A WEB OF IDENTITIES: NEGOTIATING THROUGH URBAN LABYRINTH OF MUMBAI/BOMBAY

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Abstract

The paper examines the theme of identity in a comparative literary analysis of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* and Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, with attention to how the city of Bombay/Mumbai constructs, disperses, and rebuilds individual and collective identities. In the context of a postcolonial city marked by some confluence of violence, migration, addiction, aspiration, and memory, both novels represent the city as a liquid and generally confusing space in which individuals are ceaselessly negotiating a sense of self.

In *Narcopolis*, identity is represented as precarious and fluid, especially in the figure of Dimple, a eunuch and addict who lives in the city's seedy opium culture. The hallucinatory, poetic tone is only a reflection of the disintegration of the inner lives of his characters, too and the way the addiction-marginal system distorts usual systems of caste, gender and belonging. In contrast, *Maximum City* captures the city in its journalistic, memoirist reflection of how identities are constructed under external socio-political forces. Mehta's interviews with politicians, migrants, gangsters, and bar dancers uncover how living in the city sometimes requires moral flexibility and performative reinvention.

The two works also highlight the importance of memory, violence and trauma and how these conditions shape identities, particularly during periods of history such as communal riots of 1992-93. While *Narcopolis* highlights individual loss and disorientation, *Maximum City* focuses on larger societal disjunctions and desires. The mode of narration and the language, itself a development of the construction of identity, is also analysed in the paper, wherein the poetry fragmentation created in Thayil and the blending of reportage immersion in Mehta are discussed.

Lastly, this paper presents the argument by highlighting that identity is not a fixed situation but a constantly evolving transaction that is not attributed to circularity, the historical memory and the feeling of needing to belong in Bombay/ Mumbai. The texts assist in the advancement of postcolonial urban identity in contemporary Indian literature.

Keywords: Identity, Urban spaces, Drug Culture, Marginality, and Postcolonial Literature.

Introduction

Mumbai, for a long time, has been called 'The city of Dreams', a city where the hopes of those who live there and people who are visiting for the first time come true. It was initially developed by the British, one of the largest cities in the world. Mumbai now has nearly 21 million citizens living in and around 603 sq. kilometres. Its geographical position is such that it is able to create enough opportunities for this island city in trade and commerce. As this city has a wide sea on its western side, which it faces towards the African mainland, and on the other side, it has East Asia, both of which open many opportunities for trading and commerce to its inhabitants. It is thus referred to as the economic and financial capital of the nation, with the prosperity it has to offer to its countrymen. This widespread city of Mumbai, which simultaneously comprises history, culture and money, is owned by no one and everyone. As the dweller in the city, every individual has a story to tell which comprises their struggle, aspirations, dreams, ideas and varied perspectives. These different, unique stories have encouraged numerous literary giants to adapt their lives into fiction, or plot about the stories of Mumbai itself, and these stories then become the narratives of Mumbai itself.

According to Michael E Smith, the city can be divided based on two different characteristics, that is, demographic and other economic factors. As these two characters play different roles in the formation of a city as a place with a larger and diverse demographic area, they tend to produce more for the 'retail market centres.' Such types of goods and services flourish further in the large demographic areas; therefore, further economics of a city adds to the various aspects of the city, such as economic centres, religious centres, political capitals, etc.

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Mumbai as text has become a very powerful imagery in literature from the early stage of its establishment to its current metropolis status. This city represents many different aspects and powerful images in the literature, not only through its buildings and streets but also from the relationships of the people of the city and outside the city. This relationship of socio-cultural interaction among people of the city is organised in three spatial places, that is, "places of work, places of leisure, places of sleep" (Mantri, xxvii), through which everyone must go through.

In postcolonial literary discourse, the theme of identity has emerged as a vital framework to understand individuals and communities negotiating their place within complex social, cultural, and political landscapes. Urban spaces, particularly those shaped by colonial legacies, migration, and rapid modernisation, act as dynamic backdrops for these negotiations. "A web of identities, interests, and institutions characterises the metropolis of modern India" (Mantri, xxv). Bombay, now Mumbai, exemplifies such a space—a city layered with multiplicity, memory, aspiration, and trauma.

Mumbai has seen itself change from historical to industrial age to the globalised city, it has changed from feudalism to modernism to postmodernism, further, the city has evolved from cosmopolitanism to communalism, but the most important and impactful change has been the renaming of the city from Bombay to Mumbai. As Gyan Prakash quotes in his novel *Mumbai Fables,* the task of the literary criticism of Mumbai,

> "The nostalgic dystopic city of slums appears as compelling bookends of Mumbai's story because they seem to have the force of historical truth. It is a trick of history, inviting us to believe its Bombay-to-Mumbai tale as an objective reading of the past when it is a fable. To accept it at its face value is to get ensnared in the fabulous spell that history casts" (Prakash, 23).

Even today, after so many years, people are still hesitant towards the new name given to the city. After 29 years still people are still uncomfortable with the name given to the city. As the writer of the *Narcopolis,* Jeet Thayil, says about the name change of Bombay,

> Thayil rejects "Mumbai", which he calls the "M-word". The new name, he says, was forced on the city by Shiv Sena, the right-wing Hindu nationalist party. For Thayil, that change in the mid-1990s symbolised a loss of tolerance. "It's always been a place where you find Hindus, Muslims, Christians, including Catholics from Goa and Protestants from south India, many Parsis and Buddhists. You can find Buddhist temples all over Bombay, including Japanese Buddhism," he says. "That is the great Bombay tradition: tolerance and open-mindedness. If you had talent, ambition, money, beauty – that's where you went. It was a magnet" (Pilling).

As for Thayil, the city of Bombay is a place of past which has though snatched away his late teens and early twenties, but he says, "When I think of the opium days I am filled with nostalgia, Opium fills a hole, perhaps a God-shaped hole. And I have to say, I do miss it" (Pilling). With this, he also misses the place which had turned him into an addict. He says regarding the city as "Nothing exists outside Bombay. From the moment you get off the plane, you know you have entered a room full of mirrors: everything is self-referential. The city feeds on itself" (Handal).

This paper explores the theme of identity through two contemporary literary works based on Bombay/Mumbai, Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) and Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004). While *Narcopolis* offers a fictional, often hallucinatory exploration of the city's underbelly through the lives of addicts, sex workers, and immigrants, *Maximum City* presents a journalistic and memoirist investigation into the fractured lives of Bombay's many inhabitants gangsters, bar dancers, politicians, and returnees like Mehta himself.

Despite their differing forms novel and nonfiction narrative both texts present identity not as a fixed category but as fragmented, performative, and continuously reshaped by the city's chaotic forces. This paper argues that both works portray Bombay/Mumbai as a crucible where identities are formed, broken, and reconstituted through experiences of marginality, addiction, violence, memory, and desire. Through comparative analysis, it becomes evident that in Bombay, identity is less about rootedness and more about survival, reinvention, and adaptation.

Creation of Identity in Urban Space

Bombay/Mumbai is not used as a backdrop in these stories only, but participates in both the creation and destruction of identities. Both Thayil and Mehta describe the city as a palimpsest: covered with colonial past,

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linguistic and ethnic diversity, religious conflict and movement of migrants, either dreaming of something new or the traumatised people running away. The city is simultaneously included and exclusive, enabling as well as evasive.

In *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found,* Suketu Mehta unravels the formation of identity in Mumbai city space as a multifaceted, constant negotiation influenced by migration, cultural tension, and the relentless energy of the city. Having been away from Mumbai for years, Mehta comes face to face with a world that no longer contains the remembered childhood he knew, triggering a search for home at the personal level and a battle with identity crisis (Sathya). The urban hybridity language, religion, and history mix obliges natives as well as migrants to constantly reinvent themselves. As Mehta observes, "A lonely human being here has two alternatives: He can be incorporated into the crowd, become a cell in a larger organism, or he can hold on to a stubborn, nearly obdurate sense of his separateness" (Mehta, 580). Mumbai's urban space is thus a site of both collective and individual identity formation.

The crowd, with its "14 million avatars," becomes a metaphor for the city's multiplicity, where every person is "individually multiple, severally one" (Mehta 580). Through stories of underworld figures, struggling artists, and everyday workers, Mehta reveals that identity in Mumbai is not fixed but forged through constant adaptation, resilience, and the tension between self and society. The city's energy both confronts and facilitates its citizens to discover, lose, and recreate themselves amidst its chaos (Sathya).

Mehta's Bombay is one of contrasts a place where billionaires live alongside slum dwellers, where ancient religious rites intersect with Bollywood glamour, and where hope coexists with despair. The urban area dominates its inhabitants, usually laying out the conditions of their identity. In Mehta's words, Bombay cannot be lived; it must change you (Mehta, 7). This city enforces assimilation, although this process is different according to different classes, castes, gender, and even history.

In Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, the city is refracted through the haze of opium and heroin, but it remains recognisable in its harsh realism. Bombay landscape is dotted with brothels, rundown buildings, foreign vessels, and opium dens, which are against the law. The physical actions within the city reflect the disjointedness of the characters, whose bodies are in locomotion due to disorientation.

In the novel, identity formation within the cityscape of Bombay (now Mumbai) is portrayed as fluid, fractured, and significantly marked by the city's social, cultural, and economic turmoil. The novel's characters addicts, prostitutes, eunuchs, and immigrants move through a city in constant flux, on the margins, and traumatised. Their identities are malleable rather than rigid and are forged and reformed by addiction, displacement, and the exigencies of urban existence (Rai).

The city itself is lived and breathed, with a "flickering identity" that shifts as its name is altered from Bombay to Mumbai, mirroring larger changes in social and political dynamics (Sini). As Thayil says about the city, "Bombay, which obliterated its history by changing its name and surgically altering its face, is the hero or heroin of this story…" (Thayil, 1) Thayil's story reveals how urban space becomes a location of both erasure and creation: sites such as Shuklaji Street, which had been a playhouse, are now drug dens, overwritten by histories of colonialism, migration, and modernity (Sini). It is here that identities are performed, negotiated, and at times erased, reflecting the unsettled nature of the city.

Character figures like Dimple, who is a transgender woman, illustrate the process—her trajectory from marginality to centrality within the opium den speaks to how urban environments enable negotiation and reinvention of self, while they reaffirm social stratifications and exclusions (Renu). The rites, jargon, and subcultures of the drug world create a temporary sense of belonging, but also highlight the uncertainty of identity in a city characterised by its constant change and social disintegration.

Bombay in both texts is used as a spatial metaphor for creating identity. It does not permit stable selves, it promotes unstable selves, the hybrid and transient and precarious subjects.

Marginalised and Hybrid Identities in *Narcopolis*

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* is populated by characters who exist on the margins socially, culturally, and economically. They do not refer to themselves by any specific identity, yet continue to mould themselves through addiction and sexuality as well as migration and trauma. At the heart of this story is its eunuch Dimple, who was a boy named

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Daniel, and who was forced to gender-transition into a man, a prostitute, and a pipe-preparer in the opium den of Rashid. The body of Dimple turns into a locus of identity fallout; it is neither completely male nor completely female, and she traverses through life with great insight and composure.

Dimple's identity surpasses binary categories of gender and caste. As much as she is a victim of violence that happens to her, she still makes room for agency, reading books, practising her religion, and having philosophical discussions with Mr. Lee. Her mixed character upturns the major social rules, and yet, she is a symbol of silent power that is transformative. The opium den is a place of depravity, but paradoxically, it gives her a sense of belonging and of fulfilling expression, which is closed to the outside world.

The narrator of *Narcopolis* also embodies a liminal identity he is both an insider and an outsider, part of the drug-using subculture yet able to leave it. This feeling of estrangement and alienation is emphasised by his coming back to Bombay after several years spent abroad. His identity is divided between the past and the present, the East and the West, remembrance and forgetfulness, like most postcolonial subjects.

The style of narrative that is disjointed, poetic and non-linear, as Thayil adopts, reflects the flux of identities in his characters. Time bends, imaginary borders with memories intertwine, and narrative voices transform in such a scenario of fluidity of the self in a city that never takes time to ponder. In that case, addiction has a literal and a metaphorical aspect to it; the wish to get out of fixed identities, to be something other than one is.

Shifting Selves and Moral Ambiguities in *Maximum City*

Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* presents a city teeming with contradictions, where people assume new identities to cope with the socio-economic pressures of life in Mumbai. Mehta himself belongs to the Indian diaspora, brought up in the U.S., even though he was born in India. His homecoming to Mumbai turns out to be a seeking of himself, and his account of the story gets shifted frequently between the position of a critical observer and an emotional participant.

The most memorable thing in the account made by Mehta is the way the people alter their models to stay alive. As an example, gangsters such as the Shiv Sena activists of Bal Thackeray wear the costume of being Marathi saviours to sanitise their bloodthirsty acts, whereas gangsters like the dons wear the mask of a religious leader and claim to be morally upright. Mehta interviews several men who describe how easy it is to become a "killer" in Mumbai— violence, in this context, becomes a career, a mode of identity.

Females redefine their identities as well, particularly bar dancers and sex workers. In the city where women are usually deprived of agency, dancing is both a professional activity and an attempt at making a presence in a patriarchal economy. They are performative and bend their identities using costume, makeup, and well-selected fantasy. However, there is also economic insecurity and exploitation behind the glamour.

Mehta also delves into identity crises of the middle classes of being caught between tradition and modernity, in the rut of day-to-day jobs and having to keep their identity amidst the increasing consumer culture. Identity in their world is linked to ambition: education, property, and status become the basis of urban decent capital.

Notably, the narrative put forward by Mehta indicates that identity in the city of Mumbai is usually transactional, and it is designed and transacted in line with socio-political needs. The city needs achievement, and its residents perform as they can or even as they do not want to.

The Role of Memory, Violence and Loss

Memories are important in both writings, acting as an antidote to the flow of identity. In *Narcopolis*, Dimple and Mr. Lee frequently reminisce about their pasts, finding in memory a semblance of selfhood. Mr. The memory of Lee, the Chinese exile, recounts the cruelties of the Cultural Revolution as a sort of personal memory tied with the trauma of politics. Memory means survival rather than nostalgia to Dimple in the sense that it can explain her current alienation.

In *Maximum City*, collective memory is shaped by the 1992–93 riots and the Bombay bomb blasts of 1993. These events permanently altered the social fabric of the city, marking certain communities as the "other." To Muslims, especially, such memories are traumatic, and they form a community based on suspicion, loss, and marginalisation.

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As such, violence becomes a very operative factor in the making of identities. Not only does violence leave its stains on individual, as well as societal, psyches, but also it is made manifest either through riots, gang wars, or acts of state-terrorism. It separates communities, establishes political affiliations and reinvents urban connections.

Loss is also a theme that is common in both texts, the loss of loved ones and homes, but it goes further in the loss of innocence, community, and self. In Bombay, one must forget, or forget that part of oneself, a very great deal of the time, to make a living.

Language and Narrative Form

The narrative styles of Thayil and Mehta substantially add to the ways identities are developed. Thayil's Narcopolis is deeply poetic, with long sentences, meandering reflections, and fragmented perspectives. This format imitates the confused minds of his characters, at least those intoxicated by drugs. The form destabilises the reader, as she is put in the same liminal, unanchored place as other characters and the narrator.

In comparison, Mehta uses a journalistic tone, which is objective, factual, but also a very personal tone. The authenticity in the characters that he brings out is portrayed by his use of interviews, statistics and detailed descriptions of the characters. However, he also tends to intervene in the story to keep the reader in mind that all a reportage can be. His foreignness and nativeness as two faces of the personality provide a possible literary voice, which is usually curious, compassionate, and never quite at home.

Both texts are multilingual and hybrid in language, and thus have Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Gujarati, and English. This linguistic mixture is an expression of heteronomous identity that inhabits Bombay. The city is a lingual place, and to exist in the city fully means speaking many dialects: at the very least, there are lots of tongues to learn.

Comparative Synthesis

Despite their formal differences, *Narcopolis* and *Maximum City* converge on several key themes. The two portray Bombay/Mumbai as a place of contradiction, a metropolis that promises an escape, yet is determined to be like everyone else, one that encourages transformation, yet washes over the old. In both texts, identity is also heterogeneous, transitory and defined by processes that are not within the control of the individual.

While Narcopolis focuses on the personal and intimate identity as experienced through the body and consciousness, *Maximum City* offers a more structural view—identity as shaped by politics, economy, and society. They collectively present a comprehensive picture of the identity of working in a postcolonial metropolis.

The texts are also different in the way that the notion of hope is treated. Narcopolis is more pessimistic, portraying the city as a site of decay and loss. Maximum City, while dark, retains moments of aspiration and resilience. This tonal variation demonstrates contrasting intentions between Thayil, who primarily wants to poetically capture some long-lost subculture and Mehta, who wants to chart the social and political reality of the city.

Conclusion

In *Narcopolis* and *Maximum City*, Bombay/Mumbai emerges as both a geographical and psychological space—one that constructs, fragments, and reconstitutes identities through complex social, cultural, and political mechanisms. These writings interfere with the concept of a unique individual and propose a range of characterisations constructed under the banners of marginality, memory, violence, addiction, and hope.

The multiplicity of the city is its benefit, as well as its burden. To Dimple, the narrator, Mehta, and all of the many others in these stories, identity is not an essential fixed thing, but a constant creation of adaptation and performance, of survival. Be it the cloud of opium or the eye of the investigative reporter, both excerpts depict that in postimperial urban India, identity is not a thing that is simply lived, but negotiated.

The themes touched in these works have lost nothing in relevance as urbanisation of Indian cities carries on with reshaping present cities. They also make us wonder how to belong and at what price. In this way, they expand the discussion of postcolonial identity and certify the purpose of literature in defining the sentiment and existential landscape of the contemporary city.

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