

Review Article

Writing and Space: *Writing the City* by Stuti Khanna

Orient Blackswan. 2020. pp.114, Rs. 750 (Paperback). ISBN: 9789352879229

Urvashi Kaushal

Assistant Professor, SVNIT, Surat, Gujarat. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6774-6849.

Email: k.urvashi@amhd.svni.ac.in

Writing the City, a collection of essays edited by Stuti Khanna is a noteworthy publication as it includes 13 engaging essays by critically acclaimed contemporary mostly Indian writer. The book has an attractive cover with an infographic map of cities — the theme around which Khanna assembles this collection. This book with only 114 pages can be a treasure trove for researchers of the contemporary Indian writing as “it explores the symbiotic relationship between form and content” (Khanna, 2020, p. xi) as each of these 13 writers present in their introspective mood, “the relationship of their writing to place and space” (Khanna, 2020, p.xi) of their upbringing. Hence, the apt title, *Writing the City*. The book validates Tim Creswell and other Humanist Geographer’s reverberations that: “Place is the raw material for the creative production for identity” (Cresswell, 2004, p.39).

The book begins with Khanna’s preface style introduction which lays foundation for the need to explore the relation between the writers and their city– in this case his muse/inspiration. She draws upon the argument by quoting Georg Simmel’s 1902 essay on metropolis and the mental life on the “far-reaching impact of place on personality” (Khanna, 2020, p. vii). The introduction dexterously establishes the presence of the city as much more than a setting, as it presupposes its everlasting presence in Dickens’s writing– before moving to the mutual fame Rushdie and Bombay brought to one another. She defends the Indian metropolis like Bombay, Delhi and Bangalore’s central position because of the popular and commercial niche that Indian English writing has established amongst English speaking inhabitants of these metropolises of India. These cities also act as inspiration and quintessential setting for the popular contemporary English novels. The introduction foregrounds the symbiosis between the city and the writers which re-configures the shape and meaning to their literary work. While it aims to present each writers’ journey and his/her relationship with the city– as a collection it records the milieu in which we live and which becomes a meaningful location to the writer as well as the readers.

Celebrated writers like Manju Kapur and Anita Nair present the secret of craftsmanship and techniques used to capture the city in their writings. Kapur in her piece recalls her visits to

This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact editor@rupkatha.com.

Amritsar with a notebook and a camera to preserve the nitty gritty of the historic city. The details collected on each visit, gave her 'verbal strength' and made her writing 'clearer, sharper, more affecting' (Kapur, 2020, p.65). She gives an insight into the creation of *Difficult Daughters* by recalling her rigorous reading of the daily, *The Tribune* to imagine the colonial ambience she needed to create pre-independence Lahore. But in her words, it is in Delhi that she finds the true ownership and freedom to explore, the feeling of an insider who can criticize or mourn it as she likes. Hence, Delhi remains her obvious setting since her first novel.

Anita Nair, on the other hand, deviates from her favourable setting in Kerala and describes her visit to the not-so-sought after area of Bengaluru, which she one day realized had been beyond her boundaries. Her article hints at exploring the unexplored in order to find the material setting for social relations of people she was not familiar with. Her adventurous expedition motivated by her need to visit market places where life conspires, opened a world "stripped of its veneer of education and polish" (Nair, 2020, p.114). Amitabha Bagchi's essay 'Sometimes a Hawk is just a Hawk' entails his readers' attention to the shift in his craft. He justifies indulging in the long descriptive notes on Delhi inspired by Ezra Pound, but calls them lacunae in his early novels (77). Bagchi hopes that even without the social science framework of the city which he loves to provide in his stories, his work would hit the right chord with the readers.

In my reading, one author who most effectively connects the relationship between the craft and the city is Saikat Majumdar whose love for Calcutta as his muse is engaging and distinctive. His internal dialogue provoked by the famous author Fae Myenne Ng's position on inspiration, becomes the point of genesis for this rich essay, that takes many turns but rests by agreeing to Ng's belief that "the first few years of life is the material for lifetime for fiction writers" (Majumdar, 2020, p.89). After loud introspections he agrees that Calcutta and his early years have constantly remained the crux of his writings. Discussing his initial works produced when he was in America, in Rushdique style he explains the distance in "writing about a place of memory, always half-remembered, never fully, becomes an exercise separated not only by time and space, but also by a certain kind of awareness of sensibility" (Majumdar, 2020, p.90). Even while he accepts the contribution of American academic training and western traditions in his craft, he acknowledges his connections with India, mostly Calcutta — the site for his stories.

Interestingly, Majumdar does not mourn the urbanization of his beloved city— rather for him Calcutta has remained untouched by globalisation. Yet, most of the writers in the collection reverberate their disappointment over the neoliberal urbanity making their city bow to the pressures caused by globalization. Most pronounced disappointment comes from Samrat Upadhyay and Cyrus Mistry. Upadhyay condemns the urbanization in Kathmandu, where he grew up and turns with nostalgia for the lanes and vistas lost in the concretization of the hilly capital. He asserts: "How to reconcile the changes that have taken place in my city with the ever-present suspicion that it's all a mirage, from the beginning to the end?" (Upadhyay, 2020, p.31) Mistry's

essay deserves a special mention for its equivocal subject encompassing family hardship, his own struggle, and changing face of Bombay. He conveys his disappointment with the transformation of Bombay from a metropolis to a communal stronghold after numerous riots. His essay problematizes the socio-political happenings and critically comments on the present divisive atmosphere of the nation. In between he repeatedly returns to his famous brother Rohinton Mistry and Bombay—the locus of Rohinton's stories. He holds the communal character of Bombay and India after the 1990's responsible for Rohinton's distance and resultant lack of any more literary production. He mentions too many aspects of change but misses to build on the ramification of the city in his work.

Plurality of experience marks Chandras Choudhary's article which revolves around the dichotomy of two metros— Bombay and Delhi that have together made his world ambivalent, yet meaningful. According to Choudhary his inspiration comes from the fast paced Bombay, where his stories unfold, and Delhi's ubiquitous literary culture where he imbibed his skills. His writings renegotiate their distinctive features to present his experience of the world. In this edited collection, two essays that are particularly unique for very distinct reasons are Zac O'Yeah's essay on Bengaluru and Tabish Khair's on Gaya (a small town in Bihar). O'Yeah effectively connects the relationship between crime novels and city and Khair uses his style to subvert the belief that only metropolitan cities inspire writers. He dispels the entrenched ignorance and filth from Gaya to draw the image of a small city with its own small world of enchantment for true readers that also 'forced them to look outwards' (Khair, 2020, p.85). With a hint of sarcasm, Khair focuses on the blind spots in the limited view of prize winning writers like Arvind Adiga and V. S. Naipaul and their mockery of "half-baked towns or mimic peripheries" of India (Khair, 2020, p.85). Zac O'Yeah deliberates on the politics of Oriental cities as a setting for crime movies and fiction; and then deconstructs the international image of Oriental cities. To him Bengaluru — where he now resides, presents "a poem that will never be completed, but will always remain in flux" (O'Yeah, 2020, p.24). His essay on Bengaluru invokes a sense of place because of the emotional attachment he feels with it.

Bengaluru also forms the realm which gives meaning to Anjum Hasan's identity and writing as she delves into her "past and its contrast with her present", (Hasan, 2020, p.59). 'In search of Anjum Hasan' is an essay written more for her own inner quest than for the readers. Her reminiscences of childhood spent in Shillong and inspiration drawn from Pablo Neruda's writing ameliorated in shaping her identity as a writer. Sumana Roy has described Siliguri, a city in West Bengal, situated at the eastern foothills of the Himalayas, which in her words is "the Chicken's neck of India" (42). Her composition is woven with the description of houses she inhabited or inhabits at present. In a very succinct way, she equates the houses with her identity and with her craft, balancing sometimes on the existential crisis and other times on the ecological solace, before ending it with an analogy on "Siliguri that always left its gates half-open" (Roy, 2020, p.48).

Writing about an anonymous small town which is like a pause and attachment created at many levels, Anees Salim connotes *Topophilia* which "refers to the affective bond between people and places" (Tuan, 1974, p.4). For him this small town determines his experiences of life and death. An article in the collection that misses to convey the writer's personal engagement with the place is Siddharth Chaudhary's essay on Patna. Due to his effort to position Patna as a seat of creative geniuses like Vikram Seth, Amitava Kumar and Jeet Thayil, before foraying into his rendezvous with other stalwarts of Indian English fiction, his attempt becomes precarious. The connection between the city and the writers is represented along with beautiful and memorable one-liners interspersed throughout the book like, "Each place I visited seemed to hold the key to some secret" (Kapur, 2020, p.64). It also includes certain cases where their own trajectory moulded/ maneuvered by the city, "what changed the way I looked at my hometown was a bunch of cities I was finally able to escape to" (Salim, 2020, p. 80). Their engagement with the city reflects in lines like, "the city appeared to have a will of its own" (O'Yeah, 2020, p.13) or "When I observe, when I take a stroll in Bengaluru, I feel like I'm walking through a manuscript forever in progress (O'Yeah, 2020, p.24)".

But most interesting are the statements on the obvious topic that juxtaposes the role between the writer and the city. For some writers, "It's two way communication between place and story" (O'Yeah, 2020, p.18). However, different perception and craft begets different answers, "The subject often chooses the writer, instead of the other way round" (Saikia, 2020, p. 103). Or a similar extension of the thought presented as: "We do not choose the world we write about. More often than not, we write about what is the temple of our familiar" (Nair, 2020, p. 110). The book will be useful as a reference guide for students and scholars as it can act as a mediation in the world of these writers. Besides it also unravels to some extent the critical minds of creative writers, and presents their creative choices while presenting a variety of approaches to the explicit impact of the city on, "the contours of their literary writing" (Khanna, 2020, p. xi). Hence, in a limited space of creative editing the book addresses myriad facets of the relationship between city and writer as it indulges into the discourse of the way in which city spaces are produced in literary writings. Further, it records the writers' view on the transformation due to urbanisation of their hometown. Lastly, in an engaging way it presents the city sometimes as a pause, sometimes as a realm that gives meaning to the writer's identity and his writings.

Works Cited:

Cresswell, T. (2004) *Place: A short introduction*. Oxford Blackwell Publishing.

Tuan, Y. (1974) *Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*. New York. Columbia University Press.