

From the 'Real' to the 'Hyperreal': A Study of the Postmodern and Dystopian Cityscape in Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*

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Abstract: “The City is a state of mind”, says Robert Park (1). But cities are both abstract concepts and real places with their own specific cartographic and historical realities, their peculiar socio-cultural dispositions and social relations of production. The city therefore, found its place in the “utopian and urbanistic discourses,” where it was the vision of the ideal, the fantastic that was turned into rational blueprints which could be actualized. The city was thus envisioned as Michael de Certeau puts it, “un espace proper” (1984), the ideal space of clean environment, proper amenities and therapeutic benevolence. However, this vision of the ideal city differed much from the real cartographic modern city, as it bowed down to the excessive expectations and needs of its populace. The present postmodern city is however, a space of contradiction and chaos. It is this postmodern city or “the postmodern urban landscape” (1992) as Sharon Zukin names it, which is a central motif in recent Indian novels in English.

Most of the cosmopolitan cities in India such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai were erstwhile colonial cities which grew into globalised metropolises over the years. In the present day, they have become sites of contestations, fraught with growing urban violence, security concerns and struggles over its resources especially clean air and water. It is this fragmentation, and chaos that finds centre stage in recent post-millennial Indian novels in English. The paper attempts to trace this representation of the city in two recent Indian English novels, Ruchir Joshi's *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* (2007) and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017). While Joshi traces the history of two Indian cities, Calcutta and Delhi from the colonial era to a futuristic hyper-real time, carefully following their evolution over the various socio-cultural time periods, Akbar's *Leila* speaks of a fictionalized city set in an indefinite future that builds on the fear, and general chaos that is a precondition of Indian cities nowadays. The paper would stress on the lived experience of contemporary Indian cities, seeking theoretical support from urban theories and then discuss the representation of the Indian city in fiction in the light of the political and social realities of contemporary India.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Urbanism, Exclusion, *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh*, *Leila*

Introduction

In most of the nationalistic imagination and rhetoric predominant in the colonial and the newly independent India, the nation has always been seen as one composed entirely of villages. National leaders like Gandhi imbued them with much utopian promise, viewing them as the source of Indian pride and authentic culture as opposed to the city, which was largely associated with the vice and squalor of western civilization. The city was, therefore, a more recent phenomenon that gained importance only in the 1980s as a marginalized category of analysis (Prakash 2002). Post 1990s, the liberalization moment of Indian economy, cities have assumed more complex categories of analysis, shaped as they are by networks of migration, marginalization, exchange of capital and people, spatial segregation as a result of transnationalism and globalization (Ong and Nonini 1997; Caldeira 2000). As a result of this, cities have become vital centres of industry, production and knowledge generation. Postcolonial cities carry an extra burden in this increasingly globalised world as they “exists as a conjunctural space that produces a critical combination of historical events, material bodies, structural forces, and representational economies which propel new constellations of domination and resistance, centres and peripheries and the formation of new political subjects” (Varma 1). In order to fulfill the growing requirements of the ever-increasing political subjects of cities, popular Indian politics promises to transform them into “world cities” with superior infrastructure, roads, flyovers, etc. These transformations are in a bid to “dislocate them from their national location and inser[t] them into the grid of the global economy” (Nigam 73). But in doing so, cities are reduced to fragmented and divisive structures that operate through binaries of the rich/poor and formal/informal economy. This is a reality not only for the modern Indian city but a reality for the nation at large. Cities are more crucial, as they expose the cracks in the purported monolithic structure of the nation, as they easily reveal the major problems plaguing the nation such as over-population, caste-class atrocities and environmental degradation. Cities are further robbed of their utopian potential by the divisive politics practiced by the rise of the Hindu nationalism and the demands of corporate capital and free market. Indian cities are therefore highly divisive spaces practicing a politics of exclusion (Kuldova and Varghese 3) alienating a vast majority of its socially and economically marginalized population in order to create a world-class living experience which only the rich few can afford.

While the early colonial and post-colonial Indian writing in English located the struggles and identity formation of the Indian subject in small towns and cities, such as R.K Narayan's *Malgudi Days* (1943) and U.R Ananthamurthy's *Bharathipura* (1973) this soon changed in the post-Rushdie fiction after the 1980s. In fact Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) showed how the project of modernity had terribly failed in India in tandem with the rise of newer forms of hybrid, cosmopolitan and multicultural identities. Following this, the nation's new-found political prominence at the global level along with the rise of a consumer driven economy, meant the creation of a New India which functioned on the aspirations and desires of a new emerging middle class. Parallel to the doctrines of India Shining and India Rising (two of the several popular rhetoric employed by the political parties to capture the public imagination and electoral support at the turn of the new century), we also find the emergence of a dark India plagued by corruption, violence, poverty, sexual degradation and despair.

While both shades of the city have inspired filmmakers, authors and critics alike over the centuries, the new socio-cultural and spatial changes affecting the nature and the experience of living in the cities, can be summed up in what Sharon Zukin calls the "postmodern urban landscape" (1992). In this postmodern landscape, older forms of spatial organization and identities, consumption of space and time have been broken down and reconstructed in newer ways. The older arrangements of economic systems, cultural institutions have given way to newer forms of cultural appropriation and visual consumption. Thus, most of the depictions of the city in recent post-millennial Indian English fiction, no longer see the cities simply as visible entities with their fixed social realities, but build upon these lived experiences to dream of futuristic cities of spectacle and simulation, creating a hyper-real world of techno-scientific progress and ease of living. The postmodern city hence depicted is always in a state of flux; irreverent and chaotic as it consistently breaks older forms to imagine new experiences of living. While the early city was a discrete socio-economic, geographical and political unit distinct from the rural space, the contemporary metropolis is less of an actual city and more of an image drawing its meaning from various mediums of communication and varied cultural forms. Representations of the city in literature, film and advertising has exposed us to a city not geographical but immaterial, cinematic, almost a hyper-space, reminding one of Baudrillard's dictum that soon this endless flow of simulation would overwhelm the distinction between the real and the imaginary (148). Another dimension to this is added by Sharon Zukin who also states how, "[s]pace both initiates and imitates this

ambiguity. The specific locales of the modern city are transformed into postmodern liminal spaces, both slipping and mediating between nature and artifice, public use and private value, global market and local place”(222).

“The city is a state of mind,” says Robert Park (1). But cities are no more abstract concepts than they are real entities with their own historical context, geographical features, spatial and social dispositions, linguistic variety, economy etc. Each city has its own specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, governmental practices and forms of communication. At the same time, all cities that we experience on a daily basis are copies of what Ihab Hassan calls “immaterial cities” (1994), which comprise the actual ideas or the ideals on which modern cities were based. But cities are not simply made by architects and builders, they are also envisioned and represented by authors and filmmakers, and assume an “imagined environment of its own” (Burgin 48). Cities envisioned the original utopian promise which motivated urban planners and architects in attempting to include all the diversity and dynamism of urban life in a single space, into the “un espace propre,” a clean slate (Certeau 1984), an ideal space of clean environment, proper amenities and therapeutic benevolence. However, this vision of the ideal city differed much from the real cartographic modern city, as it bowed down to the excessive expectations and needs of its populace.

The paper attempts to trace this very nature of the Indian city as a new kind of neoliberal utopia which rose in the aftermath of the post millennium moment in two relatively recent Indian novels in English. Both the novels in the context of this paper, Ruchir Joshi’s *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* and Prayaag Akbar’s *Leila* have generated widespread critical and popular interest in their ability to imagine possible future(s) of India plagued by both external and internal crises. Separated by a span of ten years in their publication, they reveal the same chaos and violence that is symptomatic of Indian cities in current times.

The Last Jet-Engine Laugh: The Post-Colonial City as a Site of Violence and Contradiction

Ruchir Joshi’s debut novel *The Last Jet-Engine Laugh* is often hailed as one of the most original specimens of science fiction and fantasy fiction in recent Indian English Literature. What Joshi achieves in the novel is a mean feat; not only does he record the political and social evolution of some of the major cities of India like Delhi, Mumbai and Calcutta from the 1930s to 2030s, he also speaks about the experience of living in some of the world’s

major urban centers, in a turbulent future torn apart by wars over water, excessive population, security threats, glaring economic inequities and ecological degradation. Of these urban centres, it is Calcutta that has captured the imagination of Joshi and that of his protagonist Paresh Bhatt who returns back to his childhood city to spend his last days. Thus the Calcutta that Joshi imagines in the novel straddles all the three kinds of urban spaces imaginable, i.e. the real city, the surreal city and the hyper-real city. Calcutta is a real city with its own cartographic realities and historical context while in Paresh's description of the city in the 2030s, it is also a surreal city where diverse elements are mixed and hybridized with no regard for their historical context where signs of Bengali ethos like Boroline or the Durga Puja are appropriated by Japanese corporations. Similarly, it also becomes a hyper-real city in the future dependent on empty signs and visual consumption for its meaning especially in the way Para visualizes the city in her *Megalopolis 3000* game. In addition to Calcutta, Joshi also gives a telling description of war over drinking water between the urban gangs of different residential colonies (or gated communities) in the streets of contemporary Delhi to highlight the urban violence and politics of exclusion endemic to the present post-colonial urban condition.

Calcutta, now known as Kolkata, is one of the oldest and prominent metropolitan centres of India, enjoying a position of supremacy in Indian politics and economy since the colonial times. But the infrastructure and the urban culture of the city have received numerous blows over the years, such as the violence in the aftermath of the Bengal partition of 1947, decline of the jute industry, the advent of the Bangladeshi refugees who poured into the city at various intervals between the 1940s and 1970s and the Naxalite violence of 1970s. In fact, spatial crisis and the lack of civic amenities has been a major experience of city life in Calcutta. Thousands of displaced families queuing up for drinking water, living in makeshift settlements in the urban fringes were a common site in the city. Despite being the capital of British India, Calcutta is a major instance of colonial apathy regarding matters of civic amenities. Mukherjee notes how in colonial Calcutta, networks of underground tunnels and drains were built only to service the white town (290). This spatial crisis and complete breakdown of civic amenities is also witnessed by Mahadev Bhatt, Paresh's father when he arrives in the city for the first time. This crisis, in fact, remains even in the future, as Paresh indicates that the urban fringes of Behala and Jadavpur are still swarming with the ever expanding population in the Calcutta of 2030s.

While Calcutta has had a long history of representation, both literal and cinematic, in the works of authors writing in English and regional languages, the ethos of the city, its turmoil and anxieties has been captured with much élan in the works of filmmakers like Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. Joshi, too seems to be influenced by such filmmakers in presenting a truly postmodern city which can only be seen in montages, and single screen shots and never in its complete glory. Calcutta's condition in the colonial period, its experience of violence and corruption in the postcolonial world and its difficulties with overpopulation and lack of resources in the future, the city in the narrative is definitely shown to be in a state of flux. Besides this, the multiple strands of narratives in the single novel bear allegiance to a defining feature of postmodernism which Lyotard calls, "incredulity towards metanarratives" (xxiv). Joshi's Calcutta is, therefore, born of a certain interaction of time and place, where the space itself is bound by certain historical temporalities and yet is out of the time. Paresh's futuristic Calcutta is marked by hordes of people travelling in overcrowded copters, of people consuming polluted water or purchasing drinking water from Japanese corporations, of nations embittered in war over the planet's dwindling water resources. In fact, much of the descriptions of the city through the eyes of the different characters are as much visual impressions as much as products of their memories and associations. The Calcutta of 2030 is a highly speculative one, similar to an alternative science fiction world where human life depends on technology for its survival. The world portrayed is a post-nuclear holocaust world with some of its major cities destroyed and nations at war using more advanced military technology and robotics.

Besides Calcutta, Joshi also gives a present example of urban violence in the streets of Delhi where rival gangs from some of Delhi's most posh colonies clash and kill each other over everyday things like drinking water. This is just an example of the growing militarization of urban spaces in India in the name of security measures. Gone are the days of relying on simple watchmen, gated enclaves as posh Delhi employs advanced security measures like private security personnel, CCTVs, retina scans and identification papers, instances of what Stephen Graham calls "military urbanism" (xiii-xiv). Here the dystopian vision of postcolonial urban centers segregated into privatized spaces and guarded by private armies is yet another symptom of the neoliberal urban city. This is a central motif of Akbar's imagination of the future cityscape of *Leila*, which is discussed at great length in the next section of the paper.

Leila: Discussing the Possible Future(s) of the Indian Urbanscape

Leila, Prayaag Akbar's debut novel is yet another speculative attempt at discussing the dystopian turn that India is veered towards in the future. The unnamed city space where the tragic incidents surrounding Shalini and her long lost daughter Leila unfold is terrifying in its palpable reality. Here the city space in the undefined future is divided not according to religion but according to communities based on class and caste, where laws regarding purity reign supreme. This city is a city of walls, where the urbanscape is littered with walls to keep the pure inside and the poor, dirt and environmental pollution outside. Divided into six sectors or zones, it is symptomatic of the many unnamed Indian cities where housing and residential permits are granted on the basis of one's community and the food one consumes.

In fact, the idea of exclusion that the citizens practice in the fictional city is inspired by the upsurge in demand for luxury living spaces defined by class-caste and economic affiliations amongst the upwardly mobile elite in recent times. In fact, these neoliberal living spaces further exacerbate the division inherent in the Indian psyche. Kuldova cites several real-life examples of such enclaves such as Gulistaan Golf View Heights for the elite Muslim brotherhood or the Brahmins only luxury community, the Vedic Village (42-43). Their advertisements promise a "gated romance" (Brosius 2009) of luxury, convenience and safety in an enclosed enclave flanked by its own army of guards and their security systems, gyms, golf courses, servant quarters etc. These are symptomatic of contemporary neoliberal India as they consist of both modernity and tradition, using futuristic technology and modern building materials and yet respectful of their conservative ideas of tradition and purity. The utopian desire of the elite in Akbar's city resonates to the traditional utopia of *Ram Rajya* in the Hindu thought system albeit suited to the present day realities of peaceful coexistence. Thus, though Akbar's city is governed by Hindu elites, it has space for all other religions and caste sub-groups. This is not a surprise for Indian readers as the rise of Hindu Nationalism has seen an equal preoccupation with tradition and cultural superiority and fears of the religious and caste "Other."

In Akbar's future city, a general state of decay and filth prevails in the city as each community collects its own taxes for its own upkeep, while the areas outside fester in urban waste and filth through which the slum people wade through for things to sell. Outside the walls, there is a complete civic breakdown, as the rich avoid the roads, instead travelling by the flyovers. The air outside is sooty and heavy with the dust from construction of more walls and more flyovers. Akbar's description of the city can easily be the description of any modern Indian city with "its dense growing pile of trash covering half the street"(7) with

festering eels, thick trickles of fluid bulging polythene packets breeched at the gut, oozing”(7). The city assumes a hyper-real quality in its depiction of a very grim landscape cut across by “silent grey walls and between them the flyroads thrumming with headlights,” like an “enormous maze” (64).

The unnamed city described in *Leila* could easily be either Delhi or Bombay, the two most important seats of power in postcolonial India. But in Akbar’s description of a city where what matters most is the purity of its citizens, where militant Hindu nationalism rules through its informal army, where migrants are looked down upon and transgressions of caste and religion are punished brutally, one is reminded of Bombay and the strong hold which certain political parties with fanatic religious views enjoy over the city.

Bombay which was established by the Portuguese and later won over by the British was an important port city in colonial India. As job opportunities opened up in the cotton mills, hordes of migrants from the hinterlands of Maharashtra and other parts of India moved in to the city and gave the city its cosmopolitan identity. Later events, like the establishment of the Indian film industry gave Mumbai a sort of a utopian halo, where almost all dreams of prosperity and popularity could be achieved. But in the late 1980s and 90s, events of religious intolerance like the Babri Masjid demolition initiated much uproar and caused religious riots across the city. This was the beginning of what cultural critics like Appadurai call Bombay’s “decosmopolitanism” (627) and Varma calls Bombay’s increasing “provincialization” (66). As a response, militant political parties like the Shiv Sena grew stronger, amassing vote banks and popular support while propagating a more parochial and orthodox idea of the city space pure of race, completely sanitized of the migrant, dalit and other lower caste population on whose menial labour the city functioned. The Shiv Sena’s doctrine of regional and linguistic chauvinism, its exclusionary understanding of the urban identity, violently obliterating the socially and economically inferior others, is similar to what the ruling elite and their informal army, the Repeaters practice in the novel. The Repeaters, i.e. groups of unruly young and middle-aged men who serve as a moral police in this dystopian world, may be seen as a manifestation of the postcolonial dream that believes that success in big cities may also come from performance of crime. These people receive their support from the capitalists and governing elites of the city, and though they are nothing more than mere instruments, they are essential to the functioning of the bureaucracy and economy of the nation. In a way, they become larger than life figures, unveiling the corruption and inequalities within the Indian society.

Secondly, the city's twin faces of exploitation and emancipation as it deals with both social and spatial crisis has been well documented in both cinematic and literal representations. Nowhere is the ambivalent nature of urbanity, where the grandeur of global capitalism coexists with the poverty, alienation and exclusion of its urban poor experienced more strongly than in Mumbai. This dual world, "has become a dominant visual trope to describe life in the city" (Majumdar 112) where the rich exist within their communities enjoying their pure air and water, commuting in their own spaces while the outside world inhabited by the slum people and those outside the community brave the urban squalor and degraded environment of the city. In Bombay (Mumbai or Bombay? They seem to be used interchangeably) as in its literary counterpart, discourses of ethnic and economic exclusivity decree an iron tight compartmentalization of the society. But what matters more is the opulence and consumptive desire of the rich in the novel, which the ruling Councilmen promote through a precarious balance between Hindu nationalism and consumer capitalism. The Repeaters, therefore, embody the violent assertive local masculinity which is fundamental for maintaining this traditional order amidst the modernized economic elite of the city. *Leila* therefore, becomes another attempt, albeit literary to combat the rise of Hindu nationalism for territorial and cultural supremacy. But things were not always the same in the city. In a separate incident, Shalini remembers the past where regulations on food and community were absent and the city was much greener and healthy to live in. What matters here, is the reason behind the sudden social and spatial restructuring that the city underwent without any hint of communal violence and de-industrialization.

Anxieties over space and property and mistrust and intolerance towards the unknown Other, make *Leila* the worst kind of dystopia possible. The fear of pollution through contact with the Other, (both the economic and social) reign so supreme that the entire population wears threads of different colours like a "civic insignia of occupancy" (Appadurai 36) for employment and mobility in these high rise spaces. Each of the community heads encourage their residents to employ servants etc. from their own communities, often subjecting them to humiliating body checks and thorough strip search for entry. Akbar's city therefore operates on a curious arrangement between the rich who willingly practice "a politics of evasion and amnesia" (Mishra 109) and the council who runs the bureaucracy with a strong hold. This tacit arrangement between the rich and political regime is nothing new in India, where the rich have withdrawn into their "virtual city" (Mazumdar 110) or "privatopias" (1) as Gyan Prakash calls them, occupying a "privatized and depoliticized subjectivity" (1) in order to

escape the violence and anarchy outside. The narrator, Shalini, too enjoys a similar position of power and ease before she is hurtled down the social scale and experiences the privations and humiliations of the lower classes herself.

For Kuldova, the Indian urban luxotopia is unique in itself because:

On the outside it [appears to be] global and modern, with its emphasis on technology and sleek design but on the inside, at its very core, is traditionalist and neo-feudal and it is this core that provides it with assumed strength and superiority. (5)

In this traditional core of the interior of the luxotopia, as Kuldova argues, Indianness is related with femininity while the muscular smooth surface of the high rise city correlates with the masculine. This is also seen in the novel, where despite technological progress of the cities, female lives and sexualities are kept under control as it is they who are the repositories of purity of the entire nation.

Somewhere Akbar's unnamed city seems to be a utopian realization of the Hindu right's vision of a modern global city with all amenities and yet careful in its homage and adherence to strict rules of purity of identity. However this global city with its clean air and water is not meant for all, but only for the rich who could afford it. This resonates with the real experience of living in Bombay, whereas Hansen states political forces wished to "remove all signs of the poor and the plebian from Bombay ... all who were seen as encroaching on the comfort and physical security of the middle class (211).

The future which Akbar speaks of is one of violent urbanization which aims at purifying the city of the disposable bodies of the poor, pollution, noise etc. In fact advance technology such as Aerodome and Pureseal is available to provide clean pure air within the walls and to keep the polluted air out, operating on the same principle of expulsion. This results in increasing temperatures outside the enclaves which makes it difficult for the urban poor to survive. The idea of exclusion is also seen in the security of these compounds as they rely on the gate as a kind of separation and only carefully screened bodies can enter these luxury compounds for their jobs.

Conclusion

Both the novels under the purview of this paper portray essentially dystopian worlds where the authors build upon the real and fictional histories of urban planning and socio-cultural

development of the cities in order to demystify and understand the urban space. This is a common theme in most postmodern literature and films, as they have responded to the forces of late capitalism and have engaged in an active restructuring of the urban space. It is interesting to observe that most of the post-millennial narratives, both cinematic and otherwise have located their utopias as well as dystopias in the same cityscape. This is because the experience of living in the neoliberal city expresses the anxieties and desires of a large section of the population. However it should be noted that such utopian visions are achieved at a huge human and environmental cost as a considerable portion of the urban poor is displaced and lands are cleared for short-sighted developmental goals. Presently, cities have become neoliberal utopias, as a response to the neoliberal restructuring of the Indian economy marked by the rising inequality and exclusion of a large section of people from the limitless potential and possibilities of future India. In addition to this, the cities that come up in such narratives are also essentially those of crisis and are pertinent to the present political climate of India as they discuss issues of spatial segregation and politics over consumption of contraband foods. Indian cities are also spaces of social contradiction because questions of ownership and control over urban spaces and the struggles between classes are essential to understand and define urban spaces. While cities initially had a utopian promise, late twentieth century fiction has long moved away from it, seeing them as spaces of poverty, crime and alienation. Postmodern depictions of the city have included a critique of the failure of cities to respond to the changing nature of capitalism. However in India especially, it is still imbued with utopian promise as most political campaigns since the 2000s in India, have expressed a utopian desire of seeing India as a modern, aesthetically promising, technologically smooth space for economic and living purposes. Such campaigns promisingly named India Shining and India Rising, have actually taken one particular group into consideration--the upwardly mobile young middle-class population with a penchant for high-class aspirations and consumption habits guided by the corporate elites while excluding those without economic means from the utopian promises in future India. As India approaches a future marked by promises and potentialities, its urban centers are a good place to mark the changes that the nation has undergone in the process.

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