

Exploring the themes of Culture, Memory and Identity in Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes *Bombay Meri Jaan: Writing on Mumbai*

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to explore urban spaces and their leverage in moulding an individual's identity and creating memories. Each city has a peculiar and different story and history of its own formed by topographical features, socio-economic environment, and characteristic features that mark it as different and unique. Thereby people inhabiting the cities also have myriad experiences as they encounter a variety of people and cultures. This experience in turn shapes their identities and creates lasting memories. The paper delves deep into Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes' *Bombay Meri Jaan: Writing on Mumbai* to examine and analyse the interconnection of culture, identity and memory with the city, urban ethos and urban spaces.

Keywords: City, culture, identity, memory, urban spaces, urban ethos.

"If each city is like a game of chess, the day when I have learned the rules, I shall finally possess my empire, even if I shall never succeed in knowing all the cities it contains." (Calvino 121)

Throughout history, cities have played a significant role in shaping societies. While the term 'city' may initially seem simplistic, its complexity is undeniable. Often perceived as a physical space comprising buildings, streets, and an expansive urban area, a city is far more intricate. It is a mosaic of socio-political and economically stable environments, but at its core, a city is constructed from a myriad of elements - including its inhabitants, their emotions, cultural connections, collective memories, and significant events. Scott Slovic eloquently articulates in *Eco Criticism Big Ideas and Practical Strategies* the interplay between an individual and city when he writes, "Reading literature, viewing art, listening to music, watching films and eating local foods all contributed, and continue to contribute, to how I understand my relationships to places."(x-xi). Research into the evolution of human civilisation has shown that cities have emerged as new identities over time. The origins of the world's first cities can be traced back to regions such as Mesopotamia along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the Indus Valley Civilization, and the Yellow River in China. Ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle are celebrated as prominent figures in Western thought

and philosophy, extolling cities' virtues in their works (talking especially of Athens). Aristotle, for example, emphasised that individuals congregate in cities not just to exist, but to pursue a life of virtue and excellence.

In recent years, city space has been the subject of debate in contemporary literature though earlier writers have already shown the importance of urban space in their works, which leads to a new genre of literature and that is 'Urban Literature', which refers to a literary genre that set in a city environment. However, just as in urban locations, the genre explores the experiences and stories of city life. A unique viewpoint on culture, identity and social issues is provided by urban literature, which explores the intricacies, challenges and victories of metropolitan settings. It typically has a dark tone and focuses on negative aspects of city living, complexities, struggles and triumph of the urban environment. It's a great way to gain insight into the diverse narratives and voices within cities. By exploring city areas, we can create lifelong memories and fully engage ourselves in the diversity of culture of a place. Famous writers like Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens have strong attachment to the beautiful city 'Of London', and with the help of their works we can see and analyse the culture of London, and the lifestyle of its people which is comparatively different from other cities and it has also long been a source of inspiration for artists and writers. On the other hand, Indian writers like R. K. Narayan, and Mulkraj Aanad have shown the cultures, traditions and values of society living in big cities and rural areas. The charm of the city has always been attracting rural people as a result, the world has experienced a population shift from the countryside to urban areas in quest of work, better lifestyle and to fulfil their dreams. The culture of cities has a great impact on people, it not only helps them to grow but also helps them to understand each other.

Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writing on Mumbai

This research paper is an attempt to highlight Jerry Pinto's and Naresh Fernandes's work '*Bombay, Meri Jaan: Writing on Mumbai*', this work is an anthology which deals with the personal experience of the writers about the metropolitan city Mumbai, memories attached to the city, the cultural diversity and the identity of the city. Both Jerry and Fernandus are Mumbai-based writers, they have spent plenty of time in Mumbai, and the city has a great influence on both. Mumbai (Bombay), a city which is located in the coastal area of Maharashtra. It is not only a big city but also one of the busiest cities in India, it is known as "The City That Never Sleeps" and "The City of Dreams". Mumbai is filled with the sweet sweaty smell of hopes, desires, aspirations, and opportunities, its high-rise apartments, the bhelpuri on the beach, its slums, the gully cricket, the city during rain, the night view at Marine Drive, the scene at Victoria Station, women in the lady's compartments in the local train, the story of the freedom struggle, scenes from a life, fast and hectic lifestyle of the people. This city is like two sides of a coin, on one side there are huge buildings and infrastructures which have compared with big cities like New York and Paris. On the other side, there are slum areas crowded with people from every walk of life. It is said that Bombay is for fortune-hunter not for those who are depending on fate. Sometimes city is not just a place but something more than that, it is seen as a lively figure who has a heart and a shape, providing love and care to the citizens. Bombay is an addiction for those who have lived in it. Once you live in Mumbai, you cannot detach yourself from this beautiful city because it runs through your veins no matter whether you are physically present there or not.

City and Culture

Culture is a notion that refers to the social behaviour, norms, beliefs, and customs found in human societies, it also distinguishes human beings from animals. It is something which is acquired from the past and transmitted to the next generation. City and culture are closely associated with each other, Cities are often considered to be the epicentres of cultural diversity and since they are home to a diverse range of inhabitants, languages, religions and customs that coexist in a relatively compact space and follow social norms. As Malcolm Bradbury views it, “There has always been a close association between literature and cities. There are essential literary institutions... There, too, are the intensities of cultural friction and influences, and the frontiers of experiences” (Bradbury and McFarlane 97). This cultural diversity may present challenges for city dwellers as well as a source of inspiration and allows us to learn, appreciate and celebrate the beauty of various cultures all in one place. It can also shape our attitude towards various aspects of life, such as family, society, relationships and work. Mumbai is the hub of cultural diversities, millions of people with varying races, dialects and religious beliefs have arrived on Mumbai’s shores from India and other countries, bringing with them their goals and dreams. However, on the other hand, it creates some major problems such as struggles of the marginalized, alienation and racism due to clashes of culture and capitalism, so culture becomes a tool of the upper class used to repress the masses. In India, major differences occur in religious beliefs between Muslims and Hindus, the gap between rich and poor which sometimes lead to riots in the city. Sometimes urban areas may reveal social dissolution, where communities are separated based on factors such as income, class and lifestyle. Karl Marx argued that in class-stratified societies the dominating culture came from the ruling class. “The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationship, the dominant material relationship grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one therefore, the ideas of their dominance” (Marx and Engels 64). Cultural diversity also brings hope for the people as it provides chances to learn new forms and norms, Pico Iyer’s in *Bombay: Hobson-Jobson on the Streets* also talks of the same, the article deals with the culture of Bombay and he calls Bombay ‘Capital of Hope’ where several people come to challenge their fate. This city is an amalgamation of variegated religions, he writes:

..Bombay has always been a money-minded mix, where Christians called Coutinho, da Cunha, and de Souza have mingled with Parsis (from Iran) called Merchant and Engineer, in the company of Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and an odd variety of cross-breeds (the hero of Salman Rushdie’s last novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, is Bombay itself—depicted as a half-catholic, half-Jewish Moor, not unlike his creator, a Christian-educated, Hindu-surrounded, Muslim-apostate Englishman) (Pinto and Fernandes 3).

Motley cultures and religions can bring communal harmony to the city. Communal harmony is a beautiful element of cities, it helps people to learn from each other and celebrate diversity, fosters a sense of unity, mutual respect, and understanding of customs, reduces conflicts and paves the way for progress and development in society. But the political parties and the politicians have played their dirty game by separating the people based on religion for the vote bank, so the local Marathi people are always against outsiders. Shiv Sena, the regional party has managed to change the city’s official name to ‘Mumbai’, a way of telling the world that Bombay belongs to its original Maharashtrian settlers, and the outsiders who have helped to make it prosper—Parsis and Muslims and Gujaratis and Jews should stay out, which bring a feeling of alienation among the people, they experience a sense of disconnection, isolation from their surroundings.

Like any other Indian city, Mumbai's cuisine is a key component of its culture. Mumbai's cuisine is quite spicy. Mumbai's favourite foods are Potato Bhaji, Okra Bhaji, Batatyasa Rassa, Bhelpuri and Vada Pav among many others. Every celebration has a distinct meal. For example, during Diwali, there are dishes like chakli, chivda, besan laddu, shakkar pale, and karaji. In this region, Modak, Puran poli, sheera, and basundi are the most popular sweets. Travellers frequently have a flamboyant experience with Mumbai culture and cuisine. In *Bombay, Meri Jaan*, Rahul Srivastava's '*Bhhelpuri*', discusses bhhelpuri, a dish made up of Rice puffs(kurmura) mixed with typical chaat sauces and sev. Just as many ingredients mixed to create a tasty dish, similarly, cultures of different religions also come together to construct a beautiful city. He posits:

Its subaltern origins and easy use as a metaphor for cultural diversity (all those mixed-up ingredients) have made it very popular with scholars of urban history and sociology talking about co-existence and cosmopolitanism. But it is perhaps equally important to see it from the point of view of the enterprise, the main ingredient in the life of the migrants in the city. Migrants, who have contributed to its richness. Not just by being there but by innovating and adapting, a quality encoded in the cultural history of bhhelpuri. (Pinto and Fernandes 122).

Bhhelpuri has created its own identity among other dishes so has the culture. The culture of a city helps to create its unique place among cities. Every culture has sweetness and we just need to understand it. Moreover, cities with diverse cultural landscapes often attract tourists and artists which helps them to create a beautiful memory of the city.

The City and Memory

Memory plays an important role in shaping our relationship to the spaces we inhabit. The places we visit, the people we meet, and the events we experience all become part of our narrative, and influence how we see the city. The city and the memory are intertwined, as our experiences of the city build our memories and identities and they all create the best annals for the city and help it flourish more. Memories are the best part of an individual's life and reside with him forever. Memories help to recreate those things and the moments. Those who come to Mumbai to explore, trade or for any reason, the city becomes a part of their life and they always carry the city in their heart and memory. However, memories in a city can be a mixture of both good and bad experiences. Some memories may bring mirth, like exploring new places, trying new foods, or meeting interesting people. On the other hand, there may be a few challenging memories that we associate with a city. When Aldous Huxley, the famous English writer visited Bombay for the first time, he had mixed experiences with the city, in his famous article, '*Arriving in Bombay*', he wrote about the women of the city who were ugly and wore mixed attire of European and Indian culture. He used birds as a metaphor for the people who were everywhere. But had a beautiful memory about the architecture, "Bombay is one of the most appalling cities of either hemisphere. It had the misfortune to develop during what was, perhaps, the darkest period of all architectural history." (Pinto and Fernandes 147). He was impressed by the beauty of The Gateway of India, the Prince of Wales Museum and the architecture of the Taj Mahal Hotel. Pico Iyer was amazed with the infrastructure of Bombay but mainly with Victoria Terminus, he wrote in his article, "the one-of-kind world-within-a-world railway station where the daily Indian madness plays out amidst the un-decayed pillars of the Empire. Outside it, you will find a Palgrave's treasury of styles--- stained-glass elephants, Progress atop its central dome, a British lion next to an Indian tiger" (Pinto and Fernandes, 7). Paul Theroux was also surprised by the scene at

Victoria Station where he saw innumerable people on the platform waiting for a train, he remembered an incident that happened with Naipaul, he even mentioned it in one of his articles, “it was at a railway station in Bombay that V.S. Naipaul panicked and fled, fearing that he might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd”. (Pinto and Fernandes 189).

Bombay is known for its streets where every street corner tells a story and every heartbeat echoes the pulse of a city that never sleeps, we can see the beautiful streets of Bombay with the help of Nissim Ezekiel’s poetries. He was notable among the new wave of Indian English poets, he was born and brought up in Bombay. Through his poems, he explored the culture of the Bombay city and his poems primarily dealt with his struggle to overcome alienation and his search for identity. With the help of his poetry, we can explore and enjoy the beautiful sights of Bombay without going there. In the poem ‘*Island*’, he describes the reality of the urbanism of Bombay. The poet’s internal battle is revealed in the poem, the poet conveys his profound sense of connection to his birthplace of Bombay at the same time he is both depressed and angry over the city’s uneven development. It is a city of slums and skyscrapers that has become a source of suffering and misery. He reveals his sense of loneliness and alienation as investigates the realities of the city.

Unsuitable for song as well as sense

the island flowers into slums

and skyscrapers, reflecting

precisely the growth of my mind.

I am here to find my way in it. (Pinto and Fernandes 1)

In the aforementioned lines, the poet makes use of irony, when he uses the word “flowers”. In this context flowers do not allude to the appearance of lovely flowers; rather, it describes the expansion of slums surrounding Bombay whereas the word ‘skyscrapers’ becomes the symbol of development, prosperity and richness.

Many Indians have left their homeland and shifted to foreign countries for better job opportunities but they feel nostalgic about their homeland and craving for the city. Suketu Mehta is a New York-based author who was born in Kolkata and spent his early time in Bombay but after some time he moved to New York. Sharing his memories he writes:

..When I moved to New York, I missed Bombay like an organ of my body. I thought that when I left Bombay, I had escaped from the worst school in the world. I was wrong. The all-boys Catholic school I went to in Queens was worse. It was in a working-class white enclave that was steadily being encroached on by immigrants from darker countries. (8)

Bombay, Meri Jaan has also incorporated an article written by Khuswant Singh, *Impressions of Bombay* which recounts the memories Khuswant Singh experienced when he first visited Bombay. He said that Bombay is the only city in India whereas other metropolises are like oversized villages. He was impressed by Marine Drive where he went for a night walk and explored the city, he called this city a miniature of New York because of its huge buildings near the shore of the Arabian Sea. According to him, “Marine Drive is Bombay’s pride and

joy. After sunset, as the lights are switched on, they gape at it in amazement and call it a queen's diamond necklace." (Pinto and Fernandes, 24). When you are in Bombay, you should not miss the monsoon season, the first raindrops bring a sense of relief, and streets are filled with waters like Venice, inspiring countless artists to romanticize the beauty of the city.

Salman Rushdie has shared his memory/experience of Bombay. When he was a little child he hated Bombay because according to him the city was the love of his parents. "I was a Bombay chakra through and through. But let me confess that, even as a child, I was insanely jealous of the city in which I was raised, because it was my parents' other love, the daughter they never had. They loved each other (good), they loved me (very good), and they loved her (not so good). Bombay was my rival". (Pinto and Fernandes, 112).

Rudyard Kipling, who was born in Bombay, shared his memories in his works. The article 'A Very Young Person' and the ode 'To the City of Bombay', delineates the condition, the places he has visited and the experiences he felt from the city.

Neither by service nor fee
Come I to mine estate—
Mother of Cities to me,
But I was born in her gate,
Between the palms and the sea,

Where the world-end streamers wait. (Pinto and Fernandes, 211)

Mark Twain came to Bombay in 1896, stayed at Watson's Hotel and explored the streets, David Sassoon Library, the Great Bazaar and many more places. In *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World (1897)*, he described the city as "A bewitching place, a bewildering place, an enchanting place—the Arabian Nights come again!" (345). According to him, this city is filled with contrasts of wealth and poverty, beauty and squalor. Vikram Chandra, an Indian-American writer whose roots has attached to his native land and the land has been source of his writing, in his work 'Love and Longing in Bombay' he portrays a remarkable picture of Bombay, "The incredible length of Bombay sped by, those endless sprawls of buildings, huts and shacks, children squatting and shitting by the tracks refuse, the crowded grey roads twisting and widening between, all of it blurred but fearsome in its strength, in its very life that grew it unstoppably." (184)

The City and Identity

Identity, the term refers to the set of qualities, traits, appearance and manner of a person, place or thing. From time immemorial, cities are considered as a character who works with society and helps its elements to flourish. For example Florence in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View*, Monroeville in *To Kill a Mockingbird* the unforgettable classic of all time *A Tale of Two Cities* talking of London and Paris to name a few. Each city has a peculiar identity, which is made up of memories and pictures. The perception of urban features including monumental buildings, public spaces and other special features helps to create a peculiar place among other cities. Some cities are still fighting for their identity in this rapidly

changing world due to a lack of diversity, if the city does not have any resources and other facilities then it is very difficult to survive as a city. Mumbai has a very significant place in the prestigious cities of the world. Sometimes this city is compared with Paris and New York City. *Paris, India* is a note by J. Gerson da Cunha which appears in *Mumbai, Meri Jaan* and deals with memories of a writer where he experiences the development of Bombay and its history. He compares the city with Paris in many aspects such as population, infrastructure and lifestyle. He thus writes:

...both Paris and Bombay are the prestige and the influence, which each of them exercises over all the country, far beyond the limits of their own administrative spheres. Bombay draws, as the metropolis, the best talent from provinces and districts around, and dictates laws and fashions to India as Paris does to France.

(Pinto and Fernandes 20).

India was known for its rustic and simple lifestyle but after colonization, India's identity was replaced with Western thoughts and traditions. Changes were not only seen in culture and way of life but also in every sector, as a result, small cities were converted into metropolitan. In India, we have only four to five metropolitan cities but it is Mumbai which is considered as the true city in spirit and in the real sense.

Conclusion

In contemporary times, cities are not the only places where people interact with each other. More than that, the cities are seen as characters, living, thriving spaces that guide us in navigating our way and sometimes motivate us to survive despite the hardships and challenges life throws. City and city life affects an individual directly or indirectly, it moulds them and helps them evolve as a person and as a citizen. Jawahar Lal Nehru eloquently put forth the significance of cities in his address delivered during a special convocation at the University of Allahabad :

.... What do these two cities convey to us, what pictures and thoughts do they bring to our minds? When I think of them, the long vista of India's history stretches out before me, not so much the succession of Kings and Emperors. but rather that of the inner life of a nation, its cultural activities in many fields, its spiritual adventures and its voyages in the realms of thought and action. The life of a nation, and more especially of a nation like India, is lived principally in the villages. Nevertheless, it is the cities that represent the highest cultural achievements of the age, as they also do some- times the more unpleasant aspects of human life. So these cities remind me of the cultural growth of India, of that inner strength and balance which come from long ages of civilization and culture.

(Tongue and Kumar 17)

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