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Dr. Manoranjan Behura
Lecturer in English in
Mahanga Puspagiri College,
Erakana, Cuttack, Odisha

City in Indian fiction in English: An assessment

Dr. Manoranjan Behura

Abstract

Cities in Literature go back to the Vedic Age which was only the religious congregations by that time. In the history of ancient India the administrative capitals of the kings were evolved into small towns which the Chinese traveller Huen Tang describes in his travelogue *Si-u-Ki*. Cities in literature is a new branch of research for which most of the universities in India show a lot of interest to focus on the different angles of cities in the fictions. The present paper focuses how different fiction writers analyse their own cities in their fiction.

Keywords: City, fiction, English, assessment

Introduction

Country is made by God and city is made by people” says William Copper in his *The Task*. Even in the Vedic time, there were cities which were almost religious. In the world, city came to exist only due to the religious congregation. For example Varanasi, Kashi, Gaya, Allhabad and Dwaraka are the ancient cities of India with a religious base for their growth and development. A large number of people stayed in a particular place for a long time transacting the minimum business to fulfil the demand of the religious tourists which accelerated the city congregation. In Europe, the ancient cities owed their origin to religion as well. The Muslim world developed Makka and Madina are the world famous cities because they could get liberation simply by visiting the places once in life. An insight into the growth and development of cities acknowledge that all the ancient cities of the world emerged mostly from the religious sentiment.

However, religion, though considered as one of the major reasons for giving birth to the cities, is not the only reason. In ancient India, the capitals of the kingdoms helped to develop cities where the kings ruled setting up their administrative base in the capital surrounding that led to the emergence of cities.

It is important to note that education and its importance played a significant role for the growth and development of cities. For example Nalanda- the ancient city of Pataliputra was an educational hub. This city was famous all over the world for Nalanda University. Thousands of princes come to the university from different parts of the world. Huen Tang has written in his book *Si-u-Ki* about the city and its educational significance.

In famous mythologies like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, we find many vivid descriptions of the capital cities of the kings and the socio cultural significance of the place. For example in *The Ramayana* we get acquainted with more than ten cities where the kings had their palaces and residences. The capital city of Ravana in Sri Lanka was made up of gold. It indicates the socio cultural and economic background of Sri Lanka which was fully urbanized and economically sound and fully developed from the military point of view. In the same way Ajodhya, the capital city of King Dasharath was the administrative hub for the governance of the kingdom.

A detailed picture of the city of Ajodhya has been presented in the Ajodhya Kanda of *The Ramayana* which is one of the seven sections of the Ramayana. The socio cultural activities, social system, ways of life of the people of Ajodhya, the relationship of the subjects with their kings have been analysed in details. R K Narayan has given a brilliant description of Sri Lanka in his Ramayana 1972.

Correspondence
Dr. Manoranjan Behura
Lecturer in English in
Mahanga Puspagiri College,
Erakana, Cuttack, Odisha

In his the Mahabharata (1978) Narayan describes, in details, about Indraprasta- the capital city of the Kouravas. The town planning of a capital city has been highlighted in this work. In the eyes of Narayan Indraprasta was "the golden city" which was superb and highly developed from the socio-cultural and economic point of view. These are the external description of the cities in Mythology only to show the strength, power and prosperity of the kings and to focus a lot about the socio- cultural importance of their time. By that time cities were not the centres of attraction though they were hubs of culture and education. People, those who were in rural areas, were not interested to live in cities. In ancient times when agriculture and animal husbandry were the backbone of economic growth common people preferred to live in rural areas or country. Though cities were the centre of administration and the entire country life was reined from the cities yet there was no connection between the cities and country life except the administrative point of view. It has been described in *The Bhagabat Gita* that the people of Gopa Pura use to send the milk products to the king through a specific person who took all these things from the subjects to the king as a tax collector. The agricultural products were collected by the king through specific appointees. These are the lives in the city which were the capitals of the small countries by the dictator kings. So, by that time most of the cities were treated as centre of oppression and exploitation for the common subjects. As a result the common people took back their face from the city life and they were not at all interested to think about cities. Again is to note that this description about cities is objective where the writer was not a part of the city rather he is alienated from the city when he or she wrote about it.

R.K. Narayan portrays Malgudi as Thomas Hardy describes Caster Bridge, as a part of Wessex with the city flavour of London. Hardy describes how Caster Bridge progresses and expands due to the development of science and technology. The socio-cultural and economic system of Caster Bridge is being rapidly changed from year to year. In similar fashion, Narayan describes the city life of Malgudi which is a metaphor of India. Malgudi is a small town in " *Swami and Friend*" (1936) but it develops into a full-fledged town in *The Guide* (1959). In course of time the town Malgudi develops in the same way like Hardy's Casterbridge, Narayan shows the impact of western culture and its technology on Malgudi In *Swami and Friend* the main course of transport was Rickshaw which was developed into horse cart in " *The Dark Room*" (1937), again the means of transport was personal car or train in *The Guide* because Raja himself was a car driver who was carrying the passenger from the railway station to various places.

The other modern writers like Aravinda Adiga, Jhumpa Leheri, Janhabi Barua, Amitav Ghosh, Prafulla Mohanti and many others have written more or less about different cities of India. When Jhumpa Leheri writes about the slum life of Calcutta, Aravind Adiga writes in details about Bangalore including poverty and self. Prafull Mohanti extensively writes about Bombay and London in his *Through Brown Eyes*. Actually he feels homeless and lonely in the city lives Bombay and London. Janhabi Barua's *Rebirth* (2010) is a wonderful piece of socio cultural description of city life of Bangalore and Guwahati. But Amitav Ghosh sticks more to the history of Calcutta and its nostalgic past than describing the socio cultural issues of Calcutta. Unlike the other writers Amitav Ghosh does not confine himself with in the city

lives rather he goes to the past and faraway of the present while analysing the socio cultural and scientific issues of the Bengal. He is away from Bengal but he cannot forget his dear city where he was brought up and lost his childhood still fresh and green in his memories as a result he often curves to his loving city in his imagination and his dreams.

Amitav Ghosh's fictive art is characterised by an exceptional capacity for finding fiction on fact. In an interview conducted by *The Hindustan Times*, Ghosh states, "researching a place or people or history is very useful for me as a writer. It lets me incorporate a lot of elements into my story telling. Some writers can write without resorting on facts. To be honest I am not one of them "(26 July 2004) P.B. In this interview Ghosh admits that his attachment to Calcutta is an inspiration to write about the great city. As Ghosh wanders from one country to another, he could not accept any foreign land as his motherland rather he is diverted more and more to his native place Calcutta to its culture and its way of life which he is narrated in his fictions. Calcutta is an inseparable part of his life wherever he stays out side of India his spirit is in this city which inspires him to write.

When one relates his academic career to his career as a writer, it is easy to see how all his six novels, written so far, have one common thread running through them that leads them all an unmistakable aesthetic identity in Calcutta. What accounts for the authenticity of his art is actually driven by the desire to take a close look at life and come out with a picture of man as a creature of conditions and forces not always within his control of comprehension. He is indeed a writer of human situations par excellence describing the lives in Calcutta and one aspect of his literacy genius as an activist in his unique treatment of history. A writer of post modern fiction, his stories travel through the frontiers of time and space creating an account that was symmetrical flow.

Gosh is better known for writing about the Calcutta commoners and their societal problems. In all his writings starting from the first novel the *Circle of Reason* to the last venture the sea of Poppies his writings stress the roots of uprooting or displacing the people, their settlement and the condition under which they are made and forced to migrate across the country and continent. Apart from ideation, his concern of nation – nationalism is further endorsed by number of critics and fans. Nadia Butt in his *Inventing or recalling the contract Zone?: transcultural space in Amitav Ghosh's Shadow lines* (2008)" says, " in order to bring out the irony of dividing ancient cultures and civilization of Calcutta by drawing borders and giving a new name to a piece of mutual territory. Ghosh contends the sinister smoke screens of nationalism hitherto unknown on the Indian subcontinent in 1947 through the all-pervasive metaphor of shadow lines in the novel" (2)

The shadow lines tell the story of three generations of Amitav Ghosh's family spread over Calcutta, Dhaka and London. It lines up characters from different nationalist religions and 'culture in a closely knit fictive world. The novel is written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta. The events revolve round Calcutta and affect severely the family of Maya Devi and their friendship and sojourn with their English friends- the Prices and Thamma. During that time the writer's grandmother was in their ancestral city Dhaka. Amitav Ghosh stresses back to history describing the riots of 1964

which claimed the lives of his elder father. The death raised questions and posed a challenge to the concept of intercultural understanding and friendship in contemporary society divided by arbitrary demarcations of national boundaries.

When Amitav Ghosh writes about Calcutta he mainly focuses on its history and the socio-cultural issues of this cosmopolitan city. Ghosh himself is a student of history. Like Carl Mars Ghosts handles history of Calcutta and its related areas as scientific study of the past history deals with real life, just like mine and yours. It deals with the people's decision and their ways life. History is essential to turn the scars of past in to the smile of present day. This is possible only through a thorough understanding of the past Ghosh always goes back to past and returns to the root which in told earlier. His root is in Calcutta which in told earlier. His root is in Calcutta which in a land of culture, literature and it has a glorious history which had been severely influencing the socio- cultural and political history of India. As Ghosh in a post modern novelist he goes on recording the changing socio- cultural structures which exerts a profound influence on women and the man- women relationship. The tradition oriented Indian society experiences a lot of change due to the impact of western culture. The patriarchal chauvinistic and indifferent male role in challenged. However, Amitav Ghosh gives stress on tradition. However, his characterisation of women in stereo typed. Ghosh conforms to cultural and status codes while portraying women in his fictions. Brinda Bose in her *Amitav Ghosh. Critical prospective (2003)*, says "writing in 1988 When educated, professional, urban woman in particular but Indian women in general have made significant interventions in spaces earlier dominated by men and have made enormous progress in articulating a revisionary, alternative reading of their history and position in the socio. Political structure, Ghosh in still unable to represent then in any subject position other than that possessed by traumatized victims" (77).

When the fiction of Amitav Ghosh is analysed with special reference to women and man-women relationship in Calcutta, in other cities the problem of alienation comes to the point. Alienation in one of the greatest problems in city life which makes an individual stranger to himself. *The Circle of Reason* deals with modern man's problem of alienation, migration and the existential crisis in life.

Ghosh's fiction doesn't go beyond Calcutta and its culture. When the Calcutta Chromosome in analysed the city in the focus point of discussion. In this fiction the writer brings about a curious mixture of fact and fiction while analysing the discovery of the malaria parasite by Ronald rush in 1895. Calcutta is the place which provided Roland Ross a conducive environment and some faithful and devoted Bengali assistants like Morgan who did their best discover the reason of malarial fever. This British bacteriologist was more close to the perfume of Calcutta as he did his path breaking research in the city only. His memorial arch at the centre of his hospital is a part and parcel of Calcutta.

In *Calcutta Chromosome*, most of the portion of the story finds its setting in Calcutta in 1995, which follows Morgan and his adventures closely. The laboratory of the P.G Hospital at Calcutta is the place where Roland Ross made the final breakthrough in his research. It is a fact that Ross discovered the cause of malarial fever in Calcutta. This fact has deeper connotation. In the whole world it was Calcutta with all its filth and garbage and puddles that nurtured

sufficient number of mosquitoes to make the research possible, since mosquito cannot be taken as a symbol of cleanliness the place where it resides is generally dirty. In this way Ghosh unearths the power politics of the West.

City has its socio-cultural and geographical interpretation in the debut novel of Jahnvi Barua's *Rebirth*. The young writer gives a vivid description of two cities: Gwahati and Bangalore. Kaberi, the heroine of the novel was born and brought up in Gwahati and serves in Bangalore, brings a comparison and contrast between the two cities. While weaving together the story of the protagonist Kaberi's inner and outer world as she negotiates the treacherous waters of betrayal of love, friendship and self renewal. (24)

Barua here portrays Kaberi's state of mind which she experiences in the two cities. Her life in Gwahati, before her marriage was very much comfortable and balanced. But by the virtue of her marriage she goes to Bangalore to study with her husband who was an IT professional. Gwahati, the place of her birth, her schooling, the town she grew up, it's surrounding to which her memories frequently turn up remembering which she gets solace during the period of her crisis and which wrecks up her nostalgic feelings. The conglomeration of the two cities – one provides her an assured sense of protection. physical security, emotional satisfaction and the other prepares her how to live independently and fearlessly to face the challenges of life confidently contributes to the growth and definition of herself and helps make up her awareness of self. Kaberi is able to secure her own identity through her confident sense of place in Guwahati.

The two cities Gwahati and Bangalore provide a sense of place for Kaberi's own sense of self which is reinforced due to the circumstances. She is put in Bangalore and the cities play definite and decisive and both help her to have a rebirth, while Guwahati develops tenderness, coyness in her that attracted Mrs. Juti Bora to choose her as the bride for her English educated son, Bangalore prepares her to face the trials and tribulations of life. According to her husband Ranjit Bangalore turns her into a mysterious woman and he says, "You are full of surprise" 109.

Cities in literature is not the new area of study but its presentation in past was purely on the basis of religion but now the modern writers mostly write about the cities in secular way and their own experiences they share with the readers. Cities, now, are the hubs of problems and difficulties to the people who live here. So the writers go on narrating the hazards of contemporary city life which is very much contrast to that of the past. But the cities are still the centres of attraction to the modern people who prefer to live here despite facing all sorts of problems. This is the essence of modern writings about the cities.

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