

Indian Fiction in English
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Module - 12
Lecture - 41
The City in Indian English Fiction

Good Morning and welcome to today's session of the NPTEL course Indian Fiction in English. In one of the introductory sessions we noted that in Rushdie's introduction to his Vintage Book of Indian Writing, he identified parochialism as the greatest wise regional writing. What he had in mind was the Pan-Indianness, the almost national appeal that the setting, the context and the overall themes of Indian Writing in English had to offer vis-a-vis regional writing.

At a later point, indicating the anxiety of Indianness that most writers in English had, Meenakshi Mukherjee further pointed out that the absence of a regional locale or even the absence of a known regional readership that made Indian Writing in English perhaps a lag behind regional writing at least in certain ways. So, there are these 2 diverse view-points that we do have in the context of Indian Writing in English as of now.

We have writers like Rushdie arguing for a Pan-Indianness that Indian Writing in English has vis-a-vis regional writings. And we have critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee who point out that it is the regional, it is the value of the local that perhaps forces many critics to prioritise regional writing in terms of its critical value, in terms of its critical tradition more than Indian Writing in English which of course has a larger global appeal.

In this context, it would also be interesting to notice that in most of the Indian English Fiction that we have been discussing. Though there is a certain kind of a national or even international appeal that most of these novels claim. In spite of that there is a focus on certain regional local settings. And here we also realise that it is possible to identify certain patterns across periods from the early 1930s onwards.

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The 'setting' in early novels

- o Country life, rural India = Indianness, representative of Indian life
- o Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Anand's *Untouchable*
- o Narayan's *Malgudi*

The setting in the early novels, it was mostly rural India. It was country life which was getting prioritised over the urban life, the country the countryside. The rural setting was seen as more responsive to the nationalist movement. It for whatsoever reason it was seen as the place where it was easy to talk about Indianness. It was easy to present the local, rural setting as the as a representative of Indian life.

We find this getting exemplified in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* which is entirely set in a village named *Kanthapura*, Anand's *Untouchable* where also we find the action focuses on one person mostly and life in that particular town. We also find Narayan even inventing a fictional village. It also later becomes a sort of a town, a semi urban place which is *Malgudi*. So, the setting in the early novels were mostly rural centric, it is away from all the vices of the city. Everything which is not urban. We do find this gradually changing. And in the contemporary it would be quite safe to say that;

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Contemporary writings

- o City-centred writings, Urban locales
- o Mostly set in Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Bangalore
 - o Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amit Chaudhuri - Calcutta
 - o Rushdie, Desai - Bombay
- o Urban cosmopolitanism
- o English as a metropolitan language

Most writings are city-centred. There are urban locales. Of course, we have certain novels such as Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* or Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* and Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide*, where the setting is away from the city, from the metropolis. But the story revolves around a city-bred modern secular male. And that really brings a lot of urbanness even to the narration there is a kind of a city centreness which becomes part of the story telling process itself.

And in the contemporary we also find that this shift from the village setting, this shift from the rural has been very market and the shift has been to these large metropolitan cities to Bombay, to Calcutta, to Delhi. And these list we also find Adiga, presenting Bangalore also as one of the emerging urban centres. And we find writers like Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amit Chaudhuri. They are all focussing mostly on Calcutta.

And if you recall most of Amitav Ghosh's Novel as set in Calcutta. And Bombay also emerges as another important centre particularly in the novels of Rushdie, Desai and many others we would take a look at. And this focus on a particular cosmopolitan setting. It can be seen in 2 ways. 1. There is a certain regionality, there is a certain local flavour which gets introduced.

At the same time the character of these metropolitan cities, the character of these cosmopolitan cities, they also give a certain kind of a Pan-Indianness to the entire setting. Meenakshi Mukherjee uses this interesting term, *The third world cosmopolitans*, to talk about

these kind of writers and there certainly is a kind of urban cosmopolitanism which can be celebrated in most of these writings.

And unlike the earlier writings where they find it compulsory, almost compulsory to talk about Indian fiction and then place its setting within an entirely rural background. We do not find the contemporary writers operating under such a compulsion. It could be because of the kind of experiences and the exposure that the current writers and the current targeted audience are exposed to.

But it also has to do with the fact that English is increasingly emerging as a metropolitan language. Not to say that in the 1930s when *Kanthapura* was getting published or when *Untouchable* or Nayan's novels came out there was a difference, but it was increasingly important then to present the rural, the rustic, the non-urban as in Indian space. And this has definitely changed for good and that is one inclusive thing which has become part of a Indian Writing in English.

But the critics also point out how there is a certain lopsidedness in the contemporary settings, in the contemporary presentation in the narrative allocations. Because there is an over prioritisation of the urban at the cost of almost ignoring the rural as well as the inhabitants who are there in these non-urban spaces. The focus of today's lecture is particularly to see how certain metropolitan cities have been seen as perhaps the most preferred settings as far as the Indian writers in English are concerned. And Shahani who wrote this essay *Polyphonous Voices in the City*;

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Bombay - not Mumbai

o "... As novelists, they are creating Bombays of their imagination. The city is fashioned in the writer's own image, thus ceasing to be geographical territory and becoming instead an imagined topos. Nor do the narratives record history; they fictionalise it"

And he points out that, as novelists they are creating Bombays of their imagination. The city is fashioned in the writer's own image, thus ceasing to be the geographical territory and becoming instead an imagined topos, nor do the narratives record history. They fictionalise it. So, there is certainly a purpose a larger purpose which is getting served.

And this purpose is quite akin to the nationalist project that we can identify in most of the contemporary writings where the nation gets narrated in particular ways; where this presentation of the city also by extension becomes another imagined place where the action centres.

And we focus this lecture mostly on these 2 cities Bombay and Calcutta and how they get represented in the space of Indian Fiction in English. And we also identify the various possibilities which have been pointed out by critics as well as writers when these metropolitan centres become the focus of action.

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Bombay writers

- o Salman Rushdie
 - o Shashi Deshpande
 - o Anita Desai
 - o Rohinton Mistry
 - o Gurchanan Das
 - o Firdaus Kanga
- You can look at a scene from a thousand different windows and you'll see something new each time (Kanga 2009)

A set of writers have been identified as Bombay writers, mostly Salman Rushdie, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Gurchanan Das, Firdause Kanga. Firdause Kanga in one of his novels published in 2009. He also makes one character talk about how you can look at a scene from a thousand different windows and you will see something new each time, so that is the possibility that Bombay offers to most of these writers.

And we find them presenting the city and making use of the immense possibility that the city offers to them as a narrative space, as an imaginative space. There is a possibility to imagine and reimagine this city in multiple ways they begin to show us.

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Baumgartner's Bombay

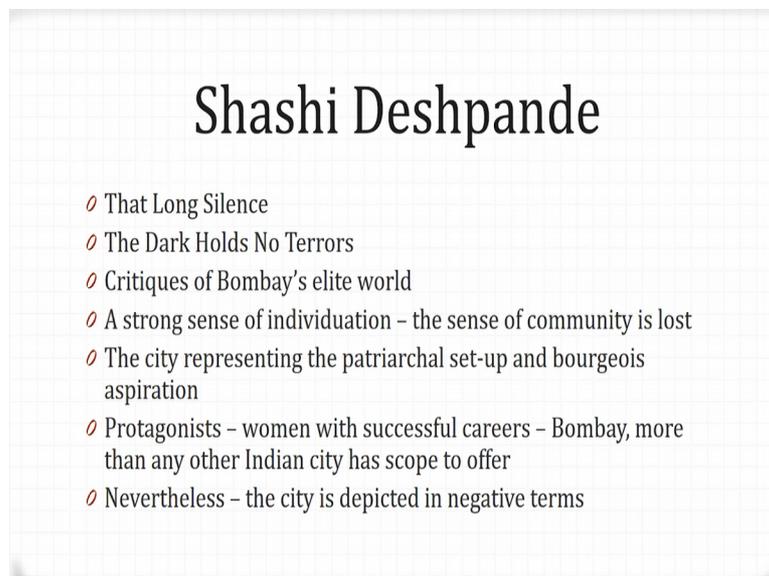
- o Anita Desai
- o The city is neither Baumgartner's nor Desai's
- o Baumgartner - an exiled Jew
- o Forever rebuffed by the city, forever in search of a homeland
- o An all-pervading nihilism

Baumgartner's Bombay is perhaps one of the celebrated novels as far as this representation of the city is concerned, written by Anita Desai. When we read the novel and when we try to

analyse it, we realise that this city, the city which is present at Bombay. It is neither Baumgartner's nor Desai's. It is a different new city which emerges altogether. Baumgartner is an exiled Jew.

In the story in the novel we find Baumgartner being presented as someone forever rebuffed by the city, forever in search of a homeland. We can see this getting replicated in Anita Desai's own life as her, in her own approach to the, where she relate with the city, relate with the nation. There is an all-pervading nihilism which at least occasionally we find getting reflected in Anita Desai's own approach to her homeland when she chooses to reside or not to reside in a particular place.

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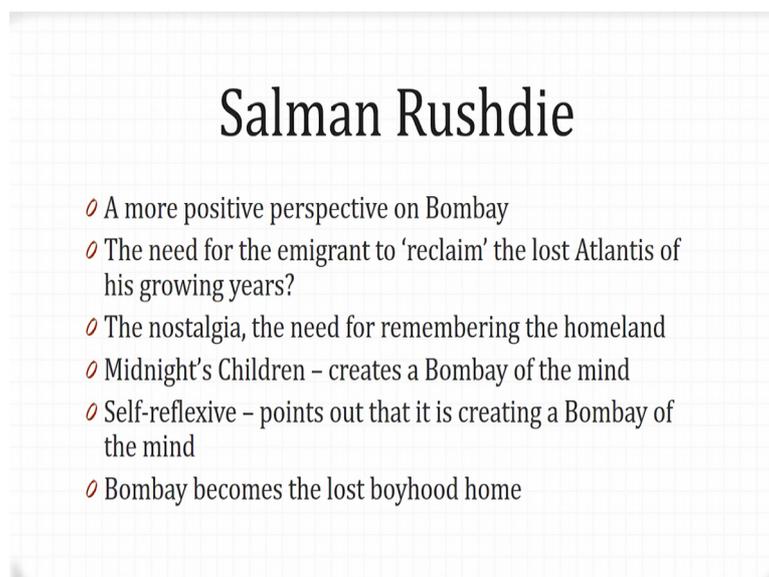
And almost similar reflection could be found in Shashi Deshpande's 2 of her works, That Long Silence and The Dark Holes No Terrors. In both these novels That Long Silence and The Dark Holes No Terrors, she tries to critic Bombay's elite world. And even within this metropolitan space we find that there are of course divisions, and there is a way in which these writers choose to focus on certain state of society, a certain class.

And here when Shashi Deshpande is trying to critic the elite world within Bombay, there are 2 things that she tries to highlight. One is the strong sense of individuation that definitively seen as a positive thing but at the same time, the flip side is that a sense of community is getting completely lost. And Shashi Deshpande does not present the city in entirely nostalgic way. She is very critical about what the city offers.

She also presents the city as representing the patriarchal setup and bourgeois aspirations. She also has women characters who are successful, who are placed as protagonists. And she also tells us through her narration that these women these women protagonists with successful careers, they perhaps would not have made it big, have they been placed in any other city in India. Because Bombay, more than any other Indian city, it has this scope to offer these kinds of newer possibilities.

This is what Deshpande's novels, they seem to try to tell us. But nevertheless, the city is not entirely depicted in positive nostalgic terms. There is also a strong critic, a strong underlying critic that Deshpande tries to present through her novels particularly in these 2 ones, That Long Silence and The Dark Holes No Terrors. When we talk about Bombay writers, it is only natural that one talks more about Salman Rushdie.

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He was the one who had given a more positive perspective on Bombay, right from his first celebrated novel *Midnight's Children*. We find the presence of Bombay being very compelling in his entire carrier. Rushdie interestingly has very little lived experience in Bombay. Though he was born in Bombay, there is a hardly anything that he can claim to be of a personal lived experience as far as his relationship with the city is concerned.

But nevertheless, he continues to write about Bombay and he finds that he is rooted in Bombay in spite of everything. People have tried to read this and interpret this in multiple ways. And one of the most dominant interpretations is that, this is perhaps the need for

immigrant to reclaim the lost atlantes of his growing years. And this gets all the more ironical when we notice that Bombay itself is reclaimed land, reclaimed from the sea.

And there is a nostalgia that we find most of Rushdie's writings. It becomes all the more highlighted and very direct in his collection of essays Imaginary Homelands, where he talks about the nostalgia and the need for remembering the homeland. He talks about how even Midnight's Children is entirely about memory, entirely about what Saleem Sainai is able to remember.

There are of course you know, in the essay the (()) (13:47) Midnight's Children, he talks about the many errors which are part of the narration in terms of the local train timings or when he is describing a particular locality, there have errors which have come in. And this he says is the error of the memory. So, this city which Rushdie creates rather recreates need not be the real city.

It is the one which he imagines in his mind as his homeland. And it is possible to argue that in Midnight's Children we find Rushdie creating a Bombay of the mind. And the text being self-reflexive, it also tells us that it is actually creating a Bombay of the mind. And Bombay in Rushdie's mind becomes a lost boyhood home. So, the presentation of Bombay, it is not in terms of Mumbai the metropolitan cosmopolitan city but in terms of the nostalgic relation that this writer has with the city.

And in this process perhaps Rushdie is also trying to reclaim that life which he never had in terms of his relationship with the nation. Summer of the opinion that, the chutnification of English that Rushdie talks about; it has been made possible through the use of Bombay's English.

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Bombay's English

o "In Bombay you can understand these various kinds of Bombay English that might have a mixture of English and Gujarati or English and Marathi or English and Hindi or English and Urdu. But I couldn't get into that problem because that could have been a terrible tangle"

In Rushdie's own words, In Bombay you can understand these various kinds of Bombay English that might have a mixture of English and Gujarati or English and Marathi or English and Hindi or English and Urdu. But I could not get into that problem because that could have been a terrible tangle. We do not find Rushdie getting into that problem, but we find him problematising it further.

We find him capitalising on that problem and creating a new kind of English, a new kind of language which many have also said that it is liberated the postcolonial nation from the shackle of the colonial tongue, from the shackles of from the straight jacket of Macaulay, away from Macaulian mandates there is a new kind of English which gets presented, which also can be attributed to the hybrid nature of the city to this inclusive accommodating nature of the city.

And it becomes also a convenient sight where Rushdie can enunciate this fictional recreation of his version of the nation's history. So, there are these multiple possibilities in terms of language, in terms of history, in terms of representation that Bombay continues to offer.

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Vikram Chandra

- ◊ Love and Longing in Bombay
- ◊ Argues for his own 'regional' Indian identity – challenges the notion that he writes from a position of being 'abroad'
- ◊ "I must respectfully submit that I too am a 'regional writer'. I will not presume to claim Maharashtra or even the entire city of Bombay as my region. I will only claim part of the western suburbs, let us say north from the highway junction at Mahim causeway, roughly an area containing Dharavi, Bandra West, Khar, Santa Cruz, Andheri West, and Goregaon West. This is my region. I live in it, in the locality of Andheri, in the colony called Lokhandwalla"

Vikram Chandra is another writer who has chosen Bombay mostly as his settings, in the short story collection, *Love and Longing in Bombay*. It is mostly based on the experiences that he had while living in Bombay. Responding to a strong critic by Enakshi Mukherjee about the authenticity of his presentation about the way in which Chandra perhaps deliberately tries to sell this exotic land to the West.

Chandra began to argue that he also has his share of a regional identity. Meenakshi Mukherjee's critics has been especially the later writings has focussed a lot on how there is a burden for the Indian writer in English to write about India. There is an anxiety of Indianness because they are trying to sell this exotic land, sell their exotic experience to a predominantly Western audience.

Vikram Chandra had not taken this critic, very kindly he had written a very escading critic, attacking most of the critics who are writing about Indian Writing in English. And he therefore began to argue that he also has a regionally denied entity just as any other regional Indian writer. And he challenges this notion that he is writing from a position of being abroad. Because he also has his fair share of experiences through which he can claim his regionality.

In his own words, I must respectfully submit that I too am a regional writer. I will not presume to claim Maharashtra or even the entire city of Bombay as my region. I will only claim part of the Western suburbs, let us say North from the highway junction at Mahim Causeway, roughly an area containing Dharavi, Bandra West, Khar, Santa Cruz, Andheri

West, and Goregaon West. This is my region. I live in it, in the locality of Andheri, in the colony called Lokhandwalla. So, this is how Vikram Chandra likes to situate himself.

His regionality gets presented in these details that he is getting into. And unlike the prevalent argument that the city of Bombay offers a cosmopolitanism which makes it easier for the Indian writer in English to sell their work, sell their setting to a predominantly Western audience. Vikram Chandra claims for a regional cosmopolitanism. We may have different reasons to disagree with him but nevertheless it is important to pay attention to the line of argument that is put forward.

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Chandra's claim for 'regional cosmopolitanism'

My region is a hugely cosmopolitan place. Every single person who lives in my region is a cosmopolitan. I am of course a cosmopolitan; I travel away from my region every few months to make a living. My neighbors do also. There are the Gujarati diamond merchants who spend three weeks out of every four travelling from Africa to Belgium to Holland; flight attendants who fly to Beijing; businessmen who sell textiles in Australia; mechanics and welders and engineers who keep Saudi Arabia running; merchant navy sailors who carry cargo to Brazil; nurses who give care and nurture in Sharjah; and gangsters who shuttle between Bombay and Indonesia and Dubai as part of their everyday trade.

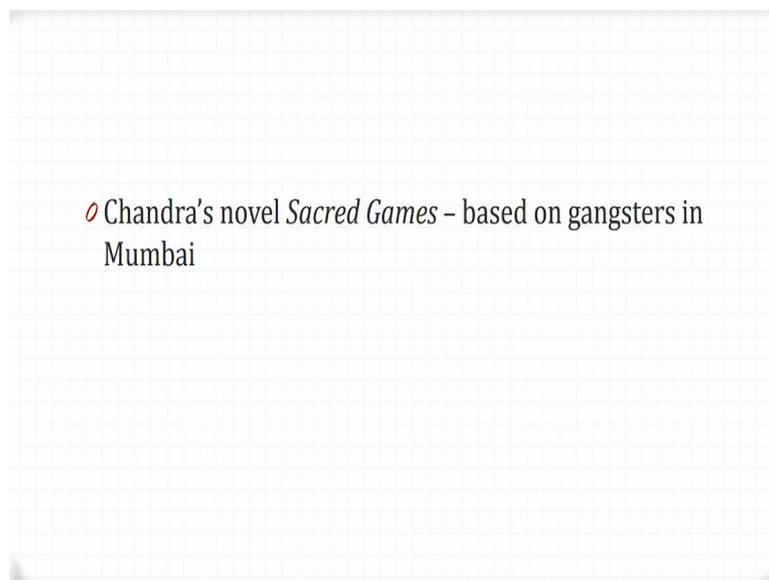
My region is a hugely cosmopolitan place. Every single person who lives in my region is a cosmopolitan. I am of course a cosmopolitan, I travel away from my region every few months to make a living. My neighbours do also. There are the Gujarati diamond merchants who spend 3 weeks out of every 4, travelling from Africa to Belgium to Holland, flight attendants who fly to Beijing, businessmen who sell textiles in Australia, mechanics and welders and engineers who keep Saudi Arabia running, merchant navy sailors who carry cargo to Brazil, nurses who give care and nurture in Sharjah and gangsters who shuttle between Bombay and Indonesia and Dubai as part of their everyday trade.

There is a claim for authenticity as well where Chandra puts forward here, trying to argue that it is not just the regional writer who can claim to know the setting that they are presenting, but a writer like Chandra also has his right for share in that. Here we find Chandra putting

forward a claim which is entirely different from that of Rushdie. Rushdie does not claim to know the details as they are there. Rushdie does not claim to know everything about the city.

On the other hand, he claims that he is conveniently recreating it, out of his memory, out of an experience which he never had. And this is an important distinction for us to pay attention to. And Chandra perhaps also has a claim because the gangsters that he mentions here, about the gangsters who shuttle between Bombay and Indonesia and Dubai as part of their everyday trade. This essay also talks about Chandra's response to. Meenakshi Mukherjee also talks about his interactions with this, Bombay underworld.

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And he has, he perhaps has a point because his novel *Sacred Games* which followed soon after this vitriolic attack on Meenakshi Mukherjee; it is also based on gangsters in Mumbai.

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Rohinton Mistry

- Feels the need to return and to retrieve through his fiction the miniscule Parsi community of Bombay
- The Parsi bagh and the city - a means of rooting himself
- Attempting to retrieve his own sense of self
- The immigrant's need for community and identification
- Bombay becomes a metaphor for two antithetical states of mind - for both exile and communication
- Such a Long Journey - located in Bombay

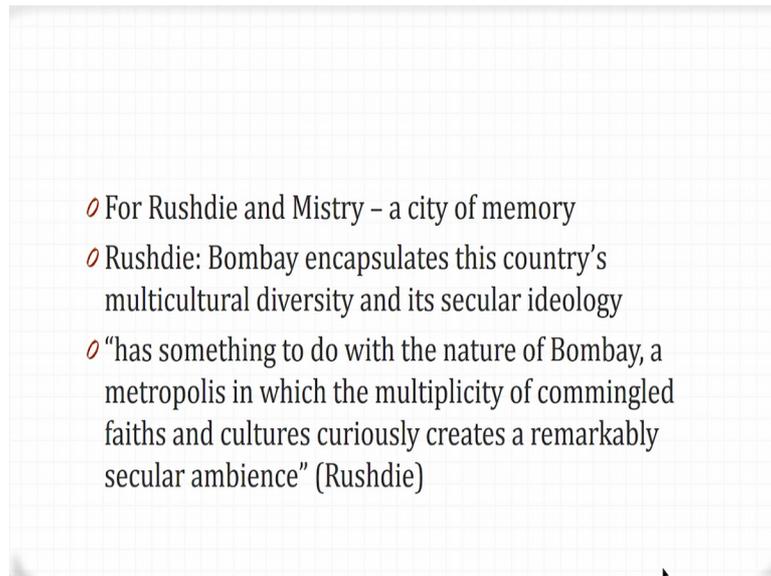
Now we look at Rohinton Mistry and his kind of writing. We find Mistry in quite similar ways like that of Rushdie. A need to return and to retrieve through his fiction the minuscule Parsi community of Bombay. We do find that his novels such as, *A Fine Balance*; they focus on the city. There is a representation of the Parsi community. He also tries to include marginal characters as far as possible.

And for him, the Parsi Bagh and the City, those are a powerful means rooting himself. And there is an attempt which he makes to retrieve his own self in this process just like perhaps Rushdie does in *Midnight's Children*. And here also many critics have identified the immigrants need for community and identification. Because this city which otherwise critics argue that, do not belong to them on account of them having, predominantly lived experiences abroad.

They begin to totally subvert that claim by retrieving the city through their fiction and claiming some kind of a belongingness in through that process. So, we really do not know whether it is the charm of the city which forces these representations or is it like the critics point out the immigrant's need for community and identification. Bombay in Mistry's works find that it becomes a metaphor for 2 anti-critical states of mind.

On the one hand it is an image of him being an exile and on the other, it also becomes a means for communication. So, Bombay is serving 2 purposes, polarise from each other; one of exile and one of communication. Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey*; it is located in Bombay.

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For Rushdie and Mistry, we can say that Bombay is a city of memory. In Rushdie, we find Bombay encapsulating this country's multicultural diversity and secular ideology. In Rushdie's own words which appear in his collection of essays, *Imaginary Homelands*, he says that, it has something to do with the nature of Bombay, a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience.

So, at the end of the day, it also serves the larger purpose that Rushdie or perhaps Mistry have in mind to present a nation, present the story of a nation which is predominantly modern, secular and not given to any kind of (()) (23:32) such as parochialism. And it also serves the larger purpose of finding an audience even outside the regional setting.

In this lecture our attempt is not been to really show how the city is represented in most Indian fiction but to demonstrate the possibilities of reading Indian Fiction in English in multiple ways, about the possibility of countering the many arguments which have been put forward by critics questioning the authenticity, the Indianness and even the non-rootedness of Indian writers who have lived experiences abroad or who are currently not based in this nation.

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- o Kanga - the city is an epicurean delight
- o Desai and Deshpande - the city as symbols of isolation and even terror

For Kanga, for Firdause Kanga who has also written extensively about Bombay, the city is an epicurean delight. But for Desai and Deshpande as we have noted the city also emerges as symbols of isolation and even terror. So, there is a certain kind of a muliebrity that the city presents to these writers. It can become whatever they want in their hands depending on their needs. And this is quite unlike the presentation of Calcutta.

Many have pointed out that, the writers writing about Calcutta, there is a tendency for them to focus on the past of the city, the past of life of Calcutta as a city, rather than writing about it from a contemporary point of view. Many have given different reasons for it when the writers such as Amitav Ghosh who also has researched extensively on the history and the past of the city.

They have also pointed out that it could also, it could be perhaps they do not have a contemporary lived experience. They are talking about the experiences that they had at some point of time, during their college days or during their childhood. So, unlike that, we find the city of Bombay getting representative in multiple ways, in a way just like Rushdie would argue, exposing the multicultural dimension and the multilingual dimension.

The various possibilities in that sense that the nation itself offers. It can become a city of nostalgia. It can become a city of immense possibilities. It can become a city of terror like it does in a fine balance or how it can become almost both in as we would say in some of Deshpande's novels.

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Kanga's *Trying to Grow*

- The protagonist watches from lofty heights the colourful cavacade of Colaba Causeway far below – feels like the Pope in his Vatican
- Though unintentionally – the panoramic perspective of the privileged
- Exceedingly picturesque when seen from towering heights and remote distances

In Firdouse Ganga's novel, one of his novels, *Trying to Grow*, there is a scene where the protagonist is watching from lofty heights the colourful cavalcade of Colaba Causeway. It is far below. And the protagonist also feels that he is like Pope in Vatican. Roshan Shahani points out that though unintentionally, there is a panoramic perspective which is offered from the viewpoint of the privileged.

It is seen, as the city is seen as exceedingly picture risk when seen from towering heights and remote distances. So, this is something that we also need to bear in mind. Most of these writers writing in English with a lived experience in the city or outside, their view point, their presentation is largely from the subject possession of a privileged person. And that is what makes the city exotic for them.

And again, coming back to critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee, that is what perhaps sells well for them in terms of it exotic elements for a Western audience. Roshan Sahani's essay *Polyphonous Voices in the City, Bombay's Indian English Fiction*, it is one among the very few works which has looked at how the city gets presented in the space of Indian Fiction in English. This is an essay which appeared in EPW in 1995. This lecture has also drawn extensively from Sahani's work. Towards his conclusion, Shahani points out;

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“If culture is to be truly pluralistic and if Bombay is to epitomise that plurality, then the writers in English have a legitimate right to ‘appropriate’ the city if it helps them to root themselves anew, or conversely, if it helps them to externalise their sense of rootlessness. . . By writing about Bombay, writers like Rushdie have charted anew the cultural map of the world. Bombay has also created space for many other writers who are cartographing other maps”

“Polyphonous voices in the city: Bombay’s Indian English Fiction” – Roshan Shahani. EPW 1995

If culture is to be truly pluralistic and if Bombay is to epitomise that plurality, then the writers in English have a legitimate right to appropriate the city if it helps them to root themselves anew or conversely, if it helps them to externalise their sense of rootlessness. By writing about Bombay, writers like Rushdie have charted anew the cultural map of the world. Bombay has also created space for many other writers who are cartographic other maps.

So, the way forward is perhaps to look at this just from the point of view of Sahani, not to evaluate, not to judge these writers whether their experience and their representations are authentic or not. But to see the immense possibilities, that even such a kind of a narration has for us. And how these kinds of representation also makes a space for many newer kinds of articulations.

As we wrap up this lecture I would like to read out to you an excerpt from Krishna Dutta's work *Calcutta a Cultural and Literary History*. It also had a forward by Anita Desai, who had written about Calcutta as well. So, her experience in terms of writing about Calcutta, that was entirely different. She also of course spoke about the past of Calcutta presented the period during which she had spent her time in the city.

And Anita Desai also had spoken about the influence of language. How English language itself changes in this process of narrating the experience in one particular city. In her own words, can the English language convey thoughts, emotions and situations that are alien to English experience. What about those that have grown out of the contact of the 2 languages. A contact which is infiltrated many English words into Bengali and few vice versa as such as

Bangla where they have taken a connotation and flavour very different from the usage in English.

This is an important question that Anita Desai asks. And what struck me as interesting is Krishna Dutta's attempt to respond to it. Krishna Dutta rightfully says the answers remain unclear. The huge success of Indian Writers in English in recent years suggest that English can cope with any experience. And this is perhaps the positive note which continues to be encouraging as far as this field of Indian Writing in English, Indian Fiction in English is concerned.

There is an immense possibility that this field of writing, this area of writing has opened up and the Englishes which are available in these metropolitan centres. It has grown so large, it has gone so accommodating, that it is possible for that kind of language emerging from these metropolitan centres to cope with any experience. So, on that note we wrap up this lecture. I thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you in the next session.