grown up over the last fifteen years, which disregard all movement save that of the automobile; and getting around on foot can be fantastically arduous. (C 17)

While Chaudhuri tries to re-moor himself in Kolkata (a city he does not understand anymore) by wandering its streets, this *flânerie* seems impossible in Delhi, as any pedestrian navigation is hampered by the car-oriented urban development and the Darwinian conflict of traffic.<sup>33</sup>

Dasgupta argues that the difficulty to capture and to narrate Delhi stems not only from its perpetual transformation and fragmentation (which is, after all, a *topos* of the modernist city), but also from its extreme sprawl, turning it into a mosaic of heterogeneous elements, preventing the unity of impression which characterises ‘real cities’ according to him: ‘the city is impossible to see’.<sup>34</sup> Delhi is made to stand out against the backdrop of the ‘much-imagined’ cities as an unimagined space, a cluster of stimuli that have not yet been synthesised yet by consciousness.

But the deficiency [of meaning] was not in things, necessarily, so much as in the imagination. It felt as though Delhi had somehow not been imagined yet, and unlike those who lived in much-imagined cities – Paris, New York, Mumbai – we in Delhi had very few codes with which to order the data-chaos around us. The ‘city’ did not yet

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<sup>31</sup> Dasgupta’s ideal of urban sociality may be connected with the American urbanist Jane Jacobs’s ‘intricate sidewalk ballet’, ‘in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole’. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 50.

<sup>32</sup> Simmel, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Other writers, such as Arundhati Roy, Aman Sethi or Siddharth Chowdhury, actually focus on the bustling street life of the city, in particular of Old Delhi, and account for the pedestrian’s experience of the Indian capital, at odds with Dasgupta’s automotive landscape. See Chapter 6.

<sup>34</sup> Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017. Véronique Dupont, among others, states that Delhi’s spatial expansion, which connects the core city with the fast-growing peripheral towns, raises the question of the proper definition of urban boundaries in expanding megacities of the South, all the more as Delhi now encompasses the National Capital Region (NCR). Dupont, ‘The Dream of Delhi as a Global City’, 538. See also *World Cities Beyond the West: Globalization, Development, and Inequality*, ed. by Joseph Gugler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and *Global City-Regions*.

exist: it remained for the present a mere force field of raw and raging stimuli – which was one of the reasons it left us so petulant and exhausted. (C 45)

The lack of meaning would thus result from the lack of imagination of the city, as though no narrative had yet emerged to structure contemporary Delhi. Dasgupta acknowledges the rich tradition of literary representations of the city but argues that, so far, no account of the early twenty-first-century Delhi has given it a form. In a grandiose gesture, Dasgupta announces his self-appointed mission, i.e. to rationalise this disorderly set of signs: ‘I resolved to start with them, with the torrent of Delhi’s inner life and to seek there the rhythm, the history, the mesh from which a city’s lineaments might emerge. It did all mean something, I felt. There *was* a city to be made’ (C 45). The prophetic – and almost parodic – tone of the passage gives a sense of the writer’s hubristic ambition to lay out the city, to shape it into existence through his narrative. He stages himself as an explorer and *ordinator*, identifying the invention of the city with the discovery of its underlying logic, in a move which is characteristic of documentary narratives.<sup>35</sup> The form and meaning Dasgupta gives to the magma of Delhi is that of a fundamentally broken city, fractured by the entangled forces of colonialism and capitalism.

Dasgupta’s project to invent Delhi can be traced back to Rushdie’s intention to invent Bombay in order to fill a gap, to remedy the city’s ‘imaginative/symbolic dispensability’:<sup>36</sup> ‘I wanted to put Bombay in a book, and I thought I hadn’t seen it there, so in a way I thought that I was trying to fill a gap’.<sup>37</sup> In *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie openly evokes his ambition to ‘reclaim’ the city: ‘Bombay is a city built by foreigners upon reclaimed land. I, who had been away so long that I almost qualified for the title, was gripped by the conviction that I, too, had a city and a history to reclaim’.<sup>38</sup> The ambiguity of the passage lies in the meaning of ‘I, too’: on the one hand, the pun on ‘reclaim’, pointing to the development of the city by the British through land reclamation, hints at the oppositional symbolical project of claiming Bombay back from the British, reinventing the city through Indian eyes. On the other hand, Rushdie connects the necessity to reclaim the city with his identity as a quasi-foreigner, as though he emphasized the similarity of his position with the British rather than

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<sup>35</sup> Lionel Ruffel writes that, if we consider fiction as an organising practice (‘une pratique de l’agencement’) of actions, nonfiction can be considered as an organising practice of signs, meant to give meaning to the empirical world. Lionel Ruffel, ‘Un réalisme contemporains: les narrations documentaires’, *Littérature*, 66.2 (2012), 13-25.

<sup>36</sup> Khanna, *The Contemporary Novel and the City: Re-conceiving National and Narrative Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Rushdie, ‘Salman Rushdie Talks to Alastair Niven’, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Rushdie, ‘Imaginary Homelands’, in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 10.



an antagonist stance ('I, too'). This ambiguity resonates with Srinivasan's argument about the underlying claim of urban return-writing: it takes a deterritorialized subject to give meaning to the city. Suketu Mehta, also overstating his own position as an almost-foreigner, acknowledges Rushdie's influence on his decision to write about Bombay, referring to *Midnight's Children* as 'the book which made me think I could write about Bombay'.<sup>39</sup>

If we go back to the metaphor of eruption developed in Chapter 1, the several occurrences of the verbal form 'erupt' referring to outbursts of rage or anxiety in Dasgupta's essay are significant of the overall tense atmosphere Dasgupta detects in the city, nowhere more palpable than at the traffic lights: 'It is in this ceasefire that the anxiety of the battlefield suddenly erupts. Drivers are racked with apprehension. They light cigarettes, curse, tap the steering wheel, honk impotently. The wait is intense and unbearable' (C 18-19). Through a mock-epic rhetoric, the passage conveys the paradoxical outbursts of rage occurring in this interstice of stillness in the midst of the megacity's chaotic traffic, pointing to the never-ending tension that fuels the city, even during moments of 'ceasefire'. The density and disorder of the traffic is pictured as wilderness, impervious to all attempts to understand or control it: 'Horns blare continually, for the traffic is not a stream that carries you with it, but a jungle through which you hack' (C 18). The bumpy journey of each vehicle, imagined as an islet caught in a permanent struggle with the others surrounding it, embodies an anti-urban ethos. The traffic is thus used by Dasgupta as an allegory of Delhi's warlike atmosphere and clannish spirit, which makes him state that 'there is nothing urban about this place. no metropolitan ethos emerges from all these multitudes who live together' (C 186).<sup>40</sup> However, as Srinivasan writes, 'Dasgupta calls into question both the organisation and legibility of Delhi, while nevertheless searching out a space of possibility for the cultivation of a metropolitan ethos'.<sup>41</sup> His critique of the new urban India as a profoundly divided space

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<sup>39</sup> Suketu Mehta, Interview with Smitha Nair, *Scroll.in*, 17 December 2017, <<https://scroll.in/video/861749/video-author-suketu-mehta-on-how-he-married-bollywood-and-the-underworld-for-his-book-maximum-city>> [accessed 10 March 2021].

<sup>40</sup> The term 'allegory' is classically understood as a story or an extended metaphor with several layers of meaning, relying on analogy and correspondence, typically employing the personification of abstract qualities. Away from its disqualification as mechanical and artificial, this rhetorical strategy is considered as departing from strict realism while constituting a powerful instrument of social critique (see Walter Benjamin's study of Baudelaire's allegories of the city in 'Paris, The Capital of the Nineteenth Century' (1935), in *The Arcades Project*, pp. 10-11). On the capacity of the allegory to represent the complexity of the world-system, see Moretti, *Modern Epic*, pp. 77-98.

<sup>41</sup> Srinivasan, 'Unmoored', pp. 329-330.

is also a way to give a literary form to his return, which, as stated in Chapter 1, takes him from bewilderment to disillusion and critical analysis.

The motif of the quest, partly borrowed from travel-writing, is not only related to the writers' personal trajectories or distress upon returning but also to their novelistic conception of urban life. The writers' mock-epic journeys through the city are intertwined with their subjects' daily battles through their shared conflictual relationship with the city, leading to victory or failure. This opposition between the individual and the city is indebted to the conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, suggesting the formal hybridity of these narratives. Amit Chaudhuri thus writes about *Maximum City*: 'the book possesses the hard-headed exuberance of the nineteenth century novels, their fascination with the spirit of compromise and with survival skills, their complete understanding of the importance of the mercantile and the pecuniary'.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Mehta's and Dasgupta's narratives of arduous progress and gradual mastering of urban codes fit the maturation pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, which is based on a fundamental conflict between the self and society, and delineates the subject's self-realisation in an unfamiliar changing environment.<sup>43</sup>

The connection between geographical and social mobility which defines the genre, usually involving the journey of a young man to the unfamiliar realm of urban modernity, is partly used in Mehta's narrative of progress, which hearkens to earlier representations of the city in Indian literature and cinema. The *Bildung's* exaltation of the city as a magnet, the ultimate seat of power and wealth to be conquered, has fuelled representations of the rural migrant coming to the tantalizing metropolis, such as Mulk Raj Anand's anti-*Bildungsroman Coolie*, in which Munoo is first mesmerized by the metropolis's sprawl and the 'colossal world' of Bombay before being ruthlessly crushed by it.<sup>44</sup> In Indian cinema, the newcomer's itinerary through the city has been depicted in numerous classic films such as *Do Bigha*

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<sup>42</sup> Chaudhuri, 'The View from Malabar Hill', in *Clearing a Space*, p. 187.

<sup>43</sup> Mikhail. M. Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Toward a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee, ed. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 10-59. On the relations between the epic and the novel of education, see Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, pp. 112-131, and Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *Coolie* (1936) (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 151-156. For a discussion of Anand's novel as an 'antidevelopmental narrative', see Caitlin Vandertop, 'Peripheral Urbanism, Imperial Maturity and the Crisis of Development in Lao She's *Rickshaw* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*', *Novel*, 53.2 (2019), <<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/126431>> [last accessed 21 June 2021], 1-31. See also Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in The Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 128-163.

*Zamin*, *Shree 420*, *Aparajito*, or *Jagte Raho*.<sup>45</sup> These works often account for underprivileged subjects arriving in the city hoping to achieve material security or success, at odds with the diasporic writers' positions upon arriving in Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata. I would argue that Mehta's overplayed progress from irritated disorientation to harmony is tinged with self-consciousness, making his incorporation of *Bildung* conventions part of his strategic exoticism, playing with these traditional tropes to exhibit his complicity with and critique of the 'spectacle of India'.

The other aspect which suggests that the *Bildungsroman* is a relevant analytical lens is the analogy between individual and national development, the ambitions of the 'unheroic hero' (a qualifier which particularly suits Dasgupta's and Mehta's self-presentations) mirroring the aspirations of an entire nation in the throes of modernisation.<sup>46</sup> The emergence of India as a world economic power and the accompanying discourse of a successful global India create a fertile ground for trajectories that are typical of *Bildungsroman*.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, although the authors display their trouble to negotiate this 'new' urbanity, their journeys (from one metropolis to another) are not attuned to the nation's embrace of neoliberalism, even though their return intersects with it. This discrepancy hints at the anti-developmental dimension of these texts, which is characteristic of the tensions inhabiting the postcolonial appropriation of the *Bildungsroman*, and is even more conspicuous when one looks at their representation of other characters.<sup>48</sup> Paralleling their own journey through the urban jungle, Dasgupta and Mehta also attempt to decipher this era of transition in India through encounters with urban-dwellers. The individuals portrayed in their narratives embody the contradictory aspect of India's development, their thirst for power leading to their self-destruction rather than self-realisation. Their works emphasize the struggle which defines

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<sup>45</sup> *Do Bigha Zameen*, dir. by Bimal Roy (Yash Raj Films, 1953); *Shree 420*, dir. by Raj Kapoor (Yash Raj Films, 1955); *Aparajito*, dir. by Satyajit Ray (Epic Productions, 1956); *Jagte Raho*, dir. by Amit Maitra and Sombhu Mitra (R.K. Films, 1956). For a psychoanalytical reading of the village-to-city journey in *Jagte Raho* and *Shri 420*, see Nandy, *An Ambiguous Journey to the City*.

<sup>46</sup> Moretti, *The Way of the World*, p. 230. On the emergence of the hero 'along with the world', reflecting 'the emergence of the world itself', accomplishing the transition from one epoch to another, see Bakhtin, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Swaralipi Nandi defines Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, for instance, as 'a narrative of neoliberal subject formation, normalizing the protagonist into the new capitalistic social order' ('Narrative Ambiguity and the Neoliberal Bildungsroman in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 47.2 (2017), 276. See also Snehal Shingavi, 'Capitalism, Caste, and Con-games in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*', *Postcolonial Text*, 9.3 (2014), 1-16.

<sup>48</sup> Ericka A. Hoagland, 'The Postcolonial Bildungsroman', in *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. by Sarah Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 217-238. See also Cédric Courtois, 'Itineraries of a Genre, Variations on the *Bildungsroman* in Contemporary Nigerian Literature' (unpublished doctoral thesis, ENS Lyon, 2019).

their everyday life and oscillate between the overstating of their alterity and the identification with them.

## 2. Slumming it?

Hansen and Verkaairk contrast the task of the urban anthropologist when he approaches the city's poor neighbourhoods with Mehta's writing of the 'heart of darkness', underscoring the exoticism at work in *Maximum City*: 'Are we bound to repeat the same story, to assume a similar cinematic gaze to that of the crime writer, or the diasporic re-discoverer of the mysteries and the heart of darkness within the city as when Suketu Mehta explores Mumbai in his *Maximum City*?'<sup>49</sup> The discounting of Mehta's reportage as exoticism invites me to interrogate the way local disenfranchised subjects and their struggle for survival in the city are represented in Indian urban nonfiction, which seems to oscillate between the indictment of inhuman living conditions resulting from an unequal distribution of resources, and the celebration of the urban outcasts' ingenuity and inventiveness to cope with them, locating their texts in a liberal narrative of individual self-making. This oscillation characterises the practice of 'slumming', that is, the observation of poor neighbourhoods for entertainment or scientific purposes, which rose in the late nineteenth century in British and American cities.<sup>50</sup>

In fact, Srinivasan draws a parallel between urban return-writing and 'slumming': she highlights the sensationalist nature of these narratives as well as the writers' use of their subjects to legitimise their presence in the city and to authorise their texts.<sup>51</sup> The return-writers would rely on urban social outcasts whose knowledge of the city's current condition is supposedly more accurate than their own, and whose personal itineraries are attuned to India's trajectory. The question of Mehta's ambiguous relationship with his characters, or informants, has been discussed by recent scholarship, which underlines his reportage's 'spectacular and gendered image of Bombay' as well as the potential exploitative

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaairk, 'Introduction: Urban Charisma, On Everyday Mythologies in the City', *Critique of Anthropology*, 29.1 (2009), 16.

<sup>50</sup> The word 'slumming' was first registered by the Oxford Dictionary in 1884, 'coinciding with a rising Victorian preoccupation that mixed philanthropy, social paranoia and voyeuristic titillation' (Marc Saint-Upéry, 'Left at the Crossroads: Ogling the Poor', *RIA Novosti*, 21 October 2010, <<https://sputniknews.com/analysis/20101021161035393/>> [accessed 11 March 2021]).

<sup>51</sup> Srinivasan, 'Unmoored', p. 95.

relationship between the writer and his subjects.<sup>52</sup> I will thus discuss the critical value of ‘slumming’ as a notion to define the literary representations of the city as an agonistic space, and underline the ambiguity of the emphasis on the struggle for survival in the city, which seems to stem from the writers’ imagination of urban space at large rather than from their position as returnees, as Srinivasan argues.

Vyjayanthi Rao recalls the centrality of slums to the development of urban theory, in the wake of earlier texts of social observation of urban poverty.<sup>53</sup> Seth Koven writes about the simultaneous yet contradictory impulses of Victorian ‘slumming’ reformist writings, drawn to exoticize and moralize urban poverty but also to critique the general unevenness of capitalist urban development.<sup>54</sup> Other commentators insist on the structural ambiguity of underworld journalism as it developed in late nineteenth-century Europe, entwining reform and exploitation, documenting social difference and transforming it into a spectacle (through the register of melodrama, pornography and voyeurism), controlling it and legitimising a ‘benevolent’ power.<sup>55</sup> In the case of return-writing, another layer of exoticism is then added to the social exoticism inherent to slumming, that of a metropolitan gaze on a semi-peripheral space: considering Mehta’s largely metropolitan audience, whose knowledge of the Indian megacity might well be limited to the image of a giant slum, his focus on the alterity he encounters in the city and his excessive rhetoric need to be scrutinized.<sup>56</sup>

Mehta’s literary mapping of Mumbai emphasizes the struggle of urban outcasts, and his writing oscillates between ‘poverty spectatorship’ and a minute investigation into the

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<sup>52</sup> Emma Bird, ‘Beautiful Thing: Literary Reportage and Bombay’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 51 (2015), 381.

<sup>53</sup> Vyjayanthi Rao, ‘Slum as Theory’, Editoriale, *Lotus*, 143 (2010), 10, <<http://www.vyjayanthirao.me/publications>> [accessed 16 June 2021].

<sup>54</sup> Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Examples of literary ‘slumming’ can be found in Charles Dickens’s *Selected Journalism 1850-1857* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), *Night Walks* ((London: Penguin, 2010), Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (London: Nelson, 1910), or George Orwell, *Down and Out in London and Paris* (1933) (London: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> Dominique Kalifa, *Les bas fonds, Histoire d’un imaginaire* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> In fact, the rise of slumming in nineteenth-century metropolitan centres was matched by its equivalent practice in colonial peripheries, the observation, classification and attempts to reform ‘slums’ being layered with racist assumptions in addition to classist ones. About the colonial perception and governance of slums in late Victorian Bombay, see Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2007). In a contemporary context, ‘slumming’ has also been used since the 2000s to refer to a form of tourism drawn to the most disadvantaged areas of the global South, turning poverty into thrilling entertainment under the guise of promoting social awareness (see Peter Dyson, ‘Slum Tourism: Representing and Interpreting “Reality” in Dharavi, Mumbai’, *Tourism Geographies*, 14.2 (2012), 254-74). See also Dominique Lapiere, *La Cité de la Joie* (Paris: Laffont, 1985), Danny Boyle, *Slumdog Millionaire* (dir. by Danny Boyle, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox India, 2009).

lower social classes' everyday life, which tends to celebrate the struggle for survival waged in these parts of the city.<sup>57</sup> In fact, the chapter he devotes to the slums of Jogeshwari is best read through the prism of the dilemma between miserabilism and populism, two analytical pitfalls derived from social scientists' attempts to break away from ethnocentrism yet which manifest the inability to overcome an uneasiness vis à vis their object: the former regards alterity as utter alienation, looking at it only in reference to dominant paradigms, while the latter tends to glorify or enchant alterity, thus abstracting it from relations of domination.<sup>58</sup> Even though they are originally concerned with cultural matters, these categories or similar ones have been used to account for urban narratives of poverty: for example, 'subaltern urbanism', a concept developed by Ananya Roy, refers to an optimistic vision of the slum as an alternative urban model based on individual enterprise and the absence of regulation, an ideology she deems dangerous as it reinforces the neoliberal *status quo* and ultimately curbs any government-led attempt to improve these denizens' conditions.<sup>59</sup> These categories prove useful to analyse Suketu Mehta's hovering between a profound outrage in front of the sanitary crisis of Bombay slums and his magnifying of the same spaces as self-sufficient organic units.

Much of the slum is a garbage dump. The sewers, which are open, run right between the houses, and children play and occasionally fall into them. They are full of a blue-black iridescent sludge [...]. I couldn't use the public toilets. I tried, once. There were two rows of toilets. Each of them has masses of shit, overflowing out of the toilets and spread liberally all around the cubicle. For the next few hours that image and that stench stayed with me, when I ate, when I drank. It's not merely an esthetic discomfort; typhoid runs rampant through the slum and spreads through oral-fecal contact. Pools of stagnant water, which are everywhere, breed malaria. Many children also have jaundice. Animal carcasses are spread out on the counters of the butcher shops, sprinkled with flies like a moving spice. (MC 53)

Mehta's fear of pollution and excrement, described earlier as 'hysterical realism', extends to his panic-laden writing of urban poverty. Nonetheless, the expression of the author's hygienist revulsion in front of the slum's filth soon gives way to an ethnographic inquiry into a local women-run organisation which struggle to solve the sanitation problem in the

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<sup>57</sup> Shingavi, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Claude Grignon and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le Savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1989).

<sup>59</sup> Ananya Roy, 'Slumdog Cities', 223-238. She also develops the concept of 'poverty capital', i.e. the simultaneous financialization of development through the democratization of capital and 'the currency of poverty experts' (see Ananya Roy, *Poverty Capital: Microfinance and the Making of Development* (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 30-32).

slum. The passage in turn evokes a quasi-reformist piece, insisting on the necessity to take the inhabitants' aspirations into account:

We tend to think of a slum as an excrescence, a community of people living in perpetual misery. What we forget is that out of inhospitable surroundings, the people have formed a community, and they are attached to its spatial geography, the social networks they have built for themselves, the village they have re-created in the midst of the city, as a Parisian might be to his quartier or as I was to Nepean Sea Road [...]. Any urban redevelopment plan has to take into account the curious desire of slum dwellers to live closely together. A greater horror than open gutters and filthy toilets, to the people of Jogeswhari, is the empty room in the big city. (MC 55)

This passage stages the way in which 'our' perspective (encompassing the reader and the author) on the slum shifts from othering it as a squalid excrescence (miserabilism) to seeing it as a tightly knit network of communities (populism). The striking comparison with Paris and the privileged neighbourhood Nepean Sea Road in Mumbai draws the margin of the slum closer to the centre, trying to narrow down the distance between the slum-dwellers' aspirations and 'ours'. I suggest that his sentimental vision of the slum as an organic system borders on 'subaltern urbanism': if Mehta focuses in this excerpt on a grassroots women's association which succeeds in its lobbying for facilities, he also insists on the slum-dwellers' ability to earn a living through menial jobs and local micro-enterprises. This emphasis locates his work within a liberal humanist narrative which considers slum-dwellers as industrious small-scale entrepreneurs, hereby indirectly redeeming capitalism and neoliberal austerity.<sup>60</sup>

The glorification of alterity, tapping into the liberal narrative of individual self-making, becomes clearer at the end of *Maximum City*, when the text leaves abjectivity aside to openly turn slum- and street-dwellers into heroic figures:

The slums and sidewalks of Bombay are filled with little lives, unnoticed in the throng, uncelebrated in the Bollywood movies. But to each one of them, the scale they are living in is mythic. It involves battles of good versus evil, survival or death, love and desolation, and the ceaseless, life-affirming pursuit of the Golden Songbird. What they have in common with each other – what they have in common, in fact, with me – is restlessness, the inability or disinclination to stay still. Like me, they are happier in transit. (MC 451)

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<sup>60</sup> Naresh Fernandes's short biography of Mumbai also uncovers the elite's unnerving celebration of 'the wonders of Dharavi' as 'a comfortable compromise with existing structures of inequality', including the large-scale casualization of employment resulting from the service-based economy: 'Pretending that Dharavi is an oasis of opportunity absolves them of the guilt of ignoring the pitiful conditions in which their cooks, maids and drivers live. They have come to believe that life in the shanties and its sweatshops can't really be so bad if slum residents are able to be so productive' (Fernandes, *City Adrift*, pp. 124-125).

Asserting the mythical dimension of his writing, Mehta celebrates these invisible urban fringes by endowing them with a heightened existential intensity, thus joining together social and existential extremities, a *topos* of underworld literature. He turns them into larger-than-life characters, driven by their hopes and aspirations, underlining a collective destiny. Yet the author subsequently identifies with these unstable lives in a gesture that erases the difference between the observer and the observed and risks masking the inequality of power relations between them, thus relinquishing any reformist ambition to embrace myth-making.

This sequence – first heroicisation, then identification – illustrates the ambivalence of Mehta’s authorial position throughout the book, wavering between othering and identifying, myth-making and documenting. He self-consciously acknowledges his privileged position when he refers to his criminal informants’ perception of him as ‘a man of the other Bombay’, or else ‘the nonresident Indian from Malabar Hill’ (MC 194).<sup>61</sup> Mehta shows himself both as participant and observer, grappling with a desire for intimacy with his subjects while inevitably falling back on the distance separating his privileged position and theirs.<sup>62</sup> Thus, his oscillation between a delusory identification with outcasts and an awareness of his privileges constructs an ambivalent (and often unlikeable) narrator *persona*, who may trigger contradictory reader-responses, between empathy and dislike. Blowing his own troubles out of proportion and staging his duplicity towards his informants form part of his strategic excess, which draws the reader’s attention to his own ambiguous authorial position as an insider-outsider.

His sentimental view of the myriad mythical ‘little lives’ is strongly determined by the quest-structure of his urban exploration, which leads him to a general reconciliation with Mumbai and an optimistic vision of the city. Mehta thus sheds light on marginalised subjects and embeds them in a larger liberal humanist narrative of self-making. Nonetheless, his aggrandizing of ‘little lives’ may also be constructed as part of his larger interest in extreme forms of life, a curiosity which goes beyond urban outcasts.<sup>63</sup> What Mehta scrutinises first

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<sup>61</sup> Mehta expresses an awareness of the spatial segmentation of the city, which restricted his childhood knowledge of Bombay: ‘But even when I was living there, there were whole worlds of the city that were as foreign to me as the ice fields of the Arctic or the deserts of Arabia.’ (MC 11).

<sup>62</sup> The method of participant observation was mainly developed by the Chicago School of Sociology as a tool of qualitative ethnography based on social interaction, which aimed at studying a social group by sharing its everyday life and participating in the group’s activities. The integration into a community is best exemplified by William Foote Whyte’s seminal work in Boston, *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (1943), 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), which we will return to in Chapter 4. While reducing ethnocentrism, the method also raises ethical concerns, notably regarding the participants’ consent and the blurred boundaries between observer and observed.

<sup>63</sup> ‘In order to uncover Bombay, Suketu transforms himself into the perfect listener, the man who will explore a city through its extremes’, writes Nilanjana Roy (‘The Poets of the Mean Streets’).



is Bombay mythologies, mostly characterised by the notion of intensity and extremity. The prominent metaphor of extremity in the text provides a potent instrument to grasp its literary project if we understand it in social, existential and stylistic terms, thus tempering with the reading of *Maximum City* as slumming. Indeed, the writer-reporter not only explores ‘how the other half lives’ but navigates the extremes of the social spectrum, from the most powerful to the powerless, the most visible to the invisible. Here is not a story about average urban middle-class clerks, but that of people on the fringe, exceptional individuals, sources of curiosity or fantasy.

Each of us has an inner extremity. Most of us live guarded lives and resist any pull that takes us too far toward this extremity. [...] In Bombay I met people who lived closer to their seductive extremities than anyone I had ever known. Shouted lives. Ajay and Satish and Sunil live on the extreme of violence; Monalisa and Vinod live on the extreme of spectacle; Honey is on the extreme of gender; the Jains go beyond the extreme of abandonment. These are not normal people. They live out the fantasies of normal people. (MC 538)

The metaphor of ‘shouted lives’ generalises the idea of an exacerbated intensity of existence, an intensity which characterises all the exceptional characters whom Mehta is drawn to. In this case, ‘extremity’ is clearly related to the lure of transgression, which also pushes Mehta to explore the world of cinema in Bombay (‘our flashlight into the darkest part of ourselves’ (MC 348)), entangled with that of organised crime. These people’s lives are extreme because they step across accepted social, legal, sexual, and moral lines, and this is also what defines Bombay and perhaps the city in general for Mehta.<sup>64</sup>

What is striking is the way Mehta lays bare his own attraction for extremities, as well as all his faults and failings: far from trying to tone down the contradictions at work in his project, Mehta openly displays them. Emma Bird argues that contrary to Rushdie, Mehta does not undermine his role as informant but is a ‘participant in the construction of himself as a privileged guide to the underside of the city’.<sup>65</sup> Yet, though his self-reflexivity is sometimes difficult to assess, I would argue that the author’s ‘cultivated exhibitionism’ consciously points to the author’s limits as an authoritative cultural commentator.<sup>66</sup> For instance, the sentimental confession of his discomfort with the ‘runaway poet’ and with the

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<sup>64</sup> ‘Bombay’s defenders often point out that all great cities are characterized by extremes of experience. But extremities are, by definition, the most intense ends of the spectrum. In India’s commercial capital, a life on the margins is actually the predominant condition.’ (Fernandes, *City Adrift*, p. 126). This sense of a city in which everything is stretched to its limit recalls Rushdie’s superlative portrayal of Bombay in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* as ‘the Central Junction of all such tamashas’, a city on which streets the most appetizingly gaudy stories proliferate, *struggling* to get heard in the crowd. (Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, p. 128).

<sup>65</sup> Bird, 390.

<sup>66</sup> Huggan, p. XI.

bar-dancer Mona Lisa points to his failure as a middle-class observer to understand and communicate with subaltern figures. However, his tendency to entwine his own destiny to that of every Bombayite altogether comes to mitigate the argument of a *strategic* domestication and spectacularisation of India and remains politically ambivalent.<sup>67</sup> If Mehta's exoticism may be construed as strategic when he narrates his own return, since his mock-epic tale of pseudo-misfortunes meant to catch the reader's amused sympathy suggests the author's awareness of his privileged experience of the city, this is less certain in the case of his representation of urban outcasts.

Mehta's liberal narrative of self-making is not fully embraced by Rana Dasgupta's account of urban outcasts of Delhi, which offers a clear diagnosis of the government-driven disenfranchisement of this population. The chapter he devotes to Bhalswa colony, a resettlement area on the northern edge of Delhi where evicted Yamuna slum-dwellers have been displaced, mostly consists of verbatim transcriptions of interviews with Meenakshi, an activist, and two residents, which partly explains the stress laid on planned violence. Yet these harrowing life-stories are interspersed with the narrator's impressions of the location during his visit, dwelling on its architecture, atmosphere and people. Like Mehta, his recounted experience oscillates between horror and admiration for these people's determination to fight. The first image of Bhalswa Colony is that of a vast pile of garbage, depicted as follows:

The mountain of garbage at Bhalswa Colony is awe-inspiring. Only nature, one would imagine, might produce something so vast. It towers over the landscape, a long, gruff cliff along whose flank zigzags a shallow road where overflowing trucks rumble slowly to the summit. From below you can see them driving along the cliff's flat top, unloading their cargo of trash, feeding the mountain with more. All around them, mere specks from down below, are the people whose work is to pick out from this megapolis-scale pile of refuse that can still be sorted. (C 236)

The passage illustrates the hypertrophic imaginary of the epic representational mode, dramatizing the immensity and horror of the garbage heap through natural and anthropomorphic metaphors, turning it into a terrifying mountain, redolent of Zola's allegory of the city as a monstrous belly, this inhuman landscape culminating in the final upscaling of the pile into a whole city.<sup>68</sup> The monumental scale of the heap is underlined by the view

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<sup>67</sup> The ideological implications of his aesthetic of excess and his romanticising of urban tumult will be further examined in Chapter 3.

<sup>68</sup> The second sentence ('Only nature, one would imagine, might produce something so vast') enlightens the epic writers' naturalisation of historical processes, studied in Chapter 1, as a way to render the inhuman scale

from below, which shrinks waste-pickers and underlines their colossal task. Yet the overwhelming description is balanced both by the documentary mode used to describe garbage-sorting and by a bucolic imaginary, which emphasizes the ‘pastoral openness’ emanating from the place, contrasting with the urban congestion of Delhi. However, these rural characteristics are also noted as symptoms of the thorough disconnection of the township from the capital city, which suggest the overlapping of different phases of development within the same space.

The text first enhances how well built the township is, yet this ‘populist’ portrait is soon belied by the rest of the visit and by Meenakshi’s account of the numerous issues plaguing the slum, such as regular floods, drugs, violence and child labour. The two female residents’ account of their tribulations and Meenakshi’s story of her ‘prolonged fight’ (C 256) for the slum-dwellers’ rights echo Mehta’s long interview with the local women organisation lobbying for facilities in Jogeswhari. The verbatim transcriptions amplify these people’s inhuman living conditions and their exclusion from the city (through demolition and perpetual displacement). Dasgupta also documents these women’s determined struggle against the city government’s indifference or oppression, and expresses his genuine admiration for the ones who have built, planned and now manage this informal city (‘they own themselves in a way that most people I know do not’ (C 244)). His celebration is furthered by the sense of community he detects among them, their solidarity pitted against the widespread suspicion he identifies among Delhi middle-classes.

Like Mehta, he insists on these women’s strength and energy, their sense of revolt and entitlement kindled by their fierce commitment. Yet if these figures are heroicised for their resilience, they are not exuberantly turned into mythical characters as in Mehta’s reportage. Dasgupta downplays the difference separating himself from Meenakshi (an activist who comes from a working-class high caste family), connecting her energetic struggle for justice with that of his friends (C 225), but does so in a less oblivious manner than Mehta’s hasty identification of street-dwellers’ mobility with his own and with the city’s restless spirit. The battle waged by these urban-dwellers is not the pursuit of material success but of political and social justice. *Capital*’s oscillation between miserabilism and populism thus forms part of the writer’s critical intervention in urban politics rather than a liberal optimistic vision of urban life. His focus on struggle and conflict still places him closer to Mehta’s epic writing

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of these mutations. The passage as a whole, pitted against the elite world of Delhi’s businessmen, is reminiscent of the description of the Valley of Ashes in F.S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, providing a counterpoint to the glamorous world of the New York wealthy. For a sustained comparison, see Chapter 3.

of urban poverty than to Aman Sethi's reportage on a Delhi homeless labourer who quits the race for material success.<sup>69</sup>

Therefore, I believe the quest mode, the trope of survival, the consorting with urban outcasts and the ambiguous authorial position epitomized by these urban narratives are not so much signs of diasporic alienation but point to a larger attempt to dramatize the shock of the metropolis at the turn of the century, underpinned by these writers' global readership. The emphasis on estrangement and the displayed curiosity for the extremes have been connected with the intersecting literary spaces these authors occupy, such as travel-writing, the *Bildungsroman*, and writings on urban poverty. The shock of the metropolis and the fundamentally conflictual dimension of urban life are also amplified through these epic narratives' stress on outbursts of direct violence, which emphasize the collisions and crashes that define the characters' trajectories across the city.

## II. Spectacular Shocks, Outbursts of Violence

The epic aesthetic which dominates the narratives under scrutiny implies the intensification of the 'shock of the metropolis', the troubled encounter with the unknown and the unfamiliar in the new megacities of India. For modernist thinkers such as Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, who explored the new sensorial and social regimes of the modernist metropolis, urban life was defined by physical collisions and psychological shocks, the subject's consciousness being constantly assaulted by an onslaught of stimuli.<sup>70</sup> The urban landscape in the 1990s in India was also characterised by 'the shock of the new', 'a plethora of signs indicating the arrival of new forms of mechanical and digital reproduction'.<sup>71</sup> Yet the experiences of modernist and of late-modernist cities are also

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<sup>69</sup> See Chapter 6. Mehta's account of slums in *Maximum City* finds an interesting comparison point in American journalist Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, a literary reportage which follows the lives of slumdweller in Annawadi near Mumbai airport. Contrary to Mehta, Boo's subjectivity is not flaunted but expunged, as the narrative recreates scenes from the past, using internal focalization, erasing the observation and data-collection process from the narrative to provide a vivid reportage, the fictional quality of which has been noted by many reviewers. For an analysis of the ambiguity of this process, see Dominic Davies, 'Literary Non-Fiction and the Neo-Liberal City: Subalternity and Urban Governance in Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55 (2019), 94-107.

<sup>70</sup> For a syncretical account of the relationship between these modernist thinkers and the city, see *Le Choc des Métropoles*, Simmel, Kracauer, Benjamin, ed. by Stéphane Füzesséry and Philippe Simay (Paris: Éclat, 2008).

<sup>71</sup> 'The cultures of distraction, of exhilaration and mobility, of loss and displacement were by no means new – they had been narrated by 1920s European modernism. What was different was that (as if) in this new modern

discordant, first of all because of the shift from urban planification to unplanned growth (often driven by private interests), and from industry to service and finance as the main engines of urban economy, which modify the social and sensorial fabric of the city. Drawing on the hypothesis that the shock of modernity is experienced with more acuteness in the semi-peripheries of the world-system, this section will explore the way Indian urban writing encodes the collisions of extremes at work in Indian cities. The polysemous notion of ‘shock’, referring to a sudden and violent blow, impact or collision, but also to an armed encounter and to a state of distress or disorientation, illuminates the multi-layered representation of violence at work in epic texts.

## 1. Psychic Deformations

### *a. ‘Failed and Dissolute Knights’*

Through the stretching of realist boundaries, Jha’s and Dasgupta’s texts capture the psychic dislocations entailed by the nation’s rapid transition to neoliberalism, fleshing out brutal characters who are both empowered and crushed by the competitive environment of the capitalist city. Dasgupta’s novelistic imagination informs his essay on Delhi, notably through his construction of dramatic scenes, his allegorical tendency and his psychological insights. His thorough portrayal of the ‘failed knights’ of twenty-first-century Delhi reconfigures urban competition as a war. It also insists on the entangled psychological and physical violence triggered both by the accelerated mutation of the city and the various traumas it went through over the course of the twentieth century. His business warriors recall Raj Kamal Jha’s inflated representation of New City’s elite, both writers delineating individual trajectories which belie the success-story of neoliberal India.

The capital was defined, increasingly, by a hyper-aggressive masculinity, which seemed to lose all constraint in the years after 1991 [...]. Delhi, where a rising breed of politician-businessmen embodied most perfectly this new Indian brawn, became the stage for a new psychotic model of manhood which jettisoned all social and even legal constraint in its concern for phallic prestige. (C 203-204)

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we were deprived of the ability to think, our ‘social body’ emptied out, prised open [...]. It was as if we were forced kicking and screaming into a new space of flows with the rhetoric of smoothness and non-linearity.’ (Ravi S. Vasudevan and others, ‘Introduction’, in *SARAI Reader 02*, pp. VI-VII).

Dasgupta relates the upsurge of physical and psychological violence in the city in the 2000s to a model of toxic manhood that built up in the aftermath of Partition, fuelling an anti-Muslim sentiment, but which also strengthened in the wake of the liberalization reforms and of the resulting ‘eruption of new power and money’ (C 400). In fact, the capital of India has been a site of struggle to obtain political power for a long time, but its nature as a major financial and economic centre, attracting aspiring businessmen, is fairly recent.<sup>72</sup> He elaborates his argument in a chapter which oscillates between various narrative modes, alternatively drawing on ethnographic work (with in-depth interviews and analysis of newspaper material) and on fictional elaborations such as vignette-like scenes and personal impressions, illustrating a ‘pluralistic formal strategy’ which, I would argue, goes beyond the duality of city memoir and dialogue.<sup>73</sup> His theory of the recent outburst of psychotic violence in the city induced by this accelerated economic transition is backed up by two crime cases documented by the newspapers in 1999 and 2002 and detailed with little authorial intervention but extensive quotations of the culprit’s deposition from *The Hindustan Times* (C 203). However, the text abruptly shifts from a strict documentary mode, based on archival evidence, to an allegorical one, as it gives voice to the malignant spirit of the city:

At the core of the city’s soul was something dark and fatal. Like all dark things, however, Delhi held a powerful attraction. It promised terrible, forbidden pleasures. [...] Delhi’s grip was nauseating and yet secretly delicious [...]. If people flocked to the city it was not because it held some promise of New York style grandeur [...]. Delhi whispered promises, even to the purest souls, of violent and demonic pleasures. *Come to me, all ye who have been fucked*, it told them, *and I will show you how you can fuck others*. (C 206)

The bombastic tone and the moral language strengthen the portrait of Delhi as a new Babylon, casting a powerful spell on its inhabitants who are irredeemably enwrapped by the sinful city. The italicized prosopopeia and rewriting of Matthew 11:28 with the archaic ‘ye’ only heightens the subversive nature of the city. Instead of offering divine mercy to the distressed, Delhi spreads revenge and destruction. Srinivasan underlines the writer’s oscillation between complicity and critique with the ruling classes he interviews, and states

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<sup>72</sup> Stuti Khanna writes: ‘It is only very recently, in the novels of writers like Manju Kapur, for example, and indeed much more in popular cinema of the last five years or so (*Khosla ka Ghosla*, *Dilli 6*, *Dev D*, *Band Baja Baraat*), that Delhi has acquired a visibility and vibrancy in mainstream culture that had hitherto been the sole preserve of Bombay’ (*The Contemporary Novel and the City*, p. 37). *Khosla ka Ghosla* (dir. by Dibakar Banerjee (Tandav Films, 2006)) interestingly addresses the issue of land speculation in Delhi through the angle of family comedy. See also *Titli*, dir. by Kanu Behl (Yash Raj Films, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> C. S. Bhagya and G. J. V. Prasad, “‘Capital’ Consciousness: Reading Rana Dasgupta’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54 (2018), 305.

that his ‘puerile’ choice to ‘ventriloquize’ a capitalist Delhi belies his ambition to counter India’s success story: ‘Dasgupta lets capital speak for itself, a narrative choice that ultimately confounds its analysis, and his focus on the disposition of the elite [...] as well as his own ambivalent relation to those who wine and dine him, supersedes the critique of New India’s contradictions’.<sup>74</sup> Yet his inflated portrayal of the city as a nefarious magnet for ruthless ambitious men may alternatively be construed as a parody of Victorian urban writing, pointing to his own ambiguous position as an Anglophone writer of the Indian city. The comparison with Roy’s use of the Victorian trope of the temptress city reveals two distinct strategies: where Arundhati Roy draws a tragic portrait of Delhi, twisting the trope to reveal the exploitation of the city by the new ruling classes, Dasgupta fully delves into it, highlighting the dark erotic power of the city.

And yet, his giving voice to the stereotypically cruel city is followed by an account of an outdoor *qawwali* concert (C 206), carefully crafted as a dramatic scene of collective mystic trance, like a counterpoint to the materialistic ruthlessness and the communal hostility characterising the city.<sup>75</sup> Tinged with lyricism, the passage mirrors the experience of being caught up in the music: ‘Their music lifts off straight away to an extraordinary pitch of ecstasy and yearning, the voices soaring one after another to the yawning sky, drums filling the static garden with dance, hands clasping at heaven. The head qawwal is a man of extra-terrestrial magnetism’ (C 206). The sense of a supernatural experience builds up to a climax in which the musicians’ ecstasy contaminates the whole audience, taken up in a mystic trance:

But the spirit spreads and soon everyone is touched by it: their restraint leaves them and they leap from their chairs in elation, they are full-heartedly clapping, swaying and crying out. Something has entered them from the outside: their bodies are making unaccustomed movements and they are moaning with words from elsewhere [...]. Islam is pouring out of these people who lie awake at night terrified that their daughter might marry a Muslim [...]. Look how this Muslim can set a fire in the hearts of these Hindus and set them free – look how he can restore them to everything they have been. (C 207-208)

The general loosening and metamorphosis of these ‘unimaginative men’ is almost magical, and their indulgence in the sheer pleasure of music almost comes to redeem the neo-

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<sup>74</sup> Ragini T. Srinivasan, ‘Complicity and Critique’, *Public Books*, 15 October 2014, <Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.> [accessed 12 March 2021].

<sup>75</sup> *Qawwali* is a form of Sufi Islamic devotional singing, originating from the Indian subcontinent. Originally performed at Sufi shrines or dargahs throughout South Asia, it gained mainstream popularity and an international audience in late twentieth century, and was part of a revival of Sufi culture in North India. This scene resonates with other literary accounts of Sufi music, such as in Anita Desai’s novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980) (London: Vintage, 2001) and *In Custody* (1984) (London: Vintage, 1999).

Victorian depiction of Delhi as a materialistic city as well as the argument about its masculine aggressive spirit. The hyperbolic rhetoric intensifies the contradictions at work in the city's development, embodied by a 'warrior ethos' which is eroded by this blatant sensitivity to music (C 258).<sup>76</sup>

The conception of the city as a space of struggle takes more substance in Dasgupta's portrayal of the new generation of Delhi businessmen. Indeed, the aggressive masculinity and violence running through the city is evidenced by the rising level of criminality in the 2000s but also by the way business is carried out: 'It will come as no surprise that the warrior ethos did not allow much room for concern about the weak. Life was war. Too bad for the ones who could not fight' (C 258). The obsession with manliness is explained in various ways by Dasgupta, who connects it with the specific history of Delhi (to the trauma of Partition in particular) but also with a global urban condition. The 'new' economic elite is portrayed as an army of 'failed and dissolute knights' (C 226) with imperial ambitions and tormented minds.<sup>77</sup> They are perfectly embodied by the real estate businessman Rahul Kapoor, who introduces himself as a 'stereotypically evil capitalist' straight from Dickens's *Hard Times* (C 223):

Those huge piles of mud, those excavations: these are the images that circulate in magazines as the horror of ruthless, relentless capital, constantly tearing down what exists in order to accumulate anew: more, bigger, further, quicker. But Rahul looks out on the gouged earth and sees himself completed, expanded, raised up. (C 222)

The author underlines how amazed the 'warrior' is in front of the perpetual material mutation he engenders. The 'gouged earth' which 'expands' him echoes the mutilated ground of New City's construction sites in Raj Kamal Jha's novel. At the head of a rising empire, empowered by devastation, Kapoor embodies the accumulative and destructive logic of capitalism. If Indian middle-classes are shown as struggling to relinquish any ounce of sympathy for the dispossessed of Indian neoliberal society, Kapoor is one of these 'hardened warriors [who] are able to assume total ownership of their cruelty, and indeed of the

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<sup>76</sup> Dasgupta's giving voice to a ruthless urban spirit, to heartless capitalists, and, to a lesser extent, to the determined yet exhausted social activists, can be read as part of the 'epic work' of his narrative, confronting conflicting views of Indian society (see Goyet, *Penser sans concepts*). The constant shift between matter-of-fact realism and excessive lyricism characterises Dasgupta's writing at large, as noted by Sharae Deckard with respect to his novel *Solo* (see Sharae Deckard, "'Surviving Globalization": Experiment and World-Historical Imagination in Rana Dasgupta's *Solo*', *Ariel*, 47.1-2 (2016), 67).

<sup>77</sup> The 'newness' of this urban elite needs to be mitigated, as its demography is actually 'based on a social basis which draws on traditional urban middle classes' (Fernandes, 'The Politics of Forgetting', 2417).



mercilessness of capitalism' (C 272). Srinivasan questions Dasgupta's method which consists in letting these businessmen talk without authorial pushback: '*Capital* stakes its claim to sociopolitical relevance on Dasgupta's ability to elicit and transmit the self-aggrandizing spiels of Delhi's elite'.<sup>78</sup> The exaggerations of Kapoor and the other interviewed titans and tyrants seem duplicated by the writer's own rhetoric of excess. In fact, as one endnote reveals, the section devoted to Rahul is actually compiled from two separate interviews 'in the interest of protecting identities' (C 453), suggesting that this ruthless capitalist is, to some extent, a fictional entity created by Dasgupta out of two probably less ostentatious people.

Yet this fictional figure appears as an allegory rather than a character, which might explain Samanth Subramaniam's criticism of *Capital's* lack of fleshed-out characters (hinting at the paradoxical expectations of non-fiction readers): 'The style is modelled perhaps on Studs Terkel's oral histories, but Dasgupta never allows his subjects' distinct voices to emerge and, curiously for a novelist, he seems to lack much interest in filling them out as characters'. Apart from one subject, he writes, 'most of the others [...] are just mouthpieces for the moneyed life'.<sup>79</sup> If 'mouthpiece' does not seem to be the accurate term, Dasgupta does turn two interviewees into one typical representative of the 'ruling class with vested interests not merely in change but in crisis and chaos', to quote Berman.<sup>80</sup> Kapoor typifies the way in which capitalism essentially thrives on crises, just like real estate magnate Mickey Chopra, another colossal embodiment of capital's creative destruction:

He is a businessman bred for the era of catastrophe, delighted by food shortages, climactic disturbance and turbulence of all sorts. Unlike American elites, who might have come to maturity in an age that believed that the future would be less assailed by catastrophe, Mickey comes to maturity in an age that believes that catastrophe is just beginning. (C 372)

The allegory becomes even clearer when one reads Kapoor's portrait along with Berman's gloss of Marx: 'catastrophes are transformed into lucrative opportunities for redevelopment

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<sup>78</sup> Srinivasan, 'Complicity', 1.

<sup>79</sup> Samanth Subramaniam, 'Glare of a Gilded Age', review of Rana Dasgupta, *Capital*, *New York Times*, 8 May 2014, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/books/review/capital-by-rana-dasgupta.html>> [accessed 27 June 2021]. The reference to Studs Terkel's oral histories (for instance, *Working* (New York: The New Press, 1974)), consisting of extensive transcriptions of interviews about work, money, dreams, seconds Srinivasan's statement about letting capital talk. Aman Sethi also refers to Terkel as a model for his literary reportage about a daily wage worker in Delhi. The critic's disappointment in Dasgupta's lack of characterization depth hints at the ambiguous compact between writer and reader in the case of nonfiction, which sits undecidedly between factuality and imagination, documentary value and narrative value. See Demanze, Ruffel.

<sup>80</sup> Berman, p. 95.

and renewal; disintegration works as a mobilizing and hence an integrating force'.<sup>81</sup> Dasgupta also follows in Berman's footsteps when he casts Rahul Kapoor as a Faustian character, both expanded and destroyed by the success of his enterprise: 'It's as if Rahul feels he has made a Faustian bargain with his family firm' (C 222). Deeply enmeshed in the thriving family business, he is an anxiety-ridden titan, caught up in the self-annihilating process of unbridled capitalism.

This New Delhi Faust seems to descend from Robert Moses as portrayed by Berman. The urbanist, responsible for the vast transformations of New York between the 1930s and the 1970s, is depicted through an emphatic style which expresses Berman's angry political commitment: 'Moses seemed to glory in the devastation, move people in the way, hack your way with a meat axe, corpses to be chopped up'.<sup>82</sup> The hyperbolic way in which Berman narrates Moses's 'heroic construction' and his 'quasi-mythical reputation', fully partakes of the epic literary mode that I defined earlier.<sup>83</sup> His prose tends to be as spectacular and awe-inspiring in its effect as Moses' redefinition of New York's cityscape. Thus, Dasgupta's tale of warriors differs from Mehta's liberal tales of individual achievement as it emphasizes the ruthless struggle to reach or to stay at the top of the social spectrum, a quest which leads to despair rather than fulfilment, countering the myth of an 'Indian American Dream'.<sup>84</sup>

One can actually find a fictional equivalent to Rahul Kapoor in one of the main characters of Raj Kamal Jha's *She Will Build Him a City*. A real estate magnate, 'Man' is defined by his fascination for his own wealth and its material incarnations as well as by his anxieties about his past, his fear of the poor, and psychotic urges of destruction, that manifest themselves through hallucinatory episodes implying brutality, and even murder. Jha's stretching of realism thus allows his text to give poignant expression to the aggressive model of manhood identified by Dasgupta. The centrality of hallucinations in his writing resonates with Rana Dasgupta's diagnosis of the Delhi-dwellers' psychological troubles induced by the high level of corruption. The disjunction between what they perceive and what is supposedly real, diagnosed by Dasgupta as a form of delirium, may be related to the accelerated capitalist modernisation of Delhi in the 2000s and the specific uneven form it

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 294.

<sup>84</sup> See Chapter 6.

takes: 'the world they operated in was not the real world and they seemed to flail, Matrix-like, in empty space' (C 406).<sup>85</sup>

### *b. American Psycho in Delhi*

In a review of Raj Kamal Jha's novel *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, Amit Chaudhuri defines Jha's writing as 'hallucinatory naturalism', an oxymoronic phrase used by J.G. Ballard to comment on Dada's pictorial work.<sup>86</sup> This phrase captures the writer's paradoxical conjunction of realism and irrealism which allows him to refract the psychological and material shocks of a tumultuous process of uneven urban development. His novels are anchored to a recognizable referent (Kolkata in the 2000s, Delhi and Gurgaon in the 2010s) but are pervaded by the logic of dreams, flights into hallucinations and nonhuman forms of subjectivity, which undermine their realism.<sup>87</sup>

*She Will Build Him a City* is clearly rooted in the specific historical context of 2010 Delhi and its satellite city, Gurgaon: the text indexes recognisable places (the Leela Hotel, India Gate, Rajiv Chowk Metro Station, the Ring Road) and news items (buildings collapsing, the Malhotra case, rural people's protests against water-cut on the outskirts of Delhi) which enable the reader to locate New City very clearly. In addition to the clinical observation of material objects (enabled by the heightened perception of Man) which recalls naturalistic techniques, the wide social spectrum of Jha's characters betrays his ambition to paint the contradictory conditions of urban life through an all-encompassing perspective, and through head-on collisions between social forces. The novel makes the itineraries of three characters from various strata of Indian society intersect, more or less violently, during one night in the city. Similarly, the plot of *If You're Afraid of Heights* is based on the literal collision of two tram coaches at night in Kolkata, the crash leading to the eerie encounter between Amir and Rima, two characters from opposite socioeconomic backgrounds. As a

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<sup>85</sup> Both Mickey Kapoor and 'Man' thus appear as protagonists in which a social type is situated, in whom all the socially and historically determining elements are active, in George Lukács's terms, thus locating them in the realist tradition of the novel, which captures an individual's negotiations with the pressures of capitalist society and reveals social and historical forces at work through his actions.

<sup>86</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, 'Champion of Hide and Seek: Raj Kamal Jha's Surrealism' (2004), in *Clearing a Space*, p. 298.

<sup>87</sup> Naturalism evokes the literary interest in the impact of large social forces on individual behaviour, and, in line with French novelist Emile Zola's scientific method, the conception of the novel as a means to examine social institutions, through a scientific dissection of human behaviour. The literary movement's conception of urban life as made up of rough clashes between contradictory forces seconds our reading of Jha's novels as structured by conflicts and confrontations.

concentration of individuals and a crux of clashing forces generating chance encounters between the characters, the city appears as the real matrix of Jha's 'plots' (albeit very fragmented ones).

Literary critic Trisha Gupta reads *She Will Build Him a City* as a trite Victorian novel, pointing out the use of conventional tropes, such as the foundling, the psychotic slumming philanthropist, or the heart-rending story of the sick nurse.<sup>88</sup> The epigraph of the novel, taken from *Oliver Twist*, also gestures to the Dickensian atmosphere of the novel.<sup>89</sup> However, the book is peppered with flights of fancy which explode the structure of the Victorian novel. The foundling escapes on the back of a dog gifted with human language, before being hosted by Ms Rose in the cinema of the Mall, a magical place which enables him to leap into the films he watches. Another twisting of the typical *Bildungsroman* trajectory is that of the little girl holding a red balloon, whose 'rescue' from the street does not open new avenues of progress and self-realisation but leads to her murder. This disruption of realism evinces Jha's subversive engagement with his literary forebears.

Violence is thus registered through a naturalistic mode, as is the case in the chapter entitled 'Flying dog', which consists of a scene of gratuitous animal persecution in which Man and his friends set a dog's body parts on fire with rockets during the Diwali festival.<sup>90</sup> The text relentlessly foregrounds the sadistic violence inflicted on the dog for the sake of pure entertainment and pleasure. The naturalistic impulse prompts a graphic description of the dog's body being blown up, creating a horror vision which resonates with Suketu Mehta's spectacular writing of violence.

Dog makes a sound.

It is a sound he has never heard before. It comes from Dog all right but it is more than just sound, it has a shape and texture too, hard edges that scrape his skin like a knife. He smells flesh burn. Dog runs but she can go only a few yards before she trips. One by one, each of the four rockets rips the plastic string, embeds into Dog's back, a jet of fire that gouges a hole in her black fur, mats its fringe with charred skin and blood. Three clear holes, the fourth one bleeds into them.

Dog crumples like a balloon, its gas draining out. (SW 17)

The synaesthesia conflates hearing and touch, denoting the character's hypersensitivity, but it also merges human and nonhuman pain, as the sound seems to cut through the character's

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<sup>88</sup> Trisha Gupta, 'Nebulous Narratives', review of Raj Kamal Jha, *She Will Build Him a City*, *Biblio* (January-February 2015), 12.

<sup>89</sup> 'Midnight had come upon the crowded city. The palace, the night-cellar, the jail, the Madhouse: the chambers of birth and death, of health and sickness, the rigid face of the corpse and the calm sleep of the child: midnight was upon them all.' Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1833) (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 348.

<sup>90</sup> The Hindu festival of lights, usually celebrated with rockets.

flesh, uniting Man (the torturer) and ‘Dog’ in this painful sensory experience. The lexicon (‘gouges a hole’) resonates with the mutilated earth of New City (SW 215), the ripped floor of the mall (SW 191), and the ‘gouged earth’ in front of which Rahul Kapoor feels aggrandised in Dasgupta’s work, suggesting that urban experience in globalizing Delhi is that of mutilation, wrenching, and scarring. The recurrent use of the term ‘gouge’ conveys the perpetual self-destruction of the city and the resulting psychic alteration of its denizens.

In fact, the killing of the dog is not just a side-effect of Diwali celebrations. It is also embedded in the process of global modernisation: the characters putting the bomb inside the dog’s mouth mention the use of bombs in Iraq and Iñárritu’s film *Amores Perros*, and film the scene with a cell phone whose price is indicated between brackets: ‘(Rs 421, 245)’ (SW 18). The systematic notation of economic value echoes the price tagged to each commodity in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), encoding the consumerist void in which American society has delved, especially in the aftermath of the Wall Street boom in the 1980s. The similarities between the two novels extend beyond their registration of commodity fetishism, as both protagonists are extremely wealthy businessmen (an investment banker and a real estate magnate) given to psychopathic urges of destruction and violence, rendered through an indeterminacy between reality and fantasy.<sup>91</sup> The incongruous price notations as well as the references to films suggest that the characters’ sadistic urges belong to a global ‘mediascape’, and to the transnational circulation of culture, images and commodities.<sup>92</sup> The pleasure of brutality is mediated by references to international conflicts (known through the media) and films but also lies in the recording of the scene, thus actively contributing to this global mediascape of violence. Yet one may wonder if the text’s clinical precision and its cinematic dimension (a characteristic also pointed out by Chaudhuri) do not participate in the showcasing of this sadistic violence, therefore turning it into a spectacle.<sup>93</sup>

Christopher Den Tandt’s construes the use of a sublime register used by American naturalist novelists to describe the city as a strategy to evoke ‘aspects of the metropolis that

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<sup>91</sup> The fictional universe of the novel is also reminiscent of Fritz Lang’s cinema: New City appears as a millennial version of the dystopian *Metropolis* (Universum Film, 1927), in which the divide between classes is spatially engineered. In *M* (National Distributors, 1932), the murderer is fascinated with consumer goods and, like Man, he is ‘the very type of the flâneur who consumes females as he consumes toys; the sex criminal is the flâneur turned vicious, who consumes their actual lives rather than their appearance as an aesthetic experience’. (Pamela Gilbert, ‘Sex and the Modern city’, in *The Spatial Turn*, pp. 112-113).

<sup>92</sup> ArjunAppadurai, ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’, in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 35.

<sup>93</sup> To quote just a few referenced films, most of which only alluded to without being named: *Amores Perros* (Alejandro G. Iñárritu), *A Night on Earth* (Jim Jarmush), *Le Ballon rouge* (Albert Lamorisse).

resist analytical strategies of documentary realism [...], ungraspable energies and forces emanating from the totality of urban experiences'.<sup>94</sup> This analysis seconds my reading of the different forms taken by the 'imaginary' in Jha's novels as a way to refract the deeply contradictory experience of uneven urbanism, notably the psychic deformations arising from the accelerated modernisation of the semi-peripheral city.<sup>95</sup> The conflictual dimension of urban life is encoded through disquieting fantasies and hallucinations, which are never clearly separated from the diegetic reality, inhabiting what Michael Löwy refers to as the border space between reality and 'irreality'.<sup>96</sup>

Amit Chaudhuri also underscores that in Jha's novels, 'disjunctions are not undertaken with magic realist euphoria but compelling ordinariness', as mere continuations of everyday life.<sup>97</sup> Thus, Jha's writing's naturalistic impulse is counterbalanced by the dream logic that pervades the novel, fostered by the entirely nocturnal diegetic universe and made palpable through the fragmented narrative structure and the cyclically recurring motifs connecting the disparate plotlines together. The tortured dog, for instance, reappears under the name and avatar of Bhow, a key character in the novel. The balloon simile ('Dog crumples like a balloon') also foreshadows Man's encounter with the little girl holding a red balloon and their flight over the city ('The balloon stains the night like a drop of blood on a slide' (SW 35)), even more so as the dog is then flying:

He cannot sleep so he gets up, walks onto the balcony and when he looks up, he sees Dog, with flesh-coloured wings, flying into the moon, her jaws open so wide she may soon swallow a star or two, her tail a plume of fire, slashing the night sky.  
A shooting star.  
Wish, wish, he tells himself. (SW 18)

Man's vision seems to redeem the dog, its mutilated body turned into a fantastic one, the horror of the scarred flesh turned into the surrealist vision of a creature illuminating the night sky – reclaiming the lights of Diwali. The flying dog becomes a 'shooting' star, the syllepsis conflating astronomical and animal bodies, thus connected to the meteoric birth of New City.

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<sup>94</sup> Christophe Den Tandt, 'Masses, Forces, and the Urban Sublime', *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature*, ed. by Kevin McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 130. Tandt's insistence on elements exceeding realism, heteroglossia, and the incorporation of disparate discourses, actually connects with Moretti's stress on the polyphony of the modern epic.

<sup>95</sup> One of the forms of violence taken by capitalist development is that of the 'moral and psychic deformation of man' (WReC, p. 156). See also Lukács's essay on Dostoevsky, arguing that the Russian writer rendered the 'mental deformations that are brought about as a social necessity by life in a modern city' through 'fantastic realism' (in which a bizarre reality is presented as ordinary). (Georg Lukács, 'Dostoevsky' (1949) in *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays*, trans. by and ed. by René Wellek (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall), p. 153.

<sup>96</sup> Löwy, p. 196.

<sup>97</sup> Chaudhuri, 'Champion of Hide and Seek', in *Clearing a Space*, p. 298.

The wounded flesh, the broken jaw and severed tail suggest that the vision does not cancel out the inflicted violence, nor does it regenerate the dog, but somehow transfigures it into something else. The flying dog also comes across in Woman's narrative, as one of the 'strange creatures that wake up some nights in this house': 'Funny little dogs with flesh-coloured wings pinned to their backs' (SW 31), the plural form confirming that the very structure of the novel is governed by the logic of dream and that these motifs connect the characters throughout the city. The interweaving of the realistic and the fantastic is furthered by the sentence following the Diwali episode in Man's narrative: 'the Metro announcement wakes him up' (SW 19), which suggests that the scenes with the dog might be part of a dream, an uncertainty which actually surrounds all the episodes of violence in Man's narrative.

Flying over the city appears as a necessity for the characters. It is not celebrated with euphoria or wonder but pictured as the continuation of the Girl or the Man's desire to escape and to gaze at the city from above – giving way to spectacular bird's-eye views of the urban landscape.<sup>98</sup> The ability to fly over the city alludes to another intertext, that of the Bengali writer Nabarun Bhattacharya's fiction, in which flying humans, called 'fyatarus', hover over Calcutta and wreak havoc on the city.<sup>99</sup> Sourit Bhattacharya recalls that fyatarus are 'lower-class flying humans whose supernatural flight at night creates panic in the police and the upperclass people' and reads this non-realistic invention as a writerly strategy to re-empower urban outcasts.<sup>100</sup> However, the magical abilities given to Jha's characters cannot be fully read as a critical balancing act, as these supernatural powers do not seem to challenge social structures. If they sometimes allow ephemeral flights away from the city's unevenness, these characters' imaginary skills also reinforce processes of domination. They are conceived by the writer himself as expressions of urban-dwellers' daily hopes, 'the fiction[s] with which we live on a daily basis', which thus collide with one another in the modernising city.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> In *If You Are Afraid of Heights*, the protagonist is described flying on the back of a crow over the city before swooping down to meet a child, 'because [he has] something to show her' (IF 2), echoing Man's desire to show the little girl the city (SW 64).

<sup>99</sup> Nabarun Bhattacharya, 'Fyataru' (1995), trans. by Sourit Bhattacharya, in 'Nabarun Bhattacharya Supplement', ed. by Sourit Bhattacharya and Arka Chattopadhyay, *Sanglap*, 2 (2015), 142.

<sup>100</sup> 'The steady mixing of the realistic and the non-realistic in this appears to be the registration of the unevenness in postcolonial capitalist urbanity and a forceful critique of such conditions.' (Sourit Bhattacharya, 'The Margins of Postcolonial Urbanity, Reading Critical Irrealism in Nabarun Bhattacharya's Fiction', in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts*, p. 44, 50).

<sup>101</sup> Raj Kamal Jha, 'For an Author in India's Capital, "Hope, In Many Ways, Is Fiction"', Interview, *All Things Considered*, NPR, 1 March 2015, <<https://www.npr.org/2015/03/01/389343489/for-an-author-in-indias-capital-hope-in-many-ways-is-fiction?t=1581422103611>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

Among the various ‘hallucinatory’ utopian episodes that counter the city’s brutality, one occurs repeatedly: that of the homeless balloon girl soaring above the city.<sup>102</sup>

Balloon Girl and he are flying over the city, above the scattered cloud over, each has one arm outstretched, the other holding the string attached to Red Balloon [...]. Balloon Girl shouts with excitement and fear, pointing out the city, spread out below like a puzzle. There is the hospital, she says, from where you picked us up last night. He marvels at her telescopic sight, wonders how she can identify that cluster of buildings, but she is right. (SW 96-97)

Yet flying does not shield the little girl from Man’s power. Their flying together veers towards lurid fantasies of rape and cannibalism in an unsettling ‘erotics of murder’ such as in the Singapore Zoo where he sees her devoured by the birds and wants to drink her blood (SW 152), or above Delhi: ‘He wants to swallow her lips, so small that just one gulp will do’ (SW 98).<sup>103</sup> The text insists on Man’s uncanny thirst for possession and on his ability to do whatever he wants with her, seconding the assertion that the imaginary realm is not impervious to domination logics but sometimes actually intensifies them. After all, since these flights stem from Man’s dislocated mind and are always framed by indications of his sleeping, the flying girl can be construed as the transfigured spectre of the street girl whom Man abducted, raped and murdered, bizarrely turned into a benevolent guiding force. She thus joins the Flying Dog among the victims of Man’s brutality, manifesting the city’s violence.

As noted earlier, Man’s sadistic urges and cannibalistic fantasies may lead him to actual crimes but the device of the unreliable narrator maintains uncertainty throughout the novel. Without ever clarifying it, the text suggests a connection between his nocturnal invitation of a street-vendor and her child to his apartment and a reported crime: ‘CHILD RAPED, KILLED, MOTHER SEVERELY ASSAULTED, BODY FOUND NEAR AIIMS’ (SW 165, 166, 167, 186, 190). This capitalised headline, glimpsed by the narrator on the television screen of his car, is obsessively repeated across different chapters, and the news ticker gradually overwhelms his consciousness, crawling, ‘streaming in a straight line, across the white-hot sky, like the trail of a jet plane’ (SW 187), up to the point when the capital letters invade his own interior monologue, giving voice to his doubts and guilt.

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<sup>102</sup> The balloon girl brings to mind street artist Banksy’s ‘Girl with Balloon’, which first appeared in London in 2002, but is also a reference to Albert Lamorisse’s film *Le Ballon Rouge*. (Jha, Interview with the author, 2017).

<sup>103</sup> ‘Man, a wealthy, educated resident of Apartment Complex in New City, is given to lurid (macabre) fantasies of violence, sex, and death. His is an aestheticized erotics of murder.’ (Srinivasan, ‘Devouring Coolie Bodies’).



In the chapter entitled 'Falling Man' (SW 331), a reference to Don DeLillo's eponymous novel, the character's suicide is first figured as an oneiric flight with the girl, who dances in front of him and invites him to jump off the window ledge, taking him in a serene ascension, followed by the narrator's sudden downfall, beleaguered by his ghostly guardian: 'when he looks up, he can see her crying, one tear drops, its wetness brushes his face and it's only when he brings his hand to his face to wipe it that he realises he is on his own and he is falling (SW 333). If physical sensations may trigger hallucinations, it is the contact with an imaginary tear (or a real raindrop) which brings him back to reality, suspended in the air as the chapter ends on these words. The blurred boundary between fantasy and reality is paradoxically strengthened by the novel's minute exploration of physical sensations, whether actual or imagined: the sensation of the clouds on Man's skin as he flies, or of treetops brushing against Woman's skin as she is carried by a giant woman, are as closely depicted as the sensation of heat in a metro coach, the hallucination being sensorially rather than psychologically approached. Man's death in the middle of this rainy night is then postponed to the penultimate chapter, perceived from an indeterminate vantage point, his body's collision with the ground going almost unnoticed, though his dismembered body is described very graphically (SW 335).

Therefore, the protagonist's cannibalistic fantasies may allegorise the predatory force of the ruling class in neoliberal India, yet his fantasies of flight that end up in suicide signal his failure to overcome the psychic disruptions created by the uneven development of the city, exemplified by the incongruous coexistence of his extreme wealth with the extreme destitution of Balloon Girl and her mother.<sup>104</sup> One may read his impulsive kidnapping of the two subaltern women as a psychopathic way to deal with this incongruity, taking the form of a pervert desire to clean them and to erase these two 'smudges' (a term which cyclically returns in the novel) from the city. The psychoanalytical frame of reference of the novel is made clear when one understands that behind the red balloon lies the blood stain of Man's girlfriend's abortion, a 'smudge' that haunts him and that repeats itself through his murder

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<sup>104</sup> The interpretation of cannibalism, in relation with consumption, as an allegory for the predatory nature of capitalist accumulation, feeding on bodies and labour, seems convincing in the case of Jha's novel (See Crystal Bartolovich, 'Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism', in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Francis D. Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 204-237).

of the girl and her mother, in a characteristic traumatic logic of repetition and ‘après coup’, as the original event is never registered as such but ceaselessly repeated.<sup>105</sup>

At the other end of the social spectrum yet abutting Man’s luxurious apartment lies Kalyani, a tuberculosis-afflicted nurse who dreams that her blood flows through her room and floods the whole slum where she lives with her family. Her gruesome hallucination, depicted in a chapter entitled ‘Kalyani’s nightmare’, is yet another reverberation of the psychological dislocations entailed by contradictory development: ‘She covers her mouth with her palm to dam the flow but her blood breaches the embankment her fingers make to gush through, gurgling, sputtering, so thick so fast that all she can do is to give herself up to this raging torrent from within’ (SW 253-255). Kalyani’s fever-induced delirium takes the form of a gruesome primeval flood, whose progress is graphically described, rendering its monstrous materiality, the text once more stressing the powerful sensations generated by hallucinations. The language of natural disaster symbolises the inescapable rise of the disease, as the unstoppable flow is bound to swallow, submerge and destroy everything. The disease becomes an omnipotent natural force, a blood river which carries everything away, up to the heavens (SW 256). This surreal grisly vision is interspersed with excerpts from a phone call conversation in which Kalyani justifies quitting her job, thus undercutting the nightmarish vision with realist passages. Through the amplifying logic of the dream, the blood stain that haunts Man, turned into the Red Balloon, becomes a ‘raging torrent’ of blood, bringing to mind the ‘rapacious torrent’ of capitalism (C 95).

Reading Raj Kamal Jha’s novel and Rana Dasgupta’s literary essay together reveals a number of formal and thematic homologies, in terms of characterisation (both texts revolving around ‘psychotic manhood’), formal excess and representation of urban development. These similarities challenge the division between fiction and nonfiction and show how both texts delve straight into the violence of urban life. Both Jha’s and Dasgupta’s texts suggest that the level of violence at work in the twenty-first-century Indian city is such that it is best represented through the constant interplay between realism and fantasy, documentary and allegorical modes. Their inflated portrayals of both ruthless and crushed characters, who belong to the elite of global urban India but whose ascension is characterised

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<sup>105</sup> See Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, in *Paper on Metapsychology, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (1914-16), trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964). This reading intersects with Dasgupta’s psychoanalytical understanding of Delhi’s aggressive spirit.

by psychological dislocations and material brutality, serve to fissure the aspirational narratives of 'Shining India'. At odds with their focus on the self-destructive competitors in the epic race for success, *ordinary* narratives of Indian cities challenge the 'emergence' discourse through an emphasis on characters who are all out of synch with the neoliberal turn of India. Neither rising nor falling, these characters drift, circle, meander, eschewing the struggle to make it in the city, the narratives stressing invisible, oblique strategies of resistance rather than great fractures and collisions.

## 2. The Spectacle of Violence?

### *a. Between Ethnography and Sensationalism*

Suketu Mehta's graphic descriptions of mob violence and police interrogations, motivated by his avowed voyeuristic curiosity and the desire to 'show everything', could be paralleled with Jha's harrowing representations of violence. Mehta's writing of violence in the book is particularly representative of his dramatizing tendency and his rhetoric of excess. Srinivasan relates the text's inextricable in-mixing of the ethnographic and the fictional modes to the genre of return-writing, but I would also connect it with Mehta's broader narrative impulse to turn urban life into a spectacle. Jerry Pinto refers to Mehta's writing as a way of 'staging dramas for the observer', underlining the author's tendency to exaggerate but also his close links with the world of theatre and cinema. In fact, Mehta refers to himself in the text as a spectator 'on the edge of a stage' (MC 538), and the notion of spectacle directly points to the ambiguous position of the writer-reporter with respect to his subjects and to the exotic image of 'India as available spectacle'.<sup>106</sup>

Gyan Prakash's comparison of *Maximum City* with a 'cabinet of curiosities' gestures towards the exotic but also the macabre dimension of Mehta's narrative, which indeed spares no gruesome detail when reporting rioters' and policemen's violence. One of the reasons why he comes back to Mumbai in 1996 is to investigate the 1992-1993 Hindu-Muslim riots. The riots occurred in the aftermath of the destruction of the historic Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu pilgrims who claimed that the site was the divinity Ram's birthplace, and were

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<sup>106</sup> Huggan, p. 81.

followed by bomb attacks in March 1993.<sup>107</sup> This series of traumatic events, suddenly pitting neighbours against one another, left its imprint on the city and is deemed a turning point in the history of Bombay, a sign that the city by the sea was gradually decosmopolitised. Arjun Appadurai construes it as a ‘space-clearing act’, crystallising the building of a Hindu geography of Bombay.<sup>108</sup> What is at stake is the control over the city itself, which is thus turned into a battleground. Contrary to accounts connecting Bombay’s ethic of tolerance with its free market economy, Appadurai examines the paradoxical yet intrinsic connections between the gradual ethnicising of Bombay and the economic transformation of the ‘globalizing’ city, from manufacture to trade, finance and tourism: ‘So the transformation of Bombay into Mumbai is part of a contradictory utopia in which an ethnically cleansed city is still the gateway to the world’.<sup>109</sup>

Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* offers a romanticised version of this shift, which he perceives as the death of cosmopolitan Bombay and the advent of Mumbai, a city ruled by the malignant forces of chauvinism and untethered capitalism. In a famous passage, the novel describes the rise of violence in Bombay as a result of its contamination by the subcontinent’s ‘rivers of blood’.<sup>110</sup> Yet, Mehta deconstructs nostalgia for a golden-age Bombay as class feeling: ‘When people in South Bombay mourn the loss of the ‘gracious’ city, what they are really mourning is the loss of their own consequence in the

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<sup>107</sup> Following the destruction of the mosque, a wave of spontaneous fights between Hindus and Muslims occurred in Bombay, before riots (and systematic targeting of Muslims) took hold of the city, instigated by the Shiv Sena’s stirring of anti-Muslim and xenophobic sentiment. As a response, bomb attacks set up by the Muslim underworld hit several locations in the city (the Stock Exchange, the Air India building, cars, scooters) in March 1993. In November 2019, The Indian Supreme Court permitted the building of a Hindu temple on the site of the Ayodhya mosque.

<sup>108</sup> ‘In keeping with more than two decades of the Shiv Sena’s peculiar mix of regional chauvinism and nationalist hysterics, Bombay’s Hindus managed to rewrite urban space as a sacred, national, and Hindu space.’ (Appadurai, ‘Spectral Housing’, 630).

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 645. Rashmi Varma also notes the rupture that the 1990s represented in the image of Bombay: ‘In the early 1990s the promise of a postcolonial dream city was violently transmuted into the nightmare of an ethnically cleansed city in which Maharashtrians and Hindus became Bombay’s only legitimate citizens [...]. This thoroughly divided city, far from being a model for the secular Indian imagination, now seems to be emulating a different model of nationalism that is rooted in provincial and exclusionary identifications’. (Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 131). For an analysis of the erosion of the older elitist political culture that fostered the emergence of the Shiv Sena, see Hansen, *Wages of Violence*.

<sup>110</sup> ‘In Punjab, in Assam, Kashmir, Meerut – in Delhi, in Calcutta – from time to time they slit their neighbours’ throats and took warm showers, or red bubble-baths, in all that spuming blood [...]. But on the way to Bombay the rivers of blood were usually diluted, other rivers poured into them, so that by the time they reached the city’s streets the disfigurements were relatively slight. – Am I sentimentalizing? Now that I have left it all behind, have I, among my many losses, also lost clear sight? – It may be said I have; but still I stand by my words’ (Rushdie, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, pp. 350-351). The novel also accounts for the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya (p. 157). See Caroline Herbert, ‘Spectrality and Secularism in Bombay Fiction: Salman Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and Vikram Chandra’s *Sacred Games*’, *Textual Practice*, 26.5 (2012), 941-971; Rachel Trousdale, ‘City of Mongrel Joy: Bombay and the Shiv Sena in *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*’, *Journal of Commonwealth literature*, 39 (2004), 95-110.

city's affairs. It was never a gracious city for those who had to live under the shadow of their mansions' (MC 75). The city's alleged cosmopolitanism and its overtaking by the dark forces of chauvinism are two clichés that Arjun Appadurai debunks, stating that 'Mumbai has also been the home of India's most powerful movement for linguistic monoculturalism and the dominance of single regional culture, the culture of Maharashtra' since the late 1960s, embodied by the protest marches organised to reclaim Marathi as the official language of the state, an episode which is powerfully rendered in *Midnight's Children*.<sup>111</sup> Appadurai's analysis thus mitigates the rupture constituted by the 1992-1993 riots, which can also be traced back to long-lasting intercommunal tensions.

The chapter dedicated to the riots in *Maximum City* opens with a horrendous description of murder:

'What does a man look like when he's on fire?' I asked Sunil [...]. 'You couldn't bear to see it. It is horror. Oil drips from his body, his eyes become huge, huge, the white shows, white, white, you touch his arm like this' – he flicked his arm – 'the white shows. It shows especially on the nose' – he rubbed his nose with two fingers as if scraping off the skin – 'oil drips from him, water drips from him, white, white all over.' (MC 38)

Mehta's question and Sunil's detailed reply delve straight into the horror of intercommunal violence, catching the reader's attention with this *in medias res* gruesome episode. The question gives rise to an *in extenso* account of the scene of immolation, the participant sharing his vivid recollection of this distressful sensory experience. The italicization of 'you' stresses the gap that Sunil establishes between the writer-reporter (probably perceived as too sensitive) and himself as a brave, stoic Shiv Sena local leader, who is ready to see a man burning and to fight for a Hindu nation and a Maharashtrian Bombay. The *verbatim* transcription of Sunil's discourse, including repetitions of adjectives and notations of his body language (re-enacting the scene and his sensations) holds a sense of immediacy, making the scene vividly present under our eyes. It illustrates the author's voyeuristic writing, exposing his own curiosity and ambiguous pleasure, and taking in the reader in this vicarious witnessing of a horror scene.

This piece of testimony and open avowal of a crime (the reader learns later on that Sunil took part in the burning), are not framed by any authorial comments on the reporter's

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<sup>111</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'Cosmopolitanism from Below: Some Ethical Lessons from the Slums of Mumbai', in *The Future as Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 200. Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, pp. 189-192. For a historicization of this rise-and-fall trajectory, see Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*.

reaction or on the inevitable bias of the interviewee's recollection, delivered to an Anglophone middle-class foreign-returned reporter in the presence of his acolytes. One may surmise that the witness overacts his supposed insensitivity to horror in order to display his manliness and to 'stage dramas for the outsider'. Yet, a discrete notation about the subject's specific language inflection suggests Mehta's awareness of his building up his warrior ethos: 'Sunil didn't use the term "riot". He used "war" instead, the English word' (MC 42). Despite the absence of authorial interpretation, one may surmise that the shift to English is meant to emphasize the idea of an organised assault against Muslims rather than a spontaneous insurrection. The inflation of violence characterises both the interviewee and the writer-reporter as he transcribes the recollected scene.<sup>112</sup>

This sensational opening is followed by a summary of the 1992-93 riots. Mehta sums up: 'the riots were a tragedy in three acts' (MC 40). Endowing history with a tragic coherence is in line with his impulse to dramatize individual and collective trajectories, already evidenced by his use of the quest mode. Like Rushdie, the writer-reporter also registers the conflictual narratives surrounding the events, such as the Radhabhai chawl case. One of the events which kindled anti-Muslim fury was in fact the burning of a Hindu slum in Radhabhai chawl, in which a disabled young Hindu girl was trapped. Mehta underlines that one of the multiple versions of the episode (including the rape of the young girl) acted as a catalyser for Hindu mobs, notwithstanding its lack of veracity. Mehta underscores the hitmen's stereotypical anti-Muslim discourses, fuelled by the Shiv Sena doxa, but also enhances their contradictory practices, as their hostility is combined with their visiting Muslim shrines, doing business with Muslims, praising their selflessness, and protecting them.

Interested in finding out 'how the business of rioting is actually planned and carried out' (MC 41), Mehta visits the sites of the riots with participants: 'I was given a tour of the battlegrounds by a group of Shiv Sena men' (MC 44). The turn of phrase suggests both investigation and a form of sensationalist tourism. Visiting a site of violence with one of the remorseless participants (proudly recalling his contribution to the burning of a mosque (MC 44)) resembles the commemoration of feats rather than the inquiry into barbaric acts. In addition to this inevitable complicity, the 'tour' takes place only four years after the events, in a populated area and in a context of ongoing seething intercommunal tensions,

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<sup>112</sup> For another writer's personal experience of the riots, see Fernandes, *City Adrift*, pp. 89-96.

thus distinguishing it from a memorial visit. The memories are fresh, and the narrative conveys this sense of immediacy, in conventional reportage fashion.<sup>113</sup>

Mehta's uncensored scrutiny of the rioters' violence is matched by his extensive interviews and observation of Bombay's policemen. He documents the practice of 'encounter killings', a form of summary extrajudicial justice consisting in framing an alleged criminal or terrorist and killing him, supposedly in self-defence, with no other manner of trial, often on the order of a mafia don.<sup>114</sup> The narrative also exposes police violence, corruption and the complicity between the police and the underworld. Yet Mehta's inquiry into the Mumbai Police mostly assumes the form of an in-depth portrait of a police officer struggling against organised crime, Ajay Lal, 'a cop with a dream' (M 131). His 'ceaseless quest for information' (MC 148) sometimes translates as scenes of brutal interrogation, one of which is witnessed and recounted by Mehta:

The constable comes back with a thick leather strap, about six inches wide, attached to a wooden handle. One of the cops takes it and brings it savagely down across the fat man's face. The sound of leather hitting bare human flesh is impossible to describe unless you've heard it. The man screams. The cop brings it down again. Meanwhile, the cousin is getting blows in his back with the other policeman's elbow. (MC 151)

This time Mehta is a first-hand witness and the present tense heightens the sense of immediacy conveyed by the scene. He takes up the notion of incommensurability and ineffability to describe this scene ('impossible to describe unless you've heard it'), also used by Sunil when he described the man on fire ('you couldn't bear to see it'). The tortured man is depicted as a 'fat Sindhi bourgeois' who can speak English: 'they are uncomfortably familiar. A little more money, a little more education, and they would be People Like Us' (MC 151). Mehta ambiguously plays on his identification with the man under arrest (a potential criminal but also a victim of physical harassment), collapsing the distance between

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<sup>113</sup> The voyeuristic dimension of the visit and of the accounts of violence at large recall the diasporic writer M.G. Vassanji's return memoir, in which he meets a Shiv Sena leader and confesses his 'sense of voyeurism [...] at having desired such a meeting, to see what a real communalist who calmly explains mass murder, looks and speaks like' (M. G. Vassanji, *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2008), p. 280). One may think of Kiran Nagarkar's tragicomic representation of casual urban violence in Bombay's *chawls*, encouraged by the scarcity of space in this type of working-class housing but also by cultural institutions such as the gymnasium and the RSS youth clubs, a typically Maharashtrian institution (see *Ravan and Eddie* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 1995)).

<sup>114</sup> The term is associated with the Mumbai Police, which first used encounter killings systematically in the 1990s, and the practice has spread since to other large cities. It features in a number of Bombay gangster films: to quote just a few, *Monsoon Shootout*, dir. by Amit Kumar (Sikhya Entertainment, 2014), *Raman Raghav 2.0*, dir. by Anurag Kashyap (Reliance Entertainment, 2016), *Sacred Games* (dir. by Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane, Netflix, 2018).

himself and the subjects of his investigation, whether criminals or victims, once more downplaying his privileged position, making the scene even more chilling. This identification with either the policeman or the defendant evidences that Mehta's voyeurism is *embedded* rather than detached, as he is personally, psychologically and physically involved in the scenes he reports on. This embeddedness also suggests that in this case, his text's legitimacy derives from his being a direct witness to the event rather than from his status as a writer.

The interrogation is witnessed by the writer and his 'cringing' wife (MC 151), as well as their friend Vinod, a film director, and the text closely describes the witnesses' reactions, which seconds the idea of a spectacle of violence: 'He [Vinod] had kept asking her if she wanted to leave. But she had her eyes wide open and could not tear herself away in spite of her shock' (MC 152). His wife seems then to be the most affected, yet her behaviour betrays her petrified fascination for the brutality displayed, deriving a form of pleasure from the violence inflicted, hinting at the embedded voyeuristic nature of the narrative. Through the foregrounding of his wife's thrill, Mehta lays bare the enjoyment taken in these encounters and obliquely points to that of the reader. While Srinivasan argues that he is encouraged by the 'members of the creative class who derive vicarious pleasure from his tales of sex, violence, and death', one could also argue that by exposing his own thrill, he critically reflects upon it, showing his awareness of the expectations framing his text.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the author voices his own doubts as to his complicity with violence: 'What do I do with Ajay? He is a brutal interrogator; this I have seen for myself. But Ajay had become a friend of sorts' (MC 182). Mehta expresses ethical concerns about his ambivalent position while exhibiting his urge to see and to show everything, as though his self-consciousness prompted no restraint in his writing. If, contrary to Dasgupta for instance, he does not build an explicit overarching critique of the systemic violence at work in the city, one may argue that his critique is embedded in the narrative itself and encompasses his own fascination for this violence. His exhaustive reportage exhibits the conflictual nature of urban life as well as the inevitably sensationalist dimension of a literary reportage written by a diasporic Anglophone writer on an Indian megacity.

This representation of the torture scene could be borrowed from a gangster film script, and film-director Vinod Mehta actually attends the interrogation to find inspiration: he picks up an idea for a scenario, and he and Mehta have a story session for their film *Mission*

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<sup>115</sup> Srinivasan, 'Unmoored', p. 105.



*Kashmir* ‘immediately afterwards’ (M150-154), pointing to the connection between violence and entertainment.<sup>116</sup> The two writers’ scouting in the police headquarters underscores the symbiosis between the world of crime and the world of film, a relationship of mutual inspiration which is also based on financial connections, since the film industry in Bombay is largely sponsored by the mafia.<sup>117</sup> As will be developed in Chapter 3, Mehta’s dramatizing of violence also stems from his cinematic gaze on Mumbai. This cinematic influence underpins the oscillation from minute investigation to sensationalised violence in his reportage, which draws from documentary and fictional forms to tell the story of twenty-first century Mumbai.

### *b. Politicizing Violence*

Roy also ‘emplots’ various episodes of public brutality which received high media coverage, yet, like Dasgupta, her interest lies in the psychological dislocations entailed by these events. If her writing displays the violence of these ‘critical events’, it mostly refracts their traumatic impact on a subject’s mind, hinting at the limits of strict realism to translate such inhuman acts of oppression.<sup>118</sup> Reading together Mehta’s and Roy’s treatment of public violence enlightens the discordances between their works, pointing to the multifaceted epic aesthetic of the Indian city.

In a chapter from *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* made up of Tilo’s fragmentary reflections, one finds this provocative statement about uneventful literature:

NOTHING

I would like to write one of those sophisticated stories in which even though nothing much happens there’s lots to write about. That can’t be done in Kashmir. It’s not sophisticated, what happens here. There’s too much blood for good literature.

Q1: Why is it not sophisticated?

Q2: What is the acceptable amount of blood for good literature? (M 283)

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<sup>116</sup> Note that, in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the Shiraz cinema hall in Srinagar is used by the Indian army as an interrogation and torture centre. Amrik Singh, the military officer who tortures Tilo and Musa uses this setting to add dramatic power to his interrogations (M 174, M 334, M380)

<sup>117</sup> R. Padmanabha ‘Movie Mafia: The Underworld and Bollywood’, *Frontline*, 2 May 1993, quoted in Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 154. The case of Sanjay Dutt, a famous Hindi film actor arrested for alleged association with the 1993 Bombay bomb attacks, is the object of a section in the book (MC 406-415).

<sup>118</sup> Veena Das develops the concept of ‘critical event’ in her anthropological work on the discourses built by the state and by citizens around various moments of violence in the history of contemporary India (such as the Partition of India and the Ramjanmabhumi-Babri Masjid movement). She identifies them as moments of radical break which institute new modes of relations and actions. I believe the notion can be extended to the 1992-93 Mumbai riots as well as to the 2002 Gujarat massacres, both having triggered a national crisis and a rupture in intercommunal relations (Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

This reflexive comment seems to anticipate the criticism of unsubtle representation of violence, and to suggest a connection between the allegedly ‘unsophisticated’ tumultuous dimension of the novel, its excessive rhetoric, and the reality of occupied Kashmir (and of contemporary India at large), which would not lend itself to uneventful narratives. Such intensity of violence cannot be written about quietly, is what Roy suggests, and she is unapologetic about her passionate rhetoric: ‘I want to wake the neighbours, that’s my whole point. I want everybody to open their eyes’.<sup>119</sup> Yet, she also claims fiction’s unique power to narrate what happens in Kashmir:

Only fiction can tell about air that is so thick with fear and loss, with pride and mad courage, and with unimaginable cruelty. Only fiction can try to describe the transactions that take place in such a climate. Because the story of Kashmir is not only a story about war and torture and rigged elections and human rights violations. It’s a story about love and poetry, too. It cannot be flattened into news.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, if Roy’s essays, often published in Indian magazines as immediate comments on public events, appear as emergency responses, she conceives fiction as being able to encapsulate the contradictory totality of Kashmir, the long-term crisis which pervades its everyday life, harking back to the totalising ambition of epic narratives. As a ‘freer’ form than the article, the novel enables the writer to move through the multiple layers of such a complex situation without flattening it. I contend that one of the specificities of Roy’s fictional writing of urban violence is the fluid oscillation between a documentary and an allegorical language and her use of the psychological insight offered by fiction to render the rippling and belated effects of traumatic violence on individual psyches, thus departing from a strict version of realism. Her interest in the effects of trauma on human consciousness is already palpable in the complex and deconstructed chronology of the novel, where the discrepancy between the unfolding of events and the narrative order is stretched to an extreme, this anti-linear structure reflecting the fragmenting effect of traumatic violence rather than its historical development.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The Shape of the Beast: Conversations with Arundhati Roy* (Delhi: Penguin India, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>120</sup> Roy, ‘The Graveyard Talks Back’, in *Azadi*, p. 188. Ananya J. Kabir examines how Kashmir has become an object of desire in South Asian nationalistic imaginations, notably through the literary representations of the valley landscape and its natural beauty, which Roy rewrites, turning this ‘Paradise on Earth’ into a macabre landscape (M 313-319, 343). See Ananya J. Kabir, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>121</sup> The events in Kashmir are thus first narrated through Biplab Dasgupta’s first-person account, situated at the periphery of Tilo and Musa’s personal excruciating journeys, before being retold successively through Tilo’s and Musa’s viewpoints, deferring the central narrative of Musa, the Kashmiri activist who struggles for independence and loses his daughter to the Indian army. The multi-layered complexity of the novel, which

Anjum is subjected to violence from her infancy, having to deal with her transgender identity in a patriarchal society, and belonging to the Muslim community of Old Delhi, minoritized and ghettoised in the aftermath of Partition. The violence that has repeatedly wrenched the city apart is embodied by her internal split. Her conflictual identity and her body are described as a 'battlefield' torn down by 'warring factions' (M30), as though she suffered an internal partition: 'the riot is *inside* us. The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle own. It *can't*' (M 23) says Anjum, whose inner torment mirrors the violence that scarred the city in 1947.

Her first experience of state violence occurs during the Emergency, established by Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977.<sup>122</sup> The twenty-one-month suspension of democracy, the dictatorial style of rule, the suppression of liberties and the atmosphere of general suspicion pervading the city at that time are obliquely refracted through 'the Flyover Story' (M 33-35), which has multiple versions. The story is that of Anjum and other hijras being expelled from a party by the police and having to walk across the city at night under the rain, terrified of being arrested: 'they ran in blind terror, like ghouls, through the darkness and the driving rain, their make-up running a lost faster than their legs could, their drenched diaphanous clothes limiting their strides and impeding their speed' (M 35). The hijras' fright is intensified by the comparison with ghosts (*ghouls*) which suggests that, once more, marginalisation and discrimination are refracted as spectrality. The pathetic tone of the story, enhanced by the syllepsis ('running'), is erased from the expunged version of the event, the 'Flyover Story' which Anjum tells her daughter Zainab and which appears first in the novel. Tinged with fantastic elements involving a giant advertising billboard on a flyover which refuses to help the group, the episode is rewritten as a thrilling adventure devoid of adversity. This 'happier' version of an epic journey across the city seems to have a healing power: 'Anjum began to rewrite a simpler, happier life for herself. The rewriting in turn began to make Anjum a simpler, happier person' (M 34).<sup>123</sup>

The plurality of versions and angles defines Roy's writing of violence, indicating the impossibility of any univocal narrative. Thus, the text represents the 2002 anti-Muslim riots

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allows to confront discrepant worldviews, and distinct yet overlapping temporalities, is part and parcel of the 'epic work' as it is defined by Florence Goyet.

<sup>122</sup> See Emma Tarlo, *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of the Emergency in Delhi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Christophe Jaffrelot and Pratinav Anli, *India's First Dictatorship: The Emergency, 1975-1977* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>123</sup> Other literary accounts of the Emergency include Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) (Delhi: Harper Collins, 1999), and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

in Ahmedabad through various modes, rendering the shock of brutality through the prism of a shattered psyche.<sup>124</sup> The violence unfurling in Ahmedabad is directly incorporated into the plot, since Anjum, on her way back from a pilgrimage, is caught in the riots and witnesses her friend Zakir Mian's murder before she takes shelter in one of the refugee camps set up for Muslims. Yet, the narrative of her experience is deferred, as though the text reflected the inability of Anjum's consciousness to come to terms with the traumatic event itself. This hole in the narrative is first filled by a general account of the events, through the narrator's voice, describing saffron-clad mobs with tridents attacking Muslim homes, businesses, and people, the documentary mode at times disrupted by scathing comments on the complicity of the police (M 44-45).<sup>125</sup> This realist account is followed by Anjum's silence as she is found by Zakir Mian's son two months after the deflagration. Apart from her obstinate silence, her trauma is evidenced by her stripping off her identity as a Muslim hijra: dressed as a man, she obsessively repeats the Gayatri Mantra, a Sanskrit chant used by Muslim people to pass off as Hindus in 'mob situations' (M 47).

As she moves out of the hijra house to take shelter in a lonely derelict graveyard, Anjum's inexpressible grief physically surrounds her, as a fortress which both protects and terrifies her.

But her desolation protected her. Unleashed at last from social protocol, it rose up around her in all its majesty – a fort, with ramparts, turrets, hidden dungeons and walls that hummed like an approaching mob. She rattled through its gilded chambers like a fugitive absconding from herself. She tried to dismiss the cortège of saffron men with saffron smiles who pursued her with infants impaled on their saffron tridents, but they would not be dismissed. (M 61)

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<sup>124</sup> The 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim killings happened after a train coach full of Hindu pilgrims on its way back from Ayodhya was set on fire. The pilgrims had celebrated the foundations of a Hindu temple where the old Babri mosque had lain. Hundreds of Muslims were arrested as suspected terrorists, and mobs attacked Muslim localities, killing people and destroying their houses and shops in Ahmedabad and other towns, without obstacles from the police or the government (at the time headed by the future Prime Minister Narendra Modi). These atrocities are at the core of Raj Kamal Jha's experimental novel, *Fireproof* (London: Picador, 2007), combining a documentary mode (with photographs of burnt down shops and houses) with dream-like sequences, giving voice to the spectres of the victims yet also providing harrowingly graphic accounts of brutality, raising questions about the politics and ethics of the fictionalization of brutality (see Sarah Illott, "We Are Here to Speak the Unspeakable": Voicing Abjection in Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50.6 (2014), 664-674).

<sup>125</sup> Saffron is one of the colours of the Indian flag, and stands for courage and sacrifice. Traditionally symbolising renunciation in Hindu culture, it has been appropriated by Hindu nationalism, in particular by the BJP. Acts of violence perpetrated in the name of Hindu supremacy are sometimes referred to as 'saffronisation' as the colour is widely sported by its supporters in public manifestations (B.S. Raghavan, 'Saffronisation', *Hindu*, 12 September 2001). Similarly, the trident, divine symbol and attribute of Shiva, is a ceremonial weapon typically used by Hindu supremacist mobs.

The majestic fortress is a shelter she erects around her to insulate herself from the world, yet it is haunted by nightmarish visions of the Gujarat events, that she tries to escape in vain. The conventional allegory of the castle of the mind is inflected by Roy, as the ‘Fort of Desolation’ (M 66) also descends from the Red Fort in Delhi, the Mughal fortress being a site of identification for the hijras and a potent sign of their long-lasting presence in the city (M 51).<sup>126</sup> The allegory of the fortress also suggests that the text replicates a nightmare logic, working through association of ideas, condensations and recurring, if displaced, motifs.<sup>127</sup> In fact, the emblematic saffron colour, identified with horror, pervades the whole scene, spreads from flags and headbands to the body of these men, rendering Anjum’s hallucinatory reconfigurations of her chaotic impressions as she is caught in the middle of the massacre. The inhumanity of these men is enhanced by their threatening saffron smiles, which appear as the monstrous version of the ‘frozen, empty smile’ of the new city (M 51), suggesting the entangled rise of neoliberalism and fascist violence in India. The allegorical logic and the dehumanisation of the persecutors are stretched further as the saffron men are turned into cruel birds.

She tried to un-know what they had done to all the others – how they had folded the men and unfolded the women. And how eventually they had pulled them apart limb from limb and set them on fire.

But she knew very well that she knew.

*They.*

*They, who?*

Newton’s Army, deployed to deliver an Equal and Opposite Reaction. Thirty thousand saffron parakeets with steel talons and bloodied beaks, all squawking together:

*Mussalman ka ek hi sthan! Qabristan ya Pakistan!*

Only one place for the Mussalman! The Graveyard or Pakistan! (M 60-61)

The difficulty for Anjum to identify her persecutors is rendered through the repetition of the pronoun ‘they’ and the allegorical designations, first as ‘Newton’s Army’, which alludes to the organised nature of the pogrom and satirises the rhetoric of necessary and fair retaliation, akin to a law of mechanical reaction, used by the Hindu right to justify the massacres.<sup>128</sup> The

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<sup>126</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>127</sup> See Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’. Cathy Caruth glosses Freud’s understanding of trauma as follows: ‘the wound of the mind [...] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’ (Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4).

<sup>128</sup> This is a reference to an earlier official comment announcing that the burning of the railway coach would be met with ‘an equal and opposite reaction’, the narrator undermining the use of this phrase, claiming that ‘the ‘reaction’, if indeed that is what it was, was neither equal nor opposite’. (M 45).

capital letters indicate a sombre irony, conveying a sense of ridiculous solemnity and the words' loss of substance in official discourse.

The allegorical logic further heightens the horror of the events as 'they' is then turned into a frightening army of shrieking parakeets surrounding Anjum.<sup>129</sup> At odds with the friendly old vultures of the graveyard and with the 'cash-birds' made by Zakir Mian (M 61), the parakeets appear as malevolent creatures, their hostility and cruelty enhanced by the harsh sounds of the text. The image acutely renders the nightmare logic, as it both conveys the horror of the mob and their reconfiguration as a crowd of cartoonish miniature creatures. The juxtaposition of this vision with the italicized actual cry of hatred reflects the workings of a dislocated psyche. Zakir Mian's profession as a maker of paper-birds pervades Anjum's narrative of her experience, through the bird allegory, as well as through the metaphor of folding and unfolding, alluding to murder and rape. The echoes between his meticulous craftsmanship and these atrocities reflect his spectral presence. Thus, the allegorical mode and the constellation of recurring motifs throughout the text, reminiscent of Jha's nightmarish writing of violence, holds the double function of encoding a shattered consciousness and of highlighting the political nature of violence, indicating that the novel's political critique is elaborated in the novel's style, which departs from strict realism.<sup>130</sup>

The novel also accounts for the gradual receding of Anjum's nightmarish visions, the 'Fort of Desolation' scaling down and becoming hospitable, expressing her recovery and her appeased relationship with the dead.<sup>131</sup> She is able to share her traumatic experience with another broken character, 'Saddam Hussein', who after a long silence, reveals that his real name is Dayachand, and that he has renamed himself after a famous perpetrator of violence in the aftermath of his father's brutal murder by a Hindu mob in Dulina. The young man thus tries to run away from his past and his caste, but is haunted by the same sense of guilt as Anjum: 'I was part of the mob that killed my father' (M 89). The Ahmedabad riot and the Dulina lynching, though of different scales, are thus connected through the encounter and

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<sup>129</sup> Roy's writing of the frightening power of fascist mobs as parakeets echoes Orwell's allegorical fable *Animal Farm* (New York: Harcourt, 1946). Roy's reference to 'Newton's Army' and the 'Ministry of Utmost Happiness', as well as several of her essays (such as 'Peace is War', in *MSH*, pp. 227-241) suggest that Orwell is an important source of aesthetic and political inspiration.

<sup>130</sup> The dislocation of reason entailed by any traumatic experience is already at the core of Roy's first novel, *The God of Small Things*, in which incomprehensible violence is described as 'a hole in the universe' (p. 191): 'At the time, there would only be incoherence. As though meaning had slunk out of things and left them fragmented. Disconnected [...]. As though the intelligence that decodes life's hidden patterns – that connects reflections to images, glints to light, weaves to fabrics, needles to thread, walls to rooms, love to fear to anger to remorse – was suddenly lost.' (*The God of Small Things* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 225).

<sup>131</sup> See Chapter 6.

friendship between the two characters, and appear as two manifestations of the rise of Hindu India, referred to as ‘the Parakeet Reich’ in the Dulina episode (M 87).

The violence unfurling in Delhi also has consequences all over India, and Roy insists on the concentration of political power which shapes the capital city, where decisions about Kashmir are taken from the secluded ‘imperial zone’ of the city. Her allegorical writing of violence is fully fledged in the chapters devoted to war-torn Kashmir, which account for the insidious spread of violence across the valley as an evil mist, an unstoppable mesmerising spirit (compared to the Pied Piper) which gradually takes everyone away with it (M 313-314). The narrative connections drawn between Tilo, Anjum, Miss Jebeen and Miss Jebeen II strengthen the deeply political nature of violence, which surpasses the individual novel and pervades the Indian society as a whole, in particular owing to the ascendancy of the Hindu right and to the rise of an authoritarian regime in India, that ceaselessly encroaches upon democratic rights. The comparison with Mehta’s accounts of riots and police brutality enlightens Roy’s more overt political agenda as she engages with public, collective collisions, and frames these events as part of a larger historical change, transcending the individual level. If her writing describes violence in a graphic way, the displacement operated by the allegory also allows her to eschew voyeurism, thus distinguishing it from Mehta’s spectacle of violence.

### **III. ‘Cities of Fortified Fragments’, or Planned Violence**

The behavioural violence which holds centre stage in the narratives of Dasgupta, Jha, Mehta and Roy is underpinned by an ‘infrastructural violence’ which defines the experience of the contemporary Indian city. Inspired by Frantz Fanon’s description of the segregationist colonial city as ‘a world divided into compartments’, Boehmer and Davies define infrastructural or planned violence as the materialisation of an exploitative project entrenched in urban space.<sup>132</sup> Pablo Mukherjee also argues that ‘the relationship between the less visible spatial and infrastructural logic of India’s cities and the more obvious and spectacular outbursts of violence that have scarred their citizens’ is increasingly evident in

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<sup>132</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 29, quoted in Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies, ‘Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Urban Infrastructures, Literature and Culture’, in *Planned Violence*, p. 3.

recent Indian novels in English.<sup>133</sup> These readings of postcolonial texts through the lens of planned violence, which aims to show how literary texts decode and re-imagine urban infrastructures, provide a relevant template for my discussion of Jha's, Dasgupta's and Roy's imagination of spatial fragmentation.

For Harvey, in addition to consumer-oriented urban planning, contemporary neoliberal urbanism is characterised by the widening fragmentation of cities into 'micro-states':

The results of this increasing polarization in the distribution of wealth and power are indelibly etched into the spatial forms of our cities, which increasingly become cities of fortified fragments, of gated communities and privatized public spaces kept under constant surveillance. The neoliberal protection of private property rights and their values becomes a hegemonic form of politics, even for the lower middle class. In the developing world in particular, the city is splitting into different separated parts, with the apparent formation of many 'microstates'.<sup>134</sup>

The uneven distribution of capital is so uneven and the gap separating different socioeconomic conditions is so wide that the elite has given up on the civic character of the city, considering that living in the same space is unnecessary and undesirable. The novels and essays of my corpus emphasize this social fracture and its manifestation through the secession of the elite from the city itself, signing the demise of the city as a public space. They also shed light on the colonial genealogies of these 'micro-states' in India and on the peculiar anti-urban aspect of the new luxury living spaces, responding to the upper-middle classes' desire to get away from the dirt and bustle of the city.<sup>135</sup> This section looks at the imaginings of the splintering of Indian cities into 'fortified fragments', which enshrines the divide between social classes, religions and castes in urban space. In keeping with the amplifying tendency of the epic mode, Dasgupta, Roy and Jha all stress the delusional quality of these private islands. Their breaking away from realism conveys the sense of estrangement created by these pristine spaces, apparently disconnected from their immediate social and natural environment.

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<sup>133</sup> Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, 'Which Colony? Which Block? Violence, (Post-) Colonial Urban Planning, and the Indian Novel', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, ed. by Ulka Anjaria (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 284. The essay examines the colonial violence entrenched in the infrastructure of New Delhi and the way it shapes contemporary manifestations of urban 'ultraviolence', through the cases of Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

<sup>134</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 15. See also Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001)

<sup>135</sup> 'The major metropolis in almost every newly industrial country is not a single unified city, but, in fact, two quite different cities, physically juxtaposed but architecturally and socially distinct. These dual cities have usually been a legacy from the colonial past.' (King, 'Colonialism and Urban Development', p. 32). On the divide between the 'white town' and 'black town' of Calcutta, see Sumanta Bhanerjee, 'The Underside of a City Divided', *Seminar* 559 (March 2006), <[http://www.india-seminar.com/2006/559/559\\_sumanta\\_banerjee.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2006/559/559_sumanta_banerjee.htm)> [accessed 5 January 2021].



## 1. Shopping Fortresses

‘The mall itself, moreover, had arrived as part of a rapacious economic torrent that had turned everything upside-down, destroying things human and divine, scattering objects and energies, and setting down alien needs and rituals in the rubble’ (C 95-96). The inclusion of the mall in Dasgupta’s apocalyptic vision of the spread of global capitalism in India betrays the significance of this commercial space in the new Indian urban imagination, despite its relatively recent emergence. Shopping malls have mushroomed all over Indian cities since the 2000s, in metropolises as well as in smaller towns. They have been part of the frantic building boom triggered by the economic liberalization of the 1990s, and have become ‘icons of the new India of the liberalizing middle class’.<sup>136</sup> These enclosed spaces of consumption and leisure have become fixtures in recent Indian cinema, which incorporates the middle classes’ experience of the mall and the developers’ seizing of profitable land to build them.<sup>137</sup> They have also made their way into Indian Anglophone fiction, which sheds light on their role in the image-building of the ‘new’ thriving urban India, as well as their belonging to the social partition implemented by contemporary urbanism. Their pristine surfaces, rapidly imposing themselves in the Indian landscape, thus become the emblems of a splintered urban society.

Their nature as self-sufficient microcosms severed from the outside world seems to have struck a chord with the Indian middle-classes, embodying their desire to escape the city.<sup>138</sup> The Austrian designer Victor Gruen, the inventor of the mall, conceived it a cure to the isolation of suburban lifestyle in post-war America, the mall was also imagined as an improved version of a city, a sedate streetscape sealed from the inconveniences of the street (noise, smells, traffic, dirt, crime...).<sup>139</sup> If Gruen’s civic ambition to create the new *agoras* of American society was quickly dispensed with in America and around the world,

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<sup>136</sup> Fernandes, ‘The Politics of Forgetting’, 2419. The number of Indian malls has soared from 9 in 2002 to 308 in 2017, with 95 malls in Delhi NCR, making it India’s ‘mall capital’. See Suneera Tandon, ‘The Dizzying Growth of India’s Malls, in One Chart’, *QZ*, 27 February 2018, <<https://qz.com/1215248/the-dizzying-growth-of-indias-malls-in-one-chart/>> [accessed 20 March 2021].

<sup>137</sup> See for instance *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, set in Kolkata (dir. by Anik Dutta (Star Synergy Entertainment, 2012)) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, set in Bhopal (dir. by Alankrita Shrivastava (Ekta Kapoor, 2017)). For an analysis of shopping mall boom in an another ‘semi-peripheral’ context, see Arlene Davila, *El Mall, The Spatial and Class Politics of Shopping Malls in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

<sup>138</sup> See Malcolm Voyce, ‘Shopping Malls in India: New Social Dividing Practices’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42 (2007), 2055-2062.

<sup>139</sup> See M. Jeffrey Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). For another vision of the mall and its uses by consumers, see Chapter 6.

imperviousness is an abiding rationale for the construction of Indian malls. Dasgupta expresses the sense that the mall built near the modernised international airport of Delhi ('Aerocity') has absorbed the spirit of the airport itself:

Like an airport, the mall is entirely cut off from the space around. There is something aeronautical about everything – as if membership of the small minority of people who can shop here brings with it a desire to lift off from the chaotic sprawl of the contemporary Indian city into a kind of well-enclosed Duty Free in the sky. Through its refracted memories of European metropolitan achievement – the Italian piazza, the Viennese ballroom – the mall seems to present itself as part of a long history of ideal cities, but this ideal city, of course, is not a city at all [...]. Just as the ideal home for so many of Delhi's rich seems to be a five-star hotel, the ideal city seems to be an airport. (C 118)

The identification of the mall with the airport highlights the elite's desire to sever themselves from the city and to forget the surrounding urban bustle. The impression of being suspended in the air in this liminal space, in between the earth and the sky, is ironically enhanced by the detail of people wearing aviator sunglasses (C 118), which brings to mind Jameson's analogy between the gleaming walls of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel and reflector sunglasses, highlighting the way in which the reflective surface of the Hotel denotes both aggressiveness and power.<sup>140</sup> Just like the mall, 'the Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city'.<sup>141</sup> The mall and the five-star hotel cited by Dasgupta as ideal escapes find their fictional equivalent in Jha's novel, in which the character of 'Man' is irredeemably drawn to the mall or the upscale Leela hotel, fascinated by the perfection of these mirror-glass monuments, which protect him from the undesirable crowd and from the law.<sup>142</sup> Yet the text also emphasizes how these walls seem to protect Man from being charged with murder, the novel thus picturing this upscale architecture as a refuge for an unsanctioned ruling class: 'Can anyone see him? Someone from a plane above? Someone looking up from below? No, this glass has a special protective sunscreen film that keeps the outside outside' (SW 223-224). These self-sufficient spaces thus appear as architectural incarnations of the Indian elite's fantasy of perpetual mobility across various standardised global places but also of their impunity. In fact, the analogy between the mall depicted by Dasgupta and the icon of postmodernist architecture is reinforced by the

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<sup>140</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 42.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>142</sup> Just like the Bonaventure's architecture, its reflective aspect also seems to cut off the Leela Hotel from its neighbourhood: 'when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it'. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

evocation of the architectural *pot-pourri* of the mall, a compilation of emblematic elements from famous cities, commodified and transplanted into an ‘idealised nowhere’.<sup>143</sup>

The mall’s insulation and otherworldliness are also enhanced in Arundhati Roy’s novel. First, Jannat Guest House dwellers’ surprise visit to the mall is a way to celebrate the engagement of Zainab and Saddam Hussein. Each step of their journey is depicted as exceptional, highlighting how foreign this practice is to them (M 409). The group’s destination is introduced as ‘The Edge’, the capital letters only enhancing the liminal dimension of the place, imagined as the end of the known world: ‘where the countryside was trying, quickly, clumsily, and tragically, to turn itself into the city’ (M 410). The personification and succession of adverbs render the rampant unbridled urbanisation of the countryside, depicted as a pathetic and painful transformation.

Standing in the middle of nowhere, the mall is further sealed off from the outside by the heavy security check at the entrance, which impresses and silences most of the characters, who look ‘as though they had stepped through a portal into another cosmos’ (M 410). The cosmic image enhances the totality of this self-contained universe dedicated to leisure and consumerism.<sup>144</sup> Anjum’s paradoxical identification of the mall with ‘the Duniya’ (the real world) (M 411) is explained by her habitual use of this Urdu word to refer to the world she does not belong to, as opposed to the unreal world in which she lives, thus stressing how unfamiliar the mall is to her. The metaphor of the passage into another world, illustrating Roy’s hyperbolic rhetoric, echoes Dasgupta’s image of the airport, but also connects the mall to the various *dargah* (shrines or thresholds) disseminated throughout the novel, already hinting at the deviant meaning bestowed on the mall by the characters, that turns it into a mausoleum.<sup>145</sup> Even though the group is allowed into the mall, the symbolical

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<sup>143</sup> Jon Goss, ‘The “Magic of the Mall”: An Analysis of Form, Function, and Meaning in the Contemporary Retail Built Environment’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 83.1 (1993), 32. Rana Dasgupta also satirises the spectacular spatial design of the mall through a mock-erotic depiction of the grandiose fountain display accompanied by ‘loud Johann Strauss waltzes’ (C 117). The ‘Viennese ballroom’ may allude to the Austrian inventor of the mall, for whom Vienna and the European public square remained urban ideals, an archetype which is reworked by designers of contemporary malls. (Michel Lussault, *Hyperlieux, les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2017), p. 77).

<sup>144</sup> The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie imagines the mall in similar terms in one of her short-stories, insisting on the supernatural impression it conveys: ‘I felt as though I were in a different physical world, on another planet’ (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘The Arrangers of Marriage’, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (London: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 176). See also Ewan Morrison, *Tales from the Mall* (Glasgow: Cargo Publishing, 2012) and Rinny Grimaud, *Un monde en toc* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2018).

<sup>145</sup> See Chapter 1.

and material barriers that restrict its access are underscored in the text, which hints at the slightly transgressive aspect of their visit.<sup>146</sup>

Similarly, Jha's 2017 novel intensifies both the magical aspect of the mall and its underlying segregating logic. New City mall appears as a universally admired edifice, yet the colossal fortress is accessible to the working-classes only in dream-like nocturnal episodes. The text compares the street-dwellers mysteriously infiltrating the mall at night with 'children out on a school trip to a magical park' (SW 190), putting forward the frequently-observed similarity between the consumerist heterotopia and the theme park as two delirious microcosms of pure leisure. Jon Goss and Michel Lussault both shed light on the design-induced spatial disorientation of the visitor and on the 'introverted' architecture of the mall, which enhances the discontinuity with the outside world.<sup>147</sup> Yet, Jha's novel dismantles this illusion of severance through the characters' prying into the secret corners of the city mall: the characters secretly use service lifts and explore garbage areas which are usually hidden away from view (SW 191), thus uncovering the labour and the connections with the outside involved in the daily production of the mall, locating this fantasy world in a material context.

Similarly, the mall is ambiguously presented as a dream-world where images seem to supersede reality in *The Ministry*, as shown by the characters' profound yet comic confusion, at pains 'to tell the difference between the shoppers and the mannequins in shop windows' (M 410). The vanishing line between reality and image could be read in the light of Baudrillard's analysis of the shopping centre as a simulacrum, 'a total screen where, in their uninterrupted display, the billboards and the products themselves act as equivalent and successive signs'.<sup>148</sup> However, Roy's representation does not tip over into fantasy and the mall is not pictured as an 'empty sign' either but as a space entrenched in a logic of secession and exclusion. The satirical tone grounds this self-enclosed world in the materiality of class differences, using comic exaggeration to reveal the middle-classes' cult of their own image. The text first emphasizes the foreignness of this world for Anjum, through the comic scene of her adamant refusal to get on the escalator, before ultimately yielding to her friends' pleas,

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<sup>146</sup> The heavy security check is also underlined in Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*, which refracts the restricted access to this space of privilege through the protagonist's resentful perspective. The discriminatory dimension of the place is symbolized by the clothing standards and, more importantly, by the mastery of the English language (p. 150).

<sup>147</sup> Lussault, p. 71.

<sup>148</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 196. Apple Ebook.

behaving as though it was a ‘dangerous adventure sport’ (M 410). The comic of this ‘hitch’ relies on the character’s conspicuous disruption of the fluid mobility imposed by the mall, offsetting the disciplining of bodies and the predetermined path the customer is supposed to follow.<sup>149</sup>

However, the main target of Roy’s satirical gaze is a self-centred upper-middle-class family, depicted through Anjum’s bewildered viewpoint that highlights their self-absorbed behaviour: a young man ‘gazed down admiringly at his own (huge) biceps’, while the family regularly ‘immobilized their smiles’ to take selfies which they then scrutinised eagerly (M 411). Their smiles recall the ‘frozen, empty smile’ of the dressed-up city, hinting at Roy’s critique of this façade cheerfulness, an allegory of uneven urban development. The satirical device of decentring the perspective, used in travel-writing and utopian writing, serves to defamiliarize these practices in a comic way, perceived by Anjum as irrational, and stresses the wide chasm separating the observer from the observed. Focusing on characters who are outsiders to the world of the mall, these texts all defamiliarize the experience of this self-sufficient consumerist microcosm, highlighting the way in which its architecture and its workings enact the retreat of the elite into outer space, their secession from the city as a space where social classes intersect and live side by side. Yet the forsaking of any civic ideal to embrace social segregation is also embodied by private ‘fantastic estates’ (C 1) or gated communities, fortresses which recreate an artificial mythified countryside.

## 2. Millennial Garden Cities

Epic narratives of urban transformations lay the emphasis on the seclusion of the elite and on their aspiration to become part of a global social sphere disconnected from the ground of Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata. The reconfiguration of these isolated retail and housing spaces as spaceships, aircrafts or floating bubbles hyperbolises the growing chasms separating social classes in these global cities. Yet these macro-narratives of urban development also

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<sup>149</sup> This stereotypical scene is also depicted in Amit Chaudhuri’s account of the Forum mall in Kolkata, in which he observes uneasy ‘provincial families’: ‘these families frequently creating an obstreperous distraction before the escalator, akin to inexperienced swimmers by a poolside, wanting, but hesitant, to take the plunge, pleased and shy at once at making an exhibition of themselves, cheered and scolded by the more daring members of the family averted with an inured sigh by the veteran escalator-users, who dart past them straight into the moving staircase.’ (CAL 213). The mock-epic analogies with adventure sport and swimming comically intensify the foreign milieu of the mall for these families, gradually getting familiar with its system. About malls as symbols of the ‘globalization’ of Kolkata, see Siddhartha Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Kolkata: From a Colonial to a Post-Marxist City* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

suggest the paradoxical anti-urban bias of the urban elite, insulating themselves in ‘farmhouses’, ‘islands’ or privatised garden cities, their pastoral or insular lifestyle having little to do with an actual countryside.

In no other Indian metropolis does the urban elite bask in such pastoral tranquillity: this is an idiosyncrasy of the capital. It is striking in fact how Delhi’s rich, a quintessentially metropolitan set of people [...] eschew the urbane. They do not, as the rich do in Mumbai or New York, dream of apartments with sparkling views of the city from which their fortune derives. They are not drawn to that energy of streets, sidewalks and bustle which was so heroic a part of great nineteenth- and twentieth-century cities. No: the Delhi rich like to take up looking at empty, manicured lawns stretching away to walls tapped with barbed wire. (C 3)

Writings on Mumbai mitigate the specificity of Delhi’s elite in their attraction for pastoral quietness, highlighting a similar movement of secession away from the bustle of the city. Yet Delhi has a specific connection with ‘pastoral tranquillity’, as suggested in Roy’s and Dasgupta’s works, which hint at the colonial genealogies of this recreated natural environment, notably through the influence of the garden city. Jha’s novel also obliquely addresses the fantasy of a secluded natural environment through a fable-like episode, which involves Kalyani’s brother, hired to tend sick trees in the perfectly-manicured garden of a housing estate in New City. The trees are entirely covered in parasite insects, and the task proves impossible for a human being. The tragic absurdity of plucking the insects one by one is heightened by the mechanical repetition of the same verbs (‘pick, pinch, drop, pick, pinch, drop’ (SW 231)), and the sounds express the desperate repetition of this endless task, bringing to mind Sisyphus’s ordeal. The character ends up twisting his ankle, appearing as yet another body broken for the sake of preserving the beauty of this gated garden city. The mythical or biblical undertones of the episode, also redolent of one of the ten plagues of Egypt, only intensify the reality of an urban rebirth based on the exploitation of manual labour.

In his 2013 essay, entitled *Calcutta: Two Years in a City*, which narrates his return to the city and his failure to engage with contemporary Kolkata, Amit Chaudhuri slightly draws away from the ‘ordinary’ mode of urban writing. He foregoes the microscopic lens of his fiction, which scrutinises the everyday life of one neighbourhood, to delineate the great historical changes altering the face of his adopted city. He thus notes the growth of gated residential areas, encompassing gymnasiums, swimming pools, schools, cinema halls, interpreted as the first signs of globalization in Calcutta: ‘By becoming a microcosm, by being self-sufficient, they fulfil a fantasy that many Calcuttans have secretly had for years:

to live in the city without in any way depending on it, or being beholden to it, or subject to its vagaries' (CAL 206). The passage echoes Dasgupta's account of the mall and of the luxurious 'farmhouse' he visits on the edges of the city, made of immaculate glass surfaces.<sup>150</sup> The opulent villa is likened to 'two space stations', one of them 'float[ing] free of the earth, a shining bridge to nowhere' (C 1) epitomizing the moneyed elite's aspiration not to ground oneself in Delhi. This is upheld by the informants' discourse itself, equating Delhi with a temporary abode, ready to 'retreat from this cultureless place' at any moment (C 75). The strict aesthetic order governing the mansion and its garden parallels the formal purity of the futurist edifices of Jha's fictional New City, and evokes a thoroughly domesticated natural environment: 'Everything is improbably pristine. The corners are straight and sharp. No gravel spills from the decorative channels that border the path' (C 1).

The planetary analogy developed by Roy is coupled to that of insularity in her essay on the ghosts of capitalism.<sup>151</sup> The gigantic Ambani tower in Mumbai, described as a capitalist lighthouse standing on top of the city with the largest slum population in the world, is a perfect allegory of the extreme polarisation of resources in India and of the elite's self-islanding, drawing further and further away from the city:

By calling their tower Antilla, do the Ambanis hope to sever their links to the poverty and squalor of their homeland and raise a new civilization? Is this the final act of the most successful secessionist movement in India: the secession of the middle and upper classes into outer space?<sup>152</sup>

The toponym's significance is deployed to suggest an elitist archipelago both in the midst of and away from the monstrous slum-city, the rhetorical question pointing to the frightening utopia of a new society created from scratch, leaving the earth behind. The image of secession is layered with the complex history of India as a fragmented territory, whose unity is continually challenged, the central authority of the government regularly suppressing secessionist movements such as the fight for Kashmir's independence or the autonomy of Punjab. Yet the severance is stretched out to convey the image of an elite seceding from the earth, taking shelter into outer space.

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<sup>150</sup> His essay also registers the misleading use of the term 'farmhouse' to refer to these private estates, meant to circumvent the 1970s legislation reserving this land for agriculture. (C 2)

<sup>151</sup> 'This is the real horror of India. The orbits of the powerful and the powerless spinning further and further apart from each other, never intersecting, sharing nothing. Not a language. not even a country.' (Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (St Ives: Flamingo, 2002), pp. 36-37).

<sup>152</sup> Roy, 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story', in *MSH*, p. 621. Spectrality is theorised by Arjun Appadurai as characteristic of housing in Mumbai, where empty housing owned by the elite stand in the middle of an overcrowded city.

Naresh Fernandes weaves the motif of the ‘re-islanding of Mumbai’ throughout his short biography of the city, connecting the social secession with the history and geography of Mumbai.<sup>153</sup> Set on the Western coast of the continent, the city is originally made of seven islands, which have been adjoined through reclamation processes launched by Dutch, Portuguese and British colonizers. Fernandes argues that the contemporary fragmentation of the city foreshadows the return of insularity, through the growth of private complexes, signifying the loss of any civic urban ideal.<sup>154</sup> A furious cry against the loss of a common ground, his portrait also underscores the way real estate advertisement sensationalizes the nightmare of urban life to market life in gated communities as a complete retreat, as shown in Sampurna Chattarji’s stories. Her story ‘Sunday Morning’ encodes the flaunting of these sanctuaries on large hoardings, ‘city after city shouted out its wares’ (DL 224) through a narrator’s biting critical perspective.

Everywhere you looked, Paradise was waiting – Eden, Arcadia, Nirvana, Cosmos, Galaxy, Indraprastha – you never needed to go anywhere again, you never needed to step out into that other older city where everything was failing, to which these showy new satellites were anchored, nebulously, hilariously [...]. Innumerable gardens. Gardens with high gates to keep the homeless out. Not just Gardens – Woods, Meadows, Groves. The less they knew what the words meant the more beautiful they seemed, the more desirable. What fearsome longing! (DL 224)

The text points out the evocative function of these fantastic toponyms and their connotations of mythical natural environments, reminiscent of Arcadia and the Garden of Eden, disconnected from all referent and ironically at odds with actual Indian meadows and woods. The image of hilarious satellites echoes Roy’s satire of New India’s cruel cheerfulness and New City’s frozen smile. The narrator pits these ‘cities within cities’ against the ‘colonies of car’ used as houses under the flyover. The paradisiacal vision tips over into dystopia as what is hidden behind the fortress walls is pure horror, atrocities and crimes (DL 224). The narrator’s extreme sense of observation is tied up with a sense of the horror upon which these paradises are built, and the foreboding of lurking monsters, skulking ghosts ready to emerge from under ‘a crust of green’ (DL 227).

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<sup>153</sup> Fernandes, *City Adrift*, p. 155. This islanding process plays out along class and religion divisions, even more so in the aftermath of the 1993 Bombay attacks, which heightened suspicion against Muslim denizens. (Ibid., p. 97-102).

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 155. ‘Alongside these reclamations, Bombay is experiencing another, more unsettling process: the emergence of new islands, whose edges are sharply defined by religion and class. As it turns out, the riots and the retaliatory bomb blasts that followed them coincided with the beginnings of India’s policy of economic liberalization. Both events unleashed forces that have profoundly reorganized Bombay’s landscape. They have created enclaves of privilege and exclusion that undermine Bombay’s deep-seated idea of itself as a progressive, cosmopolitan metropolis.’ (Ibid., p. 88).



Fernandes somehow shares the apocalyptic vision of the future of the city peddled by the media, like Dasgupta, Jha and Roy in their works, yet their agenda is openly pitted against the corporate utopia of islanding. In line with Roy's excoriating of the alliance between media, corporate and political power, the Mumbai journalist brilliantly points to the planned urban breakdown.<sup>155</sup> However, he also highlights the colonial genealogies of such plans, referring to the neighbourhood of Fort as 'the original gated community', drawing connections between twenty-first-century island cities and colonial fortresses. He also establishes a parallel between the speculative frenzy of the 1860s and that of the 1990s, underlining the profit-driven planning of colonial Bombay.<sup>156</sup> In fact, the anti-urban bias of these gated compounds can be traced back to colonial planning, based on a strict separation between colonial and native neighbourhoods, a genealogy which is still palpable in the toponyms of Delhi neighbourhoods, as Dasgupta notes, drawing a map of self-enclosed zones.<sup>157</sup>

It is a segregated city, a city of hierarchies and clannish allegiances [...], and it has no truly democratic spaces. Delhi's bizarre vocabulary of residential addresses – much of it derived from the time when the city was a British administrative township, with all the attendant social and security paranoia – says much about what people in this city expect from home: they live in *housing societies* and *estates* which are contained in *blocks*, themselves sub-divisions of *sectors*, *enclaves* and *colonies*. (C 16-17)

New Delhi, this colonial urban artefact built from scratch on the plain located south of the Mughal capital city, appeared as a separate 'garden city', a 'combination of city and countryside', made up of sparse low buildings, wide radial roads and expansive gardens. Lutyens, the chief architect of New Delhi, drew from Ebenezer Howard's model of the 'garden city', yet he relinquished the social utopian scheme attached to it. Dasgupta stresses the conception of the imperial capital as an exact opposite to Shahjahanabad:

All in all, a reversal: where Shahjahanabad's streets were narrow and labyrinthine, New Delhi would have vast, geometrical avenues; where commerce in the old city took place in a profusion of packed bazaars, it could be confined in the new to a pillared circle, eventually named Connaught Circus. Where Shahjahanabad was a city, it could be said, New Delhi was a bureaucratic village – for though it would contain administrative buildings of

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<sup>155</sup> 'Even as builders-politicians enacted policies that created chaos in the streets, they were constructing high value residential projects that promised to shield clients from that disarray – and from the people who have the misfortune of living in it.' (Fernandes, *City Adrift*, p. 121).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>157</sup> Urban historian Anthony King also underlines the continuities between the residential spaces of colonial bungalows and contemporary gated communities or suburbs, which he defines (in a rather unpalatable way) as 'globurbs', disconnected from their immediate surrounding yet connected to other similar spaces around the world (King, *Spaces of Global Cultures*, p. 151).

stupendous size and grandeur, its dispersed, pastoral layout, whose open spaces were empty monumental, left few places for any kind of urban bustle. (C 167-168)

The series of antitheses on which the passage is built systematises the imperial capital turning its back on the Mughal city and forming anything but a city, which is one of the theses defended by Dasgupta in his essay. The author points to the paradoxical idea of a *garden* city which gained ground in colonial and post-colonial global cities. Forsaking Howard's social reformist ideal of an ordinary city meant for common people, the imperial builders of New Delhi combined the pastoral layout of the garden city with monumental government buildings, without provisioning places of congregation nor housing for the poor in this grandiose plan. Contemporary Indian urban literature suggests that the private pastoral environments created in contemporary gated communities rewrite the garden city scheme at the scale of compounds, relinquishing the idea of the city as a public space altogether.<sup>158</sup>

However, as Roy's literary mapping of contemporary Delhi shows, the epic mode contributes to debunking the capitalist utopia of pristine pastoral private cities, by excavating the violence on which they rest and exposing the fissures lining their surfaces. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* refracts the enduring infrastructural violence which defines New Delhi through the point of view of Old Delhi inhabitants, mesmerised by the emptiness and the lush vegetation of the area. A brief four-page chapter entitled 'slow goose-chase' (M 135) traces the nocturnal path of Tilo from Jantar Mantar to the south of Delhi, followed by two guardian angels from Jannat Guest House on horseback, hence the slow pace of this wild goose chase. This incongruous company rides across the 'Garden City' (M 136), referring to the Delhi Imperial Zone, still populated by government officials and diplomats.<sup>159</sup> Roy's critical voice does not take the form of scathing satire or biting irony but of wonder: the

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<sup>158</sup> The transfer of Howard's scheme of 'garden cities', conceived as a (Victorian) solution to the inhumanity of Victorian industrial cities, into colonial cities such as New Delhi, and its connections with twenty-first-century privatised micro-garden cities, would be a fertile ground of investigation, which exceeds the limits of this dissertation. See Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (London: Sonnenschein, 1902). For an account of Howard's influence on Lutyens and Baker's design of New Delhi, see Romi Khosla, 'The City as an Idea', in *The Idea of Delhi*, pp. 12-13. The impoverished and socially exclusionary imagination of 'green cities' is also palpable in the Indian urban middle classes' 'bourgeois environmentalism' (see Baviskar, *Uncivil City*; Banerjee, *All Quiet in Vikaspuri*). About the artificial country and the obsession with security of gated communities, see the depiction of 'Terra Blanca' in Mahesh Rao's novel *The Smoke is Rising*. In a South African context, see Vladislavic's *Portrait with Keys*.

<sup>159</sup> In 2011, the circumscribed area of 'New Delhi' (consisting of the Imperial Zone and its southern extensions, excluding Old Delhi and the larger National Capital Territory) had 142 000 inhabitants, out of twenty-five million in the city at large (2011 Census of India, <<https://censusindia.gov.in/pca/SearchDetails.aspx?Id=72771>> [accessed 15 June 2021]).

character's amazement as they experience this foreign, exotic city obliquely highlights the entrenched violence of the colonial city. Defamiliarization enhances the contradictions of uneven development not through apocalyptic vision but through dream-like uncanny visions.

The text renders the slow progress of this eccentric team, offering the perspective of human and nonhuman outsiders on the majestic ethereal colonial city: 'Past the Garden City the chases and chasers approached a bumpy flyover. (Bumpy for vehicles, that is, not horses) [...]. She sensed her transgression. But she liked that part of the city. There was air to breathe. She could have galloped, if they'd let her. But they wouldn't' (M 136). The flyover is imagined through the horse's experience, the decentring of perspective shedding light on alternative practices of the city while alluding to the infrastructural violence which excludes non-motorist dwellers from the city. The text also renders the strong sense of transgression felt by the characters, the night allowing them to flout the implicit rules of urban segregation and to move through the richest and emptiest area of Delhi, 'a part of the city they oughtn't to be in' (M 135), perceived as an exotic space:

No sign said so, because everything was a sign that any fool could read: the silence, the width of the roads, the height of the trees, the unpeopled pavements, the clipped hedges, the low white bungalows in which the Rulers lived. Even the yellow light that poured from the tall street lights looked encashable – columns of liquid gold. (M 135)

The landscape is read through the grid of class exclusion, layered with architectural and infrastructural symbols of domination for these out-of-place individuals. The class prism through which the city is seen stretches to the gold yellow light, in keeping with the allegorical construction of light and darkness in Roy's writing.

The unevenness of urban development is also rendered through the characters' genuine fascination with this exotic city, as they pass landscaped roundabouts and car 'gardens'. The text enchants the city through exotic analogies: 'a cavalcade of black Mercedes with tinted, bulletproof windows appeared as if from nowhere and scorched past them like a serpent' (M 137).<sup>160</sup> The mock-epic metaphor of the horseback procession relates the subaltern horse-riders to these luxurious secluded cars, turned into mysterious parading horses before morphing into snakes, expressing both the impressiveness and the fluidity of their movement. These analogies heighten the characters' wonder, thus contributing to the oneiric dimension of the passage. The emptiness of the forbidden city is also refracted through Tilo's

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<sup>160</sup> The mysterious procession of black cars, symbolising power, may echo the majestic 'motor car with its blinds drawn and an air of inscrutable reserve', in which an illustrious figure probably sits, in the first pages of *Mrs Dalloway* (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 12-15)).

perspective as she discovers this insulated world in the immediate aftermath of her traumatic experience in Kashmir, shedding light on the contrast between the ethereal world of the capital city and the chaos of Kashmir, the two worlds being intimately connected as the former presides over the insufferable oppression of the latter from its sophisticated gentle sphere.

This short insight into the quiet emptiness of New Delhi contrasts with the depiction of the bustle fuelling the network of narrow congested alleys of Shahjahanabad. In fact, at the other end of the spectrum, away from the insulated pastoral retreats of the powerful, lie other disconnected enclaves, such as the above-mentioned Bhalswa colony, a living example of ‘planned violence’. Dasgupta emphasizes how impervious the area is to the development of the city, suggesting that instead of providing housing for the poor, public authorities displace them and keep them away from view, preventing them ‘from having any claim on city spaces or resources’ (C 246). Contradicting the idea of the withdrawing of government intervention into the citizens’ life, he thus insists on the effort the government puts into ‘protecting’ middle-classes from poverty (C 252). Dasgupta insists on the fragmentation of the city and the contradictions between a globalizing metropolis which is paradoxically made of disconnected parts, something which harkens back to Mumbai’s simultaneous globalization and ‘provincialisation’, with the demise of global frontiers mirroring the recreation of internal ones.

This impinged circulation and the class hierarchy represented by the flyovers are thematised in many literary representations of Indian cities. As they drive to the shopping mall, Anjum and her companions notice the two worlds separated by the flyover:

They drove over an impossible-to-pee-on flyover as wide as a wheat field, with twenty lanes of cars whizzing over it and towers of steel and glass growing on either side of it. But when they took an exit road off it, they saw that the world underneath the flyover was an entirely different one – an unpaved, unlaned, unlit, unregulated, wild and dangerous one, in which buses, trucks, bullocks, rickshaws, cycles, handcarts and pedestrians jostled for survival. One kind of world flew over another kind of world without troubling to stop and ask the time of the day. (M 409)

The compound adjective defining the flyover refers to the ‘Flyover Story’ studied earlier, in which Anjum had to walk on the elevated road, aware of her out-of-placeness. The comparison with a wheat field and the alliterations enhances the vastness of the road and its fluidity, while alluding to the ‘internal conquest’ of nature at work, echoing Ms Rose’s memories of the mustard fields upon which New City stands. The divorce between the two worlds is intensified by the accumulation of privative adjectives suggesting the deprivation

of the world underneath. This invisible world is both destitute and crammed, as suggested by the piling up of the different means of transportations. The final flying metaphor chimes with the elite's ideal 'airport-cities' depicted by Dasgupta and the fluid automobile movement of Man across the city in Jha's novel, pitted against the hampered mobility of pedestrians and cyclers, suggesting the total disjuncture between these parallel universes.<sup>161</sup>

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Conflict constitutes the backbone of these epic narratives of twenty-first-century Indian cities. Franco Moretti argues that, despite Lukács's assumption, the epic was a feasible form in a modern world riven by various modes of fragmentation and that this tension between the totalising ambition of the epic and the fragmentation of the modern world is what defines it. The novels and essays studied in this chapter are characterised by this tension, and their emphasis on struggle and collision chimes with Moretti's stress on the epic confrontation between contradictory viewpoints. Each in their unique way, the texts of Jha, Roy, Dasgupta and Mehta encompass the dissonances at work in the late-modern Indian city, giving voice to the material and symbolic collisions generated by the irruption of global capitalism in Indian society, through an aesthetic of shock. At odds with the focus on underground strategies to cope with oppression which characterises the ordinary mode, epic narratives insist on the crushing violence of urban life and on the deep-seated lines fracturing the city.

This chapter has demonstrated how the heightening of realism enables these texts to convey the antagonisms of Indian cities as fractured spaces, in which the widening chasm between castes, classes and communities is spatially engineered. Through the quest mode, the allegorical logic, the fantastic genre and satire, these texts are all pulled towards a formal excess which captures these contradictory mutations and the perceptual confusion they trigger. Without flattening generic specificities, I argue that this formal excess runs across fiction and nonfiction and highlights the porosities between these two genres. Thus, *Capital* deploys a pluralistic formal strategy which reconfigures fictional processes, illustrating the formal flexibility of nonfiction and its attendant ambiguities. The author-outsider portrayed in urban return-narratives brings to mind both the stranded traveller and the *Bildungsroman*

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<sup>161</sup> The road is also used as the site where the disjuncture is the most conspicuous in *The White Tiger*, the narrator being stuck in a giant traffic jam referring to migrant workers sleeping on either side of the road as remaining in the dark: 'We were like two separate cities – inside and outside the dark egg' (p. 138).

anti-hero progressing across urban society, while the ‘winners’ of globalization portrayed by Jha and Dasgupta come out as ruthless and crushed villains. The focus on confrontations and violence also takes the form of the exploration of psychic deformations engendered by capitalist modernisation in the writings of Jha, Dasgupta and Roy, the latter insisting on the political dimension of ultra-violence. I argue that the focus on conflicts, frictions, and brutality builds up a counterfactual narrative of India’s global rise. The question which arises from this aesthetic of shock and alterity is that of its political implications: by stressing these cities’ monstrosity and antagonisms, these narratives may tap into exotic representations of India and turn Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata into exceptional spaces of urban chaos, yet these features may also be emblematic of a global urban catastrophic condition.



### CHAPTER 3

## IN BETWEEN LOCAL AND GLOBAL SCALES, THE POLITICS OF THE URBAN EPIC

The first two chapters of this dissertation examined the cataclysmic landscapes of urban creative destruction and the spectacular collisions at work in contemporary Indian cities, trying to map the ways in which the epic mode animates Indian urban writing. Drawing on this exploration of the various aspects of the epic, the present chapter analyses its politics, already hinted at in the previous chapters. I will attempt to unpick the conceptions of the urban which underpin these literary geographies of tumult and to disentangle the political implications of their totalising impulse, their rhetoric of excess, and their dramatization of the contradictions of urban modernity as they surface in Delhi, Mumbai and Calcutta.

If the imaginary of natural cataclysm and the aesthetics of shock have largely been used by naturalist and modernist writers to depict urban mutations in Anglo-American representations, what does it mean for Indian Anglophone writers to deploy them in this specific literary and material context?<sup>1</sup> In other words, how do the questions of the critical or mystifying power of the urban epic fare in the context of twenty-first-century Indian cities, and what is the place of the epic mode within the long history of dystopian representations of colonial and postcolonial cities? These questions are connected to specific theorisations of modernity, capitalism, and literature which vary from the postcolonial to the world-system perspective, a variation which this chapter reflects. Indeed, I will locate Indian epic urban writing within these theoretical debates by engaging with the postcolonial critique of urban ‘concrete dystopias’ as flawed narratives, underpinned by a Eurocentric paradigm of urban

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Bernstein, *The Celebration of Scandal*, and Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime in American Naturalist Literature*.



modernity and development. These representations of urban tumult will be examined through the lens of ‘strategic exoticism’, in order to question their subversive use of a rhetoric of eruption and of shock. Tom Moylan’s understanding of ‘critical dystopia’ also proves helpful to think of the dystopian aspect of these urban narratives as a way to undermine hegemonic discourses of urban modernisation.

This chapter will thus delineate the diverse analytical scales used to account for urban turbulence in works by Dasgupta, Mehta, Jha and Roy, starting with the texts’ incorporation of local urban history and mythologies, which points to the city’s incommensurability, before widening the scope to show this condition either as an exception to or a symptom of the capitalist model of urban development. Delhi’s repeated bursting out of its boundaries, narrated as a series of inescapable eruptions, is explained both through local and global narratives in Dasgupta’s work, an oscillation which is also palpable in Roy’s and Jha’s fictionalisations of the city. As noted in chapters 1 and 2, Mehta’s biography of Mumbai is less driven by an overarching argument than Dasgupta’s essay is, yet his insistence on the city’s restlessness largely relies on local mythologies of Mumbai as the city of money, pleasure and crime, while he also imagines it as part of a global network of modern cities, all characterised by the unbridled play of individual energies.

## **I. Rewriting the *Genius Loci*? The Exceptionality of Indian Cities**

Dasgupta, Roy and Mehta first look at the economic, social and cultural turbulence at work in Mumbai and Delhi through a local lens. They connect the cataclysmic development of these cities since the 1990s with their geographical, historical and cultural specificities, intertwining historical and mythological narratives: the current tumultuous state of the city is considered both as a result of its development through the ages and as a manifestation of a more elusive spirit, a *genius loci* which emanates from the city and makes it unique.<sup>2</sup> Indian

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<sup>2</sup> *Genius loci* is an ancient concept, referring to a guardian spirit of a place. Robert Tally pointedly notes that the British novelist and critic D.H. Lawrence adapts this notion and suggests that this ‘spirit’ informs the idea of the people who live in that place: ‘Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.’ (D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), quoted in Tally, *Spatiality*, p. 81).

Anglophone writers thus reconfigure the various popular narratives, stereotypes and ‘fables’ (to use Gyan Prakash’s terminology) of the city, which we will call ‘mythologies’.<sup>3</sup>

These urban mythologies, disseminated in various cultural forms (whether poetry, cinema, or cartoons in the case of Mumbai and Delhi), often ascribe a singular quality or value to a city. In line with accounts of the interpenetration of the real and imagined cities, Thomas Blom Hansen and Oscar Verkaaik argue that these myths, impervious to falsification, have an effective impact on the material experience of the urban dweller.<sup>4</sup> Amita Baviskar interrogates this ‘strange tendency’ to ‘characterise the city in moral terms, as good or bad, loving or vicious’, sheltering or uncaring, which perhaps refracts the perception that a society has of itself, as Raymond Williams argued about the country and the city.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Mumbai’s Restlessness

As shown in Chapter 2, Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City* identifies Mumbai with extremity and restlessness: its struggling inhabitants are constantly on the move in a city whose material features are ceaselessly changing. The author primarily relies on local urban mythologies to explain this sense of agitation: that of Mumbai as the Indian capital of money, ‘power’ and ‘pleasure’ (as the titles of the different parts of the book indicate), brimming with gangsters, police officers, dancers, actors, slum-dwellers, and poets. As Srinivasan argues, the larger-than-life characters he is drawn to are ‘the stuff of myth’, all derived from Mumbai popular mythologies, in particular that of Bombay cinema.<sup>6</sup>

After the opening sweeping statement (discussed in the thesis introduction), the beginning of the book draws on figures setting Mumbai apart from other cities of the world:

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<sup>3</sup> See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, 2 vols, trans. by John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970-1973). One may also refer to Roland Barthes’s understanding of ‘mythologies’ as modern myths which help to naturalize particular worldviews or concepts (See *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Hansen and Verkaaik, ‘Urban Charisma’, 6. On the real-and-imagined cities see Soja, *Thirdspace*; Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Why are we preoccupied with attributing a singular quality – and that too a moral one – to a social place that’s defined by its diversity and complexity? Is it that, in trying to define the essence of the city, we hold up a mirror to ourselves, seeking to fathom our own humanity? Raymond Williams made this argument about attempts to classify nature, but it is equally apposite in the case of the urban experience. Cities reflect and refract society, its tides and countercurrents, but they are also sites for imagining identities, individual and collective selves.’ (Amita Baviskar, ‘Reflections on the City’, *Biblio*, March-April 2014; Williams, *The Country and the City*).

<sup>6</sup> Srinivasan, ‘Unmoored’, p. 105.

its demographical density (17 550 people per square mile in 1990 compared to Singapore's 2 535 and Berlin's 1 130) and its unequal distribution of space ('two-thirds of the city's residents are crowded into just five percent of the total area' (MC 16)) gesture to Mumbai's exceptional features. This data is immediately followed by the invocation of the myth of Mumbai as 'the bird of gold' (MC 17) — originally 'sone ki chidiya' (MC 450), sometimes translated in the text as 'the golden songbird' (MC 450).<sup>7</sup> This trope, disseminated by Bombay cinema, repeatedly appears in the text, notably through the voice of underprivileged people, such as a slum-dweller or a homeless poet, suggesting the irrevocable appeal of Mumbai for the newcomer despite the harsh living conditions offered by the city. It pictures Mumbai as a tantalising site of cultural and economic power, and emphasizes its overall dedication to trade and money: 'From the beginnings of the city there was a Mumbai culture, unique in India. Bombay is all about transaction – dhandha.' (MC 15).

The phrase 'the bird of gold' actually originates in Ismat Chughtai's 1958 film, *Sone Ki Chidiya*, revolving around the life of a poor woman gifted with a beautiful voice, who is repeatedly exploited and betrayed by men.<sup>8</sup> Much in the vein of 1950s Bombay cinema, the city is pictured in the film as a world of sham, trickery and utilitarianism, which the heroine ultimately leaves accompanied by a utopian writer. A major commercial centre since its foundation, Bombay has always been identified as a city of aspiration in Indian culture, all the more since the Independence and the growing of the Hindi film industry in the city. Mehta's appropriation of this local myth shows how much his work is imbued with Bombay's cinematic representations of itself. Stuti Khanna stresses the ways in which the film industry has generated a mythology of Bombay as 'sone ki nagri', or the city of gold:

Aspiration is the predominant mode in which Bombay is apprehended, and this in turn helps to create some of the other mythologies of the city: the unending swarms of people who arrive in the city aspiring for a better life; the harshly competitive struggle for survival; the ubiquity of apathy and self-interest; as of high degrees of corruption, exploitation and gangsterism; the high premium on individual confidence and enterprise and the perennial possibility of making it big, and above all, the irresistible seductive appeal of the city. While these characteristics may be true of any 'global' city almost anywhere in the world, in the case of Bombay these have congealed into tropes via which the city is apprehended – experientially, cinematically, in officialese, as well as in literature and popular music.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stuti Khanna mentions the myth of 'sone ki nagri', literally, the city of gold, which seems close but may not have the same genealogy (*The Contemporary Novel and the City*, p. 35).

<sup>8</sup> *Sone Ki Chidiya*, dir. by Shaheed Latif (Film India Corporation, 1958). Ismat Chughtai wrote the script. For a similar representation of Bombay, see *Shree 420*, dir. by Raj Kapoor.

<sup>9</sup> Khanna, *The Contemporary Novel and the City*, p. 35.

Arjun Appadurai also stresses the overall importance of business in the mythology of the city: ‘But Mumbai’s mythology and its everyday life places an especially heavy emphasis on the centrality of cash, as an object of desire, of worship, of mystery, and of magical properties that far exceed its mere utility’.<sup>10</sup> He connects the city’s dedication to business with its special status within the country, as a space which belongs to the Arabian Sea rather than to the nation. This transnational quality of Mumbai also makes it a city of outsiders, strengthening Mehta’s identification of restlessness as the ‘spirit’ of the city.

Mumbai is a city with a history built around contact, commerce, and conquest. The presence and struggles of the British and the Portuguese around the set of islands that later became the island city of Mumbai makes Mumbai a city of ‘outsiders’ from the start. Apart from its few coastal fishing communities, virtually every community in Mumbai has a relatively short local history, and the variety of these communities [...] gave the city a character that was inherently cross-cultural, negotiated and built on brokerage and translation.<sup>11</sup>

Amit Chaudhuri highlights how central aspiration and material ambition are to Mehta’s narrative of Bombay, which he describes as ‘a giant embrace, not only of the city but of hope, and its more complex, earthly incarnation, desire, in the age of the free market’.<sup>12</sup> In fact, aspiration may be regarded as governing the lives of Mehta’s interviewees, who are all represented as ‘struggler[s]’ (MC 385), striving to achieve their goals, whether winning the Miss India pageant, eradicating crime, giving Bombay back to Maharashtrians, or becoming a poet.<sup>13</sup> The world of cinema is one in which the struggle is fiercest. The section entitled ‘The Struggler and the Goddess’ (MC 385-406) probes into the life of aspiring actors, told through the perspective of Ali Peter John, ‘God of the strugglers’, columnist for a cinema magazine. Ali ‘is haunted by the struggling actors who have come to Mumbai and failed’ (MC 385). He introduces Mehta to a ‘genuine struggler’ (MC 387), named Eishaan (and subsequently referred to as ‘the struggler’), who gave up his successful cloth business in Dubai in order to become an actor in Mumbai, a lifepath which is presented as exemplary of the Bombay scramble. Interestingly, Ali dismisses the ubiquitous quest narratives that are spread around Bombay for their delusory and harmful nature: ““These struggle stories are the biggest enemies of the younger generations”, says Ali mournfully. “One success story destroys one thousand lives.”” (MC 391). Yet struggle seems to be the lens through which

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<sup>10</sup> Appadurai, ‘Cosmopolitanism from Below’, in *The Future as Cultural Fact*, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Chaudhuri, ‘The View from Malabar Hill’, in *Clearing a Space*, p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 129.

Mehta writes about the various individuals he encounters, probing but also fuelling the myth of the city as a place of opportunity.

Mehta closes the first section of the book and his demonstration of Mumbai's uniqueness with a reference to Sanskrit mythological scriptures, identifying Mumbai's tumult with a divine force of creative-destruction:

Bombay is the biggest, fastest, richest city in India. It is Bombay that Krishna could have been describing in the Tenth Canto of the Bhagavad Gita, when the god manifests himself in all his fullness:

*I am all-destroying death*

*And the origin of things that are yet to be...*

*I am the gambling of rogues;*

*The splendour of the splendid.*

It is a maximum city. (MC 17)

The series of superlatives is followed by a reference to the *Bhagavad Gita*. The dialogue between the prince warrior Arjun and his divine guide Krishna, who gives him counsel on how to fight, supports the identification of Mumbai as a place of epic struggle between life and death. This reading of Mumbai's perpetual transformation in the light of the Sanskrit epic echoes Rushdie's portrayal of the city as governed by the contradictory mythical forces of Shiva the Destroyer and the Creator, god of destruction and of procreation in *Midnight's Children*.<sup>14</sup> It is also reminiscent of Dasgupta's ventriloquising of the destructive spirit of Delhi, which distorts a biblical reference to convey Delhi's divisive influence on its inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> Both writers seem to depart from a historical understanding of tumult to imagine the city's *genius loci*, shifting from the documentary to the mythical.

Mumbai's devotion to money thus results in the city's perpetual self-transformation and its dismissal of its own past, which is emphasized both by Mehta and Rushdie. The latter imagines it as a forgetful space, turned towards its future: 'there is a certain endemic vagueness in Bombay about the subject of time past [...]. Bombay, a relatively new city in an immensely ancient land, is not interested in yesterdays.'<sup>16</sup> The city's restlessness is also

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<sup>14</sup> Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 290, p. 425. Moretti interprets the use of myth in *Midnight's Children* 'as the sign and instrument of a *symbolic resistance* to Western penetration' (Moretti, *Modern Epic*, pp. 247-248). The use of myths in Mehta, Dasgupta and Roy could be regarded in the same way.

<sup>15</sup> 'Come to me, all ye who have been fucked, it told them, and I will show you how you can fuck others' (C 206). See Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, p. 181. Contrary to the city's pull towards the future, Abraham Zogoiby in *The Moor's Last Sigh* and V.V. Merchant in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* both attempt to unearth the secret history of the city, whether that of its geological layers or that of its great families. Amit Chaudhuri also portrays Bombay as 'history's very antithesis' (Amit Chaudhuri, *Friend of my Youth* (Gurgaon: Penguin, 2017), p. 115). See also his comparison between Bombay and *The Graduate*'s Los Angeles, 'a very new society, a society without a history' (Amit Chaudhuri, 'I Had to Construct Lineages for Myself', Interview with Laetitia Zecchini, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1-2 (2017), 258).

illustrated by its toponymic fluctuations across the centuries, which Mehta handles through the combination of the documentary and mythological modes. This change of names has been commonly used as a mirror of the city's multiple facets and of its multi-layered history, but is also a fraught political issue.<sup>17</sup> The author starts with a brief historical panorama of the different toponyms, from ancient Heptanesia (deriving from the seven original islands) to the Portuguese Bom Bahia (the good bay), the English Bombay and the Hindu name Mumbai (probably originating in the name of a goddess Mumba Devi). What immediately follows is an association of this toponymic multiplicity with common myths about the city: 'It is a city that has multiple aliases, as do gangsters and whores' (MC 14). The various pseudonyms chosen by criminals and prostitutes mirror the multiple facets of the personified city and sensationally point to its reputation as the city of crime, corruption, deception and prostitution, a cliché also picked up by Salman Rushdie, referring to the 'over-painted courtesan Bombay'.<sup>18</sup> Mehta's endorsement of the identification of the city with a prostitute recalls Dasgupta's description of Delhi as a modern Indian Babylon, which indicates a shift from a documentary mode to a mythological one, from history to cultural common-places. The personification is furthered as the various facets of Mumbai are then related to a psychological condition: 'All great cities are schizophrenic, said Victor Hugo. Bombay has multiple-personality disorder' (MC 45). However, this metaphor is then materially and politically motivated as Mehta relates it to Muslim citizens changing their names into Hindu ones in order to survive intercommunal conflicts in 1992: 'Schizophrenia became a survival tactic' (MC 45). The political implications of the renaming of Bombay into Mumbai in 1995 are also investigated in the same chapter, thus shifting from history to sensationalism to investigation, all these branches converging towards the portrayal of Mumbai as an exceptional city.

Mehta thus explores the myths of the city of gold, of survival, of extremes, which are entangled with the reality of the city, as the space of the city is saturated with cinematic representations of itself (from film stars on billboards to film songs played on radios in cars and at street stalls).<sup>19</sup> The main reason why Mehta's reportage is so steeped in cinema is

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<sup>17</sup> See also Sampurna Chattarji's short-story 'Which One?' (DL 52-64) and Rushdie, *The Ground*, p. 235. On the political meanings of renaming Bombay into Mumbai, see, among others, Hansen, *Wages of Violence*.

<sup>18</sup> Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> 'The jumps and rhythms of cinematic representation register the jostle and press of the Bombay crowds just as the images and sounds of Bombay film that saturate the city are its allegories.' (Radhika Subramaniam, 'Urban Physiognomies', in *Sarai Reader 02*, p. 9).

undoubtedly that Mumbai is, in Rushdie's words, a 'super-epic motion picture of a city', a condensed formulation which blurs the demarcation between the real and the mythical city.<sup>20</sup> Rashmi Varma also recalls that Mumbai 'has been called a cinematic city, underscoring the city's complex imbrication in material reality and imaginative constructions',<sup>21</sup> a fact which is underscored by Mehta himself, claiming that Indian spectators all vicariously 'know' Mumbai through the fantasies disseminated by Hindi cinema (MC 350). He participates in this overlap of reality and fiction through his narrative, which digs into but also perpetuates the fantasised version of Bombay displayed in Hindi films, that of a spectacular world of dreams and transgression.

He thus immerses himself in social milieus that he primarily (and paradoxically) knows through cinema: the larger-than-life 'characters' he is drawn to are both real and imaginative constructions peddled by Hindi popular films. Gangsters and goons, corrupt policemen, drifting bar dancers, famous Bollywood actors and idealist poets, these are the myths that he endeavours to scrutinise and to magnify. He acknowledges his primary motive at the beginning of the book: 'I had the freedom – indeed, the mission – to follow everything that made me curious as a child: cops, gangsters, painted women, movie stars, people who give up the world' (MC 537-8). Driven by curiosity, Mehta overtly expresses the fascination and pleasure he derives from the observation of people's (sometimes distressing or violent) intimacy, thus exposing the voyeuristic dimension of his narrative, which he also connects with cinema, as 'our eye into the forbidden [...], an outlaw medium, our flashlight into the darkest part of ourselves' (MC 348). His definition of cinema as a fundamentally transgressive medium reads as a metatextual comment on his own scrutiny and exposure of transgressive characters, who seem borrowed from Hindi films.

In addition to the reconstitution of scenes of brutality, two examples (among many) will give a glimpse of the way in which cinematic myths of Mumbai are incorporated in Mehta's writing, who draws on his own short experience as a film-writer in Bollywood.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, p. 129. Note the pointedly use of the term 'epic' here. About Rushdie's close links with cinema, see Vijay Mishra, 'Rushdie and Bollywood Cinema', in *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie*, ed. by Abdulrazak Gurnah (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 11-28; Florian Stadler, *Fiction, Film, and Indian Popular Cinema: Salman Rushdie's Novels and the Cinematic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2013); Elsa Sacksick, 'Transpositions cinématographiques dans l'œuvre de Salman Rushdie', *Polysèmes*, 12 (2012), 203-225.

<sup>21</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 137. Priyamvada Gopal also points out that 'the 'Bombay novel' [...] draws imaginatively on the city's resources, notably, that most famous of Bombay's industries, the popular Hindi film' (*The Indian Novel in English*, p. 117).

<sup>22</sup> He relates his experience of co-writing the scenario of *Mission Kashmir*, an action thriller film directed by Vinod Chopra. A systematic study of the intermediality of Mehta's writing, drawing on cinematic techniques and themes from Hindi and American films, exceeds the limits of this chapter but would constitute a fruitful

The first one is more specifically related to gangster films. In her study of Bombay cinema as an unofficial archive of the city, Ranjani Mazumdar emphasizes Mehta's use of the language of cinema to account for the 'unreadable' forces that crisscross the worlds of Bombay: 'Mehta follows the cinematic landscape of the underworld elaborated in the gangster films of recent years', notably through the emphasis on violence and the fetishizing gaze on women.<sup>23</sup> A tense conversation with hitmen, for instance, is turned into a dramatic scene: ...

Then, holding the gun in his hand, Satish asks me point-blank, 'Are you afraid of death?'  
My answer is crucial. My answer must be exactly right.  
He is loading the gun. 'What do you think will happen to you after you die?'  
I look up from my computer. I reply that my religion tells me we will all reach moksha and unite with God [...]. 'With all the sins I've committed in this life, I'll probably be reborn an ant.'  
They laugh and the tension breaks. I start breathing again. (MC 228)

This dialogue is read by Srinivasan as an example of return-writing's use of the fictional technique of the unreliable narrator, based on the distinction between author and narrator, contrasting with the genre's purpose 'to close the gap between author and narrator'.<sup>24</sup> Yet I would also read it through the lens of gangster films as the text evinces Mehta's art of suspense: the dialogue is interspersed with brief descriptive clauses in the present tense which intensifies the anxiety he experienced, and ends with comic relief provided by his smart joke, which sounds like a punchline from a film, and artificially identifies the reporter with the criminals through their sinful lives. This momentary suspension of hindsight and the enhancing of drama, which readers enjoy even though they know the danger is minimal, draw the literary reportage closer to fiction.

The second example is related to the world of dance bars, portrayed in Bombay cinema as 'a virtual space of sexual excess' and a 'visual condensation of city space'.<sup>25</sup> This is how Mehta describes this realm of pure spectacle:

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object of future investigation. An interesting literary point of comparison is Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (which was adapted into a TV series in 2018), labelled as a 'gangster epic' (Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, p. 353). See also Vikram Chandra, *Love and Longing in Bombay* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Ranjani Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 148-149. For examples of Bombay gangster films, see *Parinda*, dir. by Vinod Chopra (Eros Entertainment, 1989); *Satya*, dir. by Ram Gopal Varma (Eros Entertainment, 1998). Regarding violence, masculinity and Indian postcolonial cinema, see *Spectacles of Blood, A Study of Masculinity and Violence in Postcolonial Films*, ed. by Swaralipi Nandi and Esha Chatterjee (Delhi: Zubaan, 2012); Vyjayanthi Rao, 'A New Urban Type? Gangsters, Terrorists and Global Cities', *Critique of Anthropology*, 31.1 (2011), 3-20.

<sup>24</sup> Srinivasan, 'Unmoored,' p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Mazumdar, p. 86.



The customers literally blow money away on the dancers: paise udana, send money into flight. They will walk up to the dance floor and stand with a stack of notes over the head of the favoured dancer. The notes, in an expert hand, traverse the distance between customer and dancer on air and fluff out, forming a halo or fan around the girl, enveloping her in the supreme grace of currency, its wealth adding immeasurably to the radiance of her face, exalting her in this most commercial of cities, till the floor is littered with rupee notes and the male attendants scurry around to collect them and deposit them in the dancer's account. (MC 270)

The use of the Hindi phrase 'paise udana' (to splash out) as well as the meticulous description of the customers' habits hark back to ethnographic reports. Yet Mehta's gloss ('send money into flight'), though based on a literal translation, triggers a metaphorical development rather than a documentary one, as if the writing were caught up in the bar's dream world, transforming the practice into an enchanting show, and the dancer into a sexualised emblem of Mumbai, embodying entertainment, beauty and money.

The city itself becomes a stage, on which Mehta projects his characters-performers. The writer-reporter retrospectively defines his position as that of a dance-bar customer, watching his interviewees perform, disclosing his ambiguous (and potentially instrumental) relation to them: 'I sat right at the edge of the stage, scattering these pieces of paper over them as payment. And in watching them I followed them closer to my own extremity, closer than I had ever been' (MC 538). The metaphor of the dance-bar also hints at the awareness of the meagre written retribution he offers for the spectacle of these outstanding lives. Thus, the text's documentary ambition is blunted by the will to create a show out of Mumbai, city of spectacle *par excellence*, as evidenced by the portrait of Monalisa, a bar dancer turned into a sublime film heroine (M 295). The blurring of lines between fact and fiction (or show), is revealed in his account of a conversation with the dancer in which she details her seduction techniques and sexual experience. The passage draws on oral history, transcribing Monalisa's words verbatim and adopting a distanced analytical point of view upon her work and her 'microscopic knowledge of men' (MC 276). Yet the mention of his sexual arousal (for instance, 'as she is telling me all this, she has the cushion grabbed tight between her legs' (MC 300)) gives an erotic dimension to the dancer's account, shifting away from the ethnographic collection of facts to a voyeuristic position, dramatizing the scene and representing her as an 'almost hyper sexual being'.<sup>26</sup>

His rendering of the dancer's everyday life is particularly pervaded by the tropes of melodrama which are typical of popular Hindi films. As Mehta becomes Monalisa's friend

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<sup>26</sup> Bird, 381.

and displays his obsession with her, the text tips over into romance and fantasy. His writing replicates the illusory logic of the beer bar, in which the dancer impersonates the female leads of Hindi film. In a reflexive and typically hyperbolic passage, he shows how the line between reality and fiction dissolves:

At some point the Monalisa that I'm writing in these pages will become more real, more alluring, than the Monalisa that is flesh and blood. One more ulloo, Monalisa will think. But imagine her surprise when she sees that what I am adoring, what I am obsessed with, is a girl beyond herself, larger than herself in the mirror beyond her, and it is her that I'm blowing all my money on, it is her that I'm getting to spin and twirl under the confetti of my words. The more I write, the faster my Monalisa dances. (MC 314)

Dreaming himself as a Pygmalion, the author unsubtly exposes the conversion of the actual Monalisa into a mythical creature of words.<sup>27</sup> This confession of imaginative intervention and instrumentalization is also a flagrant dismissal of his potential sexual interest in her, which contrasts with his previous emphasis on her erotic appeal. It also draws attention to the mediating process of writing, the translation of the real dancer into a textual entity, illustrating the 'figurative control [Mehta exerts] over his subject', 'replacing a material account of Monalisa's life with scenes of stylized and erotic spectacle'.<sup>28</sup> As Varma sums up, 'following a very old trope, the Mumbai bar girl comes to allegorize all the seductions and vulnerabilities of this great city'.<sup>29</sup> It also displays his rehearsing of 'those literary formulae of an imagined India which capitalise on the illicit adventures and extravagant clichés of exotic romances'.<sup>30</sup>

Although the narrative also emphasizes Monalisa's strength and contradictory aspirations, thus eschewing total objectification, Mehta's appropriation of the myths of Mumbai may be contrasted with Sonia Faleiro's literary investigation of a bar dancer's

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<sup>27</sup> Amit Chaudhuri makes the same confession about Ramu, the childhood friend, now a drug addict, who is at the centre of his last novel: 'The Ramu I know and the Ramu I'm writing about have become indistinguishable. The same's true of the Bombay I'm recounting from experience and the Bombay I'm assembling through words' (*Friend of My Youth*, p. 116-117). This classic blurring of the lines between fact and fiction can also be read in the light of the ambiguous relationship these writers entertain with local subjects.

<sup>28</sup> Bird, 390.

<sup>29</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 130. Rashmi Varma offers an insightful reading of the limitations of Mehta's figuring of women in the city (*Ibid.*, pp. 130-138).

<sup>30</sup> Huggan, p. 80. Several critics emphasized affinities between Mehta's writing of Bombay's underworld and that of Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the most acclaimed chroniclers of Bombay's lowlife and cinema (see Kumar, 'The Enigma of Return' and Khanna, *The Contemporary Novel and the City*, p. 152, 178). If their social universe is similar, Manto's understated tone and humour widely differ from Mehta's bombastic rhetoric, and is closer to Siddharth Chowdhury's or Aman Sethi's writings. See Saadat Hasan Manto, *Bombay Stories*, trans. by Matt Reeck and Aftab Ahmad (London: Vintage Classics, 2014) and *Stars from Another Sky: The Bombay Film World in the 1940s*, trans. by Khalid Hasan (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998).

everyday life.<sup>31</sup> Emma Bird argues that Faleiro, by addressing one of the stereotypes of Mumbai, evidences a form of ‘strategic exoticism’ that Mehta fails to show in *Maximum City*. The generic and modal disparities between the two texts evidence two distinct strategies to tackle Mumbai myths. *Beautiful Thing* is closer to ethnography than to reportage, insofar as it focuses on Leela’s daily life (her dancing practice and performing, her relationship with her family, lovers, friends, neighbours), thereby debunking the association of bar-dancing with a life on the edge. Faleiro reflexively registers her asymmetrical power relationship with the dancer, yet she also recreates scenes out of Leela’s memories, thus blurring the lines between fact and fiction in a way which is closer to Aman Sethi or Katherine Boo than to Mehta’s writing.

Her rhetorical restraint in the rendering of the dancer’s arduous path is particularly striking, and the description of bar-dancing as an acquired technique and an exhausting, sometimes boring, form of labour, with its attached alienating dimension contrasts with the dazzling spectacle created by Mehta as customer. The narrative is pervaded by the power struggle at work between men and women, as Leela’s predatory relationship with customers and lovers, symbolized as ‘ramzan goats’, is read in the light of the male domination and abuse which have shaped her life since childhood.<sup>32</sup> The author also satirises men as ludicrous victims of Leela’s performance, enthralled, bemused and ultimately preyed upon: ‘They think I dance for them, she would say. But really, they dance for me’.<sup>33</sup> She thus reverses the stereotype of the female vulnerable prey in a humorous manner:

But as soon as Leela joined the conversation, they lost all confidence. One got so nervous he began to answer my questions in monosyllables or ‘Ji’. Yes.  
As in, how long have you known Leela?  
Ji.  
How often do you come here?  
Ji.

The comic dialogue stresses Leela’s disorienting power over men, illustrating Faleiro’s larger attempt to counter ‘masculinist renderings of urbanity’ and romanticised versions of bar-dancing, thus undermining Mumbai myths rather than perpetuating them.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Sonia Faleiro, *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay’s Dance Bars* (Edinburg: Canongate, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> ‘To Leela a customer was a “Ramzan goat”. Destined for slaughter. And she, Leela said to me, must wield the knife that would slit his throat, cut his head off and hang his carcass to drip, drip, drip. Never forget, she instructed, a bar dancer’s game is “lootna”, “kustomer ko bewakuf banana”. To rob, to fool a customer.’ (Faleiro, *Beautiful Thing*, p. 51)

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>34</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 138. Another interesting counterpoint to Mehta’s account is Altaf Tyrewala’s novel, which features a scene in which a bar-dancer’s wild dance dismantles the illusion of desire

This absurd conversation which serves to puncture the myths of Mumbai is actually echoed by several comic scenes in *Maximum City*, which contrast with the general aggrandizing impulse of the text. Mehta's satirical account of his meetings with two legends of Mumbai, the famous actor Amitabh Bachchan, and Bal Thackeray, the founder of the right-wing party of the Shiv Sena, 'a self-constructed mythic figure' (MC 60), trivialize these powerful figures. In both cases, Mehta emphasizes the mythical status of the icons, before comically deflating their aura. While the lionized Bollywood actor appears as a fallen icon trapped in paranoid obsessions, forever sporting a mechanical smile (MC 359), the political leader, who is responsible for igniting communal tensions in the city, is turned into a farcical rambling old man, an entertainer and imposer prone to disjointed digressions and hallucinations. Far from drawing a monstrous portrait of Thackeray, Mehta literally scales down the politician's aura as he insists on the 'mismatch of scale' between the narrow-minded man and the vast city (MC 107).<sup>35</sup> This belittling rhetoric hints at Mehta's change of writing strategy when he engages with the giants of Mumbai, shifting from hypertrophy to comic debasement.

Mumbai mythologies have also been strengthened by their opposition to other Indian cities, such as Kolkata and Delhi. The competition between the historical financial capital and the administrative one is thus tangible in the circulation of common-places about the two cities, assimilated into the works of Rushdie, Mehta or Dasgupta: 'Bombay-wallahs have tended to dismiss Delhiites as the fawning lackeys of power, as greasy-pole-climbers and placemen, while the capital's citizens have sneered at the superficiality, the bitchiness, the cosmopolitan "Westoxication" of my home-town's business babus and lacquered, high-gloss femmes', claims the narrator of *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*.<sup>36</sup> Yet these myths, meant to convey the exceptionality of each city, also paradoxically enhance common traits, such as restlessness, or unrest, the writers being caught between incommensurability and universalism.

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and pleasure that she is supposed to convey, exposing the customers' vulgarity, thus subverting the ritual of consumption and spectacle attached to bar-dancing: 'The girl is not quite dancing any more. She swaggers about like a drunk. She twitches like an epileptic. Lurches. Marches around like a soldier. Rolls on the floor. Slaps her own face. Paces back and forth like a tigress.' (*No God in Sight*, (Delhi: Penguin, 2005), p. 150).

<sup>35</sup> This downsizing device recalls Rushdie's caricature of Thackeray as Raman Fielding (note the pun on the writer's name), also known as Mainduck (which means "frog" in hindi) in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

<sup>36</sup> Rushdie, *The Ground*, p. 178.

## 2. Delhi, a City Doomed to be Destroyed

Dasgupta first analyses the aggressiveness and volatility that characterise Delhi at the turn of the twenty-first century in the light of the city's violent history. He openly dismisses the stereotypical representations of the new hyper-aggressive elite as mere uneducated materialist *nouveaux riches*, and seeks the origin of this 'clannish ethos' in the city's post-traumatic culture.<sup>37</sup> Using a historical and a psychoanalytic frame of interpretation, he connects the recent outburst of violence to the trauma of Partition but also to the fractured history of Delhi since its foundation. One of the arguments unfolded by *Capital* is that contemporary Delhi inherits its eruptive quality from a long history of ruptures. The eruption metaphor may thus initially be construed as arising from the history of a city haunted by destruction (as hinted at through the metaphors of spectrality studied in Chapter 1). Dasgupta draws on the widespread historiographical narrative of the discontinuous development of the city, which has repeatedly been sacked and rebuilt from scratch, thus nurturing a feeling of volatility.

There is little physical continuity between the many cities of Delhi: none was incorporated organically into the next [...]. Each time a new power came to this place, it shifted ground and built afresh, draining the last life out of what existed before and leaving it to decay. This singular discontent with the already existing did not end in modern times: the British built 'New Delhi' in the wilderness, and global capital started from scratch with Gurgaon. The spirit of this place has always been staccato, and full of fractures. (C 150)

This overview recalls Percival Spear's description of the 'stop-go capital', which emphasizes the irregular formation of the city through a series of crises, destructions and displacements, a pattern which has since then been tempered by several historians and social scientists who show the continuities at work throughout the history of the capital.<sup>38</sup> If one can trace these fractures back to the capital's displacement from Lal Kot to Mehrauli in the thirteenth century, or to its sacking by Timur in 1398 and again by the Persian leader Nadir Shah in

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<sup>37</sup>The stereotypical representation of this new elite by the old cultural elite of Delhi as tasteless, uneducated, loud, materialist, is dismissed by Dasgupta in an interview (Rana Dasgupta, Interview with William Dalrymple, Jaipur Literary Festival, online video recording, Youtube, 20 January 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4FRHeHJ2IQ>> [accessed 12 May 2021]).

<sup>38</sup> Percival Spear, 'Delhi: The "Stop-Go" Capital: A Summation', in *Delhi Through the Ages: Selected Essays in Urban History, Culture and Society*, ed. by Robert E. Frykenberg (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 309-325. For a discussion of Percival Spear's argument, see Dupont and others, 'The Alchemy of an Unloved City', in *Delhi: Urban Space and Human Destinies*, p. 17.

1739, three main manifestations of the clean-slate logic are central to Dasgupta's macro-narrative.<sup>39</sup>

First, the construction of New Delhi in 1911 as the new capital of the British Empire signals the British's wilful rupture with the Mughal past of the city: as we mentioned in the previous chapter, the new city was planned south west of Shahjahanabad and does not incorporate it at all. The emblem of British imperial grandeur stands alone on Raisina Hill, turning its back to the Mughal capital.<sup>40</sup> Dasgupta dramatizes the *ex nihilo* breaking out of New Delhi as an ethereal space, a colonial artefact doomed to remain foreign to most of its inhabitants:

The city itself remained utterly conceptual, without inhabitants or culture. It was as radical as new beginnings could be: it was not at all certain how, or even if, it could work [...]. It recalled, quite self-consciously, the ethereal splendour of Athens and Washington, DC. As it came to life, the alien city, whose sapling-lined avenues petered out into the dusty brush, also introduced to this place an entirely unaccustomed ethos. (C 30)

The passage resonates with many accounts of imperial Delhi as a 'masquerade of the modern city, designed to flaunt the superior rationality and power of the Raj, but deficient in productive capacities', or as an *unreal city*.<sup>41</sup> Dasgupta uses the eruption metaphor to convey the 'heroic enterprise' of the capital's construction from scratch: 'dust and noise erupted in choking clouds from the twenty-two-acre masonry yard' (C 168), evoking once more the creative-destructive energy deployed in the building of the city.

More violent is the second landmark: the Partition of India, concurrent with the Independence on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, has left its imprint on the city's culture, demography and geography.<sup>42</sup> Dasgupta identifies it as another brutal historical fracture which thoroughly reconfigured the city. While the Muslim communities had to flee the city and the country, Hindus from Punjab and neighbouring regions hurriedly settled in Delhi, either in refugee

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<sup>39</sup> Curiously, the brutal repression of the 1857 uprising (sometimes referred to as India's first war of independence) is evoked as one of the violent episodes of the city's history but is not included in Dasgupta's series of traumatic ruptures. All the above-mentioned events are reconstructed in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* (Delhi: Penguin, 1990), a polyphonic novel which alternates historical chapters with contemporary ones, emphasising the incessant struggle for power in Delhi.

<sup>40</sup> For an account of the planning of New Delhi and the debates concerning its geographical positioning, see Romi Khosla, 'Glory of Empire: Imperial Delhi', in *The Idea of Delhi*, pp. 44-53.

<sup>41</sup> See Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, p. 110. Naipaul also describes Lutyens's Delhi as a monumental city dwarfing its inhabitants: 'the streets were wide and grand, the roundabouts endless: a city built for giants, built for its vistas, for its symmetry: a city which remained its plan, unquickenened and unhumanised, [...]: a city built like a monument. (Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, pp. 89-90).

<sup>42</sup> For a synthesis on Indian Partition novels in English, see Ananya Jahanara Kabir, 'Handcuffed to History: Partition and the Indian Novel in English', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, pp. 119-32) and *Partition's Post-Amnesias: 1947, 1971 and Modern South Asia* (Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013).

rehabilitation camps or on land left by Muslim families. Relying on Veena Das's anthropological work on the trauma of Partition in Punjabi families living in Delhi, Dasgupta argues that the general sense of suspicion and toxic masculinity permeating the city derives from the emasculating violence of uprooting, of losing one's land and settling in a foreign place.<sup>43</sup> Several wealthy businessmen he interviewed are indeed descendants of Partition refugees from Punjab and they share stories about the ghosts of exiled Muslim families which still haunt their houses: 'even as they sought to seal themselves off from the past, the evil continues to seep up from the ground [...] Islamic ghosts drifted into their nightmares' (C194). This might explain, in Dasgupta's view, the desire not to preserve the memory of the past or to awaken memories of violence but rather constantly to destroy and rebuild from scratch.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the writer shows the ways in which the accelerated development of the city since the 1990s and its frantic cycle of creation-destruction have prevented all sedimentation and perpetuate the city's sense of impermanence: 'Change was happening at such a stupefying pace that people of every age were cut off even from their recent existence' (C 47). Using a metaphor from the world of construction, he connects the material and cultural overthrow at work when he evokes 'the enormous perforations that have opened up in Delhi's consciousness during this period of transition' (C 26). The latest phase of Delhi's 'stop-go' development is epitomized in the text by the techno-corporate suburb of Gurgaon, which emerges both as an incarnation of global capital and an allegory of Delhi's eruptive condition: 'you don't develop and modify the old, you just build anew, Gurgaon is thoroughly traditional in that respect.'<sup>45</sup> Thus, the most recent transformations of the metropolis are construed as another violent rebirth, another sign of the city's fatal unrest.

This 'stop-start' history has fuelled a mythology of perpetual turbulence, which pervades Delhi's urban culture and literature, notably through Urdu poetry. If the local mythologies unfolded by Mehta in *Maximum City* are mostly derived from Bombay cinema, Dasgupta's narrative of discontinuity is fuelled by a powerful local literary myth, that of Delhi as doomed to perpetual degradation. As Anita Desai writes, 'Old Delhi does not

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<sup>43</sup> Das, *Life and Words*.

<sup>44</sup> For an account of the 'new' architecture of the Punjabi middle class in Delhi, analysed as a break away from the past, see Gautam Bhatia, *Punjabi Baroque* (Delhi: Penguin, 1994).

<sup>45</sup> Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017.

change. It only decays'.<sup>46</sup> Dasgupta turns the erasure of the past into Delhi's distinctive *telos*, as though the city's *genius loci* were reluctant to sedimentation.

This is both the reality and the fantasy of Delhi: the city is always already destroyed [...] Maybe the present book, so apparently taken up with contemporary things, merely reproduces this ancient literary mood, for my ultimate experience of this city where nothing endures is also that of being bereft. (C 154)

The melancholy awareness of urban ephemerality and decline is a worldwide literary commonplace, fuelled by a long tradition of urban ruin-gazing.<sup>47</sup> Yet it takes on a specific significance as it is unfolded by writers of Delhi, who have consistently used the trope of twilight to account for the city's tumultuous transformation. The metaphor can be traced back to the Urdu poetic genre of *shahr ashob* (literally, the lament for the city), the mourning of the city's demise. A genre borrowed from Turkish and Persian cultures, it developed in India in the twelfth century but bloomed again during the downfall of the Mughal Empire in the early eighteenth century, capturing the tumult of the age and expressing the poet's painful attachment to his falling city.<sup>48</sup> These famous verses by Mir Taqi Mir, one of the most famous representatives of the genre, express the poet's entanglement of love and desperation:

There was a city, famed throughout the world,  
Where dwelt the chosen spirits of the age:  
Delhi its name, fairest among the fair.  
Fate looted it and laid it desolate,  
And to that ravaged city I belong.<sup>49</sup>

This melancholy mood, also expressed in Mirza Ghalib's poetry, pervades most of the literature about Delhi including twentieth-century Anglophone texts, such as Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), a novel of loss relating the effects of colonialism and imperialism on Indian Muslims in Delhi in the nineteenth century, and, four decades later, Anita Desai's novels *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *In Custody* (1984), which all read as laments of the

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<sup>46</sup> Desai, *Clear Light of Day*, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> See Giovanni Macchia, *Paris en ruines* (1985), trans. by Paul Bédarida (Paris: Flammarion, 1988); Jean Starobinski, 'La Mélancolie dans les ruines', in *L'Invention de la Liberté 1700-1789* (Genève: Skira, 1964), pp. 179-181; *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>48</sup> See Carla R. Pietevitch, 'Poetry of the Declining Mughal: the Shahr Ashob', *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 25.1 (1990), 99-110; Fritz Lehmann, 'Urdu Literature and Mughal Decline', in *Mahfil*, VI.2/3 (1970), 125-131; Eve Tignol, 'Nostalgia and the City: Urdu Shahrashob Poetry in the Aftermath of 1857', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 27.4 (2017), 559-573.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Muslims of the Indian City: From Centrality to Marginality', in *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalisation*, ed. by Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 16. See also Intazar Husain, *Once There Was a City Named Delhi*, trans. by Ghazala Jami and Faiz Ullah (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2017).



decline of the courtly Urdu culture in Delhi, journeying through the city's Mughal tombs, mosques, fortresses and gardens.<sup>50</sup> The latter revolves around the disintegrating life of Nur, an Old Delhi Urdu poet, and is suffused with the author's mourning of a bygone multicultural Delhi that she tries to recreate in the English language.<sup>51</sup> Thirty years later, one cannot narrate life in Delhi in the same way. Yet, as much as Dasgupta claims to distance himself from what he calls 'post-Mughal nostalgia', his narrative builds on this twilight mood, as he partly explains the current discontent and melting down permeating the city through its self-destructive fate.<sup>52</sup> He cannot help mourning the loss of the city's spirit and even romanticises the quieter Delhi of the 1990s, with its slower rhythm and its austere frugality derived from the ethos of Partition refugees: 'that bygone Delhi also shut down early. It has become difficult to remember, because the years after my arrival were occupied with the building of a glittering archipelago of cafés, restaurants, bars and clubs' (C 38).<sup>53</sup>

Arundhati Roy's geography of Delhi in *The Ministry* is also rooted in the city's multi-layered history and its myths of lost grandeur, embodied by Anjum's family, by the ancestral albeit waning hijra community, and by the small community of outcasts who turn a ruined graveyard into a home.<sup>54</sup> Roy claims that she conceived the novel as a tribute to Shahjahanabad (the name given to the city by its founder, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan).<sup>55</sup> What is striking, however, is that the novel always intertwines melancholy and dissent, as Roy's elegiac writing of the capital is pervaded by her extreme lucidity as to the politics of erasure at work in the city, thus twisting the idea of a fatal *genius loci*, as shown by the description of the ancient city's metamorphosis (M 96).

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<sup>50</sup> Percival Spear uses the very same trope in his study of the decay of Mughal emperors in the context of the rise of the East India Company and of regional states, entitled *Twilight of the Mughals* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1973).

<sup>51</sup> See Vanessa Guignery and Alexis Tadié, 'In Custody and Beyond: A Conversation with Anita Desai', *Études Anglaises*, 62.3 (2009), 370-371. More recent examples of this melancholy mood can be found in Manju Kapur, *Home* (London: Faber, 2006); Ravi Dayal, 'A Kayastha's View of Delhi', in *Celebrating Delhi*, ed. by Maya Dayal (Delhi: Penguin, 2010), pp. 177-182; *Delhi Improbable: Writings on Delhi*, ed. by Khushwant Singh (Delhi: Penguin, 2011); Malvika Singh, *Perpetual City: A Short Biography of Delhi* (Delhi: Aleph, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Nakul Krishna identifies a similar *shar-ashob* mood in most of recent literature on Indian cities, and examines the class component of these mournful accounts. The example of Roy, however, challenges this view. Nakul Krishna, 'New Literature on India's Cities is a Variation on the Old Literature of Lament', *Caravan*, 1 June 2014, <<https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-essays/how-can-i-describe-desolation>> [accessed 14 April 2021].

<sup>54</sup> The last two examples will be fully explored in Chapter 6.

<sup>55</sup> Arundhati Roy, Interview with Marie Richeux, 'Par Les Temps Qui Courent', *France Culture*, audio recording, 18 January 2018, <<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/par-les-temps-qui-courent/arundhati-roy>> [accessed 12 May 2021].

Anjum's father, Mulaqat Ali, appears as an embodiment of the bygone glory of the city: a doctor of herbal medicine and lover of Urdu and Persian poetry, he claims to have a noble genealogy relating him to the Mongol Emperor Changez Khan. Dwelling in a dying world, bearing the 'faded grace of a nobleman' (M 15) and regularly quoting Mir Taqi Mir's poetry, but not indulging in nostalgia (M 14), Mulaqat Ali's everyday practice of Urdu seems to plunge him in a cyclical temporality in which nothing new can happen: 'It [Urdu poetry] infused everything with a subtle sense of stagnancy, a sense that everything that happened had happened before. That it had already been written, sung, commented upon and entered into history's inventory. That nothing new was possible' (M 16). Urdu is associated with a vanishing local culture, pointing to its marginalisation in India since the Independence as well as to the devastating effects of global capitalism on the vernacular, suggested by the disappearance of the traditional medicine drink Mulaqat Ali sells: 'but eventually the Elixir of the Soul that had survived wars and the bloody birth of three new countries, was, like most things in the world, trumped by Coca-Cola' (M 13).<sup>56</sup> This time it is not the anti-Muslim bias of national politics which is held responsible for the demise of a local drink but the global penetration of American consumption culture. Several passages point to the complicity of the English language with this globalized culture and to the asymmetry between the two languages, but also to Mulaqat Ali's fierce yet discreet resistance to the erasure of his language and culture:

Jis sar ko ghurur aaj hai yaan taj-vari ka  
 Kal uss pe yahin shor hai phir nauhagari ka  
 The head which today proudly flaunts a crown  
 Will tomorrow, right here, in lamentation drown. (M 15)

In line with the main melancholy mood of the *shahr ashob*, this couplet by Mir prophesies the downfall of the powerful. Mulaqat Ali uses it as an oblique weapon against the representatives of the new philistine ruling classes, Indian 'tourists' who visit him to get a flavour of 'authentic' Shahjahanabad, gesturing to the combined ghettoization and fetishization of Old Delhi.

Most of his visitors, brash emissaries of a new ruling class, barely aware of their own youthful hubris, did not completely grasp the layered meaning of the couplet they had been offered, like a snack to be washed down by a thimble-sized cup of a thick, sweet tea. They understood of course that it was a dirge for a fallen empire [...]. What escaped

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<sup>56</sup> On the Hindi-Urdu language divide, the sanskritisation of the Hindi language, and the ghettoization of Urdu in post-Independence India, see Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*; Mufti, *Forget English!*; Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Urdu in India in the twenty-first Century: A Historian's Perspective', *Social Scientist*, 31.5/6 (2003), 29-37.

them was that the couplet was a sly snack, a perfidious samosa, a warning wrapped in mourning, being offered with faux humility by an erudite man who had absolute faith in his listeners' ignorance of Urdu, a language which, like most of those who spoke it, was gradually being ghettoized. (M 15)<sup>57</sup>

The 'layered meaning of the couplet' is lost on most of the Anglophone readers of the novel too, who can only access it in translation and are not so different from these derided Indian tourists. Drawing on Graham Huggan's argument on strategic exoticism, we may read the irony of the passage as yet another sign of Roy's awareness of the inclusion of her novel in a global cultural system which weakens the vernacular, all the more as she works with clichéd images of food consumption and poison (seemingly derived from fables) that are usually associated with India or 'the East' in general.<sup>58</sup> The double-edged sly quality of the verse is enhanced by the hissing sounds and internal rhymes ('sly snack, a perfidious samosa, a warning wrapped in morning'), pointing to the character's surreptitious resistance against a slightly contemptuous yet ignorant elite. At odds with the association of Urdu with the secluded realm of poetry and courtly life, Roy stresses the everyday pragmatic use of Urdu. Thus Anjum's father also prescribes poetry as a cure to his patients, suggesting the practical beneficial use of poetry: 'he could produce a couplet from his formidable repertoire that was eerily apt for every illness, every occasion, every mood and every delicate alteration in the political climate' (M 15).<sup>59</sup>

Roy thus draws on the urban myths that surround Delhi as a broken city doomed to destruction, whose mixed cultures and languages are gradually vanishing. Yet she also reworks this twilight spirit in order to thwart attempts at erasing or fetishizing the Urdu culture of the city. Far from being represented as a vestige from a bygone era, Urdu plays a crucial part in the characters' everyday life. More than 'post-Mughal nostalgia', Roy's writing is suffused with the trauma of violence haunting the city that Dasgupta analyses in his essay. What differentiates their work from one another is perhaps fiction's ability to

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<sup>57</sup> Roy glosses this passage: 'He is confident that his young guests – who belong to the generation of "new" Hindi – will not grasp its true meaning. He knows that the straitened material circumstances mirror the straitened vocabulary of his visitors'. She also recalls that the new generation's estrangement from Urdu stems from the gradual separation of Hindi from Urdu and the purge of Hindi from its Persian-Urdu lexicon. ('In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities?', in *Azadi*, p. 43).

<sup>58</sup> See Huggan, p. 72.

<sup>59</sup> Aamir Mufti points to the common and mistaken association of Urdu in India with a declining social order, which 'reveals in fact a haze of misperceptions about the social realities of Urdu in the country'. He argues that Desai reflects the continuum between Hindi and Urdu literary and cultural registers and uses Urdu in *In Custody* to 'reflect on the fate of vernacular languages as such in the transition to the globalized economic, social, and cultural forms that are visible only in incipient or chrysalis form in the novel' so that the twilight of Urdu culture is associated with the consumptive nature of globalization rather than with a local tendency to decay (Mufti, p. 170).

penetrate the characters' psyche more deeply than any ethnographic interview, as well as Roy's capacity to engulf the reader in the meanderings of individual stories and to zoom in on infinitesimal details in order to delineate the multi-layered history of the city. Dasgupta immerses himself in the urban mythologies surrounding Delhi and he explores the psychological turmoil resulting from the city's fractured history, yet his subjects' words, as faithfully rendered as they are, serve a clear line of argumentation, contrary to what fiction requires. However, his overarching argument is not as clear-cut as it seems, since the 'tumult of creation and destruction' (C 37) wreaking havoc on Delhi is also considered as a symptom of the spirit of capitalism rather than the unique spirit of the place. Dasgupta's ambivalent use of geological images clearly demonstrates the interplay between distinct scales of conception and representation of the city, locating his narrative of Delhi both in a local and a global context, in a *longue durée* history of the city and in a contemporary global moment.

### 3. Excess as Strategic Exoticism?

The landscapes of devastation and the emphasis on conflicts explored in the first two chapters can thus be read as reconfigurations of local urban mythologies. Although they have distinct histories, both Delhi and Mumbai seem defined by restlessness and a form of dissatisfaction with their past, perpetually jettisoning it to create anew. How are these reinterpretations of local myths which place Mumbai and Delhi under the sign of excess, upheaval, and constant collisions, situated in the history of cultural representations of Indian cities? Considering the global readership of these texts, does the aesthetic of shock evidence a 're-orientalist' imaginary, pandering to the tastes of a metropolitan audience for spectacular difference? Or does this rhetoric of otherness partake of a reflexive rehearsing of orientalist tropes?<sup>60</sup> This emphasis on exceptionalism can indeed be interpreted through the lens of Graham Huggan's notion of strategic exoticism, re-tooled as *dystopic exoticism*.

Huggan defines 'strategic exoticism' as 'the means by which postcolonial writers/thinkers, working from within exoticist codes of representation, either manage to subvert those codes [...], or succeed in redeploying them for the purposes of uncovering

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<sup>60</sup> These four writers are all published internationally, by publishers having offices in London, New York and Delhi (or Gurgaon), such as Penguin, Bloomsbury, and HarperCollins. On re-orientalism, see Dwivedi and Lau. On colonial representations of Indian cities, see Pramod Nayar's essay, which examines the imbrication of colonial ideology and *sublime* aesthetics in his analysis of eighteenth-century English travelogues, which build a topography of fascination and horror where differences between cities are ignored ('The imperial sublime', *English Writing and India*, pp. 63-93).

differential relations of power'.<sup>61</sup> In the context of the emergence of India as a marketable margin in the 1980s, it has been a way for postcolonial writers to repoliticise the exotic and to critique the process through which cultural difference is commodified and domesticated in the global literary market (a process he refers to as the 'postcolonial exotic'). Huggan uses the example of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy, who 'ironically rehears[e] a continuing history of imperialist perceptions of an "othered" India' in order to point to and unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness.<sup>62</sup>

Rushdie's metaphor of India as a multitude to be swallowed in *Midnight's Children*, for instance, ironically points to India as an object of consumption and draws attention to his own novel as an exotic intellectual commodity, thereby undermining the 'postcolonial exotic' from within.<sup>63</sup> The strategic regime of proliferation and excess of his novel also subverts his assigned position as a cultural commentator and salesman. Can we say of *Maximum City*, or *Capital*, as some have said of Roy's *The God of Small Things*, that they 'recycl[e] intoxicating myths of a fabulous but dangerous Orient to an eager Western readership already attuned to the exotic formulae of Indian fiction'?<sup>64</sup> As we saw in the introduction and Chapter 2, the allegory of the multitude is revisited by Mehta and Roy, and the metaphor of swallowing India is echoed by that of the hunger for the city in Mehta's reportage, which portrays Mumbai as a city of sensorial pleasure, including culinary delight ('Bombay is the vadapav eaters' city' (MC 95)), ultimately suggesting that it is an object to be consumed. The appetite for the city that transpires in the book is noted by Amit Chaudhuri, who refers to the addictive power of the city on people and to the 'obscure set of motives and compulsions which drives people towards the hub of Bombay [...], something corrosive but indispensable to the addict'.<sup>65</sup>

Nonetheless, the crowds and the sensorial excess of Indian cities are represented as symptoms of disaster rather than objects of fascination in the texts of my corpus. *Maximum*

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<sup>61</sup> Huggan, p. 32.

<sup>62</sup> Huggan details: 'India as available spectacle; as alternating object of horror and fascination; as world of magic, mysteries and wonders; as site of colonial nostalgia; as forbidden space of cross-cultural desire; as romantic tourist goal; and so on' (Ibid., p. 81). Pablo Mukherjee actually extends and refines Huggan's concept through the notion of 'cultivated exhibitionism', considering excess and the exhibition of otherness as what constitutes the literariness of these texts and what prevents them from being wholly assimilated into the cultural logic of neo-colonial global market (Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*, p. 11).

<sup>63</sup> 'To know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me.' (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, p. 9).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>65</sup> Chaudhuri, 'The View from Malabar Hill', in *Clearing a Space*, p. 184. Sampurna Chattarji also conveys the discourse of the city as an addiction in her story 'An Ancient Memory of Pillage' (DL 184) and enhances the close association of it with food in 'Hungry' (DL 88-91).

*City* opens on the frightening overview of a city bursting at the seams (MC 3) and insists on the infrastructural failure of the city (MC 24-25), echoing the crumbling buildings and flyovers in Dasgupta's *Capital* and Roy's emphasis on the plunder and destruction entailed by urban development. More broadly speaking, the intensity and the shock with which Indian cities are identified, heightened by the rewriting of local myths, convey a sense of destructive tumult rather than of creative eruption — even though Mehta is fascinated with urban hubbub. The term *dystopic exoticism*, which emphasizes the calamity associated with the city's otherness, could thus be an apt description of these urban narratives.<sup>66</sup> It implies that the overall stress on destruction in post-1991 urban narratives displaces the 'marketing' of margins towards a horror show, self-reflexively subverting the orientalist tropes of chaotic Indian cities.

Jerry Pinto, who defines *Maximum City* as a fantasy, evokes the temptation for Indian writers in English, including himself, to stage dramas of the city for the observer, exacerbating its features to get hold of the foreign readers' attention.

We feel perhaps the need to play Bombay for the outsider [...]. But when you talk of your city, you turn to le Grand Guignol as a model. When we talk of our city to other people, we throw up the specific horrors of the city against the natural responses of our battle-scarred selves [...]. We relish the way our audience's eyes widen, how they shudder, but we know that most of our lives are spent in an ordinary manner, with an ordinary amount of horror and an ordinary amount of joy.<sup>67</sup>

Pinto examines the self-conscious magnifying of the city's horrors, which traps the reader into complicity with the rhetoric of alterity. His interpretation strengthens the argument of Mehta's strategic dramatization of Mumbai's chaotic intensity and restlessness in his reportage, which points to his own complicit and critical position *vis à vis* the commodification of otherness in the global literary market. Mehta also subverts his role as a cultural authority through his insistence on the mythical dimension of the city he explores, and through the exhibition of his ambivalent position as a middle-class Anglophone spectator and of his contradictory documenting and exaggerating impulses.

*Maximum City* is one example among others of the dramatization of urban dystopic alterity. As we will see in the next section, the idea of dystopic exoticism is complicated by the global purview of these narratives which undermines the exceptionality of Indian cities.

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<sup>66</sup> Gyan Prakash uses the phrase 'noir urbanism' to refer to the dystopic visual representation of modern cities (see Prakash, *Noir Urbanisms*), yet the term 'noir' connects the notion with a specific genre and does not convey the alterity implied by exoticism.

<sup>67</sup> Jerry Pinto, E-mail to the author, 15 April 2018.

In fact, Mehta's emphasis on the excess of Mumbai also stems from his conception of the urban at large, which he delineates in a piece about 'booming cities' and exclusion: 'Metropolitan excitement, a chaotic sense of possibility, flouting of zoning codes, shops spilling out into the sidewalk, a frisson of danger: all these things collectively make up what distinguishes a city from a suburb: hubbub'.<sup>68</sup> His writing shows concern for the blatant inequalities plaguing these cities, but also an open excitement over urban risk and the conflation of extremes, which echoes his thrill when he frays with gangsters and corrupt policemen in Mumbai. The perpetual movement, struggle and transgression that fuel the 'city by the sea' thus make it a paradigmatic city rather than an exception. Mehta's pieces on 'wild and explosive' Trinidad and Tobago and on Rio de Janeiro's favelas also reveal how his interest in urban social margins, informal networks and illegality exceeds the boundaries of Mumbai.<sup>69</sup> If this list of cities points to semi-peripheries of the world-system, Mehta also evokes New York immigrants in a similar way, indicating perhaps that the unevenness of urban development is palpable on various scales, including within one city, in particular New York.<sup>70</sup>

Therefore, if urban extremity and unevenness do not distinguish Mumbai from other cities of the world, they are not the object of a clear political diagnosis either. *Maximum City* sometimes verges on the critical reformist narrative, with policy recommendations on the subject of sanitation or rent legislation for instance.<sup>71</sup> Yet the overall tone is that of exhilaration with the chaos of the metropolis and of enthusiasm in front of the free play of individual energies at work in the city. The city is thus perceived through the prism of the pleasure of extremities more than that of oppositional politics, and the urban struggle is seen as the 'life-affirming pursuit of the Golden Songbird' (MC 451), overshadowing the structural determinations which rig the competition from the start. This prism distinguishes Mehta's writing from that of Roy's or Dasgupta's, whose critical agendas are clearly expressed. Therefore, if all these texts are saturated with local myths, enabling them to draw

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<sup>68</sup> Suketu Mehta, 'Beyond the Maximum: Cities May Be Booming, But Who's Invited to the Party?', *Guardian*, 30 November 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/30/beyond-maximum-cities-booming-party-ny-rio-mumbai>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

<sup>69</sup> Suketu Mehta, 'The Wild and Explosive TnT', *CondéNast Traveller*, 3 August 2015, <<https://www.cntraveller.in/story/wild-and-explosive-tnt/>> [accessed 17 March 2021]; 'In the Violent Favelas of Brazil', *New York Review of Books*, 15 August 2013, <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/08/15/violent-favelas-brazil/>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

<sup>70</sup> See WReC's statement that 'London itself, of course, is among the more radically unevenly developed cities in the world' (p. 12).

<sup>71</sup> See Mehta's rant about the 1947 Rent Act: 'the reason why Bombay is choking is the Rent Act. It hits the newcomer, the young and the poor [...]. It is the most extreme vision of a Newcomers' Tax. But it doesn't keep the newcomers out; it merely condemns them to live squalidly' (MC 116).

attention to the singularity of those cities, this local analytical scale is combined with a global perspective, which often holds strong critical value.

## II. Widening the Scope: Global Stories of Shock

But the book I began to write was only in part a book about Delhi. It was just as much a book about the global system itself. I did not feel that the scenes I witnessed around me were of concern only to this place. Nor did I feel that they were scenes of a 'primitive' part of the system, which was struggling to 'catch up' with the advanced West. They felt, rather, to be hypermodern scenes which were replicated, with some variations, elsewhere on the rockface of contemporary global capitalism. (C 45)

This is how Dasgupta widens the scope of his narrative of urban eruption. The sense of impermanence and perpetual destruction which pervade the city might not only stem from its local history and spirit but also from the creative destruction and 'time-space compression' inherent to late capitalism.<sup>72</sup> As grounded as they are in local stories, the apocalyptic imagery and the focus on conflict, common to Dasgupta, Jha, and Roy, thus also draw upon global narratives of capitalist modernisation. Nonetheless, the extension of the narrative scope does not entail a teleological vision, which implies a linear historical trajectory (or 'trajectoirism'), but actually serves to decentre the Eurocentric understanding of capitalist modernisation. This endeavour can be discussed through different lenses, first as a form of dystopic futurism, making of Indian cities heralds of a disquieting global future, second as a representation of the developmental crises inherent to capitalism, exacerbated in the semi-peripheries of the world-system.

### 1. Back to the Future? Critical Urban Dystopias

The urban writings in which the epic mode dominates can be considered as futuristic narratives. Dasgupta's argument about Delhi as a symptom of a worldwide phenomenon,

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<sup>72</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 260. Harvey coined the term 'time-space compression' to refer to the new experience of space and time (namely, the contraction of distances) bound up with the change in cultural and economic practices that occurred in the 1970s, notably the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation. This experience, accompanied by a sense of disorientation, is understood as a new manifestation of the basic principles of capitalistic accumulation.



resonating with Jha's and Roy's fictions, is in fact two-fold: he starts with debunking the 'regulating catch-up fiction of modernisation', which considers cities of the global South as backward spaces struggling to enter capitalist modernity, before flipping the global modernisation narrative to suggest that the South is actually the future of the North.<sup>73</sup>

The endeavour to challenge the alleged backwardness of cities of the global South is embedded in a larger historiographic discussion about the 'belatedness' of postcolonial societies, which would be in the 'waiting room of history', a Eurocentric conception of history that Dipesh Chakrabarty counters in *Provincializing Europe*, thereby also dismantling the conceptual coherence of the 'West'.<sup>74</sup> In *Ordinary Cities*, Jennifer Robinson extends this provincializing enterprise to the field of urban studies through the questioning of urban models conceived in and by the West, notably that of the 'global city', underpinned by a Eurocentric notion of modernity, reinforced both by imperial and developmentalist practices and discourses.<sup>75</sup> Dasgupta's dismissal of Delhi's belatedness may be read in the light of Robinson's attempts at deconstructing the West's self-identification with the modern, pitted against an elsewhere, fundamentally 'other' and backward.<sup>76</sup> Referring to the Chicago School (notably Robert E. Park and Louis Wirth), Robinson writes that their theories of the urban were embedded in colonial discourses, erecting 'a fantasy about the cities they knew as being creative, dynamic, modern places. This fantasy about the nature of urban experiences in the West persists on the basis of designating other places as "not modern"'.<sup>77</sup> This discourse on modernity has also fuelled conventional developmentalist narratives, ascribing innovation to cities in wealthy countries while poorer countries (former colonies or areas outside of Western culture) are supposed to *emerge* or *develop*, i.e. to mimic 'the history already performed by the West.'<sup>78</sup> Robinson thus challenges the enduring dichotomy between modern and belatedly emerging cities, arguing that we need to 'postcolonialise' urban studies in order to open up the cultural imagination of cities. She

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<sup>73</sup> Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Introduction', in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Andreas Huyssen condenses Robinson's argument about the global city as follows: 'the conceit of the global city has itself become a way of reasserting Western notions of advanced modernity and urban developmentalism which ignores many vital aspects of urban life that fall outside its purview' (*Other Worlds, Other Cities*, p. 11).

<sup>76</sup> See also King, *Spaces of Global Cultures*. For a similar approach focused on normative and prescriptive models of the city as they are applied to India, see Rao, 'Slum as Theory'.

<sup>77</sup> Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Timothy Mitchell, 'The Stage of Modernity', in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. by Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 1, quoted in Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, p. 77. The dangers and disastrous consequences of a western-based developmentalist model have also been highlighted by Rob Nixon, who closely analyses the case of post-independence India (see Nixon, *Slow Violence*).

advocates a form of urban comparativism that would eschew both the trap of incommensurability (the segmentation of cities into different categories) and that of universalism (presuming the universal applicability of a theoretical account of city life).<sup>79</sup>

One of the strategies Rana Dasgupta adopts to dismiss the stagist narrative of modernisation is the use of shared popular mythologies, such as that of the early-twentieth-century development of New York. Dasgupta uses Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola's films, portraying the taming of irrational forces by a central urban authority, to show that we tend to project the canonical trajectory of New York onto cities of the global South, expecting a 'rationalisation' of their eruptive energy, despite their geographical-historical specificities.<sup>80</sup> He even dramatizes this catch-up fiction: '*We were just like them, goes the logic, before we became like us. And – since modernity moves inexorably, inevitably in one well-known direction – they will become like us too*' (C 435). The italicized segments give voice to a trajectoirist discourse which is simultaneously undermined by the narrator's antiphrastic intervention. The use of the first-person pronoun suggests an imagined Western or global readership and the intention to unsettle their beliefs.

Yet Dasgupta goes further than merely objecting to Delhi's peripheral belatedness. More than an ordinary city, Delhi appears as a prophetic sign of the disquieting future towards which all cities are converging: 'To look at contemporary Delhi is to look at the symptoms of the global twenty-first century in their most glaring and advanced form. We understand here [...] what a strange and disquieting reality it is, this one we are all heading towards' (C 439). This passage echoes Mehta's prophetic statement about Mumbai as 'the future of urban civilization on the planet' (MC 3). Dasgupta turns the modernization narrative over and argues that 'we' will become like 'them'. The global relevance of Indian cities can be read here as predicting the future, that of a world converging towards the South, which has been through the steps of capitalist development in an accelerated way, overtaking the North. The tumultuous South moves from the periphery to the centre of modernisation and is the place where the dark core of capitalism is starkly revealed.

As we saw in Chapter 1, Jha's and Dasgupta's depictions of Delhi and Gurgaon illustrate the prophetic aspect of Indian cities as hypertrophic delirious spaces generated by the global capitalist system. Dasgupta first describes Gurgaon as a futuristic space directly

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<sup>79</sup> See Jennifer Robinson, 'Thinking Cities Through Elsewhere: Comparative Tactics for a More Global Urban Studies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 40.1 (2016), 3-29.

<sup>80</sup> Martin Scorsese's urban cinema is also a ubiquitous reference in Siddharth Chowdhury's fiction, which superimposes Scorsese's New York onto Patna (*Diksha at St Martin's*) or Delhi (*Day Scholar*). See Chapters 4 and 5.

coming out of a fictional universe, and its ‘glinting skyscrapers rising improbably from the dust’ (C 634) mirror Raj Kamal Jha’s description of the new city’s spectacular breaking out of the earth. Dasgupta expresses the sense that he is writing a ‘report from the global future’, and that the accelerated development of Gurgaon, its extreme juxtaposition of wealth and destitution, its standardised architecture and dedication to commerce are somehow indicators of our global urban horizon (C 45). The centrality of projections, potentialities, fantasies in *She Will Build Him a City* is also inextricably linked to the imagination of New City as a space from the future, in which things are yet to be achieved. The businessman’s fantasy of a mechanically-produced standardised city (‘as if all the parts of the city have been bought in a box, from a shop that sells cities’ (SW 64)), discussed in chapter 1, seems directly derived from the architect Rem Koolhaas’ prophetic ‘Generic City’, a homogenized urban model inspired from the neutrality of airports and malls, ‘liberated from the straitjacket of identity’.<sup>81</sup> This is in line with the characterisation of Man, who yearns to erase all traces of his past and identity, and is drawn to standardised places (the Leela hotel, the shopping mall, or the metro), as well as to other ‘global cities’, such as Singapore, Paris and New York.

The Generic City is not the only connection between Dasgupta, Jha and Koolhaas. In fact, what is apparently overlooked by Man’s fantasised capitalist technological utopia in Jha’s novel is the glaring unevenness of New City, the incongruous juxtaposition of economic disparities and the constant urban creative destruction, revealed through other characters’ viewpoints. Dasgupta’s futuristic Delhi and Mehta’s futuristic Mumbai bear strong resemblances with Koolhaas’s account of cities of the global South, taking Lagos as a paradigm for our future:

Rather, we think it possible to argue that Lagos represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity. This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos [...]. The fact that many of the trends of modern, Western cities can be seen in hyperbolic guise in Lagos suggests that to write about the African city is to write about the terminal condition of Chicago, London, or Los Angeles [...]. It is to recognize the modern city and to suggest a paradigm for its future.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Rem Koolhaas, ‘The Generic City’, in *S, M, L, XL* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1995), p. 1250. Fredric Jameson offers an insightful reading of Koolhaas’s urbanism in ‘Future City’, *New Left Review*, 21 (May–June 2003), 65-79.

<sup>82</sup> Rem Koolhaas (Harvard Project on the City) and others, *Mutations* (Bordeaux: Arc en rêve centre d’architecture, 2005), p. 653.

Koolhaas's use of terms such as 'extreme' and 'hyperbolic' resonates with our characterisation of the urban epic as a heightened mode of representation, depicting the Indian city as an extreme version of a city, in terms of form, rhythm, and unevenness. However, Koolhaas seems to embrace Lagos as a chaotic yet viable model for our future. His insistence on the city's vitality and on the inventiveness of its precarious inhabitants, who are able to make do with inhuman living conditions, is critiqued by Robinson as a romanticising of urban poverty which is ultimately 'unconcerned with the question of escape from dystopia'.<sup>83</sup> As we saw in chapter 2, this enthusiasm is shared by other urban scholars and discussed by Ananya Roy as 'subaltern urbanism', a discourse which is underpinned by a liberal belief in the benefits of free competition and individual merit.<sup>84</sup> This optimistic vision of the energetic 'slumdog cities' is closer to Suketu Mehta's celebration of urban 'hubbub' than to Dasgupta's portrayal of Delhi, which takes after other global narratives.

Far from flaunting Delhi's unevenness and tumult as indicators of vitality, Dasgupta's tale of the world catching up with Delhi provides a disastrous scenario of anticipation, in which the unleashed forces of capitalism are almighty. He relies on other urban futurisms, such as Neil Smith's perspective, who envisions the rapidly growing Southern cities as the 'true global cities', forerunners of new urban forms.<sup>85</sup> Smith enlarges the concept of 'global city' beyond Sassen's definition to include cities' participation in the global production of surplus value.

Cities like Sao Paulo and Shanghai, Lagos and Bombay, are likely to challenge the more traditional urban centres, not just in size and density of economic activity – they have already done that – but primarily as leading incubators in the global economy, progenitors of new urban forms, process, and identity.<sup>86</sup>

Smith's critical perspective departs from Koolhaas' fantasy of deregulation to the extent that he focuses on the mechanisms of neoliberal urbanism (such as gentrification) and what he calls the 'revanchist city', entirely dedicated to the production of surplus value. Though *Capital* mostly focuses on the psychological and cultural effects of sudden prosperity, Dasgupta's perspective is also close to Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*, in which the urban crisis in the 'Third World' heralds a new apocalyptic 'slumming' of the world's cities.<sup>87</sup> In

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<sup>83</sup> Jennifer Robinson, 'Living in Dystopia', in *Noir Urbanisms*, p. 225.

<sup>84</sup> Ananya Roy, 'Slumdog Cities'.

<sup>85</sup> Neil Smith, 'New Globalism, New Urbanism, Gentrification as Global Urban strategy', *Antipode*, 34 (2002), 427.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

<sup>87</sup> Dasgupta's narrow focus on the elite has been the object of criticisms, arguing that the book overlooks the other face of capitalism's brutality: the city's disenfranchised workers, simultaneously produced by global

fact, *Capital* may be read as the twin book of *Planet of Slums*, insofar as the extreme of wealth explored by Dasgupta is inextricably linked to the extreme of destitution in global cities examined by Davis. As part of his global panorama, Davis analyses the recent mutations of the Indian economy and urbanisation, underlining the lopsided growth of Indian cities or ‘perverse urban boom’ hidden behind the celebration of India’s success story.<sup>88</sup> In his view, the 1991 reforms led to an urbanisation without growth because it was decoupled from industrialisation and thus from employment: ‘as a result, rapid urban growth in the context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation and state retrenchment has been an inevitable recipe for mass production of slums’.<sup>89</sup> Davis’s critique of the ‘myth of informality’, the ‘semi-utopian view of the informal sector’ in cities of the global South, based on the belief in self-help, chimes with that of Ananya Roy.<sup>90</sup>

If the informal sector, then, is not the brave new world envisioned by its neoliberal enthusiasts, it is most certainly a living museum of human exploitation. There is nothing in the catalogue of Victorian misery, as narrated by Dickens, Zola, or Gorky, that doesn’t exist somewhere in a Third World city today.<sup>91</sup>

Davis’s excessive rhetoric echoes that of Dasgupta and Roy, as shown by the opening of his essay:

Sometime in the next year or two, a woman will give birth in the Lagos slum of Ajegunle, a young man will flee his village in West Java for the bright lights of Jakarta, or a farmer will move his impoverished family into one of Lima’s innumerable *pueblos jovenes*. The exact event is unimportant and it will pass entirely unnoticed. Nonetheless it will constitute a watershed in human history, comparable to the Neolithic or Industrial revolutions. For the first time the urban population of the earth will outnumber the rural [...]. The scale and velocity of Third World urbanization, moreover, utterly dwarfs that of Victorian Europe. London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1800, but Dhaka, Kinshasa and Lagos today are each approximately *forty* times larger than they were in 1950.<sup>92</sup>

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capitalism and excluded from its benefits. One may argue that documenting the wealthy is also a way of renewing our vision of the effects of global capitalism in the cities of the South, usually circumscribed to urban poverty.

<sup>88</sup> Davis, *Planet of Slums*, p. 14. Connections with Arundhati Roy’s vision of the destructive mechanisms of global capitalism are also blatant. Roy praised *Planet of Slums* and quotes Davis’s *Late Victorian Holocausts* (London: Verso, 2000) in her lecture ‘Listening to Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial and Celebration’ (*Listening to Grasshoppers*, p. 154).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186. See Ravi Sundaram’s comparison of Koolhaas and Davis’s view on informality: ‘For Davis informality marks a morbid negation of any urban vision of collectivist solidarity, while for Koolhaas informality is life itself, with an organic rhythm, emerging from the bowels of the post-colonial city’ (‘Imaging Urban Breakdown’, in *Noir Urbanisms*, p. 244).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2. See the section titles of his work: ‘the Deluge’, ‘Broken promises and stolen dreams’, ‘Back to Dickens’ (*Ibid.*, pp. 55, 61, 11).

The interplay between the three individual events as tiny separate spots on the globe and their contrasting global significance mirrors the scalar variation used by Dasgupta, Roy and Jha to convey the intrinsic connection between the local and the global and the ungraspable totality of the transformations at work in Indian cities.<sup>93</sup> The shift from the close-up to the bird's-eye view of the planet gives a sense of the radical mutations to come. Using a scalar metaphor, the end of the passage depicts contemporary urbanisation as a gigantic phenomenon that 'dwarfs' previous examples of rapid urban growth. The comparisons across time only heighten the unprecedented nature of the event and resonate both with Mehta's use of figures to show Mumbai's exceptionality and with Dasgupta's and Roy's rhetoric of shock to account for the mutations of India. Davis delineates a dismal futuristic panorama of the slum-cities of the future, his dualistic language drawing a sharp contrast between the dystopia to come and a utopian dream harking back to modernist visions of cities as sites of progress:

Thus, the cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, draw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring towards heaven, much of the twenty-first century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay.<sup>94</sup>

Reading contemporary Indian writing invites to mitigate the argument of a general slumming of cities: what these fictional and nonfictional texts reveal is how, under the current global capitalist formation, soaring cities of glass and steel (embodying the production of surplus value rather than the elevation of all the citizens) coexist with and depend on the cities of plastic, brick and scrap wood. Jha's mapping of New City encompasses both the shining towers, the adjacent slums, and the middle-class houses, showing how unevenness is intrinsically produced by global capitalist development.

Ravi Sundaram strongly criticises Mike Davis's 'doomsday narrative' which 'recalls Victorian reformers' deployment of shock exposé and horror to focus on congestion, disease, and poverty in mid-nineteenth-century cities' and which in his view cannot account for the recent mutations of Indian cities.<sup>95</sup> Focusing on narratives of urban breakdown in 1990s

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<sup>93</sup> These 'unnoticed' cases of rural exodus may also be read in the light of Nixon's concept of 'slow violence', described in Chapter 1.

<sup>94</sup> Davis, *Planet of Slums*, p. 19.

<sup>95</sup> Sundaram, 'Imaging Urban Breakdown', in *Noir Urbanisms*, pp. 241-242. 'The bipolar vision of the city as a hellish present of technics and erasure reflects the feeling of the old left literary generation aghast at the speed

Delhi, he argues that the 1990s in Delhi were characterized by the sense of the city breaking apart, through a proliferation of images of infrastructural collapse, road accidents, and crimes – three types of images which are thematised by Rana Dasgupta’s essay. Sundaram observes the prominence of this catastrophe scenario, disseminated by the media, films and books, which constitutes for him a new form of urban writing, that of ‘crisis stories’.<sup>96</sup> Joining Dasgupta in his diagnosis of post 1990s-Delhi as an under-imagined city, Sundaram evokes its ‘representational paralysis’ but also associates this *noir urbanism* to a certain melancholy among ‘the old left literary generation’ who grew up in the Nehruvian era and are now at a loss to grasp the meaning of these transformations, mainly defined by the proliferation of images, the prominence of informality, and the advent of a ‘media city’.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, Jennifer Robinson acknowledges Davis’s and Smith’s opening up of the conception of the urban beyond ethnocentric views and salutes their factoring in of perspectives from the South. Yet she sees both optimistic and pessimistic futuristic views of cities of the global South as flawed: reversing the time-chart of urban theory and picturing the South as a living dystopia partake of another universalist narrative at odds with her case for ‘ordinary cities’.<sup>98</sup> The past-future dialectic developed by Davis, collapsing Victorian and contemporary times, is precisely dismissed by Robinson, who considers Davis’s dystopian view of poorer cities as another form of universalism ‘which foreclose[s] on the very future this critique wants to provoke’.<sup>99</sup> She claims that Neil Smith, Rem Koolhaas and Mike Davis draw on the same stereotypes as the ones charted by the long line of urban visionaries with reformist ambitions often tied to fantasies of danger and moral disorder. They keep ‘third world cities’ separate from the others and this segmentation mitigates the transformative potential of these dystopic narratives. For her, Davis’s rhetorical excess precludes the imagining of alternatives: ‘the processes at work in shaping urban poverty seem extreme, extraordinary, and, ultimately, in this dystopic view, unmovable’.<sup>100</sup>

The tactic of using stereotypical representations of the present experiences of some cities as indicators of dystopian urban futures can severely limit political visions of the

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and turmoil of the 1990s. There is a sense of the 1990s as a post-colonial Fall, with warping of space, desires, and an endless present.’ (Ibid., p. 254).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 255.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>98</sup> ‘Certainly in the new dystopic urbanism the time chart of urban theory is flipped from setting urban experiences in places like Africa and South America into the West’s past [...]. Instead, cities in poorer places now commonly configure anxieties about the future of urbanization and urban living everywhere. Ironically, then, the “lack” of development is transfigured from a marker of backwardness into a vital indicator of the futures that cities everywhere might face.’ (Robinson, ‘Living in Dystopia’, in *Noir Urbanisms*, p. 222).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 224.

future in these places and undermine efforts to find imaginative strategies for effective invention.’<sup>101</sup>

In her view, these ‘concrete dystopias’, which conceive urban crisis as the future, restrict our imagining of the urban and crushes all utopian hopes.<sup>102</sup>

Samanth Subramaniam also observes a paradox in Dasgupta’s narrative: while the author refuses to project the trajectory of the global South onto that of the North in the name of historical and cultural specificities, he also unfolds a universalist narrative of convergence towards the South.<sup>103</sup> Yet I believe this critique stems from a misconception of Dasgupta’s argument in *Capital*, an essay which manages to eschew the double ‘trap of trajectoirism’, like other Indian urban writings, thus derailing Robinson’s argument about dystopic urbanism.<sup>104</sup>

Indeed, if Dasgupta’s, Jha’s and Roy’s texts do bear dystopic qualities, one cannot consider them as ‘anti-utopian’. Their representations of urban space are best construed as concrete ‘critical dystopias’, aiming to puncture the neoliberal utopia of the world-class city of the future while maintaining utopian hope for another future. Against the idea of the paralysing political pessimism of dystopian writing, Tom Moylan’s understanding of critical dystopias highlights the oppositional political potential embedded in the dystopian genre, especially in the literature produced since the turn of the 1980s.<sup>105</sup> Critical dystopia is understood as ‘a critical narrative form that work[s] against the grain of the grim economic, political and cultural climate’, and is distinctive in its contained utopian impulse, conveyed through formal hybridity and narrative openness.<sup>106</sup> The crossing of generic borders by contemporary critical dystopias, underlined by Baccolini and Moylan, invites us to extend

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 230.

<sup>102</sup> She borrows the term from Maria Varsam, who coins this oxymoron to refer to actual historical events that ‘form the *material* basis for the content of dystopian fiction which have *inspired* the writer to warn of the potential for history to repeat itself’ such as slavery, or contemporary forms of violence and oppression (‘*Concrete Dystopia: Slavery and Its Others*’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, ed. by Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 209).

<sup>103</sup> Subramaniam, ‘Glare of a Gilded Age’.

<sup>104</sup> Appadurai, ‘Cosmopolitanism from Below’, in *The Future as Cultural Fact*, p. 223.

<sup>105</sup> Critical dystopia is defined by Lyman T. Sargent as distinctive in its contained utopian hope, conveyed through formal hybridity and narrative openness (See ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, *Utopian Studies*, 5.1 (1994), 1-37). The concept is fleshed out by Tom Moylan in *Scraps of Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000). See also Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, ‘Introduction: Dystopia and Histories’, in *Dark Horizons*, p. 3, 7. For a thorough discussion of the critical power of dystopia and utopia, see Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia, 1994); Raymond Williams, *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, ed. by Andrew Milner (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010); Jean-Paul Engélibert, *Fabuler la fin du monde. La puissance critique des fictions d’apocalypse* (Paris: La Découverte, 2019).

<sup>106</sup> Baccolini and Moylan, p. 3.



the category to novels and essays concerned with contemporary Indian cities: Dasgupta's *Capital*, Roy's *Ministry*, Jha's *She Will Build Him a City*, and, to some extent, Mehta's *Maximum City*, may be read as warnings against 'terrible sociopolitical tendencies that could, if continued, turn our contemporary world into the iron cages portrayed in the real of utopia's underside'.<sup>107</sup>

Envisioning the economic and social turbulence, the growing segregation and pollution at work in Indian cities as signs of a global future, these narratives contribute to the readers' unlearning of the stereotypical utopia of the world-class city. For these writers, decolonising our imaginary of what constitutes a desirable city for the future is a necessary step before thinking of radical alternatives. In the 1990s and 2000s, the dominant narrative they chose to combat through their bleak futuristic geographies is the neoliberal utopian model of the world-class city, which is more and more powerful in India, rather than the colonial discourses of urban catastrophe. The idea that the South is at the forefront of globalization has indeed been used by advocates of global capitalism in India in order to herald Indian cities as forerunners of global futures, dreaming of Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore as leaders of urban developments and icons of 'rising India'. These futuristic urban discourses are part and parcel of the construction of a New India, which is defined as a hyper-technological society as well as a great ancient civilisation.<sup>108</sup> This neoliberal utopia is refracted in Dasgupta's, Jha's and Roy's texts, through ubiquitous triumphant messages printed on shining billboards and in the media (M 97, SW 86), but mostly through the prism of masquerade and simulacrum, these narratives disclosing how dangerously fragile this cover-up of Indian cities is.

The futuristic dimension of these narratives also partakes of the refashioning of the 'imperial prophecy' of the epic genre. Following Sneharika Roy's argument that the postcolonial epic redeploys the prophetic aspect of the epic to disrupt political and epistemological hierarchies, I would argue that these bleak prophecies offered by Dasgupta, Jha, Mehta and Roy, unveil the fissures of this new imperial prophecy of New India, embodied by these dream cities.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the foundational impulse of the epic, delineating an all-encompassing vision for the future of a mutating society, is revisited to puncture the myth of New India. The utopian impulse which defines critical dystopia is carried out through hints at potentialities for alternative futures, such as Roy's small community of

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>108</sup> Kaur and Hansen, 307. See Chapter 1.

<sup>109</sup> See Sneharika Roy, *Postcolonial Epic*.

outcasts settled in an old graveyard, Jha's ephemeral subversion of the commodified city through interlopers' visits to the mall or alternative uses of urban space, or Dasgupta's suggestions of revolutionary energies in Delhi.<sup>110</sup> Yet they remain at the level of potentialities, and these writers' dominant instrument of political critique is the amplification of the unevenness and dividedness of these cities, underpinned by the belief in the shock value of dystopia. Chapter 6 will show that the politics of the ordinary mode lies elsewhere, in the circumventing of divisions and the imaginations of small-scale 'real utopias', constituting another aesthetic strategy to counter the narrative of India's world-class cities.

Probing further into the epic narratives of twenty-first-century Indian cities reveals that restlessness is part and parcel of the capitalist model of urban development. Their futurism does not isolate Indian cities in a secluded realm of disquieting fantasy but is intertwined with an understanding of capitalism as inherently 'delirious'. Delhi or Mumbai are not exceptional or unheard of but can be connected to other cities across time and space which have been through 'uncertainty and agitation' as they were reshaped by capitalist development.<sup>111</sup> Varsam draws on Sargent's foregrounding of defamiliarization as the defining feature of utopia to show how critical dystopia also creates estrangement to renew the readers' perception of the world, thereby eliciting political warning, in keeping with my emphasis on defamiliarization in the epic mode.<sup>112</sup> Indeed, these narratives do not defamiliarize Indian urbanism so much as the capitalist model of urban development at large.<sup>113</sup>

## 2. 'Everlasting Uncertainty and Agitation': Delirious Capitalist Cities

Dasgupta's narrative of urban crisis is also presented as 'the story of the global majority' (C 444). His essay does not set Delhi apart from cities of the North but rather displays it as a glaring representative of the tumultuous urban condition in any capitalist formation. The argument he develops in *Capital* substantiates our analysis of epic urban

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<sup>110</sup> This is merely a sketch of the utopian element of Roy's and Jha's texts, which we will explore further in chapter 6.

<sup>111</sup> Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 38.

<sup>112</sup> 'Applied to dystopian fiction, defamiliarization makes us see the world anew, not as it is but as it could be; it shows the world in sharp focus in order to bring out conditions that exist already but which, as a result of our dulled perception, we can no longer see. In this sense, dystopian fiction acts as our new eyes onto the world, creating clues that we can become aware of if only we "tuned into" the right frequency.' (Varsam, p. 206).

<sup>113</sup> On the rise of postcolonial dystopia in Indian writing in English, see Mrinalini Chakravorty, 'Of Dystopias and Deliriums: The Millennial Novel in India', in *A History of The Indian Novel in English*, pp. 267-281.

writing through the lens of materialist world-literary theory, in particular of Moretti's understanding of modern epics as world-texts, insofar as it locates the upheaval occurring in contemporary Indian cities within the framework of global capitalist modernity, without flattening out local specificities. Widening the scope of his narrative, Dasgupta ultimately eschews the pitfall of stagist discourses as he identifies analogous conjunctures to that of 2000s Delhi across time and space, in the future as well as in the past.

The trajectory of accelerated rise and fall of the Indian capital city is first related to other postcolonial and post-communist cities, which have been abruptly ushered into global capitalism.<sup>114</sup> Dasgupta and other writers of urban tumult powerfully reveal that the perpetual self-destruction at work in Indian cities does not stem from their decline or backwardness, but from their accelerated integration into the global capitalist system after an era of state-controlled economy. Referring to the distress of Indian agricultural workers as a symptom of the ills of neoliberal development, turning rural India into a volatile battleground, he writes: 'The fact that their lives were getting worse was not despite the boom in the Indian economy but because of it' (C 259).

Indeed, Dasgupta argues that capitalism has been tamed in Europe in the twentieth century, its inherent harmful effects mitigated by state intervention, but has returned to its original form in the early twenty-first century, that of a destructive feral force based on accumulation and destruction. Delhi is simply where the mechanisms of capitalism are laid bare and where people are more aware of its irrational cruelty, having been raised in the suspicion of capitalism under Nehru and its successors. If expanding Indian cities appear as spaces where the contradictions of capitalism are exacerbated because of the foreshortened timescale of their modernisation, the writer also connects these mutations with those of Chicago in the 1900s or of London in the 1860s:

I think it is important to look at things like contemporary urban explosions like this not only from the perspective of the local. You can't understand everything about this if you're operating only within an Indian tradition because [...] these are the next instances of processes that have been happening in global capitalism since the eighteenth century or before that even. It is important, if you want to understand what is going on in Delhi today, that you have a sense of what happened in New York and Chicago in the 1900s

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<sup>114</sup> He also mentions Polish readers' response to the essay: 'In fact the book has come out this summer in Polish and many people who read it in Warsaw said that it spoke very much about the processes of Warsaw even though it is tiny in comparison to Delhi but the way in which in the post-Soviet world, new elites have come up, the way in which a very rapid unplanned real estate development has happened, the way in which public infrastructure is being poorly built and planned were things that people recognized in many places.' (Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017). On the affinities between the postcolonial and the post-communist world as refracted in literary works, see, for instance, Neil Lazarus, 'Spectres Haunting: Postcommunism and Postcolonialism', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48 (2012), 117-129.

or what happened in Paris in 1850-60, what happened in London at that same kind of time, this is a huge tradition of thought and work that has already been going on for two centuries and it's important that you're not naive to that history that you are writing within that history [...]. And in that respect, the name 'capital' of course invoked Marx, the whole tradition of writing about modernity. I think that in many ways I conceived that book, when I began that whole project, as a new chapter in the work of people like Marx, even Balzac, Baudelaire and Zola, to understand through human situations and relationships, the forces of modernity which have always been the same in many respects, the forces of production and destruction.<sup>115</sup>

Locating his literary reportage in the wake of Marx, Balzac, Baudelaire and Zola, Dasgupta argues that the conventional impulse to look for explanations about Delhi's current condition in the fall of the Mughal empire and its aftermath conceals aspects of the city that can only be understood as parts of the global disruptive dynamics of capital. He thus draws on local mythologies as well as totalizing narratives of urban capitalist modernity, and, when interviewed, insists on the universal aspects of the transformations he describes in *Capital*, characteristic of a 'singular' yet unequal capitalist modernity. In terms of writerly positioning, his bringing together of these tutelary figures speaks of his own projection as a thinker of capitalism and modernity more than a representative of one literary genre or one national tradition.

One example of his global understanding of urban development is the parallel he draws between the tumultuous growth of London in the 1860s and that of 2000s Delhi, underscoring the extent to which disorder is part and parcel of the capitalist system. This parallel rests on Dostoevsky's observation about London in 1862 ('apparent disorder that is in actuality the highest degree of bourgeois order' (C226)), quoted in Marshall Berman's work, a reference which suggests that the phenomena Dasgupta describes, geographically and historically wide-ranging, emanate from a world-system rather than a local one.<sup>116</sup>

To me, one of the great strengths of Marx, and this is one of the theses of Marshall Berman in his book *All that is Solid Melts into Air*, is that the great writers about modernity are those who have been equally inspired by the horror and the magnificence of the processes of modernity. Marshall Berman's complaint in his book is essentially that today we have writers who generally fall on one or the other side of this: either they're too seduced by the promise of capitalism and they are deliberately blind to its destructiveness or they think that all that happens in capitalism is destruction and

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<sup>115</sup> Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017.

<sup>116</sup> Quoted in Berman, p. 88, pp. 206-211. The reference to Dostoevsky is significant as the Russian writer takes Dickens's London as a model for St Petersburg in *Crime and Punishment*, but stretches it to an extreme point, arguing that he needs to add elements of the fantastic and of madness, to account for the city's 'modernity of underdevelopment', in Berman's terms. Dostoevsky's dreamlike St. Petersburg refracts 'a truncated and warped modernization' (p. 232) that Berman contrasts with that of Marx and Baudelaire's modernism of advanced nations, seconding the argument of the reconfiguration of realism in the semi-peripheries of the capitalist world-system (see Berman, pp. 173-286).

oppression and therefore they cannot really understand why it is so exciting and inspiring to so many people. I wanted to write a book which really grapples with this history of modernity which has that kind of paradox which is there fantastically in Baudelaire's *Poems in prose* where the glitz and the glamour and the possibility and the cosmopolitanism of the post-Haussmann Paris is fully apparent to the poet who nonetheless has the poet's empathy for the dispossessed, the thrown-out, the broken lifestyles and lost tradition.<sup>117</sup>

Dasgupta locates himself in this lineage of European writers of modernity, trying to capture the glitz and glamour as well as the degradation brought about by the development of capitalism. He shares with Berman an ambivalent position towards the delirium of capitalism, a combination of fascination and rage in front of its tumultuous processes, inherited from Marx, as Deleuze and Guattari observed: 'He is fascinated by capitalist mechanisms, precisely because the system is demented, yet works very well at the same time'.<sup>118</sup> The formal proximity between Dasgupta and Marx's writing has been examined in Chapter 1, the former seemingly drawing upon the latter's magnifying of the tumultuous disturbances but also of the tremendous energy engendered by the irruption of capitalism in a new place.<sup>119</sup> The influence of Berman's understanding of modernity is also palpable everywhere in *Capital*, suggesting indeed that Dasgupta locates twenty-first-century Delhi in a large modernist framework, with strong analogies emerging between Delhi and the compressed modernisation of St. Petersburg.<sup>120</sup> The monumental construction and demolition sites that Dasgupta depicts echo the disintegrating landscape that Berman captures in 1970s New York, in which things crumble as soon as they are built.<sup>121</sup>

Dasgupta draws on Berman's theory of perpetual creative destruction, but their works also share formal characteristics, in particular in their interweaving of theory with personal experience, enabled by the flexible form of the essay. Directly affected by the urban development of New York, and by the destruction of his childhood neighbourhood in the Bronx, torn apart by a new highway, Berman entwines the history of the city with his

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<sup>117</sup> Dasgupta, Interview with the author, 2017. The importance of Baudelaire's writing of modernity for Dasgupta's understanding of late modernity is evidenced by his very recent mini-film of Baudelaire's prose poem 'Les Yeux des Pauvres' ('The Eyes of the Poor'), appearing as an incongruous superimposition of images of gleaming soaring cities and disenfranchised populations around the world. Rana Dasgupta 'Les Yeux des Pauvres', Musée d'Orsay's celebration of the poet's bicentenary, online video, Youtube, <<https://youtu.be/MaUqi8ychus>> [accessed 14 May 2021].

<sup>118</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'Capitalism: A Very Special Delirium' (1995), in Félix Guattari, *Chaosophy, Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), p. 36.

<sup>119</sup> See Chapter 1. See in particular Chapter 13 of Dasgupta's *Capital*, which reads as an account of primitive accumulation applied to the Indian case in the wake of neoliberal reforms.

<sup>120</sup> For my definition of modernity and modernism, see introduction.

<sup>121</sup> Berman quotes Rem Koolhaas's landmark essay *Delirious New York*, as well James Merrill's poem 'Un Urban Convalescence' which captures the perpetual self-destruction of capitalist urbanism (Berman, p. 288).

personal life and his commitment to a socialist form of modernism.<sup>122</sup> His flaunted subjectivity, or even lyricism, is mirrored by Dasgupta's expression of his personal experience of globalizing Delhi. With the same focus on the impact of urban change on city-dwellers' material and psychological lives, Dasgupta's protean writing, interweaving the history of Delhi, interviews with the city's new elite, an account of global capitalism, and his personal impressions of the city, makes the most of the freedom of the essay. If the scope of Berman's book is much wider than that of *Capital*, both perfectly epitomize Barthes' definition of the essay: 'a tormented form in which analysis is pitted against romance, method against fantasy', constituting, we venture, one of the most apt forms to imagine a mutating city.<sup>123</sup>

In addition to the evident reference to Marx, the title of Dasgupta's essay also harks back to Walter Benjamin's *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1938): just as Benjamin identified traits of nineteenth-century Paris as representative of a particular phase of capitalism, Dasgupta identifies Delhi as the city which crystallises the meaning of our era, its tumult symptomatic of the violence and the harsh inequalities fostered by late capitalism.<sup>124</sup> One particular passage of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* compares Paris with a volcanic landscape, emphasising its revolutionary aspect as a fertile ground for creativity. If the emphasis is more political than economic, the use of the eruption metaphor strikingly resonates with Dasgupta's use of it.

And at work in the attraction it exercises on people is the kind of beauty proper to great landscapes – more precisely, to volcanic landscapes. Paris is a counterpart in the social order to what Vesuvius is in the geographic order: a menacing, hazardous massif, an ever-active hotbed of revolution. But just as the slopes of Vesuvius, thanks to the layers of lava that cover them, have been transformed into paradisaical orchards, so the lava of revolutions provides uniquely fertile ground for the blossoming of art, festivity, fashion.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> 'As I develop a perspective on the urban metamorphoses of the past four decades, I will be painting a picture in which I can locate myself, trying to grasp the modernizations and modernisms that have made me and many of the people around me what we are.' (Ibid., p. 298).

<sup>123</sup> 'Je n'ai au fond écrit que des essais, forme tourmentée où l'analyse le dispute au romanesque, et la méthode au fantasme', Roland Barthes, 'Leçon' (1978), draft version quoted in Marielle Macé, *Le temps de l'essai: histoire d'un genre en France au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Belin, 2006), p. 207. The final version of the lecture reads as: 'Il me faut bien reconnaître que je n'ai produit que des essais, genre ambigu où l'écriture le dispute à l'analyse'. Roland Barthes, 'Leçon' (1978), *Œuvres complètes V* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 427.

<sup>124</sup> A similar project was endeavoured for Los Angeles by the French philosopher Bruce Bégout (*Los Angeles, capitale du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Barnum, 2019), in which he acknowledges his debt to Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*.

<sup>125</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 83. The influence of Benjamin's conception of the *flâneur* and of his method of urban archaeology on Indian urban writing will be studied in Chapter 6.

Benjamin's insistence on the shock of urban modernity, his close attention to the sensorial regime of modern architecture in Paris, Berlin or Naples, and his fascination for Baudelaire, also fuel Dasgupta's portrait of Delhi.<sup>126</sup> His depiction of the new Paris created by Haussmann, which changed the texture of urban public space and partly alienated the city from its own inhabitants, and his interest in 'the unsettling effects of incipient high capitalism on the most intimate areas of life and work' suffuse Dasgupta's work.<sup>127</sup> These comparisons must not occlude the divergences between modernist and late modernist cities, which Dasgupta also underlines, as shown by his contrasting of *flânerie* in nineteenth-century Paris with hectic driving in twenty-first-century Delhi (C 18).

These filiations are an invitation to read Dasgupta's narrative anew, shedding a different light on Indian urban writing at large: more than flipping the tale of modernisation, making of Delhi or Mumbai prophetic cities, these texts of uneven urban development point to analogies between cities across time and space, outside the East-West binary. This world-scale comparativism implies a conception of modernity which differs from that of Jennifer Robinson and other postcolonial thinkers. Indeed, if Dasgupta and Robinson open up the imagination of urban space and demystify the 'world-class city' as a misleading utopia, they diverge in their understanding of modernity and modernisation. Along with Mitchell and Gaonkar, Robinson intends to pluralize the modern, refusing to regard it as having primarily emerged in the West before being adapted, copied and (poorly) imitated elsewhere. She argues that we need to refuse the West's monopolization of innovation and novelty to account for different modernities with diverse sources and outcomes, and identifies modernity with what is 'enchanted by the production and circulation of novelty, innovation and new fashions'.<sup>128</sup> She also follows Osborne in the dismissal of the 'idea of non-contemporaneousness of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous times',

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<sup>126</sup> Benjamin's account of different European cities, from Berlin to Marseille and Naples is to be found in the volume *One Way Street*.

<sup>127</sup> Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, 'Translators' Foreword', in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. XII. One could discuss Indian contemporary writers' depictions of shopping malls in global cities in the light of Benjamin's theorisation of the Parisian arcades as a phantasmagorical world of commodity fetishism. The connection is all the more relevant as Benjamin's analysis of Paris arcades and of commodity fetishism captures a moment of imperial expansion and brings out the colonial politics of urban development, connecting the metropolis with 'exotic' colonial cities (see Caitlin Vandertop, 'The Colonies in Concrete: Walter Benjamin, Urban Form and the Dreamworlds of Empire', *Interventions*, 18.5 (2016), 709-729).

<sup>128</sup> Robinson, *Ordinary Cities*, p. 6, 15-20.

spatializing and racializing chronological categories: identifying some people and places as not modern, backward, primitive, traditional.<sup>129</sup>

Conversely, Dasgupta's and Roy's works evince a historical materialist understanding of modernity which is characterised by the simultaneity of non-contemporaneous realities. Contrary to the universalist Euro-centric narrative of non-simultaneity that Robinson tackles, they do not contend that different spaces belong to different times, but precisely that in a single space, multiple times are juxtaposed. Using the example of labourers working by the light of candles to lay fibre-optic cables in her lane, Roy thus writes: 'India lives in several centuries at the same time. Somehow we manage to progress and regress simultaneously'.<sup>130</sup> The capitalist world-system produces different spatio-temporal regimes which coexist within the same space, whether in its cores or the peripheries. The passage describes these temporal discontinuities, and echoes the multiple nocturnal scenes in her novel that depict migrant workers carrying bricks or sleeping near a neon-lit highway (M 256-25). Her portrait of the metamorphosis of Delhi similarly refracts the overlapping of discontinuous temporalities: the venerable 'grandma' is an enduring embarrassing presence underneath the make-up of the young attractive city, so that the urban revolution appears as a grotesque masquerade in which the new is incongruously juxtaposed with the old (M 96).<sup>131</sup>

If this process is blatant in early-twenty-first-century Delhi, Indian cities have been characterised by the coexistence of social realities from different historical times from the moment of their coerced integration into capitalist modernity through colonisation. Gyan Prakash argues that nationalist leaders failed to acknowledge this coexistence because of their 'historicist conception of urbanisation as the pinnacle of a nation's social and political development', as a shift from tradition to modernity, which prevented them from addressing the challenge of spatial urban urbanisation after the independence.<sup>132</sup> Another way of framing this juxtaposition is Jai Sen's concept of the coexistence of an 'intended' and 'unintended city', the latter referring to a society that has grown within and beside the intended city and society, unplanned by the ruling classes, yet sustained by them and their interest in having available cheap labour.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Modernity is a Qualitative, not a Chronological Category', *New Left Review*, 192 (March-April 1992), 75. See also Jyoti Hosagrahar, *Indigenous Modernities: Negotiating Architecture and Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>130</sup> Roy, 'The Ladies Have Feelings', in *MSH*, pp. 106-107. See Introduction.

<sup>131</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>132</sup> Prakash, 'The Urban Turn', in *Sarai Reader 02*, p. 5.

<sup>133</sup> Jai Sen, *The Unintended City: An Essay on The City of the Poor* (Calcutta: Cathedral Relief Services, 1975).



In this framework, modernity does not stem from the ‘West’ but from the capitalist world-system. This association of modernity with worldwide capitalism (which may know inflections, variations, or different speeds, but is part of a single system) thus disqualifies attempts to pluralize modernity and modernism in order to think of alternative modernities, because they would still ‘imply the existence of an “original” that was formulated in Europe, followed by a series of “copies” and “lesser inflections.”’.<sup>134</sup> In this light, we may read Dasgupta’s recurrent references to the Roaring Twenties in Chicago and New York or to 1850s Paris not as elements of a stagist discourse but as an account of similar developmental crises.<sup>135</sup> His analysis is rooted in the cyclical nature of capitalist creative-destruction, which brings forward parallels between formations across history because they share ‘analogous structural conditions’.<sup>136</sup> These comparisons enable us to delineate constellations of crises of accumulation, based on analogous phenomena of accelerated urban growth and reconfiguration of capitalism – through industrialisation in the case of London in the 1850s, and through financialization of urban real estate market and high-tech bubble in Indian cities in the 2000s.

If ‘everlasting agitation and uncertainty’ concern the whole world under capitalism, derailing accusations of exoticism, the first comparison Dasgupta draws between postcolonial and post-communist countries hints at the specificity of the semi-peripheries of the world-system, where the juxtaposition of incongruous temporalities is more intensely felt. The texts studied in this chapter all encapsulate these exacerbated contradictions at work in Delhi through the representation of uncanny phenomena. Dasgupta thus uses the Yamuna river which ‘heaves muddily with bubbles erupting from its depths’ (C 424) as an allegory of the convulsing city. He weaves his analysis of future global capitalism into an account of

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Prakash, ‘The Urban Turn’, 5. Rahul Mehrotra’s concept of the informal, ephemeral, moving ‘kinetic city’, evolving in the middle of the ‘static city’ is a more optimistic way of looking at this coexistence, which we can link to ‘subaltern urbanism’. (See Rahul Mehrotra, ‘Negotiating the Static and Kinetic Cities: The Emergent Urbanism of Mumbai’, in *Other Cities, Other Worlds*, pp. 205-218).

<sup>134</sup> Parry, ‘Peripheral Modernisms’, 28.

<sup>135</sup> The comparison between *Capital* and Fitzgerald’s portrayals of the ‘Roaring Twenties’ is unfolded in Samanth Subramaniam’s review (‘Glare of a Gilded Age’). It is also used as a marketing tool on the flap-jacket of the American edition of Dasgupta’s book. Siddhartha Deb’s essay, pointedly entitled *The Beautiful and The Damned* (London: Faber, 2011) after Fitzgerald’s 1922 novel, also attempts to decipher life in the new economic powerhouse that India has become, analysing through a critical lens the early twenty-first-century as a new ‘gilded age’ in India, both periods being turbulent phases of economic expansion accompanied by increasing inequalities.

<sup>136</sup> Deckard and Shapiro, ‘World-Culture and the Neoliberal World-System: An Introduction’, in *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent*. Mike Davis shares the same viewpoint on the cyclical crises of capitalism: ‘The dynamics of Third World urbanisation both recapitulate and confound the precedents of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe and North America’ (*Planet of Slums*, p. 11).

his walking along the ‘epic’ river (C 439), going back up from the city to the countryside, thus bringing him back in time, to the ‘primordial river’. The end of his narrative, foretelling an instable, eerie, volatile future, drifts towards dystopia, yet the uncanny reality revealed by the eruption seems to derive from capitalism *per se*, or what he calls ‘capitalism’s strangeness’ (C446), augmented by ‘the era of catastrophe’ (C 372). At odds with the notion of a smooth and rational process of wealth accumulation, global capitalism is allegorised as a profoundly irrational force, a seemingly systematic order which contains within it ‘the seeds of discontinuity, instability, disorder and chaos’.<sup>137</sup>

In the same vein, Roy’s writing identifies the contemporary transformations of India as exacerbated manifestations of the disruptions entailed by global capitalism. To relativist discourses undermining the specificity of the situation in India, she responds:

Of course India is a microcosm of the world. Of course versions of what happened there happen everywhere. Of course, if you’re willing to look, the parallels are easy to find. The difference in India is only in the scale, the magnitude, and the sheer proximity of the disparity. In India your face is slammed right up against it.<sup>138</sup>

The passage encapsulates the difference in degree or scale which characterises the lived experience of capitalism in India, and by extension in the semi-peripheries. This amplified dimension compels the writer to use a heightened tone, and Roy often comments on the impossibility to express the ‘epic scale’ of the destructive transformations of India, but in a ‘feral howl’.

As a writer, a fiction writer, I have often wondered whether the attempt to always be precise, to try and get it all factually right somehow *reduces the epic scale* of what is really going on. Does it eventually mask a larger truth? I worry that I am allowing myself to be railroaded into offering prosaic, factual precision when maybe what we need is a feral howl, or the transformative power and real precision of poetry.<sup>139</sup>

This reclaiming of excess and vehemence as signs of faithfulness to an actual lived experience reads as a manifesto. The ‘feral howl’ encapsulates the furious tone of her second novel, the only one able to convey the scale of global capitalism’s threat to human rights, democracy, and environment in Roy’s eyes. Ten years after this statement, as the horror of the alliance between unbridled capitalism and nationalism is increasing day by day in India, Roy reasserts the necessity of rhetorical excess to account for the rise of the Hindu nation,

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<sup>137</sup> Prakash, ‘Introduction’, in *Noir Urbanisms*, p. 6.

<sup>138</sup> Roy, ‘The Ladies Have Feelings’, in *MSH*, p. 107.

<sup>139</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘Introduction: Democracy’s Failing Light’, in *Listening to Grasshoppers*, pp. XI-XII, my emphasis.

which she significantly pictures as a monstrous creature that mainstream discourses attempt to conceal or to polish:

In India today, a shadow world is creeping up on us in broad daylight. It is becoming more and more difficult to communicate the scale of the crisis even to ourselves – its size and changing shape, its depth and diversity. An accurate description runs the risk of sounding like hyperbole. And so, for the sake of credibility and good manners, we groom the creature that has sunk its teeth into us – we comb out its hair and wipe its dripping jaw to make it more personable in polite company. India isn't by any means the worst, or most dangerous, place in the world, at least not yet, but perhaps the divergence between what it could have been and what it has become makes it the most tragic.<sup>140</sup>

This dystopic imaginary, based on a monstrous allegory, is woven into Roy's, Dasgupta's and Jha's texts, which use images of natural disaster, cosmic disruption, nightmarish sequences, to convey a sense of uncontrollable destruction, which exceeds human grasp, scale, and temporality. The epic mode of urban writing is thus conceived as a faithful refraction of the tragically uneven development of India and of its combination with the rise of right-wing Hindu supremacism and nationalism. This representational mode also enables writers to render the magnitude of the unsettling transformations at work in India since the 1990s, which seem to escape our comprehension and imagination.

In fact, in 'The End of Imagination', written immediately after the first nuclear tests carried out by India in 1998, Roy develops the similar notion of our inability to grasp the true nature and scale of nuclear weapons. Away from the triumphant public approvals of the tests, she thus imagines an Apocalypse, redolent of her own fictional rendering of Delhi's transformation:

If there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be the earth itself. The very elements — the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water — will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible. Our cities and forests, our fields and villages will burn for days. Rivers will turn to poison. The air will become fire. The wind will spread the flames. When everything there is to burn has burned and the fires die, smoke will rise and shut out the sun. The earth will be enveloped in darkness. There will be no day. Only interminable night.<sup>141</sup>

Highlighting again the thematic and formal resonances between fiction and nonfiction, this devastated planetary landscape is part of Roy's endeavour to imagine the catastrophe in the face of our lack of understanding and imagination.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, I would argue that the

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<sup>140</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Intimations of an Ending: The Rise and Rise of the Hindu Nation', *Caravan*, 21 November 2019, <<https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rise-and-rise-of-hindu-nation>> [accessed 15 May 2021].

<sup>141</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'The End of Imagination' (1998), in *MSH*, p. 3.

<sup>142</sup> A similar argument is developed by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*.

writers of urban tumult use spectacular scalar contrasts, anthropomorphism, allegory and disaster metaphors to remedy a perceived failure of imagination and to make the reader grasp the extent of the current transformations. This epic writing of the city thus reveals the writers' awareness of the oppositional role of literature, but also discloses the way the city is conceived as a miniature showcase of global uneven development rather than of India's glorious 'arrival', contributing to puncture the myth of India's 'world-class cities'. Just as 'Marx's most vivid and striking images are meant to force us all to confront that abyss', the apocalyptic writing of urban development confronts the reader with the self-destructive road opened by global capitalism in India in the early twenty-first century.<sup>143</sup>

Therefore, I would challenge the assumption that the urban epic perpetuates exotic stereotypes about cities of the global South. Through their inflated rhetoric, their totalizing ambition and their emphasis on struggle, they defamiliarize the foundational mechanisms of the capitalist world-system rather than postcolonial alterity. Their rhetoric of excess, tapping into local as well as global narratives, popular mythologies and scientific discourses, also suggests that they rely on the 'shock value' of heightened representations, and in the critical power of anger, grief, fear and wonder as engines for political changes.<sup>144</sup> Contrary to Trachtenberg's notion that the use of the idiom of the urban wonder and dread dilutes political agency as it 'encourages subjects to admire overwhelming landscapes of exploitation', seemingly ungraspable and unchangeable, I would argue, with Den Tandt, that the amplifying movement of the urban epic contributes to the uncovering of the contradictions of global capitalism.<sup>145</sup> Each of the writers studied in this chapter has distinct politics, yet the aesthetic of shock deployed by both Dasgupta and Roy intensifies rather than mystifies the acting forces behind the whirl of urban change, even as they dramatize their all-encompassing power.<sup>146</sup> This writerly strategy of shock, is, I argue, one possible contentious response to hegemonic narratives surrounding Indian cities.

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<sup>143</sup> Berman, p. 101.

<sup>144</sup> Robinson mentions the 'shock value of dystopia' ('Living in Dystopia', in *Noir Urbanisms*, p. 219).

<sup>145</sup> In the context of American literature, and grounded in the Marxist concepts of commodity fetishism and reification, Trachtenberg endorses the view that late-nineteenth-century urban sublime was wedded to political conservatism, insofar as it 'propagated 'the image of the city as a mystery, as unfathomable darkness and shadow' [...]; a 'mystification' that encouraged urban dwellers to view monopoly capitalism as natural and unchallengeable [...]. Thus, discourses romanticizing the city's mysteriousness enhance 'human self-estrangement' and abet strategies of domination.' (Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 112, 103, quoted in Tandt, 'Masses, Forces and the Urban Sublime', in *Cambridge Companion to the City*, p. 132). For a similar interpretation in the Victorian context, see Nicholas Taylor, 'The Awful Sublimity of the Victorian City: Its Aesthetic and Architectural Origins', in *The Victorian City: Images and Reality*, vol. 2, p. 431.

<sup>146</sup> Roy's 'feral howl' can also be read in the light of the 'vehement passions' deployed by literature, 'underwriting canonically major forms and genres like Homeric epic and Shakespearean tragedy' (Philip

If these texts delve into the multiplicity of struggles raging in India, and in the complexity of caste, gender, religion and regional divisions, thus complexifying any flat narrative of international division of labour, they ultimately rely on global narratives. The formal and conceptual continuities between urban studies and the texts written by Dasgupta, Roy, Jha and Mehta enable literature to reconfigure various conceptions of the urban through the prism of the epic mode. This global orientation may finally be discussed in relation with the position of these Indian Anglophone authors as ‘global writers’, trying to encapsulate the world-system through ‘world texts’.

### 3. World Texts, Global Writers?

Among several theoretical inspirations, my understanding of the epic mode takes after Moretti’s conceptualisation of ‘modern epics’ as ‘world-texts’, that is, as contradictory literary forms which register the heterogeneity and contradictions of the capitalist world-system. Moretti’s conception of the modern epic as an uneven form, which oscillates between totalising and fragmenting literary devices, enlightens the workings of the ‘epic’ texts we are looking at, which waver between local and global representational scales, and between realism and irrealism (or documentary, ethnography and allegory, drama, fantasy). In this chapter, the texts have been examined through the lens of the oscillation between incommensurability and universalism, the expression of a unique *genius loci* and of global modernity. If, in Moretti’s view, the monumental texts of modern epics legitimate the capitalist world-system and the domination of European cores over it, I would contend that contemporary Indian urban writing, when primarily fuelled by the epic mode, rather contest the unevenness of the system, even as they are embedded in it.

It may sound paradoxical to identify Dasgupta’s, Jha’s, Mehta’s and Roy’s urban narratives, grounded as they are in the historical and cultural specificities of a singular place, as world-texts. Yet, it is precisely through their focus on the metropolis that they capture the contradictions of the world-system. Like late-nineteenth-century European cities, which, in Moretti’s words, appeared as ‘concentrates of the world’, early-twenty-first Indian cities seem to put the world on display, as ‘the scale of the imagined community of the city change[d] dramatically’, becoming a web of interconnections that spanned the entire

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Fisher, *The Vehement Passions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 10). According to Fisher, wonder and anger create a state of exception, of suddenness and intensity which discloses ‘or mar[k] out for us unmistakably the contours of injustice and unjust acts in certain moments of time’ (p. 2).

globe.<sup>147</sup> The integration of India into the world-system as a new capitalist frontier has accentuated the role of the Indian city as a microcosm of the world. It thus becomes a fertile ground to explore the contradictions of the world-system through the epic form. David Cunningham also coins the category of ‘capitalist realist epics’, referring to literary forms which draw on totalising tropes for establishing the impossibility of knowing and making sense of the complex relations of the world economy, suggesting a connection between the lived experience of global capitalism and the epic form.<sup>148</sup> These interpretations suggest that the epic form attempts to represent the heterogeneous realities of the world economy while pointing to a representational impossibility.

The worldwide scope of these urban narratives can be connected with the literary and biographical trajectories of their writers, as well as with their specific position in the literary marketplace as Indian *anglophone* writers, as stated in the introduction.<sup>149</sup> A glimpse at their other works only strengthens the argument of their global literary and political concerns and their imagination of Indian cities as part of the world-system. Rana Dasgupta’s writing history reflects both his enduring concern with globalization and his positioning as a thinker of the global capitalist system rather than a ‘British-Indian’ or a ‘postcolonial’ novelist. Very different in structure, both his first and second novel evidence the author’s wide-ranging imaginative universe, and the global horizon of his writing. His critically-acclaimed debut novel *Tokyo Cancelled* (2005), is a cycle of interlinked stories akin to Chaucerian tales told by thirteen different passengers stranded in an airport. Journeying from Paris to Lagos, Tokyo and New York, among other settings, it primarily revolves around the disrupting effects of modernization and globalization, narrating times of great turmoil. His second novel, *Solo* (2009) is set in post-communist Bulgaria and Georgia, and follows the oneiric yet disillusioned reminiscences of a blind chemist living alone in Sofia across a whole century, from the end of the Ottoman Empire to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Sharae Deckard considers *Solo* as a ‘world-mapping fiction that takes the system of global capitalism as its interpretative horizon’, arguing that its aesthetics (notably the generic divide between the two parts of the novel) addresses the formal problem of representing global

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<sup>147</sup> Moretti, *Modern Epic*, p. 124; These are the terms used by Agathocleous to describe mid-nineteenth-century London (Agathocleous, p. XV).

<sup>148</sup> Cunningham, ‘Capitalist Epics’.

<sup>149</sup> While Rana Dasgupta and Suketu Mehta can be described as ‘diasporic writers’, having moved between India, the United States and Europe, Raj Kamal Jha and Arundhati Roy have always lived in India. Yet Jha’s and Roy’s professions and political and literary commitments also bring them into close contact with the world at large and shape their transcultural imaginations of the Indian city.

scales, and offers a ‘counter history of capitalist modernity’.<sup>150</sup> The fractured, polycentric form of *Tokyo Cancelled* and the bipartite structure of *Solo* appear as two different formal compromises to capture a global totality. Both Dasgupta’s novels thus show his interest in exploring periods of economic, social and political turmoil from peripheral urban standpoints (whether Lagos, Delhi or Sofia), through fictional prose which oscillates between realism and oneirism. I would contend that the portrait of Delhi in the throes of post-reform global modernisation in *Capital* expresses Dasgupta’s continued attempt to give meaning to large-scale socio-economic processes, which he sets out to scrutinise through the form of the literary essay. The connections he draws in *Capital* and in interviews between post-reform India and post-Soviet Eastern Europe are enlightened by *Solo*, which imagines the ‘strategic adaptations to global capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union’, highlighting Dasgupta’s long-standing interest in and critique of the rapid mutations engendered by the conversion to global neoliberalism.<sup>151</sup> His novels and essays partake of the same aesthetic and political project of grasping the realities of our global condition in order to break “the sense of paralysis” that surrounds the “vastly expanded field of globalization”, and to imagine an alternative system’.<sup>152</sup>

In fact, his latest work, entitled *After Nations* (forthcoming 2021) and foreshadowed by a three-day international event he co-curated in Berlin in 2017, is an essay about the global forces of capitalism taking over nation-states as relevant units of decision-making and about the consequent need to reshape our tools of political resistance to fit this ‘post national era’.<sup>153</sup> He writes: ‘we live in another era whose nightmares are different. Less: combat between national armies, and more: giant eruptions of suppressed demographic, technological, financial and ecological forces. Our era began in 1979’.<sup>154</sup> Dasgupta’s argument resonates with that of many globalization scholars such as Saskia Sassen and Arjun

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<sup>150</sup> Deckard, ‘Surviving Globalization’, 60-61. Treasa de Loughry also identifies Dasgupta’s works as ‘global novels’, ‘that take the world as their horizon of understanding and seek the causal forces by which agency is eroded and history shaped’. Her identification of a literary transition from postcolonial concerns to world-systemic ones, due to ‘the urgency and global scope of contemporary economic and ecological crises that exceed national or postcolonial paradigms’ supports my hypothesis regarding the global concerns of Indian urban writing. (Loughry, p. 11).

<sup>151</sup> Loughry, p. 15.

<sup>152</sup> Rana Dasgupta, ‘Surviving Globalization’, *25 x 4: Channel 4 at 25*, ed. by Rosie Boycott and Meredith Etherington-Smith (London: Cultureshock Media, 2008), quoted in Deckard, p. 62.

<sup>153</sup> ‘Now is the Time of Monsters: What Comes After Nations?’, co-curated by Rana Dasgupta, Nanna Heidenreich and Katrin Klingan, HKW, Berlin, March 2017. The title takes after Gramsci, who is also a source of inspiration of *Capital* (see Chapter 1). See the curatorial statement, <[https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/die\\_jetztzeit\\_der\\_monster/die\\_jetztzeit\\_der\\_monster\\_kuratorisches\\_statement/kuratorisches\\_statement.php](https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2017/die_jetztzeit_der_monster/die_jetztzeit_der_monster_kuratorisches_statement/kuratorisches_statement.php)> [accessed 16 June 2021].

<sup>154</sup> Rana Dasgupta, *After Nations*, excerpts from the unpublished version, Facebook, 27 August 2019.

Appadurai, who argue that the state is no longer the relevant political, economic, cultural entity and deduce the subsequent rise of cities as essential nodes of this new global system, an argument which is mitigated by the recent rise of extreme ethno-nationalism across the world.<sup>155</sup> His decision to write another essay undoubtedly indicates his shift to literary nonfiction, and his positioning as a global intellectual. Equally striking is the way *After Nations* takes some of *Capital*'s main arguments further (such as the delirious reign of global capitalism and its connection with monotheism), and evidences the same rhetoric of excess. This continuity supports my argument that *Capital* takes Delhi as an illustration of his main object of analysis: the disrupting effects of global capitalism. As the occurrence of 'giant eruptions' suggests, Dasgupta's epic writing mode (especially its naturalisation of historical processes) endures, since he pictures the global system as a set of wild elemental forces that were set loose around 1979.

As our political capacities abandon us, we are returned to our naked, primitive condition and exposed, once again, to the elemental furies. Not merely hurricanes and cataracts, this time; rather, the stern forces discharged by our universal economic system – capitalism – in which even nature is now embedded.<sup>156</sup>

The environmental crisis is already one of the aspects of capitalism he explores in *Capital*, notably through the issue of Delhi's water resources. The passage ties up the literal and metaphorical meanings of the eruption, drawing an apocalyptic portrait of our age, exposed to 'elemental furies', demonstrating once more the essay's flexibility as a genre. It also highlights Dasgupta's talent as a writer who manages to captivate his readers by unfolding a large-scale ambitious theory through a spectacular representational mode. Functioning as a metonym, the Indian city is thus for Dasgupta a gateway to a global reflection on capitalism, and it reveals the extent to which the Indian Anglophone writers' imagining of the city is tied up with global concerns, and how much the contemporary city crystallises global issues.<sup>157</sup>

Suketu Mehta's literary trajectory after *Maximum City* similarly underscores his global conception of the urban. After several pieces about Rio de Janeiro and Abu Dhabi for travel

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<sup>155</sup> See for instance Arjun Appadurai, 'Sovereignty without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography', in *The Geography of Identity*, ed. by Patricia Yaeger (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), pp. 40-58.

<sup>156</sup> Dasgupta, *After Nations* (Facebook).

<sup>157</sup> His function as the creator and literary director of the JCB Literary Prize, awarded to a work of fiction by an Indian writer working in English or translated fiction by an Indian writer, also situates him as a patron of Indian literature. One of the aims of the prize, created in 2018, is to break the barriers separating literature in different Indian languages.



magazines, he first published a book (in Italian) about ‘the secret life of cities’, resulting from a tour of cities around the world with urbanists and architects.<sup>158</sup> His project to write another monumental book about immigrants in New York has provisionally deviated towards *This Land is Our Land*, an essay about immigration in the United States, probably prompted by the urgency and tense political context of immigration restrictions devised during Trump’s presidential term. Once more, the global scope of the essay is intertwined with Mehta’s personal story, that of an immigrant growing up in New York. The motif of mobility is also at the core of the narrative, which widens to the whole planet his statement about Bombayites as people on the move: ‘we’ve become a planet on the move’.<sup>159</sup> His sweeping and sensationalist statements echo the rhetoric of *Maximum City*: ‘and they were aghast when the poorest among us arrived at their borders, not to steal but to work, to clean their shit, and to fuck their men’.<sup>160</sup>

However, his tone is more vehement than fifteen years ago, showing that this book is fuelled by his indictment of anti-immigration policies and a sense of urgency. His narrative is underpinned by the history of colonisation, exploitation and dispossession: ‘this book is being written in sorrow and rage – as well as hope. I am angry: about the staggering global hypocrisy of the rich nations, having robbed the poor ones of their future, now arguing against a reverse movement of peoples – not to invade and conquer and steal, but to work.’<sup>161</sup> This shift to anger is interesting as *Maximum City* is rather characterised, as we saw, by a liberal belief in the free struggle of individual energies. The shift may derive from a different historical-political context but also from the reversal in the writer’s position, as his perspective on New York as an immigrant differs from his gaze on Mumbai as a privileged ‘returnee’.

The politics of Suketu Mehta’s writing of Mumbai is not as clear as that of Dasgupta and Roy, who openly express their opposition to the global capitalist system in their works as well as in interviews. If Dasgupta’s fascination for the delirious mechanisms of capitalism is palpable at times, the overall tone of his essay is that of disquiet and discontent. Roy’s ‘feral howl’ in *The Ministry* and in her essays express her anti-capitalist politics

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<sup>158</sup> Suketu Mehta, ‘Backstreets Tell UAE’s Real Stories’, Interview with Nick Leech, *The National*, 18 April 2017, <<https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/backstreets-tell-uae-s-real-stories-1.44325#page3>> [accessed 17 March 2021]; Suketu Mehta, *La vita segreta delle citta* (Rome: Einaudi, 2016). The book is still unpublished in English at the time of writing.

<sup>159</sup> Suketu Mehta, *This Land is Our Land: An Immigrant’s Manifesto* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), p. 9.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

unequivocally. Mehta's absence of identification of the structural causes of Mumbai's extremity sets him apart. In fact, his liberal understanding as well as his global levelling perspective is lambasted by Arundhati Roy, who criticises his article in *The New York Times* written in the aftermath of the 2008 terrorist attacks on Mumbai.<sup>162</sup>

We had Suketu Mehta, author of *Maximum City* and co-writer of the Bollywood film *Mission Kashmir* give us his analysis of why religious bigots, both Hindu and Muslim, hate Mumbai: 'Perhaps because Mumbai stands for lucre, profane dreams and an indiscriminate openness.' His prescription: 'The best answer to the terrorists is to dream bigger, make even more money, and visit Mumbai more than ever.' Didn't George Bush ask Americans to go out and shop after 9/11? Ah yes. 9/11, the day we can't seem to get away from.<sup>163</sup>

This reference is part of Roy's larger indictment of the misreading of the 2008 attacks as an 'Indian 9/11', occulting the specific communitarian politics of India. Mehta reads the attacks as a sign of hatred of cosmopolitanism and condemns them in the name of the liberal rejection of all fundamentalism, thus missing what is at the core of the attacks according to her: the anti-Muslim sentiment, leading to the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 as well as to the situation in Kashmir.<sup>164</sup> She points to Mehta's naive reading of the events and American-centred viewpoint, sharing with many the dominant narrative that '9/11 is the alpha and omega of terrorism'. The conflict between the two writers is carried out on the level of scale, as Mehta's global overview and rhetoric of 'bigness' are pitted against Roy's politics of 'small things'.

In fact, Roy's fictional and nonfictional writings have been associated with micro-politics, owing to her close attention to the local specificities of the places, people and cultures she describes and her resistance to macro-narratives and the 'tyranny of scale'. Rob Nixon argues that the 'nimble form' of the essay, a genre she has practised for twenty-years, fully participates in her fight against the developmentalist politics led in India, characterised by the 'disease of gigantism'.<sup>165</sup> Of short length, written as urgent political responses and published in Indian and international investigative and alternative newspapers, Roy's essays express political opposition through their 'rhetorical inventiveness', pitted against the

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<sup>162</sup> Suketu Mehta, 'What They Hate About Mumbai', *New York Times*, 28 November 2008, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/29/opinion/29mehta.html>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

<sup>163</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Nine is not Eleven (and November isn't September)' (2008), in *Listening to the Grasshoppers*, p. 192. Roy's dismissal of *Mission Kashmir* does not do justice to what Ananya Kabir calls the film's 'psychic topography of trauma, memory, and longing', which articulates a 'self-conscious reflection on cinema's role in precipitating th[e] loss' of Kashmir. (Kabir, *Territory of Desire*, p. 32).

<sup>164</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>165</sup> Nixon, p. 168.

obfuscating form of monumental institutional reports, piling up figures and legislative jargon.<sup>166</sup> How, then, does Roy's micro-politics fare in the light of *The Ministry*, a 438-page 'panoramic novel', which multiplies narrative threads and voices, interweaves several timelines, ranging from Delhi to Kashmir, Gujarat to California, from Maoist rebellions in Orissa to Dalit's embattled lives in Delhi?

If her micro-politics will be scrutinised in depth in Chapter 6, it is necessary to point out for now that *The Ministry* both continues and revisits Roy's aesthetic politics. Its 'crowded' form, in Roy's words, combining the local and the global, the minute detail and its relationship to a large-scale system, reflects her understanding of the Indian city as part of a global formation, and is animated by antithetical centripetal and centrifugal forces, symbolising the totalisation and fragmentation of the world-system.<sup>167</sup> Through a much narrower prism, this emphasis on the hidden global connections of local processes is already at work in *The God of Small Things* and in all her essays, which show her wide-ranging political concerns, encompassing the politics of globalization and its colonial logics, the power of ideology and corporate culture, fundamentalism, and terrorism.<sup>168</sup> Her first novel thus connects patriarchal domination, caste politics and ecological disaster in southern India to global capitalism. The oppression and exploitation of Velutha, the pollution of the river, and the maiming of vernacular culture (namely Kathakali) appear in the novel as resulting from the intersection of local and global destructive forces, among which the marketing of Kerala as a global touristic destination. Her interest in minorities' rights across the world also animates her numerous political essays, which draw lines between Indian subaltern people and minorities in Turkey, or between water privatization in Bolivia and India, for instance.<sup>169</sup> Her essay 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story' thus takes India as its principal case for the diagnosis of the fault-lines of the capitalist system, yet it has a wide-ranging scope,

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<sup>166</sup> Nixon, p. 6. Arundhati Roy regularly publishes essays in Indian newspaper (*Frontline*, *Outlook*, *India Today* or *The Caravan*) and international ones (*The Nation*, *Le Monde diplomatique*) and contributes to the American TV, radio and internet news program *Democracy Now!*.

<sup>167</sup> 'I wanted to write a book in which the story was like the streets of a great city. As I walked along, I tried not to walk past anyone. I tried to sit down and smoke a cigarette and ask the time of day. I wanted even the smallest character to have a story. I wanted the background to sometimes become the foreground, the city to become a person. *So yes, I knew it was going to get crowded.* I wanted that.' (Arundhati Roy, Interview with Penguin, 25 May 2017, <<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2017/arundhati-roy.html>> [accessed 17 May 2021], my emphasis).

<sup>168</sup> For an overview of her socio-political activism which brings together her first novel and her nonfiction writing, see *Globalizing Dissent, Essays on Arundhati Roy*, ed. by Ranjan Ghosh and Antonia Navarro-Tejero (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>169</sup> See 'Listening to Grasshoppers: Genocide, Denial and Celebration', lecture given in Istanbul in 2008 to commemorate the first anniversary of the assassination of Hrant Dink, editor of the Turkish-Armenian paper *Agos*. (in *Listening to Grasshoppers*, pp. 133-160).

evidencing a ‘maximal overview of capitalism’s weaknesses, presenting a complex but compound series of cascading ecological and economic crises’.<sup>170</sup>

As shown in Chapters 1 and 2, the resonances between her essays and her second novel are numerous, as the recent mutations undergone by Delhi are always intrinsically linked to global changes. The multi-layered history of the city is intersected and deflected by other histories, such as that of 9/11 and the war on terror, of the American invasion of Iraq (through D.D. Gupta, who helps Anjum build a shack in the graveyard and gets rich through a business of concrete blast walls in Iraq (M 64, 72)), and of regional conflicts with Pakistan or China, hinting at the multiple histories building up this world-text. The global threads of her narrative are also disclosed in the literary lineages she draws through the constellation of epigraphs, quoting Nazim Hikmet, Pablo Neruda, Agha Shahid Ali, Jean Genet, James Baldwin and Nadezhda Mandeshtam, but also Leonard Cohen and Billie Holiday, delineating a multilingual family of eccentrics, outcasts, and displaced poets. Her writing trajectory, spanning twenty years and framed by two landmark works of fiction and more than fifteen works of nonfiction, reveals that the core of her creative and political energy lies in the multiple localities of India, which are always inextricably connected with global matters. As Claire Gallien writes, Roy’s writing is rooted in India yet is also involved in an intellectual counterattack on a global scale.<sup>171</sup>

Finally, Raj Kamal Jha’s novels all evidence his transcultural imagination of Indian cities, nurtured by global literature and culture, from Dickens and Stevenson to DeLillo, Roth and Bret Easton Ellis. Yet his latest novel, *The City and the Sea* (2019), nominated for the JCB Literary Prize, broadens the writer’s imaginative map even wider. Indeed, the novel entwines two narrative threads, one in Delhi, the other in Germany, as they collide in uncanny ways. The focus on the culprits of the Delhi rape case of December 2012 shows Jha’s enduring concern with brutality in urban contexts, but also with the global

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<sup>170</sup> Loughry, p. 1. Her continuous contacts with an intellectual community across borders, as her friendship with John Berger, Eduardo Galeano and John Cusack, to name a few, evidences. See her book of conversations with John Cusack, Edward Snowden and Daniel Ellsberg, *Things That Can and Cannot Be Said* (Delhi: Juggernaut, 2016).

<sup>171</sup> Claire Gallien, ‘Arundhati Roy, ou l’engagement du littéraire’, *La Vie des Idées*, 3 January 2020, <<https://laviedesidees.fr/Arundhati-Roy-ou-l-engagement-du-litteraire.html>> [accessed 17 May 2021]. See also Auritro Majumder, *Insurgent Imaginations: World Literature and the Periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Rashmi Varma, ‘Essaying Solidarity: “Kaamraid” Roy and the Politics of Representation’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 67.2 (2021), 366-389.

ramifications of a local event as this case, widely documented in international media, could be called a global event.<sup>172</sup>

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What we can first conclude from this exploration of the aesthetic politics of the urban epic is that, in these narratives of changing India, rhetorical excess and formal heterogeneity serve a critical purpose. The scrutiny of these texts' reconfiguration of urban local mythologies and global theories reveals that the amplifying movement which characterises them does not perpetuate the exoticizing gaze on Indian cities, nor does it mystify the social forces at work in them, but defamiliarizes and dramatizes the cyclical crises of capitalism as they are embedded in urban space. Their ultimate reliance on a global frame of reference enables them to escape the stereotypical narrative of Indian cities as urban failures and to put forward a global urban comparativism, shedding light on the one and unequal world-system, in other words, on the connections but also the differentiated experiences of modernity in various urban formations across time and space. What these texts refract is not how belated these cities are or how mysterious and therefore unchangeable their workings are, but how urban capitalism works in India.

If these texts sometimes verge on urban dystopia, they manifest the writers' ambition to shock the reader into awareness of the unevenness of the capitalist world-system, and betray their belief in the transformative power of critical dystopia. The glaring unevenness of urban development in India seems to require a supplementation to realism, embodied by local myths, drama, allegory, and dystopic futurism, which empower these texts' political critique. As semi-peripheries in the world-system, Indian cities appear as extreme manifestations of the contradictory workings of global capitalism. The vehement passions deployed by the texts of Roy, Jha, Dasgupta, and, to a lesser extent, Mehta, constitute one literary response to the post-reform mutations of Indian cities. The next three chapters will explore the subdued tone which characterises the *ordinary* mode of Indian urban writing, which is underpinned by a different political vision of the city, based on the emphasis on

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<sup>172</sup> This case involved the gang rape and torture of a young woman in a private bus, which occurred in December 2012 in South Delhi and generated widespread national and international coverage. Public protests against the state and central governments for failing to provide adequate security for women took place in New Delhi, where thousands of protesters clashed with security forces. The Netflix series *Delhi Crime* follows the Delhi Police investigation of the case (dir. by Richie Mehta (Netflix, 2019)).

everyday life, local, familiar practices and small-scale strategies to challenge an unequal urban order.

Even though the global ultimately takes over in Roy's, Jha's, Dasupta's and Mehta's texts, their interweaving of local and global discourses on the city can also be connected with the 'trivial' position of the writer, in Roland Barthes's terms, which is another way of considering the formal and ideological heterogeneity of Indian urban writing. Against the strict divide between scientific knowledge and literature, the French literary critic argues that literature encompasses all forms of knowledge, refracting them in an oblique manner. The writer must thus obstinately stand at the crossroads of multiple discourses and forms, in a 'trivial' position in relation with the purity of doctrines.<sup>173</sup> These four authors stand at the intersection of local urban mythologies and global discourses on capitalist modernity, intertwining them to shed light on contemporary urban transformations. The work of nonfiction is particularly interesting in this case, as its formal flexibility heightens the possibilities of intersections between various forms and discourses, between dramatic scenes and historical accounts, allegories and political commentaries, and, ultimately, between fact and fiction.

A final word must be said about the minor place of Kolkata in these first chapters, which has a historical-material as well as a literary rationale, and is significant as to the singularities of the three cities studied in this thesis. If Amit Chaudhuri and Raj Kamal Jha occasionally refract the rapidly changing physiognomy of the city, they primarily emphasize the decline of the 'dying city', and most of the narratives on Kolkata eschew the epic mode.<sup>174</sup> As we will see in the next chapters, contemporary writing in English about Kolkata tends to stress the slow rhythm of everyday life and the village-like quality of urban neighbourhoods rather than spectacular eruptions, velocity, and social divisions. The weakness of the epic mode may stem from a specific urban culture, arising (among other factors) from the historical-material context of a former imperial capital having lost its national political centrality, and of its belated embrace of globalization.<sup>175</sup> The next chapters will interrogate the inadequacy of the inflated rhetoric and the focus on ruptures to convey

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<sup>173</sup> 'Un écrivain [...] doit avoir l'entêtement du guetteur qui est à la croisée de tous les autres discours, en position triviale par rapport à la pureté des doctrines (triviales, c'est l'attribut étymologique de la prostituée qui attend à l'intersection de trois voies)'. (Roland Barthes, 'Leçon', p. 437).

<sup>174</sup> Even Kushanava Choudhury's return narrative, entitled *The Epic City*, eschews the amplified tone of the epic mode. The 'epic' of the title precisely refers to the city as it is transformed during the festival of Durga Puja, thus holding cultural-religious connotations and suggesting that the bustle is exceptional.

<sup>175</sup> See for instance Sen, *Colonizing, Decolonizing, and Globalizing Calcutta*. See Chapter 5.

the social reality of Kolkata since the 1990s. If post-Independence social and political crises which have affected the city, notably related to Partition, the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war or the repression of the Naxalite movement in the 1970s, have been incorporated into fiction and cinema, narratives focusing on post-1991 Kolkata do not seem structured by major crises, even though they account for less spectacular forms of violence.

## CHAPTER 4

### DOWNSIZING THE INDIAN GLOBAL CITY: STREET-CORNER NARRATIVES

At the end of the 1980s, French historian Jacques Revel acknowledged the emergence of an experimental approach to social history that surfaced a decade before among a small group of Italian historians, called micro-history (or *microstoria*). Departing from the *Annales* model of macro-narratives accounting for collective destinies and from the structuralist study of regularities, repetitions and systems, historians such as Ginzburg, Levi and Poni proposed to downscale the field of investigation of social history and to focus on individual trajectories, emphasising the particular, the contingent, and the local, and undertaking intensive rather than extensive exploration of historical objects. At a distance from ‘major’ historical events, micro-history engages with everyday life, common places and histories, producing what Revel thus calls a ‘history at ground-level’ (‘l’histoire au ras du sol’), in other words, an examination of the ‘local modulations of great history’.<sup>1</sup>

However, in his foreword to Giovanni Levi’s seminal work, Revel claims that micro-history is not restricted to the micro-level: rather than confining itself to the minutiae of everyday life, it is rather characterised by the productive use of scalar variation and the identification of connections between various levels of observation. Thus, the ‘everyday’ lives of a medieval village or an obscure trial for heresy are simultaneously autonomous events and illuminate larger historical patterns. Varying the scope of investigation makes other lines and configurations appear, bringing out ‘another cartography of the social’.<sup>2</sup> He thus stresses that each reading level sheds light on distinct realities: ‘at each reading level,

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Revel, ‘L’Histoire au ras du sol’, foreword to Giovanni Levi, *Le pouvoir au village, histoire d’un exorciste dans le Piémont du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, trans. by Monique Aymard (Paris, Gallimard, 1989), p. XXI (my translation). See for instance Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976), trans. by John and Anne Tedeschi (London: Routledge, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Revel, ‘L’histoire au ras du sol’, p. XXX (my translation).



reality appears differently, and the game of the micro-historian consists in connecting these realities together in a multiple-entry system of interaction'.<sup>3</sup> According to him, micro-history enables the historian to reconstruct lived experience and its structures, invisible to other historiographical approaches.<sup>4</sup> This does not imply that we see less and in a less detailed manner at the macro-scale, but that we see something else.<sup>5</sup> Drawing a connection with literary studies, Claude Millet claims, for instance, that Victor Hugo's *Légende des Siècles*, an epic of centuries, is as detailed as *Les Misérables*, though more universal and less particular. Each of these two texts refracts and conceives of history differently, showing how varying scales transforms historical configurations. Referring to the scale of micro-history, Millet writes that enlarging the view brings out complex causalities instead of sequential necessity, leaving room for individual agency and indeterminacy, for the intricate fabric of social relationships, and for the disparate worlds of humanity observed from below rather than the great names of history.<sup>6</sup>

Although originally concerned with other forms of knowledge production, these reflections on inter-scalar variation provide a stimulating analogy to our own discussion of the inter-related scales and modes of Indian urban writing and help us shape the hypotheses which frame the three following chapters. As stated in the thesis introduction, one of the major differences between the epic and the ordinary modes of representation of the city is that of scale. If the epic mode is defined by the predominance of panoramic views of the mutating city and of macro-narratives of urban development, the ordinary mode implies a tightening of the narrative scale, with a focus for instance on one locality or one street, explored at 'ground-level' through the registering of its everyday rhythm. With micro-historians, I argue that 'micro' literary maps of India's cities do not explore the same spatial, temporal, social and individual material as macro-narratives encompassing cities at large. What, then, are the distinct urban realities highlighted by this alternative micro-cartography

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<sup>3</sup> 'A chaque niveau de lecture, la réalité apparaît différente, et le jeu du micro-historien consiste à relier entre elles ces réalités dans un système d'interactions aux multiples entrées.' (Ibid., p. XXXII (my translation)).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the ongoing discussions on scale in history and social sciences, notably on the intersection between micro-history and global history, see *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, ed. by Jacques Revel (Paris: Gallimard, 1996); Sanjay Subrahmayam, *Explorations in Connected History. From the Tagus to the Ganges* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005); Philippe Minard, 'Globale, connectée ou transnationale: les échelles de l'histoire', *Esprit*, 12 (2013), 20-32; Richard Drayton and David Motadel, 'Discussion: The Futures of Global History', *Journal of Global History*, 13.1 (2016), 1-21.

<sup>5</sup> With respect to cartography, Bruno Latour's argument against the 'zoom' metaphor, misleadingly suggesting that the smaller is contained in the larger, seconds the notion that different scales imply the observation of distinct realities. Yet his insistence on the complete discontinuity between scales establishes too strong an opposition between scales, whereas we follow micro-historians' foregrounding of the heuristic value of interscalar variations (see Bruno Latour, 'Anti-Zoom', in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, pp. 93-101).

<sup>6</sup> Claude Millet, 'Avant-propos', *Écrire l'Histoire*, special issue 'Le Détail', 4 (2009), 9.

of Indian city? What does this scalar variation imply in terms of thematic focus, temporal framework and formal choices? My hypothesis in this chapter is that the formal, temporal and thematic features which stem from the local focus result in the narrative downsizing of Indian *maximum cities*, thereby pushing back the imaginary both of the chaotically sprawling global megacity and of the urban monuments to Indian global modernity.

Primarily taking the locality as their narrative matrix, Amit Chaudhuri, Siddharth Chowdhury and Aman Sethi draw an imagined geography of the city as a familiar space structured by strong social ties, which contrasts with the conventional association of the city with individualism, anonymity and self-reinvention. Superimposed onto a physical space, the locality is encoded in both fiction and nonfiction as a socially and imaginatively constructed formation, built through social relationships and stories, thus enlightening Arjun Appadurai's understanding of the concept of locality. In his anthropological work on the impact of global flows on the production of locality, Appadurai conceptualises localities as 'structures of feelings', 'life-worlds constituted by stable associations, known and shared histories, collectively traversed and legible spaces and places'.<sup>7</sup> He defines the locality as a material reality combined with a relational and affective formation, both dimensions requiring regular work to be maintained. The social and discursive production of locality appears as the never-ending process 'through which the local emerged against forces of entropy, displacement, material hardship, social corrosion'.<sup>8</sup> This ongoing process requires the resources of habit, custom, history, as well as imagination. The production of locality does not only depend on shared or transmitted past experience but also on imagination and the ability to imagine a future. Appadurai's understanding of imagination is stimulating inasmuch as he considers it not as an individual ability but as a collective 'quotidian energy, not only visible in dreams, fantasies, liminal moments, and rituals' but used to implement concrete projects.<sup>9</sup> What he calls 'the work of imagination' is a collective emancipatory process that plays a central role in the production of locality. The chosen literary reportages

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<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'The Production of Locality', in *Modernity at Large*, p. 181, 191. Regarding the concept of the 'structure of feeling', see Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961). 'Structure of feeling refers to different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts.' (Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 454-455). Appadurai first distinguishes the *neighbourhood* from the *locality*, the former understood as a social formation from which the latter emerges as an affective and imaginative formation. Yet he also conflates the two terms when mentioning the 'production of the neighbourhood' ('The Production of Locality', in *Modernity at Large*, p. 190).

<sup>8</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'The Future as Cultural Fact', in *The Future as Cultural Fact*, p. 287.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 287.

and novels all illuminate this process, relying on the circulation of memories and stories, yet shedding light on the ambivalences of this work of imagination, which can sometimes be stifling rather than emancipatory.

The notion of *nukkad novel* (or street-corner novel), coined by Tabish Khair in reference to Siddharth Chowdhury's debut novel *Patna Roughcut* (2010), will prove useful to understand the way the local scale 'provincializes' the global city, drawing it closer to 'small-town India'.<sup>10</sup> It also accounts for the broader overlap between the spatial and the tonal aspects of the ordinary mode. In Khair's review, *nukkad* (street-corner in Hindi) refers both to the novel's scale and to its matter-of-fact tone. In these narratives, the microscopic lens directed at the city seems to entail a 'minor' mode of representation: at odds with the excessive rhetoric and the regime of the spectacular examined in *epic* narratives, the ordinary mode is primarily characterised by understatement and by an impassive tone, sometimes tinged with dark humour, which deflates rather than inflates its object. This chapter will put to the test Khair's notion that this unsentimental outlook on urban life is related to a provincial or small-town perspective, departing from the metropolitan stance of most Indian English novels. Chowdhury's writing focuses on overlooked neighbourhoods, street-corner encounters and urban legends in his stories of Patna and Delhi, highlighting the affinities between the provincial and the national capital.

References to street-corner also conjure up William F. Whyte's landmark anthropological study *Street Corner Society* (1943), pointing to the oscillation between fiction and ethnography at work in Sethi's, Chowdhury's and Chaudhuri's narratives. In fact, the attention paid to the minutiae of everyday life, the tightened geographical scope and the understated tone of these narratives question generic boundaries: Chowdhury's novels sometimes read as ethnographic studies of everyday life at Delhi University, while Aman Sethi's reportage slips into fiction as it recreates scenes from interviewees' lives. The balance between the particular and the general, the micro and the macro, the totalizing and the fragmenting impulses is pointed out by John Comaroff as the tension which energises all ethnographic work, caught between the material and the concept, the detail and the system, 'the epic and the everyday'.<sup>11</sup> This final opposition highlights the entanglement of both representational modes within ethnography, and supports the hypothesis of the inter-relation

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<sup>10</sup> Tabish Khair, 'The Nukkad Novel', review of Siddharth Chowdhury, *Patna Roughcut*, *Biblio* (January-February 2006), 34. The phrase 'small-town India', used by Khair, recalls, among others, Pankaj Mishra's travelogue, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India* (Delhi: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> John Comaroff, 'The End of Anthropology, Again: On the Future of an In/Discipline', *American Anthropologist*, 112.4 (November 2010), 532.

of both modes and scales in these ground-level narratives. Indeed, focusing on the locality also implies the enlarging of micro-events and their transformation into adventures, ordeals, or myths, via a mock-epic rhetoric. This propinquity with ethnography seems to go hand in hand with an affinity for fragmentary or sinuous narrative structures and for short texts, which contrast with monumental city-books.

Ground-level fiction and nonfiction reveal the narrative potency of the locality, or street-corner: from a very circumscribed space in the city arise a great number of stories. If Amit Chaudhuri and Siddharth Chowdhury do explore houses, hostel rooms, or apartments, the domestic space is always embedded in the larger social unit of the neighbourhood. It is this interaction between private and public, interior and exterior, I argue, which makes the locality a fertile narrative ground, resting on the street-corner as a crossing, meeting and dwelling point.<sup>12</sup> The constitutive role of the local in these texts first implies another cartography of the Indian city: far from being a single sprawling unit, it is instead made up of more or less self-sufficient villages. Through their ethnographic gaze, these texts decipher the various processes of production of the local, both in material and symbolical terms. In tension with this documentary ambition, they build up on the myriad legends and counterfactual rumours which shape the locality into being. The sense of familiarity with the city is also reinforced by the use of local vernacular slang, or the *common* language of the street, oscillating between transparency and opacity, suggesting the singularity of these enclosed worlds.

## I. The City Through the Lens of the Locality

The first section is concerned with the scale of the imagined city and proposes that the zooming-in on one neighbourhood is integral to the *ordinary* mode of urban writing and has formal, thematic and conceptual implications. The focus on the locality highlights the fragmentation of the city into a constellation of neighbourhoods which bear similarities with village life: they emerge as familiar spaces, characterised by a slow rhythm, strong social ties, and the importance of communal leisure, thus tempering the imaginary of the dizzying

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<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of *domestic* novels in which the interior holds a much central space, see Rashmi Varma's analysis of Shashi Deshpande, *That Long Silence* (Delhi: Penguin, 1989), in *The Postcolonial City* (pp. 138-140). Manju Kapur's *Home* is another novel which explores the seclusion of women in an Old Delhi house.

global city. This urban imaginary of related units also complicates the dualistic vision of a ‘splintered urbanism’ delineated in Chapter 2: the texts dominated by the ordinary mode oscillate between a representation of Indian cities as partitioned and a polycentric model, in which quarters are inter-related.

## 1. The Imagined Geographies of Kolkata’s *Paras*

Nowhere is the locality as a social and narrative matrix more palpable than in fiction and nonfiction about Kolkata, ‘a village that pretends to be a city’.<sup>13</sup> The city has been prominently imagined through its island-like localities, crisscrossed by close-knit networks of familiar lanes and houses, showing the ways this delimited space circumscribes and affects the characters’ lives. Writers often stress the differences between them, as though each locality were a microcosm produced by singular social and imaginative links. The Bengali word *para*, which one could imperfectly translate as ‘locality’, encapsulates the village-like atmosphere of neighbourhoods in the city and is an integral part of the city’s identity: ‘of all the institutions that distinguish the city of Calcutta, the most ubiquitous, yet in some respects most invisible, is the *para*, the locality or neighbourhood’.<sup>14</sup>

Urban historians foreground the rural foundations of the *para*, which primarily refers to a part or portion of a village, one’s home, one’s area. Migrating to the colonial city, the term has become ‘the primary unit of Old Calcutta’,<sup>15</sup> designating ‘a close-knit neighbourhood of families who have long known one another, sometimes for generations, and are bonded in some instances by kinship, craft or trade.’<sup>16</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay

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<sup>13</sup> Hazra, *Grand Delusions*, p. 5. For a detailed account of the history of the *para* and its importance in the urban-rural quality of Kolkata in Indian Anglophone literature and, see my chapter: ‘“A Mesh of Lanes and Voices”, Kolkata’s “Para” as a Transitional Zone in Contemporary Indian Anglophone Literature’, in *Ecotones: Partitions and Borders*, ed. by Markus Arnold and others (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de Montpellier, 2020), pp. 187-204. The rural-urban quality of Kolkata can also be connected with the juxtaposition of rural and urban qualities that Jameson deemed essential to Joyce’s modernism, hinting at a larger connection between the incongruous overlapping of the rural and the urban and combined and uneven development in colonial and postcolonial metropolises (Fredric Jameson, ‘*Ulysses* in History’, in *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 144, quoted in Vandertop, *Modernism in the Metrocolony*, p. 6).

<sup>14</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri, ‘Remembering the Para’, in *Strangely Beloved: Writings on Calcutta*, ed. by Nilanjana Gupta (Delhi: Rupa, 2014), p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> P. Thankappan Nair, ‘The Growth and Development of Calcutta’, in *Calcutta, The Living City*, vol. 1, ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Ranajit Guha, ‘A Colonial City and its Time’, in *The Indian Postcolonial, A Critical Reader*, ed. by Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 345. One can draw a parallel with the North Indian *mohalla* and its sense of community (see Kaustubh Mani Sengupta, ‘Community and Neighbourhood in a Colonial City: Calcutta’s Para’, *South Asia Research*, 38.1 (2018), 41). About the constitutive social role

emphasizes the social construction of the *para*, ‘a product of everyday encounter’, a community generated by a ‘sense of local rules and familiar faces’ more than by physical boundaries.<sup>17</sup> As a liminal space between one’s home and the city at large, the *para* thus rests on a shared sense of belonging and of loyalty to an area and its people, an appropriate example of locality as Appadurai defines it.

Kushanava Choudhury’s portrait of Kolkata in *The Epic City*, which narrates his return from the United States, expresses the author’s deep-rooted attachment to his North Kolkata neighbourhood (Maniktala), which he minutely delineates: ‘I am a North Calcutta guy. When my foot touches down on Maniktala More, no matter how late at night or how much flooding there is, when I see the familiar clock tower of Maniktala Market and the naked bulbs of the vegetable sellers squatting on the footpath outside, I know that I am home’.<sup>18</sup> Relying on personal and public landmarks, the writer becomes a subjective cartographer, drawing a mental map of his sphere of familiarity. The primacy of local belonging evidenced by ‘North Kolkata’ Anglophone writers such as Saikat Majumdar, Indrajit Hazra or Kunal Basu, also extends to the southern part of the city, which was developed later than the north, as shown by Supriya Chaudhuri’s testimony on her childhood *para*. Thus, Amit Chaudhuri’s fiction and nonfiction similarly portray the city at the level of the locality, highlighting the permeability between interior and exterior in Calcutta houses.<sup>19</sup> His debut novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address*, was critically acclaimed for its sensorial apprehension of the city, its minute delineation of the poetical aspect of everyday life in late-1980s Calcutta.<sup>20</sup> The novel revolves around the two holiday visits of a ten-year-old child to his family, which he mostly spends in the house and in the ‘short stretch of world’ of his uncle’s neighbourhood in South

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of the *mohalla* in North India Delhi, see Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* and Upendranath Ashk’s autobiographical stories (*In the City a Mirror Wandering*, trans. by Daisy Rockwell (Delhi: Penguin, 2019)).

<sup>17</sup> Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (London, New-York: Routledge, 2005), p. 210.

<sup>18</sup> Choudhury, p. 21. This surveying of the neighbourhood echoes Certeau’s definition of the neighbourhood (*quartier*), and his stress on the pedestrian path as a way of appropriating urban space (‘Walking in the City’, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, pp. 231-272). Choudhury’s narrator similarly surveys Connaught Place in Delhi in ‘The Importer of Blondes’ (PMS 3). See Maniktala on the Kolkata map in appendix.

<sup>19</sup> I primarily use ‘Calcutta’ when referring to Chaudhuri’s writing, as the name conveys his appreciation of certain qualities of the city, which he associates with ‘modernity’ and distinguishes from Kolkata, the contemporary, degraded avatar of the city. Similarly, I use ‘Bombay’ in order to reflect Chaudhuri’s use of the old toponym, conveying his particular conception of the city.

<sup>20</sup> *A Strange and Sublime Address* portrays Kolkata just before the 1991 liberalization reforms, which singles it out among my selection of texts, even though it anticipates some of the transformations to come. Including it in my analysis, along with his 1998 novel *A Freedom Song*, enables me to highlight Chaudhuri’s writing of the continuities of urban life before and after the reforms, always suffused with a nostalgia for a fantasised past Calcutta.

Calcutta (CAL 218). The strange and sublime address set into relief in the title is the following, written on the first page of his cousin's school books:

17 Vivekananda Road  
Calcutta (South)  
West Bengal  
India  
Asia  
Earth  
The Solar System  
The Universe (SA 80)

The gradual upscaling of the information, continuing the logic and order of conventional postal address indications, creates a visual zooming-out effect which locates the house in the cosmos and dwarfs it at the same time. Vivekananda Road is a fictional road based on the actual Pratapaditya Road in South Calcutta, where the author's uncle used to live.<sup>21</sup> Chaudhuri writes that, as a child, this road was all that he knew of Calcutta, and this 'short stretch of the world' appears as a metonym of the city in his novels. Considering Kolkata as a periphery in the world-system, Saikat Majumdar underlines how the address foregrounds the 'porous borders of the provincial, through which it miraculously blends into the universal', thus clearly connecting the local with the global scales here.<sup>22</sup> The passage is also a conscious mimicking of the address that Stephen Dedalus writes in his geography textbook in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, denoting a larger aesthetic affiliation with modernists on the margins of the British Empire, but also alluding to Dedalus's confounding imperial geography, thus interrogating Dublin or Kolkata's place in the world.<sup>23</sup>

Against the zooming-out movement of the address, Chaudhuri's writing actually downscales Kolkata by zooming-in on one road. This enhancing movement continues as he zooms-in on one house, in which each tiny object, insect, or movement is enlarged. As he points out in his essay on Calcutta, his novel *Freedom Song*, was described by a literary critic as an 'entomologist's notebook' and its characters compared to 'stick insects' (CAL 148). If this originally derogatory comment does not do justice to the fluid movement of Chaudhuri's prose, it does encapsulate the close attention he pays to the minutiae of daily

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<sup>21</sup> Chaudhuri, 'Stories of Domicile', in *Clearing a Space*, p. 189.

<sup>22</sup> Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 153.

<sup>23</sup> See James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 28. 'The banal materiality of the provincial, in a state of perpetually unfulfilled longing for the metropolitan, energizes the regionalist aesthetics in such fictions, in late twentieth-century Kolkata as much as in late-nineteenth-century Dublin.' (Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 154). It is worth noting that Georges Perec, another urban writer, also mimics this cosmic zooming-out in *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, trans. by John Sturrock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), p. 84.

life in his novels. The comparison actually appears in his first novel, when the summer heat reaches its highest point, compelling the family to stay indoor:

They had shut all the windows and closed the shutters so that the room was a large box covered by a lid, cool and dark and spacious inside. And they were like tiny insects living in the darkness of the box, breathing in the air of the world through invisible perforations. (SA 29)

The prose shrinks down the house, turning the bedroom into a box and its occupants into insects. Considering the way Sandeep closely observes the human and the nonhuman movements in the microcosm of the house, the comparison self-reflexively hints at Chaudhuri's microscopic writing, looking at reality through a magnifying glass. The metaphor ties in with the downscaling of the city his novels perform, renewing our vision of urban life through his magnifying of the minute world of sensations.<sup>24</sup>

The opening paragraph of the novel describes the boy's reaching his uncle's house as the taxi enters the lane which forms the novel's narrative core:

He saw the lane. Small houses, unlovely and unremarkable, stood face to face with each other. Chhotomama's house had a pomelo tree in its tiny courtyard and madhavi creepers by its windows. A boy stood clinging to the rusting iron gate, while another boy pushed it backward and forward. As he did so, the first boy travelled in a small arc through space. When the taxi stopped in front of the house, they stared at it with great dignity for a few moments, then ran off in terror, leaving the gate swinging mildly and illegally. A window opened above (it was so silent for a second that Sandeep could hear someone unlocking it) and Babla's face appeared behind the mullions. (SA 7)

The perimeter outlined in this short paragraph, in which everything is still suspended, marks the boundaries of Chaudhuri's fictional universe, a 'small arc through space' that the child will cross back and forth in the course of the novel. The detail of the two young neighbours playing with the iron gate already suggests that the gate belongs to the common space of the locality, and hints at the porosity between interior and exterior at the scale of the neighbourhood, as the boy smoothly moves back and forth between the private and the public space of the street. The precise observations of the incipit set the tone for the whole novel, attending to 'unlovely and unremarkable' fragments taken from ordinary urban life and minute movements through space. Amit Chaudhuri repeatedly expresses his attachment to the unremarkable, the ungrandiose aspects of urban life, the 'endotic' that Percec urges his contemporaries to imagine.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the description of the almost unnoticed arrival in the

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<sup>24</sup> Chapter 5 will discuss the myriad micro-events of everyday life that Chaudhuri's writing magnifies.

<sup>25</sup> 'What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic.' (Percec, 'Approaches to What', p. 177). For a thorough analysis of the 'endotic' in Indian urban writing, see Chapter 5.



house, apparently told from an external point of view, is at odds with conventional scenes of arrival in or return to the metropolis, suggesting the quiet provinciality of Calcutta. Here the use of the definite article indicates that ‘the lane’ is known, and so is the family house that Sandeep visits every holiday: no sense of disorientation, wonder or melancholy, commonly associated with return, is hinted at. The toned-down description conveys the impression that Sandeep’s viewpoint is suspended for a second, before surfacing again in the final parenthesis, stressing how subdued this moment is.

These small ordinary houses, only separated by a narrow lane, are the prism through which the writer looks at the city. The way in which Chaudhuri captures urban life through the daily life of domiciles and their surroundings is perfectly grasped by a reflexive passage, arising from a stroll around the neighbourhood in the evening, during a power-cut:

But why did these houses — for instance, that one with the tall, ornate iron gates and a watchman dozing on a stool [...] or that other one with the small porch and the painted door, which gave the impression that whenever there was a feast or a wedding all the relatives would be invited [...], why did these houses seem to suggest that an infinitely interesting story might be woven around them? And yet the story would never be a satisfying one, because the writer, like Sandeep, would be too caught up in jotting down the irrelevances and digressions that make up lives, and the life of a city, rather than a good story – till the reader would shout ‘Come to the point!’ – and there would be no point, except the girl memorizing the rules of grammar, the old man in the easy chair fanning himself, and the house with the small, empty porch that was crowded, paradoxically with many memories and possibilities. The ‘real’ story, with its beginning, middle, and conclusion, would never be told, because it did not exist. (SA 53-54)

This *ars poetica* highlights first the narrative potency of the locality, fostered, in part, by the specific architecture of the houses (a porch, a veranda, iron gates, French windows), which spurs the imagination of the writer and of his fictional double. The passage exemplifies the tension inhabiting Chaudhuri’s writing, between a form of realism and a suggestive, poetical description of the city. In fact, the houses only *evoke* potentially infinite plots that are glimpsed at without ever being fully probed. In Chaudhuri’s eyes, city life is best rendered through these irrelevant fragments and pointless meanderings rather than through all-encompassing views and monumental narratives. Thus, the story of this family cramped on the porch or that of this little girl learning the rules of Bengali grammar are not meant to be included in a larger narrative.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Majumdar interprets this passage as follows: ‘Unlike many introspective writers who delve deeper into the human psyche, for Chaudhuri, the deepest wonders of life seem to lie on its very surface, on the quotidian materiality of its daily texture [...]. The promise of the story or epiphanic significance is deferred endlessly within this deconstructive discourse, motivated by the constructed “unfinishedness” of postcolonial life and its

Sandeep's imaginative daydreaming does not stem from an in-depth exploration of one house but from the continuous stream of multiple possible lives and stories that he brushes against, so that his strolling mirrors the act of writing. His fascination for houses stems from the writer's passion for the ordinary and his dismissal of anything monumental, as suggested by this excerpt from his latest novel, set in Bombay: 'We observed this flank curving on the left, ignoring the sea, as if the panorama had no relevance – as if the houses held the key to how life might be lived here'.<sup>27</sup> Walking along the spectacular road called Marine Drive (also known as 'the Queen's necklace') unfolding along the Arabian sea, the two friends shun the dazzling landscape in order to peer at the unremarkable or unnoticed houses, evidencing the 'power of the trivial' in Chaudhuri's imagination.<sup>28</sup> Chaudhuri's writing of local life in its infinitesimal details also springs from the specific architecture of South Calcutta. Built in the early twentieth century and combining local styles with Art Deco elements, these houses (which can be found in the neighbourhoods of Ballygunge, Golpark, or Bhowanipore) are generally low, with balconies and rooftop terraces which give rise to spying and daydreaming in Chaudhuri's fiction, and lend themselves to the observation of and communication with one's neighbours. Their architectural style and the neighbourhoods' layout (with houses dispersed along wide leafy roads) differ from the nineteenth-century houses of North Calcutta, with elevated ledges (or *roak*) spilling over narrow, congested lanes.<sup>29</sup> Yet these two architectural styles foster a sense of permeability between inside and outside which characterises the whole city.

This is contrasted in the novel with Bombay's high rises, preventing direct access to the minute activities of the neighbourhood. In fact, loitering, spectating and conversing, which are the prevailing activities in Sandeep's version of Calcutta are pitted against his everyday life in Bombay, where his twenty-third-floor apartment gives him a spectacular panoramic view of the metropolis which remains a distant horizon: 'no sounds, no smells, only a pure, perpetually moving picture' (SA 91).

Once or twice, Sandeep remembered Bombay and felt oddly unhappy without knowing why. Alone in the big apartment on the twenty-third floor, he was like Adam in charge of paradise, given dominion over the birds and fishes; he was too much in the foreground. (SA 30)

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attendant cultural hybridities'. ('Dallying with Dailiness: Amit Chaudhuri's Flâneur Fiction', *Studies in the Novel*, 39.4 (2007), 454-456).

<sup>27</sup> Chaudhuri, *Friend of My Youth*, p. 102.

<sup>28</sup> Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> On the architecture of North Calcutta houses, see Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta*. See Ballygunje (Balyganj) and Bhowanipore (Bhowanipur) on the map of Kolkata in appendix.

The spectacular view of the Arabian sea, mentioned earlier, is associated with a cold loneliness. The final clause betrays the narrator's dislike of conspicuousness: he seems uncomfortable with his towering position and is rather eager to melt into the background in order to observe the unlooked-for. The view from the heights petrifies the city as a distant frozen picture, deprived of asperities and sounds whereas things are within reach from the second floor of his uncle's house in Calcutta. This is characteristic of the 'Bombay-Calcutta' opposition which fuels Chaudhuri's urban consciousness, his writing reflecting his going back and forth between the two cities.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, the author also comes across inspiring architecture in the neighbourhood of Bandra in Bombay, where his parents moved upon his father's retiring (before moving back to Kolkata). This leafy northern suburb, originally peopled with fishermen and later with an important Portuguese Catholic community, now rapidly gentrifying, is mostly made of cottages surrounded with bougainvillea and other lush trees. This is the place where the author managed to write his first collection of poems, *St Cyril Road and Other Poems*, the title of which refers to this lane in Bandra, and bears witness to the importance of the locality in his writing. His second novel, *Afternoon Raag*, alternating between chapters set in Oxford and others in Calcutta and Bombay, closely depicts the student-narrator's attachment to this neighbourhood: 'I grew to love that lane. The flat was on the third floor, and its verandah brought one magically closer to its life'.<sup>31</sup> The perception of the neighbourhood's bylanes as 'shrunk versions of the bigger ones, miniature portraits of them' demonstrates the downsizing movement of his writing.<sup>32</sup> Like the micro-historian, Amit Chaudhuri is thus very alert to the impact of height and scale on the perception and construction of urban space. He thus evinces the same sensibility to architecture as Raj Kamal Jha, who depicts the pleasure felt by 'Man' upon gazing at New City from the heights of his hotel room (SW 64) and Aamir's wonder as he observes the Maidan from one of the highest floors of Paradise Park in Kolkata, contrasting with the view from his own apartment (in *If You Are Afraid of Heights*).

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<sup>30</sup> A similar bird's-eye view of the city from the topfloor bar of the Taj Hotel is described through the vantage point of Chaudhuri as an adult, who despite his aversion to Bombay, cannot help being impressed by the panoramic view: 'You could see so much from the Rendezvous: even Bombay, which I thought of as dreary, appeared exciting in a cold, cinematic sweep. The lights, the office buildings, the tiled roofs far below, the dockyard, the exceptional dark of the water. I had to be impressed in spite of being bored. Rendezvous hovered above, yet was of, this world. So were we. I'd stare with reluctant affection at the outline of the building I lived in across the black expanse of nothing.' (*Friend of My Youth*, p. 134).

<sup>31</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, *Afternoon Raag* (1993), (New York: Vintage, 2000), p. 194.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

If Chaudhuri's deep attachment to Calcutta architecture is undeniable, these instances suggest that he is able to find some of its characteristics in other cities, drawing lines between the local and the global, mitigating the exceptionality of the city. He thus states that he is able to find Calcutta in V.S. Naipaul's Trinidad or James Joyce's Dublin, among others.<sup>33</sup> His affinity with Arun Kolatkar, whose poetry is fuelled by micro-events occurring on the pavements of Kala Ghoda in Bombay, suggests the extendibility of local writing.<sup>34</sup> Other writers of Bombay deploy the narrative potentialities of the locality, such as Sampurna Chattarji with her series of stories on the everyday life of a middle-class housing compound, and Rohinton Mistry's fiction, which scrutinizes Parsi neighbourhoods. The writer of the locality *par excellence* remains Kiran Nagarkar, whose milestone novel *Ravan and Eddie* provides a humorous ethnography of a working-class *chawl*.<sup>35</sup> The novel follows two children in their picaresque adventures through Mumbai, but is anchored to the *chawl*, as evidenced by the presence of a map of the tenement, which is deemed essential to understanding the inhabitants' psyches and the social hierarchy embedded in the architecture of the building. The novel is peppered with mock-ethnographic developments on the social life of the locality, which turn it into a microcosm of Bombay's contradictions.<sup>36</sup>

## 2. Delhi's *Nukkad* Novels

The Bengali word '*para*' has come to embody a certain relation to urban space and time in Kolkata, characterised by community and familiarity. However, the neighbourhood, as a crucial social and imaginative formation for urban-dwellers, also structures the

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<sup>33</sup> 'I found it possible to discover Calcutta in the oddest of places – in the mining town in D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*; Katherine Mansfield's New Zealand, which she said she wanted to explore to the last detail, including the "creak of the laundry basket"; the across-the-balcony exchanges in Naipaul's Trinidad; the economically conjured-up neighbourhoods and streets in the stories in *Dubliners*. Calcutta, for me, was a particular idea of the modern city, and I found it in many forms, works, and genres.' (CAL 74).

<sup>34</sup> Laetitia Zecchini reads Kolatkar's poetry in the light of Perec's notion of the infra-ordinary in her monograph (see Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar*, pp. 92-93).

<sup>35</sup> Chattarji, 'Anger Is One Letter Away from Danger', 'Bad Language', 'Gentle Folk' (DL 135-150). Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* may also be read as part of 'apartment fiction', as examined by Alex Tickell ('Writing the City and Indian English Fiction', in *Planned Violence*).

<sup>36</sup> See Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey* (London: Faber, 1991) and *Tales from Firozsha Bagh* (Delhi: Penguin, 1997); Tyrewala, *No God in Sight*. If Nagarkar's most famous portrayal of locality remains *Ravan and Eddie* (see Gopal, *The Indian English Novel*, pp. 135-137), the importance of space and local life are also palpable in *God's Little Soldier* (2006) (Delhi: Harpercollins, 2012), in which the protagonist's father is a well-known architect, and the text closely describes the Khan's family luxurious Firdaus House overlooking the Arabian sea, as well as the cramped Suleiman Mansion, a Muslim building in Bhendi Bazaar.

imaginative geographies of other Indian cities, as is the case with Delhi.<sup>37</sup> At odds with the all-encompassing urban novels and reportages studied in the first three chapters, Aman Sethi's literary nonfiction and Chowdhury's fiction portray the city through the everyday life of one neighbourhood, and often focus on a small group of individuals, embedded in their social milieu, underlining the collective production of the local, through practices such as loitering, watching, conversing and fighting. The downsizing movement at work in their writing is epitomized by the liminal space of the *nukkad* or street-corner, in between home and the city at large, which shapes their narratives, much as the *para* does for the writers of Kolkata. However, one could claim that the gap separating the *para* and the *nukkad* is the one separating the family from the gang: the *nukkad* is associated with lowlife rather than with family life and bourgeois morality.

Borrowing the category of the *nukkad novel* from Tabish Khair, initially applied to Siddharth Chowdhury's novels, I extend it to Sethi's literary reportage to show how these texts, despite their generic differences, converge in their tight focus on the neighbourhood and the restrained tone with which they narrate their protagonists' tribulations. Sethi's and Chowdhury's literary cartographies set them apart from other Delhi Anglophone writers first because their imaginative map of the capital does not encompass the entirety of Delhi's sprawling territory and its bewildering conjunction of extreme wealth and destitution. Their imagined Delhi is geographically and socially circumscribed, and even though their texts are mostly located in the 'old city', they do not indulge in the melancholy mood characterising Old Delhi literature. Secondly, not only do they take the small lens of the street-corner to map the capital city, but they also shed light on overlooked corners and neighbourhoods, often missing from the literary cartographies of Delhi. Tabish Khair thus writes that *nukkads* have often been sidestepped by Indian Anglophone literature:

But, by and large, the *nukkads* and *chowrahas* of small-town India tend to get a fleeting mention, especially in literature that has grown under the nurturing and, sometimes blinding sun of Rushdie's well-deserved success. The sleek automobile of Indian fiction

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<sup>37</sup> Based on a different corpus of texts (including novels by Rohinton Mistry, Aravind Adiga and Ruchir Joshi), Alex Tickell proposes that the 'neighbourhood aesthetics' which characterised Indian fiction up to the 1990s has faded in the wake of the rapid mutations of Indian cities' architecture and infrastructure. These new urban forms would lend themselves to a counter-aesthetic based on satirical dystopia or monstrous realist fiction more than to 'socially involved narrative of the low-rise apartment block' ('Writing the City and Indian English Fiction', in *Planned Violence*, p. 206). While this analysis supports my argument about the connection between architectural and literary forms, I observe an enduring urban aesthetics of the locality in contemporary texts, which coexists rather than is replaced by dystopian representations. Krishna Sobti's Hindi novel *The Music of Solitude* (trans. by Vasudha Dalmia (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2013)), set in a middle-class high rise in East Delhi, is an example of a novel suffused with a neighbourly atmosphere despite being set in a new tower block.

in English rushes past the nukkads, retaining only some passing image of men sitting in a circle playing the game of ‘hit-the-spitton’!<sup>38</sup>

I venture that this observation, initially concerned with small towns, can be stretched to the forgotten corners of India’s metropolises, thus challenging the divide between urban centres and peripheries. Both Siddharth Chowdhury and Aman Sethi dwell in urban areas that are rushed past by the sleek automobile of Indian fiction in English. None of them explore the ‘imperial zone’ of New Delhi nor the newly developed southern fringes of the city, thus engaging in the unsettling of Indian urban and literary monumentality.

Aman Sethi’s literary reportage, *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi* (2012), explores the much-written-about Mughal part of the capital, originally known as Shahjahanabad. Yet his interest does not reside in the close-knit networks of ancient families inhabiting crumbling *havelis*, but in a group of migrant workers whose hold on the neighbourhood is highly precarious. Far from dwelling on the crepuscular atmosphere of the Mughal capital, he sets to investigate the bustling manufacturing city and its day labourers. *A Free Man* is conceived as an account of the ‘mazdoor ki zindagi – the life of the labourer’ on the streets of Old Delhi (FM 7). After writing pieces on the steel industry and on a proposed Delhi government bill to provide health insurance for construction workers, Sethi decided to write a long-form reportage on the labourers’ everyday life, and *A Free Man* appears as the writer’s diary of a five-year immersion into a circle of manual workers in a neighbourhood of Old Delhi.<sup>39</sup>

The genesis of the reportage testifies to the narrowing-down of the narrative scale, pointing to initial similarities with Dasgupta’s *Capital*, yet gradually drifting towards the locality and Ashraf’s individuality. Indeed, Sethi’s initial project was to write about Delhi’s rapid transformation from a manufacturing North Indian city into a global finance-and-service-oriented one. Yet this macro-narrative is turned into a reportage on urban labour, focusing on a group of homeless day labourers from Bara Tooti Chowk, before narrowing down again, as Mohammed Ashraf, former biology student, butcher, floor-polishing

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<sup>38</sup> Khair, ‘The Nukkad Novel’, 34. Salman Rushdie’s caricatural representation of Indian villages and rural India, typically embodying an urban elite ignorant vision of these areas, has been lambasted by Tabish Khair (*Babu Fictions*) and Amitava Kumar (*Bombay London New York* (New York: Routledge, 2002)).

<sup>39</sup> Born in Mumbai in 1983, Aman Sethi studied at the Asian College of Journalism in Chennai and at the Columbia School of Journalism. As a correspondent for *The Hindu*, he covered the Maoist insurgency in Chhattisgarh between 2009 and 2011 and wrote several pieces on the resurgence of islamophobia in contemporary India (see for instance ‘Love Jihad’, *Granta*, 130 (Winter 2015), 33-47). After some time as the *Hindu* Africa correspondent in Addis Adaba, he was appointed editor-in-chief of the HuffPost India in 2018, which closed in November 2020.

contractor, construction painter and above all, talented story-teller, catches the reporter's attention and gradually invades the whole text. Thus, far from drawing a comprehensive portrait of the city or putting forward an all-encompassing explanation of the city's current state, Sethi tackles the transformation of the city through the small lens of one individual's daily life. His realism is that of faithfulness to Ashraf's singularity, only obliquely illuminating a larger historical process, thus contrasting with Dasgupta's realism, which constantly moves back and forth between the particular and the general, the peculiarities of Delhi and its relation to the abstract laws of capitalism.

Sethi tightens the geographical scope of his narrative to Chandni Chowk, the main commercial area of Old Delhi, then to Sadar Bazaar, and ultimately to one of its quarters, Bara Tooti Chowk, a labour market.<sup>40</sup> Locating the area within popular perceptions of Delhi, he describes Sadar Bazaar, one of Delhi's oldest markets, as a forgotten microcosm, unregistered in tourist maps:

Unlike the most scenic parts of the city, Sadar Bazaar shows up on tourist maps of Delhi as the large empty space between the backpacker haven of Paharganj and picturesque Chandni Chowk. Here gruff shopkeepers are wholesalers of goods shorn of glamour: plastics, metal products, raw cotton, grains. Till recently, the bazaar functioned like a small city. (FM 9)

The tight geographical contours of the book shed light on a part of the city which is often overlooked and soon to be brushed away by the new global city (both figuratively and literally, as shown by the 2004 ban on factory works within the city and the 2005 demolition drives documented in the book). Sethi explores the gritty manufacturing city, contrasting it with his own middle-class romanticised vision of Old Delhi as a city of ruins, and with the glistening 'global' Delhi.<sup>41</sup> He investigates the social and economic structures of the labour market and probes into its hierarchies and seasonal rhythms. The documentary mode used to describe the technicalities of work, implying the use of vernacular words, is balanced by a close attention paid to the 'counter-factual narratives' which participate in the daily construction of the locality, and of the city at large. In fact, the locality of Bara Tooti Chowk is first and foremost defined by the legends and rumours that surround it rather than by its geographical coordinates:

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<sup>40</sup> See the map of Delhi in appendix.

<sup>41</sup> He self-reflexively expresses his romanticised vision of a crepuscular Delhi: 'We head down towards Teli Bara Road, past several buildings that I once romantically assumed were ruined havelis but which turned out to be perfectly functioning godowns.' (FM 56-57)

Ashraf lives in Bara Tooti Chowk, the crossing of twelve taps, one of Sadar's road intersections. By dint of being older than most of Delhi, every lane, alleyway, and dead end in Sadar has its own claim to posterity that is kept alive by its shopkeepers, tea sellers, manual labourers, and policemen. Bara Tooti is no different.

'Mahatma Gandhi used to come here all the time', said an old shopkeeper I once interviewed. 'He came to supervise the burning of foreign foods during the azadi andolan.'

'Did you ever see him?'

'No, no, I was just a boy then. But I did see Indira Gandhi give a speech here [...]. You can still see the tree she stood under. It's either the one under the shop just opposite this one, or the tree that was cut down last year.' (FM 10)

The locality is also said to be where the first police station in Delhi was built, in which freedom fighters were imprisoned. The passage lays bare the sedimentation of stories that make up the locality, all related to great episodes of national history, from the freedom fight to Indira Gandhi's contested rule, emphasising the palimpsestic dimension of the place. The material evidence of the tree shows how physical space is used to uphold a fuzzy collective memory. The dialectical relationship between space and narrative is highlighted in Chowdhury's *Day Scholar*, in which a bullet hole in the protagonist's bedroom wall is turned into a positive trace of the landlord's purportedly dangerous life. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* similarly stresses the transmission of ancestral stories in Anjum's family and in the hijra community, supported by the walls of the Red Fort and leaving their imprint on the locality.

Sethi also collects stories travelling across the city, forming a web which covers a larger ground than the neighbourhood, therefore mitigating the tight focus of the book. The beginning of the book alludes to bizarre stories making the headlines, construed as symptoms of 'a city splintering under the strain of a fundamental urban reconfiguration [...], a city of twenty million histrionic personas resiliently absorbing the day's glancing blows only to return home and tenderly claw themselves to sleep' (FM 42). This reconfiguration of Delhi as a 'glistening metropolis of a rising Asian superpower' (FM 39) had an impact upon Ashraf's life as it entailed his eviction and the destruction of his house in Sanjay Amar Colony, one of many working-class settlements along the Yamuna bank which were destroyed in 2005 because of the Commonwealth Games of 2010.<sup>42</sup> Sethi addresses urban transformations and their consequences upon urban-dwellers through the prism of rumours. The story of 'Monkeyman', a tall humanoid or robot-like figure which supposedly attacked people on the eastern fringes of the city is construed as evidence of a general distress entailed

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter 1.



by the violence of uneven urban development.<sup>43</sup> Distress is measured through the proliferation of such improbable tales, peddled by story-tellers such as J. P. Singh Pagal, introduced as the neighbourhood's madman ('pagal' means 'mad' in Hindi): 'tales of unexplained disappearances, stories of amazing good fortune, whispers of a strange dark creature that prowls the eastern borders of the city — J. P. Singh knew them all and had seen them all' (FM 36). Probing into the mad story-teller's techniques, Sethi becomes aware of the informal network of information that criss-crosses the city:

In the course of their works, the mazdoors of Bara Tooti travelled across the city, picking up snippets of information that they used to measure the 'temperature' of the city [...]. J.P. Singh tapped into this network of mazdoor information and passed on the news as he travelled from chowk to chowk in the markets of the old city. (FM 43)

His portrayal of the talented story-picker concludes on a reflection about the significance of these half-truths, gossips and rumours regarding the city's transformation: 'By ferreting out the absurd, the unlikely, and the almost true, J. P. Singh Pagal served as the medium for Delhi's dislocation and unease' (FM 42-43). This instance evidences that, far from losing sight of the unsettling effects of these macro-historical processes, the text marks them at a micro-level. Thus, Sethi's writing shuns Dasgupta's explicit overarching diagnosis, yet it mirrors *Capital's* insistence on the delirious aspect of Delhi's metamorphosis through its registering of local stories. These urban legends also hint at the tension between mythologies and facts which energizes urban nonfiction writing at large (Dasgupta and Mehta for instance), yet these ordinary narratives mostly emphasize alternative myths, springing from one neighbourhood rather than the whole city.

Siddharth Chowdhury's fictional world is not that of subaltern workers, yet it sheds light on another overlooked social and spatial world of Delhi, as the northern fringes that he explores in his novel *Day Scholar* do not often appear on literary maps.<sup>44</sup> The Bengali-Bihari diaspora and the strength of their enduring small-town habits are oddities in the Anglophone literary landscape. Chowdhury's fiction, by zooming in on one urban neighbourhood,

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<sup>43</sup> About the Monkeyman, see Aditya Nigam, 'Theatre of the Urban: The Strange Case of the Monkeyman', in *Sarai Reader 02*, p. 22-30.

<sup>44</sup> Arundhati Roy's screenplay, *In Which Annie Gives it Those Ones*, is set in 'a fictional architecture school during the dope-smoking, bell-bottom-wearing era of the 1970s' based on her experience at Delhi University School of Architecture. She underlines the 'Delhi University patois – a combination of English and Hindi' which also characterises her first screenplay. (Roy, 'In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities?', in *Azadi*, p. 20). See also Githa Hariharan, *In Times of Siege* (Delhi: Penguin, 2003) and in Hindi, Nilotpāl Mrinal, *Dark Horse: Ek Ankahi Dastan* (Delhi: Hind Yugm/Westland, 2015).

whether in Patna or in Delhi, complicates the centre-periphery dynamics which usually defines the relation between India's global cities and provincial 'small towns', and thus offers another image of Delhi which pushes back off the 'world-class' city imaginary. While his first stories and novel (*Diskha at St Martin's, Patna Roughcut*) primarily scrutinized everyday life in Patna, his writing has gradually moved to the exploration of Delhi in his novel *Day Scholar* and latest short-story collection *The Patna Manual of Style*, reflecting the author's biographical trajectory.<sup>45</sup> My analysis primarily bears on Chowdhury's latest texts, yet the inextricable connection between Patna and Delhi, 'the twin cities of [his] imagination' (RH 427), needs to be addressed.

In his first two books, Chowdhury primarily represents Patna in the late 1980s as a familiar ground, criss-crossed by bonds of allegiances and solidarities. He mostly focuses on the 'tough Bihari-Bengali neighbourhood' of Kadam Kuan where he grew up, one of the oldest localities of Patna (DM 137). Though Patna is a state capital and counts more than five million inhabitants, Chowdhury contrasts the sense of peripheral insularity and 'mofussil slowness' that emanates from it with the mobility and centrality of Delhi (PMS 59).<sup>46</sup> Yet he also stresses the two cities' kinship, underpinned by their belonging to the coherent regional unit of North India. The narrator of 'The Importer of Blondes' thus emphasizes the meteorological connection between Patna and Delhi, joined together by their extreme weather (PMS 12). The similarities between the twin-cities are also pointed out by the narrator Ritwik when he comes back from Delhi to his hometown in *Patna Roughcut*:

Since Delhi and Patna are twin cities, separated by 500 miles, it was as if I had never left the place. The weather was identical and so were the names of the old localities. All those Ganjs, Dariya, Sultan, Andrews and Baker. The only difference being while Patna had Baghs like Kankar and Gardani the big brother had Gardens like Dilshad and Rajouri. Since both were imperial towns of yore on whose fertile fields the fate of India

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<sup>45</sup> Chowdhury was born in Patna and studied English literature in Delhi University in the 1990s. He now works for Manohar publishing house in Delhi. Patna is the capital of the north-eastern state of Bihar and one of the oldest cities in India. It was the capital of the Maurya and Gupta dynasties, and remained an important commercial centre during the Mughal era. The city was a key site of mid-twentieth-century nationalism, and has since then been caught up in corruption and municipal breakdown. Bihar itself, one of the poorest states of the country, is often stereotypically reduced to its corrupted politics and its violence, a vision which Chowdhury obliquely debunks through his focus on genteel, upper-caste, upper-middle-class Bengali-Bihari. For a caricatural representation of Bihar, see the episode of 'the Great Goat scam' in Salman Rushdie's *The Ground* (pp. 254-273). Patna rarely features in Indian Writing in English (see Kumar, *A Matter of Rats*; 'In the Light of Small Towns' in *Anthology of the Modern Indian City*, pp. 143-151). Recent novels set in Bihar include *Patna Blues*, by Abdullah Khan (Delhi: Juggernaut, 2018).

<sup>46</sup> 'Mofussil' comes from the Urdu 'divided' and originally refers to the regions of India outside the three city states of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, hence to rural areas. It occasionally carries negative connotations when used by residents of a large metropolis (see Mishra, *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*; Ian Jack, *Mofussil Junction: Indian Encounters, 1977-2011* (Delhi: Viking, 2013). On Patna demography, see Census of India 2011, <[censusindia.gov.in](http://censusindia.gov.in)> 1028\_PART\_B\_DCHB\_PATNA> [accessed 26 May 2021].

had been decided many times, the public utility system was of the utmost importance. So while Delhi had grand-sounding Sarais, like Kale Khan, Katwariya, Sheikh and, my favourite, Julena, Patna on the other hand had to make do with proletarian Kuans: Agam, Makhaniya and, of course, Kadam Kuan. (PR 156)

This passage is one of the rare all-encompassing mappings of both cities in Chowdhury's fiction, which underscores the author's interest in localities and their peculiarities. The text focuses on climate and historical similarities as well as local toponymic differences, the numerous names alluding to the palimpsest of the diverse historical layers of the cities, from ancient Indian kingdoms to Mughal sultans and British colonizers. Here, as Khair argues, the author's flippant borrowing of Hindi words is 'central to the appreciation of a point or comment', in this case the difference in stature between the two cities.<sup>47</sup> The Hindi word *kuan* originally refers to a well dug into the earth while *sarai* is a word of Persian origin meaning rest-house or roadside inn. Its association with the Persian and with Mughal public works endows *sarai* with imperial grandeur, at odds with the 'proletarian' *kuans*. Pointing to another era, Delhi's 'Gardens' convey the centrality of the city for colonial rulers, pitted against Patna's provincial *baghs* (Hindi for garden). The toponyms, which enhance the writer's preoccupation with localities, are thus used to show both similarity and disparity, and picture Patna as an important regional urban centre yet dependent on the central power of Delhi.<sup>48</sup>

The centre-periphery division is nonetheless blurred by Chowdhury's apprehension of Delhi through the small lens of the locality and through his insider's viewpoint. In fact, what prevails in his geographies of Patna and Delhi is the sense of familiarity with urban social patterns, everyday practices which are shared by the inhabitants of both cities. Except for a few excursions to South Delhi, Chowdhury's representation of the capital is geographically restricted to a few localities north of Delhi (Daryaganj, Paharganj, Connaught Place) and socially circumscribed by the members of the Bihari middle-class diaspora in Delhi, idling away in teashops, small clerks' rooms and dingy student hostels brimming with scandalous rumours. The capital is thus constructed through a small-town prism, and is somehow turned into a double of Patna, as the province insinuates itself into the city through the characters' connections and habits.

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<sup>47</sup> 'Chowdhury feels no need to explain his non-English borrowings or to flaunt them. They crop up unobtrusively, but can be sometimes central to the appreciation of a point or comment.' (Khair, 'The Nukkad Novel', 34).

<sup>48</sup> 'Patna was peripheral to Delhi but central to other peripheries in the "backward" state of Bihar' (Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. XIV).

*Day Scholar* (2010), for instance, charts the trajectory of Hriday Thakur, an upper-caste, middle-class young man from Patna discovering the decadent world of Delhi University in the 1990s and relying on regional ties to adjust to this new environment. Shokeen Niwas, the seedy student hostel where the protagonist lives, is the epicentre of the narrative and shapes the narrator's discovery of Delhi. The hostel is itself the object of numerous sulphurous legends, mostly told by Jishnuda, constituting it as a locality. It is from this original communal space, a synecdoche of the 'Patna diaspora in Delhi', that he learns about Delhi customs and habits.<sup>49</sup> The protagonist's introduction to his landlord via his Patna mentor points to the strong ties between the province and the capital. According to the charismatic hostel caretaker Jishnuda, it is actually owing to the landlord's preconceptions about Biharis that Hriday gets a room in the hostel: 'Uncle has just one condition. The boys should primarily be Biharis. He seems to think that we are just like Gujjars. Tough and callous. No need to disillusion him. So never in any circumstance prove yourself to be otherwise. Be tough, stupid and callous always' (DS 286).<sup>50</sup> The text exposes the enduring stereotypes clinging to people from Bihar, and humorously twists them into identities to be strategically performed by Biharis themselves.

In the first short-story of *The Patna Manual of Style*, the same opportunistic Jishnuda uses these stereotypes of endurance, callousness and sociability to get hired as an event manager. Asking why Biharis do well in the event management business, he answers:

That is because we can manage anything. Nothing fazes us. We have infinite patience and our skin is made of stainless steel. Scratch-proof. When we are standing in a queue, we are not thinking of air conditioners [...]. We are that very extinct commodity now, that never-do-well young chacha or cousin who was earlier found in all middle-class homes and was indispensable to all social occasions and oddball jobs. Nowadays everybody works. Nobody is unemployed. And that is where we come in, the Bihari friend who will manage everything for you. And let me tell you, people pay good money to anyone who will offer to carry the burden of their worries for them [...]. In these modern times, a Bihari friend is worth his weight in gold. (PMS 15)

The use of the term 'commodity' seconds the idea that 'Bihari-ness' is primarily a strategic performance, meant to uphold one's position on the market. The construction of this mythical Bihari figure is indeed located in a commonplace reading of history and of India's economic development, that of the transition to 'modern times', i.e. to an economically liberalized India, generating a surge in demand for workers and putting an end to an era of

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<sup>49</sup> I borrow the phrase from Amitava Kumar's piece ('RK Narayan and More: The Flavour of Small Towns in our Novels', *Hindustan Times*, 3 January 2016, <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/your-voice-in-my-ear/story-1XQztUbdIe7dIT7fejIVsJ.html>> [accessed 26 May 2021]).

<sup>50</sup> *Gujjar* refers to ethnic agricultural and pastoral communities of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

massive unemployment. The text is not concerned with the newly employed and upwardly mobile individual, who could be deemed representative of the ascendancy of India on the global stage, but with the extinct idle ‘cousin’, whose rarefaction has purportedly allowed Biharis to take over as everyday managers.

The irony of Chowdhury’s appropriation of these stereotypes lies in the characterisation of his protagonists, whether Hriday or Ritwik, who are anything but tough and callous. In fact, his stories shed light on Bengali-Bihari highly educated young people, members of a socio-economically declining middle-class, who come to the city to study, rather than disenfranchised Bihari migrants coming for work, like Mohammed Ashraf in Aman Sethi’s reportage. What Chowdhury emphasizes is the ‘Patna style’, as suggested by the title of his latest collection (*The Patna Manual of Style*), referring to ‘the Patna code of living which the characters bring to Delhi. And not to upturned collars and safari suits’.<sup>51</sup> This code is that of urbane, sophisticated gentlemen or dandies, hinting at a strategy of social distinction, as suggested by Hriday Thakur’s statement, addressed to his former lover: ‘It is the Patna courtly style, dear girl. You wouldn’t understand [...]. Go to any party, in any country, on any moonlit terrace of the world, the best dressed man is always the one from Patna’ (PMS 73).<sup>52</sup>

Instead of the typical bewildering anonymity of the metropolis, the provincial narrator of *Day Scholar* thus encounters a partly familiar world. The university area is imagined as a cluster of numerous urban villages, structured by closely-knit social and regional networks of allegiances, occasionally enlivened by turf wars and peace-making protocols. Recalling literary representations of the *para* in Kolkata, Chowdhury’s mapping of students’ everyday leisure and habits in the city contrasts with the archetypal representation of the city as an alienating whirlwind. His street-corner writing represents the university campus as a small town within a bigger town. Nonetheless, the campus is not depicted as a self-enclosed world, hermetically sealed off from the city and the country at large, supporting the idea that *Day Scholar* is at the crossroads between the urban novel and the campus novel.<sup>53</sup> The university

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<sup>51</sup> Siddharth Chowdhury, ‘This is a Delhi Book in Many Ways’, Interview with Swati Daftuar, *Hindu*, 7 November 2015, <<http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/siddharth-chowdhury-on-the-patna-manual-of-style-shortlisted-for-the-hindu-prize-2015/article7854710.ece>> [accessed 26 May 2021].

<sup>52</sup> The title’s playful allusion to the Chicago Manual of style hints at the literary world in which the characters are engrossed, far from the madding crowd.

<sup>53</sup> The character’s learning trajectory, the systematic indication of the characters’ college, the satirical outlook on students’ short-lived romances, literary dreams and idleness brings to mind the campus novel, a booming genre in Indian Anglophone writing. However, these popular novels usually focus on hardworking upper-middle-class engineering students and enhance the campus as a refuge from the city’s bustle, contrary to Chowdhury’s seedy world, described through an unsentimental, self-reflexive tone. See Amitabha Bagchi,

students' union elections, for instance, are described as 'the bonsai version of national elections' (DS 392), revealing the connections of students' politics with national politics and characterising the campus as a miniature of Delhi, countering the monumental writing of the Indian capital.

The ordinary mode of Indian urban writing thus predominantly relies on the scale of the locality to portray Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata, while obliquely indicating how embedded it is within the city at large. This local approach contributes to the downsizing and the provincializing of the global city insofar as it both eschews the panoramic view of the city as a whole and it also emphasizes the city's inter-relations with provincial towns, thus grounding it in a regional context, whether that of Bengal (encompassing what is now Bangladesh) or of North India, thus countering the notion of a disconnected global city, in relation with the world rather than with other Indian cities. These alternative maps of Indian cities conjure up different urban realities, social groups, habits, and also tend to imply different narrative methods, based on close participant observation and immersion.

## II. Street-Corner Ethnographies

As stated in the chapter introduction, the street-corner is a direct echo of William F. Whyte's seminal anthropological study of an Italian neighbourhood in Boston, entitled *Street Corner Society*. Whyte's study of the neighbourhood as a social system governed by specific patterns, his mapping of the intricate social worlds of the 'corner boys' loitering in the streets, and his pioneering use of participant observation, provide a stimulating prism through which to examine the narrative methods of these *nukkad* and *para* texts. These seem driven by the same ambition to *document* the daily life of an urban locality, through techniques which belong to ethnography, such as thick description, long-term immersion in a circumscribed social world, and in-depth empirical knowledge.<sup>54</sup> They closely delineate the social practices which turn the street-corner into an 'interior within the exterior'.<sup>55</sup>

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*Above Average* (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2007); Chetan Bhagat, *Five Points Someone* (Delhi: Rupa, 2004); Parul A. Mittal, *Heartbreaks & Dreams! The Girls @ IIT* (Delhi: Srishti, 2008).

<sup>54</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 3-30.

<sup>55</sup> S. Chaudhuri, 'Remembering the Para', p. 124.

This documentary ambition, implying a low-key, dispassionate tone, contributes to the deflating movement of the ordinary mode, which conveys a sense of familiarity with the city. In fact, these narratives are not concerned with the bewildered discovery of the city as much as with ingrained habits which participate in the domestication of urban public space. The position of the interviewees or characters in the city is that of long-standing urban-dwellers rather than freshly arrived migrants from the countryside or from abroad. While the protagonists are not originally from the city, the texts do not thematise the moment of arrival and discovery but rather the mundane moments of everyday life in a locality which is intimately known and domesticated. This sense of being at home in the city provides a striking contrast with migration or return narratives, whether those of Mulk Raj Anand, Rana Dasgupta and Suketu Mehta.<sup>56</sup> Yet differences emerge as one examines the documentary mode of these narratives: while Sethi's immersion is constantly tempered by the author's critical reflection on his outsider position in the midst of 'urban outcasts', Siddharth Chowdhury's chronicles of the daily life of middle and lower-middle-class urban-dwellers are told from the perspective of the 'perceptive insider', akin to a form of self-ethnography.<sup>57</sup>

Street-corners in India appear as a particularly fertile literary ground because of the multifarious uses of streets and pavements in Indian cities. Shared between pedestrians, cars, rickshaws, street-vendors and beggars, humans and non-humans, the street is a congested and contested space.<sup>58</sup> The confrontation between street-vendors, street-dwellers and the town councils, evicting and criminalising the former in an attempt to 'beautify' and regulate the use of public space, surfaces in all the narratives. Jonathan Shapiro thus uses the case of Bombay and its newly built pedestrian elevated paths to show how these recent constructions contradict the multifarious functions of the street in India.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Partha Chatterjee laments the passing away of street culture with the overtaking of franchise supermarkets and shopping malls, withdrawing commercial and social activities from the streets and moving them into exclusionary private spaces – the mall, for instance, being defined by its

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<sup>56</sup> The bustling atmosphere of mid-1950s Calcutta in Sankar's famous novel *Chowringhee* ((1962), trans. by Arunava Sinha (Delhi: Penguin, 2007)) also contrasts with the quietness underlined by Amit Chaudhuri and others. See also Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (London: Macmillan, 1951). However, Aman Sethi does allude to Ashraf's first night in Delhi, 'when, for him, the city was still a mysterious place of freedom, camaraderie, and possibility' (FM 34). The notion of camaraderie already mitigates the anonymity of the metropolis. Chapter 6 will examine the caricatural shift from estrangement to familiarity in Chowdhury's *Day Scholar*.

<sup>57</sup> Khair, 'The Nukkad Novel', 34.

<sup>58</sup> Anjaria, 'Street Hawkers and Public Space in Mumbai'; Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27.10-11 (2012), 541-547.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria, 'Is There a Culture of The Indian Street?' *Seminar*, 636 (2012), <[https://www.india-seminar.com/2012/636/636\\_jonathan\\_s\\_anjaria.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2012/636/636_jonathan_s_anjaria.htm)> [accessed 21 May 2021].

introverted architecture and the dichotomy between interior and exterior.<sup>60</sup> If local peculiarities are underlined, such as the specific architecture of houses in Kolkata, allowing permeability between the house and the street, all the narratives highlight the ceaseless commercial and social life of the streets, and register the struggle for space on the streets, from the students' comic turf wars to the tragic condition of migrant homeless workers, using the streets as their home, yet constantly threatened by eviction.<sup>61</sup>

## 1. The Participant Observation of the Locality

Despite its brevity, Aman Sethi's narrative conveys the effect of an untrimmed account of urban everyday life. His research method consists in immersing himself intermittently for five years in a group of labourers living and working in Sadar Bazaar, and in registering everything – the fragmentary aspect of the text illustrates his attempt to order the collected material.<sup>62</sup> This is where his narrative strategy differs from that of Dasgupta, insofar as Sethi does not aim to build a coherent argument out of the contingencies of his experience with the city-dwellers. As Lisa Lau puts it, 'his reportage seems designed to offer fuller representation rather than further interpretation of Delhi', drawing his work closer to Suketu Mehta's reportage.<sup>63</sup> Sethi and Dasgupta both intend to explore the destructive mechanisms of capital at work in the city, yet the positioning of their texts (respectively an essay and a literary reportage), and of themselves as authors, Dasgupta as a novelist-turned-public intellectual, Sethi as a reporter, radically changes their conception and construction of the city.<sup>64</sup> Dasgupta writes an argumentative essay offering a bird's-eye view on the 'erupting' city and locating its transformation within a global system. The characters he fleshes out

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<sup>60</sup> Chatterjee, 'Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?'. See also Naresh Fernandes's rant against the urban policy of Bombay, concerned with private vehicles over public transport and pedestrians, epitomized in the mushrooming flyovers, the colossal 'sea-link', or the narrowing of pavements to give cars more space, giving up on the 'city of the streets' (*City Adrift*, pp. 141-143).

<sup>61</sup> For a comparison with the post-1945 car-oriented urban development in the United States, see Marshall Berman's section on streets versus highways: 'Ironically, within the space of a generation, the street, which had always served to express dynamic and progressive modernity, now came to symbolize everything dingy, disorderly, sluggish, stagnant, worn-out, obsolete – everything that the dynamism and progress of modernity were supposed to leave behind' (Berman, p. 317).

<sup>62</sup> See Chapter 2 for a definition of participant observation.

<sup>63</sup> Lisa Lau, 'Resisting Re-orientalism in Representation: Aman Sethi Writes of Delhi', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 54.3 (2018), 379.

<sup>64</sup> Interestingly, Sethi acknowledges Dasgupta's help in writing his book: 'Rana Dasgupta read through the final proofs, smoothening out sentences and gently disentangling mixed metaphors' (FM 229-230).



from his interviews as well as the historical sources he draws on are used as arguments in his demonstration, based on his ambition to give meaning to a supposedly illegible city.

The comparison with Mehta is also enlightening on several levels: both *Maximum City* and *A Free Man* evince their authors' listener skills, their accumulation of myriad stories and the tension between documenting and story-telling. Their shared insider-outsider position also situates them in the genre of the reportage. Yet, contrary to Sethi's work, the scope of Mehta's reportage is vast and its rhetoric heightened. Where Mehta seeks to write 'something with an arc' and shapes his reportage on Bombay as a quest, Sethi's endeavour to get a 'clear sense of the arc of [Ashraf's] life' (FM 81) is met with resistance and ultimately fails, and the form of the text manifests this creative failure. The registration of Ashraf's antagonism with the author and of his unique speech-style is an attempt not to drown his voice in that of the author. As was explained in Chapter 2, Mehta is driven by his thirst for 'extreme' stories and indulges in the inflation of his characters. Conversely, Sethi's realist aesthetics draws him towards the everyday, which he recounts in a subdued if sometimes humorous tone. He reflexively points to his journalistic thirst for scoops, such as when he states that Ashraf should try his luck with the liquor shop tender Kalyani, 'if nothing else, at least for the sake of [his] story' (FM 72) and acknowledges that he initially looked for Ashraf, whom he had already interviewed for a previous project, because he was a voluble man who 'made for excellent copy' (FM 6). Nonetheless, he clearly distinguishes this work (to which he refers as a 'research project' (FM 7)) from his assignments as a journalist, in which his conversations with people are subjected to the imperative of the event or of the sensational, memorable story.<sup>65</sup> Thus, his text includes scraps of non-sequitur conversations, erratic tales and off-the-point remarks which punctuate urban life, and it thematises the impossibility to build a consistent narrative out of these fragments. He also acknowledges the partiality of his account and the unreliability of the narratives he collects.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> He mentions in the acknowledgement that the book began as 'a project for the Sarai CS Independent Research Fellowship programme' (FM 230). Sarai is an interdisciplinary research group based in Delhi, which produced several volumes entitled 'Sarai Readers', providing perceptive analyses of urban issues in India.

<sup>66</sup> 'At no point is a source required to tell you the truth; we're not judges or prosecutors. As a journalist, you get counter-factual narratives to give you an approximation of what actually happened. With *A Free Man*, I realized that if we just let someone speak for themselves, it is a narrative. You've got to respect that; whether it is truthful or not, it allows someone to get through the day. But as a journalist, I can't just swallow all of that. I wrote myself into the book as well so I could voice my unease with [the credibility of] this narrative.' (Aman Sethi, 'Aman Sethi Explores Life in Delhi's Shadows', Interview with Karren Calabria, *Kirkus Review*, 24 October 2012, <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/aman-sethi-explores-life-dehli-shadows>> [accessed 26 May 2021]).

Sethi's interest in the life of Old Delhi labourers also implies that large swathes of the narrative are devoted to work, alternating between the labourers' perceptions of their work, and the reporter's impressions, constantly reflecting on his own outsider position in this world. As an ethnographic account, the book closely details the day-labourers' techniques to get hired and not to get evicted, their various professional skills as well as their pastimes. The hierarchy demarcating the labour line, from the 'mistry' (the expert), the 'beldaar (the understudy) to the 'mazdoor', the lowest labourer on the chain (FM 13-19) is carefully explained. Similarly, the difference between the regular workers ('lafunters') and seasonal workers, referred to as 'barsati mendak' (literally rain frogs), is detailed in several paragraphs (FM 16).<sup>67</sup> The hierarchies shaping the labour market and the labourers' day-to-day tactics are the most prominent themes he looks at, with a particular attention paid to the construction business (hinting at the city's development) and to butchery:

The raj mistry sits at the top of the hierarchy. A grizzled veteran of many years, he functions as the architect, chief engineer, and head foreman rolled into one. (FM 14)

The head kasai decides everything: who does what, who sits where, and also other things like when the knives should be changed, how often the floor should be mopped. (FM 76)

The text describes, among others, a range of manual techniques, such as the tricks of grain sifting, illegal alcohol trading, goat rearing, chicken undressing. It also describes how Ashraf shows off his painting material in order to get hired, displaying his most useless yet most impressive paintbrush, magically drawing employers to him: 'it's not a brush, it's a badge of honour' (FM 84). This attempt to give voice to subaltern labourers and to convey their own perception of their work is derived from Ben Hamper's memoir *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* (1991) and Stud Terkel's *Working* (1974), an oral history of work, based on interviews of American workers.<sup>68</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, Sethi interviews a government official, working at the Beggars' Court in Delhi. Once more the ethnographic bias is palpable as the reporter is not interested in sensational cases but in the techniques of identification and the workings of their not-so-efficient machine (FM 123).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Katherine Boo details the strict hierarchy of the garbage trade in Mumbai (from scavengers to garbage traders and hagglers) and the tricks learned by the protagonist Abdul (*Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, pp. XIV-XV). Yet this reportage constantly locates the workings of this microcosm within the larger narrative of India's global success, a metonymic logic Sethi refrains from.

<sup>68</sup> Sethi, 'Aman Sethi Explores Life in Delhi's Shadows'; Terkel, *Working*; Ben Hamper, *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* (New York: Warner, 1991).

<sup>69</sup> Chaudhuri's failed attempts at participant observation are derided in his essay, which captures his ethos as a failed reporter who is unable to engage with and to fully grasp the contemporary Kolkata. His chasing down an elusive stall-owner, his brief awkward conversation with a woman begging in the street, enhance his

Chowdhury's urban imaginary is also drawn to the street, and the tea-stall in particular, a strategic *trivial* place, where the characters intersect every day on Delhi University Campus. The short-story 'Danasur', for instance, is entirely set at Kaake ka Dhaba, one of the university tea-stalls where Ritwik, the protagonist, goes for a cup of tea each evening. The story is structured by the dialogue between Ritwik and the owner Kaake, 'a friend, philosopher and unwanted guide to all the students who frequented this place' (DM 28).<sup>70</sup> *Day Scholar* closely describes how the campus main road is turned into a meeting point, a battleground and above all, a stage, embodying the transplantation of provincial male entertainment, notably student fights, into the capital. The students' customs are described in a mock-ethnographic manner, evidencing Chowdhury's ironic yet thorough study of the 'endotic'.

Chhatra Marg was the preferred open-air auditorium for all sorts of 'tamasha' and 'nukkad natak'. Some elaborately mounted and performed but most hastily improvised [...]. Like in most small towns of Bihar, when evening descends and people saunter off to the nearby railway junction for entertainment, so in Delhi University Biharis came out of their boroughs in Kamla Nagar, Vijay Nagar, Indira Vihar, Maurice Nagar, Mukherjee Nagar, Hakikat Nagar and myriad other nagars and viharis, and set out for Chhatra Marg. There they would dawdle for a couple of hours, have tea at Jai Jawan dhaba, meet their girlfriends at Miranda, or PG Women's or Meghdoot hostels, and thrash out 'compromises' without any group coming to real blows. 'Compromises' were usually about imagined slights to one's dignity concerning a girl who was a 'sister' even though the girl may not have known the guy but was from the same town [...]. Usually in ten minutes flat most 'compromises' would be over. Then the leaders of the two groups would be summoned and asked to 'shake hands karo' and then everybody would have tea at Jai Jawan. All very proper and civilized. (DS 330-31)

Like the *sarais* and *kuans* of Delhi and Patna, the litany of *nagars* and *vihars* (village or quarter) gives visibility to these northern fringes abutting the North Campus of Delhi University and conveys the impression of a multitude converging and assembling into a crowd. The provincial railway junction is here replaced by the campus main road (Chhatra Marg), where minutely-explained rituals of mock-confrontations and negotiations between rival clans are performed in front of an eager audience. The term *nukkad* is associated with drama (*natak*) and show (*tamasha*), and the recurring language of performance emphasizes the mimicry rather than the actual use of violence, which contributes to the production of

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presence as an intruder and registers his own discomfort (CAL 51), at odds with Suketu Mehta's embrace of his role as an investigator (CAL 58).

<sup>70</sup> These passages also echo Kushanava Choudhury's humorous depictions of the daily conversations of old men at the tea-stall in his *para* (*The Epic City*, p. 28).

locality in the city.<sup>71</sup> The proliferation of toponyms, the distinct local meaning of the word *compromise*, the idiomatic conflation of English and untranslated Hindi (notably in the bilingual phrase *shake hands karo*) and the humorous tone all evidence the mock-ethnographic aspect of the novel.<sup>72</sup>

The deadpan tone and the lack of indignation also suggest that the tense atmosphere of masculine aggressiveness, far from being extra-ordinary, is part of the Delhi students' everyday life. This taken-for-granted tone partakes of the rhetoric of the ordinary mode, which implies the representation of the city as a familiar space rather than as a dazzling or frightening territory. The position of the narrator as a spectator, enhanced by the performative dimension of the students' customs, resonates with Amit Chaudhuri's young protagonist Sandeep, portrayed as an eager observer of the micro-dramas unfolding in front of him in his uncle's neighbourhood, embodying in turn another insider-outsider position.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the character's two-month visit is described as a temporary immersion in the life of the house and of the neighbourhood, the activities of which are closely observed and turned into fiction by the child's vivid imagination.<sup>73</sup> Sandeep mostly appears as an eager spectator of the house's organic daily life, from human to nonhuman activity – as suggested by the 'spectacle' of the pigeons mating (SA 43). Yet he also avidly gazes on what happens outside, peering at the 'untidy but regular activity' on the pavement (SA 25), from children playing hopscotch to street vendors (SA 31), exploring the locality from behind the shutters or from the house terrace: 'In the evenings, people came out on the balconies in the lane [...]. Sandeep and his cousins sat on cane stools on the verandah, watching the balconies on the opposite side, each with its own characters, its own episodes' (SA 23). The neighbourhood shows range from 'Cinderella's Ugly Sisters' laughing together on their balcony, to the teacher's daughter's clumsy dancing at the request of Chhotomamma: 'the balcony would become a stage' (SA 24).

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<sup>71</sup> The Hindi word *tamasha* means performance, celebration but also a fuss or commotion, related to entertainment.

<sup>72</sup> *Karo* is the imperative form of the verb *karna*, 'to do', in Hindi. The same phrase is mentioned by Amitava Kumar in the context of a scene with Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Yadav Prasad and his well-trained dog: 'The master said, "Shake hand *karo*", and the dog, saliva dripping from its jaws, raised its paw', suggesting it is a Bihari turn of phrase (*Bombay London New York*, p. 78).

<sup>73</sup> On Chaudhuri's writing as a form of 'autoethnography', that is, the process of representing one's culture while 'erasing the acculturated self', thus simultaneously conveying the sense of an insider knowledge and an outsider's wonder, see Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, pp. 166-167.

Similar to the evening stroll around the neighbourhood that evokes potential stories to be told, the idleness offered by holidays enables Sandeep to imagine exuberant tales from the scenes witnessed from the terrace in the afternoon:

Sometimes, a girl came to a terrace, ostensibly to hang, let us say, a sari on a clothes-line; at the same time, a young man appeared on the terrace three houses away, apparently to inspect a water tank. They glanced at each other, then fumbled, then glanced – such shy, piercing glances exchanged in the heat of the afternoon! How straight and undeflected the man’s glance travelled, how swift and disguised the woman’s answering glance! What rhythm the moment possessed! (SA 88-89)

The child’s fanciful mind briefly endows this ordinary scene with dramatic amorous tension and imagines a romance out of these two workers’ quick glances at one another – without bringing the story to an end. The passage also points to the network of terraces through which people communicate, so that seemingly isolated houses are actually connected. Dipesh Chakrabarty briefly mentions Calcutta’s terraces and rooftops as ‘yet another unresearched urban site in Calcutta’ and the writer Sandip Roy also reminisces about the way he used to greet his neighbours when returning home, announcing his presence by calling out on his rooftop, waiting for his neighbours to answer.<sup>74</sup>

Sandeep’s passionate participant observation of his surroundings is shared by all the characters, hinting at the city’s ‘devotion to spectating’ (CAL 10, 213). Chaudhuri connects this favourite pastime with one of the peculiarities of Calcutta architecture: the ubiquitous French windows and the Venetian shutters or mullions. The first chapter of Chaudhuri’s essay, entitled ‘A Purchase’, is devoted to an abandoned French window on the street in his neighbourhood, which he decides to buy and exhibit in his house as an emblem of Calcutta’s modernity. The essay also refers to the iconic opening frames of Satyajit Ray’s *Charulata*, in which the eponymous heroine, concealed behind the shutters of an old North Calcutta mansion, spies on passers-by through binoculars, a practice which, for Chaudhuri, epitomizes the city’s spirit (CAL 294).<sup>75</sup>

As we saw, Sandeep also observes the exterior activity from behind mullions, sometimes using this privileged standpoint to make practical jokes, calling out passers-by without being caught: ‘they felt they had the dangerous power to unsettle the world outside, and then fade innocently into thin air, like spirits’ (SA 30). If the children enjoy this hidden

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<sup>74</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Adda: A History of Sociality’, in *Provincializing Europe*, p. 201. Sandeep Roy, Interview with the author, Kolkata, December 2018. The narrative potential offered by the terraces echo Tickell’s discussion of low-rise apartment blocks, often associated with childhood, as creative ground for neighbourhood fictions (‘Writing the City and Indian English Fiction’, in *Planned Violence*).

<sup>75</sup>*Charulata*, dir. by Satyajit Ray (Banshal Films, 1964).

godlike position, this typical scene of gazing also suggests the confinement and seclusion suffered by women, a gendered aspect of urban everyday life which is also explored by Saikat Majumdar in his novel *The Firebird*, set in one of North Kolkata's old *para*.<sup>76</sup> French windows and mullions seemingly foster the general obsession with watching, yet Chaudhuri also detects it in the most recent shopping malls of Kolkata, which suggests that this habit transcends any particular architecture, and is perhaps an 'offshoot of our weather', the suggestion reading as a flippant mock-ethnographic comment.<sup>77</sup>

## 2. The Locality as a Domesticated Public Space

This 'participant observation' method, whether led in fiction or nonfiction, sheds light on the social practices which rule the locality, turned into a liminal space, in between interior and exterior, gesturing towards the existence of a village-like life in the heart of Indian metropolises. In fact, the web of gazes crisscrossing the locality in Chaudhuri's novel enhances the impression that Kolkata is a constellation of villages, or of zones of familiarity, which counters the association of the city with anonymity and individuality. The importance of community ties is expressed by a commonplace humorous comparison between the three major cities of India, related by Chaudhuri in his essay: 'Well, Bombay's main preoccupation is money, and Delhi's is power [...]. Calcutta's preoccupation is, 'Will you be eating at home tonight?'' (CAL 245). The joke speaks of the sense of belonging and of filial duty which brings people back to Kolkata. The commonplace discourses assume that Bombay draws people in as a land of opportunity, while Kolkata seems to draw people back:

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<sup>76</sup> Saikat Majumdar's novel, primarily set in a neighbourhood of North Kolkata in the 1980s, charts the collapse of a *zamindari* (land-owner) family through the anguished psyche of Ori, a ten-year-old child who witnesses the fall of his actress-mother, ostracised for crossing the line between private and public space, which precisely defines the male world of the *para*. Satyajit Ray's *Mahanagar (The Great City)* stresses that the heroine's venturing out in unknown neighbourhoods of the city – thanks to her job as a saleswoman – puts her husband ill-at-ease at first and is seen as morally transgressive by her father-in-law, who embodies rural traditional habits and has troubles adjusting to the mores of modern urbanity. The separation between the different parts of Kolkata is also registered through Arati's amazed discovery of Art Deco affluent houses and through her boss's disorientation in the neighbourhood of Kalighat (*Mahanagar*, dir. by Satyajit Ray (Banshal Films, 1963). On the gendered aspect of this domesticated public space, extended to other Indian cities, see *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets*, by Shilpa Phadke and others (Delhi: Penguin, 2011), and Sameera Khan, 'Negotiating the Mohalla: Exclusion, Identity and Muslim Women in Mumbai', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42.17 (2007), 1527-1533.

<sup>77</sup> 'Never have I seen, in malls in other countries, the number of people I noticed at South City or the Forum leaning against balconies, studying the lower levels, or the people ascending, apparition-like, on the escalator. It might be a mood that's an offshoot of our weather [...] which gives us, childhood onward, a lonely, godlike vantage point on life.' (CAL 214-215).

it is a place one returns to, out of familial responsibility or desire to settle down, a city that the author compares with Benares, ‘a place where people come to be facilitated into the afterlife’ (CAL 49, FS 433).<sup>78</sup> This is evidently a partial vision of the city which still attracts many migrants from rural areas of West Bengal, Bihar and Bangladesh in search of economic opportunities, while the sense of family-like ties is also palpable in Delhi or Bombay, as shown by Chowdhury, Sethi or Chattarji’s writing. Yet it might explain why the city is associated with loitering and spectating in Chaudhuri’s writing.

In Chaudhuri’s debut novel, the life of the family house seems inseparable from that of the neighbourhood as a whole, as almost each private event is shared by the community of the locality, turning the vicinity into a stage as well as an extension of one’s living room. The comical spectacle of Sandeep’s uncle’s recalcitrant car in the morning, ‘changed into a difficult, obstinate animal’ is attended by the whole neighbourhood, with ‘a small battalion’ (SA 32) of men helping, commenting and cheering when the engine finally starts (SA 34). The scene gives way to a humorous all-encompassing portrait of the vicinity, momentarily united by this event:

People had come out on the balconies, and were watching with sympathetic curiosity. Their eyes followed the car’s reluctant progress; their lips parted to pass a few well-considered comments; husbands and wives who had quarrelled the previous night were reunited in their avid appreciation of the spectacle; brothers who could never agree about a single point reached a brief consensus about the condition of the vehicle; astonished children who had never spoken anything but thickly meditative nonsense uttered, to the delight of their mothers, their first word as the car belched twice into motion and then stopped again. (SA 33)

The series of hyperboles intertwines the language of spectatorship with that of miracle, and the event is comically turned into a spectacle which magically triggers a temporary harmony in the vicinity. All the neighbours seem concerned by the dysfunctional car, which becomes a communal matter, evincing the porosity between public and private at work in the locality. *para*.<sup>79</sup> If Chaudhuri mostly expands on the comforting world of reverie and observation

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<sup>78</sup> The experience of returning to Kolkata is also represented in Chaudhuri’s fiction, notably in *A New World* (London: Picador, 2000), which narrates the holiday visit of a recently divorced economics professor and his son to his parents in Kolkata.

<sup>79</sup> The word *para* is not used in the novel, and the author defines it in his essay as an area made up of ‘often, stifling, cloistered, ten-foot-wide lanes lasting no more than a quarter of a mile’, referring specifically to North Calcutta (CAL 239). I use the term ‘porosity’ here in reference to Benjamin, who describes Naples as a ‘porous city’ (see Chapter 2) and the use of its buildings as ‘a popular stage [...] divided into innumerable simultaneously animated theaters’. These multiple echoes suggest deep affinities between Chaudhuri and Benjamin’s conception of urban modernity (Benjamin, *One Way Street*, p. 170).

enabled by Calcutta's neighbourhood life, other novelists, such as Saikat Majumdar and Indrajit Hazra, bring about the stifling surveillance network that the locality is turned into.

In her personal and nostalgic piece on her childhood *para* in South Kolkata — indicating the geographical circulation of the term beyond the 'old town' in the North — Supriya Chaudhuri defines it as a domesticated public space, an outdoor extension of one's family home.<sup>80</sup> Both fictional and nonfictional texts enhance how permeable the boundaries between interior and exterior are within the *para*, a porosity which is likely to elicit a strong sense of belonging or suffocation. Thus, Saikat Majumdar's child narrator perceives his North Kolkata quarter as follows: 'It was more than a neighbourhood constructed from bricks and mortar; it was a *para*, a mesh of lanes and voices that chatted tirelessly with one another'.<sup>81</sup> This sphere, intertwining material and social features, shifts from being protective to threatening, turning into a collective entity which monitors, encroaches upon, and ultimately dissolves Ori's family.

The use of the neighbourhood as an extension of the living room is also evidenced by another institution of Kolkata's modern urban life, inextricably linked to the *para*: the *adda*, or 'the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations', freed from any utilitarian purpose.<sup>82</sup> In his well-known essay on the history of *adda*, Dipesh Chakrabarty defines it as an integral component of early twentieth-century Kolkata, a way for the Bengali urban middle class to make themselves at home in capitalist modernity. He underlines the rural origins of these convivial conversations and the word's double reference to a place of gathering and a social institution, thus pointing to its close connection with the *para*. Yet, far from being a relic of pre-capitalist social practices, the *adda* plays a crucial part in the formation of Kolkata's capitalist modernity. This argument can be extended to the *para*, which cannot be thought of as pre-urban or rural but is constitutive of the urban in India. Chakrabarty insists on the appropriation of *adda* as an identity marker (mythified as an embodiment of 'Bengaliness') in the context of capitalist modernity while suggesting the transcultural quality of this social practice, an argument which is seconded by Siddharth Chowdhury and Aman Sethi's writing of Delhi, which expresses similar forms of sociability,

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<sup>80</sup> 'The *para* has historically been Calcutta's most distinctive public institution, one that is in some sense both private and public. By creating a kind of social interior within the exterior, it domesticates the social, and places public and communal action within a familial framework. It allows the private to be publicly monitored, and makes the public a private matter between friends.' (S. Chaudhuri, 'Remembering the Para', in *Beloved City*, p. 124)

<sup>81</sup> Majumdar, *The Firebird* (Gurgaon: Hachette, 2015), p. 31. The text also stresses the control exerted by the local branch of the Communist party over the neighbourhood.

<sup>82</sup> Chakrabarty, 'Adda: A History of Sociality', in *Provincializing Europe*, p. 181.



pointing to the struggle to feel at home in the modern city. Amit Chaudhuri cautiously attempts to find a cultural equivalent to the *adda* in his 1993 novel *Afternoon Raag*:

In tea-shops and street corners, Bengali men, as ever, indulge in *adda*, a word that means both a pointless, pleasurable exchange of opinions and information, and the place of rendezvous in which it is conducted; if it were possible to say, for instance, of a certain kind of languorous conversation in England, 'I'm having a pub', its quality might be approximately communicated in English.<sup>83</sup>

The final incongruous phrasing is a comic attempt to domesticate this foreign practice, to draw it closer to a British or global readership while stressing the irreducible distance separating *adda* from any other cultural institution. However, Chakrabarty also addresses the nostalgia surrounding the gradual decline of *adda* in the late twentieth century, a feeling he is not immune to. This requiem-like tone recalls that of Amit Chaudhuri, Supriya Chaudhuri and other scholars and writers who associate *adda* and *para* with childhood and lament the passing of both in the late twentieth century. This melancholy mood is certainly part of a wider privileged middle-class discourse about the fading aura of Calcutta, whose refined culture and devotion to intellectual and political matters are gradually vanishing under the assault of globalization.<sup>84</sup> While it has played a critical role in the democratisation of literature and politics in Bengal, it also belongs to the *bhadralok* ethos of devotion to intellectual matters and dismissal of anything related to labour and utility.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Chowdhury's descriptions of his Bengali neighbourhood in Patna are tinged with melancholia, emanating from the crepuscular aura of the locality, 'a place of genteel shabbiness' (PR 216), which is gradually forsaken by its Bengali inhabitants, their derelict mansions epitomizing the loss of their privileged economic position in the city. Yet the narrator's nostalgia also stems from the association of Kadam Kuan with the romance of adolescence, a carefree era of male friendship based on loitering together, stealing and smoking cigarettes, going to the local cineclub, following girls in the market or fantasising about them on the bus (PR 304).

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<sup>83</sup> Chaudhuri, *Afternoon Raag*, p. 225.

<sup>84</sup> However, the melancholy palpable in Buddhadev Bose's poetry, for instance, is mostly related to the catastrophes which afflicted the city (the 1943 famine, the 1946 communal riots, and the legacy of partition) rather than to the passing of a genteel ethos (Buddhadev Bose, 'Calcutta', in *Anthology of the Modern Indian City*, p. 48-50).

<sup>85</sup> *Bhadralok* is a Bengali word (literally, 'respectable people'), referring to a social class of upper-class upper-caste Hindus, prosperous, well-educated elitist people, who emerged during British Rule in Bengal, disdaining manual labour (see Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848-85)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)).

Chakrabarty stresses the mythic quality of the idealised *adda*, as well as the exclusion (especially in terms of gender) and domination embedded in its structure. Yet, the comparison with the myths and the nostalgia for a golden-age cosmopolitan Bombay or a refined cultured Delhi, reveals that this late twentieth-century nostalgia for *adda* is construed as the symptom of a new anxiety: ‘How does one sing to the ever-changing tunes of capitalist modernization and retain at the same time a comfortable sense of being at home in it [...]? How does one manage to feel at home in the context of capitalist cities?’<sup>86</sup> Far from dismissing this nostalgia for a mythical lost world only as a delusory class feeling, the historian relates it to Marshall Berman’s questioning in *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (how does one make oneself at home in the tumult of modernity?) and revives it in the context of a city transformed by globalized capitalism.<sup>87</sup> If *adda* belongs to a bygone era, one may wonder whether the social world of the locality has faded from the post-liberalization urban landscape. Are there forms and practices in which to dwell, to inhabit, to build a ‘locality’ in the late capitalist city, in the tumult that Dasgupta, Roy and Jha describe?

Chakrabarty raises this question at the end of his essay without responding to it. While Chaudhuri’s *A Strange and Sublime Address* depicts Kolkata in the late 1980s, other literary and cinematic accounts of a neighbourhood life suggest that these zones of comfort persist in the early twenty-first century: Indrajit Hazra’s Kolkata novels and essays stress the sense of a domesticated public space, and Kushanava Choudhury also humorously stages the traditional morning gathering at the local tea-shop.<sup>88</sup> In the case of Delhi, Sethi recounts the way labourers gather in the evening to ‘swap’ stories and Chowdhury’s stories feature numerous students loitering at tea-stalls and local hustlers watching the neighbourhood. If the social groups are very different from one another, their works intersect through their emphasis on the importance of street life as an extension of one’s home. Street vendors hold a particular importance in their geography of Delhi, and Sethi’s text underlines how the labourers’ everyday lives are shaped by regular visits to landmark places such as the roadside

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<sup>86</sup> Chakrabarty, ‘Adda’, in *Provincializing Europe*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>87</sup> Svetlana Boym similarly analyses nostalgia as a symptom of the modern age, a ‘historical emotion’ and ‘a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals’ (*Nostalgia of the Future*, p. XIV, XVI).

<sup>88</sup> See Indrajit Hazra, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Delhi: IndiaInk, 2003); Choudhury, *The Epic City*, p. 28. Similar processes of locality constituting are described by Manas Ray in his autobiographical essay on the refugee settlement in which he grew up, located on the outskirts of Kolkata (‘Growing up Refugee’, *History Workshop Journal* 53 (2002), 149-170). MJ Akbar, chief editor of *The Telegraph*, also suggests that the communal ties of the *para* have survived the transition from one-storied house to multi-storied apartment blocks: ‘These tall apartment buildings have become, in fact, vertical *paras* or *mohallas*’ (in Lina Fruzetti, ‘Calcutta Conversations’, in *Anthology of the Modern Indian City*, p. 63).

shrine and Kaka's tea-shop: 'Bara Tooti began its day at Kaka's tea shop' (FM 12). It is a strategic point in social but also in economic terms as it is there that labourers look for work: 'if you want a job in Bara Tooti, wake up early, order a cup of chai, and wait by the main road – work will come to you' (FM 13). The *thick description* of the tea-shop traces the history of the shelter-shop and suggests its incremental organic growth out of the temple wall, from a shelf into the epicentre of the locality. Its contested legal status hints at the fierce struggle for space in cramped Old Delhi (FM 11-12).

Once more, the affinities between Chaudhuri's and Chowdhury's fictional worlds suggest that the communal aspect of the urban locality is not specific to Kolkata. In addition to the *nukkat nataks* of Delhi University, the writer's mock-ethnographic gaze also scrutinises the social patterns of the locality in Patna, which can easily be extended to other neighbourhoods. The domestication of public space is here strikingly imagined through the prism of Martin Scorsese's cinema, imprinted on the author's retina as he describes Patna's *mean streets* and Delhi's student fights, giving a transcultural dimension to his local stories. Chowdhury pays tribute to Scorsese's films in his first book *Diksha at St Martin's*, the title of which sanctifies Martin Scorsese and turns the director into a guru.<sup>89</sup> It refers to the epiphany experienced by the narrator the first time he saw *Mean Streets*, immediately recognising Kadam Kuan in Scorsese's Little Italy.

The streets, galis and nukkads of Little Italy, New York, seemed superimposed on the parallel ones of Kadam Kuan [...]. It was the attitude that said 'coolness is all' which grabbed me by my bandana [...] and dragged me into a world so unlike my own, yet so recognizable and immediate. The petty crooks and extortionists, the grassroot-level political activists, small-time scamsters and dreamers, the camaraderie and the little betrayals. People getting born and dying in the same place, never venturing out beyond a thirty-minute radius around their homes in their entire lives. (DM 137-139)

The imaginative superimposition of the two neighbourhoods (rather than the two cities) pushes back against the 'global cities' paradigm, since New York, the paradigmatic global city, is represented as a village, in which provincial and familial diaspora ties abide, not far from what happens in Patna. This superimposition is only heightened by the combination of English and Hindi words to refer to space, with *gali* (street) and *nukkad* (street-corner) juxtaposed with 'streets' and pluralized like English words, almost turning Little Italy into

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<sup>89</sup>*Diksha* is the Sanskrit word for 'initiation', referring to a ceremony in which a guru initiates a student into his teaching.

an Indian locality and vice-versa.<sup>90</sup> The passage stresses the studied indifference of male anti-heroes, local hustlers or loiterers as well as Scorsese's downsizing of the city (with terms such as 'petty', 'small-time', 'little'). What makes his cinematic city of crime stand out is that his gangsters are average, ordinary men and not dashing spectacular criminals, a trait which also characterises Chowdhury's portrayal of Patna and Delhi.<sup>91</sup>

The narrator playfully imagines an equivalent epiphany happening on the other side of the globe, an Indian cinematic landscape being superimposed on an actual American space: 'perhaps at that very moment a young boy in Bolton or Vermont watching the *Apu* trilogy was feeling the same way' (DM 138). The allusion to Satyajit Ray's majestic rendering of Bengal's rural world hints at an imagined circulation of cultural forms across the world, and Chowdhury's narrator ironical reversing of the superimposition process evidences the questioning of the centre-periphery dynamics at work in his writing. This transcultural connection, which does not stem from a diasporic trajectory, reveals the extent to which Chowdhury's writing of Kadam Kuan and of Delhi University campus is mediated by Scorsese's representation of urban space. He distinguishes *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* from the mythical word of *The Godfather*, by virtue of their concrete specificity.<sup>92</sup> Chowdhury's wayward, sometimes disreputable protagonists, thus find their siblings in Little Italy, as illustrated by a comparison between the common 'psychotic irresponsibility' (DM 140) of both the narrator's friend Birju and Johnny in *Mean Streets*. His gloss of the film insists on the local fights over trivial matters, which contribute to the building of the locality (whether in New York, Patna or Delhi) as a microcosm delimited by social codes of honour and loyalty, communal solidarities and allegiances.

If *The Godfather* (1972) in an ironic way was about family values, then *Mean Streets* (1973) set a couple of decades later is about the neighbourhood, the 'mohallah' or 'para', a tale of growing up, a tale of friendships, of not fucking up, about survival and responsibility [...]. In a mohallah, one is responsible for everything, for oneself, for the family, for friends, because there is no getting away from it. It is part of the culture. One

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<sup>90</sup> Amitava Kumar also dwells on the affinity he establishes between Patna and New York in the introduction to the American edition of *A Matter of Rats*: 'In my book, New York is closer to Patna than is usually imagined'. (Introduction published in *Scroll.in*, 8 March 2014, <<https://scroll.in/article/657387/new-york-is-closer-to-patna-than-most-people-realise>> [accessed 27 May 2021]). Note that much like post-partition 'Bihari' parts of Delhi, 'Little Italy' is also marked by impoverished migration from the 'south', this time from the southern regions of post-unification Italy.

<sup>91</sup> The literary representation of 'ordinary' violence implied by these allegiances is more precisely discussed in Chapter 5.

<sup>92</sup> One may notice that Dasgupta also quotes Scorsese's films as registrations of the particular atmosphere of New York as its informal order is gradually being destroyed by municipal authorities, yet he chooses *The Godfather* rather than *Mean Streets*, privileging the myth and the epic rather than the familiar and the everyday city (C 434).

imbibes it just by breathing. It is like living in a constant fish bowl. The individual doesn't matter, the community or the group does. (DM 141)

Once more, Little Italy is somehow turned into an Indian neighbourhood through the use of *mohalla* and *para*, suggesting the social and imaginative aspects of the locality rather than its physical nature. He underlines the domestication of the social sphere, the inescapable responsibility one has towards other members of this community, the bond connecting the neighbours together in this space whose codes and boundaries are 'understood though undefined', to borrow Supriya Chaudhuri's words about the *para* in Kolkata. The comparison with the fish-bowl recalls Saikat Majumdar's and Amit Chaudhuri's portrayals of the *para* as a restricted stage on which people are constantly watched, hinting at the suffocating potential of the locality. In fact, far from romanticising the local communal life, Chowdhury's writing also stresses how callous this fish-bowl can become.<sup>93</sup>

These street-corner narratives, focused on the close-knit networks and ingrained habits that structure urban life at the scale of the locality, push back against the classic understanding of urban life, which, from Simmel onwards, has been associated with the whirl of myriad unconnected atoms, a crowd of anonymous individuals which cuts one off from the community and collective customs, embodying the denizen's desire for individualisation. Against the notion of the city as the ultimate space of individualism (which is appropriated by *epic* narratives, as seen in Chapter 2), these texts highlight the more or less subterranean social practices which connect individuals together at the local level, thus blurring the lines between small towns and metropolises. The social ties which bind the local community together are less conspicuous in Sethi's reportage, which shows the migrant labourers' oscillation between camaraderie and loneliness, the group ultimately being scattered across the city and the country. The social and imaginative ties developed to build the locality are in this case more fragile than in Chaudhuri's and Chowdhury's middle-class narratives, since the belonging of these street-dwellers to the locality cannot rest on a material settlement. The imaginative constituting of the local achieved by these street-dwellers is rooted in their awareness of the fragility of their location. The ethnographic lens of the texts helps deflate the hypertrophic imaginary of the Indian city as a dystopic gigantic entity. This ground-level literary perspective goes hand in hand with the collecting of fragments of stories which shape the locality into existence. Indeed, far from deriving a general diagnosis from these observations, thick descriptions, and immersions, these

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<sup>93</sup> See Chapter 5.

narratives read as a constellation of fragmentary stories which do not add up to a whole, pushing against the totalizing impulse of epic urban writing.

### III. The City as a Common Space

Arjun Appadurai stresses that the ‘work of imagination’, critical to the production of a locality, is a collective process. Chowdhury’s and Sethi’s micro-perspectives on the city shed light on the *common* construction of the local through the constant circulation of common or commonplace narratives (rumours, legends, anecdotes, memories, conjectures), which form a narrative fabric connecting the members of this social sphere together. The notion of the ‘common’, referring both to something that is shared by a group and to something un-distinctive, un-refined, or mundane, encapsulates the ways in which these texts convey the sense of an ordinary city, both at the level of narrative structure and of language. Chaudhuri’s debut novel mostly alludes to the matrix of stories of the neighbourhood, while *Freedom Song* refracts the fragmentary, often stereotypical, discourses about public and private concerns which are spread among neighbours. The incorporation of these local narratives into their texts, as well as the dissemination of vernacular slang, partake of the writers’ ethnographic ambition, documenting the constitution of a small microcosm within the city. Yet it also has an incidence on the very form of these texts. These urban narratives are made up of scraps of conversations and legends collected in the neighbourhood. Their dwelling in the irreducible multiplicity of stories results in the fragmentary form of Sethi’s reportage, and in the episodic structure of Chowdhury’s texts, halfway between the novel and the cycle of short-stories. These fragmentary mosaic of stories, analogies of the constellation of localities which make up the city, thus mitigates the association of urban fiction and nonfiction with sprawling monumental works.

#### 1. The Collective Imagination of the Locality

The importance given to counterfactual tales and to the idiosyncratic voices of story-tellers in both Chowdhury and Sethi, which sometimes disrupt the linear unfolding of the narrative, indicates that story-telling and its meanders are integral to urban life for these writers. This is also the case for other *ordinary* urban writers, such as Indrajit Hazra and Sonia Faleiro, for instance, whose protagonists and interviewees are extraordinary story-tellers, pointing to an affinity between the dominance of the ordinary mode and the picking

of commonplace stories. Walter Benjamin's reflections on the storyteller and the opposition he draws with the novelist will help us discuss the story-telling of the locality.<sup>94</sup>

As was demonstrated in the first section, Bara Tooti Chowk, the spatial and social core of Sethi's narrative, is shaped into existence by the legends surrounding it. Equally striking is the centrality of story-telling as a practice in *A Free Man*. If Sethi relates anecdotes and memories told by several daily labourers, the most distinctive narrator of the book remains Mohammed Ashraf, who holds the limelight throughout. The book is actually driven by the antagonism between the reporter-researcher seeking to gather and synthesise information and the labourer-story-teller detracting him from his quest. The opening of the book is particularly significant. The literary reportage starts *in medias res* with the labourer's voice, singled out as that of a charismatic if self-absorbed story-teller, followed by the account of a nocturnal gathering scene:

For a quarter of an hour we have sat in silence as Ashraf has extolled the virtues of ticketless train travel, counted the blessings of being in jail, and, with a rolled-up shirt in one hand and a slender paintbrush in the other, demonstrated the proper technique for skinning chicken. We have stifled our yawns, crossed and uncrossed our legs, and swatted away squadrons of mosquitoes as Ashraf has pulled and sucked and ashed at the joint wedged firmly between his fingers. (FM 3-4)

The scene is a typical story-telling scene, with a circle of listeners gathered at night around a charismatic narrator. Here the yarn is not spun around a plot but around advice and theories of all kinds, drawn from Ashraf's multifarious experience. Walter Benjamin states that story-telling is originally related to practical advice and rests on our capacity to share experience. Ashraf's stories and explanations regarding train travel, jail and chicken-skinning are indeed grounded in concrete experience, and point to the narration as a form of communication corresponding to artisanal labour, originally linked to handicraft but also to travelling.

As shown by the use of the first-person-plural pronoun, Sethi also insists on the communal and corporeal aspect of story-telling, embodied by the alliance of smoking and talking: 'In our circle, the joint has moderated conversation; microphone-like, it singles out its holder as the speaker' (FM 4). The text ironically stresses that gestures and body-language are part of the narration and trigger a drug-induced physical osmosis between the speaker and his audience, united through words and breath: 'we've inhaled as he's inhaled, winced as he's choked on the sharp, bitter smoke' (FM 4). Story-telling thus becomes a shared physical experience, echoing Benjamin's words: 'Storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no

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<sup>94</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' (1936), in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 83-109.



means a job for the voice alone. Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work'.<sup>95</sup> It indicates once more the intimacy between the narrator and the material he reshapes into a narrative.

In his essay written in 1936, the German critic laments the decline of such practice based on shared experience, which requires great freedom of reception and a space of release and community, which the modern city would be deprived of. Chowdhury's and Sethi's urban narratives overhaul this statement since their representation of urban life is exactly based on the practice of story-telling.<sup>96</sup> If this practice and the communal ties criss-crossing the locality have rural origins, I would argue that they belong to the urban *per se*. Just like *adda* and *para* are part and parcel of Kolkata's modernity, the transplantation of story-telling into an urban space cannot be interpreted as a relic of village practices but defines urban life, thus challenging the conventional distinction between village and city.<sup>97</sup>

More broadly speaking, Benjamin's reflections on the story-teller also enlighten the tension at work in these texts in several ways. He first draws a link between the story-teller and the reporter, drawn together through the importance of idleness for their practice, since the reporter's main activity is to wait around.<sup>98</sup> Sethi repeatedly expresses his frustration at his useless loitering with this circle which does not deliver any 'memorable' information, hinting at the conflict between his intention and the multiplicity of seemingly pointless fragmentary tales he is faced with. Secondly, Benjamin pits story-telling against the novel form: 'What announces itself in these passages is the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist as contrasted with the short-lived reminiscence of the story-teller. The first is dedicated to one hero, one odyssey, one battle; the second, to many diffuse occurrences'.<sup>99</sup> Here emerges a distinction which, to some extent, may be superimposed to that of the epic and the ordinary modes: the unifying ambition of the monumental novel, driven by the ambition to build a coherent whole out of collected fragments, pitted against the irreducible

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<sup>95</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 108.

<sup>96</sup> These story-tellers bring to mind Indrajit Hazra's legendary story-teller Ghanada, whose extraordinary tall-tales are recounted each evening on the rooftop of the male hostel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which also parallels the student hostel depicted by Chowdhury in *Day Scholar*. On the contrary, R. K. Narayan's famous story 'Under the Banyan Tree' represents the story-teller as a figure of the village (*Under the Banyan Tree and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), pp. 187-192).

<sup>97</sup> Sampurna Chattarji's story 'Insectboy' also emphasizes the community of street-vendors and beggars in the area of Colaba (Mumbai), and the story-telling skills of a young crippled street-vendor, who tells the story of a giant steel-legged man, running away from home to see the sea and ultimately stretched over it – an anthropomorphic image of the spectacular Bandra-Worli sea-link bridge, built between 2000 and 2009. This fantastic embedded tale illustrates Chattarji's oblique irrealist representation of the uneven accelerated development of the city.

<sup>98</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 802.

<sup>99</sup> Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 98.

multiplicity of stories. Although contemporary epics, as suggested by Moretti, are dedicated to multiple heroes and battles, their totalizing dimension does contrast with the ‘many diffuse occurrences’ of the story-teller. Further, Benjamin’s distinction between the novel, which sets into relief anything that is exceptional, and story-telling, which is concerned with the common, shared experience, also illuminates the tension between the two poles which Indian urban writings are drawn to. However, the texts of my corpus which are dominated by the ordinary mode blur the sharp distinction established by Benjamin, as they do draw connections between the particular and the general, the micro and the macro, in tension with the close-up on the detail for its own sake. This failure or impossibility of abstraction and totalisation is inscribed in the very form of Sethi’s and Chowdhury’s texts.

The abiding plurality of stories mostly stems from Ashraf’s and Jishnuda’s untameable speech. Ashraf is primarily characterised by his voice, which permeates the whole text through verbatim (partly translated) quotations, full dialogues or monologues about freedom, friendship, loneliness or the harshness of city-life, as well as vivid accounts of his many adventures. His idiosyncratic speech, referred to as ‘Ashrafspeak’ (FM 21), is that of the witty storyteller, given to bombastic statements and punchlines, but also that of the urban denizen, familiar with the coarse slang of the streets that Sethi endeavours to render through the incorporation of vernacular words. Theatrical and garrulous, Ashraf also masters the art of delay and eludes most of the reporter’s questions, reproaching him with excessive curiosity or with ruining the story’s flavour:

‘Why were you on the train, where were you going?’  
‘Aman bhai...’  
‘Arre, at least tell me the basic facts.’  
‘You take the mazaā out of every story.’ (FM 75)

This short dialogue encapsulates the tension which animates the whole book: the journalist in search of a basic timeline is constantly rebuffed as an ignorant by the supreme storyteller, who knows that the pleasure (a translation for ‘mazaā’) of the story lies in its suspensions and digressions. As Sonia Faleiro points out: ‘the author’s effort to ferret out Ashraf’s secrets [...] in the face of skilful deflections is the quest that propels *A Free Man*’.<sup>100</sup> As the reporter asks him to specify a term he uses, here is how Ashraf responds, illustrating the story-teller’s

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<sup>100</sup> Sonia Faleiro, ‘Invisible Economy’, review of Aman Sethi, *A Free Man*, *New York Times*, 21 November 2012, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/books/review/a-free-man-by-aman-sethi.html>> [accessed 28 June 2021]. The reporter’s emphasis on his failed quest for information may be read as an indication of the difficulty for members of the elite classes to understand the material conditions of urban outcasts.

art of deferral: ‘Ashraf couldn’t help grinning to himself. This was classic Ashraf. There was a punchline somewhere, but he wasn’t going to give it away cheap. He paused for a theatrical pull on his beedi and intoned with mock gravitas’ (FM 20). Sethi not only relates the jokes and mundane anecdotes shared by Ashraf but also draws attention to his style as a performer, turning Ashraf into a full-fledged narrator.

And so it would continue: me pointing my recorder at Ashraf and asking questions, Ashraf deflecting them by distracting me with chowk trivia: ‘You know why rickshaw pullers are usually Biharis? Because no one else can afford to be one; Biharis can live more cheaply than anyone else. I’m a Bihari, I know these things.’ (FM 28)

The peddling of regional stereotypes as well as the ‘mock gravitas’ quoted earlier recall Chowdhury’s heightening of Jishnuda’s performance skills, his mastery of the art of suspense and his studied attitude.<sup>101</sup> The reference to ‘chowk trivia’ encapsulates the ‘trivial’ position of the story-teller, at the intersection of the roads or on the square (*chowk*), picking up mundane stories. The reporter’s desire to turn the scattered events of an individual life into a coherent whole and to ‘plot his route’ (FM 28) is met with reluctance and hostility by the labourer, who refuses his speech to be controlled and his life to be exposed and embedded in a narrative causal order.<sup>102</sup> Chapter 5 will show how the chronological order of his life is completely taken over by the subject’s erratic story-telling.

If Hriday Thakur and Ritwik Ray form the duo at the core of Chowdhury’s fictional universe, the recurring character of Jishnu Sharma, mostly known as Jishnuda, whom Hriday meets in Delhi, emerges as the paramount story-teller of Delhi neighbourhoods. His voice permeates the whole text of *Day Scholar*, contributing to its ‘chatty, gossipy story-telling’ effect.<sup>103</sup> As a former student and the ‘de facto caretaker of Shokeen Niwas’ (DS 283), Jishnuda introduces the young provincial gullible student to the decadent world of North Campus. Like Ashraf, he is prone to digressions and his narratives are vividly performed,

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<sup>101</sup> ‘Jishnuda, meanwhile, was in my room looking as usual philosophical and tragic’ (DS 279); ‘a bemused smile on his face, eyes looking up at the Statesman House building. Heroic gaze into fading light’ (PMS 13).

<sup>102</sup> ‘Inexactitude has been stitched into the very fabric of Ashraf’s existence, Sethi finds, and even in hindsight, the stuttering progression of his life is difficult to pin down. Only in their final encounter, more than four years after they first met, does Sethi know enough to draw up an approximate timeline for Ashraf’s past.’ (Samanth Subramaniam, ‘Where the Sidewalk Ends, the Uncertain Life of a Poor Man in Delhi’, review of Aman Sethi, *A Free Man*, *Bookforum*, 19.3 (2012) <<https://www.bookforum.com/print/1903/the-uncertain-life-of-a-poor-man-in-delhi-10028>> [accessed 25 May 2021]). Similarly, Sethi recounts his failure to pull out coherent narratives from J. P. Singh’s erratic stories: ‘Nonetheless, he sat down beside me and reduced my cunning interview technique to shambles.’ (FM 36).

<sup>103</sup> Trisha Gupta, ‘Brilliant Tutorials’, review of Siddharth Chowdhury, *Day Scholar*, *Biblio*, March-April 2011, <<http://kafila.online/2011/05/02/brilliant-tutorials-trisha-gupta-reviews-siddharth-chowdhurys-day-scholar/>> [accessed 27 May 2021].

often related to (uncommendable) practical advice. Yet he is even more given to exuberant tall-tales and constantly peddles wild legends and sordid rumours about North Campus residents, thus turning the locality into a Babylonian wild west for the newcomer.

His passion for story-telling emerges again in ‘The Importer of Blondes’, the opening story of *The Patna Manual of Style*, in which the reader meets Hriday Thakur again, now an apprentice writer and copy editor in a magazine in Delhi. Hriday encounters Jishnuda by chance in Connaught Place and reverts to his role of eternal listener. The narrator expresses his mixed feelings upon meeting Jishnuda, whom he betrayed in *Day Scholar*: he is both overwhelmed by fear but also by the thrill of the character’s histrionic personality and thirst for drama: ‘today is a historic day’ (PMS 10), he states in a grandiloquent manner, casting their mundane encounter into a scene of reconciliation or retribution. The story rests on the classical device of the embedded tale as Jishnuda asks Hriday why he does not write about his ‘violent love story’ (‘you should write about me’) and becomes the heart of the story, as the two levels of fiction are ultimately conflated.<sup>104</sup>

If the scope of Jishnuda’s embedded tale is broad, encompassing Ukraine, the Soviet Union, and London, his earlier tales mostly revolve around the neighbourhood abutting Delhi University North Campus, with Shokeen Niwas as its epicentre. Like Bara Tooti Chowk in *A Free Man*, the hostel and its surroundings are mostly represented through the rumours and sensational stories recounted by Jishnuda. In Certeau’s terms, his narratives unearth the sedimented layers of the building, unfold its subterranean legends, and thus make it inhabitable.<sup>105</sup> Yet the trajectory of the narrator is that of a gradual dissociation from Jishnuda’s hardboiled tales, perceived as excessive legends. The first impression of the character as a tough yet cunning character, immediately associated with alcohol, sex and violence (DS 280), is strengthened by a digression about Jishnuda’s smart getting away with of a whole group of angry men threatening the landlord Zorawar Singh, turning him into his local hustler and *protégé*. This landmark episode of Jishnuda’s heroic life-story ends with Zorawar Singh mistakenly opening fire and making a hole in the bedroom wall, which Hriday is invited to touch as part of a ‘rite of initiation’. Just like the legendary tree of Bara Tooti Chowk, the ‘smooth hole made by that epochal Mauser bullet’ (DS 287) appears as a trace of the history that Jishnuda’s narrative excavates, spatial evidence of a reminiscence

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<sup>104</sup> The story is reminiscent of Saadat Hasan Manto’s story ‘Barren’, in which the narrator meets a young man on Marine Drive in Bombay who turns out to be an extraordinary story-teller or liar (‘Barren’, *Bombay Stories*, pp. 26-45).

<sup>105</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, p. 264.

or legend. The hole is just one of the tangible signifiers (along with an enduring smell) that the story-teller's audience is prompted to mark, as he tells the sordid story of Zorawar Singh's purchase of the place through manipulation and vicarious murder, suggesting that the place is permeated by this corrupted history. These fantastic tales punctuate the first chapter of the novel, alternating with the scene of sexual encounter between the landlord and his mistress witnessed by the narrator. The going back and forth between a main scene and sensational side-stories, which are probably invented by Jishnuda, underlines the way Hriday's mental geography of Shokeen Niwas is moulded by the myths he is being told as part of his initiation to the codes of the locality. Far from appalling the narrator, the dense fabric of horrendous stories woven around the hostel enthrals him:

I loved the wanton amorality of the place. Its chanciness, its far remove from respectability. I wanted to be a writer. It would be here I knew that I would start to write like one. I had finally found my material, if not my voice [...]. I was deeply grateful to Jishnuda for introducing me to the magical world of Shokeen Niwas and the kerosene-suffused bedroom of the late lamented Sunita Khandelwal. (DS 293-294)

The locality is primarily seen as an extraordinary matrix of stories which generates material for the apprentice writer. The violence that permeates the place is not condemned but considered as an opportunity for the narrator. This 'magical world' of fiction in which he is engrossed is shared by most of the students, caught up in a wilful delusion: 'In North Campus no one bothered about the truth anyway. They all had their own theories. They were all storytellers and I didn't feel like correcting them' (DS 422). The narrator himself furthers this collective fantasy as he openly avows his addition of details and nuances to the stories he hears, thus thematising the entanglement of narrative and experience that Benjamin deems essential to story-telling.<sup>106</sup>

Collecting stories is also how Chowdhury proceeds to map the city. As Trisha Gupta writes, 'the throwaway ease with which new characters are introduced and side-stories told is a narratorial strategy, deliberately crafted to create the impression of chatty, gossipy storytelling – what in North India might most clearly be described as *gup*'.<sup>107</sup> The tension between the multiplicity of stories and the unity of the novel is also reflected in Chowdhury's splintering of the novel form into myriad side-stories, digressions and flashbacks. *Day Scholar* as well as *Patna Roughcut* challenge the novel form through their episodic structure, reading as a series of interlinked episodes with overlapping characters more than as a

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<sup>106</sup> 'I like to imagine that Zorawar was perhaps intrigued by her bare feet' (DS 288).

<sup>107</sup> Gupta, 'Brilliant Tutorials'.

coherent novel.<sup>108</sup> The discontinuity between chapters is somehow compensated by the recurrence of the same cast of characters in his novels and his two collections of stories (*Diksha at St Martin's* and *The Patna Manual of Style*): Hriday Thakur, a young student and apprentice writer, his university girlfriend Anjali Nawal, the writer and activist Ritwik Ray (Hriday's Patna mentor) and his girlfriend Mira Verma, Jishnuda his auxiliary and persecutor. They form a web which connects his texts together as a large novel. Chowdhury's writing thus blurs boundaries between genres and questions the self-contained nature of the book as he considers his short story collections and his novels as part of one large novel he is 'working towards', dismissing generic categories as 'marketing tools'.<sup>109</sup> Alluding to the 1957 film written by Rohmer and directed Godard, he writes: 'For over twenty years I have written the same story again and again. There has been no variation. For me, every boy is called not Patrick but Ritwik. Or sometimes Hriday for that matter' (DS 427).<sup>110</sup> Thus, the narrative discontinuity at the level of one text and the continuity across his works blur the distinction between novel and short story, suggesting that the local scale of the narrative implies a heterogeneous literary form. Chowdhury's close documentation of a restricted social environment, the proximity between his characters and himself, as well as his text's playful reflexivity, also contribute to blurring the line between author and narrator, fiction and nonfiction. The chronicle-like structure of the narratives, which are not necessarily organised by an overarching principle, draws them closer to stories than to novels.<sup>111</sup>

The fragmentary form of Sethi's, Chowdhury's, and Chaudhuri's works contrasts with monumental 'city-books' such as Dasgupta's large essay or Roy's long novel. If the belittling of the Indian global city is mostly carried on the level of scale, theme, and form, I

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<sup>108</sup> Trisha Gupta thus states about *Patna Roughcut*: 'This constant cross referencing of characters, even minor ones [...] creates a kind of deliberate jigsaw of characters and events, and goes a long way towards making Chowdhury's universe come brilliantly and cinematically to life, in the manner of some Robert Altman movie' (Ibid.).

<sup>109</sup> 'I see *Patna Roughcut*, *Day Scholar* and *The Patna Manual of Style* as part of one big novel that I am working towards. In that sense it is unfinished. Readers can read it in any way they want. As individual stories or as short novels which are part of a larger whole. As long as they get it, it is fine by me. Labels are anyway only a marketing tool' (Siddharth Chowdhury, Interview with Trisha Gupta, *Scroll.in*, 9 May 2015, <<https://scroll.in/article/726247/interview-is-fiction-writer-siddharth-chowdhury-creating-a-new-literary-form>> [accessed 28 May 2021]). The author's first short-story collection and his two novels have been republished as a single volume by HarperCollins in 2016 under the title *Ritwik & Hriday, Tales from the City, Tales from the Town*, combined under the aegis of the two main characters and of the opposition between Patna and Delhi, town and city.

<sup>110</sup> *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* (written by Eric Rohmer, dir. by Jean-Luc Godard, Gaumont, 1957).

<sup>111</sup> However, variations are clearly distinguishable between the almost autonomous episodes of *Patna Roughcut* and the plot-driven narrative of *Day Scholar*, which follows the trajectory of one protagonist and lets a progression emerge between the beginning and the end.

would argue that the overall length and structure of these texts also contribute to the deflation of these maximum cities.

In the new millennium, literature has taken a Jason Bourne-like tour through the emerging financial capitals of what used to be the third world: big books about Mumbai and Beijing, Nairobi and São Paulo, have joined books about London and New York in a glittering constellation rotating across the night sky.<sup>112</sup>

Chaudhuri's short fragmentary novels, Chowdhury's interlinked stories and episodic novels, and Sethi's thin reportage run up against a trend of 'world literature' (understood here as a publishing category) and contrast with Roy's, Mehta's and Dasgupta's expansive books. Chapter 5 will show how their focus on the instant, usually associated with the poem or the short-story, also contributes to the downscaling of the global city.<sup>113</sup> Yet this deflating movement is also carried out at the linguistic level, since these narratives incorporate the common language of the streets and show how it structures the locality.

## 2. The Common Language of the Street

Chowdhury's and Sethi's writings of the Indian city stand out through the prominent space they give to vernacular languages.<sup>114</sup> The local scale of representation and the street-corner focus, with a strong emphasis on story-telling, seem to entail a particular work on language, in an attempt to evoke the multiple idioms inhabiting the locality. The amalgamation of English with vernacular languages and with (more or less translated) slang greatly contributes to the representation of the city as a familiar space.<sup>115</sup> I propose that the use of a *common* language (in the sense of low, vulgar, unrefined, sometimes coarse, but

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<sup>112</sup> Carla Blumenkranz and others, 'World Lite, What is World Literature?' *N+1*, 17 (Fall 2013), 1-14, <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/> [accessed 30 June 2021].

<sup>113</sup> As part of his dismissal of the novel genre, Amit Chaudhuri thus quotes Frank O'Connor's distinction between the short-story or poem, which are about the moment, and the novel, which registers the passage of time: 'the poem gives you a beginning endlessly. It represents a fascination with openings' (*Friend of My Youth*, p. 66). This quote, woven into the narrative fabric of his novel, illustrates how he undermines the form from within.

<sup>114</sup> I use the term 'vernacular' to refer to Indian languages outside English (which may be considered as having become an Indian language (see Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English', *Economic and Political Weekly* (27 November 1993), 2607-2611; Chaudhuri, 'Huge Baggy Monster'). Hindi and English are the two official languages of the country, which also counts twenty-two regional 'scheduled' languages (such as Bengali, Marathi, Tamil or Kannada) and 780 languages which are not formally recognized by the Constitution. Though mostly spoken in North India, Hindi itself knows local variations and inflections.

<sup>115</sup> The systematic examination of the various modes of appearance of vernacular languages in these texts exceeds the scope of the present work, which will focus on the relation between language and the social context of the urban locality.

also of an idiom shared by a community), an instrument of literary realism, also fuels the literary creation of the ordinary city.

Originally the language of the street, slang demarcates and thus produces the locality as a space characterised by specific linguistic, social, moral and cultural codes that the characters are gradually initiated into.<sup>116</sup> Chowdhury's writing suggests that the boundaries of the locality are delineated by a specific idiom, which is made up of multiple linguistic sources. In Delhi as well as in Patna, local variations of Hindi participate in the creation of this 'enclosed and exclusive' world the writer conjures up (HR 427). The importance of local colloquial speech in order to map the city is enhanced in *Day Scholar*, which dramatizes Hriday's initiation into the world of Shokeen Niwas through his learning of Delhi's racy local slang from his mentor Jishnuda:

'Hriday babu, just like every door has a dwarfpal every chut has a chutpal. A chutpal never gets the chut just like the dwarfpal rarely gets to sleep in the master bedroom. Every good girl needs at least one chutpal, to run errands for her and listen to her bitch about her mother.' (DS 333)

Referring to a woman's protector and servant, the Hindi neologism based on the vulgar word for female genitals (*chut*) and the suffix *pal* (meaning guard or protector in Hindi) conveys the deeply sexist atmosphere of the university and the underlying fear of being subjugated by a woman, as the term is obviously derogatory. It also suggests irreverence towards religion and political power since *dwarpal*, meaning guardian, originally refers to tutelary deities and *Rajyapal* means Chief Minister, both words here twisted into a term of abuse. Jishnuda's linguistic lesson evidences the function of local slang in the character's induction into the community. Learning these words, almost all related to the body, is part and parcel of making oneself at home in the city. The explanation rests on the reader's knowledge of Hindi and unawareness of Delhi University Hindi slang, refracting regional (or even local) variations and inflections, which are repeatedly thematised in the novel.

'Betichod' was the preferred choice of verbal abuse when we were growing up in Patna. No one minded it a bit when anyone called them a 'betichod', a daughter-fucker, since firstly it was all in the future and secondly there always was a chance that one (hopefully) wouldn't have daughters. A sister or a mother was more immediate. Most of us had them. So calling someone behenchod or madharchod was serious business because then the brother/son would be forced to defend his honour [...]. This is why

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<sup>116</sup> By 'slang' I mean the colloquial speech characteristic of a place, which can be heard on the streets (see Jonathon Green, *The Vulgar Tongue: Green's History of Slang* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). The local slang of Delhi is thus made up of a conflation of Hindi, Punjabi, and Bhojpuri words (spoken in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar), among others.



some Punjabi boys in DU would suddenly get their faces slashed when all they thought they were doing was kidding around. (DS 297-98)

This comic ethnolinguistic digression expresses once more the deeply patriarchal and misogynistic roots of slang, enhanced by the allusion to the discrimination against female infants. One may note the difference between the narrator's endeavour to explain cultural and linguistic differences between Bihari and Delhi-Punjabi societies (hinting at his ethnographic gaze), and Jishnuda's condensed, cryptic explanations. The passage also stresses the variable symbolic significances and values of the same Hindi colloquial words across different regions, which is confirmed by Aman Sethi's definition of *behenchod* as a term of abuse which is tolerated among friends in Delhi: 'a *yaar* is the sort of close friend you can call a *Bhenchod*, or a sister fucker, in a fit of exasperation' (FM 226).

Chowdhury emphasizes the way the Bihari 'diaspora' in Delhi import their linguistic habits: in keeping with the transplantation of *nukkad nataks* or *compromises*, they enforce their own linguistic practice on campus, pointing to their appropriation of Delhi University campus as their territory. They actually give birth to a peculiar parlance, exemplified by the term *danasur*, referring to a failing civil-service-exam applicant: 'In a couple of years he would become, in Delhi University Biharispeak, a 'danasur'. A dinosaur. He would be extinct' (DM 27). The term, this time reflecting the specific pronunciation of an English word, marks out the local community of Delhi University Bihari students. If Chowdhury primarily investigates this social group and locality, the comic miscommunication between Biharis and Punjabis mentioned above also points to the city's nature as a meeting point between various dialects and regional inflections.

The presence of Delhi University Bihari *patois* in the text suggests that these words are explained to the character as a newcomer and thus to bilingual readers, mastering English and Hindi but potentially unaware of micro-local variations, thus inducting them into this opaque urban world. The critic Trisha Gupta refers to the pleasure of recognition and the 'shared nostalgia for a middleclass material culture' triggered by the constellation of Hindi words in Chowdhury's novels.<sup>117</sup> Yet a layer of opacity remains for non-Hindiphone readers (perhaps a secondary audience for Chowdhury), who have to guess-translate terms such as *pal* or *dwarpal*. Similarly, Hindi common nouns such as *astura* (shaving knife), caste names, religious practices (*dhram parivartan*, conversion) are not translated. The device of incomplete translation, relying on the reader's inference skills, is also used by Aman Sethi,

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<sup>117</sup> Gupta, 'Brilliant Tutorials'.

and may be read as the authors' attempt to suggest the multilingualism of Indian streets, and to render the specific soundscape of the locality as well as the untranslatability of certain words. In fact, the multilingual quality of these texts raises questions of translation and untranslatability, which can be discussed in the light of Walter Benjamin's reflections on the task of the translator, in particular because he conceives of translation as a way to incorporate a plurality of languages and to assess the irreducible gap between them, inviting to consider Indian Anglophone writers as translators.<sup>118</sup> Arundhati Roy endorses this conception and claims that 'translation as a *primary* form of creation was central to the writing of it [her novel]', which is infused with the multiple languages of the street: 'As I composed the cover page of my manuscript, in place of the author's name I was tempted to write: "Translated from the original(s) by Arundhati Roy". *The Ministry* is a novel written in English but imagined in several languages'.<sup>119</sup>

This lack of explanation or of translation and the attendant opacity for non-Hindiphone readers are enlightened by Amitav Ghosh's reference to his early writing style as a 'shared shorthand', which he pits against his writing for a global audience: writing with his Delhi friends in mind, he did not feel the need to unfold the multiple layers of meaning contained in each vernacular word, related to a specific local context that his local readers were familiar with.<sup>120</sup> Himself an alumnus of Delhi University, Ghosh praised *Day Scholar* as an 'enjoyable tale of life in Delhi University in the 1990s'. The notion of 'shorthand' is in line with Chowdhury's general downsizing strategy and is literally substantiated by the untranslated Hindi nouns and the shortening of University college names ('Hindu' for Hindu College, 'KMC' for Kirori Mal College). Chowdhury's casual use of the vernacular and of slang thus points to a specific intended audience, possessing both the cultural capital of English and a sufficient knowledge of Hindi to decipher vernacular words. However, even for a non-Hindiphone reader, this flippant use of the vernacular still conveys a sense of familiarity with the city.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' (1923), in *Illuminations*, pp. 69-82.

<sup>119</sup> Roy, 'In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities', in *Azadi*, p. 13, italics in original. Rashmi Sadana underlines that, even though the linguistic divide is smaller, a similar translation process is at work for writers in vernacular languages. (Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*, p. 8).

<sup>120</sup> Amitav Ghosh, 'Writing Is Like Music', Interview with Banibrata Mahanta and others, *Hindu*, 21 May 2000, <<http://www.thehindu.com/2000/05/21/stories/1321129n.htm>> [accessed 28 May 2021]. The connection with Ghosh is also relevant with respect to the importance of conversations in Chowdhury's and Sethi's works (See Claire Chambers's interview with Amitav Ghosh, 'The Absolute Essentialness of Conversations', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 41.1 (2005), 26-39).

<sup>121</sup> Siddharth Chowdhury seems to stretch to an extreme the notion of 'English vernacular', defined by Bishnupriya Ghosh, as 'the transformation of the language of global capital into a new kind of Indian vernacular' which 'can be decoded only with recourse to *situated* or contextual knowledges – historical,

In the light of Jean-Jacques Lecercle's argument on the *cliché* (or trite phrase) as the language of the community, the 'word of the tribe', I believe the notion of a common language resonates with the writers' use of vernacular slang in order to give a literary form to a local social formation.<sup>122</sup> *Compromise*, to use the above-mentioned example, does not distinguish the writer's voice as singular but gestures towards a given community and a local social practice. Through a specific work on language, Chowdhury's multilingual writing refracts the multiple tongues of the streets of Patna and Delhi, evincing his interest in the community and in the minutiae of everyday life in Indian cities, delving into its partly untranslatable particularities of a given locality and into what connects its people together.

Sethi's incorporation of the vernacular, in particular of Delhi slang, necessarily differs from Chowdhury's, owing to his global readership and, partly, to the generic identity of *A Free Man* as reportage, implying a lesser degree of opacity than fiction but also a more explicit reflection on the hegemony of English.<sup>123</sup> However, the parallels are numerous: the enclosed nature of Chowdhury's world is paralleled by Aman Sethi's description of Bara Tooti Chowk as a world 'where the jokes are dark and largely unintelligible to outsiders, and conversations tangential and prone to the most unlikely non sequiturs' (FM 7). His narrative is drawn by the contradictory pulls of transparency and opacity, as he endeavours to *translate* some of these jokes and conversations, yet constantly emphasizes the irreducible gap between languages and between the narrative and its referential basis.

The 'note on language' inserted at the end of the book thus opens with a disclaimer about its accuracy: 'It is hard to offer an accurate glossary of the slang spoken on Delhi's streets, particularly since it is drawn from dialects all across north India and the same word carries multiple, context-specific connotations that are opaque to unfamiliar users' (FM 225). This is characteristic of Sethi's self-conscious stance in the text, ceaselessly emphasising his outsider position in the labourers' world and the impossibility of delivering

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popular, cultural, linguistic, and so forth – as it is harnessed to its space of enunciation' (Bishnupriya Ghosh, 'An Invitation to Indian Postmodernity: Rushdie's English Vernacular as Situated Cultural Hybridity', in *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, ed. By M. Keith Booker (New York: Hall, 1999), pp. 129-130). A similar process can be found in the best-selling author Anuja Chauhan's writing, which brings a Punjabi inflection to her English (Anjaria, 'Introduction', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, p. 12).

<sup>122</sup> Lecercle considers the cliché or trite phrase as the expression of a common language, based on the repetition of things known and shared. He writes, alluding to Mallarmé's conception of poetic language, that the writer cannot escape the *words of the Tribe* (Jean-Jacques Lecercle, 'Du cliché comme réplique', in *Le Cliché*, ed. by Gilles Mathis (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1998), p. 141).

<sup>123</sup> Unlike Chowdhury's fiction, which has until now only been published in India, Sethi's reportage was published by Random House India in 2011 before being published by Norton (New York) in 2012.

an accurate account of their life. The writer's awareness of this impossibility is registered in the very form of this note, which is akin to a glossary yet is not a clear-cut list of definitions. It reads as a Delhi slang guide directly addressed to the Anglophone reader, but is also built as a story peppered with untranslated Hindi words and topical allusions, thus inviting the reader to infer meaning from context rather than giving straightforward information and to reflect on the text's ambiguous endeavour to *translate* the world of Bara Tooti Chowk for a global Anglophone readership. Its light-hearted tone also supports the notion that this mock-glossary is a humorous subversion of the conventions of factual narratives and a way to point to the inevitable opacity of the local.<sup>124</sup>

The note thus partly explains the meanings and connotations of untranslated vernacular words which occur several times in the text, such as the set phrase *angrezi murgi*, which first come up in one of the labourers' mouth: 'look what a nice *angrezi murgi* we've found you!' Lalloo shouts to Ashraf, referring to the author. The passage is a transcription of the labourer's words, imperfectly translated into English. The Hindi remainder, so to speak, points to the endeavour not to flatten out the character's language, and appears as a crack on the English textual surface, a trace of a multilingual urban world. Lise Guilhamon's work on the interpenetration of English, Hindi and Urdu in the language of Indian English novels proposes that these texts do not manifest the writer's attempt at reflecting the world, the equation between words and the world being openly dismissed, but at introducing alterity within the English language.<sup>125</sup> The explanation of the multi-layered meaning of the *angrezi murgi* is thus directly addressed to the Anglophone reader:

But then, if you are reading this book, you are probably an *angrezi murgi*, or white hen. *Angrez* was originally used to describe the English, but it is now a stand-in for generic 'white person'. When Rehaan and I first met, he called me an *angrezi murgi* to stress the distance between us. Gradually he stated calling me *Bhai*, but never came around to calling me *Yaar*. (FM 226)

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<sup>124</sup> The debates regarding the necessary or problematic inclusion of a glossary at the end of South Asian Novels, often related to publishers' demands, mostly concern fiction (see Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* for instance). This type of paratext is considered to emphasize the documentary value of these novels, to the detriment of their literary value. As Dorrit Cohn argues, paratext gives crucial information as to the generic positioning of the text and usually asserts the documentary value of a factual narrative, providing an intermediate zone between the text and its extratextual referential basis (*The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 115). Compared with other nonfictional writings about Delhi, the paratextual apparatus of *A Free Man* is rather thin: no map, index or notes append the text.

<sup>125</sup> Lise Guilhamon, *Poétique de la langue autre dans le roman indien d'expression anglaise*, un-published PhD thesis, Université de Rennes, 2007; See also 'Indian English ou Masala English: quelle variété d'anglais pour le roman indien anglophone?' in *La Modernité littéraire indienne*, ed. by Anne Castaing and others (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009), pp. 219-237.

The light-hearted address to the readers brings them back to their privileged position as English-speakers, emphasising their alienation from the opaque world of Bara Tooti, while enhancing the author's outsideness and his awareness of addressing a global audience. This definition intertwines a reflection on English as the language of power with an account of Sethi's relationship with one of the labourers, shifting from *angrezi murgi* to *yaar*, pointing to the building up of friendship. It suggests that the reporter gradually became closer to the group without ever reaching the status of friend, hinting at the unbridgeable gap between this member of the English-speaking elite and these Bihari daily labourers.<sup>126</sup> In fact, the polysemy of the term *bhai*, differently connoted across regions, is underlined in the previous page, oscillating between social parity and social superiority, thus leaving a layer of uncertainty as to the reporter's relation with the street-corner boys (FM 225). Unlike Mehta's identification with all Bombaywallahs or Chowdhury's insider perspective on Delhi's lowlife, Sethi highlights the irredeemable distance separating him from this world.

The remaining untranslated words of the 'note on language', such as *pallu* (scarf) in the following excerpt, reinforces the notion of remaining opacity while prompting the active participation of the reader in the formation of meaning.

Chamak challoos are special [...]; they are the sort of girls who are coy enough, yet wise enough, to drop the pallu or their sari just enough to reveal a shapely bosom clad in a racy blouse that makes a man's heart race chaka-chak chaka-chak chaka-chak like the train from Patna to Calcutta. (FM 226)

The comic explanation hints, once more, at the sexism of the male community that Sethi investigates, reinforced by the use of onomatopoeia which evokes the sound of a train and spatializes the sudden emotion and arousal triggered by the sight of a woman. The use of onomatopoeia also points to the author's aural sensitivity, which is tangible through the untranslated marks of orality (*bhai*, *arre*, *yaar*) punctuating the numerous conversations of the book. The deferral of translation indicates the author's attempt to emphasize the sounds of local slang and invites readers to immerse themselves in the soundscape of Delhi streets rather than immediately translating and domesticating it. The emphasis on the incommensurability between languages is also highlighted by Sethi's choice of explaining *chamak challoos* through story-telling, rather than by providing an imperfect translation.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> All the works examined in this thesis reflect on the hegemonic position of English in India, but also discredit the cut-and-dry opposition between Hindi and English, as well as linguistic nativism or nationalism (see Chowdhury (PMS 28-29, 128) and Roy (Interview with Penguin)).

<sup>127</sup> By contrast, Amit Chaudhuri's *translation* of *adda* as 'pub' and his awareness of the imperfection of this translation, is another strategy to convey local cultural and linguistic specificities.

Ultimately, the common language of the Bihari migrant workers in Delhi is overshadowed by Ashraf's idiolect, referred to as 'Ashrafspeak' by the reporter, contrasting with the emphasis laid on 'Bharispeak' in Chowdhury's writing, examining a group rather than an individual. Sethi's effort to render Ashraf's individual voice, intonations, inflections and comic neologisms is in keeping with his narrowing-down of the global city to one urban-dweller. The anecdote about 'LPPP', Ashraf's shorthand for illiterate people, which deceptively suggests an education degree acronym, showcases the character's linguistic creativity, always tied up with pragmaticism. The ironic twisting of the use of acronyms betrays his mocking of the importance of hierarchies on the labour market, and of the booming education market in India. Ashraf and his friends repeatedly use idiosyncratic shorthand and multilingual puns as everyday tricks. Thus, he relates how a friend used the homophony between B.A. and *biye* (Bengali for marriage) to get a contract (being married twice ('double *biye*' being misinterpreted by the employer as having a double degree), simultaneously exposing and challenging the hegemony of English in a satirical manner. The stress on his ability to juggle multiple languages and to use them to get his way suggests the author's addressing the political dimensions of multilingualism and the asymmetry between languages. In fact, Sethi ironically writes: 'Ashraf is proud of his literacy; he can even read little bits of English' (FM 21), alluding to the status of English as the language of power and privilege in the Indian society. The stress on the interviewee's awareness of the hegemony of English only emphasizes the asymmetrical relationship between the reporter and his subject that Sethi constantly reminds the reader of in the text.

Arundhati Roy's analogy between her novel and a crowded city that we discussed earlier also holds a linguistic dimension, as the text is 'infused' or 'marinated' (to use Roy's metaphors) in the multilingualism of Old Delhi streets.<sup>128</sup> Referring to Aftab, later to become Anjum, the text relates the character's close observation of the bustle of his family quarter, reminiscent of Sandeep's eager watching of his uncle's neighbourhood in Chaudhuri's Calcutta:

He quickly learned the cadence and rhythm of the neighbourhood, which was essentially a stream of Urdu invective – *I'll fuck your mother, go fuck your sister, I swear by your mother's cock* – that was interrupted five times a day by the call to prayer from the Jama Masjid as well as the several other smaller mosques in the old city. As Aftab kept strict vigil, day after day, over nothing in particular, Guddu Bhai, the acrimonious early-morning fishmonger who parked his cart of gleaming fresh fish in the centre of the

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<sup>128</sup> Roy, 'In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities', in *Azadi*, p. 15; 'In this part of the world, we live and speak and sing and pray in literally hundreds of languages and dialects. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is immersed – marinated – in those cadences.' (Roy, Interview with Penguin).

chowk, would, as surely as the sun rose in the east and set in the west, elongate into Wasim, the tall, affable afternoon naan khatai-seller who would then shrink into Yunus, the small, lean, evening fruit-seller, who, late at night, would broaden and balloon into Hassan Mian, the stout vendor of the best mutton biryani in Matia Mahal, which he dished out of a huge copper pot. (M 18)

The daily life of the Matia Mahal is first represented through its soundscape, mostly characterised by Urdu slang and religious chants.<sup>129</sup> The metaphor of the stream suggests the continuous music or cacophony of the great city (the term ‘cadence’ is repeated several times in the novel), which is visually mirrored by the continuum of individual shapes, one body seamlessly morphing into the other, elongating, shrinking and ballooning as the day goes by. Through Roy’s characteristic use of textual ‘time-lapse’, the text paradoxically pictures the comings and goings of street-vendors as one static yet protean body, this accelerated morphing thus enhancing the stability of daily life in the locality, which is intensified by the reference to the immutable sun course.

The call to prayer disrupts and punctuates the steady rhythm of insults. These italicized abusive terms are similar to those unravelled by Chowdhury and Sethi (*behenchod*, *madharchod*), this time translated into English, evidencing Roy’s practice of writing as translating. Contrary to other passages (such as Mir’s couplet, quoted in Urdu and translated), Urdu is thus here *evoked* rather than incorporated in the text. The association of Urdu both with slang and with the religious language of the *azaan* also serves to deconstruct the identification of Urdu with a declining social and cultural order and with the world of poetry and religion. Widely used on the streets of Delhi (in conjunction with other languages and dialects), Urdu appears as a language used in a sacred and profane way. In fact, Roy insists on translation as an everyday practice in the city: ‘translation is daily life, it is street activity, and it’s increasingly a necessary part of ordinary folk’s survival kit’.<sup>130</sup> The way the words of the call to prayer and of the invective are represented as landmarks suggests that the space of the locality is mapped through language, in particular through sonorities. As was examined in Chapter 1, the use of specific Urdu words, the evocation of their multi-layered meanings (such as *duniya* and *mazar*), and their approximative translation, do not only serve a realistic effect but correspond to central points in the novel, crucial to the understanding of the character’s relationship with the city.

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<sup>129</sup> *The Ministry* shows Roy’s sonic sensibility as she recreates the soundscape of Old Delhi and Nizamuddin neighbourhoods, describes Anjum’s singing voice and her lessons of Hindustani classical music with Ustad Hameed Khan, as well as hijras’ singing and dancing.

<sup>130</sup> Roy, ‘In What Language Does Rain Fall Over Tormented Cities’, in *Azadi*, p. 14.

This final example also points to Roy's novel as the paradigmatic case of interplay between the epic and ordinary modes, as the 'crowdedness' of the narrative points to two contradictory pulls: on the one hand, the multi-directional and polyphonic dimensions of her narrative evidence the affinity of her novel with the epic mode. On the other hand, the comparison with the crowd also illustrates Roy's aesthetics and politics of small things as she explores the tiniest nook of the city and gives depth to the most marginal characters, as shown by the fact that all the street-vendors of the locality are given a name even though they have a marginal role in the plot. The fact that she rarely gives explanations about the historical and cultural contexts of her narrative, thus confusing the 'global' reader who is unfamiliar with contemporary South Asia, also draws her close to the opacity of Siddharth Chowdhury's fiction.

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These works of fiction and nonfiction by Amit Chaudhuri, Siddharth Chowdhury, and Aman Sethi foreground the locality as the scale through which urban writers of the 'ordinary' apprehend Indian cities, thereby downsizing these vast urban areas. Yet, far from being only a scale, the locality emerges as a social and imaginative construction, a potent narrative matrix which fuels these novels, stories and reportages. Through their ethnographic gaze, zooming-in on the myriad details and particularities which make the specificity of everyday life in a Delhi or Kolkata neighbourhood, these texts emphasize the communal aspect of urban life, the tight social networks and constant interpenetration of public and private at work in the locality, at odds with the anonymity usually associated with the urban.

The value of this ground-level perspective thus resides in its reconfiguration of our imagination of Indian cities, which operates in two major ways. First, it unsettles the stereotypes of chaotic urban sprawl and colossal megacities, pushing back the exotic imaginary of Indian cities to put forward an 'endotic' urban geography, exploring what is familiar and common.<sup>131</sup> This is particularly the case for Sidharth Chowdhury, whose writing is close to a form of self-ethnography, while Aman Sethi and Amit Chaudhuri rather inhabit a liminal insider-outsider position in the locality they explore. At odds with the spectacular panoramic views of the epic mode, the close-up view serves to bring out the ungrandiose aspects of everyday life in the city. Chapter 5 discusses how the historical processes that the

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<sup>131</sup> Perec, 'Approaches to What?', pp. 177-178.



epic mode defamiliarizes and dramatizes are toned-down or subdued in ordinary narratives, which stress the continuities at work and the almost imperceptible effects of globalization on everyday life

Secondly, the ordinary mode contributes to provincializing the global city. In fact, the focus on the local brings global cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata closer to the province, or to small-town India, thus mitigating the sharp division between the metropolis and the country, which is an enduring notion in the Indian public imagination.<sup>132</sup> By investigating peripheral localities, which rarely appear on the literary maps of Indian cities, these texts also redefine the centre-periphery dynamic, suggesting that the periphery sometimes sits at the heart of a 'central' urban area. The connections with provincial towns and the grounding of Delhi and Kolkata in their regional spheres mitigate the notion that the global city is connected to other global cities but necessarily out-of-touch with its environment, as is emphasized by social scientists' accounts.<sup>133</sup> By focusing on the local and on the regional, these Indian texts written in English finally destabilise the association of the city with the nation. This narrative dissociation between city and nation reworks Appadurai's notion that the locality stands in the way of the nation-state, as the work of producing the neighbourhood often runs up against the projects of the nation-state because of the stronger attachment and commitment it triggers in its inhabitants: 'for the project of the nation-state, neighbourhoods represent a perennial source of entropy and slippage. They need to be policed almost as thoroughly as borders'.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, the texts in which the ordinary mode dominates underscore urban particularities rather than the connection between the city and India at large.

Within the Indian literary landscape, this circumventing of the nation draws these Anglophone texts closer to Indian regional literatures, which, for Amit Chaudhuri, are unburdened from the task of representing the nation. The novelist and critic puts forward a rich alternative tradition of Indian writers who are primarily concerned with 'cultures and

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<sup>132</sup> See Introduction.

<sup>133</sup> See Anthony King's notion of 'spaces of global culture' for instance (*Spaces of Global Culture*).

<sup>134</sup> 'This is partly because the commitments and attachments (sometimes mislabeled "primordial") that characterize local subjectivities are more pressing, more continuous, and sometimes more distracting than the nation-state can afford. It is also because the memories and attachments that local subjects have of and to their shop signs and street names, their favorite walkways and streetscapes, their times and places for congregating and escaping are often at odds with the needs of the nation-state for regulated public life. Further, it is the nature of local life to develop partly in contrast to other neighborhoods, by producing its own contexts of alterity (spatial, social, and technical), contexts that may not meet the needs for spatial and social standardization that is prerequisite for the disciplined national citizen.' (Appadurai, 'The Production of Locality', in *Modernity at Large*, pp. 190-191).

localities that are both situated in, and disperse the idea of, the nation'.<sup>135</sup> This tradition is mostly if not only composed of vernacular writing, which would be more likely to eschew the national literary frame.<sup>136</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee famously draws a sharp distinction between the homogenized 'pan-Indian milieu' of the Indian novel in English and the local or regional issues with which regional (or *bhasha*) writing is concerned. Bishnupriya Ghosh aptly sums up her argument on the 'anxiety of Indianness': 'Writers in English always create a unified imaginative topos out of Indian heterogeneity, while *bhasha* writers are more turned to local and regional specificities'.<sup>137</sup> What this chapter shows is that the clear-cut frozen opposition between regional (or vernacular) and Anglophone literatures does not hold in the face of these texts. The commitment to the local is constitutive of Siddharth Chowdhury's and Aman Sethi's urban writings, which also disperse the idea of the nation. If the linguistic difference and asymmetry cannot be overlooked, I believe that the importance of location in the ordinary mode brings together English and Hindi texts, for instance, with parallels emerging between Aman Sethi, Arundhati Roy, Siddharth Chowdhury and Uday Prakash, and Nilotpal Mrinal, another writer of Delhi University.<sup>138</sup> This affinity with regional literatures thus enables these writers to complicate the idea of the city as a showcase of the nation and of the world. Yet this local focus does not preclude connections with global urban imaginaries. On the contrary, we have shown how Chaudhuri, Chowdhury and Sethi unfold a transcultural imagination of the city which draws on a rich tradition of cultural representations of the urban locality, ranging from Scorsese, Rohmer, and Terkel to Joyce, Mansfield and Lawrence.

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<sup>135</sup> Chaudhuri, 'Huge Baggy Monster', in *Clearing a Space*, p. 115. This argument is a direct attack on Fredric Jameson's contention that 'third-world literatures' tend to rest on the correspondences between the private and the public realms, the intimate and the national, reading these texts as 'national allegories' (Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (Autumn 1986), 65-88).

<sup>136</sup> Similarly, he establishes a privileged link between literature written in regional languages and the focus on the everyday (Chaudhuri, 'The Emergence of The Everyday').

<sup>137</sup> B. Ghosh, 'An Invitation to Indian Postmodernity', p. 149.

<sup>138</sup> The depiction of a university campus and of the pervasive caste oppression in globalizing India in Uday Prakash's *The Girl with the Golden Parasol* (trans. by Jason Grunebaum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013)) resonates with Chowdhury's *Day Scholar*. More broadly speaking, Prakash's socio-political critique bears affinity with Roy and Sethi (see *The Walls of Delhi*, trans. by Jason Grunebaum (Gurgaon: Hachette, 2013)).



## CHAPTER 5

### ORDINARY RHYTHMS: WRITING EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE CITY

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary [...]. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist [...]. Behind the event there has to be a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal: natural cataclysms or historical upheavals, social unrest, political scandals [...]. How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1973 essay, Georges Perec invites his contemporaries to challenge the epistemological and political precedence of the spectacular event, in order to track down the familiar habits, movements and places which constitute the ordinary. Far from being oblivious to politics, the endeavour to probe into what is so familiar that it has become invisible will also enable us, he writes, to unearth the 'truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible'. Perec takes the example of mineworkers and writes that the 'real scandal' resides in the invisible catastrophe of everyday exploitation rather than in the pit explosion which makes the headlines.<sup>2</sup> His approach echoes Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, which conceives of the everyday as the sphere in which alienation is most entrenched and

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<sup>1</sup> Perec, 'Approaches to What?', p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> 'In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let's not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible. What is scandalous isn't the pit explosion, it's working in coalmines. "Social problems" aren't a "matter of concern" when there's a strike, they are intolerable twenty-four hours our of twenty-four, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, tower-block that collapse, forest fires, tunnel that cave in, the Drugstore des Champs-Élysées burns down. Awful! Terrible! Monstrous! Scandalous! But where's the scandal? The true scandal?' (Perec, 'Approaches to What', p. 177).

from which it can best be resisted.<sup>3</sup> Perec's repeated references to cataclysms, tidal waves and volcanic eruptions as what misleadingly captures our attention also anticipate Rob Nixon's work on invisible violence, which argues that we need to detach the notion of violence from the 'explosive and spectacular event', in order to account for 'incremental and accretive' forms of violence.<sup>4</sup> Through her anthropological work on low-income neighbourhoods in Delhi, Veena Das scrutinises the ways in which the violence of catastrophic events gets incorporated into the everyday, while also tracking down the small, recurring forms of violence which are woven into daily life. She thus refers to Stanley Cavell and states: 'What is catastrophic is not a spectacular event but that which is happening repeatedly, undramatically, uneventfully'.<sup>5</sup>

How, then, do these reflections help us discuss representations of contemporary Indian cities? The texts in which the ordinary mode prevails focus on the daily habits of their protagonists, whether members of a middle-class family in Calcutta, Bihari students on a university campus, or day labourers on the streets of Delhi, and insist on the regular rhythms of urban life, including the continuum of small-scale disasters defining the everyday life for the most disenfranchised denizens.<sup>6</sup> As suggested by the notions of 'slow-motion emergency' and 'slow violence', thinking about the rhythm of urban life will prove central to our discussion.<sup>7</sup> Revisiting the classic distinction between long-term, systemic crisis and the single occurrence of the event, this chapter proposes that the ordinary mode of Indian urban writing blurs the temporal frontiers of the event and sheds light on its connections with everyday manifestations of urban violence.<sup>8</sup> It also explores the various ways in which

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life and the Modern World* (1968), trans. by Sacha Rabinovitch, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). See Sheringham's analysis of the creative interaction between Lefebvre, Perec, Certeau and the situationists around the question of the everyday in *Everyday Life*.

<sup>4</sup> 'Violence customarily conceived as an event, an action immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence'. (Nixon, p. 2). These references also significantly echo the epic writing of contemporary Indian cities, which draws on metaphors of natural cataclysms to render urban transformations and historical convulsions.

<sup>5</sup> 'Cavell draws attention to the kind of destruction that consists of small, recurring, repetitive crises almost woven into everyday life itself. What is catastrophic is not a spectacular event but that which is happening repeatedly, undramatically, uneventfully.' (Das, *Textures of the Ordinary*, p. 7).

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams recalls that the word 'ordinary' etymologically derives from 'order' (*ordo* in Latin) and denotes the order of days, the regular, the expected, the customary (Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 225).

<sup>7</sup> The phrase 'slow motion emergency' is borrowed from the writer Jerry Pinto (Interview with the author, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Regarding the dialectic of event and crisis in a postcolonial literary context, see Sourit Bhattacharya, *Postcolonial Modernity and the Indian Novel: On Catastrophic Realism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 8-14.

each text delves into the ‘random occurrences’ of everyday life, and wrest them out of their invisibility, oscillating between magnifying and deflating these micro-events.<sup>9</sup> This defamiliarization of mundane moments, which runs up against the ethnographic method discussed in Chapter 4, is encapsulated in the metaphor of the fish-bowl. Siddharth Chowdhury compares life in the neighbourhood as ‘living in a constant fishbowl’ (DM 141), highlighting the way each gesture is observed and magnified by the community of the ‘mohalla’. Yet if we stretch the metaphor further, it also implies that the locality is somehow insulated from larger events. Similarly, Indian urban writing seems to amplify the everyday while muffling or dimming the ‘tremors of public history’, imagined as distant echoes, thus subverting the opposition between the significant and the insignificant, the banal and the dramatic.<sup>10</sup>

However, what these novels and essays reveal is that the focus on the everyday does not imply a retreat away from history but rather offers an alternative form of historical imagination to the one developed in epic narratives of Indian cities. As stated in the introduction and in Chapter 4, the ordinary mode implies a deflating movement which subdues violence, its dominant tone leaning towards understatement and ellipsis rather than hyperbole and saturation. The texts of Sethi, Chaudhuri and Chowdhury reverberate ‘critical events’ (whether the Partition, the 1992-1993 Bombay riots, or the destruction engendered by the Commonwealth Games in 2010) through the small lens of everyday discourses, vague rumours and allusions. In the light of Veena Das’s understanding of the mutual absorption of the event and the ordinary, this chapter looks at the way in which the deflating or belittling movement of the ordinary mode shapes the configuration of time, history and violence in the city. This discussion will consider both facets of the ordinary mode: the way in which historical ruptures constitutes the distant background of these narratives, and the way in which small everyday disasters take centre stage, thus expanding the meaning of history to ‘what’s at hand’, in Chaudhuri’s terms (CAL 65).

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Random occurrence’ is a concept developed by Eric Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). See below.

<sup>10</sup> Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 5.

## I. 'The Enduring Allure of the Everyday'

This first section probes two distinct strategies to engage with the ordinary rhythms of urban life in contemporary India. Both zoom-in on the micro-events of the everyday, and deflect any large-scale narrative of urban transformation. Yet, while the first fully indulges in the *fish-bowl effect*, magnifying mundane moments and turning them into strange exotic happenings, the second pieces together what makes up the daily life of labourers in an Indian global city through a stripped-down prose, trying to be faithful to the protagonists' uncertain experience of time.

### 1. Through the Magnifying Glass: Defamiliarizing the Everyday

In Chaudhuri's *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the downscaling of the city to one neighbourhood is combined with the figurative upscaling of mundane moments into dramatic scenes: the everyday is subjected to the amplifying movement of Sandeep's imagination, which is kept at a distance through the invisible narrator's subtle irony. The one-page introduction to the novel, written by Chaudhuri, already suggests the writer's main imaginative concern, through a brief portrait of Sandeep: 'his imagination transforms, and is transformed by the family, a city, the spaces of a house, the Bengali language, mortality, and the *enduring allure of the everyday*' (SA 1, my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> The author's attraction to the trivialities of the everyday is expressed through the subjective experience of a Bombay boy, whose imagination endows daily life in Kolkata with an aura of strangeness.

The child's defamiliarization transports the reader into an exotic aquatic world, as the house is turned into an organic universe, conducive to imaginary adventures: beds become 'islands' (SA 69), cupboards 'ugly reefs from a fictional ocean' (SA 35), and mothers putting make-up 'lilypads' (SA 57).<sup>12</sup> The description of the evening house-cleaning by one of the domestic workers, Chhaya, combines methodical precision with exotic fantasies, as the narrator details the different stages of sweeping, enumerating the collected treasure (a pigeon feather, a dead spider, hair...) even as he imaginatively turns Chhaya into a hybrid

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<sup>11</sup> The American edition of Chaudhuri's first three novels in one volume, entitled *Freedom Song: Three Novels* (New York: Picador, 2000), contains a short introduction to each novel, written by the writer himself.

<sup>12</sup> The analogy with islands and the comparison of Saraswati's wet footprints on the floor to 'the first footprint Crusoe found on his island' (SA 70) rewrite an ordinary postcolonial urban setting into an exotic location, ironically gesturing towards colonial narratives of discovery.

‘amphibian’ creature, ‘half human and half of another world’ (SA 15-16).<sup>13</sup> The whole neighbourhood becomes an oceanic world, as urchins running behind the family car in the morning look like ‘a school of ancillary fish in the wake of a whale’ (SA 21). This fertile ground for daydreaming prompts the young protagonist to ‘send waves of unreality over what was formerly the real world’, in Bachelard’s words.<sup>14</sup> Sandeep’s comparison of the familial atmosphere of the house with the shade of a banyan tree exemplifies the warm protective realm of the ‘inside’ described by Bachelard (SA 9).<sup>15</sup> The philosopher’s conceptualisation of the house as the privileged territory of imagination, reverie and childhood, is here stretched to the neighbourhood, as Sandeep reinvents this familiar space and inhabits it through fantasy. Bachelard’s understanding of the ‘enlarging gaze’ of youth which distorts and magnifies reality, is also perfectly embodied by Sandeep.<sup>16</sup>

In this fluid universe, Sandeep’s intensifying gaze also blurs the line between the human and the nonhuman, and turns adults into exotic fauna and flora, even as objects and nature surrounding the house are anthropomorphised.<sup>17</sup> The description of the first monsoon rains as a military training evidences this mock-epic anthropomorphism, with lightning and thunder commanding the tree in the middle of the yard: ‘in obedience, the leaves began to tremble, and the branches moved uniformly, disciplined as a battalion doing exercises – Bend! Rise! Bend! Rise! And, slam! A door or a window banged shut without warning’ (SA 67). The epic simile paradoxically turns the chaos of the monsoon into order and discipline, yet the mechanical regularity of the injunctions is disturbed by the final onomatopoeia indicating an unexpected act of disobedience to the cosmic march. The way nature takes back control is expressed through a play on scale as the city is miniaturized,

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<sup>13</sup> There is a striking affinity between this passage and Arun Kolatkar’s poem ‘Meera’, which sublimates rag-picking as treasure-collecting (See Chapter 6). Like Chhaya, the other domestic servant Saraswati is perceived as an exotic protean creature (SA 53). Yet a shift in Sandeep’s perception occurs when his cousins go back to school, putting an end to his exoticisation: ‘Without Abhi and Babla around, Sandeep began to see Saraswati as an individual rather than a mythical figure, which was a mildly disturbing experience’ (SA 78). The narrator’s final ironic comment gently mocks the child’s new awareness, which brings Saraswati back into the ordinary world.

<sup>14</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> See Bachelard, ‘The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut’, in *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 3-37. An interesting counterpoint to this blissful portrayal of childhood in Calcutta is Saikat Majumdar’s *The Firebird*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 155. The writer’s alert gaze, keen on detecting and enlarging the tiniest detail (whether an insect, a piece of cloth, or the movement of a branch), can also be connected to the magnifying glass of the botanist described by Gaston Bachelard, which the philosopher significantly associates with youth and its power to renew our vision of the world (*Ibid.*, pp. 154-155) (See Chapter 1).

<sup>17</sup> A comic instance of the incorporation of objects into this organic universe is the house ceiling fan, alternately described as ‘a great bird trying to fly’ (SA 8) and a ‘dervishing fan’ (SA 29): based on a neologism turning the noun ‘dervish’ into a process, the compressed image comically infuses the ordinary object with life, making it part of a mystic performance.



turned into a vulnerable object caught in the middle of a cosmic conflict: ‘the nervous, toy-like city was set against the dignified advance of the clouds, as if two worlds were colliding. There was an end of the world atmosphere’ (SA 67). Finally, the (mock-)martial atmosphere gives way to a freer movement as the trembling tree is imagined dancing in the wind: ‘Sandeep glanced out of the window and saw the palm tree dancing by itself, to itself. A silent wave of delight passed over him as he watched it dance’ (SA 68). The narrator’s microscopic gaze highlights how enmeshed humans and non-humans are in the city, and gives birth to a *natural* history of Kolkata, alert to the micro-movements of nature and to the way the rhythm of urban life is affected by natural phenomena.

These mock-epic fantasies are also defined either by the festive atmosphere or the war-like dimension of the everyday. In fact, mundane activities, such as cooking, showering, shopping or conversing are turned into extraordinary events, often associated with religious rituals and festivals, thus conflating the everyday with holy days.<sup>18</sup> For instance, Sandeep’s restless and curious eyes turn cooking into a delirious experience, as is the case when he describes the preparation of a dessert based on a local berry (*jaam*):

No mercy, no restraint, was to be shown towards the jaam. One by one, they took turns [...] abandoning their civilized facades and letting themselves go the moment they held the pan, like prophets on the verge of a vision or epileptics surrendering to a seizure. (SA 27)

The banal action of shaking the pan to crush the berry into a pulp becomes a wild trance, partaking of a mystic ceremony or of insanity. The incongruous gap between the elevated style and the banal matter, leaning towards the mock-epic, suggests the child’s amazement in front of this scene. The unmerciful shaking of the pan, meant to vanquish the *jaam*, evidences the conflictual prism through which reality is imagined. Thus, the passage following this mystic cooking episode dwells on a lively business conversation between Sandeep’s uncle (Chhotomama) and his partners, turned into a tale of heroic deeds:

He liked it because his uncle’s account of the small-business world always seemed like a suspense story or a myth or a fairy-tale, full of evocative characters that worked themselves slowly into his imagination: cheats, sophisticated two-timers, astringent moralists, clever strategists, heroic fighters, risk takers, and explorers. Each new business venture sounded like a new military onslaught, each new product like a never-before weapon capable of conquering the world added to a nameless arsenal. (SA 27)

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<sup>18</sup> Holy days are part and parcel of Calcutta’s urban consciousness, with the autumn festival of Durga Puja as the culminating point of the religious year. See Kushanava Choudhury, who claims the city becomes ‘epic’ during this festival (*The Epic City*, pp. 105-117).

The amplification of the ‘small-business world’ into an epic universe full of dangers illustrates the way defamiliarization works through scalar variation. This mock-epic imagination of ‘small’ business as a warrior quest also ironically recalls Rana Dasgupta’s earnest portrayal of Delhi businessmen as warriors. Thus, the aura of Sandeep’s uncle as an everyday hero is repeatedly suggested, notably in his serene leadership of the collective endeavour to start the family car, analysed in Chapter 4, a mock-dramatic episode witnessed by the whole neighbourhood (SA 32-33).

Adult conversations are also perceived by Sandeep as mere entertainment or performances: ‘there were times when it seemed a wonderful ‘pretend’ game, not real or dangerous at all, like the games Sandeep and Abhi played in the afternoons’ (SA 28). The belittling of adult concerns to games could be read as a trivialising counterpoint to Sandeep’s ‘enlarging gaze’. Yet, far from being disparaged, the realm of games, illusions and drama is exalted in the novel. Another passage emphasizes the theatrical quality of adults’ vehement debates: ‘One would have almost expected Sandeep’s uncles and aunts to have been attired in the splendid, vibrant costumes that folk artistes wore in keeping with the dramatic excessiveness of their gestures’ (SA 49). The connection with ‘actors in a remote village’ (SA 49) enhances the imagined *ruralisation* of the city in Sandeep’s mind, prone to turn the house into an enchanted wilderness.

The child’s imaginative defamiliarization also intensifies the gratuitous enjoyment of the moment, which makes the everyday tip over into the realm of spectacle. Childhood is identified with this enchanted perception of daily life liberated from any imperative of purpose, utility, or consequence. Just like prayer is envisaged as a pure sensorial pleasure, conversations, business, and life on the streets are imagined as shows offered to the enlarging gaze of the viewer. This exaltation chimes with Chaudhuri’s devotion to the immediate present and to the random occurrence which has no clear function, rather than to the passage of time and the sequence of events. He associates this aesthetic appreciation of the random moment with Calcutta itself. In his essay on the city, he repeatedly praises the potentiality for daydreaming and illusion offered by Calcutta for the middle-class child that he was, suggesting that the Sandeep’s magnifying imagination stems from the city itself: ‘It’s a city that [...] lends itself to make-believe, if you’re open to make-believe and to the kind of illusion precious to children’ (CAL 247). He also insists on the regularity of festivals in Calcutta (Durga Puja being the most famous one), which he closely associated with his holiday visits as a child, thus partly explaining the morphing of everyday activities into a

moment of performed ritual: ‘the refulgent Puja annual that my cousins got as gifts [...], would be mixed up for me with the enchantment of the holidays and with their melancholy, their inevitable coming-to-an-end’ (CAL 172-173).

In fact, Sandeep’s uncle morning preparation before he rushes off to work is turned into a glorious if chaotic ceremony.

He would become an archetype of that familiar figure who is not often described in literature – the ordinary breadwinner in his moment of unlikely glory, transformed into the centre of his universe and his home. Over and over again, he would shout, ‘I’m late!’ in the classic manner of the man crying ‘Fire!’ or ‘Timber!’ or ‘Eureka!’ while Saraswati and Mamima scuttled around him like frightened birds. (SA 20)

Saikat Majumdar’s perceptive reading of the passage through the lens of the conflict between the banal and the mythical underlines the scene’s ‘curious mood of comic urgency’.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the comparison of the habitual morning rush with a catastrophe (a fire or a tree falling) or a major discovery gives a dramatic importance to everyday practices, thus challenging the boundaries between the historical and the a-historical. The child confers grandeur to the ‘ordinary breadwinner’ and his daily routine, and the help provided by his wife and the maidservant is later compared to a performance (an ‘old desperate dance’, SA 93). The fictional investigation of the overlooked ordinary worker, which the metafictional comment points to, takes the form of a comic elevation. Equally striking are the dramatic and rapid dimensions of this disorderly scene, which is perceived as a miniaturised religious ceremony, possessing ‘the ring and obstinate fanfare of a Hindu festival or wedding ceremony’ (SA 21).

Chaudhuri’s literary essay on the city hints at the political implications of this fusion between the everyday and the holy, as the numerous festivals celebrated in the city are part of a strategy deployed by common citizens to disrupt the normal course of the year and the alienating rhythm of work.

I say the city isn’t at war with itself, but is in a state of chafing conflict; the oppositional mode, where kaajer lok are concerned, is passive resistance. Strategy, subtle preparedness, and passive resistance are most in use during festivals. New festivals, paying homage to some unheard-of deity, are invented almost annually by the kaajer

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<sup>19</sup> ‘Within the larger spaces of public historiography, the juxtaposition of the uncle’s anxious utterances with the same celebrated exclamations associated with some of the most phenomenal inventions of human civilization amounts to a sly commentary on the cultural value system that has left banality and grandeur to be such overdetermined categories. But Sandeep’s imagination is always ready to disorient, indeed, reverse such overdetermined categorization.’ (Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, pp. 161-162). Majumdar suggests that Chaudhuri’s fiction enhances the local and historical production of categories such as the familiar and the foreign, the ordinary and the dramatic.

lok, in order to fob off the interminable and unrewarding cycle of work in a way that, at least in their own eyes, requires no rationale. (CAL 257)

If satirical undertones may be perceived in the passage, the connection between festivals and disruption of everyday toil is also highlighted by Ranajit Guha. In his essay on the temporal displacement engendered by colonialism in Calcutta, the historian suggests that Bengali festivals are a way for colonial subjects to interrupt the *office bela* (or office time), ruled by the colonial regime, which encroaches upon the lived time of indigenous society. Guha draws on Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, in which he argues that the strict separation between the everyday and the festival, the sacred and the profane, work and leisure, is usually overemphasized in social sciences, and reinforces the individual's alienation.<sup>20</sup> In his eyes, the festival is a moment in which everyday mechanisms are exacerbated rather than reversed or overhauled. Thus, Guha argues, the festival disrupted the smooth colonial urban machine and its strict temporal patterns, and appeared as a means to reclaim one's time from colonial work.<sup>21</sup> The truncated and impoverished everyday was 'restored to its fullness only when official time [...] was suspended, that is, when there was a festival in the city. Considered thus, the festival of the colonial city is a moment of self-assertion on the part of the colonized in an elevated and intensified presence inaccessible to official time'.<sup>22</sup>

This is all the more relevant as the novel is framed by the enchanted time of holidays, which, for the young protagonist, becomes indistinguishable from the city itself (CAL 296).<sup>23</sup> Chaudhuri repeatedly mentions the defamiliarizing effect of vacation: 'A holiday doesn't so much entail a journey to a foreign place as a certain change in mood that causes familiar and everyday things to become foreign. It's this transformation that Calcutta once represented for me' (CAL 295). In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the child's enthusiasm upon getting to his relatives' house is not related to the anticipation of bustling activity but to the state of abeyance provided by 'the shadowy, secret life of the holidays' (SA 80), during which nothing apparently happens, letting the imagination wander and enchant the city. At a micro-level, the afternoon is also emphasized as a moment of enchanted interruption for

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<sup>20</sup> Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, pp. 36-38.

<sup>21</sup> 'From the rulers' point of view, all that inconvenience and confusion were due entirely to the peculiarities of an indigenous time prone to slowing down, interrupting and otherwise hindering the smooth and effective flow of a master time governed by rules which the colonized, as a population of servants, could never understand or grasp.' (Guha, 'A Colonial City and its Time', in *The Indian Postcolonial*, p. 355).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>23</sup> 'At the novel's centre is not even Calcutta, but the holiday itself, which on some level becomes indistinguishable, for the boy, from the city; and for me, the writer, from the novel' (CAL 296).

the child, a time of sleep and digestion during which the city is wrapped in a ‘mist of drowsiness’.<sup>24</sup> This suspended moment allows for long stretches of daydreaming and close observation of trivial details in the house, a form of indoor *flânerie* which fosters the creation of fictional worlds. Chaudhuri’s writing springs from these interstitial moments of interruption and inactivity, which form the backbone of his novels.

The slow pace of the afternoon and of the holidays suggests the village-like quality of Calcutta, yet it is also what constitutes Calcutta’s urban modernity in Chaudhuri’s eyes. Drawing on Baudelaire’s conceptions of modernity, he identifies it with the possibility of transforming the banal into the extraordinary, the everyday into something foreign, perpetually conflating the old and the new, the decrepit and the beautiful.

The Calcutta I’d encountered as a child was one of the great cities of modernity [...]. By ‘modern’ I don’t mean ‘new’ or ‘developed’, but a self-renewing way of seeing, of inhabiting space, of apprehending life. By modern I also mean whatever alchemy it is that changes urban dereliction into something compelling, perhaps even beautiful. It was that arguable beauty that I first came across in Calcutta, and may have, without being aware of it, become addicted to. (CAL 8)<sup>25</sup>

This modernity is embodied by the ‘unfinished’ character of the city, which can be construed as a facet of modernity’s uneven and irregular nature. Chaudhuri also encounters it in New York in 1979 (CAL 8, 69), in 1920s Dublin, recalling Marshall Berman’s comparison of urban modernity across time and space (CAL 74). As I showed in Chapter 1, the writer’s aesthetic vision of modernity does not eschew an attention to the material implications of uneven modernisation, embodied by the perpetual dust hanging over the city and the conflation of the old and the new.

If Chaudhuri associates this slowed-down rhythm with the aura of the city itself, he also acknowledges that his childhood visits to Calcutta, on which his first novel is based, were permeated by the ‘volatile atmosphere’ generated by the Naxalite insurrection and its brutal repression:

My first remembered impressions of Calcutta are of that troubled, pulsating time. I would come to my uncle’s house in Pratapaditya Road for a month and a half during

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<sup>24</sup> ‘The afternoon was a time of enchantment in Calcutta, pregnant with meaning for the Bengali child, when the adult, the figure of authority, had withdrawn, and the child was granted solitary freedom within a fixed ambit.’ (CAL 294). The ‘afternoon world’ (FS 258) is also imagined in *Freedom Song* as a territory to be protected from all kinds of externalities.

<sup>25</sup>See also: ‘By “modernity”, I have in mind something that was never new. True modernity was born with the aura of inherited decay and life [...]. I’m not referring here to an air of timelessness; the patina that gave Calcutta’s alleys, doorways, and houses their continuity and disposition is very different from the eternity that defines mausoleums and monuments. It’s this quality I’m trying to get at when I speak of “modernity”.’ (CAL 75-76).

my summer vacations, and sometimes three weeks in the winter – and the volatile atmosphere, the hammer and sickle painted on walls, the home-made bombs being detonated in the distance (Pratapaditya Road was an area of disturbance), the refulgent Puja annuals that my cousins got as gifts [...], would be mixed up for me with the enchantment of the holidays and with their melancholy, their inevitable coming-to-an-end. (CAL 172-173)

If things were mixed up in his experience, enchantment clearly supersedes the explosive atmosphere in *A Strange and Sublime Address*. Contrary to other fictional and nonfictional accounts of 1980s Kolkata, the political unrest occurring in the city is nowhere to be seen in his novel.<sup>26</sup> This contrast suggests that the quietness that allows the narrative to develop, although fuelled by the city itself, primarily derives from the writer's attraction to the micro-events of the everyday, which momentarily muffles the larger urban tumult around. This affinity with the ordinary, which extends to Oxford, Bombay or London, comes to mitigate Chaudhuri's own argument that Calcutta is a city which has lost its connection with history.<sup>27</sup>

The politics of Chaudhuri's defamiliarizing of the everyday have been hinted at through Lefebvre and Guha, and further conclusions can be drawn in the light of Rancière's argument that the politics of fiction lies in its arrangement of time and in its unveiling of a new temporal *form*.<sup>28</sup> The modernist lineage of Chaudhuri's prose, underlined by Saikat Majumdar and evidenced by the writer's own references to Joyce, Woolf or Mansfield, is palpable in its rendering of an individual consciousness grasping and magnifying mundane moments, which redefines what is significant and what is not.<sup>29</sup> These micro-events are explored for themselves, and rarely wedged into a linear causal narrative. Contrary to

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<sup>26</sup> The history of Kolkata has been defined by its strong political life, from the anti-colonial *swadeshi* movement in the early-twentieth century to the tumultuous rule of the Left Front (an alliance of parties, among which the dominant communist party) from 1977 to 2011. Internecine conflicts emerged in the 1960s between different factions of the party, notably over the Maoist peasant insurgency in Naxalbari (a village in West Bengal), which started in 1967 and led to the emergence of the Naxalite revolutionary movement, which spread to Kolkata, where it was brutally suppressed by the police. See for instance, Mahasweta Devi, *Mother of 1084* (1974), trans. by Samik Bandyopadhyay (Kolkata: Seagull, 1997); Jumpa Lahiri, *The Lowland* (New York: Knopf, 2013); Neel Mukherjee, *The Lives of Others* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2014) and Mrinal Sen's film *Calcutta 71* (Echo Entertainment, 1972). For an ethnographic study of the *para* as a political location, see Henrike Donner, 'Locating Activist Spaces: The Neighbourhood as a Source and Site of Urban Activism in 1970s Calcutta', *Cultural Dynamics*, 23.1 (2001), 21-40.

<sup>27</sup> 'Calcutta is a marginal city and has been a marginal city since the late seventies/early eighties. It is a city that has lost its connection with its history.' (Amit Chaudhuri, 'I See History as Junk, and Junk as Somehow Being Historical', Interview with Devdan Chaudhuri, *The Punch Magazine*, 1 October 2015, <<http://thepunchmagazine.com/the-byword/interviews/amp-039-i-see-history-as-junk-and-junk-as-somehow-being-historical-amp-039>> [accessed 24 March 2021].

<sup>28</sup> 'S'il y a une politique de la fiction, elle ne vient pas de la manière dont celle-ci représente la structure de la société et ses conflits. Elle ne vient pas de la sympathie qu'elle peut susciter pour les opprimés ou de l'énergie qu'elle peut engendrer contre l'oppression. Elle vient de cela même qui la fait être comme fiction, soit une façon d'identifier des événements et de les lier les uns aux autres. Le cœur de la politique de la fiction est le traitement du temps.' (Jacques Rancière, *Les bords de la fiction* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2017), pp. 147-148).

<sup>29</sup> See Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary*.

Lukács's well-known condemnation of the modernist novel because of its focus on insignificant events, indicating the decadence of the modern novel, the magnifying of trivial habits can also be analysed through Rancière's assertion that the focus on the 'random moment' for itself, away from 'the great epics of the human condition', does not divert us from the human community at large but reaches out to it through the exploration of a common experience of time. Rancière actually expands on Auerbach's argument, itself based on Virginia Woolf's novel *To The Lighthouse*, that the modernist novel, through its emphasis on the 'random occurrence' and the destruction of the causal sequence of events, brings the revolution of modern fiction to completion.<sup>30</sup> His stretching of the political ramifications of Auerbach's theory supports my argument that intensifying micro-events does not disconnect Chaudhuri's writing from larger political, social and economic processes but surreptitiously hints at their mutual interplay. The privilege given to the random occurrence liberated from any concatenation of events also characterises Sethi's writing of the everyday, albeit in a very different urban world from the one explored by Chaudhuri.

## 2. The Uncertainty of the Everyday

Away from the genteel atmosphere of a middle-class neighbourhood transfigured by a child's magnifying gaze during the holidays, Sethi explores the rougher world of a labour market in Delhi. Work is thus at the centre of Sethi's narrative, yet it also focuses on interstitial moments of leisure, and is fuelled by the labourers' conversations at the tea-stall, at the illegal bar, or on the pavement. The main question that seems to drive Sethi's investigation is: how is time organised for someone whose home is the street and whose job changes every day? One of the strengths of this urban reportage, I venture, is that it reflects the uneasy confrontation between the writer's interests and the labourers' expression of their own perception of time, which oscillates between regularity and uncertainty. The deliberately restricted lens of Sethi's narrative goes hand in hand with the tempered tone of his writing, which seems attuned to the pragmatism of his protagonists.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Le microrécit de Woolf ne nous détourne pas des enjeux de la communauté humaine. Il ouvre au contraire vers son avenir, vers ce moment où l'humanité vivra "une vie commune sur terre". Mais s'il le fait, c'est non pas *bien que* mais *parce que* il ruine cet agencement d'actions qui a été tenu jusque-là comme le principe même de la fiction.' (Rancière, p. 147). He quotes the following passage from Auerbach's *Mimesis*: 'What takes place here in Virginia Woolf's novel is precisely what was attempted everywhere in works of this kind [...] – that is, to put the emphasis on the random occurrence, to exploit it not in the service of a planned continuity of action but in itself'. (p. 757).

Made from the finest commonly available ingredients, Everyday whisky isn't for everyone. New recruits often shun this intoxicating brew, in favour of more bombastic brands like Hulchul that shakes the very foundations of a man's being [...]; Enclosed in a squarish, clear-glass bottle, the name printed across in simple bilingual lettering, Everyday makes no such promises, its prosaic name serving as a reminder of an incontrovertible truth: Everyday – for those who crave it every day, day after day [...]. After enough Everyday, Tilak Bridge looks like Howrah Bridge, Sadar Bazaar looks like Bara Bazaar, India Gate looks like the Gateway of India [...]. The broad intersections of the bazaar divide into the side streets of smaller towns' (FM 61-62).

This digression around the favourite drink of Old Delhi labourers encapsulates Aman Sethi's temporal focus and tone. Everyday whisky speaks of regular, cyclical habits or addictions, and is defined by its plainness: its name, branding and bottle-shape, stripped down to the purely matter-of-fact, indicate that its consumer targets are hardboiled old-timers rather than newcomers. Pitted against other bombastically-named whisky brands, Everyday whisky is presented as mild and prosaic, its name self-evident, its plainness inscribed into the 'simple' lettering on the bottle, resonating with the down-to-earth, disillusioned tone of Sethi's reportage. The book is not deprived of grief, pain and pathos, yet these are pitched to the level of the ordinary, seemingly downplayed so as to register 'crisis ordinariness', or the constant yet uneventful manifestations of systemic violence of the city.<sup>31</sup>

Yet this plain liquor also induces hallucinations and imaginary teleportation, giving the workers an ephemeral and fantasised escape from Delhi, hinting at the narrative's opening up to a larger horizon than daily life in Sadar Bazaar. The landmarks of Delhi are magically overlaid by iconic places in Kolkata (Howrah Bridge, Bara Bazaar) and Mumbai (the Gateway of India), this spatial superimposition expressing the migrant labourers' homesickness. The vast city is then imaginarily downsized to become a small town, the roads turned into streets, conveying the same downscaling effect explored in Chapter 4, this time tinged with melancholy, the very name of the beverage suggesting the ineluctable cycles of hard work and alcohol-induced oblivion that define the lives of these migrants.

Samanth Subramaniam stresses Sethi's skills in registering the various rhythms of the locality, 'absorbing the tempo of Sadar Bazaar'.<sup>32</sup> The lives of labourers in Old Delhi are defined by the monotonous time of the labour market, following the rhythm of seasons which

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<sup>31</sup> See Laurent Berlant's concept of 'crisis ordinariness': 'My claim is that most such happenings [traumatic events] that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or "crisis ordinariness" and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated. Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming.' (*Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 16).

<sup>32</sup> S. Subramaniam, 'Where the Sidewalk Ends', 14.



is reflected in the cyclical movements of the street-dwelling workers around the *chowk* (square) like the needle of a sundial.

Chowk time creeps along at its own glacial pace, marked only by epochal events and the coming and going of regulars: the year of Indira Gandhi's assassination, the year of Kale Baba's first illness, the year of Lambu Mistry's return. Seasons will change, and Ashraf and Lalloo will move cyclically around the lamp post with the surveillance cameras. In summer they will sit in the northwest quadrant of the chowk, shielded from the blazing sun. In winter they will shift to the centre to soak in the sun's comforting warmth. In the monsoons, they can sleep in the southeast quadrant, where the sheltered pavements offer respite from the rains. (FM 64)

The circular seasonal movement around the square conveys the impression of a natural rhythm and exemplifies the text's subdued rendering of uneven urban development, which also emphasizes the street-dwellers' strategies to cope with insecurity. The impression of stagnation, expressed by Ashraf himself, contrasts with the notion that uncertainty rules over his life: 'And then I found Bara Tooti and it has been the same ever since' (FM 34-35). In the passage, the same importance is given to events involving national figures and local people, showing how both are used as equally important critical points in time to measure change. The price hikes of basic amenities (such as tea) are also given as examples of 'events [which] can shake the chowk out of its monotony, alerting its residents to the transformations around them' (FM 64) and disrupting the habitual cycle. The text aptly renders the way vast historical changes are registered through their trivial everyday effects. Thus, the demolition campaign of 2005, which led to the destruction of many 'informal' housing (including Ashraf's dwelling) and to the eviction of pavement-dwellers, is mostly remembered through the Hindi term *todh podh* (demolition) without being framed by a larger narrative on the city's globalization (FM 166).

Beyond the communal time-space of the chowk, the reportage also focuses on the individual experience of time, contrasting Lalloo's blurred sense of passing time ('Most events occur either too fast to register, or too slowly to notice.' (FM 63)) with Ashraf's careful marking:

Classification is important to Ashraf: it is important to draw lines, make tables, and most essentially, mark time. To distinguish between now and then, yesterday and today, because tomorrow and thereafter may be better or worse or at least different. Marking time is important as it allows for planning. Planning is crucial, as it indicates a degree of purpose without which a man could easily lose his way. Bara Tooti is full of those who, according to Ashraf, have lost their way; and in the presence of such company, it is important to run on his own sense of time. (FM 63)

Setting himself apart from ‘lost people’, Ashraf uses timetables and planning as safeguards against drifting and being subjected to the time of the chowk. The importance of time in his life is revealed by his definition of a stable friendship, ‘premised on a shared notion of time’ (FM 65), embodied by the daily routine he shares with his fellow workers. His passion for methodical classification, which stretches to brains and personalities (FM 70), may be read as his own way of coping with the contingencies that define the life of a day-labourer. Yet the text highlights Ashraf’s contradictions as this ‘planning’ mindset is in constant tension with his own inconsistencies and his unreasonable choices. His narrative inexactitudes and his refusal to explain his decisions might, however, stem from his reluctance to surrender to the reporter’s narrative control.

The text encodes Ashraf’s stubborn resistance to the reporter’s attempt to reconstruct his basic biographical lines, first epitomized by his shrinking of the temporal scale of the cursed ‘timeline’ to one day, the ‘arc of his life’ (FM 81) restricted to a daily cycle of working and drinking. The different steps are listed by Ashraf and transcribed as such by the writer as separate paragraphs headed by the indication of time and the fluctuating amount of money owned by Ashraf and Lalloo (‘Time: 11 pm | Money: About one hundred rupees’ (FM 82)), which underline the endless cycle the labourer is caught up in. The transcription of Ashraf’s ‘meticulous’ description of his methodical drunkenness (FM 81) highlights a pattern which, once more, mitigates the instability usually associated with the lives of homeless workers. The chapter actually conveys the interweaving of systematicity and uncertainty which defines Ashraf’s life through the clear typographic layout in eight paragraphs and the uncertainty he expresses as to how they spent the money, what they ate or how much they are going to earn. Their daily routine is thus both organised and precarious, regular and vulnerable to all kinds of contingencies.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the form of the list indicates the annihilation of any organising principle but that of plain succession, the refusal to detect a larger coherence out of a sequence of events. This twenty-four-hour timeline captures the restricted temporal scale which Sethi is almost compelled to use in order to account for the labourers’ lifestyle, and its apparently neutral tone evokes ‘the kind of

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<sup>33</sup> Though in far more privileged background, Siddharth Chowdhury also tightens the scope of his ‘Autobiography’ in his eponymous short-story, in which, instead of tracing back his whole life, he systematically details his morning routine, setting into relief the micro-movements of his daily life from 7.25am to 9 am. The list and the attention paid to the infra-ordinary are reminiscent of Georges Perec’s calling for a renewed interest paid to unnoticed things and movements of everyday life, exemplified in the systematic notation of the food he ate during one year.

destruction that consists of small, recurring, repetitive crises almost woven into everyday life itself'.<sup>34</sup>

The text also incorporates Ashraf's erratic story-telling of his own life which prevents any linear trajectory from emerging. Ashraf first tells the reporter about his arrival in Delhi (FM 34-35) before telling him about his earlier time in Mumbai (FM 74-80) and in Kolkata (FM 89), distilling information in an anti-chronological order and resisting the journalist's inquiries. When the text takes a step back from the everyday, a constellation of unconnected critical episodes surfaces. These flashes constitute ruptures which contrast with the everyday focus of the narrative and refract the labourer's experience of his own life. Subramaniam thus comments: 'Sethi asks these questions constantly, trying to piece together a working chronology. He is led, instead, to chart *the undercurrents of this life*, marked not so much by its journey through India – Patna, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Mumbai, finally Delhi – but by its psychological states [...].'<sup>35</sup> In fact the title of each part (Azadi, or Freedom, Akelapan, or Solitude, Lawaris or Forsaken, Ajnabi or Stranger) evidences the psychological journey taken by the labourer. The overall chronology is thus forsaken and overtaken by the inner lives of the labourers, which are shaped by uncertainty.

Without weaving a sequential narrative out of the workers' lives, Sethi narrates seminal episodes which are either staged or narrated through the reconstructed psyche of Ashraf or Munna. The writer thus identifies ruptures, occurrences which altered the course of their lives yet they are not clearly identified as such or inserted in a larger causal frame. I would contend that the magnifying lens through which these scenes are perceived and the reporter's reluctance to draw a chain of events converging on Bara Tooti Chowk stems from his ambition to be faithful to the subjective experiences of the labourers. However, this realistic ambition entails a shift from factuality to fictionality, as Sethi borrows devices such as the dramatization of specific scenes or the reconstruction of an interviewee's subjectivity.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> S. Subramaniam, 'Where the Sidewalk Ends', 14, my emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> I consider the access to a character's subjectivity and the elaboration of scenes as 'signposts of fictionality', taking after Dorrit Cohn's internalist definitions of fictionality (Cohn, p. 109). However, as Genette noted, the move to a 'fictional regime' is also characteristic of works of anthropology, such as Michel Leiris's *Phantom Africa* ((1934), trans. by Brent Hayes Edwards (Kolkata: Seagull, 2017)) or Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes tropiques* ((1955), trans. by John and Doreen Weightman (London: Penguin, 2012)). If *A Free Man* at large can be defined as 'literary reportage' (inasmuch as it is characterized by the writer's singular style and by the self-reflexive staging of his own practice), the formal characteristics of these specific episodes (namely internal focalisation and monologue) make the text tip over into *fictionality*.

The dramatic reconstruction of specific scenes witnessed by the writer, reported in the present tense, conveys the effect of a textual close-up on a few minutes, such as the unloading of trucks in Naya Bazar by a swarm of workers (FM 68-69) or the examination of an old man in the emergency room of Bara Hindu Rao Hospital (FM 131). Other events, recollected by interviewees, are recounted through a blend of third-person narrative and direct speech, bringing them closer to a fictional regime. The episode of Ashraf's first night in Delhi, for instance, is told in turn through Ashraf's voice and through a third-person narrative, clearly bearing the imprint of authorial intervention:

'I arrived on the late night train from Surat, Gujarat, around half past nine, at Old Delhi Railway Station. I had nothing on me. Absolutely nothing. One bundle of clothes and maybe two or three beedis [...].' When he awoke the next morning, the city was already wide awake. Last night's card players had disappeared, as had the food stall, the beedi seller, and even the security guard. Only Jama Masjid remained where it had been last night, its onion-shaped domes reassuring in their solidity. (FM 34)

The source of the final detail of the mosque as a comforting marker of permanence remains uncertain, as it may be drawn from Ashraf's colourful tale or from the author's imagination. Sethi thus 'orchestrates' scenes out of witnessed events (as nonfiction novels do) but his authorial intervention also stretches to recreating his subjects' inner lives.<sup>37</sup>

Three other major episodes stand out in the novel through the use of internal focalization and free indirect speech, all related to Ashraf's childhood, his short stay in Bombay and his marriage. Written in the third-person, in the past tense and deprived of any context, especially since they are placed at the beginning of chapters, these flashbacks into the labourer's life contrast with the rest of the book insofar as the journalist's persona as well as the interviewee's enunciation disappear.<sup>38</sup> Two of these episodes will evidence the fictionalisation at work in the text. The first of these landmark episodes is a flashback into Ashraf's youth in Patna, in which he shot at a group of men harassing his employer:

Studying in his room on the terrace, Ashraf was disturbed by a commotion on the first floor. Someone was banging on the front door. Someone was kicking the door hard enough to shake dust from its frame.  
Locate the thymus gland which is placed over the anterior portion of the heart. Carefully move it out of the way. (FM 25)

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<sup>37</sup> 'Facts are silent as Conrad said, and any singing they do depends on their orchestration by a human arranger.' Tony Tanner, 'Death in Kansas', review of Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (1965), *The Spectator*, 18 March 1966, 19-20, <<http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/18th-march-1966/19/death-in-kansas>> [accessed 24 March 2021]. See John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

<sup>38</sup> Another episode involving a labourer's unfortunate drunken adventure with a bicycle is fictionalised in the same way (FM 49-53).

The contrast created by the third-person narrative of the men's violent irruption and the young protagonist's reading of a dissection manual points to the author's attempt at reconstructing the character's subjectivity. The ensuing interior monologue renders the character's fearful self-admonitions and panic-induced reaction:

They had not noticed, they could not notice. Dr Husain was still shouting in the hall. Stand in the balcony, must stand in the balcony. Remember what Dr Hussain had said about the shikar, the time he almost shot a leopard. Stand firm, keep your feet planted, take a deep breath. Don't tremble. Stop trembling! (FM 26)

The lapse into free indirect speech ('The men had guns. Fuck, fuck, fuck. The men had guns! [...] Just shoot!' (FM 26)), mimicking the character's psychic process, moves the text further into fictionality. The same process is used to describe the altered state of mind of a man undergoing forced kidney surgery (FM 125), suggesting that the interior monologue is specifically used to narrate critical moments. This device, usually forbidden to historians or journalists, suggests that the book shifts from the regime of referentiality to that of realism, perhaps a characteristic of 'new journalism', as pointed out by Gérard Genette, who acknowledges the frequent use of internal focalisation – a characteristic but not a defining trait of fiction – in hybrid nonfiction.<sup>39</sup>

What is also interesting about the 'aasmani firing' episode (FM 29),<sup>40</sup> is that Ashraf's voice surfaces again at the end in a self-reflexive manner: 'If I thought like you presswallah think, I would probably say Taneja was the reason I ended up at Bara Tooti' (FM 28). The protagonist alludes to a cause-and-effect relationship – his leaving is indeed prompted by the threats sent by Taneja's gang –, yet he immediately dismisses it as belonging to a journalistic mindset. The only connection the shooting has with another event is established through the motif of dissection, as Ashraf's dissection razor is used by his young brother Aslam to stab a member of a rival gang in Kolkata:

Aslam had stabbed a pickpocket with an astura, a slender metal shiv.  
'I didn't know he had an astura', Ashraf exclaimed.  
'Wake up, Ashraf bhai. He stole it from your old dissection kit. He slashed this man like he was cutting open a rat. Kssskh! Right across the stomach.' (FM 92)

The echo creates a retrospective effect of anticipation and a connection between these two violent events, which might be a sign of authorial orchestration. The chapters devoted to life in a tuberculosis hospital and to Satish's death (FM 131-162) also foreshadow Ashraf's

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<sup>39</sup> Gérard Genette, *Fiction & Diction* (1991), trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 81.

<sup>40</sup> *Aasman* means sky in Hindi.

tuberculosis, narrated at the end of the book, which creates an echo which wistfully hints at the labourers' common fate.

The chapter about Ashraf's short stay in Mumbai as a promising assistant butcher, whose progress is brutally interrupted by an unfortunate event, departs from the transcription of interviews and shifts between various narrative modes. Like a camera, the first sentence describes an unidentified figure in the famous crowds of Mumbai trains: 'Submerged in the depths of a train compartment, a slender figure struggled through the crush of commuters on the Monday morning Virar Slow' (FM 75). The use of external focalization, which temporarily conceals information as to the man's identity, gestures to the fictionalization of the scene from collected memories.<sup>41</sup> The text moves from this distanced viewpoint introducing the context, to a quasi-stream-of-consciousness, conveying the character's subjective perception of the event which triggered his abrupt departure from Bombay:

Late night, last night – kuch ho gaya, kuch ho gaya. He can explain, they will understand, something happened, some things happen.  
Slip, trip, jump, slide – the long road past the church had never looked too long. Up the slope, up the slope, almost there, almost there, panting, gasping, 'Salam walekum, Maalik. (FM 75)

The repetitions, the Hindi phrase (meaning 'something happened'), the asyndetic series of verbs rendering Ashraf's erratic walking and short breathing up to his greetings his employer all contribute to representing the character's inner turmoil. The use of the third-person maintains a gap between the author and the character and suggests that Sethi recreates Ashraf's subjectivity without speaking for him. His crossing the boundary between factual and fictional regimes gives intensity to his narrative and allows the reader to empathise with the labourers without seeing them only as victims or heroes. It raises issues such as that of the ethics of the erasure of difference, the line between empathy and identification, the obliviousness to power asymmetry and socio-economic disparity, already explored with Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*.<sup>42</sup>

These close-ups on short, recreated episodes which are interspersed in the text, dramatize various forms of violence and contrast with the dominant undramatic tone of the text, which rather focuses on insidious forms of everyday violence. Yet these events remain

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<sup>41</sup> It is also used with Kalyani, another interviewee, who surfaces *incognita* in a scene of truck-unloading in the bazaar (FM 69).

<sup>42</sup> Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing* and Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* also tread the thin line between fiction and nonfiction. Drawing on their interviewees' recollections, they reconstruct entire scenes through their points of view. The authorial intervention is stretched further by Boo, who completely erases herself from her text.

part of a mosaic of discontinuous ‘random moments’ which are not woven into a sequential narrative. As I will develop in Chapter 6, these fragments strengthen the notion of lives subjected to contingencies, and identify uncertainty both as a pressure weighing down on the labourers and as a form of life that is cultivated.

However, the inclusion of a timeline at the end of the text, although it does not consist in a *narrative* of Ashraf’s life, suggests that Sethi ultimately surrenders to the impulse of sequential ordering and disrupts the radical equality he strives to establish with his protagonist. The reporter reasserts a form of narrative control, albeit with great self-consciousness about the implied violence of his gesture (FM 92).<sup>43</sup> The chronology is followed by Ashraf’s words which sound like a defeat and a mild accusation:

That’s it, Aman bhai. Now you know everything about me – sab kuch. Like a government form: name, date of birth, mother’s name, place of residence, everything. Our faces are pasted in your notebook, our voices all locked in your recorder – me, Lalloo, Rehaan, Kaka, J.P. Pagal, everyone. Now you know everything. What will we talk about if we ever meet again?’ (FM 217)

The comparison with the government form is significant, all the more as another passage describes the municipal administration’s storing of information about homeless people in the same terms: ‘it is stored in my brain’s computer’ says the municipal official in charge of arresting beggars (FM 120). Sethi thus self-consciously points to the similarity between his documentary ambition and the techniques of control of the state. Ashraf’s intense curiosity regarding the lives of other people slightly qualifies the one-sided intrusive nature of the reporter-subject relationship, yet the disparity in terms of reach and power is clear (FM 158).<sup>44</sup> More importantly, the writer self-reflexively stresses the thorough failure of his ordering ambition and of the government’s repressive project: the municipal digit-scanning identification system is made inefficient because of the dusty hands of the labourers (signs

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<sup>43</sup> ‘I’m really conflicted about that timeline. No one asked me to put it in; I put it in myself. It is something that I’ve been thinking about a lot, about whether I should have put it in or not. Initially the book ended on the timeline, in one of the drafts. And then my friend told me that it was an act of violence, to have that control over Ashraf’s narrative. I hadn’t seen it like that when I put it in there, but when I read it from a distance, it appeared to be like that. I have no good idea why I put it in there. It’s just one of those big questions.’ (Aman Sethi, ‘On the Itinerant as Philosopher’, Interview with Sukhdev Sandhu, *Public Books*, 20 June 2013, <<http://www.publicbooks.org/interviews/on-the-itinerant-asphilosopher-aninterview-with-aman-sethi>> [accessed 28 May 2021]).

<sup>44</sup> About the asymmetry between the writer-investigator and his subjects, and the relation between documentation, registration and state control, see Demanze. On the relation between the rise of literary realism in nineteenth-century Europe and of state bureaucracies, collecting, storing, classifying data on which the realist writer depended, see WReC, p. 74. See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Oxford: Polity, 1987).

of work-induced damage on their bodies): ‘All they got were blurry smudges that the machine was unable to identify, let alone catalogue and search’ (FM 123). Sethi also openly indulges in detailing the contradictions and absurdities of the identification system of the Beggars Court and sides with the beggars rather than with the judiciary system (FM 118). The author concurrently thematises his failure to contain Ashraf’s life which remains as blurry as the smudges on the machine, and his heterogeneous text reads as an attempt to render the conflict between his obsession with order and the free movement of Ashraf’s speech.

## II. Circling around the Event

Amit Chaudhuri claims that one of the reasons why he chose to write about Calcutta is that it enabled him to escape the ‘burden’ of tying up his writing to national history: ‘Just as I’d escaped to Calcutta as a boy, to write about it was to escape the unspoken, but increasingly palpable, duty – for the Indian writer in English – to write about India’.<sup>45</sup> His fiction as well as his critical essays suggest his taste for the apparently irrelevant elements that escape the grand historical narratives, in particular that of the tumultuous development of the Indian postcolonial nation, its experiment with Nehruvian socialism and later with capitalism. Saikat Majumdar thus argues that Chaudhuri’s exploration of the private sphere for its own sake, and not as a mirror of national historical events, suggests an ‘implicit critique of the existing preoccupation with the valorised notions of postcolonial nationhood’.<sup>46</sup> More recently, the writer stated that moving to and writing about Calcutta also represented for him the possibility of moving out of globalization (as though such a thing were possible), and of eschewing writing about India’s global ascent.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, ‘My New Perspective on Calcutta’, *Guardian*, 2 February 2013, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/02/amit-chaudhuri-new-perspective-calcutta>> [accessed 30 June 2021].

<sup>46</sup> He goes on: ‘His fiction illustrates how the revelatory power of the mundane in the everyday life of private individuals troubles the constructions of spectacular nationhood that shape the narrative model of the national allegory’ (Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 148).

<sup>47</sup> ‘At the very end of the millennium, I tried to escape globalization by escaping Britain. I didn’t want to go back to a time *before* globalization; I just wanted to get out, move. I moved to Calcutta. Then I tried to escape globalization by taking leave of the novel. I wrote stories. I wrote essays. I composed music.’ (*Friend of My Youth*, p. 19).



Conversely, I propose that the emphasis placed in his essays on the marginality of Calcutta, a city seemingly severed from the tumult of the age, is, to a large extent, belied by his novels, which neither write off history altogether nor completely sever the connection of the city with the nation.<sup>48</sup> What surfaces in Chaudhuri's novels is a dimmed imagination of history, which is refracted through its ripple effects on the everyday, its violence reverberated through attenuated echoes. This could be understood as the other side of the fish-bowl effect: to the magnifying of micro-events corresponds the muffling of catastrophic events. This oblique representation of violence is underpinned by Chaudhuri's conception of history as 'what's at hand' (CAL 65). It also characterises Siddharth Chowdhury's writing, in particular in the way it downplays violence, rendering it through rumours and miniature details. This section scrutinises the various ways in which historical events are slowed-down, muffled, miniaturised, or, in other words, 'descended into the ordinary', examining in particular the fictional treatment of the fracture of the subcontinent in 1947, the Bombay riots of 1992-1993, and the disruptions entailed by economic liberalization.

### 1. Dilating the Temporality of the Event

Even though the everyday holds the limelight in Chaudhuri's fiction, the lives of his characters are all directly and deeply affected by ruptures which have defined the history of postcolonial Kolkata. Both in his first and third novels, the protagonists are from East Bengali families, who migrated to the city as a consequence of the region's Partition between India and Pakistan along religious lines in 1947. Their experience of the city is largely shaped by their migratory path. However, even as it incorporates this catastrophic event, the narrative subdues its intensity by slowing down the pace of the event.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For an instance of his emphasis on the eccentric dimension of the city, see Chaudhuri's interview, 'I see History as Junk' ('Calcutta is a marginal city and has been a marginal city since the late seventies/early eighties. It is a city that has lost its connection with its history.').

<sup>49</sup> Representing the aftermath of Partition from Kolkata also enables him to decentre the perspective on this national event, as the Partition of Bengal is usually overshadowed by that of Punjab. Before and in the aftermath of the partition of India in 1947, an influx of migrants from East Bengal (a region which became East Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971) came to the city, hurriedly and precariously settling in on the southern fringes of the city, squatting empty military barracks and wastelands. This unprecedented wave of migration, which the urban infrastructure failed to cope with, has profoundly marked the development and the culture of Kolkata in the second half of the twentieth century (see Manas Ray, 'Growing up Refugee'; *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, ed. by Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015)).

Chhotomama's fragmentary memories from his isolated childhood in Sylhet, his hometown in East Bengal, crop up in *A Strange and Sublime Address* (SA 60), yet it is mostly in *Freedom Song* that the consequences of Partition on the perception of the city are obliquely explored. In fact, a shift in the relation to history and the city is perceptible between the two novels. Published in 1998, *Freedom Song* is made up of a series of vignettes or fragments depicting the everyday life of three families in Calcutta, connected by their common migration history: the parents' generation all grew up together in Sylhet, and their memories regularly surface throughout the text, reminiscent of a past which is buried yet not completely forgotten (FS 354). Set in the winter of 1992-1993, this uneventful narrative is mostly told from the viewpoint of two elderly women, Mini and Khuku, and encompasses three different neighbourhoods, a triangle joining a social circle together. Compared with Chaudhuri's first novel, the geographical expansion and the relinquishing of the child's viewpoint induce a new mode of apprehension of time, as the everyday is no longer aggrandised nor intensified.<sup>50</sup> Chaudhuri explains the difference between these two novels through the metamorphosis of the city that he witnessed in the 1990s, evidencing his deep consciousness of historical change:

In *Freedom Song*, I returned to Calcutta, to explore a number of metamorphoses – political and economic – that had made the city subtly different from itself: fifteen years of the Left Front rule, and the departure of industry, the liberalization of the Indian economy and the ushering in of the free market; the demolition, by right-wing hooligans of the Sangh Parivar, of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. (CAL 296)

Yet these transformations are mostly handled through ellipsis and allusion in the novel, relying on the reader's background knowledge. First imperceptible, they are then recounted in extremely abstract terms as a looming alteration which remains largely ungraspable:

Much would change in the next few months in subtle ways, but much would seem to remain unchanged [...]. The change in the weather from late January to early February was small but palpable, a fractional abatement of the dawn's and evening's chill [...]. Then there were the other changes, the larger ones; as the country altered, gradually and almost imperceptibly, from one kind of place to another. Memories died and new ways of life came into being. (FS 341-342)

These highly allusive few sentences condense the great economic and cultural mutations of the country and the amnesia which has accompanied them, dissected at length by Dasgupta, Roy and Mehta in their works. This panoramic view of the country, the only one in the novel,

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<sup>50</sup> A similar correspondence between the widening of the scope and the de-dramatizing of the everyday appears in Siddharth Chowdhury's *The Patna Manual of Style*, compared with *Day Scholar*.

emphasizes the ‘gradual’ rhythm of these developments, which go almost unnoticed. The text thus pictures the rupture of the 1990s as a slow process, toning down the rapidity and brutality of these transformations. This vaguely defined change is also represented in spatial terms, as though the concurrent economic deregulation and rise of Hindu fundamentalism altered the very nature of the country.

This immediate context is embedded in the larger and complex history of Bengal. Paradoxically, it is this novel, in which the tumults of history are more palpable, which conveys a strong impression of continuity and familiarity, the muffling or slowing down of events emerging as a counterpoint to the dramatization of the ordinary in Chaudhuri’s first novel. In fact, Chaudhuri’s writing mitigates the impact of history upon the characters’ private lives through the slackening of the pace of events. The sense of urgency attached to the Partition of Bengal and the forced migration of families to West Bengal is dimmed through the characters’ perceptions of a phenomenon happening at a slow pace, as if to undermine the very notion of ‘event’. One of the chapters traces back Mini’s family trajectory from Sylhet to Shillong to Guwahati to Calcutta. The uprooting and dislocation entailed by Partition are reconfigured through the image of a planet leaving its orbit:

Then the upheaval came, and friends, brothers, teachers, magistrates, servants, shopkeepers, were all uprooted, as if released slowly, sadly, by the gravity that had tied them to the places they had known all their life, released from an old orbit. They had awaited it with more than apprehension; but when it came they hardly noticed it. The votes were counted after the referendum; their country was gone. (FS 354)<sup>51</sup>

The opening elliptical reference to Partition and exile, referred to as ‘the upheaval’, indicates the uniqueness of the event. Yet this forced migration is not seen through a spectacular lens: the celestial metaphor paradoxically conveys both the violence of being torn away from one’s homeland and the slow movement of wistful parting, intensified by the repetition of ‘released’. The image of the gravitational pull resonates with the natural imagery used in Dasgupta’s, Roy’s and Jha’s *epic* narratives, yet it combines a heightening and a subduing effect. The naturalisation of historical processes at work in both the epic and the ordinary modes discloses the way they happen beyond or below the radar of human perception, but it seems here to lessen the sense of urgency attached to the event. If the understatement (‘more than apprehension’) suggests the distressing anticipation of the event, the disappearance of

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<sup>51</sup> Sylhet was a Muslim-majority district in Assam, which was a Hindu-majority province. In 1947, a referendum was held in the district to decide whether it would remain in Assam (India) or join East Bengal and thus Pakistan, and it decided in favour of Pakistan, entailing the migration of Hindu families.

the country itself is anti-climactic, almost going unnoticed by the participants. This deflating of intensity is however nuanced by the matter-of-fact brevity of the final clause, which expresses the brutal rapidity with which their country is brushed away. The text also describes the thrill felt by the young Mini upon embarking on this journey, which she experiences as an adventure and a new beginning: ‘They’d lost their home; but there was the silent, incommunicable excitement of beginning anew in what was now their own country’ (FS 355).

The novel’s emphasis on regularity also applies to small events, such as Bhaskar’s marriage and street-play. One of the key concerns of the characters is Bhaskar’s marriage, who, as a communist activist and street-theatre actor, seems quite indifferent to matrimonial matters. Several passages recount his parents’ ceaseless matchmaking endeavours, yet the wedding itself is anti-climactic. The representation of the ceremony itself foregrounds its banality (‘But it was difficult to come to terms with how ordinary it was’ (FS 409)) and the ambivalent feelings of Bhaskar and his bride, baffled by the religious ritual, are at odds with the festive atmosphere usually associated with these events (FS 409). The aftermath of the wedding is a liminal moment of suspension, the sense of baffled expectation and almost renunciation emphasized through the image of the threshold: ‘They were at a loss as to what to do now; they had the puzzled air of people who’d just knocked on a door and were on the verge of turning round without having heard of a reply from within’ (FS 409).<sup>52</sup> Thus, the marriage ushers in neither rupture nor renewal in the bride and groom’s ways of life: ‘and this seemed to him almost a continuation of that very meeting’ (FS 408). Referred to as ‘the union between Vidyasagar Road and a lane off Lansdowne Road’ (FS 396), the marriage is more about connecting two geographical and social points than about sentimental union. Bhaskar remains passionately involved in politics (FS 425), and a sense of permanence permeates the couple’s life, epitomized by their honeymoon, which follows a familiar route (FS 427), as well as by tiny details captured by the microscopic gaze of the narrator. Toys left in the house, ‘their small but exact shapes lying overturned, but still intact’ (FS 422) and plastic flowers symbolise the temporal stasis which envelops the whole city: ‘thus the perennial blooming flowers, cheap, bright, immortal blossoms, remained’ (FS 423).

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<sup>52</sup> This episode also exemplifies the way Chaudhuri blurs the line between the familiar and the foreign. Familiar to Indian readers and foreign to others, the wedding ceremony is here defamiliarized for both readerships, represented as an odd, anti-climactic event, defusing the dramatic intensity of the event (see Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 166).

The performance of Bhaskar's political street-play, which is anticipated throughout the novel, is ultimately almost suppressed from the narrative: 'Beena had gone to see the play being enacted; Khuku couldn't go. That evening, it was suddenly done' (FS 362). This anti-climactic ellipsis deprives the performance of all intensity, the anti-spectacular bias of the writer all the more palpable as it concerns a play. Suketu Mehta's spectacular writing of bar-dancing and cinema in Mumbai and Dasgupta's lyrical evocation of the trance-inducing *qawwali* music in Delhi provide striking contrasts to Chaudhuri's toning down of the urban spectacle. In fact, Calcutta at large is permeated by a peculiar sense of temporality, as if no event could break through the continuous flow of time. Khuku's life seems governed by slowness and the patient waiting for a turning point which never comes: 'Everything had happened in Khuku's life at an abnormally slow pace' (FS 356), 'years passed. She read; she waited; she waited silently for some change. She knew, instinctively, she wouldn't end in the place she'd begun in' (FS 430). Yet she comes back to Calcutta, and the materialisation of her intuition is left suspended.

Amid the numerous diminutive things observed by Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, one is a lizard on the watch for its prey. This moment of intense expectation and observation of the reptilian's stop-go movement, which ineluctably ends up missing the actual 'event' of swallowing, encapsulates Chaudhuri's relationship to the event:

One could never manage to see that precise instant, that half instant when it actually grasped the insect with its mouth and swallowed it. Now the insect was here, part of the world of creation, and now it was gone, into the underworld of the lizard's belly. (SA 76)

The micro-event of the lizard's grasp is perceived as a blank, and the phrasing ('now it was gone') echoes the ellipsis of Bhaskar's play in *A Freedom Song*.<sup>53</sup> Chaudhuri's writing systematically dilates the liminal moment of expectancy, conveying a sense of tension, thrill or fear, yet suppressing the event itself, as though the anticipation cancelled out the event. Derrida writes that the paradox of anticipation is that it eventually cancels or neutralises the future, transforming it into a memory before it even takes place.<sup>54</sup> Chaudhuri's writing

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<sup>53</sup> The close-up on the lizard brings to mind Anita Desai's microscopic writing of birds (*koels*), snails and lazing lizards in *Clear Light of Day*.

<sup>54</sup> In the context of a conversation about archivization and the way it intensifies the desire to keep the past as well as to capture the future, Derrida reflects on the way anticipation results in the nullifying of the event: 'this is the paradox of anticipation. Anticipation opens to the future, but at the same time, it neutralizes it. It reduces, presentifies, transforms into memory [*en mémoire*], into the future anterior and, therefore, into a memory [*en souvenir*] that which announces tomorrow as still to come [...]. The event, the other, is also what we don't see

renders the way anticipation prevents the event from registering in the characters' consciousness. Thus, at various temporal scales, the characters' waiting for the referendum, Sandeep's uncle's morning preparation (SA 20), the breeze foreshadowing the monsoon rains (SA 67), the *azaan* preceding the city's waking up (FS 243), the street-play rehearsal, and the lizard on the watch all epitomize Chaudhuri's predilection for these interstitial moments of anticipation, postponing and ultimately suppressing the event.<sup>55</sup> The thrill experienced by Sandeep as the winter mist surrounds the family house is conveyed through a similar image: 'this is what it must be like, Sandeep thought, to live inside a crater, the fumes putting you to sleep, each day the last before the eruption' (SA 98). Sandeep's comparison captures Chaudhuri's concern with the winter sleep that precedes the explosion and with the slowed-down rhythm of expectation, standing in sharp contrast with Rana Dasgupta's imaginative interest in the explosion itself, expressed through the overarching metaphor of the 'eruption' of Delhi.

Thus, catastrophic events which directly affect the lives of the characters are downplayed by Chaudhuri's elliptical writing and by the subdued tone of his novels. They appear as a defining background to the story but are seen from a distance, slowed down, so that continuity and regularity are enhanced. The narrative structure of *Freedom Song*, far from following the sequential unfolding of historical events, disperses them as a myriad of short vignettes, isolated fragments which do not coalesce. As with Sethi's fragmentary episodes of the labourers' earlier life, no causal relation between past and present is drawn by the novel, yet the reader is prompted to detect underlying connections, as the experience of Partition surreptitiously leaves its mark on the characters' everyday life, palpable in their daily conversations and responses to the news of urban violence.

## 2. Muffling the Sounds of History

Contrary to Mehta's and Dasgupta's narratives, Chaudhuri's novels *muffle* history: they never fully delve into historical events but address them obliquely, often from a

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coming, what we await without expecting and without horizon of expectation'. Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. by Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 105-106.

<sup>55</sup> It also chimes with Chaudhuri's aesthetic affinity with beginnings, suggested by the number of incipient elements in *Freedom Song* (the break of day, the beginning of the winter, of married life, of post-communist Caccutta). See Geeta Ganapathy-Doré, 'A Dawnlight Raag, Amit Chaudhuri's *Freedom Song*', *Commonwealth*, 22.1 (Fall 1999), 73-80.

peripheral viewpoint. Thus, whereas Chaudhuri has an intimate knowledge of Mumbai, the 1992-1993 Mumbai riots are narrated from afar, the violence unfurled in the city reaching Calcutta through distant echoes.<sup>56</sup> This eccentric viewpoint enables the writer to convey the way violence, rather than constituting a radical rupture, is gradually embedded in the ordinary life of the characters. Yet the sound metaphor is all the more relevant in the case of Chaudhuri because of the refined soundscape he creates in his novels, made of religious and profane music, natural sounds, distant and close rumours.<sup>57</sup> The aptly entitled *Freedom Song* thus opens with the evocation of the morning *azaan*, the Muslim morning call to prayer, which punctuates Khuku's daily life (FS 243, 294, 323, 368).

It was a solitary voice, saying *Allah-hu-akbar* and other familiar but incomprehensible syllables. Though it was coming from quite far away, for the nearest mosque was a mile northward, she could hear it clearly, as if it were being recited in this very lane, and its presence filled the grey area between her sleep and walking. The singer, if one could call him such, seemed absolutely absorbed, wherever he was, in the unearthly lift of the melody, in his indecision between repetition and progression, and in the delicate business of now prolonging and now shortening a syllable. The city was still [...]. Soon that machinery would start working again, not out of any sense of purpose, but like a watch that is wound daily by someone's hand. Almost without any choice in the matter, people would embark upon the minute frustrations and satisfactions of their lives. It was in this moment of postponement that the *azaan* was heard, neither announcing the day nor keeping it a secret. (FS 243)

Narrated through this elderly woman's viewpoint, this voice is depicted as familiar yet partly foreign to the character, coming from an upper-class Hindu family. The opening sentence points to the ordinary as that which is close yet not fully known or understood, since these words, heard every day, remain unexamined by the character. The character hears discrete syllables rather than words, showing her ignorance of Arabic but even more importantly her purely sensorial apprehension of the chant. Khuku is introduced as a musician, who used to practise in the morning, and she evinces here her sensibility to the rhythmical variation of the call. This aesthetic appreciation recalls that of Sandeep in *A Strange and Sublime*

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<sup>56</sup> Elements of context are given in Chapter 2.

<sup>57</sup> Christin Hoene examines how 'sonic events' act upon Chaudhuri's experience of the city, showing the interrelation between sound, place and modernity ('The Sounding City: Soundscapes and Urban Modernity in Amit Chaudhuri's Fiction', in *Re-Inventing the Postcolonial (in the) Metropolis* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 363-378). Chaudhuri's mother (whom the character of Khuku is based on (CAL 297)) was a professional singer, and he is a professional musician and composer, regularly performing with his band ('This is not fusion'). Music is also at the centre of his writing practice, as shown in *Afternoon Raag, Real Time* (London: Picador, 2003), *The Immortals* (London: Knopf, 2009), and his latest essay (*Finding the Raga: An Improvisation on Indian Music* (London: Faber, 2021)). If studies on the sensorial experience of the city have often focused on sight, the recent growth of sound studies has also given rise to works on urban soundscapes. See for instance *The Acoustic City*, ed. by Matthew Gandy and BJ Nilsen (Berlin: Jovis, 2014).

*Address*, whose sensorial and aesthetic pleasure overtakes the religious meaning of the Hindu prayers.<sup>58</sup>

As stressed by the end of the opening paragraph, the *azaan* embodies this temporality which is not that of productivity. It marks a liminal moment ‘between sleep and waking’, a temporal threshold in which the city is still static, not yet dedicated to what is presented as an alienating mechanical activity (through the comparison with a watch). The mechanism of the capitalist city seems to be on hold for a few minutes, the *azaan* ‘postponing’ the eruption of activity. This dedication to an empty time of pure sensorial pleasure corresponds to what Dipesh Chakrabarty says of the *adda*: ‘Enjoying an *adda* is to enjoy a sense of time and space that is not subject to the gravitational pull of any explicit purpose’.<sup>59</sup> The image of gravity ties in with the sense of suspension which emanates from Chaudhuri’s text.

Yet the initial aesthetic perception of the chant gives way to another one, expressed by Khuku’s guest and childhood friend Mini when she hears that Khuku has been awakened by the *azaan*: “‘Really!’” said Mini, feeling outraged on her behalf [...], “They are going too far! And”, she said, “it isn’t really Indian, it sounds like Bedouins” (FS 244). Significantly, the construction of the chant as a disruption, narrowed down to an alien sound on a racist basis, and simplistically ascribed to Bedouins, only emerges in conversation, drawing a sharp contrast between Khuku’s individual perception and the social universe in which she is situated. As intercommunal tensions simmer, the two women’s perceptions tip over into paranoid exaggeration: ‘and Khuku, listening to Mini, began to see Muslims everywhere. They grew excited about the *azaan* on the loudspeakers, and about Muslim festivals in which people beat themselves with whips and cords’ (FS 294). This hostility is twisted by a comic detail which hints at the disconnection between Mini’s discourse and her everyday mingling with Muslims, as she suddenly notices the presence of Abdullah the tailor, ‘sitting, self-consciously, on the sofa’ (FS 294). The irony lies in the following clause, referring to Abdullah, ‘more self-conscious about sitting on the sofa than about anything the two might have said’ (FS 294), hinting at his experience of class consciousness rather than communal tension.

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<sup>58</sup> Drawn in by smells and sounds, the child appreciates the performance for its own sake, the ‘vivid entertainment of the instant’ (SA 37). Far from any transcendence, the ritual is perceived as a moment of extreme attention to sensible realities, thus akin to childhood: the comic miniaturisation of the ritual, Sandeep’s aunt being compared to a child playing with a dollhouse, contributes to the close connection between childhood and the senses.

<sup>59</sup> Chakrabarty, ‘Adda’, in *Provincializing Europe*, p. 204.



Mini's discomfort with the *azaan* and prejudiced outrage, based on the doxa of the cultural clash, emerge in the context of intercommunal tensions between Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, especially under the form of the dispute over public space. In fact, the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and the resulting riots and bomb attacks in Mumbai implicitly appear throughout the text, which obliquely connects Calcutta to national events. The aural presence of Muslim religious chanting is perceived as threatening and ultimately encroaching upon 'Hindu' territory. If the immediate context of Mini's response is that of the rise of Hindu supremacism and nationalism in the 1990s (and her cue sounds like a repetition of commonplace anti-Muslim discourse), it also harks back to her migration history and to the Partition of Bengal along religious lines, leaving its mark on the character's perception and everyday discourses. The characters' response is also entrenched in this multi-layered context of historical and political conflicts, which is only alluded to, through scraps of conversation and bits of news overheard and discussed here and there.

Another aural metaphor is used in the text to represent the muted anxiety caused by the troubles of 1992-1993. The immediate aftermath of the Mumbai attacks is described as follows: 'that had been a particularly empty time. For the seven days of the curfew the country had been like a conch whose roar you could hear only if you put your ear to it' (FS 333).<sup>60</sup> The curfew wraps the city in silence and the violence of the riot is perceptible as a faraway muffled reality. The roar of the eruption is paradoxically palpable through inactivity and stasis. Contrary to Suketu Mehta's ambition to confront the participants and to delve into the collective violence which unfurled in Mumbai, Chaudhuri only represents the echoes of history heard from a distance through the conch. This 'empty time' is refracted through Mini's and Khuku's perspectives, which downplay the importance of the destruction of the mosque (FS 322). In fact, the novel bristles with Mini and Khuku's conversations, concerned with national events as much as with changes in the city and family gossip, their comments often relying on commonplaces, suggesting the levelling of history to yet another ordinary story.

This web of comments is interwoven with that of public speeches about the riots and the attack, rendered through vague and abstract terms. In fact, the internal yet shifting focalisation precludes any overview of the conflict: only partial opinions are disseminated

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<sup>60</sup> The comparison heightens the distance from the event since the conch is the instrument used in the daily prayer in Chaudhuri's first novel (SA 100, 117).

throughout the text, reflecting the overall confusing swarming of discourses around such a violent event, as evidenced by this series of statements opening a chapter:

The government did one thing today and another tomorrow. Today they said they would rebuild the mosque, and the next day they failed to honour the statement.  
Some people thought they'd been too tolerant in the past.  
Some people thought that the whole conception their country was based on was flawed; so they must start again. Speeches were expended on the 'idea' of the country and what the meaning of that idea was.  
The word 'fundamentalism', travelling everywhere and belonging nowhere: people tried to understand what it meant. (FS 323)

The quotation marks heighten the vacuity of the ubiquitous terms used in the media, which are incorporated as drifting signifiers disconnected from reality, failing to account for the events. The combination of definite and indefinite articles ('the mosque', 'the razed site', 'speeches', 'people') conveys an ambivalent effect of familiarity and indeterminacy, echoing the perception of the *azaan*. Chaudhuri's writing thus encodes a troubled atmosphere, grasping fragments of news filtered by the characters' perceptions, imagination and failing memory. The winter of 1992-1993 is represented through short vignettes, isolated paragraphs on a separate page, recounting bits of conversation and the curious impression that nothing has changed in Calcutta (FS 392).<sup>61</sup> Thus, Mohit, a teenager engrossed in his studies, quickly forgets about it: 'All that had happened before – the end of the tests, the curfew, the troubles far away in Ayodhya, the visit to Bhaskar's house – seemed vague and dream-like' (FS 328). Contrary to Mehta's ordering of the same events as a 'tragedy in three acts' (MC 42), Chaudhuri's narrative remains fragmentary, made of echoes of armchair debates which do not add up to a consistent tale, evincing the author's refusal to detach his prose from the everyday.

The subdued encoding of the events through ellipsis, common-places, fragments of discourses which make little sense, points to the illegibility of the event, which cannot be fully grasped but only circled around, echoing Derrida's understanding of the event as 'that which I don't understand'. Similar to the self-standing turning points of Ashraf's life which remain disconnected from each other, Chaudhuri's elliptical phrasing, while apparently conveying the banality of violence, gives potent expression to the event as an occurrence which is removed from the causal chain and 'set free from all contextual explanation'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> 'Rumours of atrocities in other cities came and went around them. Meanwhile, Nando went out to the market and came back, having pocketed a rupee and fifty paise for himself.' (FS 337). The zeugma brings together the circulation of rumours and the daily chores of domestic worker, thus enhancing the sense of continuity.

<sup>62</sup> Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. by Shane Mackinlay (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 39.

Chaudhuri's close attention paid to voices, speeches, rumours and the way they surreptitiously reveal the inscription of past violence into the everyday can also be discussed in the light of Veena Das's anthropological work on Partition and anti-Sikh violence of 1984, which explores 'the way that the event attaches itself with its tentacles into everyday life and folds itself into the recesses of the ordinary'.<sup>63</sup> Her fieldwork in low-income neighbourhoods of Delhi with families who had fled from Lahore during Partition explores how the memory of such events erupt in everyday expressions, discourses and encounters, paying close attention to the 'frozen speech' through which the Partition is remembered. Her latest volume of essays, entitled *Textures of the Ordinary*, reflects on her own works as micro-histories and micro-geographies, in line with the micro scale which underpins the ordinary mode of Indian urban writing.<sup>64</sup> Chaudhuri's writing of life in Calcutta in the 1990s in the context of the Mumbai riots, suggests that the violent history of Partition and the division of the country along religious lines discreetly permeate the characters' mundane conversations about politics and the city. *Freedom Song* is not strictly speaking a 'Partition novel', yet it is concerned with the low-intensity manifestations of a political crisis which has been going on at least since 1947, rather than with the event itself, which is circled around rather than addressed head-on.<sup>65</sup> The way threats are 'secreted in the most ordinary expression and effects' finds expression in Mini's and Khuku's responses to the Mumbai riots, through threatening pronouncements against a common 'enemy', deflated by narratorial irony.

Violence is also reverberated through the dim sounds of rumours and everyday conversations which downplay the issues at stake, political conflicts being reduced to an object of prejudiced and commonplace opinions. The novel relates Mini and Khuku's frequent exchanges about politics, which are compared to a 'prohibited game', suggesting the belittling of public concerns but also their insertion into the realm of entertainment. Alluding to the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, they evoke the possibility of voting for the right-wing Hindu political party of the BJP as follows:

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<sup>63</sup> Das, *Life and Words*, p. 1

<sup>64</sup> 'Part of the impulse of this book is to see how different routes to knowing – through tracing microhistories and microgeographies of neighbourhoods, through attentiveness to words that suddenly swell up without any warning, and through quotidian forms of revelation and concealment – are all braided into each other as I try to understand the texture of the ordinary.' Das, *Textures of the Ordinary*, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> The experience of loss and migration triggered by the partition of Bengal is also narrated in Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines* ((1988) (Delhi: Penguin, 2009). See also *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, dir. by Ritwik Ghatak (Chitrakalpa, 1960).

They spoke defiantly and conspiratorially, as if they were playing a prohibited game. They would stop once Shib arrived at the house. ‘In fact, it was no bad thing that they toppled that mosque’, said Mini. She looked small and powerful, as if she had unsuspected energies within, and could have gone up to the mosque and toppled it herself, alone. She had quite forgotten about the pain in her leg. (FS 295)

Afraid of Khuku’s husband’s dismissal or condemnation of their views, the two women seem to enjoy maintaining the secret and scandalous possibility of voting for a right-wing party, traditionally unpopular in Bengali upper- and middle-class. Mini’s provocative statement suggests both her anti-Muslim sentiment and a diminutive form of rebellion within a social and gendered order. Their narrow-minded perception of the news is heightened by the image of Mini’s toppling of the mosque, which rests on the scalar contrast between the character’s short height and the monumental edifice, even as the final sentence ironically hints at her sense of delusion, bringing her back to the reality of her ageing body.

Another passage evidences the scaling down of the catastrophic events to a trivial incident: ‘What if one mosque had gone – for hundreds of temples had been destroyed before. She could not understand what the fuss was about’ (FS 322). The understated perception of the destruction pulls it down from the public sphere to the private universe of gossip, ‘the fuss’ standing out as a harsh litotes for the unleashing of violence in Ayodhya and Mumbai.<sup>66</sup> The very allusive terms in which the eruption of violence is described (‘one mosque’) neutralize the singularity (and sacredness) of the mosque and simultaneously stress the quantitative imbalance between destroyed mosques and temples. The allusion to the two women’s a-religiosity and to Khuku’s childhood vision of both ‘Hindoos’ and ‘Musholmaans’ as ghosts intensifies the way communal lines are perceived through the lens of fiction and fantasy by the two women, who replicates the anti-Muslim doxa (FS 296).

Just after the Mumbai attacks in March 1993, Khuku describes the ambivalent thrill experienced in a dramatic situation, echoing the one felt when they had to leave their homeland:

The day after the explosions no one wanted to go out but found themselves at work anyway, the usual noises surrounding them [...]. She herself was planning to leave shortly for the market with two hundred rupees in her purse. There was a pleasurable and wholly fictitious feeling of doom around this simple expedition; it touched

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<sup>66</sup> It negatively resonates with the ‘fuss’ mentioned in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, referring to a family event, the presentation of gifts to relatives: ‘it was nothing, of course [...] but they fussed and fussed and created the illusion that it was something, something unique and untasted and unencountered’ (SA 61). If this passage somehow encapsulates Chaudhuri’s celebration of the insignificant, it also echoes the trivialization of the tragic events of Ayodhya in *Freedom Song*.

everything about her life at the moment. 'Let's see what they do!' she said. 'They won't be able to harm me', as if she were speaking of a gang of half-wit miscreants to whom it would be soon be proved that she was unassailable. She said then, conspiratorially: 'Suleiman came yesterday... He looked quite pleased.' (FS 392)

The page exemplifies the allusiveness of Chaudhuri's prose when it comes to national events and emphasizes the strange sense of continuity experienced by the inhabitants of Calcutta despite the chaos triggered by the attacks. This time, continuity originates in the economic imperative, forced upon the inhabitants who are compelled to go to work despite the ominous atmosphere, the stress on 'the usual sounds' pointing to Chaudhuri's focus on enduring regularities. Nonetheless, the character of Khuku is singled out by her desire to go out, which evinces the same determination as Mini when she feels powerful enough to topple the Babri mosque herself. The banal practice of going to the market is endowed with a sense of adventure, reflecting the way the catastrophe obliquely reshapes her experience of the city.

The fragments of conversation at the end slightly change the meaning of the everyday from its usual celebration in Chaudhuri's prose. The resolution she shows reflects the widely-shared yet vain response to such an overwhelming event consisting in projecting oneself as a resilient force, able to get on with one's life as if nothing had changed. Sticking to habits becomes a statement of defiance that the narrative mocks, as if going out proved the terrorists' failure. It resonates with the invocation of the 'Bombay spirit' after the attacks, referring to the city's so-called resilience, or again with George W. Bush's injunction on the day after 9/11 to go shopping, to show 'them' our determination to live on.<sup>67</sup> The use of the same adverb ('conspiratorially') as the one used to describe their political armchair debates to refer to Khuku's paranoid suspicion of her tailor suggests the narrator's irony, mocking the women's prejudices as inflated generalisations. Yet it also hints at the way violence is anchored to the everyday, permeating one's perception of familiar people and practices.

The trivialisation of politics also appears in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, notably in a scene in which Chhotomama interrupts Sandeep and his cousins' role-play of the freedom fighters to perform a comic monologue on the superiority of the Bengali nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose over Gandhi, portraying him as a 'sham yogi who knew no economics' (SA 73), or again as 'the bald anorexic with the grandmother's smile' (SA 74).<sup>68</sup> The text ironically stresses the discrepancy between his scholarly lecture and his diminutive audience: 'by a magical suspension of disbelief, he forgot he was talking to Sandeep and

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<sup>67</sup> See Roy, 'Nine Is Not Eleven', in *MSH*, p. 192.

<sup>68</sup> This satirical portrait is redolent of Arundhati Roy's caricature of Ana Hazare's 'gummy Farex-baby smile' in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (M 103).

Abhi and Babla; he saw, in front of him, three conservative, pro-Congress intellectuals' (SA 74). Saikat Majumdar analyses this passage as a celebration of the power of the trivial over grand narratives.<sup>69</sup> In fact, it is again through game and entertainment that a significant political debate about the anticolonial struggle is reverberated. The children's role-playing itself participates in the comic miniaturising of history performed by Chaudhuri's writing, reinforced by Chhotomama's out-of-step performance. Yet the comic tone is precisely used to shed an eccentric light on this critical episode of Indian history through the regional perspective. Chhotomama's praise of the nationalist leader is shown as caricatural, yet it brings out the limits of the dominant historical narrative of Indian independence: 'He began to deify Subhas Bose, the brilliant, sidetracked Bengali' (FS 74). If his position stems from regionalist pride and a sense of filiation with Bose, competing with the idea of Gandhi as 'The Father of the Nation' (SA 73), the glorification of a less-known figure and the attacks on the internationally known hero of freedom and non-violence still contribute to debunking the grand narrative of Indian independence.

The narrowing down of economic and political matters to the murmur of commonplaces, rumours, and entertainment is also palpable in Sethi's collecting of scraps of labourers' conversations and general statements on Indian society, as shown earlier, and in Chowdhury's writing, which sets into relief the way communal violence seeps into everyday discourses. Thus, in *Day Scholar*, Mrs Midha's speech about liberalization echoes Mini and Khuku's conversations about politics. The character is the mistress of the student hostel landlord and epitomizes the upwardly mobile middle class who is intent on making the most of the economic reforms, placing all her hopes in her daughter's success. Chowdhury captures the taken-for-granted castist violence at work in her perception of society, revealing the ruthless power struggle at work in the city:

Mrs Midha wanted her daughter to do well and she was saving money for her to do an MBA later on. What with economic liberalization and the markets opening up, India would need thousands of MBAs to manage all that wealth. 'Just when I thought reservation would make paupers of us, God has given us liberalization so that we as

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<sup>69</sup> 'A moment such as this has symbolic importance in Chaudhuri's fiction. It is not so much a trivial moment itself (indeed, its political implications mark it as anything but trivial) as it is a metaphor for the power of the trivial in the face of the grander political narratives of anticolonial struggle. It is, as such, a metafictional moment, in which something as idiosyncratic and private as a children's game reveals the place of a significant motif in the national anticolonial narrative, namely, the reception of its key figure, Mahatma Gandhi.' (Majumdar, *Prose of the World*, p. 51).

upper castes can hold our head high for some time more. Till they eventually catch up.’  
(DM 377-378)

Tinged with dark humour, this passage exhibits Mrs Midha’s cynical opportunism, considering liberalization as a providential gift allowing the upper castes to perpetuate their privilege against a threatening ‘them’ and political progressivism. The text conveys her callous voice through free indirect and direct speech and suggests that far from unsettling traditional hierarchies, liberalization and globalization only reinforce an iniquitous system of caste and privilege. Even if the passage tackles a more diffuse form of violence than the Bombay attacks, it resonates with Mini and Khuku’s fabrication of an enemy.

Yet, far from the rather innocuous declarations of these women, who are not represented as *enacting* violence or directly complicit with it, the prejudices of Chowdhury’s characters are sometimes connected to direct violence. The story ‘Conjunctivitis’, in *Patna Roughcut*, thus revolves around the beating down to death of a young man by the neighbourhood men for having stolen shoes. The reader later learns that the young man was Muslim and the text voices the anti-Muslim sentiment and the fear of invasion shared by Ritwik’s family and neighbours, recalling Mini and Khuku’s narrow-minded vision of history as a perpetual antagonism between ‘us and them’ in *Freedom Song*:

‘These people are totally different from us. They can’t integrate and frankly neither can I [...]. They won’t ever go back. Is it already six months since the war ended but they still keep coming in [...]. The crime rate will go up. We were shortchanged at the time of the Partition. Same is happening now [...]. Mrs Gandhi should seal the border and send all the bastards back.’ (PR 210)

The page highlights the way communal tensions are reverberated through private conversations, and frozen into stereotypical opinions and sweeping statements. The ‘small’ tragedy of a local murder and this trivial discourse offer a precipitate of the long history of tensions between communities, the immediate context of the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 being embedded in the larger memory of Partition. The tremors of public history are thus palpable through the small lens of everyday conversations and local violence.

### 3. Miniaturising History

The downplaying of historical processes also operates through the miniaturisation of global and national history in Amit Chaudhuri’s and Siddharth Chowdhury’s writings, which use small details as synecdoches for larger transformations at work in the city. This belittling

movement is already hinted at through onomastic means. The first name ‘Mini’, notwithstanding its Bengali origins, mirrors the character’s short height and evokes the power of the miniature. Another character, Shib, is hired to revive a company, whose name (‘Little’s’) suggests its role as a synecdoche of the history of the city:

In Little’s history, in fact, the history of Calcutta could be seen to have been written. First the company created by the Englishman of the same name eighty-five years ago; then the buying over of the company by an enterprising Bengali businessman of the name of Poddar; then the death of Poddar after Independence; quarrels and disputes between his sons; the company gradually going to seed; the takeover of the company by the state government in 1974; and what it was now, something that had a kind of life and breath, an existence, but not a real one. (FS 327)

A fictional double of Britannia Biscuits, where Chaudhuri’s father used to work (CAL 117), the life of the company appears as a compressed version of the development of Calcutta, from its growth up to its decline and bankruptcy.<sup>70</sup> The decline of the factory (and of the city) is embodied by the isolated and decrepit colonial building, which enhances the impression of being ‘cut off from the larger movements of the world’ (FS 260).

The factory was tucked away in a lane on the outskirts [...], where no one would have expected it, hidden behind stone walls and huge rusting gate that opened reluctantly to outsiders. Once, the two-storey buildings made of red brick, with long continuous corridors and verandahs, with arches that were meant to give shelter from the tropical heat, would have been impressive and even grand. Now it was like a hostel; cups of tea travelled from room to room and bearers ran back and forth in the verandahs. (FS 260)

The political taking over by Delhi is made clear: ‘their lives were governed from Delhi; they were maintained like tamed and exotic pets’ (FS 326), the simile hinting at the downsizing and exoticising of Calcutta. The way the trajectory of the company is conflated with that of the city highlights the author’s vision of Calcutta as a declining city, which has lost its identity and its creative power.

The power of the miniature runs throughout Chaudhuri’s writings, and is epitomized by his statement that the history of Calcutta is mostly represented by its ordinary houses rather than its monuments: ‘the most revealing places in Calcutta are not the museums or the great monuments (of which, anyway, there aren’t many), but the houses and lanes in which people live’ (CAL 125).<sup>71</sup> Chaudhuri’s reflection on history strengthens the argument that his magnifying of the organic life of a house and a neighbourhood does not evade history

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<sup>70</sup> ‘In consonance with the flight of capital from Calcutta in the sixties, Britannia had re-established its head office in Bombay in 1964 [...]. That intervening history – of Britannia, my father’s job, and Calcutta – felt as *compressed as a fable*’ (CAL 117, my emphasis).

<sup>71</sup> Or again: ‘When people visit me in Calcutta, I take them not to see landmarks, but people’s houses [...]. There are no other monuments in Calcutta’ (CAL 291).



but is a compressed version of it. This is underpinned by a reversal of value between the minute and the monumental, the everyday and history, which he articulates in his essays. In his introduction to Arun Kolatkar's collection of poems *Jejuri*, Chaudhuri quotes Walter Benjamin's text on 'The Return of the Flâneur' and dwells on the flâneur's devaluation of history as 'junk' and exaltation of everyday debris as more valuable than great monuments.<sup>72</sup>

The junk of the urban everyday – a stained doorknob, a disused threshold, a tile – fills the flâneur with momentary excitement and adoration; these random items seem to possess a mystery that derives from being part of a larger narrative, an unspoken theology or mythology. The objects the flâneur lights upon in streets, bylanes, alleys, have, for him, an aura, an air of sacredness, that's almost religious.<sup>73</sup>

The way junk is 'aggrandized and magnified' in Kolatkar's poetry resonates with Chaudhuri's enlarging gaze on the infinitesimal details of urban life.<sup>74</sup> The passage underlines that the aura of junk stems from its connection to a larger narrative, thus seconding the argument that Chaudhuri does not dismiss history altogether but makes it discreetly emerge through echoes, miniatures and details interspersed throughout urban space. What he relinquishes is a monumental view of history, fuelled by spectacular tremors and events. He thus evokes the nineteenth-century Bengali poet Ishwar Gupta, called 'the poet of what's at hand' by Bankimchandra Chatterjee and a 'poet of the present' by Rosinka Chaudhuri, and explains his conception of history as *what's at hand*: 'History is not the annals; it's what happens around us when we're unaware it's history. It's Gupta's unawareness of himself, his subjects, or of Calcutta as something separate called 'history', in a static, retrospective sense, that makes them all bustle with it' (CAL 65). He also strengthens this notion via his reading of Partha Chatterjee's essay on the sacredness of images as national icons, which argues that certain insignificant details have been erased from pictures of national monuments in Indian textbooks because of the monuments acquiring a kind of religiosity, 'which purifies the image and takes away the quotidian or

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<sup>72</sup> 'The flâneur is the creation of Paris. The wonder is that it was not Rome. But perhaps in Rome even dreaming is forced to move along streets that are too well-paved. And isn't the city too full of temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines to be able to enter undivided into the dreams of the passer-by, along with every paving stone, every shop sign, every flight of steps, and every gateway? The great reminiscences, the historical frissons – these are all so much junk to the flâneur, who is happy to leave them to the tourist. And he would be happy to trade all his knowledge of artists' quarters, birthplaces and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile – that which any old dog carries away.' (Walter Benjamin, 'The Return of the Flâneur', (1929) in *Selected Writings II.1* (1927-1930), trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others, ed. by Michael W. Jennings and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999), p. 263).

<sup>73</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, 'Arun Kolatkar and the Tradition of Loitering' (2006), in *Clearing a Space*, p. 233.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

random elements which don't fit into the purity of that national image'.<sup>75</sup> Chaudhuri claims that he has always been 'more interested in those quotidian elements, those accidental elements. So neither a picture of reality nor a picture of history to me is sufficient. It is always those random elements, those loose threads which are of greater consequence, for whatever reason'.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, other almost invisible details appear as discreet synecdoches of the conflictual history of Calcutta, such as the peeling political posters disseminated throughout the city (FS 330), suggesting a weak attempt to resist the onslaught of capitalism. India's embrace of global capitalism in the 1990s and the communist party's initial resistance to it are thus encoded through opaque graffiti drawn by an invisible hand on the walls of the city:

It was afternoon. And in a small lane, in front of a pavement, with the movement of a wrist, something like a curve began to appear, it was not clear what pattern was forming, then the letter D appeared upon the wall of a two-storey house, in black and paint, and then U, and N, until DUNKEL had been formed, in the English language, which seemed to blazon itself for its curious purpose; then it began again, and I and M and F began to appear in another corner. Afternoon; no one saw them. It was too hot; on the main road cars went past, up and down; a few people rested; they had eaten; beggars dozed, blind to the heat and shadows, their heads bent to their stomachs. (FS 401)

Almost imperceptible, the Dunkel graffiti (after the name of the GATT general director from 1980 to 1993) is described as it is being drawn without the drawer being identified. The passive form withdraws all human intention from the protest against the 1993 free-trade agreement (reinforcing the opening of the country to foreign investments, under the impulsion of the IMF), as though the graffiti magically appeared. The writing mimics an individual consciousness gradually deciphering the drawing, and the slow pace defuses the tension of public protests. The public debates triggered by the economic liberalization emerge through a microscopic detail, which goes unnoticed to most of the inhabitants. The unmindful cars and people around heighten the general indifference to political opposition. The reference to the beggars can be construed either as intensifying the insignificance of the protest or as a symbol of the already uneven development of the city. The description goes on:

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<sup>75</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Sacred Circulation of National Images in India' (2003), in *The Indian Postcolonial*, pp. 19-32.

<sup>76</sup> Chaudhuri, 'I see history as junk'. Note the connection with Auerbach's concept of the 'random' moment.

Now a picture was forming that would multiply, like an ornate decoration, in different parts of the city, a decoration mirrored, yet seen by almost no one [...] yet it told a story. Gatt has been ratified of course. The whole matter had been done with and it had left a wound; yet they went on with these slogans as if they knew something might still come of it. (FS 400)

The unnoticed picture represents the Indian finance minister as a tiger with a man representing the United States. Once more, the event itself is made peripheral, yet the ellipsis also expresses a form of brutality, a fatality that the activists are not ready to accept. In the image, the minister appears as ‘hesitat[ing] before he leapt’ (FS 401), embodying this liminal time of vacant expectancy before something happens which is so dear to Chaudhuri.

In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the ‘decline’ of the city is also metonymically signified through the dysfunctional Ambassador car owned by Sandeep’s family. The first car to be made in India, albeit modelled on a British car, the Ambassador was a symbol of status for colonial and postcolonial bureaucratic elites, modelled in the metropolitan centre after a British model. Yet in Chaudhuri’s novels, this single ubiquitous car model represents solidity and middle-class family values. Chaudhuri’s second novel, *Afternoon Raag*, gives a brief history of the model and emphasizes its embodiment of continuity and of Calcutta’s disconnect from development:

The Ambassador is a spacious, box-like vehicle with a Taurean single-mindedness and a rickshaw’s tenacity. It is known as a ‘family car’; on Sundays, cousins and aunts on outing will sit, perspiring, inside it; I myself associate its hot floorboards, its aching gear-pulley, its recalcitrant pedals, with domesticity and the social events of childhood. For the Ambassador has remained faithful to the ideal that was perfected in the secure, organic era of the ‘protected market’, and, in its shape, still retains that philosophical look, that aura of being cut off from the ‘real’ world: squat, conservative, and spacious.<sup>77</sup>

The old recalcitrant car, also compared to an ‘old carboard box’ (SA 17), is comically shown in Chaudhuri’s first novel as a disgruntled animal, the centre of everyday drama in the vicinity. The obsolete car epitomizes the economic stagnation of the city and its oncoming decline, enhanced by the gradual superseding of the Ambassador by a multitude of foreign brands. The failure of Chhotomama’s business is actually never exposed or lamented but merely alluded to through the disappearance of the car, noticed by Sandeep when he returns to Kolkata at the end of the novel. The rhetorical restraint and narrative ellipsis, characteristic of Chaudhuri’s discrete writing, circumvent the crisis rather than addressing it head-on.

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<sup>77</sup> Chaudhuri, *Afternoon Raag*, p. 145, 226.

The symbolic power of the car is also used by Siddharth Chowdhury as a way to suggest the accelerated transformation of Delhi in the 1990s and 2000s. The major changes affecting the city seem peripheral to Chowdhury's fiction, whose prism is tightened to one locality and whose rhythm is dictated by everyday habits rather than by ruptures. It is through the small lens of new commodities and entertainment venues that his writing alludes to Delhi's development. As was shown in Chapter 4, the materiality of the city is foregrounded in a very realistic register in *Day Scholar*, as the narrative is fraught with actual toponyms, local brand names (Tweetie Pie shorts, Charminar or Gold Flake cigarettes, Old Monk rum), small landmarks circumscribing and signifying a local familiar territory. In *The Patna Manual of Style*, written five years after *Day Scholar* (though written immediately after and following the same characters after the end of their studies), local landmarks such as Volga Bar or Bercos restaurant in Connaught Place stand out as well, yet more clues hint at the globalization of Delhi, through passing references to international brands (Adidas tracksuits (PMS 57)) and to shopping malls where young lovers meet, such as Centre Stage Mall in Noida (PMS 64).<sup>78</sup> These two details obliquely hint at the growth of a global leisure-oriented economy and the transformation of everyday life through new global patterns of consumption.

The post-1990s boom of leisure and real estate industries is also embodied by the ascent of Zorawar Singh, hostel landlord, 'mid-level political broker and property dealer' (DS 415) who becomes a successful real estate businessman thanks to political scams and petty crimes. Singh's dubious economic success, helped by his connections with political power, is symbolised by the white Ambassador government car which comes to pick him up now and then, perceived by students presenting the civil service exams as the utmost sign of power and achievement, symbolizing the top in the hierarchy of civil servants:

For Jishnuda, like many other Bihari students in Delhi [...], the white government Ambassador car with the red beacon light on top and all sirens blaring was the ultimate achievement. To have that kind of power, which they perceived as invincible, the leisurely feudal ambience with five or six servants attending to all their demands [...]. (DS 339)

Similarly, Jishnuda's individual trajectory, from his days as a failed applicant to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) exams to his job as Zorawar Singh's assistant in the entertainment business (in 'The Importer of Blondes'), obliquely mirrors the transformation of Delhi from a bureaucratic city to a rising centre of capital accumulation. Interestingly,

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<sup>78</sup> See the map of Delhi in appendix.

this shift is not seen through the perspective of a high-ranking businessman, as in Dasgupta's essay, but from that of the go-between, whose rise is far from spectacular.

And in cash-rich, newly liberalized Delhi, there was no dearth of events to manage. In recent times, in Delhi, a lot of Biharis had joined the event management bandwagon and most of them, judging by the speaking new white Maruti Suzuki Gypsies parked in the lanes of North Campus colonies, were doing rather well for themselves. (PMS 14-15)

The dancing company he manages hires Ukrainian dancers and Nigerian DJs, hinting at the global networks of entertainment Delhi is part of. The economic liberalization and the ensuing relative upward mobility of the middle class are mostly manifest through the proliferation of new car brands. This detail is also noted by Rana Dasgupta in *Capital*, which closely maps the power struggle at work on the large roads of the capital, the hierarchy being denoted by the various car brands (C 21-22).

However, whereas Chaudhuri dilates the time of the event and muffles its violence, Chowdhury's writing rather oscillates between the normalisation of violence and its dramatization, pointing to another mode of imbrication of the epic and the ordinary. The everyday is seen through the magnifying class of the newcomer in *Day Scholar*, yet this familiar material is much rougher than the one Chaudhuri explores. Brutality is never directly witnessed by Chaudhuri's characters, whereas Chowdhury's fiction incorporates acts of violence as part of everyday life in an Indian city.

### III. Writing Everyday Violence on a Minor Mode

The texts examined in this chapter often focus on the moments preceding or following large deflagrations of violence (or 'critical events'), showing how the impact of the event gets entrenched into ordinary gestures and pronouncements. Another facet of the exploration of the urban everyday is the emphasis on the 'minor' manifestations of urban violence, individual tragedies which do not affect the whole city, such as a fire in a slum or a street fight.<sup>79</sup> Through the analysis of Siddharth Chowdhury's novels and stories, I interrogate the

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<sup>79</sup> The first example is taken from Adil Jussawalla's small piece entitled 'Another Normal Day', in which a fire in a slum triggers no fear and is even treated as pedestrian, the poet himself being 'puzzled by the normalcy of things' (see Adil Jussawalla, 'Three Uneasy Pieces', in *Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writings on Mumbai*, pp. 28-36). See also Sampurna Chattarji's story 'Grounded' (DL 148-150).

*ordinariness* of urban everyday violence and the effects of the narrator's detached indifference on the reader's perception of these small disasters.

Tabish Khair thus connects Chowdhury's anti-dramatic tone with his faithfulness to the street-corner perception of urban violence, which stands out from 'a tone of socio-political or moral indignation' he observes in most of contemporary Indian Anglophone fiction.<sup>80</sup> Trisha Gupta similarly notices Chowdhury's uncensored and matter-of-fact writing of violence, in particular regarding gender and caste: 'This is a world in which caste is simply a fact of life – the basis of opinions, alliances and battles, not something swept under the carpet'.<sup>81</sup> However, this section slightly nuances these interpretations by suggesting that the text expresses conflicting responses to these small tragedies, oscillating between indifference, panic and fascination, and that Chowdhury's understated prose, far from indicating strict realism, is very much inspired by the fictional universe of gangster films and hardboiled fiction.

## 1. Small Tragedies, Minor Events?

In one of the stories from *Diksha at St Martin's*, entitled 'The Leader of Men', the narrator gives an admiring portrait of the dignified security guard of his building in Patna and tells the story of his unexpected thrashing of the lobby in a fit of rage. Preceding the narrative is the following statement: 'what happened next can only be called unfortunate, maybe tragic but "tragic" has a kind of grandeur attached to it, which doesn't necessarily include the minor characters of this world' (DM 81). In *Patna Roughcut*, the narrator also refers to the 'minor characters' of his childhood and adolescence 'who sometimes drop by announced in my dreams and want to have their stories told' (PR 154-155). In both cases, the narrator minimizes the importance of his stories and expresses his reticence to amplify 'unfortunate' episodes. This minoration of violence contrasts with Suketu Mehta's

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<sup>80</sup> 'How does one write about a place where a boy can be beaten to death for stealing a pair of shoes [...]? You can assume a tone of socio-political or moral indignation [...]. You can turn it into dark humour, satire, even magic realism of the sort where all those contorted, broken bodies seem to be, finally, devoid of any unbearable sensation of pain. And there are surely other options, not all equal, and all equally off-key from a certain perspective – the perspective of the street, bāgh or nukkad where the murder actually takes place.' (Khair, 'The Nukkad Novel').

<sup>81</sup> 'Even more striking, though are Chowdhury's (or rather his characters') unabashed references to caste, around which most Indian writing in English tends to maintain a cordon sanitaire of coyness and/or stifling political correctness even stronger than that which surrounds sex and sexuality [...]. This is a world in which caste is simply a fact of life – the basis of opinions, alliances and battles, not something swept under the carpet. Like with much else in *Day Scholar*, it may seem unsavoury, but it seems real.' (Gupta, 'Brilliant Tutorials').

magnifying of his interviewees into extraordinary characters and of the scenes he witnesses into sensational episodes.

One instance of Chowdhury's downplaying of everyday violence in *Patna Roughcut* and *Day Scholar* is the reference to caste brutality. The tragedy of a young man from a carpenter caste led to suicide by his upper-caste family-in-law is referred to as 'a familiar story in Bihar' (PR 154), and Jishnuda's social background is described as follows:

Jaishankar Sharma aka Jishnuda came from proud Bhumihar stock and his family owned quite a bit of land near Nadaul in Jehanabad district, where the joke in some enlightened circles in Patna was that whenever on some winter night it got unbearably chilly, the upper castes gathered together and went to the nearest untouchable and landless labour settlement and set it alight [...]. But with the recent spread of CPI (ML) activism in the district much of the joy of living, simple everyday pleasures like rape, beatings and bonfire, had suddenly been denied to the upper castes, especially the Bhumihar majority and the Rajputs. (DS 329)

The text illustrates Chowdhury's gallows humour, which is double-layered: the brutality of rural upper castes towards subalterns is addressed through sarcasm and ironical antiphrasis, the end of the passage presenting repetitive acts of violence as a form of joyful entertainment that has unfortunately disappeared. Yet the 'enlightened circles' of Patna deriding this inhuman ruthlessness as backwards are also obliquely satirised, their disparaging tone pointing to their blindness regarding the everyday violence which pervades their own social sphere.

Thus, the story 'Conjunctivitis', analysed before, evidences the banality of evil in the narrator's locality. Yet the narrative precisely rests on the conflict between the banality of the event for the local society, and the protagonist's trauma after witnessing the murder. It thus sets into relief the limits of this numbed sensitivity to violence which characterises Chowdhury's universe. The story actually starts with the narrator's extreme conjunctivitis, which is described as a traumatic symptom, and the murder is handled elliptically, the doctor asking if Ritwik has 'witness[ed] the boy get killed' (PR 309). The tragedy is then refracted through the comments of the family, which immediately unveil the 'social sanction' of violence, hinting at the simmering communal tensions in Patna in the 1970s. The text contrasts the narrator's familiarity with occasional street fights with his shock when faced with gratuitous cruelty and murder.

He has till now in his young life seen nothing in the past that could prepare him for this. Though he has seen violence, knife fights, Shantu Ghosh's ear sliced off by a rangbaz from Subzi Baug, Harryda slapping a rickshaw-puller for demanding a higher fare from Mrinal Babu, and once or twice even the random firing of pistols in the air during a confrontation, he has taken it all as the normal course of life. But this present incident

is the first time he comes up close with inherent middle-class Indian mohalla cruelty and the casualness of it, the social sanction of it disorients him. He knows each one of the perpetrators. These are the people he meets each day, boys who sometimes include him in their cricket teams, uncles who buy him comics and chocolates, who come to his house and have food there. The coordinate in his mind shift forever altering the way he looks at things; what frightens him the most is not the fact that he knows them but that he will know them for the rest of his life. This is what he comes from. (PR 215, my emphasis)

The series of ‘petty crimes’ that Ritwik had witnessed before enhances the casual aggressiveness he is used to, involving his friends as victims or perpetrators, shedding light on the aggressive atmosphere of the city. These examples would fit any of Chowdhury’s stories and be told on a minor mode, deflating their dramatic nature. On the contrary, what shakes the narrator first is the banality of extreme violence and the way it is taken for granted as a social norm, ingrained in the locality and ready to emerge at any moment. Equally overwhelming is his awareness of belonging to this world and of being complicit with it. The insistence on his proximity with the criminals suggests his awareness of being determined by the contours of such cruelty. Chowdhury’s fiction then probes into the tragedy in a straightforward manner, detailing the beating up in a matter-of-fact tone which does not minimize the outburst of brutality:

Bhattacharjee caught hold of the boy by his hair and punched him on the mouth. The beating started in earnest then [...]. The boy lay curled up on the street, trying to protect his face and groin, the trouser torn open at the waist, blood dripped from his mouth and nose as he was simultaneously kicked by ten to fifteen people. (PR 213)

The realism of the description underlines that a threshold has been crossed in the narrator’s consciousness between minor and major violence, his coolness unable to hold under the circumstances. Similarly, in a story from *Patna Roughcut*, the narrator’s mentor Harryda is deeply shaken by the witnessing of the neighbourhood’s community looting a shop owned by their Sikh friend, in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, and ultimately leaves the city, estranged from his former friends. These disquieting episodes of barbarity unveil the ingrained violence which structures the locality, at odds with blissful representations of solidarity and conviviality.

The list of petty fights, feuds, and assaults the narrator lists echoes the description of Scorsese’s urban world in *Diksha at St Martin*, suggesting the insider’s familiarity with everyday violence.<sup>82</sup> Yet the ‘coolness’ Ritwik identifies in Scorsese’s protagonists

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<sup>82</sup> See Chapter 4.



encapsulates the narrator's ideal behavior, that of the hardboiled hero, whose stoical attitude suggests how impervious to fear he is. The romanticization of coolness is indeed part of the ethics of Scorsese's gangsters, which values the feudal virtues of stoicism and loyalty over everything else.<sup>83</sup> Despite their virtues, Scorsese's gangsters are also ordinary men, at odds with dashing figures of earlier gangster films yet close to the ordinary heroes of hardboiled crime fiction. Repeated intertextual allusions to Hemingway, considered as the forefather of the genre, and to popular hardboiled fiction writers such as James Hadley Chase, gesture to the author's transcultural sources of influence but also to his protagonist's reinvention of his surroundings through a hardboiled lens.<sup>84</sup>

Therefore, if a deadpan tone may be considered as mirroring the 'pragmaticism of the survivor' or the insider's perspective in Aman Sethi's or Sampurna Chattarji's depictions of everyday violence, it is not exactly the case with Chowdhury.<sup>85</sup> The coolness of his protagonists partly derives from their own mimicry of literary and cinematic models. This cinematic filter laid on reality is palpable in 'Outlaws', for instance, in which theft is perceived by the narrator's friend as a banal yet glamorous act of rebellion which subverts bourgeois morality. When the narrator expresses his disapproval of his friend's stealing of cigarettes, the latter replies: 'We are not thieves. We are just a couple of cool outlaws. Don't you feel the thrill of it? Kind of like Robin Hood' (DM 37). The character endows illegality with the aura of coolness and the greater value of redistributive justice, a sense of manly heroism which overtakes narrow-minded morality. Amitava Kumar underlines Chowdhury's glamorization of misery and violence, which makes his own Patna adolescence seem exciting: 'misery is masked by a distinct kind of cool. If you can carry it

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<sup>83</sup> See Sophie Djigo, *L'Éthique du gangster au cinéma: une enquête philosophique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2016); Fred Gardaphe, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>84</sup> The text also refers to emblematic hardboiled characters such as Travis McGee, the detective of John D. Macdonald's fiction, and Lew Archer, Ross Macdonald's protagonist. Note that India has had a strong tradition of anglophone and non-anglophone pulp fiction (including detective fiction and romance), as Tabish Khair points out (see his article, 'Indian Pulp Fiction in English: A Preliminary Overview from Dutt to Dé', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 43.59 (2008), 59-74).

<sup>85</sup> Sampurna Chattarji refers to her own understated writing of violence in the city as follows: 'I have the feeling this is the pragmatism of the survivor. For me it's really a reflection of reality. It's not realism but it is an appreciation of the lived reality where you get on with it no matter what crisis come [...]. I don't think so much of aesthetic choice, consciously setting out to create a distance or aloofness between the crisis unfolding and the person reporting on the crisis but rather reflecting on the manner in which we cope with imminent and everyday crisis. There could be flashpoints which the world notices but every day is a crisis.' (Chattarji, Interview with the author, 2018). She also interestingly distinguishes the way she deals with urban crisis 'on a large scale', 'creating this epic backdrop of a global cataclysm' in her novel *Rupture*, from the celebration of 'a way of coping with everyday crisis' in her short-stories, suggesting a connection between what I call the ordinary mode and short fiction.

off, your own coolness can make you crazy with pleasure [...]. Chowdhury's prose painted the remembered misery in the brilliant colours of adolescent romance'.<sup>86</sup> This painting of boredom and banal illegal acts in the colours of adventure is intimately associated with adolescence. In fact, the same tension between the dramatization and banalization of violence plays out in *Day Scholar*, which stages the narrator's induction into a pulp fiction world of sleazy heroes and casual violence, and his gradual relinquishing of this studied 'cool' attitude.

## 2. The 'School of Cool', or the Romanticising of Violence

*Day Scholar* chronicles the first year of young provincial student at Delhi University and his introduction to the codes of this urban world. The mock-ethnographic aspect delineated earlier runs throughout the novel, as illustrated by the methodical depiction of students' daily habits, such as Jishnuda's daily schedule (DS 340) or the narrator's morning writing routine, his regular meetings with his lover and the time he spends every day at the tea-stall (DS 353-360). Hriday is characterised as an apprentice writer and identifies his writing style as follows: 'I didn't worry about publication, just that I should write about places and things I knew in a simple matter-of-fact manner. Concrete specificity and not long-winded waffle' (DS 356). Inspired by Hemingway's realism, the object of Hriday's writing is thus the familiar world which surrounds him, his terse style pitted against wordy circumlocutions. This description matches the author's unsentimental realism.

This metatextual comment is however belied by the comic excess which characterizes witnessed or reported scenes of violence in the novel, depicted as simultaneously ordinary and thrilling. In fact, the narrator later claims later that he gave up on Hemingway's school of fieldwork realism to indulge in complete invention, yielding to the tall-tale impulse animating the whole campus. His dramatization of everyday life may first be ascribed to his outsider's vantage point, in a typical *Bildung* fashion, with the young protagonist discovering the Babylonian city of pleasure and corruption. Yet it is actually fuelled by the general atmosphere of the place, as all the students surrounding him are prone to magnifying their life, inspired by hardboiled fiction and noir films. Only at the end of the novel does Hriday pull the pulp fiction filter from his eyes to realize how morally and intellectually delusory

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<sup>86</sup> Amitava Kumar, 'The Patna School of Cool', *Biblio*, July-August 2003, 38.

this romanticising of urban violence is. The uncertain status of the scenes of scuffle, which seem borrowed from film scripts, and their comic excess, ultimately suggest their belonging to the collective fantasy of Delhi students, resulting in the belittling of the glamorisation of violence as part of adolescent romance.

The opening scene represents the narrator's 'rite of initiation' (DS 287) to this seedy world: it closely depicts a sexual intercourse between the hostel landlord and his mistress, scrutinised by the narrator and his friends.<sup>87</sup> This peeping scene connects the novel to the genre of hardboiled fiction as it immediately introduces the narrator as a spectator, mesmerized by the amoral world of the hostel. The scene is interspersed with legends and anecdotes about the characters involved, all characterised by their blatant exaggeration. Jishnuda is thus introduced as a theatrical character ('looking as usual philosophical and tragic' (DS 279)), and portrayed through the sulphurous rumours which surrounds him, turning him into the campus tough anti-hero:

In fact the shorts were so stiff with profligacy that the story was that once during an argument in the hostel over who was supposed to pay for the Old Monk khamba that Friday night, Jishnuda in anger had taken off his shorts and thrown them at Farid Ashraf's (third year History Honours, KMC) face. Though Farid managed to turn his face in time, he cut his fingers on the razor-sharp edges of Jishnuda's shorts. The next day Farid had to take tetanus shots. (DS 280)

He immediately comes out as a disreputable character, mostly associated with alcohol, sex and violence, but also as a cynical unsentimental hero. This digression sets the tone for the myriad tales told by Jishnuda and reported by the narrator: the comic amplification makes the narrative veer off realism while toning down violence as an object of comic anecdotes.

The inhabitants of North Campus are not only talented story-tellers but also skilled performers of street-corner dramas: theatricality appears as a strategy to entertain their friends and endow their lives with adventure. Everyday violence is thus often represented as a spectacle, as is palpable in the description of a showdown between the godfather figure of Jishnuda and the alleged harasser of a 'sister'.

We saw Jishnuda walk purposefully towards the couple, the astura gleaming in the orange glare of the street lamps, and as he reached the 'sister', he pushed her gently away and swung his hand from left to right and back like a wide X mark, in a controlled arc. The boy looked surprised for a second and then covered his face as blood gushed out. Farid put the Rajdoot in gear, Vinodini Khan ran back into the hostel. The red bandhini chunri swirling in the air like a long-tailed kite. (DM 335)

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<sup>87</sup> This peeping scene has been published in the collection of crime stories *Delhi Noir*, supporting my argument of Chowdhury's noir literary imagination of the capital city.

The passage humorously emphasizes both the spectacular aspect of the aggression as well as Jishnuda's casual mastery of violence, thus reading as a self-reflexive rewriting of a typical scene from hardboiled fiction or gangster film. Jishnuda's shrewdness, his repeated demonstrations of physical force and his detached attitude cast him as the perfect embodiment of hardboiled manhood, which highly depends on dramatization and performance.<sup>88</sup> The confrontation setting, Jishnuda's perfectly controlled gestures, and the image of the vanishing girl followed by the birdlike swirling shawl ('bandhini chunri') all reveal the mock-heroic aspect of the scene. The heroic tone is further deflated by the impression that the girl needs no protection at all: 'to all purposes it looked to me that she was harassing the poor boy instead' (DS 334), thus twisting the canonical damsel-in-distress scenario and hinting at the gratuitous demonstration of aggression.

A similar comic twist is performed when the narrator's bold confrontational strategy fails, despite its being directly inspired by Jishnuda's advice. As the story unfolds, Hriday gets more and more familiar with the petty crimes around him, he witnesses the rigging of students' elections and entrance exams, and even takes part in Zorawar Singh's schemes, giving lessons to his mistress's daughter and acting as a messenger between Singh and the young girl. Yet at the end of the novel, as Hriday finally decides to betray Zorawar Singh to get back on the straight and narrow, he is faced with Jishnuda's wrath:

'I don't care how much you beat me. I am not scared of you, Jishnuda. You are just a small-time crook. Do anything you want, but you will remain a crook all your life. There will be no profile change for you ever [...]. You are not a scholar. Come on, cut my wrists. I dare you to cut my wrists, you moron.' So Jishnuda did just that. He rushed over to my side and before Zorawar could stop him he had slashed my right wrist. (DS 421)

Hriday's attempt at impressing his master-turned-opponent and at performing a tough hitman's rhetoric runs up against an unsparing reality, as Jishnuda takes his words at face value, abruptly changing the expected script. The tragi-comic effect is enhanced by the laconic monosyllabic phrasing ('did just that') which mirrors Jishnuda's sharp blade and surprising brutality. Hriday seems to be carried away by his own cinematic imagination and ultimately caught back by actual violence. Yet this violent episode also makes him the object of a tall-tale, his story blown up as it is disseminated across the campus: 'In those two days I had become some sort of a celebrity [...]. Nothing like a sustained beating to really propel

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas Strychacz, 'Dramatizations of Manhood in Hemingway', *American Literature*, 61 (1989), 245-60; Megan E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

you through the popularity charts up north' (DS 422). Truth is dismissed in favour of the multiplicity of legends, clearly hinting at the 'stylised' world of Chowdhury's fiction, in which the banal life of students is turned into that of gangsters in the badlands of Delhi University.<sup>89</sup>

The reflexive comments of the narrator and the clear reference to cinema invite readers to question the realism of these chronicles. The romanticizing of casual violence is mocked as the students' distorted take on reality, indicated by the narrator's identification of people around him as 'characters in a pulp novel with a lurid cover' (DS 371). These short scenes are redolent in this sense of Suketu Mehta's dramatization of violence, in particular his gangster dialogues, drawn from Bollywood gangster films, yet they also contrast with it through their openly comic dimension and the distance with which the spectacle is presented. Similarly, the quest pattern that Mehta introduces in his urban narrative is parodied in *Day Scholar*, as the protagonist is not led anywhere through the obstacles he overcomes, his drifting ultimately ending with a sudden fit of indignation which is also comically excessive.

Only in the final pages are the narrator's initial fascination for and his wilful participation in this seedy world superseded by a moral and sentimental awakening. In fact, Hriday ultimately forsakes the romanticizing of everyday violence and of unsentimentality. The corruption of Shokeen Niwas is unveiled both as banal and destructive, and his new awareness is treated as the stripping of his crime fiction filter on urban life. Zorawar Singh's mistress, for instance, previously pictured as a loose 'gangster's moll, like Helen', finally appears to him as 'a regular middle-class mother with a somewhat complicated personal life. There was nothing glamorous about her' (DS 412). The reference to Helen, the famous Hindi film vamp actress and dancer, adds another layer of cinematic intertext to Chowdhury's writing of the decadent city. The de-glamorisation of Mrs Midha had already started when he first met her after having heard so many legends about her, and it takes the form of a literal downsizing: 'I noticed how small in stature she actually was. No more than five feet two inches in her off-white Liberty sandals. In my mind she was much bigger, the face harder, the hair shorter, the movements brazen' (DS 375). This deflating of the character embodies the way the amplifying of reality is always undermined as a comic fantasy in Chowdhury's fiction.

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<sup>89</sup> 'Many readers who actually live in those twin cities of my imagination find my work to be, well, totally fictional. The world I create is a stylized one, and yet for the characters who inhabit it, it is I believe intensely real.' (DS 427).

Even Hriday's awakening is tinged with comic excess, pointing to the satirical nature of the text and its twisting of the *Bildung* pattern. The moment is presented as a caricatural painful epiphany, prompting the character's dizziness and despondency, the first-person narrative enabling an ironic distance between the narrator and the reader.

I was no different from Zorawar who used women in a calculated manner for his pleasure and then discarded them. I was a coward and a cad. This sudden realization of my behaviour fuelled by a rapidly splintering mind almost buckled my knees and I sat down on the pavement outside the mandir opposite Hansraj College to rest my legs [...]. I had to take a stand now. I couldn't drift anymore. I had been unfair to Anjali Nalwa and in the last year and a half I had tried to lead a life of studied indifference to anything good and decent and veered more and more towards the callous and amoral. Things somehow had to change. I couldn't be a disinterested flaneur anymore. I had to show interest in things around me. I had to start being good once more. (DS 412-414)

The overstated sentiment expressed in the second part contrasts with the cynicism displayed earlier in the novel, and the reference to the 'disinterested flaneur' recalls the 'coolness' of Scorsese's gangsters. The narrator's redemption, saving him from utter moral downfall, is also spatialized. Hriday leaves the 'magical world' of Shokeen Niwas hostel to move to the neighbourhood of Hakikat Nagar: 'I moved in without seeing the room because I liked the name of the colony. I needed a reality check' (DS 422).<sup>90</sup> The pun on the neighbourhood's name allegorically connects Hriday's new consciousness with his new environment. The escape out of Zorawar and Jishnuda's sphere of influence signals the return to the ordinary city and the awareness that the heroic view of regular trashing is a mere delusion.

The domestication of urban space and the gradual distancing from the dramatization of conflicts are even more palpable in Chowdhury's latest collection of interlinked stories, *The Patna Manual of Style*, in which the rhetoric of excess is constantly deflated, mocked or taken on by unpleasant characters. Chowdhury acknowledges the shift of tone between *Day Scholar* and *The Patna Manual of Style*: 'But with this book, I wanted Hriday to be mellower, more contemplative, less angular'.<sup>91</sup> Like Chaudhuri's tonal and scalar variation between his first and his third novels, Chowdhury's relinquishing of the magnifying lens may also be related to the wider geography of the collection, which encompasses several neighbourhoods, as opposed to the fish-bowl effect of the focus on one locality. Therefore, the reader is reacquainted with Hriday, now an aspiring writer navigating a city he knows intimately. The first story of the collection, analysed in Chapter 4, already indicates the

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<sup>90</sup> *Hakikat* means 'reality' in Hindi.

<sup>91</sup> Chowdhury, 'This is a Delhi Book in Many Ways'.

narrator's amused distance from tall-tales as the 'violent love story' told by Jishnuda is an embedded tale, its exaggerated drama being taken on by Jishnuda without contaminating the narrator.

Another instance of the anti-epic mode is the story 'Damsel in Distress', which satirises a narrow-minded provincial youth coming to Delhi. Told in the first person, it reads as a compressed rewriting of the anti-*Bildung* pattern used in *Day Scholar*, that of a provincial anti-hero's troubled encounter with the city: 'Delhi is still a new place for me. I am still getting used to its rhythms but the mofussil slowness still clings to me like a burr' (PMS 59). Yet the angle is quite different, as the story explores the complex intersection between power and marginality embodied by this narrator, who comes from the rural periphery (an unspecified northern state), from a Hindu family of Partition refugees from Sylhet. His excessive expression of clichéd sexist, anti-Muslim and castist prejudices makes him an ostensibly unpleasant character, who is also repeatedly faced with comic humiliation in the city owing to his naivety. As the allusion of the title indicates, the character's reinvention of the city is not layered over by hardboiled fiction references, but by archetypal medieval romance, which the story ironically subverts.<sup>92</sup> This caricatural narrator perceives the metropolis through his patriarchal chivalric norms and wants to save 'heroines' from urban corruption, turning every encounter into an extraordinary adventure. The antihero's puritanical prejudices lead to highly comical misunderstandings, such as when he misguidedly disturbs a couple in a park at night, assuming the girl is being assaulted. The comic description of his misplaced anger as 'the wrath of god' (PMS 63) points to his magnifying of the common event as an epic episode. His inflated fantasies of power are satirised as a self-centred naive projection:

I must admit that I am terribly bright. I stay in a barsati nearby and from my terrace you can have a grand view of the Ring Road, Ashram Chowk, the NAFED building and Mathura Road. At nights after consuming a quarter bottle of Old Monk [...], I feel like Kaikobad then, standing at the ramparts of his now vanished fort at Kilokri, staring intensely at the Yamuna, where he liked to disport with his concubines. (PMS 58)

The passage connects the narrator's presumptuous self-delusion with a panoramic view of the city, which becomes a canvas on which his fantasies of power are projected, fuelled by the history of Delhi. The reconfiguration of history is ambiguous as the character's delirium excavates the multiple layers of Delhi's history, bringing out the palimpsest hidden

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<sup>92</sup> The title and the comic episodes of mistaken intentions and identities clearly hint at P.G. Wodehouse's eponymous novel (*A Damsel in Distress* (London: Jenkins, 1919)), which inspired a musical comedy film with Fred Astaire in 1937.

underneath the contemporary landscape. Yet this glorious vision of imperial Delhi, underpinned by the narrator's megalomaniac identification with the thirteenth-century Turk sultan Kaikobad, is clearly undermined as a drunken delusion. It also hints at his simplistic vision of history as a tale of heroic conquests, strengthening his chivalric imagination of the city.

The history of the capital is often glimpsed at through comic delusions of grandeurs in Chowdhury's narratives, which echo the trivial angle at which history is rendered in Chaudhuri's fiction. In fact, this passage echoes Zorawar Singh's towering over North Campus from the terrace of his recently 'purchased' hostel in *Day Scholar*, the bird's-eye view over the area epitomizing his achievement. His sense of pride is related to the history of the city, as he traces back the history of the neighbourhood: 'Beyond loom the dense kinkar-encrusted Delhi Ridge and Bara Hindu Rao, where in 1857 Zorawar's Gujjar ancestors fought their last stand against the British and their Sikh mercenaries and forever lost the land on which later North Campus would be built' (DS 290). The reference to Bara Hindu Rao, the scene of a major battle during the 1857 uprising against the British rule, suggests that he construes his criminal acquisition of the hostel as a form of displaced avenging of his ancestors who were defeated and lost their land. History as a narrative of heroic deeds thus serves his self-construction as a powerful hero. This parallel hints at the continuity between *Day Scholar* and *The Patna Manual of Style*, even as the latter signals a shift further away from urban delusions of glamorous violence.

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This journey through the various representations of the everyday in Indian urban writing has revealed that the focus on the regular rhythm of quotidian practices, far from collapsing history or undermining the conflicts which define contemporary urban life, enables these authors to show the ways in which violence inhabits the everyday. Critical events, such as the Partition of the subcontinent, the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war, and the 1992-1993 riots and bombings in Bombay, do not constitute the backbone of these narratives, but their impact is obliquely reverberated through muffled echoes, the distant rumours of commonplace discourses, fragmentary recollections and individual acts of everyday violence. These writers' focus on 'what's at hand' (CAL 65) thus expands the meaning of history and discloses how pervasive violence is in everyday encounters. In fact, the focus on



daily life in the city invites us to decentre our understanding of urban violence away from great tremors and eruptions and to look at pedestrian, uneventful forms of discord. These small tragedies and ‘chafing conflicts’ (CAL 257) gesture towards the epistemological and political power of the trivial as the site where systemic urban crises are best revealed.

It also shows the value of peripheral standpoints to shed light on urban crises, supporting the argument of a provincialisation of Indian booming cities. This decentring of the perspective is evidenced, for instance, in Chaudhuri’s eschewing the violence tearing Calcutta apart in the 1980s and his narrating of the Mumbai riots from Calcutta, as well as by Chowdhury’s addressing Delhi’s transformations from the vantage point of Bihari migrants settled on the periphery of Delhi University North campus. Both writers downsize the manifestations of conflicts through a metonymic logic which enlarges details, fragments and debris of the ordinary to suggest the greater movements of history. This step aside and this ground-level view are reminiscent of R.K Narayan’s treatment of great political events, such as the independence struggle, through the prism of the fictional small uneventful town of Malgudi, away from metropolitan centres. The texts where the ordinary mode prevails use the same eccentric viewpoint from the very heart of the metropolis.<sup>93</sup>

The dominant detached tone of these narratives, deflating the intensity of certain events, may be construed as the expression of a *grounded* perspective on Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, which denotes familiarity with the harshness of urban life: violence is uneventful because it shapes the character’s everyday life. Even the imbrication of heightened and subdued tones in Chowdhury’s prose, which turns the lives of students into epic urban adventures and romanticises petty antisocial behaviours, paradoxically results in emphasizing the banality of urban tensions, the enlarging view being satirised as a grand delusion.<sup>94</sup> I would thus argue that the low-key or mock-epic tone of these texts, which mostly eschews expressions of shock, anger, or indignation when faced with violence, does not imply relativism, conservative realism or a fatalist acceptance of the *status quo*. By foregrounding the insider’s perception of violence, the ordinary mode prompts the reader to

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<sup>93</sup> See for instance Narayan’s novel *Waiting for the Mahatma* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1955), whose title resonates with Chaudhuri’s preoccupation with waiting and anticipation. Narayan’s geography of Malgudi as an ordinary town, with its shopkeepers, idlers and benign crooks, suffuses contemporary writings of the urban locality. Vivek Shanbhag’s Kannada novel, *Ghachar Ghochar* (trans. by Srinath Perur (Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016), offers a similar glimpse at booming Bangalore through the lens of the banal life of a middle-class family and its small dramas, the subdued, melancholic tone decentring the perspective on the city, away from the frantic energy and chaotic bustling of the ‘Silicon Valley’ of India.

<sup>94</sup> The excess of Chaudhuri’s writing of the everyday, his drawing on the mythical vision of Bengal as ‘sona Bangla’, and of Chowdhury’s lowlife in Delhi and Patna, amalgamating heterogeneous narrative modes, could be read, to some extent, in the light of ‘peripheral irrealism’.

recognize how structural it is. Chapter 6 will explore the way the protagonists cope with structural violence through oblique strategies rather than head-on confrontations.

These restrained representations of political, economic and social tumult contrast with Rana Dasgupta's, Suketu Mehta's and Raj Kamal Jha's narratives. Instead of positioning their narratives as spectacular counterpoints to the celebration of the advent of global New India and to swoop down on eruptions of violence, Sethi's, Chowdhury's and Chaudhuri's mappings of the unnoticed effects of violence on everyday life undermine the rupture constituted by the 1990s in India, suggesting gradual change and the intensification of previous social, economic and cultural patterns. Their micro-histories and micro-geographies unsettle the opposition between the event and the everyday and paradoxically inscribe the contradictions of contemporary Indian cities in a *longue durée* narrative of urban crisis.



## CHAPTER 6

### ‘A FOOHOLD IN THE CITY’, THE POLITICS OF THE URBAN ORDINARY

Derived from the lessons of micro-history, the hypothesis I have unfolded throughout the previous two chapters is that the micro-scale of representation does not bring out the same material as a macro-scale one, and the dominance of the former in the ordinary mode of urban writing gives birth to another ‘cartography of the social’.<sup>1</sup> This ordinary cartography of twenty-first-century Indian cities thus closely delineates the processes at work in the production of locality, the everyday rhythms of urban life, and ultimately, I would argue, it entails a focus on individual paths which are not attuned with India’s trajectory since the 1990s. Indeed, these downscaled urban narratives shed light on characters who seem out-of-step with the neoliberal turn of Indian society and its celebration of upward social mobility.

In literary terms, the outliers, drifters, outcasts, secessionists or tricksters depicted in the texts of Sethi, Chowdhury, Chaudhuri and Roy, all belong to the category of the anti-hero. Their relationship with the city does not reflect it as a site of opportunity and material achievement in a *Bildungsroman* manner. They thus sidestep an aspirational pattern which would mirror the ‘awakening’ of global India. At odds with Mehta’s, Dasgupta’s and Jha’s warriors or strugglers, driven by an endless quest for power which generates head-on collisions, these individuals ‘step out of the race’ for capital accumulation. The phrase is used by Aman Sethi in reference to the protagonist of his reportage, and hints at the spatial and social *groundedness* of these characters, whose stories are not defined by geographical mobility and social progress but either by social stagnation or slow downfall, neither of which is depicted as spectacular. We established in Chapter 2 the ways in which the maturation pattern of the *Bildungsroman* was borrowed and partly unsettled by epic urban narratives, which are shaped by the ideas of self-making and of the individual struggle to

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<sup>1</sup> Revel, ‘Une histoire au ras du sol’.

make it in the city, yet also emphasize social crashes and catastrophic collisions rather than individual ascensions in the city. The fictional and nonfictional texts studied in this chapter also split the characters' lifepaths from the collective narrative of India's 'emergence', yet they do so through more or less chosen social and economic failure, open disinterest in the quest for material success, or strategies to circumvent the scramble for riches.

The chapter scrutinises the politics of these *grounded*, ordinary narratives: Roy, Sethi, Chowdhury and Chaudhuri seem to represent social stagnation or slow-motion and spatial rootedness as symptoms of disempowerment, in line with Jed Esty's analysis of anti-developmental narratives and with Majumdar's study of semi-peripheral stagnation.<sup>2</sup> Yet their texts also reclaim them as radical political gestures and raise the question: is there such a thing as a rooted radicalism? Entrenching oneself in a locality may constitute a form of resistance from below to the injunction of material achievement, made impossible by uneven development as it plays out in India's cities.

The conjecture which drives this chapter is thus that the focus on characters who 'step out of the race' enables these writers to shed light on small-scale tactics to reclaim the city and circumvent the race, through secession, occupation, or the creation of 'real utopias', that is, in Erik Olin Wright's terms, 'utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change'.<sup>3</sup> The revolutionary potential of occupying space is directly derived from Henri Lefebvre's notion of the right to the city, developed by David Harvey in his study of 'rebel cities'. The emphasis laid on local radical gestures is also connected, I believe, with the engagement of the writers with the city's past, and their literary excavating of urban debris parallels the interest of micro-historians in disseminated fragments, which are used to reconstruct the density of a bygone social world.

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<sup>2</sup> Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); See also Vandertop, 'Peripheral Urbanism'.

<sup>3</sup> Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso, 2017), p. 4.

## I. Anti-Heroes: Debunking India's Success Stories

From Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's exaltation of the flâneur to the Chicago School's definition of the mobile man as the epicentre of urban life, the celebratory idea of the mobile body has defined standard modernist urban narratives. Rashmi Varma thus writes: 'notions of both velocity and constant dislocation became central to the modernist idea of the impossibility of holding on to the present, graspable only as fleeting and transient flickers of experience'.<sup>4</sup> Suketu Mehta's foregrounding of Bombay's restlessness, Dasgupta's depiction of the urban whirl of Delhi, and Jha's precise mapping of the wealthy protagonist's unhampered movement across the city, all build on this cultural tradition. Yet all the texts of my corpus also shed light on the uneven mobility which defines contemporary Indian cities, contrasting the rapid movement of cars or the metro with the slow, arduous movement of pedestrians, bus-travellers and rickshaw-pullers. The representation of these contrasting mobilities embody the recent critiques raised against the identification of the rapidly moving body with urban modernity, exposing the 'gendered, classed and normatively bodied projection of the flâneur or flâneuse', thus complicating the politics of loitering, notably in an urban Indian context.<sup>5</sup> The 'ordinary' novels and essays particularly foreground the slow motion or immobility of their characters, exposing these as signs of disempowerment. However, they also highlight the ways in which, from this disempowered position of hampered mobility, the subjects make tactical uses of immobility, slow drifting or dwelling, willingly circumventing the race for success. I would like to link this emphasis laid on material immobility with the social stagnation or decline which define the characters of these narratives. I will thus discuss the extent to which social downward mobility or stagnation can be understood through Jed Esty's prism of 'anti-developmental narratives', indicting the crisis of capitalist modernisation, while being alert to the agency given to these anti-heroes, whose social trajectories are not portrayed through a catastrophic lens. This section thus explores the ways in which social stagnation or marginalisation, sometimes wedded to physical immobility or slow motion, is construed both as a sign of disempowerment, resulting from the uneven development of the city, and as a token of

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<sup>4</sup> Varma, *The Postcolonial City*, p. 49

<sup>5</sup> See Susan Buck-Morss, 'The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering', *New German Critique*, 39 (Fall 1986), 99-140; Tickell and Ranhasina, 'Delhi: New Writings on the Megacity', 300. See also Phadke and others, *Why Loiter* and the recent volume, *Mobility and Corporeality in 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Anglophone Literature: Bodies in Motion*, ed. by Jaine Chemmachery and Bhawana Jain (London: Lexington, 2021).

resistance to the worship of material success, a way to reclaim another form of life and place in the city.

## 1. Promises vs. Compromises

The epic mode dismantles the success stories of upwardly mobile India through narratives of the destructive race for power or the growing abyss between social classes. Rana Dasgupta's essay highlights the destructiveness of India's frantic quest for capitalist growth, including for those who materially benefit from the country's neoliberal shift, portrayed as mere cogs in the mad wheel of capitalism. The psyches of these Faustian heroes seem crushed under the weight of the capitalist delirium. At the other end of the socio-economic spectrum in the same city, Aman Sethi and Siddharth Chowdhury do not scrutinise the flawed 'Indian American Dream' but focus on protagonists who are not attuned to this quest for material achievement.<sup>6</sup> Neither portrayed as winners nor losers in the competition, Mohammed Ashraf, S.A.M. Crown or Hriday Thakur, Bartleby-like, simply opt out of the race.

Sethi's narrative of urban working-classes is devoid of miserabilism, yet its relationship with populism is more ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> Lisa Lau argues that Sethi eschews the othering of his interviewees and the commodification of poverty, and the writer himself claims that he sets out to break away from 'abjectivity' (or 'miserabilism', in Grignon and Passeron's terms), which he describes as follows: 'the tendency for narratives about the working class to deliberately and thoughtlessly describe entire ways of life as abject and hence worthy of examination only with the express purpose of transforming these lives'.<sup>8</sup> As I have demonstrated in Chapter 5, although he stresses the harshness of labourers' lives in Delhi, he does not depict Ashraf as a victim, nor does he rely on a rhetoric of indignation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Thus, Hari Kunzru praises Sethi's 'fierce determination to tell the stories of ordinary Indians, too often forgotten in the scramble for the spoils of the economic boom'. (Hari Kunzru, praise for *A Free Man*).

<sup>7</sup> These notions are defined in Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> Aman Sethi, personal communication with Lisa Lau (2016), quoted in Lau, 'Aman Sethi Writes of Delhi', 378.

<sup>9</sup> The paratext is interesting in that respect since the back-cover blurb foregrounds Ashraf's extraordinary destiny and Sethi's investigation into the causes of his improbable downfall: 'an unforgettable portrait of an invisible man. Mohammed Ashraf studied biology and then became a butcher, a tailor, and an electrician's apprentice; now he is a homeless day laborer in the heart of old Delhi. How did he end up this way? In the pavement-pounding tradition of Joseph Mitchell and Katherine Boo, *A Free Man* is award-winning reporter Aman Sethi's attempt to find out' (back-cover of the American edition). The summary is thus allied with the reporter's emphasis on Ashraf's singularity yet at odds with his careful eschewing of all sequential patterns.

Contrary to what the back-cover implies, the character's trajectory, from Patna where he studied biology while working for a renowned doctor, to his business in Calcutta, to his butcher's apprenticeship in Bombay and to his pavement-dwelling in Delhi, is not narrated as a downfall. The eschewing of narrative teleology and rational explanations go hand in hand with Sethi's rhetoric restraint. The pathos, grief and comedy which are built into his narrative are tempered as a result of being pitched at the level of the ordinary, which enables the text not to erase his protagonist's agency.

The articulation of Sethi's reportage with populism is nonetheless ambivalent. In his ambition to be faithful to Ashraf's singular trajectory and idiosyncratic world-views, the writer seems to tip over into the magnifying of Ashraf's austere way of life as the fruit of his self-determination, undermining the structural unevenness he is submitted to and amplifying his degree of agency in the process. Sethi's intensifying of his subject's agency does not partake of the liberal narrative of individual merit which Mehta's and Boo's reportages tap into, exalting slum-dwellers' tenacious striving to escape poverty. Ashraf's way of inhabiting Delhi is not through fighting his way out, but rather through dodging the draft. He disowns the quest or the struggle and aims at finding a 'compromise' between freedom and money. Aspiration and struggle are thus pushed to the margins of Sethi's *ordinary* portrayal of homeless casual labourers in Old Delhi.<sup>10</sup>

Ashraf's poverty is not depicted as a failure or openly described as injustice but as a compromise between money and freedom: "The ideal job", Ashraf once said, as if elucidating a complex mathematical function, "has the perfect balance of *kamai* and *azadi*" (FM 19), that is, of fortune and freedom. His aims at reaching 'the point where these counteracting forces offset each other to arrive at a solitary moment of serenity – a point when he is both free and fortunate' (FM 19). His ideal seems at first akin to other celebrations of poverty as freedom, coming either from religious asceticism or from certain trends of anti-capitalist movements advocating the return to a 'simple life'.<sup>11</sup> Sethi acknowledges his own interest in this deliberately chosen precarious life: 'And this is one particular way of living a life that drew me because it had these resonances of asceticism, of renunciation from

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<sup>10</sup> Sethi states in an interview that he aims at 'displacing the centrality of aspiration' which underpins numerous narratives on poverty (Aman Sethi and Pankaj Mishra, 'In Conversation: Pankaj Mishra and Aman Sethi', *Granta*, 130, 18 May 2015, <<https://granta.com/in-conversation-pankaj-mishra-aman-sethi/>> [accessed 8 June 2021]).

<sup>11</sup> India has a long tradition of religious asceticism, embodied by *sannyasins* and *sadhus*, people who renounce action and lead an itinerant life dedicated to meditation. Yet the Christian (and in particular Franciscan) glorification of poverty also infuses European representations of India, such as Dominique Lapierre's *The City of Joy*, which overlooks the economic and political factors underpinning destitution.



worldly ambition, of stepping out of a certain idea of a rat race and coolly observing it'.<sup>12</sup> This statement brings to mind Gandhi's ideal of a simple life, advocating the relinquishing of tokens of material success to reach a form of inner peace, but also used as a political weapon, an ideal which has been harshly criticised for its withdrawal from the struggle for economic and political equality.

In fact, Sethi's portrayal clearly identifies Ashraf with the cultural ideal of the itinerant philosopher withdrawing from the material world. Ashraf's many peregrinations across India, from Patna to Calcutta, Bombay, and Delhi, as well as his passion for travelling, connect him with the type of the restless wanderer, an identification which his autobiographical tales sustain, as they stress his impulsive decisions, enhancing individual will over circumstances and structures: 'I suspect Ashraf sees himself as that man, the sort who jumps onto a train on a whim and is carried away to a faraway place. Ashraf loves the railways' (FM 55). In spite of Sethi's repeated claims of placing himself on an equal footing with his interviewee, the slight expression of suspicion suggests the journalist's distance from this self-portrait and hints at the determinations of his travels, closer to the 'forced mobility' of the migrant worker and dislodged slum-dweller rather than to light-hearted movement. In this case, the emphasis is laid on mobility rather than immobility, yet, as Caitlin Vandertop argues with respect to Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, forced mobility may be understood as a symptom of 'immobile life', exposing modernisation as a fundamentally unequal system.<sup>13</sup>

Ashraf portrays himself as a carefree adventurer who lacks self-control, pitted against Kalyani's 'control-type personality' and 'business-type brain' (FM 70): 'So am I, but I'm a mast maula, dil chowda, seena sandook, lowda bandook! A dancing adventurer, with my heart for a treasure chest and my penis for a gun. People like us never have any money. The moment we earn some, we give to someone like Kalyani' (FM 70). The fragment of Hindi, the musical sounds of which are tentatively rendered in the translation (with the rhyme between 'adventurer' and 'treasure'), enhances Ashraf's self-characterisation as a generous wanderer as well as his talent as a joker.<sup>14</sup> Ashraf's wit and art of storytelling echo that of the proud, voluble beggar, the wise fool who is able to expose society's failings through

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<sup>12</sup> Aman Sethi, 'A Conversation with Katherine Boo and Aman Sethi', Interview with Chiki Sarkar, *Brick*, Summer 2012, <<https://brickmag.com/a-conversation-with-katherine-boo-and-amansethi/>> [accessed 13 June 2021].

<sup>13</sup> See Vandertop, 'Peripheral Urbanism', 25.

<sup>14</sup> A literal translation would read: 'I'm a frolicking master, with a great heart, my chest for a (chest)box, my penis for a gun.'

ironical distance, running throughout the history of literature from Diogenes to Shakespeare's fools, from Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and George Orwell's encounters in *Down and Out in London and Paris* to Albert Cossery's *Mendiants et Orgueilleux*. Conjoining Ashraf's lifestyle with that of an ascetic is a way to endow it with a certain dignity and agency at odds with dehumanising portraits of urban poverty, yet it also occludes the limited range of possibilities the character has. The validation of a certain kind of impoverishment as freedom might be part of the 'problematic meta-narrative' Lisa Lau identifies.

The critic thus discerns a tendency to romanticise Ashraf's vision of life in *A Free Man*, which might amplify his agency, 'swapping an older meta-narrative with a newer, but no less problematic, one'.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Sethi's aesthetic and political choice connects with the larger 'double bind of documentary realism, a genre that, in seeking to treat its subjects on a level of equality with that of the writer/observer, risks evacuating the very political categories that might be used to redress poverty'.<sup>16</sup> Sethi's dismissal of sociological categories as instruments to understand Ashraf's life, just like his discarding of the reformist ambition of his narrative, are significant in this respect.<sup>17</sup> We may wonder whether, like Vollman's ethics of 'radical equality with the poor and the homeless people he writes about', this commitment to existential individualism occludes any structural critique.<sup>18</sup> Yet his suspension of judgement drifts towards praise in the author's comments on his own book, as aspiration is almost equated with alienation and poverty with freedom, a view which is not exactly that which transpires in the text, which hints at the limitations embedded in this notion of freedom.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Sethi succeeds in bringing Ashraf to life, endearing him to the reader, warts and all; the risk is that he may have rendered Ashraf somewhat larger than life. In his anxiety not to objectivize this community or focus on their exploitation to the neglect of their humanity, Sethi may be attributing to them more agency than they actually have, swapping an older meta-narrative with a newer, but no less problematic, one.' (Lau, 'Aman Sethi Writes of Delhi', 382).

<sup>16</sup> Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, 'Introduction: A Theory of Capitalist Realism', *Reading Capitalist Realism*, ed. by Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), pp. 20-21. See Caren Irr, 'Anti-Capitalism and Anti-Realism in William T. Vollmann's Poor People', in *Reading Capitalist Realism*, pp. 177-191.

<sup>17</sup> 'But for me, Ashraf is more of a philosopher than someone who should have another life. Ashraf, as a person, has a kind of crazy, well-thought-out view of the world. Ashraf is free, but Ashraf is poor. You can't really say they're oppositional things, because Ashraf has chosen a life of making do with poverty, which allows him a certain world of freedom'. (Aman Sethi, 'On the Itinerant as Philosopher').

<sup>18</sup> The struggle against indifference to these marginalised forms of life also recalls James Agee and Walker Evans' monumental reportage on Alabama farmers during the Great Depression, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (New York: Library of America, 1960).

The free man of the title takes on a new significance once one is made aware of Ashraf's own understanding of *azadi* or freedom, based on the context of the labour market: 'Azadi is the freedom to tell the maalik to fuck off when you want to. The maalik owns your work. He does not own us' (FM 19).<sup>19</sup> Freedom in Ashraf's view is not to be understood as a liberation from worldly matters as much as a form of autonomy, the freedom to give and take your labour force, embodied by daily wage (*dehadi*) as opposed to permanent employment. The next paragraph unveils the exploitative relationship which explains Ashraf's choice of daily wage: the contractors (*maalik*) constantly trick labourers into accepting permanent jobs without paying them in the end, turning the labourer into 'a gulam! A slave' (FM 20). Freedom thus takes on a restrictive meaning, circumscribed by the contours of an uneven relationship. Ashraf does not opt out of the rat-race because of the inanity of the competition, but because it is rigged. The text avoids the pitfall of overlooking systemic unevenness since it points to the protagonist's precarious balance as a choice partly determined by the uneven structure of the labour market, which gives disproportionate power to the contractors. This blatant asymmetry is considered as a factor to consider in order to reach a certain level of happiness.

Poverty is thus not regarded as an ideal but as the result of an adjustment stemming from resignation and the acceptance of one's place in a deeply stratified society, which makes upward mobility impossible. Ashraf's own contradictions regarding business, money, and poverty come to fissure the idea of 'ascetism', put forward by Sethi in his interview. Several passages reveal his hovering between accepting and bemoaning his destitution, between resignation and his dream of becoming a businessman, which would grant him greater 'freedom' (FM 21): 'in a sense, he had always been a business-type: a business-type in search of the right business.' (FM 90). His desire for autonomy does not enable him to overcome the many obstacles society throws at him. The relationship between his philosophy of adjustment and the city becomes clear as he exposes once more his ambivalent vision of poverty:

When you first come here, there is a lot of hope, *abhilasha*. You think anything is possible. You have heard all the stories of people who have made it big in the city. Slowly, as times goes by, you start wondering what you are doing [...]. But one morning you wake up to realize that living isn't so much about success as it is about compromise – *samjhauta*. A *samjhauta* with life, where you stop wanting to be anything at all. After

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<sup>19</sup> *Maalik* is the Hindi for 'master'.

enough time in Delhi, you even stop dreaming – you could go crazy if you think about it too much.’ (FM 113-114)

Once more, Ashraf pits Kalyani against his group of friends, who seem drained of all their energy. The passage debunks the myth of the city as a site of opportunity, peddled by ‘all the stories’ which recall the mystifying stories of aspiring actors in *Maximum City*. Ashraf traces an individual’s trajectory from his arrival onwards, the compression of his narrative only enhancing his grim vision of urban life as a gradual degradation. The city is presented as a dehumanising force which deprives you of your dreams, hopes and forces. This portrait of the city as a force which exhausts people rather than making them thrive, later conveyed through the trope of cannibalism (‘This is a city that eats you raw – kaccha chaba jati hai’ (FM 114)), recalls Dasgupta’s voice of Delhi’s destructive spirit which promises to destroy all newcomers (C 206).<sup>20</sup> The ‘compromise’ Ashraf describes looks like an extreme form of adjustment to the city’s infernal machinery, a form of surrender which stems from staying too long in the city. The opting out of the fight against the city is suffused with a pathetic tone which arouses the reader’s sympathy. The understanding of freedom as adjustment to one’s narrowed-down possibilities resonates with Leela’s, the bar dancer interviewed by Sonia Faleiro in *Beautiful Thing*:

‘Every life has its benefits. I make money and money gives me something my mother never had. Azaadi. Freedom. And if I have to dance for men so I can have it, okay then I will dance for men.’ And so Leela chose azaadi, and she chose also to curtail it, by defining the parameters of her life as the area from her flat to Night Lovers, a place whose rhythm and cadences she lived by. Anything outside these self-imposed boundaries, even if it was an adjoining suburb, she firmly referred to as ‘Bombay’, as though Bombay was elsewhere and distantly so. Bombay was also bahar gaon, out of the village, abroad.<sup>21</sup>

*A Free Man* thus does not provide a thorough analysis of social inequality in India, yet it clearly – albeit obliquely – maps the structures circumscribing Ashraf’s agency and trajectory. I therefore disagree with Sonia Faleiro’s observation that Sethi’s tight focus on the individual excludes any structural explanation: ‘Sethi chooses not to explore the big picture, the roots of the social inequality that forces Ashraf and so many millions of Indians to live and work in such dangerous and inhumane conditions’.<sup>22</sup> If his own story-telling insists on his own decisions, which sometimes appear impulsive and hazardous (like leaving Calcutta after his brother has got into trouble or leaving Bombay after being slapped by his

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<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>21</sup> Faleiro, *Beautiful Thing*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>22</sup> Faleiro, ‘Invisible Economy’.

boss), details hint at the restricted range of possibilities he is faced with and at the uneven structure of the labour market. The ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of injustice chimes with the text’s emphasis on everyday tactics as the weapons of the weak to cope with an unfair system. Their physical entrenchment in Bara Tooti Chowk (symbolised by their circular movement around the *chowk*, analysed in Chapter 4) could thus be construed as a symbol of their precarious life, resulting from the systemic unevenness of neoliberal urban development. Out of this structurally impossible mobility is devised a deliberate choice to opt out of the race, pointing to an oblique critique of the myth of individualism and merit.

Sethi does not smoothen Ashraf into a wise man. In addition to his many contradictions, the text humorously exposes his flaws. Far from being heroicised as a ‘model’ labourer, he is shown as presumptuous, prejudiced, irascible, self-centred, overbearing, lacking empathy and perseverance.<sup>23</sup> Yet, despite the many manifestations of Sethi’s impatience with him, the reporter cannot hide his fascination for this ‘hypnotically interesting’ character, whose wit, story-telling talent, passion for trains and timetables, and endless theories on everything make him endearing to the reader. His contradictions, flaws and strengths and in particular his *style*, as we saw in Chapter 4, rather turn him into a literary character. The impression of an uncensored portrait, ‘warts and all’ as Lau puts it, and the expression of the reporter’s impatience and irony evoke a comic duo, the reporter desperately chasing this Don Quixote of the streets, irritated yet fascinated by him, trying to pin him down to no avail.<sup>24</sup>

The carving out of Quixote figures chasing windmills in the air of India’s globalizing cities is not the prerogative of Aman Sethi alone. Siddharth Chowdhury’s characters, for instance, are also often depicted as drifters or daydreamers leading eccentric quests. Though relatively disempowered as provincial lower-middle-class and middle-class individuals, these characters do not strive to improve their condition but are happily satisfied or only mildly dissatisfied with their status of ‘enemies of promise’. In fact, the allegory of the race finds a literal expression in Chowdhury’s short-story ‘Autobiography’:

All round him joggers move about in quiet desperation [...]. It always cheers up Siddharth immensely whenever he watches the human race battle against the ravages of time. He himself has lost the battle a long time back [...]. He rummages inside his

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<sup>23</sup> His lack of empathy surfaces when he refuses to visit Satish at the hospital for instance (FM 156-157).

<sup>24</sup> *A Free Man* can be located within the tradition of rehabilitating the invisible builders of Indian cities, such as Narayan Surve and Kaifi Azmi, who praised the heroic workers. Yet he also departs from the epic of heroic working classes through his low-key writing, often tinged with irony.

magical bag for the book of the day. It is the Cyril Connolly classic *Enemies of Promise* [...]. A good choice and Chowdhury would do well to read it carefully. (PMS 54)

The allusion to Cyril Connolly's autobiographical work *Enemies of Promise* (1938) hints at Chowdhury's self-characterisation as a minor writer: Connolly's book dissects the perils of literary life, trying to explain the reasons why he failed to produce a major work of literature. In addition to this self-reflexive reference, the context (watching joggers running in the park) is also meaningful as the narrator-protagonist represents himself as a detached observer of the ultimately futile race to live a better life. This fitness practice, a social phenomenon translating a new concern with wellbeing which is part of a 'global' lifestyle, is derided as endlessly running around. The mock-epic language suggests that running (and its allied obsession with performance) may also be viewed as a symbol of the capitalist rat-race that the narrator has withdrawn from.

Chowdhury's persona and most of his characters choose to opt out of the war or to lead wild goose-chases. In fact, his stories shed light on the invisible corners of the globalizing city, and redeem these marginal characters from the oblivion thrown upon them by the upholders of the 'new', awakening India. The comic tone of Chowdhury's prose makes the texts oscillate between contempt and empathy for these characters, failure being more often acknowledged as the common lot of humanity rather than despised. Out of synch with the global city and its demands of performance and achievement, this crew of 'minor characters' (DM 81) arouse the reader's sympathy through their deluded perception, living their life vicariously through the prism of Dickens, Hemingway or pulp fiction.

The circumscribed mobility of Chowdhury's loiterers, always haunting the same tea-stall, hostel or cafe, wedded to their moral and social stagnation or slow decline, may be construed as an oblique registering of uneven development.<sup>25</sup> As I showed in Chapter 4, the protagonist's first year at university in *Day Scholar* is not characterised by progress and maturation but by drifting and delusions, his romanticising of violence appearing as a form of protracted adolescence, or 'unseasonable youth', in Esty's terms.<sup>26</sup> Hriday is surrounded by legendary 'Danasurs', students whose repeated failure to pass the civil service exams entails their eternal loitering and their taking root at the tea-shop of University Main Road,

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<sup>25</sup> These students, clerks or apprentice writers cannot become proper flâneurs in so far as they do not have the required purchasing power to wander across the city.

<sup>26</sup> Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*. Focusing on students of literature and civil service exams may already be construed as a step aside from India's neoliberal success story, as bureaucracy, once considered the ultimate achievement in the Indian public imagination, has been superseded by engineering, management and corporate business since the 1990s.

associating failure and physical stasis (DM 27). The story 'Danasur' consists of a comic tall-tale which reports Ritwik's disappearance from campus after his umpteenth failure to the IAS exams and his 'demented quest for a perfect egg' (DM 26), an improbable dream which consumes him to the point of madness. His eccentric quest for knowledge and perfection, embodied by his 'compulsive eggomania', reads like a parody of the larger vain struggle for material success and achievement, social ambition being literally downsized to an egg. Yet the comic dimension of the story, fuelled by mock-epic exaggerations, is dimmed by the ending, which reveals that Ritwik's wild-goose-chase led him to a psychiatric ward in Ranchi, suggesting the crushing pressure of middle-class family's expectations of success.

Chowdhury's comic tales illustrate the oblique aesthetic strategy deployed by writers of the ordinary to counter what Manu Goswami calls 'narratives of emergence', aligned with the public discourse of India's rise. Away from the 'vehement passions' of epic writing, the pathos and grief of his stories are levelled to an 'ordinary' mode, often balanced by humour, his failing or forgotten characters redeemed by their eccentricity, their admirable determination and obsession, however absurd the object of their quest is.<sup>27</sup> Ritwik is thus significantly compared with Fitzcarraldo, the hero of the epic German film being identified as an 'overgrown adolescent' (DM 64), hinting at the common 'arrested development' of his characters. This protracted youth, associated with obsession, is not openly descried or lamented but rather gently derided or exalted, suggesting that Chowdhury's critique of the developmental myth remains surreptitious.

One of these enemies of promise is Samuel Aldington Macauley Crown, the protagonist of the story 'Death of a Proofreader', a melancholy-tinged portrait of this eccentric yet invisible man. The story is set in the neighbourhood of Paharganj in Delhi in 1998-1999, and offers a wistful yet humorous tribute to an anachronistic character and to the world of publishing in Delhi, symbolised by Ansari Road, the book district.<sup>28</sup> The story opens with the account of Crown's funeral, which is interspersed with fragments of Crown's biography and with memories of his literary friendship with the protagonist Hriday Thakur. The allusion to Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* in the title stresses the homage paid to a man who is so engrossed in a bygone world that he is blind to the transformations under way around him. However, the tone of the story is less desperate than that of Miller's play, in particular because, though self-deluded, Crown becomes a mentor to Hriday,

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 3.

<sup>28</sup> For an ethnographic approach of literary life in Delhi which investigates the divide between Hindi and Anglophone publishing, see Sadana, *English Heart, Hindi Heartland*.

instilling in him a love for the art of book-making. A quaint clerk, the ‘proofreader extraordinaire’ (PMS 124) with ‘hawk-like eyes’ (131) is also portrayed as a hero of book-making, able to spot the tiniest typographical error on a page and working with incredible speed (PMS 130).<sup>29</sup>

In the days when India is trying to shed off the remains of its colonial past in order to rise as a global power, this Anglo-Indian character born before the Independence is deeply steeped in British culture and appears as a relic from the past. His very name, Macauley, alludes to the British politician well-known for his *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), the slight spelling variation hinting at the ‘almost-but-not-quite’ of colonial mimicry and suggesting that the character is a parody of the class of ‘interpreters’ that Macaulay wished for, ‘Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect’.<sup>30</sup> His quixotic personality is made palpable through his bookish, old-fashioned speech style, ‘picked up from the Wodehouse countryside’ (PMS 132), replicated by the narrator, who recounts their first chance encounter in a cheap Bihari restaurant in a mock-epic mode, gesturing towards a world of chivalry redolent of Scottish romance.

That night, the Christmas Eve of 1998, he had decided to grace the august precincts of Yadavji Litti Centre and have their fabled Patna Large [...]. It would be on that fateful night that Hriday Thakur would first meet Crown, intrigued by the sight of a fifty-something gentleman, wearing a blue travel blazer with gold buttons, steel grey immaculately pressed worsted trousers and dark tan brogues, reading a Penguin paperback of *A Tale of Two Cities* and eating litti-chokha. (PMS 118)

The incongruous conflation of an elevated style with an ordinary Bihari cafe creates a comic effect, anticipating the theatrical encounter between the two histrionic characters.<sup>31</sup> Crown’s portrait enhances his perfect appropriation of British gentlemanly style, his endless quest to find the perfect hunting jacket or blazer (PMS 126) redolent of Bhaka’s ‘sartorial mimicry’ in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, fetishizing clothing that signifies the power associated

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<sup>29</sup> The closely detailed techniques of proofreading and book-printing point to the author’s first-hand knowledge of this profession, and echoes Sethi’s investigation of the world of labour, as both texts shed light on little known professional universes. The homage to the craftsmanship of publishing is already evidenced by the title of the collection, *The Patna Manual of Style*.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Babington Macaulay, ‘Minute on Indian Education’, *Archives of Empire, Volume I: From the East India Company to the Suez Canal*, ed. by Mia Carter and Barbara Harlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 237.

<sup>31</sup> The fact that this fateful encounter occurs just after the protagonist has been fired from his job in a magazine and has decided to celebrate this event enhances the anti-heroic quality of the protagonist.



with English identity.<sup>32</sup> The ensuing dialogue reads as a comic act, Crown's old-fashioned chivalrous colonial language is immediately caught up by Hriday:

'Dear boy, is that a genuine Harris Tweed jacket that you are wearing or is it only my old Scottish eyes playing up tricks on the native plains?' Crown bellowed across the table [...].

'It is Harris Tweed all right, dear sir. You can still smell the Outer Hebrides on its weave when it rains, even though it is over fifty years old', Hriday Thakur bellowed back, affecting an impromptu Connery brogue [...].

'A highlander is always ready for battle. S.A.M. Crown at your service, sir. My forefathers came down from Bridge of Allan near Stirling to provide culture to the natives. I am continuing the same.' (PMS 119-120)

His self-portrait heightens his anachronistic vision of the world but also hints at his parodic performance of a literary type directly drawn from a book: the 'native plains' hint at Kipling's Indian tales, and the proud allusion to his continuation of his Scottish forefathers' mission is a direct echo of the imperialist and colonial rhetoric of enlightenment. The mock-heroic register suggests that this scene is a spectacle, both characters *performing* their obsession with colonial symbols.

Crown's literary mindset is also grounded in the material art of bookmaking, as typographic norms are used to express his feelings. He thus tells Hriday about the failure of his marriage: 'The problem was that after one glass, feeling happy and secure in my domesticity, I would start telling them about our Scottish legacy, our home in the Highlands. Our descent from Stirling to the native plains. I would get *bold-italic* in my happiness' (PMS 136, emphasis in original). His alcohol-induced enthusiastic rambling, which gets him to identify with his colonial ancestor and irritates his wife and daughter, is rendered through a typographic metaphor, powerfully suggesting something of an out-of-line excess and madness. This self-enclosed literary world also hints at the bygone world of the Cold War: Crown's colleague Jehangir George Thekari owes his middle-name to his passion for John Le Carré's Cold War detective novels, suggesting how entrenched in literature the characters' identities are. His paranoid cold-war mindset makes him see spies everywhere and project the international conflict onto the geography of Delhi publishers: 'Proscenium Press was the "Circus" and Oxford University Press "Moscow Centre"' (PMS 123). This obsolete Cold War culture is also signified by Crown's samovar, bought during his tour of USSR publishers (PMS 129), hinting at the Indo-Russian political friendship. Through this

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<sup>32</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (1935) (London: Penguin, 2014). See also José Sebastian Terneus, 'The Empire's New Clothes: The Politics of Dress in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*', *South Asian Review*, 37 (2016), 109-121.

onomastic playfulness, Chowdhury weaves a fabric of hybrid names intermingling different fictional worlds, cultures, and historical periods, which are gradually forgotten or wilfully erased by neoliberal India. The transcultural quality of his prose also hints at the transcultural connections at work in Delhi as a literary city, from colonial times to postcolonial Nehruvian times.<sup>33</sup> This humorous tribute paid to the multi-layered cultural history of the city goes against the current of the post-reform Indian public imagination, looking forward rather than backward, and suggests the connection between the critique of urban development and the excavation of fragments of the urban past. The predilection for anachronistic figures also shapes Chaudhuri's melancholy writing of the city, which is drawn to misfits and daydreamers, and Roy's empathetic writing of 'slow goose chases' (M 135).

## 2. Failures and Wild Goose Chasers

Amit Chaudhuri claims that the critical force of literature lies in its ability to host marginality and to shed light on characters who are slightly out-of-synch with dominant social, economic, and political trends:

For any cultural practice, whether it's academic or literary, the position of the outsider, the misfit, the daydreamer and even of failure are very important categories in the creation of a truly energetic and self-critical social and intellectual space. They are important components because of the latent critique of power that they have in constituting our imaginative life. *Right now we do not have a space for the irresponsible misfit, which means we do not have a space which is at an angle to power. Even those who speak against power are in some ways in powerful positions of their own. In India, everybody is some way in some kind of nexus of power. We need to regain that space for the irresponsible.*<sup>34</sup>

In his novels, the reader's gaze is drawn away from 'Rising India' and directed towards unremarkable, drifting or declining individual paths. Set in downwardly mobile middle-class backgrounds, both *A Strange and Sublime Address* and *Freedom Song* displace aspiration insofar as they are fuelled by the suspension of time rather than its movement forward, by the repetition of everyday gestures rather than change, by failing characters rather than individuals attuned to the pulse of globalizing India. Arundhati Roy also reflects on the

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<sup>33</sup> Chowdhury writes that he pays special attention to onomastics: 'I collect names. I like names with a bit of *vajan*, as they say in Patna. With the right name half of your work is done. It is like casting in movies. Sometimes I feel I could have been another Lynn Stalmaster.' (Chowdhury, Interview with Trisha Gupta).

<sup>34</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, 'I Wish Indian Writing in English Were Less Triumphant', Interview with Sonia Phalnikar, *DW*, 3 October 2006, <<https://p.dw.com/p/9Ajl>> [accessed 11 June 2021].

critical value of failure, as shown by her essay written in the wake of the instant success of her first novel:

There are other worlds. Other kinds of dreams. Dreams in which failure is feasible. Honourable. Sometimes even worth striving for. Worlds in which recognitions is not the only barometer of brilliance or human worth. There are plenty of warriors whom I know and love, people far more valuable than myself, who go to war each day, knowing in advance that they will fail. True, they are less 'successful' in the most vulgar sense of the word, but by no means less fulfilled.<sup>35</sup>

Her second novel, dedicated 'to the unconsolated', is thus filled with these beautifully failing warriors, whom she pits against the triumphant Hindu nationalist leaders, adopting a virile rhetoric of martial victory to advertise India's arrival. In fact, in *The Ministry*, when Tilo starts to teach children in the small graveyard, she decides not to teach them 'we shall overcome', 'because she wasn't sure that Overcoming was anywhere on anyone's horizon' (M 397). The reference to the key anthem of the civil rights movement (the Hindi version of which is sung every day in the primary school next to her house (M 254)) is thus set aside as unrealistic, but, more than a form of political pessimism, this dismissal hints at the character's scepticism about great narratives and aggressive rhetoric, emphasising micro-strategies of survival and resistance to the rigged game of Indian society. In fact, the song might also allude to the rhetoric of triumph adopted by neoliberal India, from Manmohan Singh's budget speech announcing liberalization ('Let the whole world hear it loud and clear. India is now wide awake. We shall prevail. We shall overcome') to Hindu nationalist masculinist rallying cries.<sup>36</sup>

The critical productivity of failure foregrounded by both writers is theorised by Jack Halberstam's work on the art of failure, which, without denying the negative affects triggered by failure, endeavours to dismantle the static models of success and failure which prevail in capitalist societies and to build up 'counterhegemonic discourse of losing'.<sup>37</sup> His debunking of the toxic positivity embedded in contemporary capitalism and of the false equation between individual responsibility and success is an illuminating lens through which to look at ordinary narratives of Indian cities, focused on drifters and misfits in the midst of numerous success-stories of New India.<sup>38</sup> Bearing in mind the relatively disempowered

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<sup>35</sup> Roy, 'The End of Imagination', in *MSH*, p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> Singh, *Budget Speech of 1991-1992*.

<sup>37</sup> Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 12. See also Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

<sup>38</sup> 'While capitalism produces some people's success through other people's failures, the ideology of positive thinking insists that success depends only upon working hard and failure is always of your own doing.' (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 3). The parallel with North American myths of self-made-men and

position from which Chaudhuri's and Roy's characters experience the global Indian city, I believe Halberstam's approach of 'failure' as a means of surreptitious resistance to the neoliberal fetishization of a certain form of success enlightens my understanding of these texts, which, I argue, represent social decline, failed or eccentric quests and compromises both as symptoms of alienation and as a challenge to the rampant ideology of individual success in India.

If ten-year-old Sandeep appears as a day-dreamer in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, his uncle is also characterised as a pipe dreamer, a fickle and impressionable mind, whose endeavours are irredeemably doomed to fail. What makes the character deviate from the national trajectory and thus turns him into an anti-hero is not, as in Ashraf's case, the surrender of any dream of achievement, but his ongoing enthusiasm which switches from one object to the next, and his failure to succeed in any project. The twists and turns of his ideological trajectory are summed up by an omniscient narrator:

When he had been a student, he had believed he was a Communist, and had planned his part in the coming revolution with great passion and earnestness [...]. When the coming revolution failed to come, he had begun to believe he was a businessman, and had invested all his savings, with a few friends, into starting a small company. He still had that passionate temperament, and he now planned his new transactions and ventures with the involved enthusiasm with which he had once planned revolutions. (SA 28)

Yet the text succeeds in treading the thin line between irony and empathy, as the various viewpoints offered on the character make him appear simultaneously as a failure and a hero: 'Only the other grown-ups seemed unpardonably cynical about Chhotomama's abilities. They said things like: "Anindo doesn't have a head for business. If he'd stuck to a proper job, he would be leading a better life."' But the children had boundless faith in him' (SA 27). The children are mesmerised by every new product the company launches and by the vehement negotiations Sandeep's uncle leads, turning each business venture into an epic. The text exhibits the fictional world in which the children are steeped, blissfully unaware of

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exceptionalism is supported by India's nation-branding as a rising power, in which the embrace of global capitalism expands horizons of success for every one (see for instance this self-help book by Vinodh Subramaniam, *The Self Made Indian Dream: The Entrepreneurial Awakening* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2020), or Giridharadas's *India Calling*). The parallel has been fuelled by international media (see Rajini Vaidyanatha, 'India's Version of the "American Dream"', *BBC*, 5 November 2012, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-20205811>> [accessed 11 June 2021]; Akash Kapur, 'How India Became America', *New York Times*, 9 March 2012, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/opinion/sunday/how-india-became-america.html>> [accessed 11 June 2021]. For critical analyses of this comparison, see Manu Goswami, 'American Dream Outsourced', and the first chapter of Deb's *The Beautiful and the Damned*, entitled 'The Great Gatsby, a Rich Man in India'.

the actual consequences of business failures. Yet their viewpoints are not discarded as meaningless in the novel, as suggested by the constant parallels between adults' and children's fantasies. It echoes Halberstam's conflation of failure with 'the anarchy of childhood', a time in which one is protected from the necessity to deliver.<sup>39</sup> Chhotomama's failure to reach the heights of the social average is symbolised by his dysfunctional car, which significantly refuses to move forward, before disappearing, hinting at a connection between social decline and hampered mobility.

However, the relationship of Chaudhuri's characters to material success is also defined by the elite *bhadralok* culture of Calcutta's upper-middle class, characterised by a devotion to intellectual matters and the apparent discarding of productivity and usefulness.<sup>40</sup> Chaudhuri encodes this lip-service dismissal of wealth accumulation, slowly superseded by the desire of material achievement, as in this passage about concealed ambition:

Everywhere in the lane, fathers prayed their sons would be successes [...]. No effort would be spared; 'future' and 'career' had become Bengali words, incorporated unconsciously but feverishly into daily Bengali parlance [...]. The urge to do well, which existed behind closed windows like libido, was sad and strangely obscene, because no one would admit into it. Meanwhile, children, like Egyptian slaves, dragged huge books of frustrating study all day to build that impressive but non-existent pyramid of success. (SA 23-24)

The final sentence evinces the narrator's typical mock-heroic amplification of trivial matters, the 'non-existent' pyramid suggesting the inanity of the competition. The passage also registers the secrecy of this shift in Bengali culture and language, embodied by English words, symbolically linked to this newfound desire of upward mobility fostered by the liberalization of the economy.<sup>41</sup> The ironic encoding of the hypocritical contempt for material ambition indicates Chaudhuri's distance from the *bhadralok* culture, yet his predilection for moments of leisure and loitering, which, he argues, fostered the creative effervescence of Calcutta in the nineteenth-century, is suffused with this nostalgic urban consciousness (CAL 292).

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<sup>39</sup> 'Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.' (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 3).

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>41</sup> The fact that this passage is followed by an account of a girl's clumsy dance on the neighbours' balcony, 'beating a rhythm on the floor with her foot, and never managing to do it in perfect measure' (SA 24), points to the enduring allure of imperfection for Chaudhuri, only reinforced by the young boy's ambivalent feelings towards her: 'scornfully, Sandeep looked away, talking to his cousins; yet he could not resist glancing, too frequently, at that swaying figure from the corner of his eyes' (SA 24-25).

The most striking anti-hero in Chaudhuri's Calcutta novels remains Bhaskar, the young Communist activist and street-actor of *Freedom Song*, depicted as a 'great daydreamer' (FS 298), evidencing the writer's ambivalent politics of failure. Bhaskar's embrace of communism in the early 1990s is represented as untimely and bound to fail, contributing to his characterisation as an unrealistic misfit. Through the other characters' vantage points, his commitment is represented as an anachronistic aberration, as though his convictions belonged to a bygone world. His joining the communist party just when its power is on the wane in Calcutta is met with 'disbelief' (FS 265) and disapproval by the family, whose grievances are mostly related to matrimonial interests: 'which father will give away his daughter to a boy who has party connections?' (FS 263). If 'party connections' used to uphold one's social status, Bhaskar's belated political activities seem to hamper on his matrimonial odds, arousing suspicion in the putative families-in-law (FS 395), suggesting that Calcutta has eventually become attuned to global capitalism's 'cruel optimism'.<sup>42</sup> Once more, the novel refracts the effects of India's economic liberalization on the city from a peripheral 'anachronic' standpoint. Chaudhuri explains Bhaskar's character as follows:

I wanted to make Bhaskar a Quixote-like figure, in that he'd embrace the codes and tenets of Marxism and be fired by them in a world which they'd been rendered obsolete, just as Quixote had taken up the dead chivalric codes of the romance novels in all earnestness, unmindful of their complete irrelevance. (CAL 296)

Echoing Sethi's and Chowdhury's quixotic figures and their eccentric quests, Bhaskar's political enthusiasm is characterised as 'irrelevant' in the context of a post-communist city (even though the Left Front lost power only in 2011). Once central to the city, communism has declined and become an exotic remainder of the past in Chaudhuri's eyes.<sup>43</sup> Bhaskar embodies an ideology which has been marginalised in a city which tries to overcome its marginalisation. In fact, Bhaskar's activism is not presented as a solid alternative to the global capitalist city. His characterisation as one among many of Chaudhuri's off-centred characters, whose charm consists in their innocuous dissociation from society, indicates the writer's scepticism regarding the power of collective political action against the global capitalist system. Not only is Bhaskar's commitment socially reproved, but it also seems

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<sup>42</sup> Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.

<sup>43</sup> 'Here, in the deep green humid Gangetic delta of Bengal, among jackfruit trees, malaria, and bluebottle flies, was one of the last Socialist governments in the world, and here, in a lane ten minutes away from Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar Road, was one of its local outposts' (FS 286-287).

inconsequential. His radical politics do not result in any insurrection or political change nor in his spectacular downfall, in keeping with the stasis which defines his whole life. His joining his father's ailing factory halfway through the novel is thus not narrated as a dramatic turning point but as a way for him to cling to a familiar realm. Yet it may also be construed as an oblique registration of his commitment not to achieve any material success: 'for it was not as much an entry into the world of business as an escape from it. Why should a young man, unless he had no serious ambition in life, or no choice, want to join a company that was already a ghost of itself?' (FS 376). The rhetorical question, voicing collective bemusement at this decision, actually hints at a residual form of resistance to the rules of the market, a compromise which allows the character to escape being 'swallowed up in the orbit of temporary sales work for large companies' (FS 376). Bhaskar's timid opting out of the rat-race appears as a young man's surreptitious means of circumventing the rules of capitalist success, illustrating Chaudhuri's politics of the 'irresponsible misfit'. His portrayal of a communist activist as an obsolete anti-hero thus departs from accounts of Naxalite insurrection, foregrounding direct political action. I would argue that his sceptical representation of political commitment stems both from his critical perspective on the Left Front government which ruled over Calcutta between 1977 and 2011, which he holds responsible for the decline of the city (CAL 81, 111, 128), and from his crepuscular geography of the city.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, his essay on the city is shaped by his nostalgia for a 'vanished Calcutta' which he cannot find in the city he moved to in 1998 (CAL 71). His mental landscape of decay also manifests itself through his interest in a declining gentry, embodied by Mr. and Mrs Mukherjee, an elderly couple of Anglo-Indians whose lifestyle seems frozen in time. Their mimicry of English rituals such as high tea and their anachronistic pronunciation ('it was a late Victorian pronunciation of English words, and should have survived, at most, to the forties' (CAL 153)) echo Chowdhury's S.A.M. Crown's anachronistic figure, suggesting their discrepancy with the contemporary city.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, instead of interviewing members

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<sup>44</sup> 'Anyway, if Calcutta today suffers in comparison, it's not really to other cities, but principally to itself and what it used to be. Anyone who has an idea of what Calcutta once was will find that vanished Calcutta the single most insurmountable obstacle to understanding, or sympathizing with, the city today.' (CAL 71).

<sup>45</sup> This geography of decline can be traced back to melancholy for the lost 'Bengaliness' (CAL 92) or 'cosmopolitan' quality of the city which is widespread among Bengali upper-middle-classes. This class nostalgia, pointed out as such by Indrajit Hazra, mirrors Mehta's analysis of the nostalgia permeating middle-class accounts of Mumbai, analysed as a symptom of one social class losing power to another: 'in most discussions about "the changing, vanishing city", it is either the loss of a "cosmopolitan" (read: colonial and anglicized post-colonial) Calcutta, or the disappearance of a high culture, Bengali Kolkata that one is talking

of the rising Trinamool Congress, promising change (*paribartan*) for the city, he reports his conversation with Nirupam Sen, the minister of commerce and industry of the Left Front government, held just before the Party's final defeat. This prominence of declining figures in the essay indicates the writer's reluctance to embrace the city's transformations and suggests an attempt to escape capitalist globalization through circumventing tactics and compromises. For Chaudhuri, the radicalism of Calcutta lies in marginality and its celebration of loitering, remaining 'at an angle to power' without committing to fight it.

If Arundhati Roy shares the dismantling of the value of 'success' with Chaudhuri, her politics of failure depart from his discounting of political struggle *per se*. Anjum, Musa, Tilo, Saddam Hussain, and many others, appear as quixotic, broken characters, and are portrayed as eccentric warriors, celebrated for their determination against all odds and their endurance despite repeated failures. Their slow, underground tactics are pitted against the raging current of neoliberal India. Dedicated 'to the unconsolated', *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is suffused with a subdued hope, which contrasts both with Chaudhuri's melancholy and with the loud cheerful aspirations of the New Indian nation.

The example of Dr Bhartiya, a protester who lives on the pavement in in Jantar Mantar, a place of public demonstrations in Delhi, can be used as an epitome of Roy's anti-heroic politics. Away from the most visible spots of Jantar Mantar yet prominent in the novel, Dr Azad Bhartiya belongs to the same dynasty of wise fools as Aman Sethi's protagonist, his self-chosen name, meaning Free or Liberated Indian, echoing the *azadi* that Ashraf yearns. Even though Ashraf expresses no overt political claim, there is definitely an affinity between these two men who 'step out of the race'. A tireless pamphleteer and hunger striker, Dr Bhartiya is rooted in Jantar Mantar, and I would argue that his dwelling partakes of his non-violence strategy of resistance which can be traced back to Gandhian forms of anticolonial struggle, pointing to the political force of entrenchment. If his reference to Jantar Mantar as 'a public prison on the public footpath' (M 127) recalls Ashraf's constrained freedom, Dr Bhartiya's definition of freedom is highly political and he does appear as a resilient fighter. He is portrayed as an eccentric utopian thinker and a lost prophet, someone Tilo comes to for advice: 'she considered him to be a man of the world, among the wisest, sanest people she knew' (M 262). Entering the eleventh year of his strike, Dr Bhartiya fasts

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about. Going by this effective mirage, Kolkata has been populated only by Bengalis and the British, a view that seems to be perpetuated in every mainstream narrative of the city's history' (*Grand Delusions*, p. 56).



for a socialist world order but also on behalf of everybody, a human flag for all people's movements. His portrayal underlines both his steadfastness and his weakened body (his arm is in a plaster cast) suggesting a sense of defeat: 'the empty sleeve of his grimy striped shirt flapped at his side like the desolate flag of a defeated country' (M 125). Yet his many battles are given full expression in the novel, making of this invisible yet forceful figure an embodiment of Roy's interest in apparently defeated and yet resilient people, and of her belief in small-scale political battles, seemingly doomed to fail and to be forgotten yet remarkable through their unflinching conviction and their humanity.<sup>46</sup>

The novel incorporates the extensive transcription of his monthly pamphlet, singled out in the text through a different typography which enhances the unmediated expression of his views (M 129). The pamphlet, entitled '*My News & Views*', directly addressing the reader in a conversational tone, is an odd combination of autobiography, diary, political vindications, and paranoid digressions about the surveillance by the United States, making him more than a mere political spokesman. The details about his everyday life, his studies (he claims to have a PhD pending from Delhi University), and his struggle, give psychological depth to this character, who is yet another wild-goose-chaser, or 'slow-goose-chaser' (M 135). The radical potential of these characters lies in their grounded struggle against the tide. His sale of eight or nine copies of his newsletter each month, with Tilo's help, is ironically described as 'a thriving media partnership' (M 262), deriding corporate media language while also celebrating this small-scale political success.<sup>47</sup> In a sense, he appears as the pacific counterpart to Tilo's other companion and lover, Musa, the Kashmiri activist fighting for independence through direct political action, remaining undeterred despite his awareness of probable failure.<sup>48</sup> His continuous struggle is not led through mobility (as is the case of Musa), but through his refusal to move from his spot.

Like Mona Ahmed, the iconic transgender woman living in a graveyard in Old Delhi, whom the character Anjum is loosely based upon, Dr Bhartiya brings to mind an actual Jantar Mantar protester called Rama Indra Kumar, originally from Bihar, 'protesting for the

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<sup>46</sup> Her concern with characters who embody both grief and hope is palpable in the way the text describes Anjum's rundown body, the blind imam, or Tilo, who is compared with an old jaguar in Delhi Zoo: 'He stayed like that, supremely indifferent, for hours. Maybe years. Tilo felt like him. Dusty, old, and supremely indifferent.' (M 236).

<sup>47</sup> Her letters to him, raising questions and proposing radical political schemes, also thematise the critical value of failure ('I am personally and in principle completely against efficiency') (M 299).

<sup>48</sup> Musa explains to Tilo: 'More than Azadi, now it's a fight for dignity. And the only way we can hold on to our dignity is to fight back. Even if we lose' (M 370). The knowledge that Kashmir's freedom is probably a lost cause never deters him from fighting.

past nineteen years for the abolition of capitalism and the fulfilment of all demands of the poor and the oppressed’, holding degrees from JNU and Delhi University.<sup>49</sup> The original name given for Dr Bhartiya in the novel, ‘Inder Y Kumar’ (M 127) leaves no doubt as to his real-life model. This fictionalisation of actual people redraws the line between fact and fiction while suggesting that the most eccentric characters are actually drawn from reality.

The multitude of broken lives that Roy minutely explores in the novel escape both heroism and victimhood as even the most crushed characters are depicted in their idiosyncratic peculiarities, whims and wounds, and are never stripped of their dignity and humanity, notably through the author’s sense of humour. I would thus challenge Parul Sehgal’s statement that the novel ‘can feel like a collection of so many single stories and stock figures – heroic martyrs and tragic transgender characters’, notably by pointing out Roy’s comic talent.<sup>50</sup> Rather than the empty ‘frozen smile’ of aspiration and blissful shallow optimism, their discreet chuckles embody a subdued form of hope, a frail yet swift happiness.

In her own words, the novel is the appropriate form to contain this shattered ‘story-universe’, to collect and connect the fragments of this broken narrative, hinting at the capaciousness of the novelistic form. Yet her comparison of the novel with a ‘mathematically constructed chaos’ also suggests that the fragments remain scattered, and that the micro-level at which she explores each street of this city deliberately diverts any coherent, unified narrative structure.<sup>51</sup>

I knew that if *The God of Small Things* was about home, about a family with a broken heart in its midst, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* would begin after the roof had blown off the home, and the broken heart had shattered and distributed its shards in war-torn valleys and city streets. It would be a novel, but the story-universe would refuse all forms of domestication and conventions about what a novel could and could not be. It would be like a great city in my part of the world in which the reader arrives a new

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<sup>49</sup> Chinki Sinha, ‘12 Years, 1 Strike, 1 Goal: More Power to the Poor’, *Indian Express*, 25 March 2005, <<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/12-years-1-strike-1-goal-more-power-to-the-poor/>> [accessed 19 June 2021]. Mona Ahmed’s story is narrated in photojournalist Danayita Singh’s book *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Zurich: Scalo, 2001) in a way which echoes Aman Sethi’s approach of Ashraf’s life. See also Urvashi Butalia’s piece ‘Mona’s Story’, *Granta*, 115, 9 May 2011, <<https://granta.com/monas-story/>> [accessed 24 June 2021].

<sup>50</sup> Parul Sehgal, ‘A Fascinating Mess’, *Atlantic*, July-August 2017, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/arundhati-roys-fascinating-mess/528684/>> [accessed 7 June 2021].

<sup>51</sup> ‘I needed it [the novel] to be a wild thing, a mathematically constructed chaos, like Delhi or a great third-world city: people keep trying to plan it but other people keep destroying the plan [...]’ (Roy, Interview with Marie Richeux (my transcription)). In that sense, even though the restricted narrative scope of *The God of Small Things* is forsaken in *The Ministry*, its micro-scale descriptions and its narrative fragmentation highlight aesthetic and political continuities between the two novels.

immigrant [...]. The only way to know it would be to walk through it, get lost, and learn to live in it. Learn to meet people, small and big. Learn to love the crowd.<sup>52</sup>

This unruly text emerging from the crowd of micro-biographies reflects the writer's refusal of a single, homogeneous story. Thus, at the end of the novel, Musa reads out a note from Tilo's notebook which reads as an *ars poetica*: '*How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything*' (M 436).<sup>53</sup> The story of the broken Indian nation requires the text to inhabit every corner of the city, to give voice to every individual (human and nonhuman) consciousness and, in fact, the writer fleshes out each character that she comes across in the streets of the city. The politics of narrative fragmentation and 'density' surface in her consistent indictment of the triumphant nationalist and neoliberal narratives of India's global 'awakening', identified with simplified stories:

Hope lies in texts that can accommodate and keep alive our intricacy, our complexity, and our *density* against the onslaught of the terrifying, sweeping simplifications of fascism. As they barrel towards us, speeding down their straight, smooth highway, we greet them with our beehive, our maze. We keep our complicated world, with all its seams exposed, alive in our writing.<sup>54</sup>

The metaphor of the maze evidences the political implications of her formal experimentations. The layered fragmentary narrative disrupts the smooth success-story of India's neoliberal turn as well as the fake history of India peddled by Hindu fundamentalists, showing how these flattening mystifications do not hold in the face of these multiple sinuous stories. The maze also connects with the micro-scale of her writing, which makes different configurations of the city emerge, and sheds light on local inflections of national and global history. Both the scalar variation and her use of characterisation challenge the macro-narrative of India's success. Like Aman Sethi's, Amit Chaudhuri's, and Siddharth Chowdhury's characters, Roy's protagonists are anti-heroic figures whose sinuous trajectories and desperate struggles jar with any teleological narrative.

The allegory of the highway, which is also used by contemporary Indian urban writing as an allegory of the post-reform uneven modernisation of India, resonates with Halberstam's spatialization of failure and success: 'failure's byways are all the spaces in

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<sup>52</sup> Roy, 'The Language of Literature', in *Azadi*, p. 88.

<sup>53</sup> Italicized, these words are also laid out as an oblique calligram: the words 'shattered' and 'everybody', typographically detached from the rest of the text, materialize the fragmentation of the narrative. The repetition of the adverb also hints at the praise of slow pace in the novel, at odds with the speedy efficiency of the neoliberal city.

<sup>54</sup> Roy, 'The Graveyard Talks Back', in *Azadi*, pp. 176-177.

between the superhighways of capital'.<sup>55</sup> It is also enlightened by Marshall Berman's celebration of the 'shout in the street' against the 'expressway world', opposing two forms of modernism, one associated with speed and technology, the other closer to the slower rhythm of the street and alert to the ghostly presence of the past in the city.<sup>56</sup> In fact, Roy's characters' struggle against the economic, political and social norms often take the form of grounding themselves in a locality. As I will develop in the next section, what emerges from the reading of these ordinary narratives is the emphasis on the micropolitics of dwelling. Being entrenched in one place is imagined as a way for disempowered people to resist the neoliberal current. The race from which Mohammed Ashraf steps out in choosing a daily wage in *A Free Man*, or the current against which Bhaskar, Musa, Tilo, or Dr Bhartiya fight, becomes literal: putting down roots in one locality, they resist the accelerated rhythm of urban transformations and its associated dream of individual hypermobility, allegorised by the expressway.

## II. 'Real Utopias': Reclaiming Urban Space

Through their micro-scale narratives, writings in which the ordinary mode is dominant put forward urban-dwellers' attempts to inhabit the uneven city, to circumvent its discriminatory rules and to reclaim their right to it through micro-political gestures. While obliquely pointing out the disempowered position of the protagonists, these texts disclose the way the everyday lives of these misfit, eccentric, and marginalized urban-dwellers rely on small acts of resistance which elude dominant structures without toppling them. These 'tricky and stubborn' spatial practices are theorised by Certeau as means of appropriating urban space, and, in a more radical way, by Lefebvre as heterotopic waystations towards urban revolution.<sup>57</sup> Erik Olin Wright's work on 'real utopias' focuses on grassroots local

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<sup>55</sup> Halberstam, p. 19. Roy's characters thus use the flyovers and large radial avenues of New Delhi in unorthodox ways, walking on them or riding them on horseback (M 33, 135), suggesting both uneven access to mobility and the reclaiming of urban infrastructure.

<sup>56</sup> Berman, p. 329. On the automotive urban imaginary, which can be traced back to Peter Hall, *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning and Design in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) and Lewis Mumford *The Highway and the City* (New York: Harcourt, 1963). For a synthetic view, see Richard J. Williams, 'The City on the Highway, Revisited', in *The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries*, ed. by Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 262-274.

<sup>57</sup> 'I would like to follow out a few of these multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised, and which should lead us to a theory of

initiatives which anchor the horizon of political equality to concrete practices, and illuminates the practices disclosed in Indian urban narratives.<sup>58</sup> The foregrounding of ordinary, local practices as sources of urban political transformations in the literary texts of my corpus embed them in a larger intellectual and social movement of re-assessment of the local as a relevant scale of investigation and of political action.<sup>59</sup> I would argue that the emphasis laid on local improvised tactics of occupation, secession or reclaiming is always connected to an underlying understanding of uneven urban development, thus avoiding the trap of ‘glorifying the politics of the locality’ and the obliviousness to structural inequalities.

### 1. From Occupying to Seceding?

Two locations in Arundhati Roy’s novel embody the grounded micro-politics of the ordinary mode. The well-known protest gathering place of Jantar Mantar in Delhi and the little-advertised commune set up in an Old Delhi small cemetery both appear as liminal sites of re-appropriation of urban space. Yet while Roy suggests the revolutionary force and the political limits of occupying urban space, she also describes the heterotopia of a subaltern community, which almost secedes from the city, as the ultimate way for urban outcasts to reclaim urban space.

Located in the centre of the capital, Jantar Mantar is an eighteenth-century astronomical observatory built by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, now a heritage site and most importantly the only authorised place of protests in Delhi.<sup>60</sup> Yet another trace of the multi-layered history of Delhi, this three-century-old structure is where the multitudes of India’s dissenters and protesters gather, sit-in and go on hunger strikes in the hope of being listened to by the central power, ranging from displaced tribal people to rape survivors, from mothers of disappeared Kashmiris to anti-caste-reservation groups and rickshaw-puller unions. In *The Ministry*, this is where all the plotlines converge: on a summer night, Anjum and her

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everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city.’ (Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 243).

<sup>58</sup> On improvised responses to infrastructure and other forms of urban ‘pirate modernity’, see Boehmer and Davies, ‘Infrastructural Violence’; Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity*; Sanjukta Poddar, ‘Delhi at the Margins: Heterotopic Imagination, *Bricolage*, and Alternative Urbanity in *Trickster City*’, in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts*, pp. 204-220.

<sup>59</sup> See Doreen Massey, ‘The Political Place of Locality Studies’, in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp. 125-145.

<sup>60</sup> About the history of the site, see Anisha Shekhar Mukherjee, *Jantar Mantar: Sawai Jai Singh’s Observatory in Delhi* (Delhi: Ambi Knowledge, 2011).

companions briefly meet Dr Azadi Bartiya and Tilottama, who rescues an orphan, Miss Jebeen II. Roy claims that it is a key point in the novel, and choosing it as the narrative nerve centre of the novel is thus politically significant. Yet, if Roy represents it as a place of democratic debate and protest, Jantar Mantar is not described as a utopian enclave: it is a highly conflictual space, whose radical potential is undermined by the media craze around media-compatible struggles.<sup>61</sup>

Roy states that she wanted to ‘see the world from that pavement’, from this cluster of the oddest people in the country.<sup>62</sup> The novel registers the multitude of political battles gathered in Jantar Mantar and shows the observatory as a microcosm of India’s grassroots movements, depicting several protesting groups, utopian dissenters, as well as lunatic artists (one of them, called the ‘Lime Man’, has his body covered in mud and lime (M 107)).<sup>63</sup> Representing the world, and Delhi in particular, from that ‘pavement’, serves to show Delhi as the seat of national political power but also as a place of powerful political contestations, the capital city constituting the intersection of the ruling classes and the wretched of the earth, also epitomized by the strange geographical proximity between the protest site and the five-star-hotel that one of the protesters keeps recalling (M 127).

Evincing the rhetorical power of scalar variation, the text contrasts a panoramic view of the night (recalling the astronomical function of the observatory) with the below-the-radar protests happening in Jantar Mantar:

Above the smog and the mechanical hum of the city, the night was vast and beautiful. The sky was a forest of stars. Jet aircraft darted about like slow, whining comets. [...] Down below, on the pavement, on the edge of Jantar Mantar, the old observatory where our baby made her appearance, it was fairly busy even at that time of the morning. Communists, secessionists, revolutionaries, dreamers, idlers, crackheads, crackpots, all manner of freelancers, and wise men who couldn’t afford gifts for newborns, milled around. Over the last ten days they had been sidelined and driven off what had once been *their* territory – the only place in the city where they were allowed to gather – by the newest show in town. (M 101)

The enumeration of protesters ‘down below’, in the gutter, conveys the sense of a bustling place, crowded with dissenters and mavericks. This bustle is exactly what appeals to Anjum

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<sup>61</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>62</sup> ‘The first thing I wrote about was the baby that appeared in Jantar Mantar. It actually happened once when I was there years ago. Jantar Mantar, in a way, was a nerve centre, for looking at the world from that pavement.’ (Roy, Interview with Charmy Harikrishnan).

<sup>63</sup> She also considers the chapter devoted to this space as a twisted version of *War and Peace*’s opening: ‘here, the ball is in the gutter’, and the crowd is that of social and political outcasts demanding justice (Roy, Interview with Marie Richeux). The comparison with Tolstoy chimes with the epic scale of the book and perfectly captures the narrative value of Jantar Mantar as a microcosm.

as she drags her companions to the observatory to watch the anti-corruption protests. Yet the end of the passage underlines the war over space at work in Jantar Mantar, which undermines the convergence of struggles. It also hints at the encroachment of ‘show-business’ upon this sanctuary of free protests, placed under the sign of the great masquerade.<sup>64</sup> The limited space and unequal media coverage granted to protesters lead to internal frictions, such as the conflict opposing disabled beggars against farmers protesting against the petrochemicals industry:

The displaced farmers and their famous leader had displaced them [the beggars] from the coolest, shadiest stretch of pavement where they usually lived. So their sympathies were entirely with the petrochemicals industry. They wanted the famers’ agitation to end as soon as possible so they could have their spot back. (M 107)

The irony is palpable in this account of *ad hoc* convictions determined by immediate self-interests, eschewing the glorification of the dispossessed, Roy’s satirical edge spares no one, contrary to Paul Sehgal’s statement that ‘Manichaeon dualities prevail’ in the novel.<sup>65</sup> Patronising intellectuals, PhD students who are glad their fieldwork has come to the city, upstart film-makers failing to understand the language of the protesters, all are derided as self-interested people who fail to bridge the gap separating them from the protesters (M 110).

Thus, what actually saves Jantar Mantar from the ‘Democracy Zoo’ (M 132) is a miraculous baby on the pavement, who connects Anjum’s and Tilottama’s paths (and with them Saddam Husain, Comrade Revathy, a Maoist activist from Bastar forest and Dr Azad Bhartiya), joining together the worlds of Old Delhi hijras and of occupied Kashmir, of Dalits, of anti-state-violence movements and of anti-capitalist hunger strikes. If Dr Bhartiya’s resilience and the radicalism of his long-lasting struggle are emphasized, it is significantly through the most vulnerable presence of a quiet orphan that these struggles intersect, away from the loud spectacle of anti-corruption protests.

She appeared quite suddenly, a little after midnight. No angels sang, no wise men brought gifts. But a million stars rose in the east to herald her arrival. One moment she wasn’t there, and the next – there she was on the concrete pavement, in a crib of litter: silver cigarette foil, a few plastic bags and empty packets of Uncle Chipps. She lay in a pool of light, under a column of swarming neon-lit mosquitoes, naked [...]. A thin white horse tethered to the railing, a small dog with mange, a concrete-coloured garden lizard, two palm-striped squirrels who should have been asleep and, from her hidden perch, a she-spider with a swollen egg sac watched over her. Other than that, she seemed to be utterly alone. (M 95-96)

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<sup>64</sup> For an analysis of the way the multitude of struggles are eclipsed by the newest media-compatible protest, described as a masquerade, see Chapter 1.

<sup>65</sup> Sehgal, ‘A Fascinating Mess’.

The original function of the site as an astronomical observatory is here rekindled as the miraculous, albeit unnoticed, appearance of Miss Jebeen II is celebrated by the sublime night sky. This connection with astronomy, joined with the midnight hour, helps to rewrite and downscale the trope of midnight as the birth of the Indian nation, famously invested by Rushdie's magical imagination.<sup>66</sup> In both cases, children are invested with a new hope and symbolize a new dawn (M 438). Yet in Roy's case the only midnight child does not have magical powers, nor is she on a mission to save the nation's unity from the grip of post-colonial divisions. Her only power is to gather the powerless around her, her tiny presence illuminating the life of all the inhabitants of the 'ministry of utmost happiness', the graveyard commune of injured human and non-human beings.<sup>67</sup> The rewritten nativity scene, which replaces infant Jesus Christ with a baby girl abandoned by her Maoist-fighter-mother, and surrounding parents and canonical donkey and cow with waste and tiny yet protective insects, encapsulates Roy's 'politics of scale', simultaneously downsizing the epic dreams of the nation and magnifying micro-events, small people and things shunned as a surplus by neoliberal Indian society.<sup>68</sup>

Writer and critic Karan Mahajan regrets the excessive space taken by the baby in the novel, construed as an artificial device revealing 'a desire to connect plotlines and political movements' which ends up 'erasing meaning': 'because the camaraderie is forced, the novel begins to feel like a sentimental response to violence – a fairy tale in a time of suffering'.<sup>69</sup> The symbolism of the baby, most powerless yet most innocent figure is indeed redolent of fairy tales or the fables. Yet because the question of filiation and kinship is so central to the novel, I would argue that the baby actually crystallises the personal and political aspects of Roy's interest in 'small things', which is anything but a fairy tale. Thus, Miss Jebeen II embodies the heterodox model of kinship proposed by the novel, as a heteroclitic family is created around her: rescued by Tilo who names her after Musa's late daughter Miss Jebeen, she is also called Udaya after her mother's wish (discovered later in her letter) and is considered as Anjum's second adopted daughter. Tilo's fraught relationship with her mother

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<sup>66</sup> According to Dominique Lapierre and Larry Collins's *Freedom at Midnight* (London: Collins, 1975), the choice of the midnight hour to declare India's independence was partly influenced by astrology, thus strengthening the connection between the observatory and politics.

<sup>67</sup> The orphan also recalls one of Jha's characters, 'Orphan', who similarly crosses the city from one end to another at night.

<sup>68</sup> Nixon, p. 157.

<sup>69</sup> Karan Mahajan, 'Arundhati Roy's Return to the Form That Made Her Famous', *New York Times*, 9 June 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/books/review/arundhati-roys-return-to-the-form-that-made-her-famous.html>> [accessed 12 June 2021].



(yet another eccentric character for whom the reader cannot but feel admiration and empathy), her refusal to have biological children and her joy at rescuing this baby, Anjum's complex relationship with her adopted daughter Zainab, another orphan who finds several (antagonistic) mothers in the hijra house and the recreated family of the graveyard, foreground chosen affiliations, pointing to the recreated 'Noah's Ark of injured animals' and people of the graveyard-turned-guest-house in Old Delhi (M 400).

If Jantar Mantar embodies the power of occupying urban space, the graveyard, or Jannat Guest House, appears indeed as the paradigm of these small-scale 'real utopias', as its inhabitants claim their right to the city through the reclamation of a minoritarian space defined by its multi-layered memory of the city.<sup>70</sup> Roy describes her novel as 'a conversation between two graveyards' and indeed, the reader cannot understand Jannat Guest House without Kashmir's myriad cemeteries.<sup>71</sup> Jannat Guest House is the ultimate site where the urban outcasts are given voice and agency, however restricted their range of possibilities are. As an abandoned graveyard, it is not a place of glorification of the dead but of quiet companionship with them. This is where Tilo and Musa, who 'had been as a strange country together for a while, an island republic that had seceded from the rest of the world' (M 359) ultimately come together, joining this communal 'ministry of utmost happiness'.<sup>72</sup>

Roy investigates the multi-layered social world of this derelict cemetery as a micro-historian would, mooring her novel in this locality that she defines as a 'radical space'.<sup>73</sup> In fact, the text narrates how, on the margins of the city, a small community of outcasts or anti-heroes is gradually formed, taking in human and nonhuman beings, both alive and dead. This

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<sup>70</sup> Even though Jantar Mantar is a place of *authorised* protests, it points to the central place of Delhi as a centre of revolutionary politics. Jha's novel also incorporates a scene of urban protest with farmers demonstrating on the highway leading to New City because of water shortages (SW 119-122), a scene witnessed from Man's air-conditioned car, which is uncannily pervaded by the heat of discontent. The city has a long history of sit-in protests, the most recent ones being the Shaheen Bagh protest (2019-2020), a non-violent sit-in started by Muslim women in response to the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens which openly discriminate against Muslims (see Ita Mehrotra, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2021)) and the farmers' mass protest against agricultural neoliberal reforms (2020-2021). These examples can be connected with other 'real utopian' movements around the world, using urban space as a political arena (such as Occupy Wall Street, Tahir Square), and supports Harvey's conjecture that 'the urban experience [...] under capitalism [...] *in itself*, has the potential to ground anti-capitalist struggles' and emancipatory struggles (Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 121). See Henri Lefebvre, 'The Right to the City' (1968), in *Writings on Cities*, trans. by Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (London: Wiley, 1996), pp. 147-159.

<sup>71</sup> Roy, 'The Graveyard Talks Back', in *Azadi*, p. 152.

<sup>72</sup> The image of secession is repeatedly used by Roy, suggesting her dismissal of any form of nationalism, which is all the more radical in the context of the rising suspicion against 'anti-national' citizens. See *The God of Small Things* in which the twins Estha and Rahel live in 'a Mobile Republic' (p. 96, 143), and 'The End of Imagination', in *MSH*, p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> Roy, Interview with Marie Richeux.

alternative micro-society, which appears as an ‘other city’, a place which challenges and reverts the norms of urban space, may be read in the light of the concept of heterotopia, defined by Foucault as ‘effectively enacted utopia[s]’, real places which nonetheless invert the norms of our society and juxtapose several places in one.<sup>74</sup> This is all the more relevant as the graveyard is used by Foucault as an instance of heterotopia.<sup>75</sup> If Foucault’s reflection is embedded in a European context, and if the specific minoritarian use of graveyards in India needs to be considered, the notion of heterotopia illuminates the politics of this graveyard as an eccentric place of secession and sedition. Yet, Henri Lefebvre’s use of the term seems even more apt to enlighten the revolutionary potential of Jannat Guest House.

Lefebvre’s concept of heterotopia (radically different from that of Foucault) delineates liminal social spaces of possibility where ‘something different’ is not only possible, but foundational for the defining of revolutionary trajectories. This ‘something different’ does not necessarily arise out of a conscious plan, but more simply out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives. Such practices create heterotopic spaces all over the place. We do not have to wait upon the grand revolution to constitute such spaces. Lefebvre’s theory of a revolutionary movement is the other way round: the spontaneous coming together in a moment of ‘irruption’, when disparate heterotopic groups suddenly see, if not for a fleeing moment, the possibilities of a collective action to create something radically different.<sup>76</sup>

David Harvey builds on Lefebvre’s concept to theorise the revolutionary potential of grassroots initiative, micro-practices which gesture towards a greater emancipatory change. In fact, he challenges the notion that the reclaiming of urban space is a retreat from real political struggle, arguing that Lefebvre was acutely aware of the crushing power of dominant practices and of the necessity to eradicate them: ‘claiming the right to the city is a way-station on the road to that goal’.<sup>77</sup> Anjum’s guest house, which is not necessarily defined by a clear political project, is represented as one of these way-stations.

Situated on the edge of the city, the graveyard is first perceived by the characters as a universe apart, heightening the notion of Delhi as a constellation of radically different worlds

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<sup>74</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, 24.

<sup>75</sup> ‘As an example I shall take the strange heterotopia of the cemetery. The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is however connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery.’ (Ibid., 25).

<sup>76</sup> David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. XVII. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution* (1970), trans. by Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>77</sup> ‘The whole capitalist system of perpetual accumulation, along with its associated structures of exploitative class and state power, has to be overthrown and replaced. Claiming the right to the city is a way-station on the road to that goal. It can never be an end in itself, even if it increasingly looks to be one of the most propitious paths to take.’ Ibid., p. XVIII. This resonates with Erik Olin Wright’s argument in favour of ‘real utopias’. See below.

which do not usually communicate.<sup>78</sup> The account of Anjum's secretly moving in at dawn stresses how insulated the graveyard is, despite its geographical proximity to the hijra house: 'only a ten minute Tempo ride from the Khwabgah, once again Anjum entered another world' (M 57). The phrasing resonates with the account of Anjum's earlier moving to the Khwabgah as a teenager: 'And so, at the age of fifteen, only a few hundred yards from where his family had lived for centuries, Aftab stepped through an ordinary doorway into another universe' (M25). This spatial, social and psychological transition to the Khwabgah (or the House of Dreams) is represented as a threshold in Anjum's existence, as she becomes a disciple of Kulsoom Bi and breaks away from centuries of tradition, forsaking 'what most ordinary people thought of as the real world – and Hijras called *Duniya*, the World' (M 24). Being outside the *duniya* may refer to the hijras' belonging to a spiritual or metaphysical world, to their privileged status as holy or blessed souls (M 53), but also to their ostracism, and, in Anjum's case, to a special relationship with the afterworld.<sup>79</sup>

If the Khwabgah provides a heterotopic shelter and an alternative community in which Anjum's fractured identity and gender are accepted, its rigid hierarchies (M 68) and her traumatic experience in the Ahmedabad anti-Muslim riots make the house inhospitable to her extreme grief. Only this derelict isolated graveyard, peopled with smack addicts, homeless people and stray dogs, seems able to host Anjum's pain. Referring to the graveyard as 'the Place of Falling People' (M 85), Anjum hammers her belief that it does not belong to 'reality.' Arguing with Saddam Husain, she claims:

'Once you have fallen off the edge like all of us have [...], you will never stop falling. And as you fall you will hold on to other falling people. The sooner you understand that the better. This place where we live, where we have made our home, is the place of falling people. Here there *is* no *haqeeqat*. *Arre*, even *we* aren't real. We don't really exist.' (M 84)<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> By contrast, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (London: HarperCollins, 2004) also imagines a utopian subaltern community on Morijchapi island, a place of freedom for the country's most oppressed, in the wild environment of the Sundarbans rather than in the city.

<sup>79</sup> If the multi-layered metaphysical implications of 'duniya' exceed the scope of this work, we can still surmise that Anjum's self-identification with what lies outside the 'duniya' is ambivalent insofar as the word 'duniya' (meaning earth or world), in Islam, refers to the temporal world and its earthly concerns and possessions, as opposed to the hereafter ('*ākhirah*'). If Anjum might understand herself as outside the world, notably because of her transgender identity (which in her eyes annihilates the rules of the real world), she might also hint at her belonging to a metaphysical world, as suggested by her companionship with ghosts. Yet this privileged relationship is sometimes presented as a curse, an affinity with the dead which cuts her off from the world around her (M 66).

<sup>80</sup> The use of the Hindi word curiously echoes Chowdhury's *Day Scholar*, at the end of which the protagonist ultimately moves to Hakikat Nagar (see Chapter 5).

Her narrative spatializes their condition both as traumatised psyches (both she and Saddam Hussain have witnessed the murder of a loved one) and as ostracised people subjugated and invisibilised by a system of oppression (that of caste, class, religion and heteronormativity). The fall into another world is nonetheless ambivalent as it implies demise but also, to a certain extent, liberation, as they topple into a realm in which their own rules prevail.<sup>81</sup>

‘Roy has imagined an inverse of the Garden of Eden – a paradise whose defining feature, rather than innocence, is experience and endurance’, writes Sehgal, alluding to the connection between Jannat (paradise) guest house and the Valley of Kashmir, known as ‘Paradise on Earth’.<sup>82</sup> Jannat Guest House is indeed peopled with broken yet resilient people. Like Anjum’s ‘failure’ to overcome her grief, her visitors are all wounded creatures, from the old blind imam with whom she argues every day to Saddam Hussain, psychologically shattered by the murder of his father and physically diminished because of his job as a security guard. He is accompanied by an old pale mare, ‘equally gaunt and battered’ (M 73), and a stray dog, Biroo, whose tribulations are delineated as that of any another character in this crowded story (M 82-83). The last to move in, Tilo, is one good example of an anti-heroic figure delineated by Roy, and of the graveyard’s capacity to accommodate bereaved people, or people with a ‘riot inside them’ (M 23). A woman in constant movement, whom ‘nobody seemed able to *place*’ (M 154), Tilo is portrayed as a restless, solitary yet magnetic figure. Her determination never to stay still is a way for her to resist the assignation to a fixed position in society, but also comes from her failure to find a home, scarred as she is by many disrupting experiences. The graveyard thus becomes a miraculous home: ‘For the first time in her life, Tilo felt that her body had enough room to accommodate all its organs’ (M 305).<sup>83</sup> This is not completely her decision as she is compelled to move there because of the police inquiry into her kidnapping of an infant, yet it provides her with a home. This complex entanglement between constraint, marginalisation, domination and agency shapes many characters in the novel, who thus resemble Sethi’s and Chowdhury’s protagonists, individuals who are on the wrong side of the rigged game of Indian contemporary society,

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<sup>81</sup> This sense of freedom which is reminiscent of Ashraf again, is also cherished by Saddam Hussain, who describes his small-time jobs as follows: ‘All of it [...] was tiring work, especially in summer, and the income was uncertain. But none of it involved having a boss and that was the main thing’ (M 78).

<sup>82</sup> Sehgal, ‘A Fascinating Mess.’

<sup>83</sup> Her insulation from the world or from society is also interestingly symbolized as an isolationist country: ‘It has to do with the way she lived, in the country of her own skin. A country that issued no visas and seemed to have no consulates. True, it had never been a particularly friendly country even at the best of times. But its borders were sealed and the regime of more or less complete isolationism began only after the trainwreck at the Shiraz Cinema’ (M 217). Here her retreat into this self-sufficient territory is shown as emanating from the traumatic experience she went through in Kashmir.

yet who manage to ‘fail beautifully’, and to bring out a humble form of happiness and precarious hope.<sup>84</sup>

As we argued in Chapter 3, ruins have had a prominent place in the literary imagination of Delhi and are often the site of melancholy meditations on the city’s decline. Chowdhury’s elegiac story, ‘Death of a Proofreader’, is set in St James Church’s cemetery, embodying the vestiges of Anglo-Indian history. Like Roy’s novel, it is centred on the ruins of Delhi rather than its remaking as a new global city and both novels portray declining descendants of long-standing lineages, rather than striving self-made-men. Yet the political force of Roy’s novel lies in its use of the ruin as a ground on which an alternative micro-society rises, steeped into the ancient history of the city. The novel puts down roots in the derelict graveyard and narrates the emergence of a small marginal society and of its everyday practices. Challenging a static conception of space, the text describes the way its living inhabitants appropriate its peculiarities, as the graves become the foundations of guest-house rooms, each ascribed to a guest in accordance with its dead occupants’ characteristics.

Anjum’s founding of a guest house epitomizes her love for hospitality. This is one of the paradoxes which makes her a round character: she seems ill-at-ease with any form of hierarchically organised community, yet she is never happier than when she is surrounded by a multitude, and that is how she reinvents the space of the graveyard. One way to conceptualise her ideal community is the notion of *mehfil*, which she uses several times. The word refers to a banquet or a festive gathering of people, and, in addition to the parties Anjum throws for Zainab’s birthday and Tilo’s arrival, it also encapsulates her multiple unruly identities: ‘Who says my name is Anjum? I’m not Anjum, I’m Anjuman. I’m a *mehfil*, I’m a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone’s invited’ (M 4). *Mehfil* could also capture the spirit of the graveyard-turned-guest-house, a gathering in which there is a master of ceremony whose only role is to host the multitude of guests. Thus, the main difference between the Khwabgah and the cemetery is that the former is an ancient institution with rigid rules in which Anjum (incompletely) assimilates, whereas the latter is a ground where Anjum creates her own rules, woven into the historical fabric of the cemetery. In fact, out of her sense of hospitality

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<sup>84</sup> A parallel can be established between the graveyard and Velutha’s house in *The God of Small Things*, which both embody the resistance to the ‘politics of largeness’. Inhabited by maimed bodies yet tenacious spirits, haunted by ancestors’ whispers, decorated with things salvaged from rubbish bins, they are locations of border crossing and solidarity which defy marginalisation (See Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*, pp. 96-97).

but also as a means to provide her with a basic income, she transforms the graveyard into a refuge for dead and living outcasts.<sup>85</sup> The graveyard thus fulfils its heterotopic function as it becomes a 'liminal social space of possibility' and juxtaposes many places into one: it becomes a cheap guest house for travellers, migrants and expelled hijras, and an informal funeral parlour, for those who are denied funeral rituals elsewhere.

Anjum's extravagant whims and her sometimes unreasonable decisions about who is welcome or not are often comically emphasized.<sup>86</sup> Roy's talent for characterisation prevails over any easy symbolism, as the guest-house manager's peculiarities and the absence of collective decisions prevent any hasty political reading of the graveyard as a communist utopia. Yet, Anjum's opinion is based on her absolute hospitality for the dispossessed: 'the only clear criterion was that Jannat Funeral Services would only bury those whom the graveyards and imams of the Duniya had rejected' (M 80), echoing the Kashmiris' resistant funerals. The rules she establishes also break with traditional funerals, as the ceremony may be accompanied by Hindu or Muslim hymns, as well as the Internationale or Shakespeare verses, escaping any association with one particular religion.

Characterised by fluidity and openness, this unruly *mehfil* of informal small business is created by local outcasts who have small-scale pragmatic ambitions and no clear political claims. Roy's depiction of everyday tactics to survive in the graveyard and of the reclamation of this stigmatized place as a hospitable home through the use of discarded material, waste, leftovers (M 304), which endows it with a function that was not intended by urban planners, suggests the critical force of everyday practices. It also runs up against the dream of a global city built from scratch, as this locality is specifically built, materially and symbolically, from residual elements of the past.<sup>87</sup> The way the graveyard gradually develops into a locality, with roofed shacks, a bathing house, a funeral parlour, a vegetable garden and even an (empty) swimming pool, exemplifies the art of making do, the *bricolage* techniques one is

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<sup>85</sup> She is seconded in this endeavour by her friends, who also turn the cemetery into a shelter for animals: 'Between Zainab and Saddam, they had turned the graveyard into a zoo – a Noah's Ark of injured animals' (M 399).

<sup>86</sup> 'Anjum was whimsical and irrational about whom she admitted and whom she turned away – often with unwarranted and entirely unreasonable rudeness that bordered on abuse [...], and sometimes with an unearthly, savage roar.' (M 68). Her imperial authority is often derided: "'Recite the Kalima...'" Anjum said imperiously, as though she was Emperor Aurangzeb himself' (M85). Here the comic lies in the conflation of Hindu sacred hymn with the Mughal Emperor. Roy glosses: 'Those whims are unashamedly partial to people and animals, living as well as deceased, for whom the *duniya* has no place.' ('The Graveyard Talks Back', in *Azadi*, p. 185).

<sup>87</sup> On the difference between residual (an element formed in the past which still has an effective role in the present) and archaic (an element recognised as an element of the past), see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121-127.

compelled to use when cornered in the margins of the neoliberal city.<sup>88</sup> The text closely depicts the material birth of an informal settlement, redolent of Manas Ray's narrative of the growth of his refugee colony in the south of Calcutta in the 1970s, except in this case the connection between the inhabitants does not derive from regional or family ties but precisely from their uprootedness and their marginalisation from society.<sup>89</sup> The transformation of the graveyard into Jannat Guest House by Anjum and her friends thus epitomizes 'locality production' in a precarious context, thus connecting with the Mumbai slum from which Appadurai's notion was developed.<sup>90</sup>

## 2. 'A Foothold in the City', Urban Micro-Politics

If the graveyard-turned-ministry embodies an alternative social system which does not rely on the state, it does not completely secede from urban space either, but rather reclaims it, as shown by its enduring connections with the city at large. In fact, the re-invention of the graveyard can be considered as taking part in a larger network of 'interstitial processes', theorised by Erik Olin Wright as 'processes that occur in the spaces and cracks within some dominant social structure of power'.<sup>91</sup> While the graveyard and other reclaiming practices delineated in *ordinary* novels and reportage do not belong to 'interstitial strategies' as such, insofar as they are driven by necessity more than by a deliberate project of social transformation, they appear as tactics, in Certeau's language, improvised pragmatic solutions which gesture towards new forms of social relations, even though they occupy spaces 'within' a dominant social structure.<sup>92</sup> The cemetery actually appears as a matrix of

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<sup>88</sup> Certeau evokes these spatial practices in the following terms: 'I would like to follow out a few of these multifarious, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised, and which should lead us to a theory of everyday practices, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city.' (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, p. 243).

<sup>89</sup> The parallel with the portrayal of an alternative micro-society in the 'Magicians' ghetto' in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (which takes inspiration from the real Kathpuli colony, or artists' ghetto in Delhi) is striking, yet in this novel the ghetto is finally smashed to the ground by Shiva as part of the slum demolition drive at work during the State of Emergency, suggesting the vulnerability of such commune. See also Tanvi Misra, 'The Doomed Fight to Save Delhi's 'Magician's Ghetto'', *Bloomberg City Lab*, 8 August 2014, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-08-08/the-doomed-fight-to-save-delhi-s-magician-s-ghetto>> [accessed 6 May 2021]).

<sup>90</sup> Roy expresses her amusement when journalists ask her about the 'magic realism' of the graveyard-guest-house in the novel, as it is actually one of the most verisimilar passages of the novel: 'In cities like Delhi, meanwhile, the homeless and destitute congregate in shrines and around graveyards, which have become resting places not just for the dead, but for the living, too'. ('The Graveyard Talks Back', in *Azadi*, p. 152).

<sup>91</sup> Wright, p. 292.

<sup>92</sup> Wright, like Harvey, recalls the scepticism of orthodox Marxist socialists about these projects, which, they argue 'pose no serious challenge to existing relations of power and domination. Precisely because these are

other processes of spatial reclamation, as Roy's novel incorporates many small-scale endeavours to claim one's spot in the city through various interstitial activities. They all deflect the original function of a place or an object, illustrating Harvey's conception of the right to the city as 'some kind of shaping power over the ways in which our cities are made and remade' while indicating the writer's awareness of the crushing power of dominant structures.<sup>93</sup> This *bricolage*, often based on recycling practices, which is also registered in Sethi's, Chattarji's and Jha's works, points to the role of debris, leftovers, waste in the imagination of the modern city.<sup>94</sup>

The recycling of discarded material, from leather-work to waste-picking and to the art of making paper-birds, is central to Roy's novel. When Anjum first meets Saddam, he works as a cleaner in the mortuary next to the cemetery, and actually becomes an 'amateur surgeon' (M 73), able to conduct post-mortem operations and to handle human remains – which explains his ability to run Jannat Funeral services later on. Belonging to a caste of leather-workers, his original work also revolves around the handling of dead bodies:

Saddam knew no poetry and very little Urdu. But then, he knew other things. He knew the quickest way to skin a cow or buffalo without damaging the hide. He knew how to wet-salt the skin and marinate it with lime and tannin until it began to stretch and stiffen into leather. He knew how to calibrate the sourness of the marinade by tasting it, bleach it, buff, grease and was it till it shone. He also knew that the average human body contains between four and five litres of blood. (M 84)

This thorough description of leather work techniques resonates with Aman Sethi's ethnographical writing of manual work. The anaphora emphasizes the character's acquired knowledge, his precision and expertise, a praise which contrasts with the social stigma attached to these skills in India. The end of the excerpt thus openly connects leather work with caste violence, alluding to the human blood shed in the name of purity, in this case a direct reference to the murder of Saddam's father by a Hindu fascist mob near Delhi. This unnerving connection entangles practical knowledge and the awareness brought by this traumatic experience, the same awareness which haunts Tilo and Anjum who aren't able to

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"interstitial" they can only occupy spaces that are "allowed" by capitalism [...]. Ultimately, therefore, interstitial projects constitute retreats from political struggle for social transformation, not a viable strategy for achieving radical social transformation.' (p. 231). Yet he argues that as of now, in a hegemonic capitalist system, no alternative strategy poses a solid threat to the system, so that we need to 'imagine things we can do now which have reasonable chances of opening up possibilities under contingent conditions in the future' (Ibid., p. 232), thus defending the role of interstitial strategies in a long-term trajectory of emancipatory social transformation.

<sup>93</sup> Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, p. 5.

<sup>94</sup> About the role of waste-picking in cities of the Global South, see AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Nandini Sen, *Urban Marginalisation in South Asia: Waste Pickers in Calcutta* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).



‘un-know’ things (M 61).<sup>95</sup> The precise depiction enhances Saddam’s craftsmanship as well as its embeddedness in an iniquitous caste system, inevitably connecting these skills with the consciousness of the lethal stigma associated with it and the haunting memory of the violence it gives rise to.

Later deprived of his work, Saddam becomes a small-time entrepreneur, and manages to earn money through various tricks which are all related to the use of discarded material, with the complicity of an old mare, described as her ‘business partner’, an Indian version of Don Quixote’s Rocinante: ‘At night Saddam rode Payal home through the empty streets like a prince’ (M 77). This mock-heroic knight riding the city at night is a recurrent uncanny vision in the novel, and this sign of uneven urban mobility is turned into an element of fairy-tale, the mock-epic mode magnifying the character rather than debasing him, suggesting a form of secret, ephemeral power over the city. One of his informal businesses is to roam around hospitals and to sell medicine and used horse-shoes (which are supposed to bring luck), another is to sell pigeon feed to people looking for God’s benediction, using the same food again and again. These tricks are tiring and not very profitable but they ensure his independence: ‘none of it involved having a boss and that was the main thing’ (M 78), a claim which echoes Mohammed Ashraf’s conception of freedom and his reluctance to be subjugated to anyone’s authority.<sup>96</sup> The descriptions of Ashraf’s techniques to get hired (e.g. exhibiting his best-looking paintbrush) or not to get evicted (e.g. finding the best spot where to sleep while avoiding the eye of the camera) similarly emphasize the subject’s agency and his ability to trick the system. Within a crushing socio-economic formation, Ashraf and his acolytes, like Saddam Hussain, are represented as tricksters trying to make do within a rigged system rather than as victims or heroes. Sethi’s self-reflexive exposition of his ‘South Delhi’ fascination with the ‘illegality and ingenuity of the North’ (FM 56) prevents him from utterly romanticising these tactics. Roy’s and Sethi’s stress on agency is never tied up with a blind celebration of popular ingenuity to survive which would conceal the wider mechanisms at work.

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<sup>95</sup> Thus, Anjum’s inability to forget about Ahmedabad is also conceived of as a gesture of resistance against ‘the Great Project of Unseeing’ caste and community violence in India: ‘So Gujarat in 2002 is rapidly being erased from public memory. That should not happen. It deserves a place in history, as well as in literature. Anjum ensures that’ (Roy, ‘The Graveyard Talks Back’, in *Azadi*, p. 180).

<sup>96</sup> The tricks he performs also resonate with the collection of stories by Azra Tabassum and others, *Trickster City: Writings from the Belly of the Metropolis*, ed. and trans. by Shveta Sarda (Delhi: Penguin, 2010) and with Anamika Haksar’s film *Ghode Ko Jalebi Le Riya Hoon (Taking the Horse to Eat Jalebis)* (Gutterati Productions, 2019), portraying the everyday life and the dreams of four street dwellers who try to make a living in Old Delhi, through surrealist techniques of collage.

The radical potential of waste-picking and recycling is also embodied by Ahlam Baji, former midwife turned rag-picker, a formidable figure roaming the streets of Old Delhi in quest of debris:

In the years before her death, Ahlam Baji had grown disoriented and obese. She would float regally down the streets of the old city, like a filthy queen, her matted hair twisted into a grimy towel as though she had just emerged fresh from a bath in ass's milk. She always carried a tattered Kisan Urea fertilizer sack that she crammed with empty mineral-water bottles, torn kites, carefully folded posters and streamers left behind by the big political rallies that were held in the Ramlila grounds nearby. (M 59)

This wandering queen is reminiscent of Meera, a sweeper transformed into a mythical figure towering over her pile of heterogeneous debris turned into a work of art in one of Kolatkar's poems.<sup>97</sup> Ahlam Baji's mock-heroic portrait enhances her regal manners and her moodiness, as she abuses everyone and reluctantly accepts free food, making her into yet another vulnerable character whose forceful personality forecloses victimisation. When Tilo moves to the graveyard, Anjum deliberately ascribes her the room standing above Ahlam Baji's grave, pointing to their shared fierce temperament and their collection of discarded material, whether junk or debris of everyday life in Kashmir.

In fact, the detail of the fertilizer sack gestures towards Ahlam Baji's active use of the debris generated by the great city. This waste-picking queen, as well as the paper-birds maker Zakir Mian, whose business is the ornamental use of banknotes (M47), also conjure up the Benjaminian portrait of the writer as a rag-picker, inspired by Baudelaire's writings on the *chiffonnier*. Unlike the flâneur, the rag-picker scrutinises the ground, obsessed by the unnoticed material left over by capitalist society, endowing these residual elements with a new function, which subverts capitalist fetishism and exchange value.<sup>98</sup> The strength of Roy's writing lies in her close depiction of the materiality of these recycling practices, away from any easy romanticising of rag-picking as a symbol. Always drawing the reader's attention to the uneven structures which determine these practices, her writing also eschews

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<sup>97</sup> Arun Kolatkar, 'Meera', *Kala Godha: Poèmes de Bombay* (2004), trans. by Pascal Aquien and Laetitia Zecchini (Paris: Gallimard, 2013), p. 62. See Zecchini, 'From Scrap to Art: Recycling and Transfiguring the World', in *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism*, pp. 117-143.

<sup>98</sup> 'Let us descend a little lower and consider one of those mysterious creatures who live, as it were, off the leavings of the big city [...]. Here we have a man whose job is to pick up the day's rubbish in the capital. He collects and catalogues everything that the great city has cast off, everything it has lost, and discarded, and broken. He makes a selection, an intelligent choice; like a miser hoarding treasure, he collects the garbage that will become objects of utility or pleasure when refurbished by Industrial magic.' (Excerpt from Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels* (1869), quoted in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 350). See also Irving Wohlfarth, 'Et Cetera? The Historian as Chiffonnier', in *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, ed. by Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 12-32; Marc Berdet, 'Chiffonnier contre flâneur. Construction et position de la *Passagenarbeit* de Walter Benjamin', *Archives de Philosophie*, 75 (2012), 425-447.

the liberal praise of waste-picking, which is part of the essential informal economic network in the city, as evidence of the self-regulation of the urban economic system.

The art of making-do as a way to reclaim one's place in the city goes beyond recycling *stricto sensu* and extends from the graveyard to the whole city. It surfaces through the use of the city by itinerant workers as their 'giant bedroom, bathroom and closet', in Dasgupta's words, which Roy also describes (C 22). In a chapter narrated through Tilo's point of view, the text scrutinises the strategic sleeping positions chosen by migrant homeless workers sleeping on the street, having understood that car exhaust fumes acted as efficient mosquito repellent.<sup>99</sup> As with Sethi's writing of Ashraf's everyday life, the text foregrounds both the 'precise algebra' the street-dwellers figure out (M 256), the clever compromise they find, and the extremely restricted scope of choices they have in such an uneven dispensation. The latter is painfully emphasized when the characters are crushed by a truck, the final equation of their clever algebra.<sup>100</sup>

Another night scene witnessed by Tilo illustrates the migrant workers' use of urban infrastructure as substitute furniture and hints at its connection with claiming the right to the city. The character watches a group of migrant construction workers surrounding a small boy ready to urinate in a manhole: 'the women leaned on their shovels and pickaxes as they waited for their star to perform' (M 301). The mundane moment is turned into a spectacle, and the boy's urine into an offering to the city, a way to mark one's place, comically suggesting once more the value given to waste:

Nothing in the city belonged to the women. Not a tiny plot of land, not a hovel in a slum, not a tin sheet over their heads. Not even the sewage system. But now they had made a direct, unorthodox deposit, an express delivery straight into the system. *Maybe it marked the beginning of a foothold in the city.* (M 301, my emphasis)

The passage thus also humorously suggests the potential critical power given to an apparently trivial gesture. Even though the symbolism is comically far-fetched, the 'yellow leaf' of urine is to be connected with all the other instances of junk collected and transformed

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<sup>99</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>100</sup> The use of the phrase 'precise algebra' is a clear echo to Roy's 2001 essay *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, suggesting the overall uneven system this calculation is embedded in. This scene brings to mind Sampurna Chattarji's short-story 'Hungry', which also depicts a Bombay street-dweller's ability to spot the best road divider on which to sleep: 'he has tried them all, the raised dividers splitting the roads into left and right, southbound northdumbfounded. He knows the exact spots where they widen out so you can lie on your back looking at stars you cannot see' (DL 88). The story then veers off to a reverie about the legendary 'vada pao', or buttered bread of Bombay, the stream-of-consciousness technique closely rendering the delightful gustatory sensations imagined by the character, the emphasis laid on pleasure contributing to mitigate the sense of crisis (DL 89).

by characters (and by the writer). This is one of the clear instances of the junction between material and symbolical waste-picking in the novel, and of the connections between the active use of residual elements and the claim of one's right to the city.

Indeed, the metaphor of the 'foothold in the city' echoes the hijras' laughter, which 'could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future' (M 51) represented by the eunuch's laughter in one of the scenes of the Red Fort Sound and Light show. In this miniaturised spectacular version of history, projected onto the walls of the city itself, the 'clearly audible, deep, distinct, rasping, coquettish giggle of a court eunuch' (M 51) asserts the hijras' ancient lineage and their belonging to the history of Delhi.

*'There!'* Ustad Kulsoom Bi would say, like a triumphant lepidopterist who has just netted a rare moth. 'Did you year that? That is *us*. That is our ancestry, our history, our story. We were never commoners, you see, we were members of the staff of the Royal Palace.'

The moment passed in a heartbeat. But it did not matter. What mattered was that it *existed*. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being written out of it altogether. A chuckle, after all, could become a foothold in the sheer wall of the future. (M 51)

The comparison with the lepidopterist reflects the microscopic size of the detail which testifies to their presence in history and echoes Chaudhuri's 'entomologist' writing of Calcutta. It is through this tiny detail that they strategically attach themselves to the city and resist their erasure from history and from the future urban space. Thus, although seemingly dissimilar, these two fragments illustrate Roy's 'micropolitics', connecting material and symbolical reclamation: her writing salvages these unnoticed gestures through which one resists exclusion from urban space and might secure a place in the city's history and future.<sup>101</sup> In fact, the opening up to the future suggests the frail utopian hope carried by Roy's novel, based upon the retrieving of these micro-gestures. This stealthy chuckle, embodying the ordinary resistance enacted by Roy's anti-heroic characters, stands in opposition to the bright 'frozen smile' of beautified New Delhi (M 96) and to the 'cheerful' steel sculptures adorning the lawns where the migrant workers sleep, embodying the shallow surface bliss of the neoliberal city.<sup>102</sup> This unflinching sneer is also connected with the frightening 'saffron smiles' of Hindu fascists in the novel (M 61). This network of frightening smiles and warm

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<sup>101</sup> Rob Nixon's reading of Roy's 'politics of scale' proposes that her short essays are aimed at countering the 'national self-aggrandizement' of nationalist populist rhetoric and the genre of the 'ponderous, strategically impersonal epic report'. It enlightens her foregrounding of these small events as weapons against the gigantism of both nationalism and developmentalism, embodied by the genetically modified 'giant trout' evoked by Tilo in one of her letters to Dr Bhartiya (M 299) (see Nixon, p. 158, 168).

<sup>102</sup> See Chapter 1.

laughter hint at the comic dimension of the novel. However bleak the general tone, humour looms large in Roy's writing, running from harsh satire to gentle irony, as is evidenced through her in-depth micro-portraits of eccentric characters, eschewing all miserabilism.

The minute scale of resistance Roy explores is palpable at the end of the novel, which depicts Miss Jebeen's II urinating in the graveyard, echoing both her own miraculous appearance in a 'pool of light' at night in Jantar Mantar and the small boy urinating in a manhole:

With her eyes fixed on her mother she peed, and then lifted her bottom to marvel at the night sky and the stars and the one-thousand-year-old city reflected in the puddle she had made. Anjum gathered her up and kissed her and took her home.

By the time they got back, the lights were all out and everybody was asleep. Everybody, that is, except for Guih Kyom the dung beetle. He was wide awake and on duty, lying on his back with his legs in the air to save the world in case the heavens fell. But even he knew that things would turn out all right in the end. They would, because they had to.

Because Miss Jebeen, Miss Udaya Jebeen, was come. (M 438)

Once more surrounded with animals and insects, the messianic Miss Jebeen embodies the anti-heroic resistance offered to the gigantic projects of global city, the tiny hope that outcasts will have a place in this city. The novel closes on the minute figure of a dung beetle, yet another non-human character who is given a name (meaning dung beetle), echoing CR, the cockroach haunting New City in Raj Kamal Jha's novel. The vision of this miniature insect-Atlas on its back holding up the world in case it should fall symbolises Roy's use of vertiginous scalar variation and her indefectible belief in small things.

Jha's *She Will Build Him a City*, though dominated by the conflictual focus of the epic mode, also zooms in on the appropriation of urban space by outcast city-dwellers, which turns New City into a home of sorts through delirious episodes. The street-dwellers settled under the highway, whose begging techniques are delineated, are joined at some point by a dog named 'Bhow', which plays a crucial role in the novel: 'Home for Bhow is off the national highway next to a traffic signal beyond the toll gate where the thirty-two lanes veer off into a network of streets that twist and loop like petals of a giant flower and make up New City' (SW 135). The novel follows the trajectory of 'Orphan' who escapes his nursing home and traverses the city on Bhow's back, and recounts how they join the street-dwellers to turn the city's shopping mall into an ephemeral shelter to escape the scorching heat of the

city.<sup>103</sup> In a fantastic vein, Raj Kamal Jha's text imagines disenfranchised characters flouting the mall's disciplining of bodies and its consumerist imperatives to transform it into a utopia of hospitality and abundance. Their overthrow of the consumerist rules is all the more disruptive as the episode is preceded by the mall's advertising blurb (inspired by Gurgaon Ambience Mall's website), which consists in a digest of marketing publicity's hyperbolic language.<sup>104</sup> The characters reclaim the rhetoric of boundlessness and of community used in the blurb as they explore the endless forgotten corners of the place and turn the retail environment into a cornucopia of free goods enjoyed by a joyful gathering of outcasts.

One kilometre of shopping on each floor means countless bends and corners, sharp and gradual, alcoves and clearings, corridors that abruptly branch out or gradually meander away from the main atrium into spaces out of bounds for people during business hours. (SW 191)

The group alters the function of the furniture and 'recycles' the mall into a home: 'the counters are there to be climbed over so that the cooking areas, the gleaming steel ovens and sinks can be explored. Or chairs and tables joined to make beds for the night' (SW 192). It is also through the re-use of waste found in trash cans that the logic of segregation embodied by the mall is defeated, as suggested by the renaming of the mall into 'leftover heaven' (SW 193) – echoing Anjum's 'paradise' guest house. The nightly intruders also convert the whole place into a giant playground, imbuing it with a carnivalesque atmosphere as they disguise themselves with the stores' outfits or ride a shopping cart throughout the corridors. They thus turn the paradise of consumerism into one of games and revelry, 'spaces to play, places to hide' (SW 192). The gap between the glossy discourse of luxury and the merry band's playful journey through the mall illustrates how 'aberrant' practices of space, in Certeau's words, twist the high-end shopping experience that the mall is supposed to foster.

These deviant playful practices in the interstices of the neoliberal city divert the place from its original function and symbolism as an icon of novelty and prosperity, hinting at the re-shaping power of everyday practices, albeit belonging to the world of dreams. This moment of revelry may also read as a heightened, fantastic version of local practices of appropriation of these transnational spaces of consumerism. The anthropologist Sanjay

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<sup>103</sup> The reference to heat in the novel points to the protective space offered by the mall, and to its 'politics of micro-climate', which make of clean air and of temperate climate a luxury commodity (Lussault, p. 75), here appropriated by these nocturnal tricksters. This is even more the case in Indian cities, where the heat and the level of pollution of urban areas are extreme.

<sup>104</sup> 'The Mall is an apogee of lifestyle distinction, it offers not only unprecedented scale in terms of its size but also an experience of unparalleled retail mix [...]. The Mall is the largest operational shopping mall in India, with 1 kilometre of shopping experience on every floor.' (SW 167, emphasis in original).

Srivastava investigates the various uses of the mall by different portions of Delhi middle class, notably women, and his analysis challenges the univocal interpretation of the mall as a site which condenses the fractures dividing contemporary Indian urban society.<sup>105</sup>

The active re-creation of the mall echoes Anjum's conversion of the Mall into a memorial in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Both novels thus stage the penetration and appropriation of this profit-driven space by supposedly unintended visitors who have no intention to buy anything. Through their reinvention of the mall as a utopian space of hospitality and as a space where the past can be recovered, Jha's and Roy's novels provide a space of surreptitious political dissent.<sup>106</sup> In fact, these examples, tinged with irrealist hues, partake of the reinterpretation and reclamation of urban space through everyday, local practices, and hints at their connection with the memory of the city, as they re-inscribe the seemingly insulated discriminatory space of the mall into the history and geography of the city. The next section will thus explore the way the micro-scale of urban writing and the focus on local reclaiming tactics is intrinsically linked to the recovery of fragments of the urban past.

### III. Grounded Texts, Rooted Writers?

'I have depicted the conflicts of the 1960s as a struggle between opposed forms of modernism which I described symbolically as "the expressway world" and "a shout in the street"', claims Marshall Berman.<sup>107</sup> The end of the first section pointed out the significance of the road metaphor to account for the oppositional politics of Indian urban writing,

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<sup>105</sup> Sanjay Srivastava offers a nuanced account of malls in Delhi, not only based on 'lost authenticity' narratives but considering the citizens' perspectives on the promises of post liberalization as opposed to the strictures of planned economy. He also underlines the relative heterogeneity of malls in Delhi, more or less locally grounded (challenging their signifying a simple process of 'Americanisation') and their being sites of safe leisure for young and old women, offering a new imaginary of loitering. His work reflects how it becomes a space of fantasy for relatively poor people who act out fantasies of passing as global Indians (Srivastava, *Entangled Urbanism*, p. 213). Similarly, Michel Lussault's analysis of the shopping mall as a *hyper-place*, whose form and function are altered by specific local contexts and practices, seems to us more relevant than Augé's notion of *non-place* (see Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995) and Lussault, pp. 69-77).

<sup>106</sup> On the connection between utopia, erasure and the memory of urban space, see *Urban Utopias, Memory, Rights, and Speculation*, ed. by Barnita Bagchi (Kolkata: Jadavpur University Press, 2020).

<sup>107</sup> Berman, p. 329. He also references Jane Jacobs' seminal work on American Cities and the 'intricate sidewalk ballet' she closely depicts as signs of the ongoing romance of the street, resisting the onslaught of the expressway world, while pointing to the limits of Jacobs' approach (Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, quoted in Berman, p. 318. See Chapter 1).

resonating with Berman's defence of another form of modernism than that of *tabula rasa*. These texts foreground the intricate maze of streets, which imposes a slow rhythm to the city-dweller, against the dizzying speed and smooth lines of the highways. Berman's championing of an alternative modernism (or a 'modernism with ghosts') foregrounds the 'recycling' practices used by artists in the 1970s, creating new artistic forms from waste, detritus and debris of the past, which shows, in a Benjaminian fashion, how recollection can be tied up with critical thinking and fuel utopian desires, contesting the connection between looking backward and conservatism. This 'modernism with ghosts' enlightens our discussion of contemporary Indian writing on the city, which is underpinned by a belief in the radical aesthetic and political force of bringing remnants of the past to the surface.<sup>108</sup> In fact, the emphasis laid on dwelling in these narratives goes hand in hand with the excavating of the multiple historical layers of the locality, partaking of the writers' endeavour to 'localiz[e] dissent'.<sup>109</sup>

## 1. The Writer as Archaeologist

The material and symbolical importance of rag-picking and recycling as ways of carving one's space in the city can be connected with the writers' position, tracking residual fragments of the past in the present and, following Walter Benjamin's method of urban archaeology, using these debris as tools of radical critique and potentially revolutionary *praxis*.<sup>110</sup> Comparing memory and archaeology, Benjamin insists on the necessity to 'establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up', in other words, to draw connections between the fragments of the past and the urban space of the present. The emphasis they lay on local entrenchment also characterises their own self-positioning in their works: while Suketu Mehta roves across Bombay and

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<sup>108</sup> Berman, p. 333. Svetlana Boym's reflections on the 'off-modern', as a 'tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia', which critiques both the fascination for newness and the reinvention of tradition by exploring 'sideshadows and backalleys rather than the straight roads of progress' resonates with Berman's 'shout in the street' and illuminates Indian writers' conception of the city. The link is all the more relevant as she states that many 'off-modernist artists' came from outside Western Europe and the United States, i.e. from what we may call the semi-peripheries of the world-system, where modernity developed differently from the centres (Boym, pp. XVI-XVII, pp. 30-31).

<sup>109</sup> 'I really believe dissent has to be localized. The people who are winning battles right are those fighting on the ground. Those people need to be supported. The globalization of dissent has morphed into the NGO-ization of dissent.' (Arundhati Roy, 'Dissent has to be localized', Interview with Antonia Navarro-Tejero, in *Globalizing Dissent*, p. 201).

<sup>110</sup> See, for instance, Benjamin, 'Excavation and Memory', in *Selected Writings II.1*, p. 576.



Dasgupta draws an all-embracing panorama of Delhi, Chaudhuri and Sethi put down roots in one neighbourhood, their immersion relying on stasis rather than mobility, thus identifying with their subjects or characters. Benjamin's theorisation of the historian and critic as rag-picker is also enlightening insofar as the fragments excavated by contemporary Indian writers are not used to build a grand national narrative, but precisely to shatter it, bringing out debris of alternative histories which are marginalised by the narrative of India's 'emergence'.

Archaeological excavating, based on spatial fixity, may be construed in opposition to the constant movement of the flâneur, seeking stimulation in the array of commodities and of people offered by the modern city. However, if Benjamin's fragments on the flâneur are usually thought in correlation with mobility, I already highlighted in Chapter 5 the way Benjamin's review of Franz Hessel's book on Berlin inflects our understanding of this figure to emphasize his dwelling practice. Like his nineteenth-century counterpart, the twentieth-century avatar of the flâneur does move around the city, yet Benjamin insists on the dialectic between moving and the art of dwelling: 'the perfected art of the flâneur includes a knowledge of "dwelling"'.<sup>111</sup> The writer-dweller grounds himself in the city, haunts it as the 'priest of the *genius loci*', resonating with the guardian figure of Dr Bhartiya, rooted in Jantar Mantar, or with Anjum's companionship with the dead in the graveyard.<sup>112</sup>

The correlation between dwelling and paying attention to the unnoticed detail or trace of the past is made clear, and connects, as we stated, with Chaudhuri's own experience of Calcutta and with the radical potential he ascribes to stillness. His essay, *Calcutta: Two Years in a City*, captures his endeavour to look for remaining fragments of the past, and he is fascinated by the remainders of a certain version of urban modernity, such as the French windows, embodiments of the city's cross-cultural architecture in the early twentieth century. Unable to find the right place to exhibit his purchased French window, he explains that it seems everywhere out of context: 'the context was a city in which things were being

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<sup>111</sup> Benjamin, 'The Return of the Flâneur', in *Selected Writings II.1*, p. 264.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264. Other narratives focus on avatars of 'priests of the *genius loci*', local loiterers and hustlers, hired security guards or self-designated watchmen of the neighbourhood, who are often represented as having an acute knowledge of the city (see Choudhury, *The Epic City*, for instance). Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik define these local hustlers as 'diviners of the urban space', urban specialists whose sharp practical knowledge of the city's opaque streets is suffused with a 'magicality', fuelled by semi-legendary narratives ('Urban Charisma'). See Sampurna Chattarji, 'Gentle Folk' (DL 144-147), Raj Kamal Jha's novel, or Siddharth Choudhury 'The Leader of Men' (DM 72-82).

disinterred and dislodged from their moorings, and being washed ashore by an invisible tide' (CAL 18), hinting at the erasure enacted by neoliberal urban development.<sup>113</sup>

This imaginative and political concern with buried fragments which do not fit the great narrative of the postcolonial neoliberal nation draws Chaudhuri closer to Arundhati Roy's writing. This unexpected affinity between the modernist-inspired writer of brevity and ellipsis and the overtly political writer of capacious novels lies in their concern with the debris of global India, with the obsolete, the irrelevant, and the celebration of 'failure' as an act of resistance against the raging current of uneven development. In Roy's novel, the character of Tilo appears as an avatar of the writer, who notes the unnoticed disappearances in the city of Delhi as well as in Kashmir.<sup>114</sup> She rescues many invisible voices from oblivion, that of her mother's delirium-induced speech, that of Dr Bhartiya's 'news and views' that she types and prints every month, and ultimately, that of Musa and his fight for Kashmir's freedom. Her investigation and patient, obstinate archiving of Kashmir's everyday life under occupation is nevertheless characterised as a drift more than an organised computing of data, creating a 'ragged archive' and recalling the other eccentric quests of the novel.

Sometimes she took odd pictures. She wrote strange things down. She collected scraps of stories and inexplicable memorabilia that have appeared to have no purpose. There seemed to be no pattern or theme to her interest. She had no set task, no project. She was not writing for a newspaper or magazine, she was not writing a book or making a film. She paid no attention to things that most people would have considered important. Over the years, her peculiar, ragged archive grew peculiarly dangerous. It was an archive of recoveries, not from a flood, but from another kind of disaster [...]. None of it amounted to anything in the cut and thrust of real argument in the real world. But that didn't matter. (M 270)

What Tilo documents is not the spectacular catastrophe (as shown by the allusion to the 2014 flood in Srinagar) but the more surreptitious stranglehold of Indian occupation on everyday life.<sup>115</sup> The cult for the apparently irrelevant detail, the 'recovery' of fragments and junk from history takes a clear oppositional political value as these archives evidence the everyday manifestations of the attacks on human rights entailed by the Indian occupation of Kashmir is.

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<sup>113</sup> The tidal metaphor recalls Dasgupta's apocalyptic description of India's globalization in *Capital* (see Chapter 1).

<sup>114</sup> The history of Tilo, who comes from Kerala and studies architecture in Delhi, whose mother was a fierce activist in her small town, leaves no doubt as to the autobiographical inspiration of the character.

<sup>115</sup> The way the Indian military rule has turned the city into a military camp and a necropolis and has restricted the experience of urban space in Srinagar is closely delineated in the novel.

One instance of Tilo's reversal of hierarchy between what is relevant and what is not is to be found in the description of Miss Jebeen's funeral:

To someone looking down at the city from the ring of high mountains that surrounded it, the procession would have looked like a column of brown ants carrying seventeen-plus-one sugar crystals to their anthill to feed their queen. Perhaps to a student of history and human conflict, in relative terms that's all the little procession really amounted to: a column of ants making off with some crumbs that had fallen from the high table. As wars go, this was only a small one. Nobody paid much attention. So it went on and on. So it folded and unfolded over decades, gathering people into its unhinged embrace. (M 326)

Once more the text points to the political implications of scalar variation. It equates the bird's-eye view with that of the history student, for whom a child's funeral is insignificant and reveals the way Roy conceives of fiction as an alternative discourse to that of history as a grand narrative concerned with major 'events' (such as the flood), a street-level discourse which is able to capture the least micro-event, identified as an assemblage of debris.<sup>116</sup> Far from undermining the procession, its miniaturisation as a line of ants carrying crumbs only adds to its importance, as suggested by the acute observation of tiny insects in the novel, and in particular of ants, such as the one eating cake crumbs in Tilo's room: 'Ants making off with crumbs larger than themselves. Black ants, pink crumbs' (M 214).<sup>117</sup> The tremendous destruction embodied by the microscopic funeral is highlighted by the metaphor of folding and unfolding, which enlarges the scope, suggesting that these unnoticed acts of violence are perpetuated precisely because nobody pays attention to them. The same metaphor is used to describe the massacres witnessed by Anjum in Ahmedabad and thus reads as a code connecting mob violence and state violence, suggesting the ways in which macro and micro scales interact in Roy's writing. Thus, *The Ministry's* panoramic views of the country, studied in Chapter 1, are always combined with the myopic view of the ants carrying fallen crumbs of cake, suggesting that this constant scalar variation may help to start understanding and resisting the infinitely complex maze of violence in contemporary India.

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<sup>116</sup> This distanced view is also the perspective adopted by the civil servant Biplab Dasgupta in order to normalise the underlying violence which pervades Indian society: 'Normality in our part of the world is a bit like a boiled egg: its humdrum surface conceals at its heart a yolk of egregious violence. As long as the centre holds, as long as the yolk doesn't run, we'll be fine. In moments of crisis it helps to take the long view' (M 150-151). This vision is discounted by the narrator as a way of depoliticising violence, at odds with Roy's ground-level, 'small-scale' politics.

<sup>117</sup> Note Tilo's extreme attention to the realm of the microscopic, as she feels her nails and hair growing, as she greets an owl on her windowsill every evening, recalling Anjum's seeing off and welcoming birds in the graveyard (M 213).

The archaeological gesture of Roy's writing finds its culminating point in the graveyard, in which the stories of the dead are transmitted though not glorified, resisting the erasure of marginalised communities (Muslims, Christians, hijras, and prostitutes, among others) from the history of Delhi. Claiming this discarded plot of land, in which the centuries of the city's history are sedimented, as a place in which to live reveals the close relationship between the struggle for the city and the recovery of its past. Even though only a nascent institution, Jannat Guest House is entrenched in the history of the city, defined by the companionship between the living and the dead. Therefore, when Anjum settles in, each and every dead 'inhabitant' of the graveyard is described, this gallery of characters and of their lives reading as a description of one's neighbours (M 58-60). The place is thus inhabited by the life-narratives of several generations of urban-dwellers, which are transmitted to each guest: when Tilo moves in, Anjum tells her the story of Ahlam Baji, on whose grave her room is built, and of the people she brought into the world, as though they shared the room with her (M 305). Anjum thus replicates in her own way the hijra tradition of passing on the history of eunuchs and hijras to each new member of the community, thus tracing back their lineage in order to assert their place in the city. One sign of the living presence of the dead is the smell that exudes from the grave of Anjum's aunt, Begum Zeenat Kauser, who spent her life cooking for a restaurant in Delhi: 'even when life left her, she was interred in her grave smelling like a delicious Old Delhi meal' (M 58). The comic sensorial presence hints at the enduring presence of the past, which is all the more significant as the life of Anjum's aunt is deeply enmeshed in the history of Partition and of the subsequent ghettoization of the Muslims as 'intruders' in Delhi, thus embodying a fragment of history that the grand narrative of Hindu India tries to erase.

Redeeming the overhauled relationship with death in Kashmir, the boundary between life and death is willingly blurred in the graveyard. In fact, the conversation between Jannat Guest House and the graveyards of Kashmir is maintained through the practice of 'keeping the door illegally open' between the living and the deceased. In Jannat Guest House, the uncertainty about death is not necessarily linked to extra-legal violence and to the secrecy surrounding death but is a way for Anjum and her friends to 'soften the line' between life and death. If Musa is thought to be buried under the name of Commandant Gulrez in Srinagar (whereas his comrade Gulrez is actually buried there), he is then buried *in absentia* in Jannat Guest House. Dwelling in this interstitial space between life and death makes Tilo less and less anguished about the 'potential looming news of Musa's death':

Not because she loved him any less, but because the battered angels in the graveyard that kept watch over their battered charges held open the doors between worlds (illegally, just a crack), so that the souls of the present and the departed could mingle, like guests at the same party. It made life less determinate and death less conclusive. Somehow everything became a little easier to bear. (M 398)

The door which is illegally open allows the outcasts to put their foot in the door, or, in other words, it becomes their ‘foothold in the sheer wall of the future’ (M 51). The novel weaves a web of images hinting at the political significance of these invisible gestures and cracks. Holding the door slightly open appears as soothing but also as a means of resistance against the organised forgetfulness of the ‘battered’ people.

The companionship with the dead, kept alive through narratives, chimes with Certeau’s argument that the only liveable places are those which are haunted: ‘There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can “invoke” or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in’.<sup>118</sup> Beyond haunting, the novel shows that the multiple spirits of the graveyard are constantly invoked by Anjum’s fragmentary tales, thus disrupting the smooth surface of Delhi as a global city. Similarly, the episode of the visit to the mall, discussed in Chapter 1, shifts from a gothic writing of this space, pervaded by the spectral presence of Saddam Hussein’s father, beaten to death on the site where the mall stands, to the emphasis on the active remembering of the deceased. After Saddam tells the story of his father, the group decides to buy a shirt in the name of the departed ‘(like people bought chadars in dargah)’ (M 412) and to bury it in the old graveyard. The shirt, a standardised commodity which comes from the mall, is paradoxically used as a memorial and funeral object to honour the memory of Saddam’s father, which has been erased by the building. It becomes a constructed trace of the father, and symbolises the characters’ capacity to recreate imaginary traces where real ones have been wiped out. The analogy with the ritual of buying *chadars* in shrines (which Anjum herself performs in Ajmer to pray for Zainab’s health) enhances the collapse of the boundaries between commercial and religious place. Just like the new ‘stylish, Madras-checked shirt’ (M 413) is converted into a paradoxical emblem of the dead father, the mall, flaunted as an icon of global modernity, is turned into an imaginary mausoleum.

The text thus endows this seemingly a-historical space with temporal depth and memorial value. Just like the shopping mall on the edge of Delhi is reinvented as a mausoleum, the persistent desire to perpetuate the significance and memory of a place

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<sup>118</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, p. 268.

despite their material disappearance is also palpable through the ongoing devotion of people to the shrine of Wali Dakhani in Ahmedabad. Destroyed and built over, it is still venerated by people who leave flowers on the tarred road where it used to be. The road is imaginatively turned into a memorial by worshippers of the Urdu poet and saint, thus thwarting the dynamics of erasure of neoliberal urban development (M 46). Similarly, if Jha's novel can be read through the lens of the gothic, underscoring the spectralisation of the dispossessed at work in New City, one could also construe the enduring presence of subaltern inhabitants in the interstices of the city as a way to claim the city as their own despite the attempts to dislodge them. In addition to 'CR', the cockroach, Ms Rose is an instance of micro-resistance to displacement as she is deeply rooted in the cinema hall of New City. The old lady has taken shelter in the forgotten corners of the cinema after having witnessed the disappearance of the farmland over which New City was constructed (SW 214), thus mooring herself in this place and refusing to leave her home despite its disappearance.

Therefore, the archaeological writing of Amit Chaudhuri, Raj Kamal Jha and Arundhati Roy suggests that the prevailing micro-scale of representation enables the literary text to shed light on the erased presences of New India. Roy's writing evidences the intersection of the epic and the ordinary as she uses both the capaciousness of fiction (identifying her novel to a gigantic labyrinthic city) and its power to delve into the minute insignificant moments of everyday life. She thus writes against the success-story of global India and its attending cleansed global city through both epic excess and ordinariness, shunning the great spectacular events of history to focus on columns of brown ants or on a small commune of unruly misfits dwelling in a graveyard on the edge of the city. The specific localities she explores appear as ones among many sites of small seditions and humble hope. Against the empty smile of the global city, she pits the chuckle of her scarred yet fierce people.

## 2. 'Localizing Dissent'

The examination of the politics of characterisation and of the emphasis on dwelling as a minoritarian way of reclaiming one's right to the city supports my argument that local grounding is given radical political value in these urban narratives. This does not amount to say that these writers are not 'global' in the sense that I have delineated in Chapter 3.

Siddharth Chowdhury's or Amit Chaudhuri's writing creates a transcultural imagination of Indian cities and addresses the global ramifications of their development as much as Rana Dasgupta or Suketu Mehta. However, they do it in surreptitious ways and they foreground a local level of representation and analysis, pushing the global to the margins. The micro and macro scales constantly interact, both in the epic and the ordinary modes of urban writing, yet the microscopic scale is given prominence in the latter. The importance of the local is also evidenced by the presence of vernacular languages in the texts, which suggests that their narratives are *infused* with the multilingual world of Indian cities, as I showed in Chapter 4.<sup>119</sup> Thus, if writing in English inevitably narrows down the scope of their local readership to an Anglophone elite, the literary refraction of the daily translations and collisions between languages which occur in the streets of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata suggests their entrenchment.<sup>120</sup>

The focus on the multi-layered cultural, social and linguistic world of the locality embeds these literary representations within the rising concern with the everyday and with the local in social and political sciences. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have thus examined the lines connecting Sethi, Chaudhuri and Chowdhury with thinkers of the everyday such as Lefebvre, Certeau or Perec, primarily focusing on everyday crises, individual agency and interstitial tactics and heterotopic spaces more than on spectacular catastrophes, structural determinations and head-on collisions.<sup>121</sup> The writers' emphasis on the tactical use of urban resources and waste also locate their literary inquiries in the current discussion on urban commons: one may think of Amita Baviskar's work on the complexity of environmental issues and on the fair use of commons in Delhi, or of David Harvey's reflections on the creation of 'urban commons'.<sup>122</sup>

The rooted radicalism which pervades their narratives can be connected with the writers' *location* in the city they explore, their everyday experience of the by-lanes of Matia

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<sup>119</sup> The metaphor of 'infusion' is used and discussed by Roy in her essay 'In What Language Fall Over Tormented Cities' (in *Azadi*, p. 14).

<sup>120</sup> 'Translation is daily life, it is street activity, and it's increasingly a necessary part of ordinary folk's survival kit.' (Ibid., p. 14).

<sup>121</sup> The debate between the emphasis on individual uses of urban space as opposed to macro-scale analyses of urban forms also runs through the field of urban studies at large. For an example of these different scalar approaches with respect to cities of the Gulf, see Roman Stadnicki, 'Le capitalisme perché', review of Yasser Elsheshtawy, *Temporary Cities: Resisting Transience in Arabia* (2019) and *The New Arab Urban: Gulf Cities of Wealth, Ambition and Distress*, ed. by Harvey Molotch and Davide Ponzini (2019), *La Vie des idées*, 10 October 2019, <<https://laviedesidees.fr/Elsheshtawy-Temporary-Cities-Molotch-Ponzini-New-Arab-Urban.html>> [accessed 13 June 2021].

<sup>122</sup> Baviskar, *Uncivil City*; Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, pp. 67-88. See also Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Common: On Revolution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, trans. by Matthew MacLellan (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

Mahal, Sadar Bazaar or Daryaganj in Delhi, Ballygunge in Kolkata or Kala Ghoda in Mumbai fuelling their street-corner narratives. Thus, Roy's interest in international politics and culture is tied up with her visceral attachment to and concern with the many localities of India. In the wake of the global buzz generated by her first novel, she writes: 'for a whole year I've cartwheeled across the world, anchored always to thoughts of home and the life I would go back to. Contrary to all the enquiries and predictions about my impending emigration, that was the well I dipped into. That was my sustenance. My strength'.<sup>123</sup>

This local entrenchment is sometimes wedded to local activism, suggesting that their imaginative preoccupation with the city is furthered by direct intervention into the urban political fabric. One example is Amit Chaudhuri's initiative to prevent the destruction of Calcutta's architecture, in particular that of late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth-century residential buildings. The architectural interweaving of indigenous and Art Deco elements, evidencing the multi-layered material and cultural history of the city, distinguishes, in the writer's eyes, South Calcutta neighbourhoods. Chaudhuri's campaign emerged in the context of the growing financialization of real estate in Indian cities, which has deeply affected urban development since the mid-2000s, creating what Searle calls 'landscapes of accumulation'.<sup>124</sup> Despite the stalling impact of the 2008 economic crisis, urban land has become a more profitable financial asset than the structures built on it, and on both publicly- and privately-owned land, ancient buildings are increasingly being destroyed to 'redevelop' the ground they stand on (often as high-profile standardised residential and commercial buildings). Amit Chaudhuri's project, called CAL (or Calcutta Architectural Legacies) aims to raise awareness about these buildings as architectural tokens of the multiple cultures intersecting in Calcutta, and to redevelop them in a sustainable way, trying to avoid the destruction of this legacy.<sup>125</sup> The history of CAL evidences both its intimate relationship with Chaudhuri's conception of the city and the writer's oscillation between local and global intellectual and political roots. It started with an open letter to Calcutta and West Bengal officials, signed by many Indian and international artists, historians, economists, architects and activists, among which world-renowned economist

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<sup>123</sup> Roy, 'The End of Imagination', in *MSH*, p. 8.

<sup>124</sup> Searle, *Landscapes of Accumulation*. By the same author, 'Fragile Financialization: The Struggle for Power and Control in Indian Real Estate Investment', *Metropolitica*, 27 November 2020, <<https://metropolitica.org/Fragile-Financialization-The-Struggle-for-Power-and-Control-in-Indian-Real.html>> [accessed 30 November 2020] (see Chapter 1).

<sup>125</sup> Anik Dutta's film *Bhooter Bhabishyat*, among others, addresses this issue through fantastic comedy.



Amartya Sen, but it gained international attention through Chaudhuri's piece in *The Guardian* (in which he regularly contributes) in 2015.<sup>126</sup>

CAL significantly focuses on residential neighbourhoods, away from grandiose buildings, and this anti-monumental approach coincides with Chaudhuri's conception of Calcutta's modernity. The initiative's website claims: 'We point to the desirability and necessity of renewal and reuse over destruction, while recognising that creative reuse is a difficult challenge, but an unavoidable one if we are to eventually counter gentrification, packaging areas for tourists, and what Amit Chaudhuri has called 'boutiquefication'.<sup>127</sup> The term used by Chaudhuri points to the complex social and economic issues involved in redeveloping historic heritage, among which that of exoticisation and of gentrification.<sup>128</sup> In fact, his campaign has been criticised for its 'bourgeois' project fuelling an uncritical nostalgia for a bygone Calcutta and divorced from issues of urban domination and exclusion. I would argue that the claim to preserve traces of the urban past is intimately connected with larger concerns for social and political justice. Yet, one could question the project's specific valuing of Art Deco houses and of certain neighbourhoods over other parts of the city. Other endeavours to preserve buildings or entire neighbourhoods beyond this restricted scope have emerged in the past decade, such as architect Nilina Deb Lal's work on the Alipore Jail, which links the architectural preservation of localities to the struggle for urban sustainability and the use of urban commons. Part of Deb's argument is that the frantic pace of real-estate development deprives the city and the citizens of its resources.<sup>129</sup> This initiative is also located in the larger commitment against the erasure of the multi-layered past of the city, which, as we've seen through this chapter, has strong political, social and environmental implications.

Roy's representation of architecture and infrastructure is always connected to larger issues of erasure and exclusion, grounded in her 'localized' dissent. The political implications of architecture are already addressed in her 1974 film script *In Which Annie*

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<sup>126</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, 'Calcutta's Architecture is Unique. Its Destruction is a Disaster for the City', *Guardian*, 2 July 2015, <<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/jul/02/calcutta-architecture-heritage-destruction-city-campaign-amit-chaudhuri>> [accessed 13 June 2021]. See also CAL official website: <<https://cal-legacies.com/>> [accessed 13 June 2021].

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> See, for instance, the very chic boutique-hotels of Calcutta Bungalow, or Haveli Dharampura in Old Delhi.

<sup>129</sup> Nilina Deb, Interview with the author, Calcutta, 14 December 2018. About her campaign against the razing of the Alipore jail buildings and redevelopment of its open spaces for the real estate market (see Subrata Chatteraj, 'PIL Against Razing of Heritage Jail Buildings', *Times of India*, 11 May 2019, <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/pil-against-razing-of-heritage-jail-bldgs/articleshow/69274953.cms>> [accessed 13 June 2021]).

*Gives It Those Ones*, set in the Delhi School of Architecture, which features an idealistic student's radical plan to solve the problem of urbanisation, as well as another student's incendiary discourses against the money-making industry of architecture, embodied by the imbalance between the architect and the labourer on the same construction site.<sup>130</sup> Drawing on her own training as an architect, Roy exposes the use of architecture as a way for dominant classes to project their power. She tackles the monumentalist craze which characterises contemporary India, while also using the suggestive power of architecture in her writing to 'translate cash-flow charts and scintillating boardroom speeches into real stories about real people with real lives'.<sup>131</sup> Her depiction of Antilla, the gigantic tower erected in the middle of Mumbai already evoked in Chapter 2, draws this chapter to a close, encapsulating the connection between architecture and the politics of the urban ordinary. Roy's essay 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story', opens on this spectacular building, which seems uninhabited. A symbol of the upper and middle class's simultaneous domination and secession from the city, this monumental tower epitomizes the uneven and combined development of the city, in particular in its latest, global, form.

I stood outside Antilla for a long time watching the sun go down. I imagined that the tower was as deep as it was high. That it had twenty-seven-story-long tap root, snaking around below the ground hungrily sucking sustenance out of the earth, turning it into smoke and gold [...]. As night fell over Mumbai, guards in crisp linen shirts with crackling walkie-talkies appeared outside the forbidding gates of Antilla. The lights blazed on, to scare away the ghosts perhaps. The neighbours complain that Antilla's bright lights have stolen the night. Perhaps it's time for us to take back the night.<sup>132</sup>

The writer's imagination of an underground monstrous network of taps gives poignant expression to the intrinsic link between the city's development and the extraction and depletion of natural resources. The sunset scene emphasizes the spectral dimension of the tower, haunted by the ghosts of capitalism. The impoverished farmers driven to suicide, the spirits of dead rivers, the pillaged mountains and forests, continue to visit the city. The writer's final call to action is tied up with the night, thus echoing Roy's emphasis on underground forms of resistance and seditions arising from the forgotten corners of the planet.<sup>133</sup> The passage stresses

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<sup>130</sup> See Joel Kuortti, 'City and Non-City: Political and Gender Issues in *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*', in *Globalizing Dissent*, pp. 80-90.

<sup>131</sup> Roy, 'The Ladies Have Feelings', in *MSH*, p. 124.

<sup>132</sup> Roy, 'Capitalism: A Ghost Story', in *MSH*, pp. 652-653.

<sup>133</sup> See our analysis of the tension between darkness and light in Roy's writing in Chapter 1. For another example of the monumentalist craze of nationalist leaders, see the project of a 192-metre statue of Chattrapati Shivaji (the Marathi warrior, the icon of the Hindu chauvinist movement of the Shiv Sena) opposite Bombay

the necessity to reclaim the stolen night, which has been corrupted by the artificial lights of the tower, and to fight with the ghosts of the capitalist city. The final sentence is in keeping with the shift from the observation of spectrality to the revolutionary praxis of walking with the ghosts.

In the foreword to her collected essays published in 2019, Roy connects this gleaming monument of capitalism with the ‘world’s tallest statue’ built in the desert of Gujarat in the memory of Sardar V. Patel, an independence leader.<sup>134</sup> Inaugurated in 2018, the 182-meter statue, one among many other hubristic nationalist monuments, stands opposite the Sardar Sarovar Dam, on the site of a hamlet which had been destroyed because of the dam against which Roy has protested since 1998: ‘the whole village of Kothie, had it still existed, could have been accommodated in its big toe.’<sup>135</sup> Roy’s incongruous image mirrors the surreal ‘tyranny of scale’ which underlies the oversized statue, the erased Lilliputian village hinting at the satirical tone of the text. The identification of the inhabitants with toenails dirt further expresses the state’s humiliating neglect of these ‘unimagined communities’, airbrushed from the clean picture of New India.<sup>136</sup> She imagines her texts as ‘pieces of laundry – poor people’s washing – strung across the landscape between these two monuments, interrupting the good news bulletins and spoiling the views.’<sup>137</sup> The classical sartorial metaphor, identifying written and textual fabrics, is reshuffled to express her politics of small things. The identification of her texts with small fragile fragments, which are precariously joined together to connect two colossal elements – suggesting the wedding of unbridled capitalism with nationalism –, hints at her humble yet resolute faith in the power of small things and practices to topple formidable entities.<sup>138</sup> It points to the disruptive effect of Roy’s microscopic writing, obfuscating the blinding light of ‘Shining India’. These two examples capture how Roy’s dissent, whose global reach was underlined in Chapter 3, is grounded in local issues, pointing to the political and aesthetic value of scalar interaction.

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in the Arabian sea. The recent redevelopment of the government buildings in Delhi partakes of the same glorification of the Hindu nation.

<sup>134</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘Foreword’, in *MSH*, p. XV.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. XIV-XV.

<sup>136</sup> Nixon, p. 151.

<sup>137</sup> Arundhati Roy, ‘Foreword’, in *MSH*, p. XVI.

<sup>138</sup> Roy ‘sees the artist and intellectual as ‘connectors’, as those who reveal the meaning of things’ (Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, ‘Committed Writing, Committed Writer?’, in *Globalizing Dissent*, p. 104).

Far from undermining or overlooking the processes of domination and exploitation at work in contemporary Indian cities, these narratives of the locality prove as alert to the inequalities of urban development as the texts in which the epic mode dominates, reconfiguring them in subtle ways. In Roy's, Sethi's, Chaudhuri's and Chowdhury's works, the dismantling of the false utopias of the world-class city is not primarily deployed through dystopic landscapes but through small-scale 'real utopias' or way-stations on the road to a more equal city. These texts delineate spaces of relative autonomy within the system, in which the struggle for the city is led through secret byways and underground paths. The spectacle of India's 'arrival', fuelling aspirational tales of individual success which play out in the city, is thus debunked through the focus on eccentric anti-heroes and on surreptitious attempts to thwart dominant structures, hinting at a form of rooted radicalism, with tricks, endurance and compromises as the only available weapons to appropriate the city in such an uneven field of possibilities. To aspiration they oppose a subdued hope, which also takes the form of looking back at the cities' past rather than 'looking forward', as Roy writes in the prologue novel. These micro, local narratives rescue these misfit characters who are likely to be erased from the smooth narrative of twenty-first-century India. The critical force of these fictional and nonfictional works does not lie in their offering panoramas of catastrophic urban development but in the fragmentation of neoliberal macro-narratives of triumph into a multitude of centrifugal storylines and trajectories, thwarting any attempt at drawing a linear narrative of urban development in India.

These grounded urban imaginations also help to challenge the political and aesthetic emphasis laid on mobility in urban studies as well as in postcolonial theory, often referring to Rushdie's own theorisation of the simultaneous curse and boon of being a 'translated' individual, and his claim that 'we are all migrant people'.<sup>139</sup> This perspective has been criticised for its abstraction from the various material conditions of migration (conflating forced migration and chosen journeys across borders) and its (perhaps unintended) complicity with celebrations of globalization and the cultural diversity enabled by its attendant hypermobility.<sup>140</sup> Simon Gikandi thus tackles the overemphasis on the privileged cosmopolitan subject as the centre of postcolonial discourse, and the 'error to equate the local with parochialism and fundamentalism and to see it as a form of retreat from global

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<sup>139</sup> Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', in *Imaginary Homelands*, p. 17; 'Gunter Grass', in *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>140</sup> See Introduction

cultural flows'.<sup>141</sup> His focus on the production of locality by refugees within metropolitan urban centres as an alternative narrative of global cultural flows illuminates the way Sethi's migrant characters or Roy's rootless protagonists recreate precarious localities in the heart of the metropolis.

Thus, slow motion or immobility are not celebrated *per se* in these texts, but shown as minor, provisional ways to survive in the city while being excluded from or willingly staying out of the race for profit. Similarly, taking after Doreen Massey's warning against the exclusive emphasis on the locality, I would say that my analysis does not seek to exalt the local level as such, 'either as object of analysis or as arena of political action',<sup>142</sup> but to suggest that it is the constant scalar interaction which constitutes the critical power of these literary urban imaginations, in which local and global scales are intertwined through distinct configurations.

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<sup>141</sup> Gikandi, 'Between Roots and Routes', in *Rerouting the Postcolonial*, p. 32.

<sup>142</sup> Massey, 'The Politics of Locality Studies'.

## CONCLUSION

The starting point of this thesis was the emergence of a substantial body of anglophone fictional and nonfictional writings *from* and *of* Indian cities in the 1990s and its connection with the liberalization of the Indian economy. This shift in economic policy, I argued, has triggered radical mutations in the material and cultural forms of urban spaces, and has intensified the global success of Indian writing in English. After decades of planned economy, the new position of India in the world-system and its coerced embrace of neoliberalism, turning it into a new territory where surplus capital (both economic and cultural) could be absorbed, have altered the way cities were planned, developed, conceived, and imagined. Fuelled by a proliferation of images of the Indian ‘world-class’ city of the future, contemporary Indian urban planning is primarily characterised by the attempt to flatten urban space and to homogenize its social and aesthetic fabric.

This thesis has delineated the ways in which Indian anglophone literature critically reflects upon these changes through the development of an imaginary which expresses itself through the interplay of two heterogeneous modes. This interplay, I argue, constitutes a new literary urban aesthetic, defined by a tension between the *epic* and the *ordinary*. The close and comparative readings of these ten texts on Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata show that this tension, resulting in the intertwining of discrete registers, thematic focuses, scales and rhythms, cannot be resolved into a homogeneous form. This formal heterogeneity refracts the juxtaposition of heterogeneous social realities within the global Indian city.

The six chapters have mapped the contours of these two approaches of the city which constantly interact, and showed how one often dominates another in any single text. The overlapping of the two modes can be seen in Roy’s, Jha’s and Mehta’s writings, for instance, in their conflation of the heightened tone of the epic – palpable in the cataclysmic imagery and the telescopic views of mutating cities – with a corresponding deflated note – expressed in the ethnographic recording of ordinary practices and microscopic views of the sensorial experience of the city. The oscillation between an allegorical register and a documentary

one, particularly striking in Dasgupta's and Roy's representations of urban violence, also reflects the tension between the expansive and contracting impulses of the epic and the ordinary. This conflict also appears in the magnifying of mundane events in Chaudhuri's, Mehta's and Chowdhury's texts, which turn everyday moments into dramatic scenes or adventures, via a mock-epic register. The mock-epic register actually runs through most of the works of this corpus and hints at these writers' satirical eye, which exposes the contradictions of contemporary Indian society through comic hyperbole. The use of crime fiction codes by Mehta, Jha and Chowdhury is yet another example of the interplay of rhetoric inflation and deflation in Indian urban writing: Suketu Mehta's tales of Mumbai gangsters, Raj Kamal Jha's portrayal of a psychotic criminal businessman and Siddharth Chowdhury's stories of petty crimes oscillate between a spectacular aesthetic of violence and the emphasis on the ordinariness of everyday brutality, thus hinting at the ability of crime fiction to grasp the volatile urban atmosphere of twenty-first-century Indian cities.

The contribution I hope to bring to the literary history of Indian writing in English is two-fold, and concerns both the aesthetic and political dimensions of this literature. First, if the city had been a source of inspiration for Indian anglophone writers at least since the 1980s, I argue that post-liberalization Indian urban writing is characterised by an intensified blurring of generic boundaries, which contributes to the renewal of the urban imagination and to *provincializing* the Indian novel in English. Reading together fiction and nonfiction has evidenced that both genres are equally fuelled by the contradictory expansive and contracting impulses of the epic and the ordinary, and by contrasting political visions of the city. The dynamic field of urban non-fiction, ranging from literary reportages and essays to city 'biographies' and return narratives, draws on the tremendous *poetic* power of the city as a concentration of narratives as much as fiction.<sup>1</sup> These hybrid literary forms appropriate fictional codes while moving away from the form of the novel. Mehta's, Sethi's and Dasgupta's documentary narratives thus elaborate pluralistic formal strategies which

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<sup>1</sup> The growth of urban nonfiction is a global literary phenomenon, as evidenced by the number of recent publications on cities across the world, including, for instance, city biographies (Peter Ackroyd, *London: The Biography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000); Simon Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011)), travel writing (Régine Robin, *Mégapolis. Les derniers pas du flâneur* (Paris: Stock, 2009); Laure Murat, *Ceci n'est pas une ville* (Paris: Flammarion, 2016)), psychogeography (Eric Hazan, *L'invention de Paris* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2002); Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2016)), memoir (Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul, Memories and the City*, transl. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber, 2006)), literary essay and investigations (Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc* (Paris: Fayard, 2007); Jean Rolin, *La clôture* (Paris: P.O.L., 2002); Ben Judah, *This is London. Life and Death in the World City* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016)).

conflate fictional techniques (such as dramatization, the reconstruction of interviewees' subjectivities, or the rewriting of mythologies) and ethnographic methods (participant observation, thick description, identification of social types or patterns). Contemporary Indian writers also re-work the novel form to capture a shifting urban space, redrawing the lines between fiction and nonfiction. To recall a few examples, Jha's plotlines are always woven out of actual events, whether 'small' news items (a collapsing wall, a tram or car accident) or outbursts of collective violence (the 2002 riots in Ahmedabad). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is similarly immersed in the multi-faceted economic, social and political turmoil of contemporary India, and its formal heterogeneity makes it an unclassifiable literary object. This capacious, dense novel juxtaposes narration with authorial interventions, letters, diaries, judicial testimonies, a juxtaposition which suggests the necessity for the writer to blur generic lines in order to convey a fragmented social reality. In a different way, Siddharth Choudhury and Amit Chaudhuri undermine the genre of the novel from within as they splinter it into a series of chronicles and vignettes, and dim the distinction between fiction and autobiography. Siddharth Choudhury's autobiographical yet highly stylised stories and novels, like Amit Chaudhuri's fiction, are not clearly dissociated from their authors' lives, a permeability which Chaudhuri claims as part of the osmosis between living and writing.<sup>2</sup>

The growth of urban documentary narratives and the reworking of the novel form partake of a larger movement of redefinition of generic frontiers in contemporary Indian literature. This may be related to the democratization of the Indian English novel and to its interaction with other fictional and nonfictional forms, such as popular cinema, pulp fiction (romance, noir detective fiction), fantasy, and graphic novels.<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the growing centrality of nonfiction and its cross-fertilisation with fiction helps to enrich critical discourses on Indian writing in English by *provincializing* the novel. The ubiquitous category of the 'Indian novel in English', which is often conflated with that of Indian *literature* at large (thereby overlooking the tremendously rich and varied history of other forms such as short fiction, essays and poetry), has been deemed the adequate form to re-imagine the postcolonial condition and to critique nationalist history. However, I have tried to show both the heterogeneity of contemporary Indian novels and the emergence of other literary forms, and to shift the analytical focus from the nation to the city. This focal

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<sup>2</sup> Chaudhuri, *Friend of my Youth*, p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Anjaria, 'Introduction', in *A History of the Indian Novel in English*, p. 12. See also the introduction of this dissertation.



variation, informed by the method of literary world-system theory, has allowed me to demonstrate that what these fictional and nonfictional works re-imagine through the prism of the city is the interaction between a national history and a global history of uneven modernity.

I propose that the amalgamation of fiction and nonfiction in contemporary Indian urban writing also stems from these writers' social and political engagement with their urban environment. All the writers of the corpus have indeed a fluid relationship to literary forms and genres, and consider fiction and nonfiction as different forms which are part of the same writing project, fuelled by their profession or their political commitment. Raj Kamal Jha's profession as the chief editor of *The Indian Express*, Aman Sethi's and Suketu Mehta's journalistic portfolio, Rana Dasgupta's stance as a public intellectual, Arundhati Roy's multifarious political struggles, and Amit Chaudhuri's cultural and political essays, evidence the constant interaction of their writing with society, denoting a form of literary activism which is not devoid of contradictions, notably because of its addressing a heterogeneous yet restricted anglophone readership.<sup>4</sup> Without establishing reductive correspondences, I have suggested that the predominance of one aesthetic mode over another could be related to the different positions of the writers in the literary field, to their intended readership but also to their primary political concerns, oscillating between the local and the global levels. These hypotheses could be extended to other Indian writers in English and in vernacular languages, such as Jeet Thayil, Kiran Nagarkar, Anjum Hasan, or Vivek Shanbhag.

Over the course of the thesis, I have moved between the identification of two intertwined aesthetic modes and the delineation of their political contours. By doing so, I aimed to challenge the clichéd identification of epic excess with the global culture of plenty and with the orientalist discourse of an 'overabundant' India. Equally, I have distanced myself from the association of the formal restraint of realism with political conservatism as well as thinking of 'critical irrealism' as being necessarily radical. In so doing, I have wanted to avoid the entrenched dispute over the merits of realism and modernism that mark most discussions of Indian anglophone literature. One of the conclusions to emerge from this study is that both modes are underpinned by a critical vision of the city, whose forces and ambivalences I have tried to disentangle by locating them within a larger political and social

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<sup>4</sup> Siddharth Chowdhury is a notable exception here insofar as he is relatively absent from the media and does not express his political views in the rare interview he has given.

discussion. They represent two aesthetic strategies to express the unsettling experience of urban modernisation, and, therefore, two ways of debunking the hegemonic narratives of Indian cities.

The ambivalence of the epic mode lies in its strategic inflation, which sometimes risks tipping over into sensationalism, fuelling the notion of Indian exceptionalism by making of Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata objects of dread and wonder. However, I have shown that the enlarging movement of the epic mode reworks the exotic stereotypes of the chaotic proliferating city to intensify the destructive process of urban development, thus challenging the orientalist imagination of India as a spectacle to be consumed, the ‘trajectoirist’ or developmentalist narrative of urban failure, as well as the nationalist discourse of India’s successful *world-class* cities. The ordinary mode rather relies on rhetorical restraint and nuance, resulting in the deflating of tensions and in an emphasis on the banality of violence, whether infrastructural or direct. I have argued that this mode serves to undermine both the image of urban success and of disaster, by stressing the systemic nature of urban violence and the ways in which social conflicts invisibly shape the everyday experience of the city, through gestures, interactions and discourses.

These critical urban imaginaries also intersect with contemporary urban and social theoretical debates on the ways through which teleological narratives of progress can be disrupted, on the relationship between radicalism and history, and on the revolutionary potential of urban movements. It is to be noted that none of these texts thematise a global insurrection or imagine a utopian future city. They are grounded in the contradictory social reality of twenty-first-century India and are fuelled by humble hope rather than grandiose revolutionary visions. The epic mode tends to approach the city through a macro-perspective which dramatizes the shock of titanic social forces at work in urban space. The prevailing global scale of analysis, the rhetorical inflation and the focus on collisions serve to expose the disaster of uneven development. On the other hand, through a micro-perspective, the ordinary mode tends to emphasize the effects of these global social forces on the everyday, and to focus on individual agency, putting forward the local as the relevant scale to imagine social transformation. While this modality might suggest a form of relativism, or an acceptance of an unequal order indicating the forsaking of a universal political ideal, I have argued that the emphasis that these street-corner narratives place on the local scale gestures towards the critical power of provisional tactics of urban reclamation. These tactics surreptitiously undermine the predatory logic of urban development and help to imagine

alternative social collectivities, such as the small community of Jannat Guest House in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Thus, while the epic draws a panoramic narrative of oppression, relying on the political power of shock-and-awe, the ordinary invites us to think of dissent through concrete, provisional, ‘real utopias’. Rather than antagonistic movements, these modes constitute two facets of the same critical vision of the capitalist production of space, and I have tried to show that by oscillating between these two modes, literary texts complexify this political opposition.

The critique of urban development embodied by these two approaches of the city is also inextricably rooted in the writers’ historical consciousness. Their subversion of the homogenizing imaginary of the world-class city operates through their palimpsestic writing of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, which uncover the asperities of these spaces. They highlight both the destructive fantasy of utter novelty and the impossibility of a complete *tabula rasa*, either through the lingering presence of spectres (of Partition, of anti-Sikh violence, of evictions and plunder, as shown in Chapter 1), or through the active recovery of fragments of the urban past (described in Chapter 6). Walter Benjamin’s method of urban archaeology has informed my reading of these attempts to track down debris of the past, insofar as he stresses the link between excavation and the location of these debris in the present city, or the use of these fragments of the past for a radical political *praxis*, as shown in Chapter 6.

The value of archaeological writing is thus two-fold: first, the emphasis on the ‘junk’ that is deliberately erased from the narrative of national ascent (such as the traces of Islamic culture in Delhi) is a radical political gesture in the context of the use of an expunged and fallacious ‘Hinduized’ Indian history as an instrument of propaganda by the current government. Secondly, it reveals the complex relationship between the unfolding of the hidden historical layers of the city, melancholy and critical thinking. Far from mourning a golden age of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, Indian urban writing actually uncovers a history of violence. A telling example is that of the textile mills chimneys of Mumbai, which are represented by Sampurna Chattarji’s writing as the ruins of a bygone era in which the working class was at the centre of the urban imaginary, but also as traces of the inhuman exploitation of labour force by colonial and postcolonial industrialists. By connecting these salient architectural elements of the urban landscape with past manifestations of uneven modernity, the writer’s historical consciousness thus mitigates the rupture constituted by 1991 both in the sense of the celebrated phoenix-like rebirth of India and in the sense of the death-knell of a socially progressive, culturally diverse and tolerant India, a process which

is representative of Indian urban writing at large. I have thus built on the transhistorical and transcultural urban imagination of the writers themselves to locate the contemporary Indian city in a critical history of global modernity.

These complex interactions between various forms, genres, and imaginations of social change suggest that the city is not only a theme but constitutes a valuable heuristic prism through which to think of contemporary literature and society. This spatial literary approach contributes to renewing the critical analysis of postcolonial literature, which has often hinged on the key notions of displacement, rootlessness, and hybridity, in line with the emphasis on flows and mobility of globalization studies, as I developed in Chapter 6. These authors write *of* and *from* Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata and this thesis has demonstrated how crucial this location as well as the recreation of localities in the heart of global metropolises were to their writing. Thinking through the city allows us to address central concerns of postcolonial studies, such as the various literary reconfigurations of history, the multiple forms taken by colonial, postcolonial and global violence and by the resistance to it, and the complex relationship between English and vernacular languages.

However, this *grounded* literary approach is not synonymous with a return to a rigid conception of the relation between locality and identity. Far from embodying a fixed local, regional or national identity, the city is conceived as a centripetal space of interaction and inter-penetration between local and global forces. These cities simultaneously belong to a regional sphere, a national space and a global urban network, and the interplay between these various scales are attended to by the writers, with varying emphases. In her *Sociology of Globalization*, Saskia Sassen asserts the epistemological gain of thinking globalization through space, scale and location, and argues that looking at the city enables us to grasp the major social transformations of an era. In fact, the city crystallises the major social, cultural, and economic transformations of contemporary India. It is through the imagination of the city that Indian writers think the contradictions of twenty-first-century India as it is remodelled by global capitalism. These grounded comparative readings, which scrutinise the ways in which uneven development is entrenched in urban space, pave the way for the analysis of literary representations of other cities, widening the geographical scope of my urban literary comparativism to other semi-peripheries of the world-system. It might be possible, for example, to test the hypothesis of an uneven literary urban aesthetic in South Asia at large (with examples from Dacca, Lahore or Karachi) but also in cities such as

Nairobi and Johannesburg. The ubiquitous imaginary of the ‘world-class’ city, the exponential urbanisation of these regions and the fact that they have been forcibly coerced into the capitalist system through colonialism and are now rapidly integrated into global capitalism, with local inflections, only strengthen the relevance of the parallel.

Finally, if literary analysis undoubtedly benefits from the insights of urban studies, as shown through my discussions of literary texts through the prism of various theories of the production of space, I think that this study has established that the field of urban studies also gains from the insights provided by literature, which densify our understanding of urban modernity and, in this particular historical context, of global cities. The six chapters have highlighted how the discourses and imaginations of global urban modernity were splintered by this heterogeneous urban imaginary, interested in uncovering the contradictions of these gleaming icons of New India. They have also foregrounded the ways in which literary texts question the antagonism between the city and the country, the centre and the province, an opposition which has specific implications for India but could be extended to other geo-historical contexts. Contrary to Rushdie’s caricatural opposition between city and village, most of these narratives show how these spaces are mutually constitutive and actually overlap within urban space. They expose how the fast-paced development of cities rests on the extraction of energy and resources in rural peripheries, which often implies the expropriation and eviction of inhabitants from their land, suggesting how rural spaces are profoundly embedded in and transformed by global capitalism.

Contemporary writings also suggest continuities between provincial towns and metropolises, which contribute to provincializing the global city. Thus, the imagination of the city through localities, or what sociologists sometimes call ‘urban villages’, particularly striking in Chaudhuri’s and Chowdhury’s narratives, unsettles the association of the city with individualism, anonymity and velocity and draws a more complex geography of global cities.<sup>5</sup> These representations of the city highlight the transplantation of small-town social practices into urban space as well as the juxtaposition of different temporalities within the city, thus mitigating the antagonism between the rural and the urban as well as the homogenizing force of the city. Through a different angle, descriptions of Delhi as a

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<sup>5</sup> See Marie-Caroline Saglio-Yatzimirsky, ‘Village dans la ville ou village imaginaire ? Les communautés migrantes de Mumbai’, in *La Ville en Asie du Sud*, ed. by Véronique Dupont and Gérard Djallal Heuzé (Paris: EHESS, 2007), pp. 175-199. See also Vandana Vasudevan, *Urban Villager: Life in an Indian Satellite Town* (Delhi: SAGE, 2013).

constellation of scattered settlements or self-contained colonies which do not cohere into a whole, or of the various neighbourhoods of Mumbai as different countries, also challenge the city as a consistent unit, and complexify the image of the global city, by highlighting the legacies of colonial segregation on contemporary urban development. In the specific case of New Delhi, the 'rural' quality of the city can indeed be traced back to the influence of the 'garden-city' movement on the planning of the imperial capital, discussed in Chapter 3.

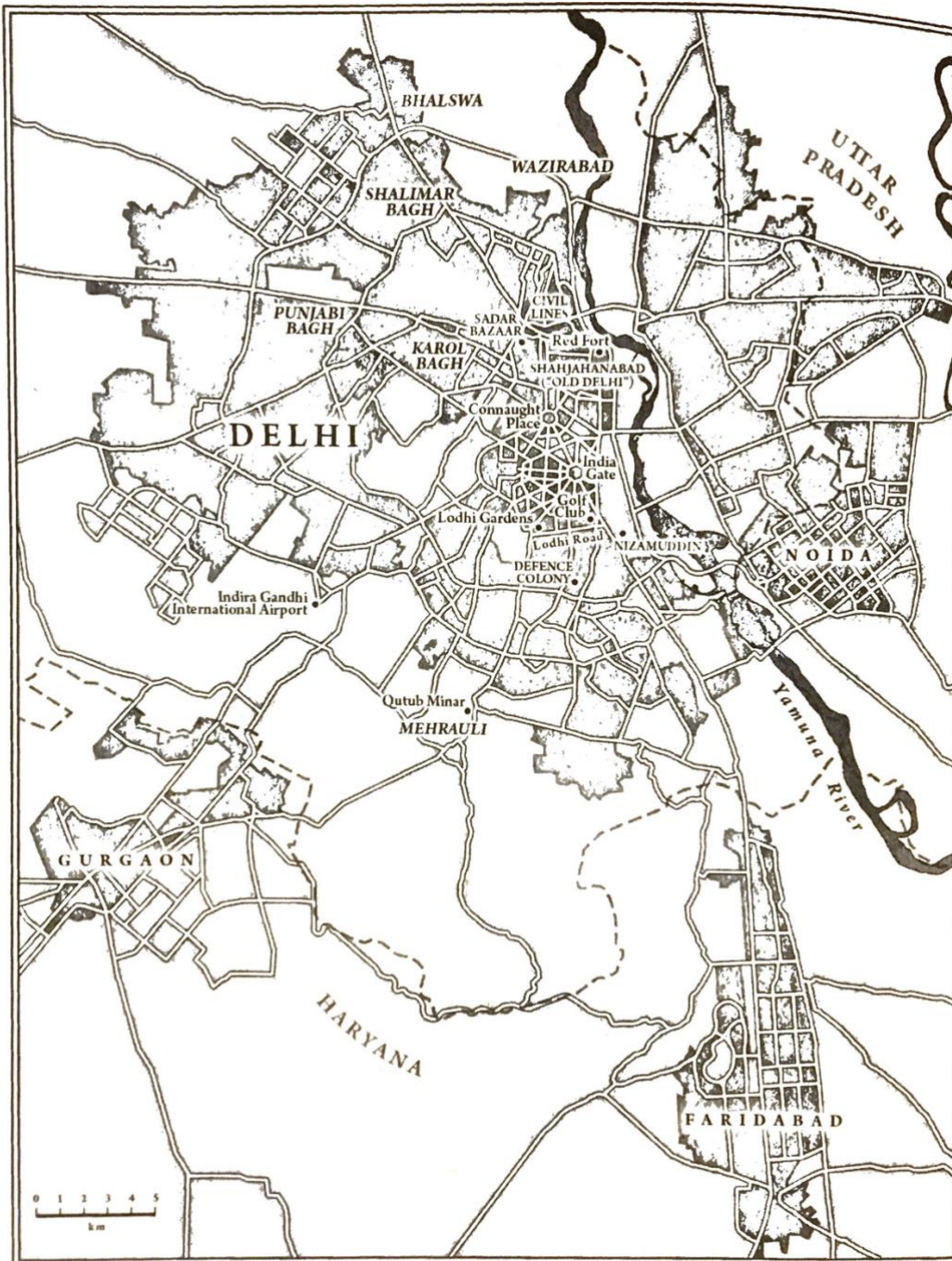
The main focus on this dissertation is the city as a social formation and an infrastructural and architectural project, or as a 'mesh of lanes and voices', in Saikat Majumdar's words. Yet in the interstices of this social and manmade space lie natural forces which are attended to by contemporary Indian writing. The erasure of the urban-rural divide is also expressed through the representation of the complex relationship between human and nonhuman elements in the city, the reflections on urban commons, and the grounding of Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata in their natural environments, which offer rich material to be investigated further. To give a few examples, Dasgupta's essay on Delhi shows sustained concern with the particular topography of the city and in particular with the role of water, from the historic use of canals and water tanks to the depredation of underground water and of the Yamuna river, emblematic of the multi-secular history of the city. Suketu Mehta's and Sampurna Chattarji's imaginations of a flooded or liquid Mumbai, returned to its original insular and marshy condition, are invitations to think of the environmental history of the city. Roy's and Chaudhuri's alertness to the non-human elements in the city and to the way cyclical rhythms of nature define urban life and imagination, from the daily movements of birds in the prologue of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* to the winter mist and the monsoon storms of Kolkata, which grounds the city in the specific environment of Bengal.

Therefore, this exploration of the moving aesthetic lines of contemporary Indian urban writing and of their political implications brings to light the close relationship between Indian anglophone literature and the transformations of the city, and thus contributes to renewing the terms of the conversation on Indian literature as well as world-literature. Indeed, these literary texts reveal that the compressed urban development at work in twenty-first-century India, characterised by its dizzyingly fast pace, is a paradigmatic case of capitalist modernisation. The contradictory processes of capitalist urban development, which intensify social and economic disparities and result in the overlapping of incongruous realities in the city, thus haunt the multiple forms of contemporary Indian writing.



# MAPS

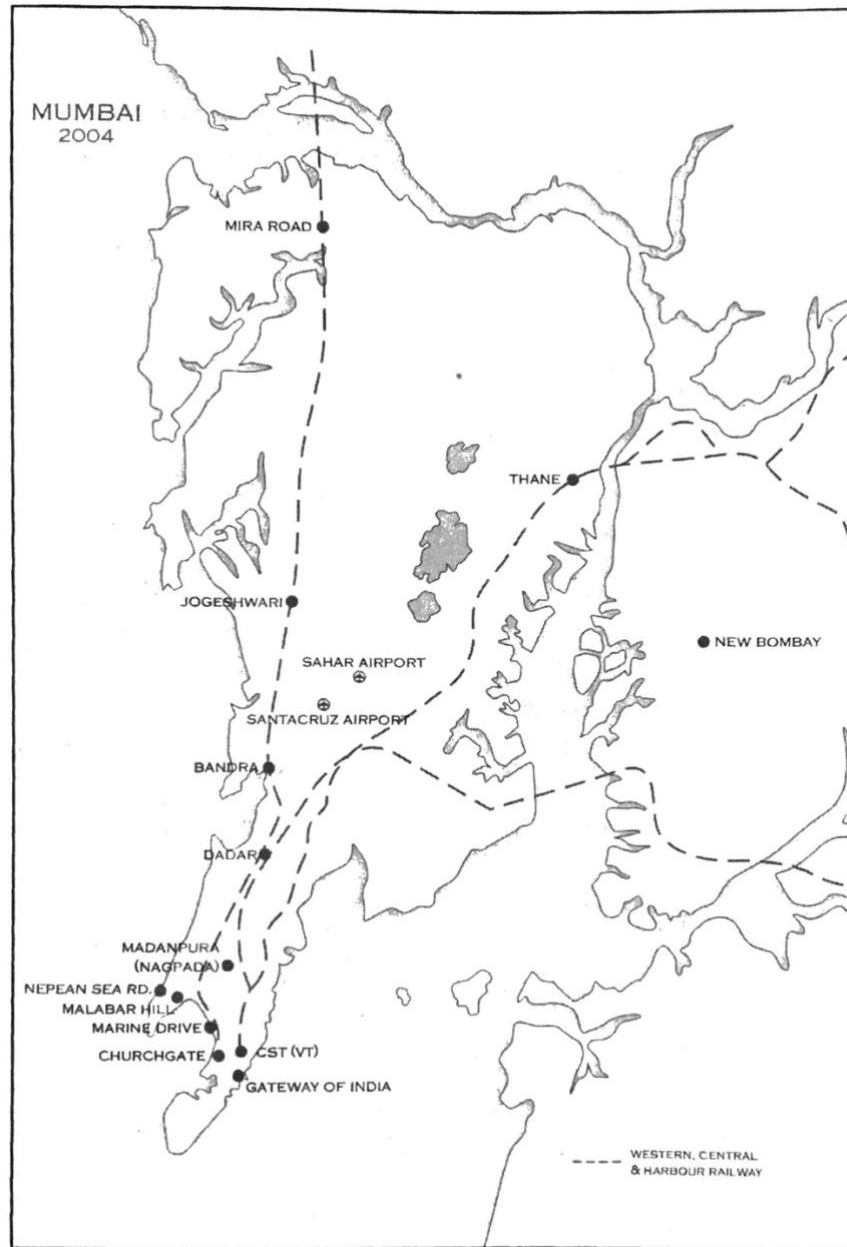
## 1. Map of Delhi



Map of Delhi, in Rana Dasgupta, *Capital* (Delhi: Penguin, 2014), p. X.

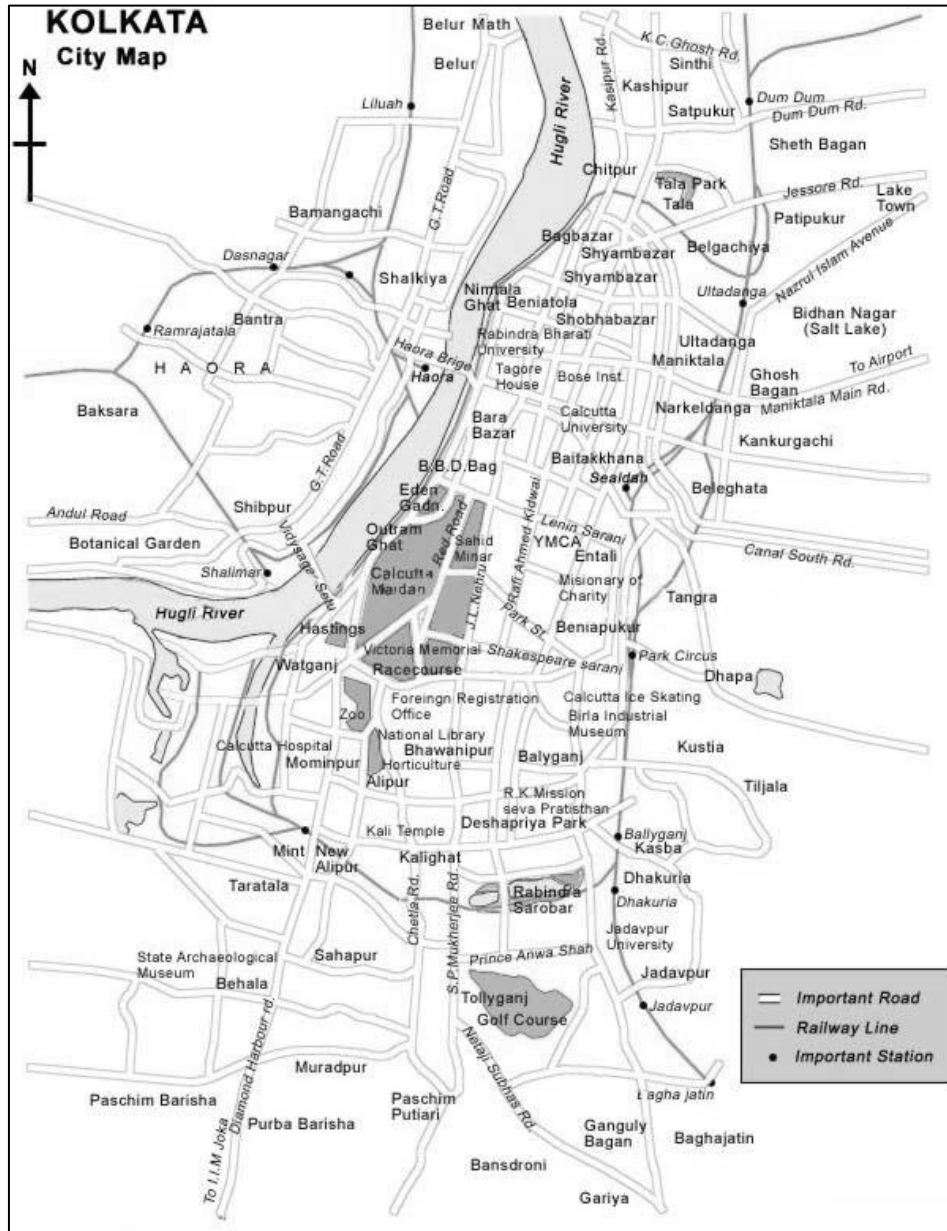


## 2. Map of Mumbai



Map of Mumbai, in Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (New York: Vintage, 2004)

### 3. Map of Kolkata



Map of Kolkata, mapsof.net <<https://www.mapsof.net/bombay/map-kolkata>>



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## SUMMARY IN FRENCH / RÉSUMÉ EN FRANÇAIS

Si la ville a une place importante dans la littérature indienne anglophone en prose depuis au moins les années 1980, notamment chez Anita Desai et Salman Rushdie, les décennies 1990 et 2000 voient l'émergence d'un ensemble foisonnant de romans mais aussi d'essais et de reportages littéraires sur les villes indiennes. Cette thèse prend pour ainsi point de départ **l'émergence d'une « esthétique urbaine » ou le « tournant urbain » de la littérature indienne de langue anglaise**, pour reprendre les termes de plusieurs commentateurs.<sup>1</sup> Cette profusion révèle en effet un renouvellement des formes et des motifs de l'écriture de la ville indienne, notamment un brouillage entre fiction et non-fiction, qui n'avait pas encore été étudié de manière systématique par la critique.

En articulant études urbaines et critique littéraire, ce travail se penche sur la façon dont la littérature indienne anglophone représente **l'expérience contradictoire de l'explosion urbaine actuelle** : je mets en évidence au sein des œuvres étudiées un imaginaire littéraire qui se caractérise par une **tension entre deux modalités esthétiques**, que je définis comme *épique* et *ordinaire*. À travers des lectures croisées au sein d'un corpus principal de dix textes de langue anglaise écrits entre 1991 et 2017 et portant sur Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata, auquel s'ajoute l'étude d'un corpus secondaire qui illustre l'ampleur de l'intérêt littéraire pour les villes indiennes « post-libéralisation », j'analyse les traits essentiels de ces deux modes et définis leur potentiel critique, en les situant par rapport à un ensemble de discours sur les villes indiennes.

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<sup>1</sup> Alex Tickell, « Introduction » dans Alex Tickell (dir.), *South Asian Fiction in English: Contemporary Transformations*, Londres, Routledge, 2016, p. 7. Roshan G. Shahani, « Polyphonous Voices in the City: Bombay's Indian-English Fiction », in Sujata Patel et Alice Thorner (dir.), *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 99-112.

## I. Les années 1990-2000 en Inde : explosions urbaines et littéraires

Si la croissance urbaine mondiale que l'on observe depuis le dernier quart du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle et qui touche principalement les pays du Sud justifie en partie le regain d'intérêt pour la ville indienne en littérature, celui-ci doit aussi être replacé dans le contexte spécifique de la libéralisation de l'économie indienne amorcée en 1991. Après des décennies d'économie planifiée, la conversion à marche forcée de l'Inde au néolibéralisme et sa nouvelle position dans le système capitaliste mondial ont entraîné l'urbanisation accélérée du pays, qui s'est accompagnée d'une transformation radicale de la **physionomie des villes indiennes**, dictée par la nécessité d'attirer des investisseurs étrangers ou issus de la diaspora indienne. Comme le montrent D. Asher Ghertner et V. Dupont, l'influence du **modèle de la « ville mondiale »** (*world-class city*) est palpable à Delhi à travers les campagnes successives **d'embellissement urbain et les projets d'infrastructures monumentaux**, mais aussi *via* l'importance croissante de l'immobilier, de la finance et des services comme moteurs de la croissance urbaine.<sup>2</sup> Devenue la vitrine de l'ascension de l'Inde, la ville mondiale indienne est désormais au cœur du discours nationaliste triomphant, mettant en scène la métamorphose miraculeuse d'une nation du « tiers-monde », particulièrement associée à la pauvreté, en un acteur majeur du capitalisme mondial.<sup>3</sup>

Ce tournant urbain du développement économique indien, ainsi que l'usage symbolique de la ville comme emblème de la nation (qu'illustrent, par exemple, la *Smart Cities Mission* lancée par le gouvernement de Narendra Modi en 2015 et l'indigénisation des noms de certaines villes indiennes) sont particulièrement frappants dans la mesure où, comme le montre Vyjayanthi Rao, l'expérience de la modernité en Inde n'avait pas été

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<sup>2</sup> Véronique Dupont, « The Dream of Delhi as a Global City », *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies*, vol. 36, n° 3, 2011, pp. 523-554 ; D. Asher Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Voir par exemple Ravinder Kaur et Thomas Blom Hansen, « Aesthetics of Arrival: Spectacle, Capital, Novelty in Post-reform India », *Identities*, vol. 23, n° 3, 2016, pp. 265-275 ; Ravinder Kaur, *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-First-Century India*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020. Bombay et Calcutta ont été renommées respectivement Mumbai et Kolkata en 1995 et 2001. J'utilise donc dans ma thèse ces noms par souci de cohérence historique, mais j'aborde précisément la question des enjeux politiques de ces changements de toponymes, dans un contexte postcolonial d'indigénisation des noms de villes qui porte parfois une dimension nationaliste hindoue, notamment dans le cas de Mumbai et de la politique du parti d'extrême droite hindou du Shiv Sena (voir Rashmi Varma « Provincializing the Global City: From Bombay to Mumbai », *Social Text*, vol. 81, 2004, pp. 65-89).

associée à l'échelle de la ville – ce qui peut expliquer en partie les attitudes ambivalentes des classes dirigeantes indiennes vis-à-vis de cette dernière.<sup>4</sup> Comme le montre le célèbre film *Mother India* (1957), **c'est le village qui avait principalement incarné la régénération de la nation indienne** depuis l'indépendance – une image renforcée par l'allégorie gandhienne de « l'Inde des 500 000 villages » –, la ville ayant été laissée de côté par les dirigeants politiques nationalistes en tant que création coloniale étrangère et corrompue.<sup>5</sup> On retrouve cette ligne de fracture entre ville et village dans les romans indiens de langue anglaise du début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle (chez Mulk Raj Anand et Raja Rao, entre autres).

L'ouverture de l'économie aux investissements étrangers, faisant de l'Inde une « nouvelle frontière du capitalisme global »<sup>6</sup>, a aussi renforcé le **succès mondial de la littérature indienne de langue anglaise. Son lectorat s'est à la fois élargi et diversifié ces dernières années** : il mêle désormais un public international à une élite urbaine anglophone indienne, comme en témoigne l'essor de maisons d'édition anglophones en Inde depuis une décennie (Yoda Press, Juggernaut, Aleph, pour n'en citer que quelques-unes). Cet engouement éditorial s'est accompagné d'autres mutations dans le paysage littéraire indien anglophone des années 1990-2000, notamment la proportion croissante de textes écrits par des **auteurs résidant en Inde** ou retournant y vivre après des années passées à l'étranger, contrastant avec la prédominance supposée d'auteurs diasporiques auparavant. Ainsi, des auteurs aussi différents qu'Aravind Adiga, Amit Chaudhuri, Rana Dasgupta ou Chetan Bhagat sont retournés vivre en Inde dans les années 2000 et prennent la ville pour objet d'écriture. Entre les années 1980 et la période contemporaine, on observe aussi une **pluralisation des lieux d'écriture** : au-delà de Mumbai, creuset de la littérature indienne anglophone, de plus en plus de textes explorent Delhi, Bangalore, Chennai, Patna ou Ahmedabad, par le biais du roman mais aussi de l'essai sur la ville ou de la « biographie » de ville.

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<sup>4</sup> Vyjayanthi Rao, « Slum as Theory: The South/Asian City and Globalization », *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 30, n° 1, 2006, pp. 225-232.

<sup>5</sup> Voir le dialogue entre Nehru et Gandhi au sujet des villes et des villages indiens, dont les désaccords n'empêchent pas une conception commune du village comme lieu authentique de la culture et de la société indienne (M.K. Gandhi, « Gandhi-Nehru Dialogue », in Anthony J. Parel (dir.), *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 143-153).

<sup>6</sup> Voir Llerena Guiu Searle, *Landscapes of Accumulation: Real Estate and the Neoliberal Imagination in Contemporary India*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

De nouvelles formes littéraires sont apparues, notamment dans le domaine de la non-fiction, un phénomène que Rajeswari Sunder Rajan relie directement à la mondialisation.<sup>7</sup> Tous les auteurs de mon corpus entretiennent ainsi un **rapport fluide à la fiction et à la non-fiction**, passant du roman à l'essai politique ou culturel, de la nouvelle au récit autobiographique. Les frontières génériques s'estompent souvent au sein d'un même ouvrage, ce qu'illustre très bien l'essai littéraire du romancier Rana Dasgupta sur l'*éruption* de Delhi, qui puise dans les ressources de la fiction pour broser le portrait de la ville et de ses transformations. Les changements matériels et culturels qui ont affecté les villes indiennes depuis 1990, les déplacements formels et thématiques de la littérature indienne contemporaine, tout comme l'évolution du marché de l'édition et du lectorat forment ainsi une nouvelle configuration au sein de laquelle ont été produits les textes composant mon corpus. Il faut désormais se demander comment caractériser et cartographier cet ensemble foisonnant de romans et essais anglophones urbains du tournant du siècle et quels sont les outils analytiques disponibles pour ce faire.

## II. Une approche théorique plurielle, des études postcoloniales à la littérature-monde

La ville en littérature a fait l'objet d'une multitude de travaux critiques depuis une vingtaine d'années, notamment sous l'impulsion du « **tournant spatial** » des études littéraires, et cette thèse se veut une contribution à ce champ d'étude dynamique. Elle aborde de front des questionnements très contemporains sur les villes du Sud, les villes globales, mais aussi sur la décolonisation des savoirs. En effet, aussi riches soient les travaux portant sur la ville littéraire, souvent associée au modernisme et postmodernisme, leur périmètre est souvent **limité aux villes euro-américaines** et leurs catégories d'analyse sont ancrées dans ces espaces. Je me suis donc interrogée sur la pertinence de ces catégories pour l'étude des villes indiennes et les cadres de comparaisons possibles entre les espaces et les textes : que gagne-t-on et que perd-on à comparer le Londres de Dickens et le Bombay de Rushdie, l'étalement urbain de Los Angeles et celui de New Delhi ? Comment comparer ces textes et

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<sup>7</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, « After *Midnight's Children*: Some Notes on the New Indian Novel in English », *Social Research*, vol. 78, n° 1, Printemps 2011, p. 222.



ces villes, sans adopter une perspective « trajectoiriste » ou « développementaliste » (pour reprendre les termes de Jennifer Robinson) qui ferait du Nord l'avenir du Sud ?<sup>8</sup>

Les **études postcoloniales** fournissent un premier cadre d'analyse fécond pour répondre à ces questions. Les premiers travaux de critique littéraire urbaine postcoloniale ont défriché ce nouveau champ d'étude mais se sont majoritairement concentrés sur l'aspect discursif ou fictionnel de la ville, analysant les **mythes, fables et imaginaires urbains**,<sup>9</sup> ainsi que les réécritures d'un espace marqué par les discours coloniaux, en faisant parfois abstraction des conflits sociaux et des réalités économiques que ces textes représentent. Si la ville est en effet constituée de récits et d'images, elle est aussi un **espace social et économique**, aspect sur lequel des ouvrages plus récents ont insisté. Cette étude s'appuie donc sur l'appareil conceptuel des études postcoloniales tout en prenant acte du **tournant matérialiste** de ces dernières et en insistant sur l'imbrication des logiques coloniales et capitalistes.<sup>10</sup> Les travaux de Rashmi Varma mais aussi d'Elleke Boehmer et Dominic Davies sur les représentations littéraires de la ville postcoloniale, qui insistent tous sur la nécessité de penser le fait colonial en lien avec le fait capitaliste,<sup>11</sup> me permettent de situer le développement de la fiction et la non-fiction urbaines indiennes dans son contexte historique et géographique local mais aussi global. Cette approche a bénéficié de la théorie développée par le Warwick Research Collective, qui, à la suite de Franco Moretti, définit la **littérature-monde comme une littérature qui réfracte les contradictions du système-monde et de la modernité**.<sup>12</sup> Le développement *inégal et combiné* du système capitaliste mondial, entraînant une juxtaposition de réalités sociales contradictoires au sein d'un même espace, est très bien décrit Arundhati Roy à l'échelle de l'Inde :

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development*, Londres, Routledge, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Global World*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008 ; Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables: A History of an Enchanted City*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Voir Raphael Daello (dir.), *Bourdieu and Postcolonial Studies*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Rashmi Varma, *The Postcolonial City and its Subject: London, Nairobi, Bombay*, Londres, Routledge, 2012 ; Elleke Boehmer et Dominic Davies (dir.), *Planned Violence: Post/Colonial Infrastructure, Literature and Culture*, Londres, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Voir aussi Madhurima Chakraborty et Umme Al-Wazedi (dir.), *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts: City Margins in South Asian Literature*, Londres, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Franco Moretti, « Conjectures on World Literature », *New Left Review*, n°1, Janvier-Février 2000, pp. 54-68 ; Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004 ; WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2015.

*In the lane behind my house, every night I walk past road-gangs of emaciated labourers digging a trench to lay fibre-optic cables to speed up our digital revolution. In the bitter winter cold, they work by the light of a few candles.*<sup>13</sup>

L'analyse de la nouvelle position de l'Inde comme semi-périphérie dans le système-monde et des contradictions qui en résultent permet de mieux comprendre **ces formes littéraires et leur lien à un discours critique de la modernisation capitaliste**. Ce cadre m'a semblé d'autant plus pertinents que les auteurs eux-mêmes s'intéressent à l'impact de la mondialisation sur l'espace urbain, articulant les spécificités locales à des traits propres à la vie dans les villes globales.

Cette **approche matérialiste des textes** place mon travail à la croisée des études littéraires et des études urbaines, ce qui permet, je l'espère, d'analyser des aspects de la littérature urbaine habituellement passés sous silence par la critique littéraire, en lisant les textes au prisme de notions telles que la « ville globale » (Sassen), « le droit à la ville » (Lefebvre), « l'urbanisme néolibéral » (Harvey) ou encore « l'urbanisme subalterne » (Roy). Les travaux de David Harvey et sa perspective « historico-géographico-matérialiste », plaçant l'espace au cœur de son analyse du capitalisme, sont ainsi centraux dans ma lecture des textes. Ma méthodologie s'appuie donc sur ces concepts afin d'éclairer le travail esthétique de la littérature. Le discours des auteurs eux-mêmes sur leurs textes et sur leur rapport à la ville fournit également des ressources cruciales, ce que j'ai pu constater à travers les entretiens que j'ai menés au cours de trois séjours de recherche à Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata. Comment les écrivains s'emparent-ils des tensions propres à la modernisation urbaine ? Dans quelle mesure la position de l'Inde dans le système-monde mais aussi la position des auteurs, appartenant à une élite anglophone urbaine, affectent-elles leurs représentations ? **Par quels moyens spécifiques à la littérature les textes réfractent-ils l'expérience contradictoire de la modernisation urbaine en Inde ?**<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Arundhati Roy, « The Ladies Have Feelings, So... Shall We Leave it to the Experts? » (2001), in *My Seditious Heart*, Londres, Hamilton, 2019, pp. 106-107.

<sup>14</sup> La notion de réfraction, empruntée à Fredric Jameson, fait aussi écho à l'approche bourdieusienne du champ, qui permet d'envisager le lien entre le texte et le monde social de manière non-mimétique, en prenant en compte les prismes propres à la littérature. Voir Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Londres, Methuen, 1981 ; Gisèle Sapiro, « Champ », *Politika*, 2017, <https://www.politika.io/fr/notice/champ>.

### III. Entre l'épique et l'ordinaire : oscillations esthétiques et politiques

La lecture d'un vaste corpus alliant fiction et non-fiction ainsi que de textes critiques écrits par des auteurs indiens eux-mêmes, a permis de dégager **deux modes ou pôles principaux d'appréhension littéraire de ces villes en perpétuelle transformation**, qui traversent les frontières génériques. Cette thèse entend remettre en question l'opposition qu'établit l'écrivain et critique **Amit Chaudhuri** entre deux traditions esthétiques (gigantisme et miniaturisme, ou encore excès et retenue) qui caractérise selon lui la littérature indienne, ainsi que la **correspondance entre cette opposition esthétique et un antagonisme idéologique** : l'esthétique de l'excès et de la démesure (principalement associée à Salman Rushdie) serait complice vis-à-vis des discours dominants (célébrant l'avènement de l'Inde et la mondialisation) tandis que celle de la retenue serait du côté de la subversion.<sup>15</sup>

Ce travail montre comment ces deux tendances esthétiques, dont je redéfinis les contours à travers les catégories **d'épique et d'ordinaire**, interagissent au contraire au sein de chaque texte et déjouent à la fois les discours orientalistes, nationalistes et capitalistes sur la ville indienne. Ma lecture invite donc à dissocier d'une part l'excès propre au mode épique du regard orientaliste sur une Inde opulente mais aussi du discours capitaliste d'exaltation de l'abondance ; et d'autre part, à détacher la retenue qui caractérise le mode ordinaire du radicalisme. Cette dichotomie est d'ailleurs battue en brèche à la fois par **Salman Rushdie** et par **Arundhati Roy**, qui associent la démesure, l'ampleur et la complexité formelle à une ambition de subversion, déjouant l'idée d'une domestication du roman indien anglophone par le marché littéraire mondial.<sup>16</sup> Toutefois, je m'écarte également de l'idée selon laquelle le réalisme du mode ordinaire incarnerait une forme de relativisme ou de conservatisme politique tandis que l'*irréalisme* de l'épique serait nécessairement radical.<sup>17</sup> Ma perspective vise ainsi à renouveler le débat quant aux valeurs esthétiques et politiques propres au

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<sup>15</sup> Amit Chaudhuri, « "Huge Baggy Monster": Mimetic theories of the Indian Novel after Rushdie » (1999), in *Clearing a Space: Reflections on India, Literature and Culture*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 113-121.

<sup>16</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Londres, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Voir Michael Löwy, « The Current of Critical Irrealism: "a Moonlit Enchanted Light" », in Michael Beaumont (dir.), *Adventures in Realism*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, pp. 193-206 ; WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development*.

réalisme et au modernisme, qui limite souvent les analyses de la littérature indienne anglophone.

Les deux modes sont caractérisés par des **traits rhétoriques, narratifs mais aussi scalaires**. D'une part, le mode épique (terme que je lis à l'aune des travaux de Franco Moretti mais aussi de Florence Goyet)<sup>18</sup> est défini par un mouvement d'amplification, adossé à l'usage d'une rhétorique hyperbolique, qui intensifie **le choc de la métropole en pleine mutation**. Il implique une structure narrative fondée sur **le conflit, la rupture, et la collision des extrêmes**, mais aussi un usage dominant de l'échelle macroscopique de représentation, offrant des **vues panoramiques** de Mumbai, Delhi ou Kolkata, englobant ces villes fragmentées dans leur ensemble. D'autre part, le mode *ordinaire* (terme que je dois à Jennifer Robinson, mais qui se situe aussi dans la lignée de Perec, Lefebvre et Certeau) est caractérisé par un mouvement de déflation, adossé à une rhétorique de la retenue qui atténue le choc de la transformation urbaine et suggère une **familiarité avec la ville**, qui est décrite à l'échelle **d'un quartier ou d'une rue**, au prisme des **pratiques quotidiennes**. Ce mode, qui souligne la continuité et mine ainsi l'idée même d'un tournant post-libéralisation, donne néanmoins à voir toute la violence souterraine qui structure la vie ordinaire.

Ces deux notions sont donc pensées comme des **aspirations ou des pôles** entre lesquels les textes fluctuent que comme des catégories génériques. Ces modes ne s'opposent pas termes à termes mais sont compris comme étant pris dans une relation dynamique, le mouvement d'amplification de l'épique étant sans cesse contrebalancé par l'atténuation véhiculée par le mode ordinaire, même si l'un domine souvent sur l'autre au sein de chaque texte. Comment ces deux modes entrent-ils donc en tension au sein de ces textes ?

#### **IV. Définition du corpus**

Parmi la multitude d'œuvres publiées depuis les années 1990, j'ai choisi de me concentrer sur **dix textes de langue anglaise, écrits de 1991 à 2017, portant tous sur Delhi, Mumbai ou Kolkata**. Ces œuvres n'épuisent pas les potentialités des deux modes mais en sont emblématiques, et explorent toutes ces trois métropoles indiennes en pleine mutation à

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<sup>18</sup> Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez* (1994), trad. Quintin Hoare, Londres, Verso, 1996 ; Florence Goyet, « Narrative Structure and Political Construction: The Epic at Work », *Oral Tradition*, vol. 23, n° 1, 2008, pp. 15-27.

travers des genres littéraires variés: **le roman** (*She Will Build Him a City* de Raj Kamal Jha (2015), *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* d'Arundhati Roy (2017), *Day Scholar* de Siddharth Chowdhury (2010), *A Strange and Sublime Address* et *Freedom Song* d'Amit Chaudhuri (1991), **la nouvelle** (*Dirty Love*, de Sampurna Chattarji (2013), *The Patna Manual of Style*, de Siddharth Chowdhury (2015)), **l'essai** (*Capital : The Eruption of Delhi* de Rana Dasgupta, *Calcutta : Two Years in a City* d'Amit Chaudhuri, (2013)), **et le reportage littéraire** (*A Free Man* d'Aman Sethi (2011)). La lecture de ce corpus polygénérique permet d'étudier la **porosité entre fiction et non-fiction** et de souligner qu'elles sont toutes deux traversées par la tension entre les modes épique et ordinaire qui caractérise l'écriture de la ville indienne.

En étudiant conjointement des auteurs à la renommée mondiale (Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Rana Dasgupta) et des auteurs moins établis (Aman Sethi, Raj Kamal Jha), dont certains ne sont publiés qu'en Inde (Siddharth Chowdhury, Sampurna Chattarji), cette thèse fait aussi émerger un corpus pluriel qui vise à **élargir l'horizon du discours critique sur la littérature indienne anglophone contemporaine**. Même si les trajectoires de leurs auteurs sont diverses, ces textes émanent de l'immersion quotidienne de leurs auteurs dans la ville, plutôt que du souvenir mélancolique d'une ville natale perdue, se détachant ainsi du modèle des « patries imaginaires » de Salman Rushdie.<sup>19</sup>

Cet **ancrage dans la ville** est l'un des points sur lesquels j'insiste dans la thèse, qui nuance le statut esthétique et politique privilégié donné à la migration, au déplacement, et à l'hybridité dans l'étude de la littérature postcoloniale. L'inscription – sinon l'enracinement – dans la ville, apparaît comme une ressource essentielle pour ces auteurs, et justifie le choix de s'intéresser à trois d'entre elles en particulier. Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata sont les trois plus grandes villes du pays, et elles partagent une histoire coloniale et postcoloniale commune en dépit de leurs singularités. Loin de faire de ces trois villes des exceptions, le **prisme comparatiste** de cette étude donne lieu à des parallèles avec des récits d'autres villes indiennes (telle que Patna, Bangalore ou Chennai), de plus en plus fréquemment mises en récit dans la littérature indienne anglophone.

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<sup>19</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Londres, Granta, 1991.

## V. Structure du propos

Cette thèse s'articule autour de six chapitres organisés en diptyque. L'analyse part du mode de représentation majeur (l'épique) et progresse vers le mode mineur (l'ordinaire), passant de la ville monstrueuse à la ville banale, de l'hyperbole à l'euphémisme, de la vue télescopique à la vue à la loupe. Cette architecture globale doit être comprise comme un cadre fournissant des repères au sein duquel les oscillations peuvent être observées, comme le montre chaque section de chapitre.

### 1. *Les crises de la modernité urbaine*

Le premier chapitre examine **les paysages urbains apocalyptiques** décrits dans les romans de Raj Kamal Jha, d'Arundhati Roy et de Rana Dasgupta, au sein desquels la modalité épique domine. Ces récits mêlent des perspectives panoramiques spectaculaires et des vues microscopiques témoignant d'une attention extrême à l'expérience sensorielle d'une ville où se côtoient chantiers et ruines. Ils mettent ainsi en lumière **la destruction matérielle mais aussi la désorientation psychique qu'implique ce processus de création-destruction perpétuelle**, faisant de la ville un terrain instable, dont le passé ne cesse d'être recouvert et de ressurgir. À travers le motif de l'éruption, de la chute météorique, du raz-de-marée ou de l'éclipse, ces textes amplifient la dévastation qui accompagne ce développement débridé, et revisitent le trope de la métamorphose perpétuelle généralement associée à la ville moderne.

Cette esthétique amplifie la **logique de spectacle** sur laquelle est fondé l'urbanisme néolibéral en Inde. Celui-ci vise en effet à construire une *image* de la ville indienne à la hauteur de standards supposément mondiaux, impliquant des investissements massifs dans des lieux de consommation et de divertissement (centres commerciaux, salles de cinéma multiplexes, stades, parcs d'attractions, hôtels haut de gamme et aéroports flambant neufs). Cette importance de l'esthétique, soulignée par l'anthropologue D. Asher Ghertner<sup>20</sup>, est traitée sur un mode satirique très sombre dans *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), qui décrit la transformation de Delhi comme une **mascarade, un travestissement de cette ville ancestrale**, ployant sous le poids de son histoire fracturée, en une jeune prostituée au sourire

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<sup>20</sup> D. Asher Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

figé. Le trope de la ville prostituée est ici détourné puisque la ville n'est pas tentatrice mais représentée comme une victime exploitée par ses dirigeants. Le règne de l'esthétique, visant à homogénéiser l'espace urbain, est aussi figuré dans le roman de Raj Kamal Jha, *She Will Build Him a City* (2015), par les **surfaces miroitantes de « New City »** (avatar fictionnel de Gurgaon, centre technologique et financier construit au sud de New Delhi dans les années 1980) qui fascinent l'un des protagonistes, magnat de l'immobilier sensible à l'érotisme de cette architecture de verre et d'acier, qui symbolise aussi son pouvoir et son impunité.

Toutefois, ces romans suggèrent aussi que l'esthétisation de la ville est fondée sur une **politique de l'oubli (Leela Fernandes) ou une amnésie spatiale (Rob Nixon),<sup>21</sup> qui invisibilise les citoyens les plus défavorisés et les exclut de ce paysage urbain rutilant**, à la fois symboliquement (c'est le consommateur de la classe moyenne qui incarne désormais le citoyen indien modèle) et matériellement (l'embellissement des villes passe par la destruction des habitats dits informels et l'expulsion de leurs habitants). Ces textes, notamment ceux de Roy et de Dasgupta, mettent également en avant la **destruction environnementale** sur laquelle sont fondées ces villes nouvelles. Le **motif de la spectralité** déployé par Jha, Dasgupta et Roy suggère ainsi que l'exclusion sociale et l'occultation du passé de ces villes (notamment de la culture islamique de Delhi, ancienne capitale de l'empire moghol) sont deux facettes de la même violence structurelle propre au développement urbain capitaliste.

Le réseau métaphorique du désastre naturel déployé par ces textes pour représenter la croissance accélérée des villes indiennes dramatise ainsi la destruction créatrice à l'œuvre à Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata au tournant du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle. Contrairement à ce qui a été dit du *sublime urbain* dans la littérature victorienne ou le roman naturaliste américain,<sup>22</sup> je montre comment **la naturalisation de processus historiques dans ces textes ne représente pas le développement urbain comme un cycle naturel inévitable mais défamiliarise ce processus et en révèle les contradictions.**

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<sup>21</sup> Leela Fernandes, « The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India », *Urban Studies*, vol. 41 n°12, 2004, pp. 2415-2430 ; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Carol Bernstein, *The Celebration of Scandal: Toward the Sublime in Victorian Urban Fiction*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991 ; Christophe Den Tandt, *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1998.

## 2. Des villes en conflit

Les paysages spectaculaires de métamorphose urbaine vont de pair avec la représentation de la ville comme un **espace où les extrêmes entrent en collision**. Conformément à la définition par Moretti de la *totalité épique* comme confrontation entre des points de vue contradictoires, le mode épique donne une place centrale à la confrontation des forces sociales antagonistes à travers une **esthétique du choc**. Le deuxième chapitre montre qu'à travers le mode de la quête individuelle, le recours à une logique allégorique, le genre fantastique et la satire, ces textes tendent vers un **excès formel qui saisit les contradictions exacerbées de la ville indienne et la confusion psychique qu'elles entraînent**. Sans niveler les différences entre fiction et non-fiction, je suggère que cette esthétique du choc et de la démesure traverse à la fois les romans et les essais ou reportages du corpus.

En tant que lieu majeur d'accumulation du capital, la ville aime les ambitions et les espoirs de nouveaux arrivants, qui entrent souvent en conflit, notamment dans le contexte du tournant néolibéral et nationaliste de l'Inde et de la lutte accrue pour l'espace urbain.<sup>23</sup> Le chapitre examine d'abord l'accent mis sur la ville comme **lieu d'une quête individuelle** dans les **romans et récits de retour urbain**, catégorie développée par Ragini T. Srinivasan – et dont je souligne aussi les limites.<sup>24</sup> Ainsi, Suketu Mehta joue avec les codes du *Bildungsroman* dans *Maximum City* (2004), un reportage sur Mumbai qui célèbre le jeu des énergies individuelles à l'œuvre dans la ville, tandis que Rana Dasgupta et Raj Kamal Jha font un portrait beaucoup plus sombre de la collision permanente des intérêts individuels qui renforce l'atmosphère explosive de Delhi. Dans les ouvrages présentés comme des reportages ou des essais, les auteurs ne s'interdisent pas d'utiliser des procédés fictionnels : chez Mehta, l'utilisation des codes littéraires classiques se double d'une réappropriation des conventions du **cinéma Hindi**, milieu qu'il a beaucoup fréquenté lors de son séjour à

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<sup>23</sup> Dans le contexte de Mumbai, la coïncidence entre le renforcement de l'ouverture économique de la ville et sa 'provincialisation' ou son repli sur une identité régionale Marathie et hindoue est frappante. Voir Arjun Appadurai, « Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai », *Public Culture*, n°12, 2000, pp. 627-651 ; Rashmi Varma, art.cit.. Si le nationalisme hindou ne prend de l'ampleur qu'après 2008, tandis que la libéralisation économique est amorcée en 1991, on constate une collusion entre ces deux discours, comme le montre Arundhati Roy dans ses essais (voir Arundhati Roy, *My Seditious Heart: Collected Nonfiction*, Londres Penguin, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Ragini T. Srinivasan, « Unmoored: Passing, Slumming and Return-Writing in New India », in *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts*, op.cit., pp. 95-109.



Mumbai ; dans son essai sur l'*éruption* de Delhi, Rana Dasgupta dessine son autoportrait en étranger déchiffrant le magma de la ville, mais esquisse aussi des portraits d'hommes d'affaires en scélérats dickensiens. Ces membres de l'élite de Delhi, que Dasgupta observe pour comprendre la transformation de la ville, trouvent leur équivalent fictionnel dans le protagoniste du roman de Raj Kamal Jha cité plus haut, qui se révèle être un psychopathe et criminel, incarnant la déformation psychique engendrée par la modernisation capitaliste.

Le chapitre interroge les ambiguïtés de **l'écriture de la quête** lorsqu'elle s'attache à décrire la vie de citadins marginalisés. La notion de *slumming*, qui renvoie à la fois à une pratique sociale et à un sous-genre littéraire, permet d'analyser l'approche des quartiers les plus pauvres de la ville par Mehta et Dasgupta, qui semble osciller entre **misérabilisme et populisme**.<sup>25</sup> L'ambition documentaire du premier tend parfois vers le sensationnalisme, qui amplifie à la fois les conditions de vie inhumaines dans les bidonvilles et l'ingéniosité des habitants, leur détermination à lutter pour leur survie. Cette posture est proche de ce qu'Ananya Roy appelle **l'urbanisme subalterne**, qui exalte le modèle urbain alternatif incarné par les *slums*, fondé sur l'entreprise individuelle et l'absence de régulation, et qui tend à renforcer le *statu quo* néolibéral – un discours que critique également l'écrivain de Mumbai Naresh Fernandes.<sup>26</sup>

Ces récits sont également structurés par des **épisodes de violence directe**, parfois tirés d'événements réels (comme les émeutes et attentats de Mumbai en 1992-1993 et les émeutes d'Ahmedabad en 2002) : ils sont traités sur un **mode allégorique** chez Arundhati Roy, qui en manifeste la charge traumatique, ou par l'emprunt aux **codes du film de gangster** chez Mehta, l'inflation rhétorique minant ainsi l'ambition documentaire de son texte.

D'autre part, le conflit entre les forces sociales se manifeste par la **violence infrastructurelle** (Elleke Boehmer et Dominic Davies), visible à travers la ségrégation sociale à l'œuvre dans le développement de ces villes nouvelles. Dans sa « biographie » de Mumbai, intitulée *City Adrift*, Naresh Fernandes utilise le terme *islanding* pour faire référence à l'isolement des élites dans des résidences sécurisées, terme qui met en abyme la topographie insulaire de la ville. Les textes de Roy et de Dasgupta révèlent l'ancrage de cette

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<sup>25</sup> Claude Grignon et Jean-Claude Passeron, *Le Savant et le populaire. Misérabilisme et populisme en sociologie et en littérature*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> Ananya Roy, « Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism », *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 35, n° 2, 2011, pp. 223-238. Naresh Fernandes, *City Adrift: A Short Biography of Bombay*, Delhi, Aleph, 2013.

violence planifiée dans la logique ségrégationniste de **l'urbanisme colonial**, incarnée par des ensembles résidentiels fermés, dont la construction est motivée par un idéal technopastoral rappelant les *bungalows* coloniaux mais aussi le modèle de la cité-jardin transplanté à Delhi lors de la construction de la nouvelle capitale impériale en 1911. Les romans et essais étudiés investissent aussi les forteresses consuméristes que sont les *shopping malls*, et en révèlent les mécanismes : ils suggèrent que ces microcosmes fermés tendent à remplacer la ville elle-même pour une frange privilégiée de la population, qui s'identifie à ces espaces hors-sol, protégés de la pollution et de la chaleur.<sup>27</sup>

### ***3. Politiques des jeux d'échelles : du local au global***

Le troisième chapitre pose la question des implications politiques de cette esthétique du choc. Il démontre que **l'inflation rhétorique et l'hétérogénéité formelle du mode épique servent un propos critique**, ancré dans une compréhension globale de la ville indienne. Le chapitre propose donc d'analyser ces textes à la lumière des propositions théoriques de différents courants des **études urbaines et des théories de la modernité**, d'une perspective postcoloniale (incarnée par l'ambition de Jennifer Robinson de *provincialiser l'Europe* dans le champ des études urbaines, pour mettre fin au mythe du *retard* des villes du Sud) à un point de vue plus global (invitant à penser ces villes au sein du système-monde).

Ces textes puisent dans des **mythologies locales**, qui suggèrent l'exceptionnalité de chacune des villes indiennes. Mumbai est ainsi représentée chez Mehta comme une ville toute entière dédiée à **l'argent, au plaisir et au divertissement**, en particulier au cinéma, qui entretient une vision fantasmée de la ville. Son récit est animé par le désir d'explorer tous les mythes de Mumbai, du monde du crime organisé à celui de la police, de la prostitution au monde du cinéma, des *slums* au chef légendaire du Shiv Sena (parti politique régionaliste d'extrême droite). La logique de spectacle qui imprègne l'atmosphère de la ville est en quelque sorte dupliquée par l'écriture de Mehta, qui se représente lui-même comme

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Lussault évoque « la politique du micro-climat » des *malls* en Asie, où l'air et le climat tempéré deviennent des biens de luxe (Michel Lussault, *Hyper-lieux, les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation* (Paris, Le Seuil, 2017). Une étude récente révèle ainsi que les inégalités sociales se manifestent aussi par l'accès à un air propre, marchandisé, réservé aux *malls*, hôtels et appartements de luxe dans les villes indiennes. Gardiner Harris *et al.*, « Who gets to breathe the clean air in New Delhi? », *New York Times*, 17 décembre 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/17/world/asia/india-pollution-inequality.html>

un spectateur au bord d'une scène, observant les performances de ses personnages. Il perpétue aussi l'image de Mumbai comme une ville qui ne « tient pas en place » (*restless*), dont le perpétuel mouvement et la position géographique la détachent presque du continent indien.

Dans son essai, Dasgupta puise également dans les mythologies de Delhi lorsqu'il analyse la condition contemporaine de la capitale au prisme de **récits mélancoliques sur le déclin de la ville**. L'histoire fracturée de la ville, mise à sac, détruite, reconstruite et déplacée à maintes reprises depuis sa fondation, a alimenté une **tradition littéraire élegiaque**, notamment dans la poésie de langue ourdoue, qui reprend le genre persan de la plainte sur la chute de la ville (*shahr-ashob*) pour décrire le crépuscule de la capitale de l'empire moghol au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les romans indiens de langue anglaise sur Delhi, d'Ahmed Ali à Anita Desai, sont imprégnés de cette mélancolie. Si Dasgupta affirme se détacher de cette vision crépusculaire de la ville, elle apparaît tout de même dans son essai.

Néanmoins, probablement du fait de leur **trajectoire migratoire et de leur lectorat largement international**, Dasgupta, Mehta, Roy et Jha tendent à **ancrer les villes sur lesquelles ils écrivent dans le système capitaliste mondial**. Ces textes tissent ainsi des liens entre la modernisation globale des villes indiennes et d'autres expériences de la modernité urbaine à travers l'histoire, connectant Delhi et Mumbai à New York, Chicago, Paris ou Singapour. L'influence de Marshall Berman ou de Mike Davis sur la conception de la ville chez Dasgupta ou Roy est très claire, et suggère que ces auteurs pensent les villes indiennes au sein du système capitaliste mondial.<sup>28</sup> La vision comparatiste de Berman, qui détecte des affinités entre différentes formes de modernisation urbaine, de Saint-Petersbourg à Londres, Berlin et New York, invite à établir des ponts entre les villes indiennes « post-libéralisation » et d'autres conjonctures similaires à différents moments de l'histoire, sans pour autant souscrire à un récit historique linéaire de la modernité, qui ferait des pays capitalistes développés l'avenir des pays du Sud.

La reconfiguration littéraire de mythologies urbaines locales et des théories de la modernité globale à l'œuvre dans ces textes montre ainsi que **le mouvement d'amplification de l'épique ne perpétue pas un regard orientaliste ou exotique sur les**

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<sup>28</sup> Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Londres, Verso, 2006 ; Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (1982), Londres, Verso, 2010.

villes indiennes, ni une mystification des forces sociales qui les animent, mais défamiliarisent les crises cycliques du capitalisme telles qu'elles s'inscrivent dans l'espace urbain. En effet, ce que le mode épique permet de mettre en avant n'est pas le retard des villes indiennes mais précisément la manière dont fonctionne le capitalisme global à l'échelle de ces villes. Les traits dystopiques du mode épique témoignent ainsi de la nécessité pour ces auteurs de **dépasser les frontières du réalisme** pour représenter l'ampleur des contradictions du développement urbain et suggère que leur projet politique est ancré dans la force transformatrice de la **dystopie critique** (telle que la définit Tom Moylan).<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. *Street Corner Narratives*

Si le mouvement d'atténuation qui caractérise le mode *ordinaire* d'écriture de la ville est présent dans les récits de Dasgupta, de Jha et de Mehta, il domine plus clairement d'autres textes, comme ceux d'Amit Chaudhuri, d'Aman Sethi et de Siddharth Chowdhury. La ville y est principalement représentée à **l'échelle du quartier**, participant ainsi à la *déflation* métaphorique de la ville globale indienne. En s'appuyant sur les hypothèses de la micro-histoire, **le quatrième chapitre** montre que **le changement d'échelle dessine une autre géographie de Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata**, en mettant en lumière des espaces et des groupes sociaux rarement présents dans le paysage littéraire indien anglophone.

Dans son reportage sur un travailleur migrant vivant dans les rues d'Old Delhi, intitulé *A Free Man : Life and Death in Delhi*, Aman Sethi explore un quartier marchand de la vieille ville, décrivant en détail ses institutions (comme le stand de thé et le bar clandestin) et son rythme quotidien, et fait le portrait d'une ville industrielle qui contraste avec les descriptions mélancoliques de l'ancienne capitale moghole en déclin. Tabish Khair souligne l'attention que Siddharth Chowdhury prête au « coin de rue » (*nukkad* en Hindi) et à la vie de quartier dans ses romans, au point d'en faire une catégorie, le ***nukkad novel* (ou roman du coin de rue)**, que je déploie dans le chapitre.<sup>30</sup> Khair distingue ainsi la sentimentalité de écrivains métropolitains de la prose détachée de Chowdhury dans ses récits de la vie quotidienne à

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<sup>29</sup> Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder, CO, Westview, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Tabish Khair, « The Nukkad Novel », recension de *Patna Roughcut* de Siddharth Chowdhury, *Biblio*, Janvier-Février 2006, p. 34.

Patna (capitale de l'état du Bihar), qu'il relie à sa perspective *provinciale*, mais que l'on retrouve aussi dans ces récits de Delhi.

À l'image de la célèbre enquête de William Foot Whyte *Street Corner Society* (1949), ces récits posent sur la ville un **regard ethnographique**, qui observe la ville au ras du sol et scrute les détails et particularités de la vie quotidienne dans un quartier de Kolkata ou de Delhi. Les auteurs peuvent même s'approprier les méthodes ethnographiques, telles que **l'observation participante** chez Aman Sethi. Toutefois, ces récits jouent eux-aussi de la porosité entre fiction et non-fiction, et ces scènes quotidiennes peuvent parfois être réinventées au prisme du **cinéma ou de la *pulp fiction***, comme l'indiquent les nombreux liens que fait Chowdhury entre son environnement et le **Little Italy des films de Martin Scorsese** ou les personnages des romans noirs de James Hadley Chase.

Ces textes insistent également sur **l'aspect communautaire de la vie urbaine** et la **constante interpénétration du public et du privé**. *A Strange and Sublime Address* (dont le titre suggère déjà l'ancrage local), premier roman d'Amit Chaudhuri, est écrit du point de vue d'un enfant de dix ans qui rend visite à sa famille de Calcutta pendant les vacances, et est structuré par la perméabilité entre intérieur et extérieur, qui transforme la vie familiale en spectacle observé par le voisinage. Le **poids des langues régionales** dans ces textes de langue anglaise participe de leur ancrage dans la localité. En mettant l'accent sur l'argot local, fait de multiples strates linguistiques, les textes donnent à entendre le **paysage sonore du quartier** mais aussi la manière dont **la localité se construit sur ces codes linguistiques spécifiques**. *Day Scholar* représente ainsi l'initiation du jeune Ritwik à l'argot local de l'université de Delhi, tandis qu'Aman Sethi tente de rendre les inflexions locales des travailleurs migrants d'Old Delhi dans son reportage littéraire tout en dévoilant le rapport de force inégal qui le lie à ses personnages et sa conscience de s'adresser à un lectorat global, comme le montre la « note sur la langue », une parodie de glossaire qui clôt son ouvrage.

Ces textes accordent aussi une grande importance aux **conversations (notamment sous la forme de l'*adda* à Kolkata)** et aux **pratiques quotidiennes de narration**, que je lis au prisme de l'analyse du narrateur (ou conteur) chez Walter Benjamin.<sup>31</sup> Ainsi, loin d'être simplement une échelle de représentation, le quartier (sous le nom de *para* à Kolkata ou de *mohalla* dans les villes d'Inde du nord) apparaît comme une construction sociale et

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Benjamin, « The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov » (1936), in *Illuminations*, trad. Harry Zohn, éd. Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken, 1969, pp. 83-109.s

imaginative, **une matrice narrative puissante** qui nourrit ces romans et reportages. L'ancrage local de ces textes les rapproche peut-être **d'auteurs de langue vernaculaire**, comme Saadat Hasan Manto, Vivek Shanbhag ou Uday Prakash, écrivant respectivement en ourdou, kannada et hindi, démontrant que l'opposition entre la littérature indienne de langue anglaise, qui représenterait un espace national homogénéisé et factice, et celle de langues régionales, plus attentive aux réalités locales, ne tient pas.<sup>32</sup>

Ces récits du coin de rue font ainsi de la gigantesque ville indienne un **espace familial**, une constellation de villages urbains qui invite à **repenser la démarcation entre l'urbain et le rural**, le centre et la périphérie. Ainsi, les liens entre Delhi et une capitale de province telle que Patna, ou entre Kolkata et les villages du Bengale, sont mis en avant, et **enracinent la ville globale dans une sphère régionale, nuancent ainsi la vision de la ville globale comme un espace hors-sol**. La valeur de cette perspective réside donc dans sa capacité à renouveler notre perception des villes indiennes : contre une vision lointaine et uniformisante de la ville globale indienne, elle propose une *description dense* des lieux urbains et s'attache à en rendre les irrégularités ; mais contre le stéréotype orientaliste du chaos urbain des *megacities* indiennes, elle met en avant une **géographie de l'endotique** (Georges Pérec), qui explore la ville sur un mode ordinaire.

### ***5. L'écriture du quotidien***

La *miniaturisation* de la ville, qui s'allie souvent à des formes courtes (nouvelle, court reportage, roman fragmentaire), semble aller de pair avec une écriture du quotidien urbain, qui oscille entre un **mode documentaire**, caractérisé par une retenue rhétorique et un ton détaché, et **l'exagération comique de micro-événements**. Cette focalisation sur le rythme régulier des pratiques quotidiennes, que j'explore dans le chapitre 5, n'implique pas une échappée hors de l'histoire ou la minimisation des conflits qui définissent la vie urbaine, mais révèle plutôt la manière dont **la violence s'ancre dans la vie quotidienne**.

Les **événements critiques** (Veena Das) qui marquent l'histoire de l'Inde contemporaine, comme la partition de 1947, la guerre d'indépendance du Bangladesh de 1971, et les émeutes et attentats de 1992-1993 à Mumbai, tout comme le bouleversement

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<sup>32</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee, « The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English », *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27 November 1993, pp. 2607-2611.

plus général des années 1990, ne sont ni au cœur de ces récits, ni tout à fait oblitérés : ils sont principalement traités de **manière oblique ou elliptique, à travers leurs réverbérations sur la vie courante des habitants, les rumeurs sourdes, ou les souvenirs fragmentaires des violences qu'ils ont engendrées.**<sup>33</sup> Les romans de Chaudhuri mettent tous en scène des personnages ou des familles originaires du Bengale oriental, qui ont émigré à Kolkata suite à la Partition de 1947 ou à la guerre de 1971. Néanmoins, l'exil et la Partition sont traités *de biais*, via des fragments de souvenirs ou des comportements quotidiens qui ne font que suggérer l'expérience traumatique. De même, les attentats de Mumbai n'apparaissent qu'au travers de rumeurs se propageant dans le quartier ou de passages de discours médiatiques et de lieux-communs stéréotypés dans *Freedom Song*, le troisième roman de l'auteur. La logique métonymique structure aussi la représentation *ordinaire* de la transformation urbaine des années 1990, qui n'est visible que par des détails (une nouvelle marque de vêtement, un nouveau *shopping mall*), des absences ou des ellipses.

L'accent que ces écrivains mettent sur le **proche, le familial et le trivial** permet de souligner les formes presque invisibles que prend la violence, celles de désastres mineurs mais révélateurs des rapports de forces profonds qui structurent la société indienne, loin du vacarme des grands récits. La tonalité détachée et le registre héroï-comique de ces textes, qui contrastent avec le choc, la colère ou l'indignation que véhicule le mode épique face à la violence, n'impliquent donc pas une forme de relativisme ou de résignation au *statu quo*, mais révèlent **l'enracinement des antagonismes sociaux ou des traumatismes historiques dans le quotidien**. Cette perspective a aussi pour effet de nuancer le récit du tournant indien des années 1990 et de mettre en lumière des transformations graduelles et l'intensification de logiques sociales, économiques et culturelles antérieures.

## ***6. Politiques de l'ordinaire***

Le sixième et dernier chapitre prolonge cette interrogation sur les modalités de la violence structurelle en étudiant les stratégies élaborées par les personnages pour la contourner. Le mode ordinaire porte lui aussi **une critique de l'utopie de la ville mondiale capitaliste**, mais elle ne passe pas par la création d'un décor urbain dystopique dans lequel

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<sup>33</sup> Veena Das, *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995.

s'affrontent des forces sociales antagonistes présageant peut-être d'une révolution à venir ; cette critique s'incarne, elle, dans des *hétérotopies* (telles que les entend Henri Lefebvre plutôt que Michel Foucault) ou des *utopies réelles* (Erik Olin Wright), **des espaces d'autonomie relative qui laissent entrevoir la possibilité d'une ville plus juste**.<sup>34</sup>

Les personnages excentriques de ces romans, essais et reportages, à la dérive ou menant des quêtes improbables, cyniques ou idéalistes, se détachent tous du culte de la réussite économique et de la mobilité sociale, sans pour autant être décrits comme des victimes. Au contraire, ces textes insistent sur **l'agentivité individuelle** et la force de caractère de ces personnages, tout en dépeignant les inégalités structurelles et la violence à laquelle ils sont soumis. L'exemple de Musa, le militant du Cachemire qui est l'un des personnages principaux de *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, dernier roman d'Arundhati Roy, est caractérisé par sa détermination et sa persévérance dans la lutte pour la liberté de ce territoire, tout en étant conscient de son échec probable.

L'espace du cimetière musulman abandonné tient une place centrale dans ce roman, et montre à quel point l'invention d'une nouvelle forme de collectivité sociale incarnée par la Jannat Guest House (lieu d'hospitalité créé par l'héroïne du roman, Anjum, dans le cimetière), est fondée sur la relation fluide entre vivants et morts, le présent et le passé de cet espace urbain, rappelant les analyses de Michel de Certeau sur **l'espace hanté comme seul espace habitable**.<sup>35</sup> D'autres exemples de **tactiques et de subterfuges pour habiter la ville** malgré les structures d'oppression sont mises en avant dans les romans et essais étudiés, y compris sur un mode fantastique comme chez Raj Kamal Jha, qui réimagine l'espace du *mall* comme une utopie d'hospitalité et d'abondance pour les sans-abris qui y trouvent mystérieusement refuge la nuit. Au sein de la ville globale, ces personnages excentriques ont pour **seules armes les ruses et les compromis, qui ensemble constituent une stratégie d'appropriation de l'espace urbain**.

Plus qu'un flâneur explorant la ville entière, l'écrivain a ici une posture d'**archéologue**, qui traque les fragments résiduels du passé de la ville dans l'espace contemporain, non au service d'un récit national grandiose, mais comme **instruments d'une praxis critique**. Cette méthode archéologique, qui est éclairée par la conception de la ville de Walter Benjamin, est en effet fondée sur l'immersion des auteurs dans un quartier plutôt

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<sup>34</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *La Révolution urbaine*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970 ; Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Londres, Verso, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien, Tome 1*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 162.



que sur leur mobilité. Elle leur permet aussi de donner corps et voix à des individus occultés de cette *nouvelle* Inde et de mettre en lumière une **histoire fragmentée qui éclate le récit national d'ascension**. La figure de Tilo dans le roman de Roy, archiviste forcenée de la vie quotidienne au Cachemire et éditrice du pamphlet révolutionnaire du militant Dr. Bhartiya, apparaît comme un avatar de l'écrivain en chiffonnier ou archéologue, liant ainsi **la collecte de débris à une politique radicale**, qui fait écho à la politique des « petits riens » de Roy.

La force critique de ces œuvres de fiction et de non-fiction réside dans leur capacité à **miner le grand récit du triomphe des villes indiennes** : à travers les personnages d'anti-héros qui évitent soigneusement la réussite et résistent aux logiques capitalistes ; par la valorisation du passé de ces villes plutôt que l'avenir glorieux qui leur est promis ; par l'éclatement du macro-récit linéaire et triomphant du développement urbain indien en une multitude de fils narratifs sinueux, qui refusent de s'ordonner en un récit univoque.

Par ailleurs, les textes d'Aman Sethi, d'Amit Chaudhuri, de Siddharth Chowdhury ou d'Arundhati Roy ne font pas littéralement l'éloge de la lenteur et de l'enracinement, mais, contre le culte de la vitesse et de la mobilité, ils suggèrent que ces pratiques quotidiennes d'appropriation de l'espace urbain sont des **moyens mineurs et provisoires de survivre dans la ville tout en étant hors de la course au profit**. Ce sixième chapitre examine **l'ambiguïté politique de cet éloge**, qui parvient tout de même à échapper à une forme d'idéalisation de l'initiative individuelle qui ne ferait qu'entériner un récit libéral, par la mise en lumière des inégalités structurelles qui imposent ces formes de survie à ces personnages. De même, l'échelle locale n'est pas glorifiée en tant que telle comme arène privilégiée de l'action politique, puisque c'est précisément la **variation entre les échelles** qui constitue le pouvoir critique de ces récits littéraires, qui connectent sans cesse le local et le global. L'ancrage de ces récits dans la ville n'implique pas un retour à une conception rigide du lieu comme déterminant de l'identité, ce dont témoigne l'écriture de Roy par exemple, qui rassemble précisément en un même lieu des personnages qui n'en ont pas ou dont les liens avec leurs origines sont rompus (Tilo, Anjum, Dayachand rebaptisé Saddam Hussein). La prédominance de l'échelle locale, comme la fin du chapitre le suggère, résonne avec **l'engagement social et politique local** des écrivains dans leur environnement urbain, notamment dans le cas de Chaudhuri, qui est à la tête d'un mouvement pour la préservation de l'architecture de Calcutta et surtout d'Arundhati Roy, dont les combats, s'ils ont des ramifications internationales, sont profondément ancrés en Inde.

## VI. Apports de la thèse

Ce travail démontre donc que la place croissante de la ville dans la littérature indienne anglophone depuis les années 2000 a donné lieu à des textes d'une grande hétérogénéité, une diversité que j'ai tâché d'appréhender à l'aune de l'interaction entre les modes épiques et ordinaires, dont les caractéristiques sont à la fois esthétiques et politiques. Après avoir retracé le parcours en 6 chapitres proposé par ma thèse, je voudrais essayer de synthétiser en trois axes les principales contributions de mon travail au champ de l'histoire littéraire indienne comme des études postcoloniales et de la littérature-monde.

En premier lieu, ce travail **ouvre le canon des études littéraires indiennes anglophones** de deux façons : d'abord par l'inclusion de textes écrits en anglais mais publiés en Inde et destinés à un lectorat indien, sur lesquels la critique ne s'était jusque là quasiment jamais penchée ; ensuite, **par l'analyse approfondie de textes de non-fiction**, habituellement ignorés des études littéraires. Ce travail montre aussi comment **l'hybridation entre fiction et non-fiction** est particulièrement développée dans les écrits sur la ville qui mêlent sans cesse – et subrepticement – méthodes fictionnelles et ethnographiques. Les « biographies » de ville, essais, reportages et « récits de retour urbains » puisent dans la puissance poétique de la ville comme creuset de récits, tandis que les romans étudiés témoignent d'un **éclatement de la forme romanesque**, par des incursions dans le mode documentaire, par l'incorporation directe d'une matière non-fictionnelle brute dans le texte fictionnel.

Pour ne citer que quelques exemples développés dans la thèse, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, roman imposant d'Arundhati Roy où s'entrecroisent de multiples trames narratives, est imprégné du tumulte social, économique et politique de l'Inde contemporaine, et son **hétérogénéité formelle** (mélangeant l'intrigue à des interventions auctoriales, des lettres, des extraits de journaux intimes, des témoignages judiciaires) indique la nécessité pour l'auteur de brouiller les frontières génériques pour saisir cette réalité sociale fragmentée. Chaudhuri et Chowdhury fragmentent aussi la forme romanesque en une série de **chroniques et vignettes fragmentaires**, et leurs textes sont caractérisés par une **ligne de partage incertaine entre fiction et autobiographie**.

Mettre en évidence cette pluralité formelle permet de renouveler le discours critique sur la littérature indienne en anglais **en replaçant le roman au sein d'un ensemble de**

**formes littéraires diverses.** Le roman indien de langue anglaise, auquel la littérature indienne dans son ensemble a souvent été réduite (occultant ainsi l'histoire riche et complexe d'autres formes littéraires populaires en Inde telles que la nouvelle et la poésie), a été envisagé comme la forme permettant de réimaginer la condition postcoloniale et de critiquer l'histoire nationale. **J'ai tenté de montrer dans ce travail l'hétérogénéité du roman indien anglophone ainsi que l'émergence d'autres formes littéraires avec lesquelles il interagit.**

Deuxièmement, cette thèse invite à **repenser la dichotomie souvent trop simple entre discours complices et discours critiques des représentations dominantes** (orientalistes ou nationalistes) de la ville indienne. L'opposition esthétique – elle-même nuancée, comme on l'a vu – entre les modes épiques et ordinaires ne recoupe pas une opposition politique frontale : j'envisage **ces deux modes comme deux faces d'une même vision critique de la production capitaliste de l'espace urbain.** La prédominance d'un mode sur l'autre peut aussi être reliée à la position des auteurs dans le champ littéraire contemporain, à leur lectorat envisagé (indien ou global) et à leurs engagements politiques, plus ou moins tournés vers le global ou le local.

Cette critique est aussi ancrée dans le rapport étroit de ces textes à **l'histoire de ces trois villes. L'écriture archéologique de ces auteurs** détecte la persistance du passé dans l'espace urbain contemporain, soit par la présence de spectres, victimes, entre autres, du développement urbain, soit par la collecte de fragments et débris de la ville passée à la manière du chiffonnier de Baudelaire ou Benjamin. Le dévoilement des strates cachées de l'histoire urbaine révèle les relations complexes entre **mémoire et pensée critique.** La valeur accordée à ces traces, délibérément ignorées ou effacées du récit d'ascension nationale (comme l'importance de la culture islamique de Delhi, ou les traces d'échanges transculturels dans l'architecture de Kolkata) est en effet un **geste politique radical** dans le contexte de la réécriture de l'histoire comme instrument de propagande par le régime actuel, qui promeut une vision de l'Inde hindoue (l'Hindutva), expurgée d'éléments exogènes. Lancé en 2020 par le gouvernement Modi, le projet pharaonique de rénovation du quartier administratif de New Delhi, impliquant la destruction de son patrimoine architectural, est un exemple frappant d'effacement de l'histoire urbaine, notamment de l'héritage de Jawaharlal Nehru, et de glorification d'une Inde hindoue, au nom d'un geste prétendument postcolonial.

Troisièmement, par son **approche spatiale des textes et son usage du jeu d'échelles**, à la fois au sein des textes et dans leur analyse, ce travail offre une contribution d'ordre méthodologique et théorique aux études littéraires. L'une des originalités de ce travail, je l'espère, est de lire ce corpus à la lumière des **théories postcoloniales mais aussi des théories matérialistes de la littérature-monde**, ce qui implique de faire varier les échelles d'analyse, entre le local, le régional, le national et le global, mettant en avant les spécificités des villes indiennes (que mes séjours de recherche m'ont aidée à percevoir plus finement) mais aussi les similarités avec d'autres villes semi-périphériques. Ces écrivains écrivent *depuis* Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata, et cette thèse a montré à quel point cet ancrage était crucial. Toutefois, leurs œuvres révèlent aussi que le développement urbain à l'œuvre en Inde, caractérisé par son rythme effréné, est **paradigmatique de la modernisation capitaliste**. Le processus de modernisation urbaine, qui accentue les disparités économiques et sociales et crée une juxtaposition de temporalités hétérogènes, travaille les multiples formes de la littérature indienne contemporaine.

Le passage du prisme de la nation à celui de la ville, dans le cadre du système monde littéraire, montre que ces œuvres réimaginent **l'interaction entre une histoire nationale et une histoire globale de la modernité**, replaçant ces villes indiennes dans une histoire plus large et invitant à approfondir les **comparaisons avec d'autres villes du Sud**, esquissées dans cette thèse, telles que Johannesburg, Nairobi ou Lagos, en mettant au travail l'hypothèse d'une esthétique urbaine définie par la tension entre deux modes. En avançant des hypothèses fortes sur le lien intime entre la matérialité de la ville et les formes littéraires qui en émergent, cette thèse voudrait donc aussi éclairer **des dynamiques qui traversent une large part du monde postcolonial**. Ainsi, les études urbaines peuvent à leur tour bénéficier de cette discussion de textes littéraires, **qui élargissent notre compréhension de la modernité urbaine**. Mon étude des lignes mouvantes de l'écriture de la ville indienne et de leur implications politiques met donc en lumière la relation étroite entre la littérature indienne anglophone et les transformations urbaines, et contribue ainsi à renouveler les termes du débat sur la **littérature indienne et la littérature-monde**.

## Entre l'épique et l'ordinaire : l'écriture politique de la ville dans la littérature contemporaine indienne de langue anglaise (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata)

### Résumé

Si la ville a une place importante dans le roman indien de langue anglaise depuis les années 1980, la profusion de romans, essais et reportages littéraires urbains publiés depuis les années 2000 témoigne d'un renouvellement des formes et des motifs du discours littéraire sur la ville indienne. Au croisement de la littérature et des études urbaines, cette thèse situe ce phénomène littéraire dans le contexte de l'ouverture de l'Inde au capitalisme global dans les années 1990, qui a engendré l'expansion et la transformation accélérées des villes indiennes sous l'influence notable du modèle de la ville globale. A partir d'un corpus de dix textes fictionnels et non-fictionnels portant sur Delhi, Mumbai et Kolkata, j'étudie le développement d'un imaginaire urbain critique qui traduit, à travers deux modes esthétiques majeurs, l'expérience contradictoire de cette métamorphose urbaine et fissure les discours orientalistes ou nationalistes sur la ville indienne. Au sein des textes analysés s'entrecroisent ainsi un mode épique, qui défamiliarise la modernisation urbaine et amplifie la confrontation brutale de forces sociales à l'œuvre dans la ville, et un mode ordinaire, qui explore ce processus historique à l'échelle du quartier, à travers le prisme de la vie quotidienne, mettant en lumière une violence structurelle mais aussi des tactiques de réappropriation de l'espace urbain. Ces deux modes sont pensés comme deux facettes d'une écriture politique de la ville, fondée sur la forte conscience historique des auteurs, qui mettent au jour dans leurs textes les strates d'une histoire urbaine fragmentée que l'urbanisme contemporain s'emploie à effacer.

**Mots-clés :** Littérature indienne anglophone, études postcoloniales, littérature monde, ville globale, études urbaines, épique, ordinaire, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Inde, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Rana Dasgupta, Raj Kamal Jha, Aman Sethi, Siddharth Chowdhury, Suketu Mehta

## Between the Epic and the Ordinary: Locating the Politics of Contemporary Indian Urban Writing in English (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata)

### Summary

While the city has been central to the Indian novel in English since the 1980s, the profusion of urban novels, essays and literary reportages published since the 2000s reveals important formal and thematic shifts in the literary discourse on Indian cities. At the crossroads of literature and urban studies, this thesis locates this literary phenomenon in the context of India's embrace of global capitalism in the 1990s, which has resulted in the accelerated expansion and transformation of Indian cities, notably based on the model of the 'world-class city'. Drawing from a corpus of fictional and non-fictional texts on Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, I study the development of a critical urban imaginary which expresses the contradictory experience of this urban metamorphosis through the interplay between two major aesthetic modes, and challenges both orientalist and nationalist discourses on the Indian city. These texts oscillate between the epic mode, which defamiliarizes urban modernisation and amplifies the collision between antagonistic social forces in the city, and the ordinary mode, which explores this historical process at the scale of the locality through the lens of everyday life, obliquely shedding light on structural violence but also on tactics devised by urban outcasts to reclaim urban space. These two modes are considered as the two faces of a political literary approach of the city, which rests on the strong historical consciousness of the writers. Their works unveil the multiple layers of a fragmented urban history which contemporary urban planning endeavours to erase.

**Keywords:** Indian literature, postcolonial studies, world literature, global city, urban studies, epic, ordinary, Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, India, Arundhati Roy, Amit Chaudhuri, Rana Dasgupta, Raj Kamal Jha, Aman Sethi, Siddharth Chowdhury, Suketu Mehta

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