

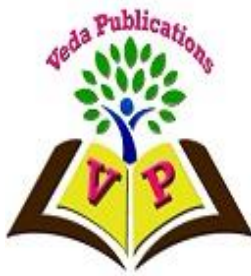


DEMYSTIFYING 'CHARACTERS' THROUGH 'SPACES': A STUDY OF CITY SPACES IN PARSİ LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT



The research article is an attempt to study the characters in the selected novels with respect to the spaces they live in. The works chosen are *Such a Long Journey*, *The Crow Eaters*, *Trying to Grow* and *Bombay Time*. The selected novels are by Parsi authors and hence the Parsi psychology will also be explored with regards to the spaces they dwell in. It is interesting to find out that the consciousness of individual characters in the works is largely dependent on the places and the surroundings. In the novels we observe the prominence of countries, cities, campuses and enclosures in deciphering the human characters, their characteristics, their consciousness and their conscience. The built environments in the forms of roads, buildings and houses, pave way for Topoanalysis that will be attempted in this paper.

Keywords: *City Spaces, Consciousness, Parsi, Place, Psyche, Topoanalysis.*



INTRODUCTION

City Spaces deal with the representation of cities in the form of several thematic concerns in contemporary literature. Urban spaces in literature are often used as metaphors to signify significant plots and characterizations. This paper aims to study the representation of cities and spaces in selected Parsi works in English. Parsi writers of English have contributed handsomely to Indian literature through which the readers learn about the Parsi community and ethnic identity. The Parsi history and cultural identity is deeply attached to the Indian soil resulting from their immigration to the western coast of the country centuries ago. Their journey and growth as Indian citizens are deep rooted in the cities that the authors choose as a backdrop for their stories.

This study has been inspired from the cultural geography that conceptualizes space as "something that is culturally produced, lived and represented in various ways" [1]. The city is equivalent to a whole world for the Parsi characters in most novels and therefore it remains an indispensable element in the storyline. The authors shape the personality of the characters by the cultural surroundings and conversely the cultural surroundings are perceived according to the character's psyche. In this paper, an attempt has been made to understand the characters and how their personality is shaped by the spaces around them. Excerpts from the novels *Such a Long Journey*, *The Crow Eaters*, *Trying to Grow* and *Bombay Time* have been taken to comprehend the city spaces as used by the authors. It is interesting to study the impact, the spaces and surroundings have on the characters and how with the change in spaces, the characteristics of the human beings change. Influenced by Cynthia Wall's contention that the identity of the literary characters was constructed by place "and [characters] more determined to construct their own or others' identities from place (or series of places)" [2] this paper researches the fictional characters and their relation to place through topoanalysis.

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

Rohinton Mistry has a typical 'Bombay' setting in all his works that act as a canvas on which he depicts

the fundamental aspects of the human condition. Set in 1971, *Such a Long Journey* (1991) is written against the backdrop of Indo-Pak war which culminated into the formation of Bangladesh. The fictional world of the novel centers on a lower middle-class segment of the Parsis of Bombay, who bear the brunt of the political upheavals that also shake the country to the core. In the novel, the metropolitan Bombay has a smaller Parsi world within it in the form of Khodadad building. This building encompasses within its boundaries everything that is Parsi in nature and serves as an example of cultural pluralism. It provides a haven to the Parsi community to uphold their religious and cultural practices. Starting from offering prayers to Ahura Mazda to leading a life that is enveloped in a Parsi flavour, we see the boxed in Khodadad building as a metaphor signifying their demographic decline as compared to the vastness of Bombay. The boundary wall has a symbolic importance in use of spaces in the novel as it not only divides the minority culture from the majority but also protects the minorities from external invasion. However, the demolition of the wall towards the end of the story opens new horizons for the inmates. This act, coupled with return of the protagonist Gustad Noble's long estranged son Sohrab suggests that the course of life will find a way to expand beyond boundaries by annihilating the imaginary shackles that bind our mind. The three hundred feet long boundary wall that seemed to protect the authentic Parsi essence has a significant role to play. What acted as a public lavatory every night at the onset of dusk in the first half of the novel became a religious extension equally venerated by people of all religious beliefs, later. The paintings of Gods and Goddesses drawn on the wall by the street artist on Gustad's insistence converts the filth and stench into aroma of incense sticks and flowers. The change of façade of Khodadad building brought a striking change in the attitude and action of the passersby.

Another place that demands a mention is the 'House of Cages', a residency of the prostitutes in one of the most glamorous metropolises of India. The name itself suggests a caged experience for the inmates with narrow staircases, dingy rooms, dim interiors, and flashy exteriors. The inmates are



restricted both physically and mentally, and their daily activities and experiences are dependent on the visitors. They are least moved by the happenings outside their boundary wall as the outer world is out of bounds for them. As Fran Tonkiss asserts in *City A-Z*, the city “houses a multitude of little spatial histories told by bodies moving within it” [3], these little spatial histories give the city its form. Another such caged experience is observed in the house of Gustad himself. The blackened windows of his house that serve as the remainder of wars, restrict “the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial” [4]. The blackout papers symbolize his life of despair and problems that culminate one after the other. Life appears to be a tedious journey for him that seems to proceed at a dead end. Having lost the fortunes and status, he is left to see his brilliant elder son shattering his dreams by refusing to join the IIT and later running away from home, his only daughter’s never-ending ailments, his colleague’s death, his beloved friend’s betrayal, and the compound’s lunatic who brings new troubles every other day. The blackout papers serve a perfect environment for his dull life making the rooms too, dull, dark, and damp with no fresh air and no vitality. Towards the end of the novel hardships change him a great deal and he views life from a different perspective. He therefore tears off the papers from the ventilators and windows signifying his urge to start his life afresh. The act makes way for the long-blocked sunshine to enter their house and fill their lives with new hope. Mistry subtly uses many such insignificant spaces to reveal significant human psychology.

Alongside spaces, streets too are powerful agents that help us to navigate the urban spaces and lead to new discoveries about the everyday culture of the places. On the one hand they are materialistic entities providing evidence and on the other hand they are metaphysical objects airing philosophies. Mistry has used the names of streets to map the city and build on his narrative on several occasions and has also expressed his concern over the change of the street names by questioning the existence of the dwellers who live to witness this change unwillingly. In the novel the Maharashtra Government changes the street names in Bombay that were given by the

Britishers, which Dinshawji is reluctant to accept. He feels vulnerable about not being able to relate to the places, which now have a discreet identity. He has a meltdown while walking down the streets with Gustad:

Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared, in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it is Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what will happen to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me! [5]

In this context street names do not just have a materialistic utility it also has a metaphysical consequence.

The two road accidents that Mistry has described provides a vision of the hustle and bustle of the roads, the disorganized traffic, the pedestrians, and their attitude towards road accidents that seem commonplace. While we find some people going out of their ways to help the distressed, there are others who are either apathetic towards the sufferers or are engulfed with guilt for staying aloof. These incidents happening in open spaces help us learn more about the human psyche dwelling in metropolises. The description of marketplaces too offers a visual aid for the readers to understand the place and the people who visit those. The Crawford Market is a busy place with people from all communities accumulating to bargain on their chosen items. Gustad’s father loved visiting this place whereas Gustad detests going to the market. His preference of beef for mutton too had to do with the seemingly scary butchers who might not hesitate to cut open his throat if he argued over the price, as warned by his grandmother when he was a child. Chorbazar is also showcased as a place which is often crowded by rogues and that was the reason why Dilnawaz, Gustad’s wife was



concerned when Ghulam Mohammed had called Gustad to visit him in that place. These open spaces not only give details of the place but also throw light on the characters visiting those. Rohinton Mistry has used spaces to narrate his story and develop his characters in *Such a Long Journey*.

THE CROW EATERS

The second novel in consideration is Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* originally published in 1978. The novel is a wonderful saga of three generations where the protagonist Faredoon Junglewala is seen to rise from mediocrity to affluence. Though Sidhwa might not have made a conscious effort to use city spaces to narrate her story, the metaphorical impact of how she used cities in the novel cannot be denied. The cityscape is not only visual, but also an interaction with the characters' development and mental state. The novel opens with Faredoon transporting his family from Gujarat to the more beneficial lands of Lahore to grow his fortunes. Lahore has been depicted as a land of resources that is teeming with business. It is in the riches of this place that the protagonist finds his professional growth to the extent that he becomes one of the most affluent and revered Parsi in the community; "he not only succeeded in carving a comfortable niche in the world for himself but he also earned the respect and gratitude to his entire community" [6]. Here the city is showcased as the harbinger of success. The streets, the house, Freddy's shop; every detail speaks volumes about their life and Parsi custom. The presence of a sick room in the Parsi household for the sexually mature girls and women reveals this practice of secluding the menstruating women, which is also followed by other religions and communities.

Lahore has been depicted as a quaint place with the old-world charm, nothing fancy in the lifestyle, even though the Parsis were rich people. In contrast Bombay appears to be more polished and extravagant than Lahore. When the Junglewallas visit Bombay to fix a match for their son Billy, they are flabbergasted by the riches of Tanya's family. Everything appeared to them as immaculate and unblemished. One of the richest families of Lahore looked raw in front of the metropolitan dwellers. This

depiction of the two major cities is interlinked with the ways of life of the characters. Tanya's family appears more sophisticated and refined in their taste and conduct as compared to Billy's family who are more rooted and rustic. The 'City of Dreams', Bombay, has a dream-like semblance whereas the 'Business Hub', Lahore, is jostling with energy.

Another contrast that is observed in the description of urban spaces is Sidhwa's articulation of London. In a humorous manner London is described as glittery from the outside but lacking a soul in the inside; a soul which is Parsi by nature. The London hotel did not provide attached baths and therefore Jerbanoo, Freddy's mother-in-law had to queue up in the corridor for the sole bathroom for her daily use every day; and bathing once in three days as suggested by Freddy was out of question. However, her biggest nightmare was using toilet papers in the 'tiny lavatories' instead of water. Eventually, her eight feet by five feet balcony turned into her personal bathroom for she "was brought up to believe that cleanliness is Godliness, and she refused to fail her religion" [7] and that resulted in getting them ousted from the hotel. The initial euphoria of visiting London waned into a major disappointment for the family. The difference in cultural geography of Lahore and London was the reason for such an experience. The architecture, space and utility of the space was unlike in the two cultures and cities which ruined their initial fantasies altogether.

TRYING TO GROW

The next novel taken into consideration is *Trying to Grow* (1991) by Firdaus Kanga. The story has autobiographical elements in which the protagonist Brit has a rare disorder and is wheelchair bound for his entire life. Naturally his wheelchair is his entire space and interestingly his world is restricted to his wheelchair. His bounds are to the extent to which his wheelchair takes him. Kanga has acutely interwoven this space with the character of Brit. Unlike Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) where Devi's existence is stifled by her own mother, Brit chooses to curl up in his limited space and enjoys his barricaded life. He enjoys the special treatment he gets for being invalid and remarks, "I liked being



different from most people. It tickled me” [8]. His parents, his home tutor, his own sister, and his neighbour open-up new horizons in his life and he travels through those however confined in his space. Kanga draws a neat parallel between Brit’s restricted movement in his limited space and his restricted vision for life. He doesn’t have great aspirations in life and seems satisfied with what he is. He embraces his limitations and does not complain about his situations. His struggle and actions are internalized and when he gradually catches the glimpse of reality, he carefully masquerades his wounded heart with a cheerful face. His expressions, dreams and true self is held within; just how his physical condition holds his movement and compresses his space.

BOMBAY TIME

The last novel that has been studied is *Bombay Time* (2001) by Thrity Umrigar. Umrigar creates a setting similar to that of Mistry’s, where the Parsi world is called ‘Wadia Baug’, and the inmates are very much like the inmates of ‘Khodadad Building’. Wadia Baug is a place that spells emotions and the dwellers share a strong bond amongst one another brushing aside their differences. The nostalgia of this place is so heavy that Jimmy and Zarin Kanga had to return to this middle-class community from their flat at Cuffe Parade with all the modern amenities and facilities fell short in front of their old and compact flat at Wadia Baug. For them it was the people who made their life worthy and made them feel at home. At Cuffe Parade they felt as an outsider even when they shared good rapport with their neighbours from diverse communities. The focus here is to highlight that the spaces are created by not just the dimensions but the emotions and bonds that people share.

Similar reflections are found in bounty in this novel, which treats spaces as an explication of human emotions and their characters. The resonance of Soli Contractor’s acquaintance with Mariam Rubins is beautifully blended with their immediate surroundings. The streets, the beach, their houses; every space is used parallelly with their mind frame. When Soli, a Parsi, first noticed Mariam, a Jew, he

fancied about her upbringing and her lifestyle. “In his imagination, he had pictured a fairy-tale apartment straight out of Arabian Nights, exotic and sensual, with velvet couches and silken drapes and Persian carpets” [9]. This description highlights the direct association of the home décor and the people of a certain community. This brings us back to lay emphasis on the fictional characters and their relation to place. Their happy moments together had a background of tidy and cozy apartment, soulful music, liveliness, and beautiful surroundings, which is in stark contrast with their saddest moment together.

The day Mariam broke up with Soli, he was devastated. To accurately describe his mental frame Umrigar masterfully relies on the description of the place where they met for the last time.

When he turned back to face the room, it seemed shabbier than it had an hour ago. He noticed the peeling paint, the cracks in the floor tile, the frayed corners of the lamp shade. A fly buzzed around where the tandoori chicken lay opened and untouched [10].

This same room was a heavenly abode for the lovers where they consummated their love earlier. The shift of emotions results in how we experience a certain place just as how our surroundings are instrumental in shaping our mood and to a certain extent our characters too. This is evident in the case of Adi and Saraswati who happened to meet by chance. Adi, the only son of a rich landlord had grown up in luxury and comfort. The openness of his luxurious bungalow made him broad minded and a good-hearted human being. Life was easy for him, and everything seemed achievable until that fateful night when he met Saraswati for the first time which changed the course of his life. In contrast Saraswati was a peasant girl who lived in a hovel. She was timid who barely spoke a word on both the occasions they met. Her upbringing and the space she grew up in resulted in her being recoiled all the time, pointing at the fact that the impact of the surroundings and exposure to spaces of typical kinds dictate the development of characters in many cases.



The idea of space is also depicted by the idea of the land of birth and nationality. The history of the Parsi settlement in India reveals the rise and fall of the Parsis culturally and economically. The Parsis were always very loyal and close to the rulers and chose to live a life of peace. They were a small agricultural community under the reign of the King of Gujarat. Gradually they started excelling in trade and commerce and became prosperous and successful in their field. During the British Raj in India the Parsis became very close to the government, rose higher in status and wealth, and became the most westernized of all Indian communities. Unlike other Indian communities they shared a good rapport with the rulers. This was because even though they were considered Indians, they lacked the Indian ethos. "This not only alienated them from the Indian mainstream, but also cut them off from their own Parsi roots" [11]. Nevertheless, they are still Indians and Bombay is their home. We find this consciousness in Soli when Mariam says she would relocate in Israel, the 'original homeland' for Jews. Soli retorts, "What homeland? India is your homeland. This is where you were born, where you were going to school, getting a job, having friends, going to picnics and parties... India is your country, Mariam. You are a *pucca* Bombayite, born and bred here" [12].

Soli's idea of belongingness is deeply rooted in the place of his living; so even though he shared a different religion, customs, and practices from that of the mass, he attached himself to the small things that were instrumental in shaping his consciousness. The spaces, the places, their importance in his life helped him to grow as a separate individual. In contrast, Mariam's view of belongingness is dictated by her roots, "we were always raised to think of ourselves as Bombayites first, but ... that's a mistake. That's how Hitler won, ... because the Jews thought of themselves as Germans, even when nobody else did. There is a new country being built for Jews and by Jews. I want to be part of it" [13]. For Soli the places create his own people and characteristics and for the Mariam the people and their characteristics create her own place. This is the line of thought that

Umrigar projects through the depiction of these characters in her novel.

CONCLUSION

This reckoning of space as defining human characters reveals how the authors connoted their idea of using 'place' and 'space' to depict their characters. The individuals are shaped by their immediate surroundings and at the same time their individuality guides them to discern their surrounding places in their preferred manner. The built environments in the form of roads, buildings, and houses pave way for topoanalysis that has been attempted in this paper. In the novels we observe the prominence of countries, cities, campuses, and enclosures in deciphering the human characters, their characteristics, their consciousness, and their conscience.

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