



Locating City in Indian Writing in English: A Theoretical Introduction

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The notion of colonialism as an agent of total disruption in the native society has come under extensive scrutiny. Colonialism is not just a force of intrusion, but it is seen as a continuing legacy in native societies. The reconsideration of colonial system is necessitated by the native system itself, since it has not only withstood the onslaughts of colonialism, but has assimilated its divergent features to shape a new social order altogether. Thus assimilation, heterogeneity, hybridity, plurality, are the key words to analyze the postcolonial societies ¹.

The issues of hybridity, plurality, and heterogeneity can be studied in the context of metropolitan/urban experience. It can be argued that the representations of cities/ metropolis are the models of hybridity, syncreticism and heterogeneity. With this premise an attempt is made in this paper, to explore the validity and appropriateness of metropolitan / urban experience represented in Indian writing in English, particularly in the fiction of post-Rushdie period. In this paper, I have tried to evolve a theoretical framework, which would help to analyze metropolitan experience.

Though the urban population is fast heading overtaking the rural population in the world, city has always evoked mixed reactions in popular imagination. Cities are always seen as centers of discontent, evil, greed and destruction. Eliot believed that, city was what man had made without god. Sumit Sarkar shows that despite the novelty of metropolitan experience cityscapes rarely influenced the literary minds of India in nineteenth century. It was not joyfully accepted as in the case of Baudelaire or Dickens ². American urban sociology, lead by George

Simmel, Louis Wirth, and Lewis Mumford, is also guilty of characterizing the cities in pessimistic terms. Cities may promote diversity and creativity, according to George Simmel, but he still identifies bored and blasé attitudes to life in cities. In India the nationalist imagination was predominantly preoccupied with villages. The nationalist movement looked at village as the defining point of India.

Ashis Nandy suggests that the impact of colonialism was confined to urban centers because of the cultural and political heterogeneity of India³. Though the place of colonial modernity in India was obviously the city, the nationalist thinkers devoted their energies to produce the idea of rural India. “For a long time, perhaps not until the 1950s metropolis did not quite acquire, in the minds of India middle class the moral security and stability of home”⁴. One of the reasons for the prominent place of village in nationalist imagination is Gandhi. Gandhi’s conceptualization of India as essentially rural had a major influence on the nationalist imagination. Nehru on the other hand, saw villages as the places of ignorance and backwardness. On the other, B.R. Ambedkar advocated the dalits to migrate to cities in order to escape from the stigma of untouchability and caste based identity. The issue of national identity became a contested terrain due to the dichotomy between Gandhi and Nehru. It also created an ambivalent position for city in Indian imagination⁵. It can be argued that the rhetorical contrast between city and village / country was the result of Industrial capitalism and European imperialism. But to present city as the adversary of village/ country is fallacious. Raymond Williams suggests that the abstract comparisons of rural virtue and urban greed forget the “functional links between the social and moral orders which were so easily and conventionally contrasted”⁶.

Ashis Nandy in his book *An Ambiguous Journey to City* (2001) points out that the case of binary division between city and country is rather overstated. With the examples of Gandhi and Satyajit Ray, he shows how both of them ‘discovered’ the ‘village’ with the help of their metropolitan upbringing. He also illustrates how all the developmental projects of rural places take place in the board rooms of metropolis. Hence for him, many a times the village is reconceived by the city. Further as Raymond Williams has shown, what happens in the town is generated by the needs of rural class. “What was happening in the ‘city’, the metropolitan economy, was determined by what was made to happen in the ‘city’⁷. Hence to posit the city as the adversary of village is unnecessary.

Moreover, India may be predominantly rural society but it cannot remain a peasant society always. The changes brought about by colonial modernity, communication technology and the forces of global capitalism have altered the basic structures of Indian society. Though village is considered as the prototype of Indian civilization, there has been a steady decline of village in the Indian mind. For a new generation of Indians, the village has become a demographic or statistical datum. The village is no longer a living presence in the mainstream Indian intellectual life ⁸.

Cities have been considered as the habitats of modernism. Malcolm Bradbury shows how modernism was concentrated in urban centers at the period of its high intensity at Berlin, Vienna and Prague, which were the centers of German modernism; at Moscow, St. Petersburg and Paris at the height of modernism, at London, New York and Chicago⁹. The emergence of novel form itself can be related to cities, since prose fiction is essentially an urban art. Further, the colonial administration projected the Third world as the province of western metropolis. In a way, by the end of nineteenth century the rest of the world became a cultural province of Western metropolis. Since cities are the generative environments of new arts and ideas, and the focal points of intellectual activities they are considered as the ‘storm centers of civilization’¹⁰.

There is always a close association between literature and cities. Though artists have abhorred the notion of city to a great extent, cities are the essential centers of literary activities, publishers, libraries. They are the places of intense intellectual debates. Thus there is a constant pull and push, attraction and revulsion, towards the city. For many writers city is more a metaphor than a space to discuss various issues of society. However, Walter Benjamin was interested in exploring the relationship between the city and a literary artist / intellectual. His *Arcades Project* ¹¹ and *Illuminations* ¹² are of immense help in understanding the relationship between the two. What makes Benjamin’s analysis fascinating is, he is concerned about showing how the crowds and buildings of Paris and Naples have a determining influence on the artistic expression of writers like Baudelaire and so on.

Salman Rashdie, explicating the major sources of his creative energy, suggests that city is the reality and a metaphor throughout his writing. He acknowledges that, Bombay the most cosmopolitan, most hybrid and the most hotch potch of all Indian cities is the principle influence on his works. However, the celebrated novels of India both in English and in regional languages draw upon rural experience and tend to reject metropolitan experience in favor of the values of agrarian society and puritanical spiritualism. Such a view considers the village as the essential feature of Indian society and the endless obsession about local reality has the risk of keeping India out the continuum of history. India cannot be defined in its localized milieu. It is

not only true of India but also true of most of the postcolonial societies. Cities are the appropriate places to discuss the issues such as heterogeneity, hybridity, plurality and syncretism, which are central to postcolonial discourse. Alessandro Triulzi, talking about the African cities says that they are the ‘new sites for the symbolic production of the ‘post colonial’¹³. It is here that we must look for the new urban rites and languages, the multiple memories and a rediscovered identity. These are not to be found in the ‘traditional’ culture, nor in the ‘modern’ one inherited from colonialism, but in the ‘apparent chaos of everyday’, produced by the informal economy; small traders, smuggling, recycling and all the numerous forms and means of urban survival”. (p.79). He also states “it is in this polymorphous and apparently chaotic post colonial city that we need to search for the new ‘rules of chaos’ and seek the signs and new codes of expression of these urban identities in formation. In particular we must find the ‘generative, recitative and iconic texts’ that give them life...” (p. 81). Because today’s urban citizens, either in India or in any post colonial societies, are no longer strangers in the city as they were considered to be in the colonial or in the early periods of modernity. Most of them have been born in cities or have adapted to it and as a result they have redefined their relationship with the urban milieu.

Postcolonial theorists have argued that since the regulative system of colonialism has broken down, it has created hybrid and multiple identities in colonized societies. With this, the rapid progress of global economy, large scale migrations have made the neat distinctions between nations, cultures and identities invalid ¹⁴. The boundaries of nation- states have become less significant, because these boundaries are insufficient to contain the influx of people, cultures, technologies and capital. Behdad points out that due to the political and cultural reconfigurations the issues of hybridity, transculturation and multiplicities have gained greater currency.

Ashis Nandy (2001) suggests that the Indian city has re-emerged in public consciousness not as a location of home but as a place of homelessness. The new city doesn’t fear homelessness and multiple identities rather it celebrates them. (p.25). This has resulted in dissolving the distinctions between the city-country, center-periphery, tradition modernity and so on. The celebration of homelessness, multiple identities and belongings can also be seen as the postmodern phenomenon. Peter Broker remarks that in the Postmodern, late capitalist phase many cities which have been created under the global influence have produced hybrid, hyphenated and borderline identifies ¹⁵. Such a transition, which can also be termed as the transition from modernity to post-modernity in other words, results in dissolving the binary

opposition between country and the city. The collapse of binary distinctions in postmodern era, in some sense provides a useful insight to address the city-village divide in a different way. As W.E.B Du Bois has suggested, the binary divisions which are crumbling by various reasons were essentially hierarchical in nature¹⁶. Satish Desphande, in his illuminative analysis of Indian Society, states that the divide between tradition and modernity (which in a way is reflective of the divide between city and village / country) is essentially hierarchical in nature as the modern always claims to be superior of the other ¹⁷. Arjun Appaduari, also shows that modernity declares and desires universal applicability for itself ¹⁸. It is to be noted that due to these reasons the unequal relationship between the city and the country is being redefined to create a new social identity. It is in his context that the representations of cities / metropolis are to be studied.

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