

**Diasporic Dilemma: A Quest for Home and Belongingness in Suketu Mehta's
*Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*****Bharatender Sheoran¹ and Meenu Kumari²**

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ABSTRACT

The Diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the customary pictogram of the Indian mode of life, he extends out his roots in numerous soils, getting sustenance from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world. Diasporic writing raises questions regarding the definitions of 'home' and 'identity'. In "*Maximum City : Bombay Lost and Found* " the journalist and fiction writer Suketu Mehta, newly returned from New York and searching for a way to understand the place he left as a youth, similarly faces identity crisis and sense of belongingness. The gentle and genteel world of Mehta's remembered childhood no longer exists and he arrived with a simple question: can you go home again? In this paper, I will examine the identity predicament and struggle for existence faced by the protagonist in the novel.

Keywords: Diasporic, Existence, Protagonist, Belongingness

Despite many definitions and connotations of 'identity', Sudhis Kakar's view, quoted in *Modern Indian Novel in English* - "at some places identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness, and at yet other places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideal" (R. S. Pathak: 1999, 52) seems to be most relevant with the present discussion. Search for identity goes through two aspects; the representation of difference and the expression of a particular community. Thus, one's identity is an amalgamation of both the cultural difference and identification with the cultural tradition and the lack of either generally results in a 'state of loss', and it was Macaulay who created a sense of 'loss' in the minds of many Indians by developing a kind of feeling of superiority or inferiority to fulfill his dream of developing the colonial mentality among Indians.

Macaulay, in an educational, Minute in 1835, thus advised the British government on education in India "we must at present do our best to form a class [in India] who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." His words led the then cultural and educational policies adopted by the British government in India and making English the medium of instruction in some schools and universities in India in 1850 was the starting point of the impact of the western culture on the mind of a class of Indians. It re-stratified the Indian society. The Indians 'in blood and colour, but English in taste' were recruited into the British rule and thus enjoying a respectful social status.

If you look at Bombay from the air . . . you get a sense of its possibilities. On the ground it's different." Those early lines in Suketu Mehta's dizzyingly ambitious *Maximum City* go right to

the heart of something that even the most transitory of visitors to Bombay can't help but notice -- the juxtapositions of that city's capacity to fuel the imagination with the sheer misery of the living conditions it imposes on almost all of its 14 million inhabitants. A chronicler less intimate with the city, or less skilled in the art of narrative non fiction, might use that juxtaposition as a way of guiding his readers through the city: here are the poor and there are the rich; here the glamour and there the squalor. Fortunately, Mehta chooses the more complex and far more rewarding strategy of showing us how the seemingly divergent facets of the city are interlinked: dreams and misery, violence and incorruptibility, the filth of the underworld and the glitz of Bollywood.

Maximum City does not immediately divulge the grandness of its scope. It starts as a personal journey -- Mehta, a Bombay boy who left his home town for New York as a teenager, returns twenty-one years later to see if he can make a life for himself and his family in the city he still thinks of as "the place I'm from". But Bombay has, in those twenty-one years, changed almost as much as he has and so the "return home" becomes a process of learning how to live in "the Country of No". One of the first things he learns is the uses of anger: "It is the only way to get things done; people respond to anger, are afraid of it. In the absence of money or connections, anger will do". The anger Mehta experiences on a personal level he also sees reflected -- and magnified -- all around him. Bombay is a city enmeshed in communal violence, gang activity and police brutality. One of the more remarkable features of *Maximum City* is Mehta's ability to gain access to people deeply involved in all these overlapping centres of anger and power. Members of extremist political parties, gang members, police officers -- Mehta doesn't merely interview them, he virtually becomes part of their lives for months on end, developing relationships with them that extend beyond that of interviewer and subject. The section "Power", which details Mehta's interactions with those different groups, is nothing short of spellbinding. Although his writing is utterly located in Bombay, he is also embarking on a profound, abstract look at the nature of violence, and how it intersects with power and powerlessness. "How does it feel to kill a man?", he asks, over and over, of people on both sides of the law. This could easily

become voyeurism -- and he is intelligent enough not to deny that he is drawn into these lives, fascinated by them in a way that is hardly distanced -- but it never does. His purpose is something far deeper than titillation: "There is a gulf between the human heart and murder, and I was intent on seeing the bridges men build for themselves over that gulf", he explains. (His ability to find complexity makes it even more disappointing to encounter the moments where he fails to do so; I couldn't help being jarred by the way Pakistan - the place I call home - is reduced to a cardboard cutout of the evil neighbour.) The most fascinating of the men who deal in violence is the policeman, Ajay Lal. In a city reeking of corruption, he is the incorruptible man, dogged in his pursuit of the murderers and gang members who rule Bombay. He is also a torturer; because, how else is he to get the information he needs from criminals who have judges in their pockets and witnesses intimidated or shot into silence? And yes, he, too, has killed, but when a policeman turns executioner there is no outcry from the public: "When you live in a world of fear, you give unlimited power to the state". It is depressing to realize how relevant Mehta's book is to parts of the world far from Bombay.

But beyond the abstract questions of power and violence, there is a deeply personal story continuing to play itself out in the pages of *Maximum City* -- that of Mehta's relationship to the people he writes about. His is generally the presence in the shadows, typing away at his laptop while stories of excess are retold and, in some cases, unfold -- but occasionally he steps forward to dispel the impression that he is a mere chronicler. One such moment comes when he reads a former prisoner's account of torture either conducted by Ajay Lal or in his presence. He allows one word -- "horrified" -- to stand in for what he's feeling, and later he asks, "What do I do with Ajay? He is a brutal interrogator . . . but had become a friend of sorts". The lines between writer and subject become even more blurred in the next section of the book, the one entitled "Pleasure". Here Mehta writes about the "dance bars" where "fully clothed young girls dance . . . to recorded Hindi film music, and men come to watch, shower money over their heads and fall in love". Mehta's primary focus in this section is on a "bar-line" dancer who chooses "Monalisa" as the name by which she wants to be known in his book. The relationship between the two of them

is close but its parameters remain unclear, in a manner strangely suited to a section about desire and yearning.

There is no mistaking the tenderness and compassion with which Mehta writes about Monalisa and the other bar-line girls (as well as Manoj, aka Honey, the one who is really a man), which contrasts sharply with his cruel dismissal of unmarried Bombay women "in short skirts" who have reached their thirties. He describes the type: "successful at her career because she is single, desperately lonely also because of it, she is fair game for the married, the lesbian and the fat -- anybody to hold her through the endless night". One could make a game of counting the number of objectionable assumptions in that sentence.

In course of portrayal of love, longings and losses the characters and actions in *Maximum City* move between national and international (transnational), local and global locations and movements to result in hybridized form of culture, that is, "Third culture". This cultural hybridity, even though, leads to further controversial relations in the characters of the novel their longing is perhaps the thing that the characters in this novel do best. They long for identity, they long for love and they long for acceptance -- yet rarely are they skilled at locating aptly any of the above since postcolonial hybridity is, in Radhakrishnan words, "a frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity."

References

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