

DEPICTION OF CULTURAL CONFLICTS ISSUES IN SUKETU MEHTA'S MAXIMUM CITY: BOMBAY LOST AND FOUND : A STUDY

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Abstract

The present paper aims to explore some of the central features of Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found, written by Indian author Suketu Mehta, in order to make explicit how Mehta, through his exploration of the city of Bombay and of its 'extreme characters', weaves a new identity for the city he carried in his memory and, as a consequence, reconfigures the understanding he had of his own immigrant writer/artist identity. One of the most emblematic characteristics of Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found is precisely the imbrication Mehta engenders between the narrative about the city of Bombay and his own personal history. That is, Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found has a hybrid nature that mingles autobiographical aspects with depictions of the city in a symbiotic narrative in which the representations of both the city and of Mehta himself are mutually influential and interpenetrable. Therefore, in Mehta's work, the city is portrayed as the ultimate locus for both intellectual investigation and self-investigation --due to the markedly autobiographical quality of Mehta's narrative. There are various kinds of diasporas like Asian diaspora, European diaspora, African diaspora and the principal characteristics of diasporic writing are nostalgia, alienation, crisis of identity, search for home and etc. In the present paper the elements like search for home and identity crisis will be examined in a work written by the fiction writer and journalist Suketu Mehta, Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found. The author himself is the protagonist in his work, who left for New York in his youth and when returned; his remembered childhood does not exist. The identity crisis, searching for home and plight for the existence faced by the protagonist in the novel will be examined.

Keywords: Cultural conflicts, Identity Crisis, Cultural issues, Immigration, Cultural identity, Protagonist, Nostalgia, Suketu Mehta. City. Autobiography. Identity.

INTRODUCTION TO CULTURAL CONFLICTS

Cultural conflicts is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. Cultural conflicts has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, cultural conflicts literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, quest of identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures. It reflects the immigrant experience that comes out of the immigrant settlement. "Why do people still live in Bombay?" Mehta asks in frustration. "Every day is an assault on the individual's senses, from the time you get up, to the transport you take to go to work, to the offices you work in, to the forms of entertainment you are subjected to." The literary landscape this description brings to mind is Dickens's London. Take some 19th-century European urban blight, throw in a little tropical sea breeze, sex and Islamic terrorism and you have Mehta's Bombay -- a city in heat," as he memorably calls it. Part history, part travelogue, part memoir, his book illuminates this supercharged world through its people, presenting a meticulous documentary of living -- and struggling -- on a teeming island that always seems about to slip into the ocean.

Bombay native Mehta fills his kaleidoscopic portrait of "the biggest, fastest, richest city in India" with captivating moments of danger and dismay. Returning to Bombay (now known as Mumbai) from New York after a 21-year absence, Mehta is depressed by his beloved city's transformation, now swelled to 18 million and choked by pollution. Investigating the city's bloody 1992-1993 riots, he meets Hindus who massacred Muslims, and their leader, the notorious Godfather-like founder of the Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party, Bal Thackeray, "the one man most directly responsible for ruining the city I grew up in." Daring to explore further the violent world of warring Hindu and Muslim gangs, Mehta travels into the city's labyrinthine criminal underworld with tough top cop Ajay Lal, developing an uneasy familiarity with hit men who display no remorse for their crimes.

Mehta likewise deploys a gritty documentary style when he investigates Bombay's sex industry, profiling an alluring, doomed dancing girl and a cross-dressing male dancer who leads a strange double life. Mehta includes so-called "Bollywood" in his sweeping account of Bombay's subcultures: he hilariously recounts, in diary style, day-to-day life on the set among the aging male stars of the action movie Mission Kashmir.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Mehta was born in Kolkata, India, to Gujarati parents and raised in Mumbai, where he lived until his family moved to the New York area in 1977. He is a graduate of New York University and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. Mehta is an Associate Professor of Journalism at New York University and lives in Manhattan. Suketu Mehta is the New York-based author of *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, which won the Kiriya Prize and the Hutch Crossword Award, and was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, his autobiographical account of his experiences in Mumbai, *Maximum City*, was published in 2004. The book, based on two and a half years research, explores the underbelly of the city. His latest book *This Land Is Our Land: An Immigrant's Manifesto*, was published in June 2019 under a 2007 Guggenheim fellowship.

MAXIMUM CITY: BOMBAY LOST AND FOUND- AN INTRODUCTION

In *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, Suketu Mehta relates the story of modern Bombay, India (or Mumbai, as it has been renamed). The author's family immigrated to New York for business reasons, and Mehta was largely educated abroad. His return to the city where he spent much of his youth is a search for his own roots but also a study of perhaps the world's largest city.

In character sketches that extend over pages and months, Mehta, a brave and persistent reporter, sheds light on the darkest (and most bizarre) corners of the city. He befriends underworld terrorists and visits (stretching the limits of intimacy) with beautiful dancing girls. A Hindu fundamentalist speaks to him nonchalantly of burning Muslims during the religious riots that shook Bombay in the early 1990's. A policeman famous for breaking the resistance of suspected terrorists describes some of his horrifying techniques -- then, suddenly turning sentimental, tells Mehta he'll miss him when he returns to New York. ("We got used to having you around.")

Like cities throughout history, Bombay is a magnet for often poverty-stricken villagers. However, what Indians often find in Bombay is less the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow but rather a modern version of Dante's "Inferno," or so it can appear to an outsider. To Bombay's fourteen million inhabitants, however, it is the land of dreams and promises, not least because Bombay is the center of India's motion picture industry, and its "Bollywood" films are not only escapism but also models of reality to be hopefully achieved.

Mehta is literally working with a cast of millions, living in a city where privacy is seemingly almost nonexistent, with one or two rooms perhaps housing a dozen inhabitants, and where the utilities, including the availability of water, operate sporadically. A brilliant reporter, the author obtained first-person accounts from police, corrupt and otherwise, criminal gang murderers, both Hindus and Muslim, budding actors and a youthful poet who sleeps on the streets, a night club singer who dreams of becoming Miss India, a popular transvestite dancer, and a family of Jains who abandon their prosperous material life in the quest for the end to the cycle of rebirth.

Maximum City is an exciting, perceptive, and well-written personal description of one of the world's great cities. Highly recommended. There are various kinds of diasporas like Asian diaspora, European diaspora, African diaspora and the principal characteristics of diasporic writing are nostalgia, alienation, crisis of identity, search for home and etc. In the present paper the elements like search for home and identity crisis will be examined in a work written by the fiction writer and journalist Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. The author himself is the protagonist in his work, who left for New York in his youth and when returned; his remembered childhood does not exist. The identity crisis, searching for home and plight for the existence faced by the protagonist in the novel will be examined.

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There are so many definitions of 'identity' but as Sudhish Kakar quoted in *Modern Indian Novel in English* – "at some places identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness,...and at yet another places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideal" (Pathak,52) seems to be more relevant with the discussion about search for identity. Our identity is an amalgamation of both the cultural difference and identification with the cultural tradition and the lack of either generally results in a state of 'loss' in the

minds of many Indians by developing a kind of feeling of superiority or inferiority to fulfill his dream of developing the colonial mentality among Indians.

Suketu Mehta is a writer who lives in New York, but Bombay is the city where he grew up. 'When I moved to New York,' he remembers, "I missed Bombay like an organ of my body." (Mehta, 8). It might be nostalgia that led him back to Bombay. The writer discovers the city of his past through the people who make up its present.

Maximum City is also a memoir of migration across cities. At one point, Mehta describes how when he was in high school, his father had shouted at him, 'When you were there, you wanted to come here. Now that you're here, you want to go back.' This was in New York, but it doesn't really matter; it could have been Bombay. The episode made Mehta aware of a truth about himself: "It was when I first realized I had a new nationality: citizen of the country of longing." (Mehta, 33)

But more than memoir, Maximum City serves as a record of a writer's engagement with the city he lived in his childhood. When Mehta went back to Bombay in 1998 with his wife and kids, twenty-one years after he had left, his foreign-born children began to suffer from a variety of illnesses. One of his sons contracted amebic dysentery. "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." (Mehta, 30)

The frantic realism of this passage, mixture of panic and exaggerated irony, is not unselfconscious. It doesn't simply reflect the visitor's nervous response to the sight of a man defecating in public in India. Rather, Mehta notes the obvious--he has seen men relieving themselves on the rocks by the sea every morning, and twice a day, when the tide washes out, he can smell from his window the stench that rises from those rocks and sweeps over the half-million-dollar flats that spread toward the east--and as a good journalist he goes and talks to people who can tell him more.

One of Mehta's informants is Prahlad Kakkar, who made Bombay, 'a film about shitting in the metropolis.' Kakkar explains, "Half the population doesn't have a toilet to shit in, so they shit outside. That's five million people. If they shit half a kilo each, that's two and a half million kilos of shit each and every day. The real story is what you don't see in the film. There are no shots of women shitting. They have to shit between two and five each morning, because it's the only time they get privacy." (Mehta 137-138)

According to Mehta, the problem is that the Indians lack 'civic sense.' The private spaces are perfect, the public ones intolerably dirty. As the government cannot make the physical city any better, it resorts to frequent changes in the names of its streets and crossroads. Mehta knows this too, but he seeks to complicate the picture further. He sees in the renaming of his beloved city the assertion of the poorer people in Bombay, the Maharashtrian ghaties, those people who for him had so far generically been the 'servants.' One is tempted to say that the city was taken aback by those who don't have any toilets.

As Mehta points out, this is how the ghaties took revenge on us. They renamed everything after their politicians, and finally they renamed even the city. If they couldn't afford to live on our roads, they could at least occupy the road signs.

Mehta, at the railway station feels his individuality being crushed by the endless rush of bodies, Mehta discovers a vision of belonging. "All these ill-assorted people walking toward the giant clock on Churchgate: they are me; they are my body and my flesh. The crowd is the self, 14 million avatars of it, 14 million celebrations." (Mehta, 581) It is tempting to view such a declaration as a direct response and even a resistance to the fear about the loss of the self amid the 'white stream in and out of Churchgate Station'. But it is just as probable that Mehta's response is over determined by Bombay's own recent history. After the razing of a mosque by Hindus in Ayodhya in December 1992, riots broke out in Bombay. In January 1993, there were fresh clashes instigated by the Shiv Sena, and Muslims suffered terribly in that round of violence. Then, two months later, on March 12, which was a Friday, ten powerful bombs were detonated in the city by the Muslim underworld. Maximum City began as a story on the 1992-93 riots. There is another way in which nothing human is alien to Mehta as a writer. He is comfortable in the company of murderers, or at least they are in his, since they offer him their stories. He asks a man who had set fire to a Muslim bread-seller during the riots, 'What does a man look like when he's on fire?' The rioter tells the writer: "A man on fire gets up, falls, runs for his life, falls, gets up, runs. It is horror. Oil drips from his body, his eyes become huge Oil drips from him, water drips from him, white, white all over." (Mehta, 3)

Mehta writes about Monalisa-a bar girl from Bombay whom he met in a bar named Sapphire. Mehta writes that he was puzzled by the beer bars and couldn't understand why men spent large amounts of money there?

At the end of this , Mehta 'goes home' to the United States and at last he has found what he was looking for: a beautiful, varied, warm human nest, standing Tower of Babel whose inhabitants communicate in a dizzy mix of Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu, Tamil and sometimes English.

Through it all – we hear Mehta's own story: of the mixture of love, frustration, fascination, and intense identification he feels for and with Bombay, as he tries to find home again after twenty-one years abroad.

CONCLUSION

The final section follows subjects who are on the periphery of Bombay society. He follows one family who joins a strict sect of Hinduism called Jains, denouncing all elements of city living and modernity, and choosing to wander in piety. The last subject he writes of is Babbanji. He is a struggling young poet who lives on the street. Mehta follows his everyday life and the extreme poverty that comes with it. The poet's perspective on Bombay offers a poignant closing analysis of the city. It is a city filled with both despair and hope. Somehow, it seems to thrive, despite the poverty, corruption, violence, and infrastructure issues. It is a city of contradictions.

The tapestry Mehta weaves represents this contradiction through a large cast of characters. Since it is mostly written from his perspective, his beliefs and how they change inform his observations and exchanges with subjects. Further informing this view, he notes how being away and coming back reveals the change in the city more clearly. His time away perfectly coincides with the big changes during the 1990s, giving him a unique outlook. He closes by juxtaposing collectivism and individualism, believing that the residents of Bombay really do believe in the wellbeing of the collective.

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