

Subashish Bhattacharjee and Goutam Karmakar (Eds), *The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 328 pp. ISBN: 9781032110820.

Reviewed by Deblina Rout

Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, India

The City Speaks: Urban Spaces in Indian Literature investigates the urban literature of the subcontinent at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, adopting a critical stance towards the study of narrative accounts of the ‘city’. The volume explores the longstanding and intricate relationship between Indian literature (in English) and urban spaces, evaluating the city as a “producer of narratives as well as a consumer” (7). Registering the representation of urban spaces as more than mere background settings for narratives, as the foreword mentions, the anthology attempts to read the ‘city’ as represented within “sociocultural and experiential spheres” in Indian contexts (xiii). As the editors, Subashish Bhattacharjee and Goutam Karmakar, note, cities serve as a record of the “momentum of cultural maturity, the evolution of thought, and the shifts in demographic realisations” that foreground the very formation of countries (9). Documenting cities as evolutionary metaphors for tracing the cultural historiography of the nation, the volume presents novel interpretive frameworks for analysing urban literature through a variety of mediums, including novels, poetry, drama, and non-fiction accounts.

The first section of the volume, ‘Fictions of the “Cities at the Centre,”’ deals with the representation of the metropolitan cities in India: Delhi, Mumbai, and Kolkata. Disrupting some of the polemical ways of analysing representations of these urban sites, the essays range from treating the city as a sanctum, a memory, or a figment of nostalgia to a contested terrain

inhabited by diverse populations and cultural associations. In the opening chapter, Deeptangshu Das meditates on the city as a sacred space through a reading of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and *Journey to Ithaca*, deploying the spiritual and the symbolic to map human interactions within the psychosocial spaces of the city. The city becomes an anthropomorphic entity in Sarani Mondal's reading of Khushwant Singh's *Delhi*, representing a heterotopia rife with pluralism and mutability, best experienced through the art of flânerie. Rima Bhattacharya's essay on Calcutta as the diasporic homeland in Bharati Mukherjee's fiction and non-fiction, premised on the immigrant's composite experiences of the homeland left behind, studies the blend of fact and fiction across two genres in the portrayal of the city. This ambivalent projection of urban space in the narratorial psyche continues in Sayan Aich Bhowmik's analysis of Amit Chaudhuri's *Friend of My Youth*, where the city becomes a site for the fomentation of memories through the flânerie of the narrator. The figure of the flâneur is further dealt with in Rupayan Mukherjee's reading of Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*, where flânerie becomes a tactical means to engage with the city and survive in it, the flâneur being an "absorptive sponge who is unconditionally open to the exterior" (66). The city opens up as a networked space in Amrutha Kunapulli's reading of Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, as she argues how the networked depiction of Bombay in the novel configures the characters as "networked subjects and subject networks" (70). The fast-morphing state of postcolonial cities in a rapidly globalising world is decoupled from the flâneur's perspective in Kuheli Singha's reading of Raj Kamal Jha's *She Will Build Him a City*, as the city becomes a fragmentary spatial entity that alienates. In Nilanjan Chakraborty's reading of Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others*, the city becomes a prism of changing socio-cultural dynamisms, from the colonial past to a radical present. Moving from the centre to the periphery in the depiction of the city is Kunal Basu's *Kalkatta*, which treats the city of Kolkata as a microcosm inhabited by a variety of populations. Avijit Das and Shri Krishan Rai analyse *Kalkatta* as a text that presents the city from the point

of view of the ‘outsiders’, the marginalised and often excluded members who are radically different from the core Bengali intelligentsia, which is often considered the legitimate claimant to the spatial and cultural momentum of the city. The city further becomes a historical palimpsest in Subhadeep Paul’s study of Rajat Chaudhuri’s *Hotel Calcutta*, caught in an “unstable” juxtaposition between the “roots of an old-world nostalgia and the ‘postcolonial melancholia’ (as Paul Gilroy puts it) of an unstable multi-culture” (113). The city is transformed into a corrupt hub festering “unholy connections” between the powerful and the powerless in Jerry Pinto’s detective novel *Murders in Mahim*, which, as Somdatta Bhattacharya analyses, can be read as a present-day meditation on Mumbai as a city of “capitalism and crime, a city of ‘damaged’ human beings and class politics” (132). The section ends with Rajarshi Roy’s critical look at Ravish Kumar’s *Ishq Mein Shahar Hona*, where the author expresses the legibility of Delhi in terms of the experiential, inaugurating a new cityscape not exclusively historical, but based on the experiences of marginal citizens, such as those of the migrants.

The second section, ‘Fictions from the Fringes’, builds on the theme of marginality, discussing fiction about cities that have been on the fringes developmentally, yet have come to represent a fast-evolving world with changing cultural and material conditions. In the opening chapter, Natacha Lasorak reads Rohinton Mistry’s *City by the Sea*, where the city becomes a hostile space, reinforcing the existential condition of marginality afflicting the protagonists. The city is further delineated as a dystopic development in Debajyoti Biswas’s analysis of Mamang Dai’s novels *The Legend of Pensam* and *Stupid Cupid*, where the author portrays two inverse trajectories: one from a ‘primitive’ old world to the new world of urban space, and the other as a retreat from the city to the hills. Biswas comments on how the texts hint towards an increasing need to urbanise the rural, projects that can prove to be damaging ecologically and culturally. The debilitating effects of urbanisation manifesting as industrialization and

neocolonialism in third-world spaces are further explored in Somasree Sarkar and Neha Kumari's study of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, where the cityscape assumes toxic proportions and ultimately stands as a heterotopic space that is not only a geographical location but also oozes a 'sense' or experience that is transmittable and transgressional in time and space. The discussion on the liminality of spaces is continued in Maya Vinai and Revathy Hemachandran's analysis of the port city of Muziris in Sethumadhavan's novel *The Saga of Muziris*. They analyse the usage of intergenerational memory in the novel to map alternate histories of the city, depicting how space becomes an important signifier of interpersonal relationships, spanning the historical and the contemporary, and how this affects the material and cultural dynamics of the city.

The third section, 'Staging the City', diverts the mode of narration from the textual to the theatrical, analysing the city in the mode of dramaturgy. The section begins with Arnab Chatterjee's reading of the city vis-à-vis the country in Rabindranath Tagore's *Red Oleanders*. Chatterjee mentions how Tagore highlights the conflicts between an "organised urban political community of the rulers, equivalent to the Western nation-state, and a village community of the common people", corresponding to his idea of *samaj* (197). The novel, as Chatterjee observes, delves into the "dark recesses of modern city life" as "unleashed by the Enlightenment discourse of modernity", highlighting the organicity of the village in comparison (200). The anxiety bred by urban hubs is a theme continued in the next chapter, as Jolly Das studies the use of urban space as a theatrical device for historiographic as well as contemporary contextualization in Girish Karnad's plays. As Das mentions, in his plays, Karnad explores a "complicated network of cities with an ever-changing, complex, multidimensional matrix of interactions", thereby presenting these spaces as not just locational entities in theatrical productions but also vibrant, participating entities in the play (211). The

polysemic voices of the city are further explored in Pragnaparamita Biswas's reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* and *Harvest*. Analysing the two plays, Biswas writes that the female characters "utilise" urban landscapes from a "gendered perspective", charting how the "flow of consumerism and virtual culture affects the cityscape" and how these women negotiate with "dehumanisation" in the "complex web of gender violence" marking the urban spaces that the texts depict (225). The 'spectacular' angle of the theatre, which is explored through the lens of gendered violence in Padmanabhan's texts, is further studied through a different prism in Sib Sankar Majumder's chapter on Parsi Theatre. Reflecting on the cosmopolitan spectatorship of the Parsi theatre historically, owing to its development in the city of Bombay, Majumder argues how the reception of theatrical practises was a manifestation of the city's multicultural ethos that eventually inspired the development of a 'pan-Indian style' performance culture in the subcontinent and beyond.

The fourth and penultimate section, 'Poetics of the Cities', describes the Indian city as expressed through the medium of poetry. Baisali Hui explores the city-country dichotomy in twentieth-century Indian poetry through the works of two Parsi poets, Keki N. Daruwalla and Adil Jussawalla. She attests to how these two poets try to visualise the utopian ideal of perfection embodied by the pastoral within the city space, provided that the citizens adopt a subjective agency to overcome the surveillance of the state and the world of consumerism that the city upholds. The issue of subjectivity in urban space gets a diasporic turn in Sujata Bhatt's poetry, wherein the city becomes both the 'home' and the 'world' for the global citizen. Joyjit Das notes how Bhatt's poetry denotes a hectic sense of movement and a constant search for home away from home across city spaces throughout the globe. As a diasporic citizen, her poetry not only reflects tangible spaces she has travelled to, but also "imaginary spaces and spaces of remembrance", thereby talking about the city as an elusive space that represents multi

layered stories of dispersion and settlement (266). The final chapter in the section comprises Goutam Karmakar's reading of the representation of Bombay in Gopal Lahiri and Sunil Sharma's *Cities: Two Perspectives*. The city becomes a backdrop as well as a muse for the exploration of the spatial and temporal visions of these poets, turning it into an artistic ground rife with possibilities.

Finally, the fifth and closing section of the volume, concerning the city's non-fiction accounts, contains three chapters. In the first chapter, Goutam Ghoshal reads Sisirkumar Ghose and Jiddu Krishnamurti's accounts of the ways of shifting from an urban consciousness that is detached from nature, to a more sustainable and equitable way of life in the cities. In both Ghose and Krishnamurti, the idea is to discover an "integral path, a path that does not deny materialism", rather than that which makes "material life a blissful experience" (291). The city, then becomes an unsolved crisis within us that has to be negotiated by questioning the basis of knowledge dissemination in modern society. The next chapter ties in the abstract nature of the hybrid identity borne by the diaspora in its negotiations with the city of birth and the city that hosts them in the later phases of life. Reading Bharati Mukherjee's *Days and Nights in Calcutta* as a travel memoir, Basundhara Chakraborty analyses Calcutta as a chronotope that shapes the identity of the author, the cityspace acting in a highly personal capacity not only as a socio-cultural backdrop but as an assemblage of imaginaries, perceptual experiences, and representational constructions. The final chapter deals with the city as a shaper of psychic experiences in Ujjwal Panda's analysis of Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, where Bombay not only influences the inhabitants who are part of it but in turn becomes a reflection of the inhabitants' personal experiences, mapping a psychogeography of the city for the flaneur protagonist. The city ultimately becomes not only a geographical location in Mehta's book but also a location of the mind.

All in all, the anthology attempts to fill in the dearth of scholarship on cities in India through multiple literary modes, contextualising it in the socio-political, cultural, moral, ethical, and economic changes within the rapidly urbanising subcontinent. Treating the city as a highly complex, ambivalent space, the essays try to dissect what a city embodies— as a spatial entity, a geo-political structure, and a cultural hotspot. The volume also performs the crucial task of documenting literature from the lesser documented urban areas, as well as destabilising the hegemony of literary studies focusing on the developmental core of cities by discussing its darker, grittier aspects, such as capitalism, crime, and corruption. As such, the book marks an important intervention in the rise of humanities scholarship globally that tries to decode the literary in the urban and the urban in literature. With an interdisciplinary bent and projecting against the homogeneity of a Western understanding of urban literature, the volume lays important groundwork for a unique urban studies approach to Indian literature.