"DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE MAJOR CHARACTERS OF *MAXIMUM CITY: BOMBAY LOST AND FOUND*"

Rashmikant K. Ruparel* & Dr. Deepkumar J. Trivedi**
*Research Scholar, Rai University, Ahmedabad.
**Associate Professor, IITE, Gandhinagar.

Received: June 05, 2018 Accepted: July 30, 2018

ABSTRACT *Diaspora refers to the sense of uprootedness, alienation, displacement and feeling of nostalgia. The main characteristics of diasporic writing are search for identity, loneliness, alienation, nostalgia etc. The main focus of the present paper is on the diasporic consciousness reflected in the major characters of Suketu Mehta's Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found. The diaspora is easily seen in this work of fiction. Maximum City is the record of an uncomfortable return by an author extremely conscious of his status as an outsider. Mehta is immediately eager to be accepted not only within his own community but among his subjects. In 'Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found,' the author is not a distant spectator, but gets involved with the characters in the book and becomes a character himself. When we keep meeting characters we can experience how they feel uprootedness, discrimination and long for the homeland. Their search for identity in the host land and nostalgia is clearly visible. The stories of individuals: the writer himself, Rahul Mehrotra, Chotta Shakeel, Zameer, Eishaan are very convincing and human at several levels. Telling the stories of his characters, Mehta paints a picture of Bombay.*

Keywords: *Discrimination, Nostalgia, Alienation, Displacement*

Suketu Mehta

Mehta was born in Calcutta in 1963. Six years later his family moved to Bombay which he loved at first sight. Mehta is an exile wrenched as a boy of 14 from a community of diamond merchants by a father determined to seek a better life in New York. He grew up absorbing the education, values and individual ruggedness of America, but homesick for the smells, food and childhood memories of Bombay. A generation later having spent as much time in Jackson Heights, New York as in the Dariya Mahal neighbour hood to Bombay not to mention the months and years in London, Paris and Iowa City the question is: Can you go home again?

In his book, Maximum city Bombay Lost and Found, Mehta tells Bombay's tales through the eyes and experiences of a circus tent of characters morally compromised he calls them - that spans all Bombay, the cops, the killers, the dancing girl, the Jain who renounces. In a real sense, Mehta becomes his characters. As he says that his father and uncle kept moving first to Bombay and then across the black water to Antwerp and New York to add to what was given to them picking up and going to another country to live was never a matter for intense deliberation. He says, "You went where your business took you."(Mehta, 4) Once Mehta comes back to visit his ancestral house in Maudha (Gujarat) and he maintains a memory of his original homeland.

Mehta goes America at the age of fourteen which is a difficult age at which to change countries. His father could have moved to all the possible cities but he chose New York, "It's just like Bombay."(Mehta, 6) When Mehta was 14 years, he had to leave Bombay to move to the US. To understand this central event in his life, he becomes a writer.

He remembers when he moved to New York, "I missed Bombay like an organ of my body."(Mehta, 9) It might be nostalgia that led him back to Bombay. Mehta finds wrong and feels guilty when he thinks that when he left Bombay he had escaped from the worst school in the world. He realizes that the Catholic school he went to in Queens was worse. He experiences there racial discrimination which other diasporic people also experience.

In Jackson Heights he reapproximates Bombay with his friend Ashish (a migrant) who also has moved from Bombay to Queens, at the age of fifteen. Hindi Cinema holds to the overseas Indian. Suketu Mehta writes of how the happiest afternoons of his adolescence were spent singing Hindi - film songs and watching Bombay Cinema at Eagle Theatre with his Queens buddies. He calls it "traveling back [to India] on music, the cheapest airline."(Mehta, 9) This account of diasporic Indians shows how Bollywood serves as a shared idiom.

Mehta finds himself confined in America, he thinks that his father would send him to Bombay in the summer of his junior year and he was told so by his father also. "Each day I crossed off the previous one and counted the remaining days like a jail sentence. I was happy towards evening because it was one less day in

America and one more towards my liberation."(Mehta, 11) He existed in New York but lived in India, taking little memory train. As he says, "the fields at dusk, birds flying home overhead, your car stopping by the side of the road and you getting out."(Mehta, 13)

When he is seventeen he finally comes back to Bombay for a visit, three years after he has left the city. He feels that he is no longer a Bombayite; from now on his experience of the city would be as an NRI. He does not join his father's business but he keeps going back and forth, spending longer and longer periods in India, up to six months at a time. It is like migrant work because he has begun writing about India - and would get commissions from the West. He also comes back to Bombay to marry. He meets his wife on an Air-India Plane, "the perfect metaphor for a meeting of exiles: neither here nor there, happiest in transit."(Mehta, 13) His wife Sunita is an NRI from London, born in Madras.

His first son Gautama and he once go in the playground in New York, Suketu sees that his son maintains his distance with the other children. Suketu says that, 'at a very early age, too early an age, he became conscious of his difference.' Education is one of the vital issues being faced by NRIs who are born and raised outside are not familiar with local language; they may lack the necessary command over it. Once, Mehta takes Gautama to his first day of preschool, at the Y on 14th Street. All the two-year-olds were speaking English except his son. "We had raised him speaking Gujarati at home."(Mehta, 30) His son cannot understand. He sits with him, feeling miserable. Mehta finds how colonialism has left its impact even today. "It had rendered our language unspeakable our food inedible."(Mehta, 33) Mehta experiences this when he sees his son eating his *khichdi* - and the girl living across the hall screws up her face, 'Eeeuww'. Mehta here refers to racial discrimination experienced in New York.

Suketu thinks that his and Sunita's children must have the experience of living in a country where everyone looks like them and where they can go into a restaurant and heads will not automatically turn to stare at them. It is only because their children would not find an evil of racial discrimination. Suketu's children would not feel a sense of alienation. He thinks that his children would get a sense of their unique selves and they would grow up with confidence – Gautama and his second son Akash.

Mehta journalistic and fiction writer, returns with his wife and children, packing Sicilian olive oil and NRI nostalgia. Their early days in Bombay are filled with battling their foreign born children's illness - as Gautama had amoebic dysentery for two weeks. He thinks that 'the food and the water in Bombay, India's most modern city are contaminated with shit.' Here we can see the Western touch of his hypocrisy. Further he says; "We have been feeding our son shit."(Mehta, 62)

Mehta thinks that anger is the only way to get anything done in the city because people respond to anger as he is experienced with taxi drivers, doormen, plumbers, government bureaucrats. Even his CD player in India responds to anger. Mehta says,

> Any nostalgia I felt about my childhood has been erased. Given the chance to live again in the territory of childhood, I am coming to detest it. Why do I put myself through this? I was comfortable and happy and praised in New York; I had two places, one to live and one to work. I have given all that up for this fool's errand, looking for silhouettes in the mist of the ghost time. Now I can't wait to go back, to the place I once longed to get away from: New York. I miss cold weather and white people. I see pictures of blizzards on TV and remember the warmth inside when it's cold inside and you open the window just a crack and the air outside slices in like a solid wedge. (Mehta, 125)

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.' The episode makes Mehta aware of a truth about himself: 'It was when I first realized I had a new nationality: It was an exile, I am an adulterous resident; when I am in one city, I am dreaming of the other. I am an exile; citizen of the country of longing.'

Mehta maintains a memory of his childhood i.e. his past and compares with the present time. Mehta believes that anybody in the world can come to India and find home even those who have been gone for twenty years.

As very young boys he and his friends used to make little huts in the construction behind the building he lived in on Ridge Road. Even as children in Bombay they were constantly trying to claim space but the important thing was not to get crowded off the space they happened to possess at the moment. The moment they left, it was up for grabs. But now as an exile he finds that all has changed. "Those who come in from outside can't find a room to rent because the middle class and the rich already have a lock on all the best properties."(Mehta, 581) Name changing becomes disservices to Mehta's memory. As he says;

> I grew up on Nepean Sea Road, which is now Lady Laxmibai Jagmohandas Marg. I have no idea who Sir Ernest Nepean was nor do I know who Lady Laxmibai Jagmohandas was, but I am attached to the original name and see no reason why it should change. (Mehta, 282)

Mehta observes that if you extend your hands to catch a train, you will find 'many hands stretching out to grab you on board...And at the moment of contact, they do not know if the hand that is reaching for theirs belong to a Hindu or Muslim or Christian or Brahmin or untouchable or whether you were born in this city or arrived only this morning.' That's why thousands continue to enter Bombay daily, live and not loose their sanity. Bombay allows them space to dream. And as Mehta points out, that 'dream life is bigger than... squalid quarters.' Mehta 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 millions avatars of it, 14 million celebrations."(Mehta, 259) It is tempting to view such a declaration as a direct response and even a résistance to the fear about the loss of the self amid the 'white stream in and out of Churchgate Station.' 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. 'Bollywood', the centre of India's prodigious film industry, is older than Hollywood and lures thousands of new immigrants to the city every year, not only from the Indian hinterlands but other parts of Asia as well, Mehta adds. As in Charles Dickens' London, great wealth and great poverty exist side by side in Bombay. Mehta says, 'even today immigrants from other parts of India continue to move into the city.'

At the end, Mehta 'goes home' to the United States; but he has, after all, found what he was looking for: a beautiful, fantastically varied, warm human nest; a still - standing Tower of Babel, whose inhabitants communicate in a dizzy mix of Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu, Tamil and a unique brand of sometimes cockeyed English.

Gangsters:

The gangsters are particularly keen to acquire overseas rights for the films and have a near lock on the Bollywood roadshows, those hybrid assemblages of actors, musicians and vaudeville comedians who roam the globe from Barcelona to Boston, wherever Indians and those who love Indian movies reside.

Zameer:

He is in his mid twenties, under five feet and very thin, with a small moustache. He works in Kamal's office for Shakeel. Satish -a shooter is controlled by Zameer. Zameer has been in Dubai for a month being ordered by Shakeel. When Suketu goes to Dubai Zameer makes arrangements for Suketu to meet Shakeel. When Mehta asks Zameer if he likes in Dubai, he quickly shakes his head no. In Dubai Zameer remembers and says; "how wonderful Bombay has become. Fifty five - flyovers! You will be able to get from Andheri to Colaba in the speed light."(Mehta, 262) He has nostalgic memories of train hopping from Mira Road to Borivali and Borivali to Andheri and Andheri to Dadar. He remembers the greenery everywhere; in Dubai there are few trees to look at. He misses his family most of all, the fact that ten people would be in tension if he was late, that *apanapan*, that sense of belonging. Here they have to wash their own clothes, cook their own meals, and clean their own toilets. Zameer stays and sits comfortable in Dubai. Here, in this strange country, "Zameer is anonymous, sad and safe."(Mehta, 263) this is the true exile: some undefeatable force that keeps you from going back.

Chotta Shakeel: The Don in Exile

Chotta Shakeel passed out of high school and started out repairing TVs. Then he started doing matter, or debt recovery work, and caught Dawood's eyes. Eventually he fled to Dubai from Bombay in 1989. Suketu Mehta interviews him in Dubai. Mehta asks the don if he misses Bombay. "There is no other city like it in the whole world. I miss my people, my land; that air, that sky; those known faces, those relatives."(Mehta, 263) It seems that he strains to convey his great longing in some poetic form. "It is like a dish which, once tasted, is never forgotten. I miss my whole family, but apart from that I was born there."(Mehta, 264) A man never forgets his childhood, his lanes, his neighbourhood, says Mehta. Shakeel wanted to be military officer. "I wanted to die for my country."(Mehta, 265)

Rahul Mehrotra: An NRI

He is committed to the maintenance and restoration of the homeland. He talks to anyone who will listen – governments, journalists, Rotarians about what needs to be done in Bombay. Rahul identifies the five builders who along with the V.P.Nayak government ruined Bombay: the Makers, the Rahejas, the Dalamals, the Mittals, and the Tulsianis. "If the builders hadn't violated the development plan, all the offices they put up at Nariman Point would have come up in New Bombay, and that momentum and that energy

would have driven the new city into being. It would have reoriented the commuting axis of Bombay for the better."(Mehta, 131)

When Rahul goes back to Cambridge, where he he'd studied at Harward, he finds that nothing has changed in the decade he has been away. When he comes back to Bombay after four weeks, he finds he cannot "recognize the pavement outside his house; they had dug it up and done new things to it." (Mehta, 137)

Eishaan:

He is a Sindhi, an NRI struggler who finished his school up to the twelfth standard and his family moved to Dubai from Andheri. In Dubai he managed a textile shop for an Arab man, making seventy thousand rupees a month but in the Gulf War, business went down so he keeps visiting Bombay and feels he should do something else, 'something closer to his heart' so he wishes to be an actor in Bollywood film. Since his family is wealthy in Dubai Mehta asks him whether he would return to Dubai. In reply, he says, I love my India. He thinks sometimes about what it might be like if he returns to his life in Dubai, with all its comforts. He thinks "Bombay has a unique advantage for an actor.

WORKS CITED

1. Mehta, Suketu. Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found, New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2004. Print
2. Nayar, Pramod K. Post Colonial Literature: An Introduction, New Delhi: Pearson Education India, 2008.
3. Suketumehta.com/about.html
4. thenation.com/doc/20041018/kumar