Writing the City: Exploring Urban Space in the Narratives of Select Indian Women Writers

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DECLARATION

I, Keerthy Sophiya Ponnachan, hereby declare that the thesis titled **"Writing the City: Exploring Urban Space in the Narratives of Select Indian Women Writers"** is a work of bona fide research carried out by me under the supervision and guidance of Dr. O. J. Joycee and Dr Sijo Varghese C, and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship, or any other similar title or recognition.

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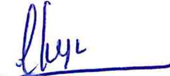

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Keerthy Sophiya Ponnachan

ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamic interaction between individuals and urban spaces as a critical factor in shaping and conceptualizing lived experiences. It focuses on the works of the Indian women writers Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shobhaa De, with particular attention to their novels *Voices in the City*, *Rich Like Us*, and *Socialite Evenings*. These novels explore the cities of Kolkata, Delhi, and Bombay, portraying urban spaces not merely as backdrops but as active participants that influence the characters' identities, destinies, and experiences. Anchored in the theories of Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City and Edward Soja's Thirdspace, the research critically examines how urban spaces are produced, controlled, and experienced in these narratives. Through textual analysis, the study explores the hybrid and dynamic nature of urban spaces and their role in shaping the personal and social lives of the characters. The analysis highlights the distinct characteristics of Kolkata, Delhi, and Bombay, delving into the historical, cultural, and social contexts that define these cities. It investigates themes such as alienation, identity crisis, relationships, moral decay, gendered spaces, patriarchy, and the impact of societal expectations. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the representation of urban spaces in Indian women's writing and underscores the pivotal role of cities in defining identities and experiences within literary narratives.

Keywords: Urban spaces, Indian women writers, Thirdspace, gendered spaces, Right to the City, textual analysis.

പ്രബന്ധസംഗ്രഹം

നഗരപ്രദേശങ്ങളും വ്യക്തികളും തമ്മിലുള്ളബന്ധത്തെ ,ജീവിതാനുഭവങ്ങളെ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുകയും ആശയവൽക്കരിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്ന പ്രധാനഘടകമായി ഈ പഠനം പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു. ഇന്ത്യയിലെ വനിതാ എഴുത്തുകാരായ അനിതദേശായ്, നായന്താരസാഹ്ഗൾ, ശോഭാഡേ എന്നിവരുടെ കൃതികളെ അടിസ്ഥാനമാക്കിയുള്ള ഈ ഗവേഷണം, *വോയ്സസ് ഇൻ ദിസിറ്റി, റിച്ച്ലൈക്ക്അസ്, സോഷ്യലൈറ്റ് ഇവനിംഗ്സ്* എന്നീ നോവലുകളിലെ നഗരാവിഷ്കാരങ്ങളെ കുറിച്ച് ചർച്ച ചെയ്യുന്നു. കൊൽക്കത്ത, ഡെൽഹി, ബോംബെഎന്നീ നഗരങ്ങളെ ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്ന ഈ നോവലുകൾ, നഗരങ്ങളെ വെറും കഥാപശ്ചാത്തലങ്ങളായി വീക്ഷിക്കാതെ, കഥാപാത്രസൃഷ്ടിയുടെ സജീവഘടകങ്ങളായി ദൃശ്യവത്ക്കരിക്കുന്നു. ഹെൻറിലെഫെബ്വറുടെ **Right to the City**, എഡ്വേഡ്സോജയുടെ **Thirdspace** എന്നീ സിദ്ധാന്തങ്ങളെ അടിസ്ഥാനപ്പെടുത്തിയുള്ളതാണ് ഈ ഗവേഷണം . നഗരങ്ങളുടെസൃഷ്ടി, നഗരനിയന്ത്രണം, നഗരാനുഭവം എന്നീ സാധ്യതകളെ ഈ സിദ്ധാന്തങ്ങളുടെ അടിസ്ഥാനത്തിൽ വിശദമായി പരിശോധിക്കുന്നു. നഗര ജീവിതത്തിന്റെ സങ്കീർണ്ണതയും ദ്വന്ദ്വസ്വഭാവവുമാണ് ഈ പഠനം അനാവൃതമാക്കുന്നു.

കൊൽക്കത്ത, ഡെൽഹി, ബോംബെ എന്നിവയുടെ സാമൂഹിക, സാംസ്കാരിക, ചരിത്ര പശ്ചാത്തലങ്ങൾ വിശകലനംചെയ്യുന്നതിനൊപ്പം, നഗരവാസികളുടെ വൈയക്തികവം സാമൂഹികവുമായ നഗര ബന്ധം വ്യക്തമാക്കുകയാണ് ഈ ഗവേഷണം ചെയ്യുന്നത്. നഗരമേഖലകളിൽ ചിതറി നില്ക്കുന്ന വ്യത്യസ്തമായ വിഷയങ്ങൾ—അന്യതാബോധം, അസ്തിത്വപ്രതിസന്ധി, ബന്ധങ്ങളിലെ വിള്ളലുകൾ, മൗലികതയുടെ തകർച്ച, ലൈംഗികഘടനകൾ, സാമൂഹികപ്രതീക്ഷകളുടെ സമ്മർദ്ദം എന്നിവയും ഇവിടെ വിശദമായിപരിശോധിക്കുന്നു.

താക്കോൽവാക്കുകൾ: നഗരപരിസരം, ജീവിതാനുഭവം, ഇന്ത്യൻ വനിതാ എഴുത്തുകാർ, കൊൽക്കത്ത, ഡെൽഹി, ബോംബെ, നഗരജീവിതം, അന്യതാബോധം

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Chapter: 1

Introduction

A city is a dynamic space that integrates people from diverse ethnic, caste, cultural, and economic backgrounds, fostering a complex and multifaceted social fabric. The social life in a city is "distinctive because its scale is larger and activities more intense than anywhere else" (Pile 6). Pile says that in a city "we can imagine millions of people, all with their own stories to tell" (9). Hence the city is an essential platform that encompasses multiplicity, diversity, energy, and receptivity to the needs and wishes of people.

Indian women writers through their diverse voices and perspectives have left a lasting impression on world literature. In the introduction to *Indian Women Novelists*, R. K. Dhawan observes that,

> Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of contemporary Indian writing in English…Through women writers' eyes, we can see a different world, with their assistance we can seek to realize the potential of human achievement. In any appraisal of Indian English Literature, an appreciation of the writing of its women is essential. (10)

Scholars have attempted to uncover a uniquely female perspective on urban spaces. As Deborah Epstein-Nord observes, a distinctly female urban vision encompasses an awareness of transgression and trespassing, complex sexuality, the commodification of the female body, the necessity for concealment or anonymity, and, crucially, the inescapable dominance of the male gaze and its capacity to objectify and eroticize (366). This exposes how women's experiences of the city are shaped by pervasive structures of surveillance, objectification, and the need for anonymity.

Indian women writers have not received much attention in the study of the city in their literature. The exploration of urban space in the works of Indian feminist writers has not been explored much. The current study investigates whether a city assumes the role of a character defining the narrative and storyline, or confines itself to being a place of action that city impacts the characters and situations in the work. One must examine several aspects of the city, such as its culture, evolution, human relationships, the gap between the affluent and the poor, and the social, political, and historical elements that constitute the city to discover the answer.

Background of the Study

The works written by Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shobhaa De can be placed within the larger context of Indian English Women's fiction. Therefore, it would be apt, to examine briefly the context and history of this corpus of writing. Contemporary Indian English literature is well recognized for its exceptional complexity and keen sense of social criticism in the global literary scenario (Ashcroft 46). Although the selected works were written in the twentieth century, the proposed research gains valuable insights from exploring the development of Indian English novels and the specific contributions of Indian women writers.

Indian Women Novelists in English

The current form of the Indian English novel may have been “borrowed from the West,” but it combines several Western novel literary forms with the narrative styles of the *Kavya* and *Purana* (Mund 25). According to Meenakshi Mukherjee's argument in *Realism and Reality*, it is incorrect to view Indian novels as merely copies or adaptations of Western novel formats. As Mukherjee shrewdly points out, for a book to flourish, culture has to be a fertile ground; without it, outside influence is futile (99). It is significant to note that concepts associated with realism, the novel,

and prose were creatively reimagined and suitably adjusted within the Indian literary context, rather than being mechanically copied (Gopal 20). Mukherjee's highly acclaimed book, *Elusive Terrain*, emphasizes that the realm of Indian literature is ever-evolving and elusive.

The phrase “Indian literature” might be used to refer to a broad category of works that encompasses Indian women's English-language novels, considering the volume of novels written in different Indian languages (Dutta 146). In the latter part of the nineteenth century, with greater access to education and the ensuing social reforms, Indian women started writing to express their experiences (40). As expected, the majority of these works took the shape of an “extraordinary number” of memoirs and autobiographical works (Tharu and Lalita 160). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian women writers often encountered challenges in producing English-language literary works. Despite English being approved for official and public usage, the mother tongues were frequently prioritized in schooling. Additionally, their writings tended to focus on domestic issues rather than historical and political matters. As a result, the writings of the Indian women of this time were confined to articles and short stories, rather than novels. Many of these stories acquired an ethnographic quality, as demonstrated by the writings of Cornelia Sorabji, Rokeya Sakhaway Hossain, Pandita Ramabai, and Toru Dutt (Gopal 40).

Describing a writer as a “woman writer” distorts other equally important aspects of her identity by condensing her life experiences to a single dimension of her gender. However, the writer’s gender functions as a focus point in this context, stimulated by a particular goal. H. Lewes G. in *The Lady Novelists* remarks,

> The advent of female literature promises a woman’s view of life, a woman’s experience: in other words, a new element. Make what distinctions you please

> in the social world, it still remains true that men and women have different organizations and, consequently different experiences…. But hitherto…. The literature of women has fallen short of its functions owing to a very natural and a very explicable weakness- it has been too much a literature of imitation. To write as men write is the aim and besetting sin of women; to write as women is the real task they have to perform. (G. Lewes 4)

According to Helene Moglen, among the many literary and creative mediums, the novel is the one that mainly delves deeply into and negotiates complexly the socio-psychological ramifications of gender inequalities (4). A significant rethinking of male-female interactions is made possible by the novel, which stands out as a distinct genre and is defined by the representation of confident female characters (Gopal 4). This provides the catalyst for analysing the rise of “women” writers of Indian English fiction. The landscape of Indian literature is far from homogeneous, even within the realm of English fiction, as it is shaped by diverse perspectives from various regions of the country. So far, women's lives have been reflected in literature by males, with the occasional exception of a few women who have prompted Annie Besant to say,

> Literature can show no grander typing of womanhood than is to be found in the great epic poems of India. The types of Indian women sketched in by the master hands from noble models and writing in a few heroic figures reflect all that is at once strongest, sweetest, most lofty and most devoted in humanity. (Andal 9)

Krupabai Satthianadhan stands out in Indian English literature as the first Indian woman novelist to produce several English-language novels in the nineteenth century. Her books *Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna, A Story of*

Native Christian Life (published posthumously in 1895) were not well known to academics or general readers until they were reissued in 1998. Interestingly, Satthianadhan skilfully handled concerns of gender, caste, and cultural identity in her stories which are issues that are still in debate. Both of her works explore the plight of women who resist being confined to the home, an issue that even has resonance in 21st-century writing (M. Mukherjee, “Beginnings,” 100–101). These novels are not only valuable as historical works but are also highly esteemed for their mastery in handling the subject matter and the pleasure they provide to readers. It is possible to view Satthianadhan's writings as a forerunner of the female-authored Indian English literature that addresses feminist and intercultural issues (102).

During the era spanning from 1950 to 1975 some of the best-known works of fiction by Indian women editors emerged. Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, and Anita Desai are a few notable women writers of this age (Jha 38). A steady stream of remarkably distinctive literature written by Indian women in the years to come may be traced back to these writers. They were praised for their unique literary styles. In the stories written by Sahgal and Desai, contemporary Indian women are often portrayed as being caught between the limits of a restrictive past and the opportunities of an infinite future. This theme is developed further in the following decades by another well-known writer, Shashi Deshpande (Dutta 150). In the fiction of writers such as Desai, an aesthetic of the everyday place emerges, providing new perspectives on the domain of domesticity (146). Her novels are frequently described as having Chekhovian elements. Desai’s writings typically feature marginalized subaltern people, although her depictions of elite women with English education are remarkably realistic (Gopal 152). Markandaya’s narratives initially explored the issue of women's dreams, which gradually faded in her subsequent novels. However, in the late 20th and

early 21st centuries, writers such as Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan brought the theme back to life (Dutta 146).

Cartography of Indian women's literature in English places a strong emphasis on the years 1975-2000, which Jha labels as the fourth stage of the evolution of Indian English fiction (Gopal 156). Indian English books reached a greater audience in the 1970s when they were internationally recognized. According to Roshan Shahani and Shoba Ghosh, in this period many women writers entered the literary landscape because of this transition (3814). The publication of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in 1997 marked the dawn of a new era for Indian English novels, winning the esteemed Booker Prize nearly two decades after Salman Rushdie's groundbreaking *Midnight's Children*, which had left an impact on the literary world (Jha 41; Gopal 156). Roy's writing deviated greatly from the epic-like Rushdie-esque world. In her works, magical realism was infused to give dimensions to present an incredibly realistic depiction of ordinary lives struggling with issues that assumed great relevance. This writing style may be seen as a coming-of-age Indian English family novel. It emphasized physical, emotional, and intimate experiences while blending the mundane and the exotic into one cohesive narrative (156).

English lost its colonial overtones in the 1990s when a wave of Indian women authors used it as a means of expression (156). During this period, Shashi Deshpande, one of the most prolific Indian women authors in English, also published her first book *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Her works focused on women's life, their silences, and their interactions. Both the author and the protagonist, who comes from a middle-class upbringing and experience privilege, are often shown to be struggling with a profound fear of failure (152). Desai, Deshpande, Sahgal, and Markandeya express the intimate realities of motherhood, sexuality, and women's subjection under

patriarchy within the confines of a strictly middle-class household in their narrative (E. Jackson 8).

From 2001 until the present, women writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Manju Kapur have made significant contributions to the field of Indian English literature. Popular authors like Shashi Deshpande have continued to create intricate fictional worlds (Jha 41). Many of the 21st-century novels explore the family structure and the caste system as the key aspects of patriarchy, showing diverse responses to traditional norms (Nagarajan 88). In 1999, Manju Kapur's first book *Difficult Daughters* won the Commonwealth Writers' Award for Best First Book in the Eurasia area, marking the beginning of a new century. Since then, Kapur has written a significant corpus of fiction. Her writing frequently explores the conflicts that arise between parents and daughters, with a special emphasis on mothers. In the setting of fresh waves of modernity, Kapur's writings examine a woman's place in the family, her growing understanding of ever-changing reality, and her attempts to forge her own identity (Gopal 148). Jaisree Mishra skilfully portrays the balance of suffering and desire with her understanding of human relationships (P. K. Singh 7-8).

Notably, a diverse group of Indian women writers has produced an extensive range of English-language novels that have contributed significantly to the Indian and international literary canon. Kamala Markandaya, Sarojini Naidu, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi, Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Kamla Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Arundhati Roy, Ismat Chugtai, Susan Viswanathan, Neelam Saran Gaur, Gita Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Anjana Appachana, Shobha De, Jaishree Misra, Mridula Koshy, Mether Pestonji, Shilpi Somaya Gowda, Sunetra Gupta, Manju Bajaj, Namita Devidayal, Simran Singh, Kishwar Desai, Jahnavi Barua, Indu

Sundaresan, K. R. Usha, Padma Viswanathan and Kanishka Gupta are a few among these accomplished writers. Their creative works have made a lasting impression on the literary canon, which provides a wide range of perspectives and gripping narratives that continue to resonate with readers even today.

Major Themes of Indian Women Novelists

Women authors use literature to communicate female consciousness, which enables them to investigate a variety of themes and manoeuvre through life's complexities (P. Singh 7). A recurring theme in Indian fiction is the narratives on familial roots (Dutta 146). Domestic fiction, also known as "world family fiction," historically has bravely explored the complexities of domestic life which include the frailty of familial relationships, the difficulties of financial constraints, the societal pressures, and everyday struggles of life (Chatterjee S. 156). This genre is promising for women writers even though male writers like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee have made great contributions to it. Rabindranath Tagore, the first Indian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, also showed a deep appreciation for this style of writing in Bengali. Some of his fictional works capture the ways that colonial modernity has affected gender interactions and the ways that family structures are changing. Women's autobiographical and memoir writing in the later part of the 1800s paved the way for the emergence of women's domestic fiction. It was mostly written in Indian languages rather than English (Gopal 140). Linda Anderson's theory on women's autobiographical discourse suggests that,

> It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories, that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself, she is violating an important cultural construction of femininity as passive or hidden.

> She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the place from which she writes, is produced by difference and produces differences. (Anderson 59)

The novels of writers such as Arundhathi Roy and Manju Kapur, tackle issues of homelessness and dysfunctional family dynamics. Their works remain relevant throughout the ages, underscoring the universality of the fragmented family culture in contemporary society (G. Das 33). The issues including elder neglect, violence against women and children, marital conflict, and honour murders are examined in the realm of home (33). Fictional families are closely connected with the broader social structure; hence it is wrong to see them as completely separate from society.

Dutta observes a pertinent contrast between women's literature in English and men's fiction from India, noting that the latter frequently concentrates on postcolonial themes associated with migration, hybridity, country, and marginality. Literature by women often emphasizes the “small” and often overlooked aspects of daily life, rather than focusing on the “big” issues. While many women writers from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries move away from postcolonial themes, authors like Sahgal highlight how some female writers choose to challenge this trend (150).

The feminists perceived the space of women as limited, centred around their domestic lives and occupations. This is why there is an ongoing emphasis on the daily chores in their work (151). Whereas male Indian authors of English-language literature wrote about significant national historical moments while often sidelining the everyday aspects of life. As demonstrated by Deshpande, Indian women writers portray the country as an unseen force in the lives of common people fighting for existence (151). In the literature of modern Indian women, the focus on everyday life is a powerful investigation of the cultural and personal space that they live in (158–

59). The routine of everyday life no longer serves as a background; rather, it actively contributes to the formation of identities (147). Women's literature in postcolonial India is identified as a form of resistance against discourses that mistakenly blend ideas of nationalism with feminism, such as the creation of terms like "Mother India" that arbitrarily conflate the nation (Chatterjee S. 15).

The thematic diversity found in the twenty-first-century English novels written by Indian women novelists presents their stories in a diverse setting. These stories come from places that have distinct histories of English education, cultural orientations, and modernist ideas. Nonetheless, a recurring theme among these works is their middle-class origins, which emerge from different settings and perspectives (Dutta 145). The main focus of these Indian English novels was the experiences of middle-class women, who have endured difficulties because of the emphasis given to household duties. Several characters in novels written by Indian women writers serve as examples of how difficult it is to manage household chores. When women realize that claiming independence could potentially destabilize the balance of their entire household it turns out to be a barrier for women who want to overcome traditional constraints. Eventually, it leads them to create private spaces as a form of resistance (152). This subject is frequently used in English novels written by Indian women (154).

Subaltern women are often portrayed in fiction in a way that makes the upper class seem less threatening, even when there are conflicts between classes. These images of subaltern women and the problematic interaction between traditional conceptions of class and gender have not received much attention in the post-colonial era (Guttman 173). Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, experts on women's writings in Indian contexts, show how, during the nineteenth century, the image of the Hindu widow has

given way to that of the middle-class housewife, or badhramahila, who is defined as the “crude and licentious behaviour of lower-class women” (8). It has been shown that the idea of the middle-class family as a site of resistance is biased since it prevented discussions on problems like child marriage, sex trafficking, and female foeticide, which are equally important. Thus, in these stories, a “modern” woman facing sexism is represented with unanswered paradoxes and contradictions (5).

One of the main causes of the lack of a critical framework to study fiction in English written by Indian women writers because that privileged women from privileged backgrounds write about issues that concern a similarly privileged segment of society (Shahani and Ghosh, 3815). However, in the decades that followed, the nation's female authors have taken up this dilemma and have strongly addressed these issues (Chatterjee 5).

Geetha Ramanathan observes that women's works from all over the world exhibit a “global feminist realism.” She reflects that many of them explore the foundations of modernity, which marginalize social groups based on gender, caste, and class (4). Narratives on marginalized groups, like women, the working class, and minorities, who fight injustice in their surroundings are crucial to analyse global struggles against exploitation and discrimination (Chatterjee 163). A strong critique of modern India comes from closely observing daily life and telling the stories of vulnerable people caught in politics, city life, and mundane events (Dutta 150). A tiny but affluent group of rich, educated, and self-sufficient women writers make up the periphery. Through their storytelling, they portray an equally distinct perspective from this point.

Currently Indian female fiction writers fearlessly delve into the complexities of sexuality through bold depictions of passion and portrayals of intimacies in their

narratives. It was not like this in the earlier period. According to Accad, "In postcolonial women's writing the silence around the theme of sexuality is usually focused around three sub-themes: the woman's body, the woman's personal relationships, and her sexual identity" (Nayar 240). In India, subjects like body, sexual pleasure, and sexual desirability are taboo, especially for women. "In India, sexuality is coded as morality: to be moral is to be monogamous, reticent about one's sexuality / sexual preferences or even being asexual" (241).

Women writers in their works highlight traditionally overlooked characters such as domestic helpers, unmarried daughters, women in the service industry, and dependent family members. This is true of writers who deal with the portrayal of everyday life in a familial setting. The act of choosing to reject the conventional narrative of the "man of the family" and embrace interesting accounts of lesser-known members of the home is itself a form of resistance. These works reconfigure the domestic space by questioning the traditional privileges of specific socioeconomic groups, lineages, and genders (Chatterjee 166). Women writers have constantly focused on domestic life as a means of challenging dominant discourses in the country that marginalize and push women to the edge of mainstream attention. This is achieved by crafting narratives of characters who are excluded from the family and the national identity (15).

Chatterjee regrets the undervalued status of women's writing, which is actually rich and varied enough to have a place in the history of world literature (17). Even the significant number of women writers who actively address the effects of social injustice, nationalism, colonialism, and other relevant issues in their writings are pushed to the periphery of academic discourse, despite the claim that the underrepresentation of women writers is due to their excessive focus on domestic

affairs (4). The fact that women writers are still marginalized in academic discourse emphasizes how female writers ultimately work from a position of contestation, in outer space (8). These writings are an invaluable resource for the study of India since they experiment with literary content, even if not in textual form (Dutta, 146). The claim that women's writing is confined to domestic themes is challenged by these literary works. They are artists of the contemporary era who craft innovative and evocative narratives (P. K. Singh 9).

It is unfair to assume that works by women writers would just appeal to other women or be exclusively feminist. In Indian feminist critique, new paradigms have surfaced since the women's movement of the 1970s. Indian feminism has gained pace with the opening of feminist publications, women's research centres, and platforms for speaking out against women's oppression (Shahani and Ghosh 3813). The works *Recasting Women* and *Women Writing in India* combined theoretical, experiential, and historical perspectives which were revolutionary in their methodology. Tharu, Lalita, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Kumkum Sangari, and other influential critics and theorists have made significant contributions to the field of Indian literary studies. According to Tharu and Lalita, women's works are fundamentally marked by “difference” and latent resistance because “they articulate and respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentred positions within them” (35).

Indian writers often use the subversive method, which is a key technique of postcolonial literature and has varying effects on different discourses (Singh and Kumar 2-3). Women challenge the patriarchal order through their writings. Sidhwa explores the connection between colonialism and patriarchy, showing how colonialism exploited and degraded men, who, in turn, oppressed and demeaned women. As a result, whenever a society's social fabric is weakened, women bear the

consequences. Women become a target for men to quench their frustration and this cycle continues with unfair demands for their subordination (Sidhwa 48- 49). The purpose of writing is not merely to reverse the hierarchical order but also to challenge the philosophical foundations that uphold it. The postmodern focus on plural perspectives, which discredits any singular viewpoint, leaves feminists without a unified platform for protest. Another challenge is the transformation of the publication of women's English fiction into a glamorous industry. This commodification culture has shifted the focus from issues to events and turned individuals into celebrities. As a result, the transformative power of meaningful fiction is likely to get diminished (Shahani and Ghosh 3814).

The expectations society places on how women should be treated are reflected in how women approach literary works. A complex connection between culture, nationality, and gender is apparent in the outcome of colonialism. Feminism becomes a means of disconnecting women from "Indian culture" when women are continuously associated with the Nation and its customs. Thus, in the field of cultural studies, women's studies in India are given a lot of emphasis (Niranjana 214).

The literary works written by women have significance in this field. Despite numerous limitations, literary studies have not been entirely marginal to women's studies initiatives in India. The English language gave access to theoretical tools, and theory and feminism coexist in a mutually beneficial medium. The main theoretical problems concerning language, representation, identity, subjectivity, sexuality, power, knowledge, and history are all pertinent to feminist research (Rajan "English," 70).

The book *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* by Malashri Lal provides an insightful analysis of gynocriticism. *Real and Imagined Women*, written by Rajan on culture and gender, calls attention to the problem of

representation. He rejects the idea of polarizing the imagined and the real, discourse and materiality, culture and society, language and the world. The representation acts as a mediator between these opposing terms in each pair. This perspective is neither superstructural (elevating “culture”) nor foundationalist (elevating “reality”). It neither denies the existence of the “real” nor essentializes it into a predetermined metaphysical category in need of representation (9). Representation itself may be researched as a field with substantial political implications (Rose 12). According to Rajan, the question of representation is critical for women's studies (Rajan “English,” 68).

Unveiling The City

The Latin word Civitas is the source of the English word city, which itself comes from the French phrase “Cite” (Hoad, The Concise Oxford Dictionary 78). It is extremely difficult to describe a “city” since the spaces both lived and material are not just the things that constitute the city. The word changes according to its depiction in the geographical and architectural spaces. The definition of a city is influenced by its idea. Phrases such as "a place larger than a village or town" never fully capture the city's social structure. Cities are defined by their planners and designers based on the purpose and way of life of the local population. Furthermore, its cultural expectations and usefulness are shaped by the cultural depiction in literature, art, music, films, and other media. Hence, “ideas about cities are not simply formed at a conscious level; they are also a product of unconscious desires and imaginaries” (Bridge and Watson “Reflections on Materialities” 5). According to Merriam-Webster, the term “urban” means “of, relating to, characteristic of, or constituting a city” (“Urban”). Even if the terminology could refer to different aspects of social habitat, a city develops from a population centre that has unique educational, economic, and infrastructures. Cities

are complex systems due to their land use, the diversity of social, economic, cultural, and political structures, and their varying degrees of control over societal resources and facilities.

The city has a broad epistemology and is widely recognized as a symbol. In the past, cities were sizable human habitats with well-established municipal systems of governance and management. In contrast, today's cities are contentious arenas of politics, rivalry, commercialization of people and the environment, communalism, unrest, inequalities, and identity crises.

Cities are dynamic spaces where people from diverse backgrounds and cultures coexist, shaping their identities through interactions influenced by social, political, and economic factors. Urban spaces act as both sites of integration and separation, where varying ambitions, privileges, and forms of discrimination emerge. The city serves as a complex intersection of time, space, and identity, where diverse social, cultural, religious, and political influences interact, sometimes harmoniously and at other times in conflict. While cities provide opportunities for growth and progress, they also reflect deep societal disparities.

The urban landscape of a nation reveals its broader social structure. Some cities symbolize innovation and prosperity, while others bear the marks of competition and decline. As economic hubs, metropolises drive development and serve as cultural centres, attracting both residents and visitors. Cities have two major goals in the twenty-first century: to "create wealth" and "get to perpetuity" (Mau 18-19). However, urban diversity, while enriching, also brings challenges, as disparities between communities persist. Writers critically engage with these complexities, examining how hybrid cultures, social hierarchies, and political structures shape the urban experience (Löw 904).

A city is more than just an architectural design, enterprise, or system. The city creates an image that inspires people to adopt the ideals of developed, progressive nations since it is the epicentre of contemporary, progressive culture, values, and socio-economic activity. People are drawn to the city due to its opportunities for employment and potential for personal growth. The city starts to form its identity as people contribute to its growth. Cities have networks of housing, transportation, utilities, and social interaction networks, which both support and restrict urban expansion. Sister suburbs and exurbs are typically found in larger cities, sometimes known as metropolises. These cities make it easier for industrial and commercial workers to live in and commute to those urban centres of employment since they are frequently connected to metropolitan areas.

In contemporary and postmodern literature, the city serves as a major setting. However, not every literary work situated in an urban setting could be classified as urban literature. Scholars examining urban literature typically emphasize one of two primary aspects when defining a text as urban. One perspective, championed by critics such as Mary-Ann Caws, Richard Lehan, and David Seed, emphasizes the importance of the city as a setting. They argue that the depiction of the urban landscape is essential to the classification of a work as urban literature. In contrast, other scholars, including Michael Jaye, Diane Levy, and Ann Chalmer Watts, place greater emphasis on the characters within the narrative. They contend that the portrayal of individuals whose lives and identities are intertwined with the city is the defining feature of urban literature. Both approaches are valid, as a text cannot be considered urban without the presence of the city, and the term “urban” inherently implies a connection to or relationship with the city. Ultimately, urban literature exists

at the intersection of the city as a setting and the characters whose stories are shaped by its complexities.

The emergence of the “city” in the sociological arena prompted writers to adopt it as a topic, leading to its presence in the realm of fiction or imagination. Indian writers, in both English and native languages, have tackled social realities that turn “a specific section of Bombay's society” into a “culture... that is genuinely pluralistic” (Shahani 1254). Cities started as democratic entities, and authors such as Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobhaa De, Nayantara Sahgal, and others have portrayed their imagined versions of cities. “The city is fashioned in the writer's own image, thus ceasing to be geographical territory and becoming an imagined topos instead. Nor make the narratives record history, they fictionalize it” (1251). But in terms of representation, the city has been detached from the issues of the region and geography. Fictional cities no longer depict landscapes in the true meaning of the word. The author constructs the imagined space using several worldviews and cityscape modes.

Indian Cities

India is home to numerous cities, and although its urbanization is less extensive, its population growth surpasses that of other emerging countries (Shaw 44). Indian cities are scattered across a large region in uncertain spatial structures, much like the cities of other third-world nations (24-25). After an extensive period of colonial rule and economic stagnation, attention is placed on certain aspects of India, such as its overall growth, development, or challenges, rather than on the cities themselves. India’s cities are becoming an oasis of creativity that inspires writers, filmmakers, entrepreneurs, and legislators. Indian cities are as old as Indian culture. Ramachandra claims, “The first phase of urbanization in the Indus Valley is

associated with the Harappan civilization dating back to 2350 BC" (22). Living in a metropolis has its advantages and disadvantages. Cities could offer opportunities for personal growth, innovative ideas, and social development as well as social disorientation and mechanical existence. Cities provide freedom for both men and women to explore their potential with fewer restrictions compared to rural areas.

The current trend shows metropolitan areas are expanding in size and increasing in number. The urban population will continue to rise in the future. The job opportunities in Indian megacities like Delhi, Bombay, and Calcutta are depleted, and the slums are already overcrowded (Kundu and Basu 21-24). These slums are unable to provide food, shelter, employment, and sanitary conditions for the poor and rural migrants due to a lack of resources and efficient management by the municipality (Kundu et al. 31). This rapid rise of urban areas has created challenges wherever the metropolitan population is growing faster than the country's overall population, making the city a centre of influence and a model for living. Modern city residents face numerous challenges, including overcrowding, housing shortages, safety concerns, rapid advancements in transportation, pollution, and the rise of ghettos. They also deal with issues like open sexual relationships, family instability, immorality, violence, and identity crisis. The rapid growth of the urban population has put immense pressure on basic resources and infrastructure.

A "continuous concentration of population and activities in large cities" has been brought about by urbanization in India ("Urbanization in India" 62). The growth in population in Indian cities is mostly due to poverty in rural areas. The Indian urbanization process is "involuted" for such poverty-driven expansion (Mukherjee, The Nature of Migration, 203-206). As a result, the prosperity and culture of Indian cities have degenerated (Nayak, "The Challenge of Urban Growth" 361-381).

City-texts and Cities in Texts

Cities in Indian literature is an important ‘postcolonial location’ and it has created discussions within urban studies and related fields. This importance is further enhanced by the perception of urban spaces as hubs of cultural creation. Vinay Lal observes that urban centres have been integral to Indian culture for centuries, noting that “the city in India is as old as Indian civilization” (xvi–xvii). The increase in research on cities represents a more recent development. This shift gained momentum with Edward Soja’s 1999 study of urban studies as a cultural framework, signifying a move away from the late twentieth-century emphasis on nationalism (Chakraborty 1). Chakraborty also highlights that post-independence Indian scholarship often exhibited an ‘anti-urban bias,’ creating a disconnect between the realities of urban life and their theoretical representation (2). As a result, although cities have long held significant socio-geographic roles in Indian society, they have not always been given adequate academic focus. In Indian literature, urban settings were often overshadowed by rural landscapes.

Indian cities are dynamic and continuously evolving. Their transformation is shaped by their historical significance as centres of linguistic, religious, and cultural convergence. Some cities have been considered archaeological sites, while others have persisted and modified over centuries. Mumbai, with a legacy of 2,000 years, Delhi, with a history of 3,000 years, and Kolkata which has a relatively younger history illustrate how India's urban landscapes have been shaped over the years by invasions, migrations, and cultural assimilation. These cities testify to significant demographic and cultural shifts which are reflected in their architectural heritage, urban planning developments, and ecological challenges. Each era in a city introduced new populations, redefined spatial organization, and reformed cultural narratives.

These transformations are documented in literature and other cultural forms. Hence the historical and socio-political evolution of Indian urban spaces was preserved.

In Indian literature, cities are portrayed as a dynamic space that encapsulates a variety of human experiences. The anxiety, depression, infidelity, nostalgia, opportunities, alienation, enchantment, and chaos of the inhabitants are depicted profoundly in narratives. These urban spaces represent broader sociopolitical, cultural, religious, and economic structures. In contemporary Indian narratives, cities are not merely backdrops but they are an integral part that shapes and influences the plot and its characters. This approach aligns with the literature produced internationally where urban centres play a pivotal role in spatial discourse.

Several Indian cities hold historical and religious significance in the country's cultural and spiritual legacy. Ancient texts such as *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* mention cities like Ayodhya, Hastinapur, and Kashi as central to their narratives. These cities serve as both mythological and historical landscapes. They become the setting where key events of the narrative unfold, shaping the moral, political, and spiritual discourses of these epics. Ayodhya is esteemed as the birthplace of Lord Rama, while Kashi (Varanasi) is considered a sacred city in Hinduism. The legendary capital of the Kuru dynasty, Hastinapur, plays a crucial role in *The Mahabharata*. These references reveal how cities in India are not just geographical locations but also spaces where history, mythology, and religion converge.

Indian literature always had writers critically engaging with the socio-cultural and political dynamics of cities. Poets such as A. K. Ramanujan, Nissim Ezekiel, and Jayanta Mahapatra have written about the complexities of city life. Ezekiel's *Poet, Lover, Birdwatcher,* and *Night of the Scorpion* expresses his views on Bombay's contradictions which are its vibrancy alongside its realities of poverty. Similarly, A. K.

Ramanujan's *The Striders* reveals urban displacement and identity, while Jayanta Mahapatra's *Relationship* and *A Rain of Rites* portray the impact of urbanization on both personal and collective consciousness in the context of Cuttack.

Bombay has emerged as a prominent setting in fiction. It stands as a metaphor for desire, struggle, and socio-economic disparity. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* portrays Bombay as a site of historical transformation. Rohinton Mistry, in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, offers a poignant analysis of Bombay's class divides, political uncertainty, and the resilience of its marginalized communities. Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay* and *Sacred Games* depicts a noir-infused portrayal of the metropolis. In these narratives delves into its criminal underbelly, corruption, and moral ambiguities.

Indian dramatists Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, and Vijay Tendulkar have also explored urban spaces in their plays. They used them as sites of conflict, transformation, and struggle. Dattani's *Tara* depicts gender discrimination in an urban middle-class family. His *Bravely Fought the Queen* critiques the hypocrisy of metropolitan households and *Final Solutions* observes the communal tensions in the city. Karnad's *Wedding Album* portrays an urban family grappling with globalization. His work *Bali: The Sacrifice* illustrates the evolving moral fabric of India in recent times. While Tendulkar's works unveil the corruption and moral decay in urban spaces, as seen in *Silence! The Court is in Session*, which critiques middle-class morality. His work *Ghashiram Kotwal* metaphorically explores political power and exploitation in Pune.

Indian graphic novels have included urban themes, portraying cities as both spaces of isolation and memory. Vishwajyoti Ghosh's *Delhi Calm* captures the paranoia of the Emergency period in Delhi. In this narrative, Delhi serves as both a

setting and a silent witness to political oppression happening at that time. Sarnath Banerjee's *Corridor* set in Delhi's Connaught Place explores the complexities of urban life. His work *The Harappa Files* discusses urban modernization and shifting identities. The works in different genres do not merely use cities as backdrops but as active forces that shape the narratives. By weaving personal narratives, they examine the tensions between tradition and modernity, identity and anonymity, and conflict and cohabitation. They create a layered representation of the city and explore the paradoxes that define the modern urban experience.

The convergence of urban studies and Indian literature has nurtured a wealth of scholars. Thinkers like David Harvey, Vinay Lal, and Ravi Sundaram examined how cities act as dynamic agents in a technological and interconnected world. The depiction of cities in Indian literature reflects the diversity and fluidity inherent in urban spaces.

Cities provide a fertile ground for understanding narratives on the society where demographic, political, and cultural shifts occur. These narratives emerge through spatial metaphors, signs of religion or race, and as sites of diverse interactions shaped by gender, class, caste, and politics. Thus, the depiction of cities in Indian literature goes beyond mere geography and it emphasizes the complex relationship between space and human experience.

The cosmopolitan character of Indian cities ensures that their literary depictions are complex and multifaceted. Indian literature has utilized cities both as a setting and as a metaphor to explore the social, cultural, and political challenges brought by urbanization. The urban theorists through their works offer a nuanced portrayal of cities that transcends physical descriptions. They delve into the lived experiences and societal changes that urban centres symbolize.

Literature Review

The city emerges from the setting to become a focal point of action in the modern novel, with most of the action centred in places like coffee shops, theatres, museums, bars, restaurants, hotels, and stores that blend public and private areas. The cityscape is frightening to writers like Kafka, while Woolf considers it hopeful, and the depictions of the city fluctuate between optimism and pessimism. Several literary critics have explored the intersection between literature and the city.

Lehan provides a comprehensive overview of the city in literature in *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*, spanning from the early English novels to Thomas Pynchon's dystopian cityscapes. Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Theodore are the authors that he studies. He examines the evolution of cities focusing on the shift from commercial to industrial and global cities, using fiction and cultural signs in literature to support his analysis.

The city is highlighted as a problematic space in debates of the contemporary novel in Hans Wirth-Nesher's *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*. He observes, "In *City Codes*, novelists, readers, and characters are all engaged in verbal cartography, plotting cities through language" (4). He argues that while the city promises abundance, it also creates inaccessibility, forcing residents to rely on imagination to reconstruct what they cannot see, like glimpses of people that they cannot see through high-rise windows. He discusses how writers blend elements of real cities into fiction using landmarks, maps, and urban clichés to create realistic settings.

First-world cities have long been the primary focus of urban studies, with modernist cities being central to literary analysis. However, scholars like Edward

Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Anthony D. King have shifted their attention to the postcolonial city in their theoretical works. In *Spaces of Global Cultures: Architecture, Urbanism, Identity*, King explores the hybridity of cities in the global South, suggesting that these cities embody "multiple modernisms" or hybrid modernities, born from the intersection of indigenous and colonial influences. This is evident in phenomena such as the rapid construction of malls, roads, and neighbourhoods named after European cities, emphasizing that modernity arrived in a diverse, multifaceted manner. Bhabha underscores the significance of hybridity in understanding postcolonial cultural and linguistic structures. Meanwhile Said's "Imaginative Geography and its Representations" in *Orientalism* places the tropes of place and space at the heart of postcolonial research. Postcolonial city studies thus focus on the material transformations driven by colonial and postcolonial urbanization, national division, migration, and globalization.

Some contemporary studies that have emphasized spatiality in the analysis of postcolonial literature include those that focus on broader concepts of the nation and city-specific are Ian Baucom's *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*; Timothy Brennan's *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*; Imre Szeman's *Zones of Instability: Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Nation*; Rashmi Varma's *The Postcolonial City and its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay;* Jane M. Jacobs' *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City*; Sara Upstone's *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* and Stuti Khanna's *The Contemporary Novel and the City: Re-conceiving National and Narrative Form*.

The Postcolonial City and its Subjects by Varma examines literary and cultural developments of the postcolonial city in the 20th and 21st centuries via the lens of historical and current debates on urbanism. Upstone's transnational and

comparative approach to *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel* challenges the inclination to discuss authors in isolation or connection to other writers from a specific geographic location. Her selection of a diverse group of authors presents a compelling argument for what she refers to as the "postcolonial spatial imagination," which is always contextualized but not limited by location. Kevin R. McNamara's *The Cambridge Companion to the City in Literature* provides an elaborate study of the literary city by investigating the myriads of imagined cities found in many genres.

Thesis Statement

This thesis proposes to investigate the intricate relationship between individuals and urban settings. It uses this relationship as a lens through which lived experience is comprehended. The research seeks to explore how cities influence a person's identity, social dynamics, and emotional depth by assessing the interaction of these characters within the urban space. A critical analysis of literary works by Indian women writers is taken for the study to explore themes such as alienation, relationships, and the negotiation of space. How urban settings serve not only as backdrops but also as active participants in the narratives is revealed through this study.

Objectives

The objective of this thesis is to explore how Indian women writers represent urban spaces and their lived experiences in their narratives. By analysing the distinctive characteristics of cities as depicted in the narratives the research aims to investigate how cities influence and shape the destinies of characters. The impact of urban life on individual experiences will be explored. Additionally, the study delves into the investigation of dominant stereotypes and the uniqueness of each city. It offers a nuanced critique of how literature contribute to the depiction of urban life.

The research focuses on the socio-cultural dynamics of cities and the personal trajectories of characters. The study explores how urban spaces enhance the identity formation and interpersonal relationships of characters. It aims to provide a deep understanding of the complex connection between urban space and human experiences. This analysis contributes to the current discourse on urban literature, offering insights into gender, space, relationships, and the depiction of city life by Indian women writers.

Methodological Framework

The methodology for this research involves textual analysis and spatial analysis to explore the representation of urban spaces in literary works by Indian women writers. The analysis is grounded in the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja. This framework is designed to analyse the narrative and spatial dimensions of the selected texts. Lefebvre's concept of the Right to the City and Edward Soja's Thirdspace offer a perspective on how real and imagined spaces intertwine within the urban narrative. Through close textual reading and spatial theory, this study aims to investigate how urban spaces are depicted and the role they play in influencing the lives of characters within these narratives.

Lefebvre's Space and Right to the City

The Production of Space, The Urban Revolution, and *Critique of Everyday Life* (3 Vols.) are three of Henri Lefebvre's important works that were originally written in French and have been translated into several languages like English, Spanish, Italian, and German. His writings are seminal to the understanding of space and here discussion shall focus on his work *The Right to the City (1968)*. After reading Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*, David Harvey notes in the text's "Afterword" that he "came to recognize the significance of urban conditions of daily

life (as opposed to narrow concentration on workplace politics) as central in the evolution of revolutionary sentiments and politics" (430).

Lefebvre gives space a significance that extends beyond the realms of philosophy and mathematics, referring to it as "social space". He believes it is essential to create a bridge when thinking about space between the social and mental domains, between the space of philosophers and that of material objects, and between the theoretical (epistemological) and practical realms. The first three domains of interest are the cerebral (including formal and logical abstractions), the physical (nature, the cosmos), and the social. "In other words, we are concerned with logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of imagination such as projects and projections, symbols and utopias" (Lefebvre, *Production* 11-12).

Lefebvre states emphatically that "(Social) space is a (social) product" (26), and both points build upon and support one another. Social space comprises social relations of production. Lefebvre's work is linked by the conceptual triad of Spatial practice, Representations of space, and Representational space. Spatial practice or Perceived space is concerned with characteristics of social formation of places and it includes both production and reproduction of it. The conceptualized space of scientists, planners, and urbanists is represented by Representations of space, or "conceived space," which are linked to the relations of production and its signs and codes. Complex symbolism is embodied in Representational spaces, which are the homes and workspaces of users as well as artists, authors, and philosophers. These spaces are immediately experienced through images and symbols that are linked with them. To comprehend contemporary social practices and ideologies, he proposes a new take on the history of space as the history of representations, their origins, and

their connections to the spatial practices of the specific society. Space moves from the mental to the social and back again, "Spatial practice regulates life- it does not create it. Space has no power 'in itself', nor does space as such determine spatial contradictions" (358).

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the *Right to the City* is a critical theory that challenges the capitalist appropriation of urban spaces and advocates for the right of all people, mainly marginalized and disenfranchised communities, to access, inhabit, and shape the city. Lefebvre argues that urban space is not merely a neutral physical environment but a social product shaped by the power dynamics of economic, political, and cultural forces (*The Production of Space*). In his view, the city should be a collective space where every individual, regardless of class, race, or status, has the right to contribute to the creation, transformation, and enjoyment of urban life (*Writings on Cities*). This right includes the right to participate in the social, political, and cultural life of the city. It also includes shaping the urban space according to the needs of its diverse inhabitants.

Lefebvre's theory critiques the commodification of urban space under capitalism. He states that the cities are designed to serve the interests of profit rather than the collective needs of the people. As a result, urban spaces alienate those without economic means and reinforce social inequalities (Harvey 38). Lefebvre envisions a reversal of this trend. He advocates for urban spaces that allow for a more inclusive and equitable urban experience. This theory not only addresses physical spaces but also the broader social relationships rooted within these spaces. He emphasizes the importance of the lived experience of urban environments. For Lefebvre, the right to the city is tied to the power of individuals to shape their

environment, challenge social injustices, and claim space for personal and collective identity.

The theory of the Right to the City has a significant role in urban studies and critical geography. It creates discussions around gentrification, urban inequality, and the role of the city in shaping identities (Harvey 30). In literary studies, this framework is valuable while analysing how urban spaces depicted in literature reflect and shape the characters' identities, relationships, ambitions, and morality. Lefebvre's theory is applied to explore how the city is depicted as both a site of oppression and resistance. The lived experiences of its inhabitants are accentuated by providing a platform for the negotiation of power, space, and identity.

Building on Lefebvre's triad of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces, Soja argues that creative trialectics—rather than dialectical opposition—is essential for understanding space.

Soja's Thirdspace

Writings by Lefebvre, Bhabha, and Bell Hooks are woven together in Soja's theory Thirdspace to create a case for a trialectic approach to space. While historicality (or chronological) and sociality (or sociological) had dominated earlier writings, he examines the shift in the late twentieth century towards a focus on spatiality in scholarly studies. The intricate interdependence and inseparability of the social, historical, and spatial redefine the study of history, geography, and society. It also encourages interdisciplinary thinking where spatiality is not limited to the expertise of urban planners, architects, and geographers. According to Soja, there is no either/or choice in the Thirdspace of these crossings:

> It is instead an efficient invitation to enter a space of extraordinary openness, a place of critical exchange where the geographical imagination can be

> expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be incompatible, and uncombinable. It is a space where issues of race, class, and gender can be addressed simultaneously without privileging one over the other, where one can be Marxist and post-Marxist, materialist and idealist, structuralist and humanist, disciplined and transdisciplinary at the same time. (Soja, *Thirdspace* 5)

Soja attributes the creative process of "Thirding-as-Othering" or trialectics in critical thinking to Lefebvre's metaphilosophy, which allows thesis, antithesis, and synthesis to exist concurrently. Using this technique, he reinterprets Lefebvre's weaving together of three distinct types of spaces: the experienced space defined as Representational Spaces/ Spaces of Representations; the conceived space defined as Representations of space; and the perceived space of materialized Spatial Practice. Soja's Firstspace, also known as spatial practice, is rooted in the concrete materiality of spatial forms; Secondspace, also known as Representations of space, is conceived in terms of ideas about space, mental, or cognitive forms; and Thirdspace, also known as Representational spaces or spaces of representation (lived space), which is a combination of mental and material spaces but goes beyond them in scope and meaning.

Thirding, as Soja understands it, is full of possibilities, whether one looks at Bhabha's concept of hybridity or Foucault's trialectics of space, knowledge, and power. Everything, including subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the mind and body, the transdisciplinary and the disciplined, daily life and endless history, come together for him in Thirdspace. From

here, one may strategically embrace, comprehend, resist, and potentially alter all places at once. As Soja describes it:

> Representational space is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel (*noyau*) or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action, of lived situations, and this immediately implies time. Consequently, it may be qualified in various ways: it may be directional, situational, or relational, because it is essentially qualitative, fluid and dynamic. (Soja, *Thirdspace* 42)

For Soja, the signifier-signified-signification concept is mirrored in the Representing-Represented-Representation triad. He thinks that Heidegger's *dasein*- being in the world- means being simultaneously historical, social, and spatial, and that this is appropriately understood in the placement of the body in urban space. He believes that the trialectics of Spatiality, Historicality, and Sociality apply at all levels of knowledge development.

In *Writing the City: Exploring Urban Space in the Narratives of Select Indian Women Writers*, a comprehensive literary analysis is conducted on *Voices in the City*, *Rich Like Us*, and *Socialite Evenings*, focusing on the cities of Calcutta, Delhi, and Bombay. This study employs an analytical methodology. The research investigates how these urban environments transcend their physical existence, evolving into dynamic entities that shape the characters' identities, relationships, resilience, and destinies. Through close reading and textual analysis, the study examines how the character's interactions with the city reflect broader socio-political and emotional influences, highlighting the city's role in shaping their lives. To enrich the analysis, the study incorporates relevant secondary sources to contextualize the primary texts.

This approach exposes how urban spaces in the narratives are not passive settings, but active forces that shape the mental and emotional trajectories of the characters.

Authors and Works Selected for the Study

Anita Desai

Anita Desai is celebrated for the in-depth portrayal of her characters' inner struggles in her writing. Her works portray women who challenge issues such as isolation, existential dilemmas, and the pressure between tradition and modernity within Indian society.

Desai was raised in a multilingual setting; hence she became proficient in Hindi, Bengali, German, and English, with the latter emerging as her primary literary medium. Shaped by her own life across Indian and European cultures she portrays a sensitive depiction of cross-cultural experiences in her narrative.

Desai's first novel, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), explores the psychological nuances of a woman struggling with loneliness and alienation. Similarly, her novels Bye-Bye, Blackbird (1971) and Fasting, Feasting (1999) tackle the same theme. In the novel *In Custody* (1984), the inner turmoil of the characters in a politically charged post-colonial India is depicted.

Anita Desai has been nominated for the Booker Prize multiple times. Beyond her literary accomplishments, she has also played a pivotal role as a mentor to her daughter, Kiran Desai. Anita Desai through her evocative narratives has earned a significant space in contemporary Indian Literature.

Voices in the city

Voices in the City by Anita Desai is set in Kolkata. It revolves around the lives of three siblings, Nirode, Monisha, and Amla. Each of the characters in this novel struggles with a sense of alienation and disillusionment. Nirode drifts aimlessly

through life by rejecting traditional ideas of success. Whereas, Monisha finds herself trapped in a depressing marriage and she is burdened by the constraints imposed by the joint family she was living in. The silencing and suppression she had to face in the family eventually led to her tragic death. Amla, the youngest, arrives in Kolkata with high hopes and big dreams. But as she immerses herself in the city, she too becomes disappointed and a sense of helplessness begins to take hold of her. Their mother residing in Kalimpong, plays a distant yet important role in their lives. The mother symbolizes the traditional and cultural separations that complicate her children's quests for identity and relationships. Through the experiences of these siblings within the city, Desai delves into themes of isolation, anxiety, despair, and the city's detrimental impact on individual lives. The analysis employs the current nomenclature Kolkata, while the original quotations from the text retain the historical name Calcutta.

Nayantara Sahgal

Nayantara Sahgal belongs to the renowned Nehru-Gandhi family. She is the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister. Her mother, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, was a leading freedom fighter and India's first female diplomat. Sahgal grew up in a politically charged family that shaped her writings. The themes of Indian politics, democracy, and social transformation were addressed in her novels.

Her education at Wellesley College in the United States exposed her to a blend of Western and Indian philosophies. This also became evident in her works. Sahgal began her writing career with *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), a memoir reflecting her childhood during India's struggle for independence. Her major novels are *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), and *Rich Like Us* (1985). She earned the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986 for *Rich Like Us*.

The Indian Emergency was enforced by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Even though Indira Gandhi was her cousin, Sahgal resisted this authoritarian rule. She was candid in her critiques of Gandhi's regime. She could be positioned as a rare dissenting voice from within a prominent family. Sahgal has been a keen advocate for freedom of expression, women's rights, and secularism. She even returned her Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015 as a powerful statement against the rising intolerance in India. This action reaffirmed her commitment to democratic values. Sahgal's contributions as a writer and activist remain vital for the exploration of political and personal freedom in postcolonial India.

Rich Like Us

Rich Like Us by Nayantara Sahgal is set during the period of the Indian Emergency from 1975 to 1977. It portrays the political oppression and authoritarian rule in India under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The narrative links the personal and political lives of its two female protagonists Sonali and Rose. Sonali is an idealistic and independent civil servant while Rose is an Englishwoman who marries Ram, a prominent Indian businessman.

Sonali becomes agitated with the corrupt political scenario in Delhi. She finds herself marginalized in her bureaucratic position due to her unwavering faithfulness to her principles. In contrast, Rose a foreigner in Indian society, struggles with her identity within a family steeped in patriarchal traditions. Her relationship with her stepson Dev is strained. Dev epitomizes the new generation of ruthless business elites.

The novel delves into how the political unrest of the Emergency period affects the people. The themes of power, exploitation, marginalization, and the ethical negotiations individuals make to live in a corrupt environment are explored. Through Sonali and Rose, Sahgal critiques the undemocratic actions taking place during the

Emergency and the moral decline it enforced on Indian society. *Rich Like Us* portrays how personal integrity and political turmoil intersect in contemporary India.

Shobhaa De

Shobhaa De began her career as a model before transitioning into a writer. She was the founder and the editor of magazines like *Stardust, Society*, and *Celebrity. Socialite Evenings* (1989) was her debut novel in which she explored the glamorous yet morally complex world of Mumbai's elite. Her works *Starry Nights* (1990), *Sultry Days* (1994), and *Second Thoughts* (1996), address themes like complexities in relationships, sexuality, and power dynamics. Through her writings, she reflects on the struggles faced by modern urban Indian women from a woman's perspective. De has openly critiqued patriarchy and traditional gender roles that are still prevalent in society.

She has candidly portrayed the middle-class challenges in contrast with the lifestyle of the elite in her novels. De's work offers insights into the transformation that happened in post-independence India. Her bold thoughts on female independence and sexuality were revolutionary in the conservative Indian literary context. Beyond her novels, Shobhaa De is renowned for her sharp, fearless columns on politics, culture, and society. In Indian literature and journalism, she holds a prominent voice serving as a key figure in representing urban Indian womanhood.

Socialite Evenings

In the novel *Socialite Evenings,* De delves into the emotional and mental challenges faced by the protagonist Karuna. She was born in Satara, a small village in Maharashtra, and relocated to Mumbai with her family due to her father's job. Her humble upbringing has made her dream big. This transition to the bustling city creates

an allure in her for the modern culture that is a complete contrast to her traditional upbringing.

Her friendship with Anjali, a wealthy yet unhappy woman changes her life. Together they navigate love, betrayal, infidelity, anxieties, desire, and self-discovery. Karuna's husband a wealthy businessman lacks an emotional connection with her, leaving her feeling restricted and unsatisfied. This emotional emptiness of Karuna drives her to seek comfort in an affair with Krish who is a theatre enthusiast and her husband's friend. However, societal, and patriarchal expectations pressure her to lead a void life. Soon her husband finds out that she is pregnant and he accuses her of infidelity. She chooses to get a divorce from him which eventually leads her family to reject her making her further isolated.

Throughout the novel, Karuna struggles with her sense of self, caught between societal expectations and her quest for empowerment. Her journey critiques the patriarchal structures of marriage and the societal pressures that compel women to obey it. Karuna disregards her mother's insistence on remarriage for financial security and chooses to carve her own path. De's depiction of Karuna describes the psychological and emotional struggles of urban women, showing the impact of patriarchy even in urban areas. The analysis employs the current nomenclature Mumbai, while the original quotations from the text retain the historical name Bombay.

Structure of the Thesis

The study has been structured into six chapters that include the introduction and the Conclusion. The introductory chapter sets the foundation for the study by examining the contributions of Indian women writers to literature, particularly their evolution and unique thematic concerns. It explores concepts such as city texts and

the representation of urban environments, focusing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of The Right to the City and Edward Soja's Thirdspace. This framework will guide the analysis of how cities are portrayed in literature. The chapter also includes a literature review, articulates the thesis statement, outlines the study's objectives, and describes the methodology employed in the research.

Chapter two titled "The City of Joy" delves into the historical and cultural context of Kolkata while analysing how Anita Desai depicts the city in *Voices in the City.* The chapter emphasizes the city as a lived space, examining the complexities of relationships, parental bonds, and individual identity within the urban landscape. The Thirdspace experience in the city and the characters' Right to the City are explored. It further examines how gendered spaces shape the experiences of characters. Finally, the uniqueness and stereotypes of Kolkata are analysed.

In the third chapter titled "The City of Rallies" the city of Delhi portrayed in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* is explored. This chapter analyses the city as an active setting for the narrative where the intersections of politics, power, and gender happen. The character's Right to the City is examined, revealing the city's role in shaping their destinies. The notions of gendered space, Thirdspace, and the city's stereotypes and uniqueness are examined to exemplify how the characters' lives and choices are influenced by the city space.

Chapter four "The City of Dreams" offers an analysis of Mumbai city in Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings.* The chapter initiates with a brief history of Mumbai and further explores the city's relationships, gendered spaces, and parental bonds. The dynamics of *Thirdspace* in the city and *Right to the City* are analysed. The chapter concludes with an investigation into the stereotypes and uniqueness associated with Mumbai as depicted through the characters.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the findings from the previous chapters, reflecting on the intricate relationship between urban spaces and individual experiences as portrayed by the selected Indian women writers. It analyses the themes of identity, gendered spaces, and the social dynamics within the urban context. The chapter reaffirms the significance of understanding cities as active participants in shaping the life and destiny of their inhabitants. The final chapter, "Recommendations" will point out the limitations of the present study and suggest the scope for further research. A comprehensive list of all the sources referenced throughout the study is provided at the end. It will provide a solid foundation for the research and offer researchers avenues for further investigation of the themes discussed.

Chapter 2

The City of Joy

Introduction

Kolkata, a city with rich history, culture, and intellectual tradition, serves as a powerful backdrop in literature, offering a unique lens through which to explore human experiences. Kolkata, the setting of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*, explores how the city's intellectual, artistic, and literary essence influences and shapes the lives of its inhabitants. As Bharti Mukherjee observes,

> Bengalis love to celebrate their language, their culture, their politics, their fierce attachment to a city that has been famously dying for more than a century. They resent with equal ferocity the reflex stereotyping that labels any civic dysfunction anywhere in the world 'another Calcutta'. (Mukherjee 2024)

Kolkata, with its rich intellectual and cultural backdrop, is both a nurturing and confining space for its residents, as seen in the lives of characters like Nirode, Monisha, and Amla. The city's essence, with its blend of artistic vibrancy and underlying misery, is brought to light through these characters, each embodying the dual nature of Kolkata. As intellectuals, artists, and writers, they reflect the city's cultural depth while also becoming trapped within its social and emotional limitations. Their struggles for self-expression, identity, and personal fulfilment mirror the tension between the city's celebrated cultural wealth and its darker, more stifling forces. The characters, in their search for meaning, redefine Kolkata, illustrating how the city shapes their perceptions and lives, even as it fails to offer them true liberation.

This chapter is unique in its exploration of Kolkata not just as a backdrop, but as an active, shaping force in the characters' journeys. By focusing on *Voices in the City*, the study aims to analyse how Desai uses the city as both a literal and

metaphorical space that impacts the characters' quests for identity and expression, ultimately contributing to the broader understanding of urban spaces in literature. Through this lens, the chapter examines the complexities of Kolkata, a city that has been a symbol of intellectual grandeur making it a critical site for this study.

History of Kolkata

Kolkata, formerly known as Calcutta is often referred to as the "City of Joy," (Dominique 1986). It stands as one of India's largest metropolitan hubs. Serving as the capital of West Bengal, it lies along the eastern banks of the Hooghly River. Kolkata is known for its vibrant history and culture. Deeply embedded in its culture, traditions, rituals, literature, cuisines, and colonial heritage, Kolkata's distinctive identity is aptly captured by its title, the "City of Joy." Kolkata is also known as 'The Cultural Capital of India'. The city has been a cradle for renowned writers, filmmakers, intellectuals, poets, and artists. It established its place as a hub of literature, music, cinema, art, and theatre. Vir Sanghvi captures the essence of the city, stating that, "Calcutta isn't for everyone. If you prefer clean and green cities, Delhi is the ideal choice. For those seeking wealth and impersonality, Bombay fits the bill. If high-tech hubs with an abundance of draught beer appeal to you, Bangalore is the place to be. However, if you are drawn to a city with a soul, then Calcutta is where you belong" (2012).

The British colonial legacy is evident in the city's socio-economic and cultural fabric. The iconic colonial landmarks of the city, such as the majestic Victoria Memorial, the Howrah Bridge, and the gothic-style structures of the High Court and St. Paul's Cathedral are reminiscent of the colonial past. Other architectural wonders in the city include the domed roofs and Ionic-Corinthian columns, such as the General

Post Office and the Governor's House (Nair P. 54). The city still has trams and hand-pulled rickshaws which are remnants of its colonial past.

Kolkata presents a unique blend of urban culture along with inequalities and social pressures. Often called "The Cultural Capital of India" and known as the "City of Palaces" during British rule (Hunter 381), Kolkata also carries contrasting epithets such as "The City of Slums" and "The City of Rallies," highlighting its diverse and complex nature (381). How a person chooses to explore Kolkata greatly influences one's perception of this extraordinary city.

During the British Raj, Kolkata experienced a blend of colonial power, poverty, exploitation, and socio-economic inequality. Post-Independence, the city witnessed both the hard-won ecstasy of freedom and the torment of the partition of India and Pakistan. During this period, Kolkata entered a socio-economic crisis that mainly impacted its middle-class population. Despite the hardships and challenges, the people of Kolkata nurtured a sense of resilience and fostered bonds of love. It is this indomitable spirit that Dominique Lapierre aptly celebrated by calling Kolkata "The City of Joy" (1986).

The name Kolkata originates from *Kolikata*, which was one of three villages that existed before the British established the city. The other two villages were Sutanuti and Govindapur (Sanjoy Chakravorty 56). The term *Kolikata* is believed to have evolved from *Kalikkhetro*, meaning "Field of Goddess Kali." Another theory suggests the name may have derived from the Bengali term *Kilkila*, meaning "flat area" (Chatterjee 85), or from the combination of the words *Khal* (canal) and *Kama* (dug) (Nair P. 54). However, the British adopted the name Calcutta. It remained the official nomenclature of the city in all formal establishments and documents for many

years. It was in 2001 that the city's name was officially changed to Kolkata, aligning with the Bengali pronunciation and embracing its cultural heritage.

The history of Kolkata is closely associated with Job Charnock, a Britisher who recognized the region's potential as a strategic trading hub. In 1690, he arrived on the banks of the Hooghly River and acquired three villages on its eastern bank which were Sutanuti, Govindapur, and Kalikata. This crucial role earned him the title of the "Founder of Kolkata" (Manorama 306). The English East India Company (EEIC) established its first trading post in Sutanuti. This was a small village known for its handicraft industry and bustling marketplace and Kalikata was primarily a fishing village. These settlements formed part of an estate under the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's rule.

The deeper navigable channels along the left bank of Sutanuti offered significant advantages. The East India Company capitalized on these benefits to establish dominance over other European traders, including the Dutch, French, and Danish, who operated from trade points further upstream along the Hooghly. The British, however, secured a stronger foothold due to their proximity to the Bay of Bengal. By 1712, they had completed the construction of Fort William on the east bank of the Hooghly River, further consolidating their control and influence in the region (Mitter 110). Siraj Ud-Daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, attacked Fort William and orchestrated the tragic killings of British prisoners of war in what came to be known as the Black Hole of Calcutta (Nair P. 56). In response, a combined force of company soldiers from Madras and British troops, led by Robert Clive, successfully recaptured the city (56). By 1764, the East India Company had secured the exclusive right to collect land taxes. The revenue generated from these taxes covered administrative costs, with the surplus being invested in purchasing goods for

export to Europe. During this period, Kolkata became the headquarters of the Bengal Presidency and was designated as the capital of the East India Company's territories in India. As the British influence expanded into the Indian heartland, the city grew in size and significance. In 1864, Shimla was selected as the administrative capital during the summer months (Sharma 13). Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of India, further enhanced Kolkata's stature by making it the seat of the Supreme Court of Justice and the Supreme Revenue Administration.

In the early 19th century, the marshlands surrounding Kolkata were drained, and the government district was strategically established along the banks of the Hooghly River. Richard Wellesley, who served as Governor-General of India from 1797 to 1805, played a significant role in shaping the city's development and overseeing the construction of its public architecture (Dutta 58). During the late 18th and 19th centuries, Kolkata became a pivotal hub for the East India Company's opium trade (Pati 2006). Commerce and transportation were the dominant urban functions of the city at the time, alongside its role as the political administrative centre for the economic hinterland. Kolkata's prosperity and strategic importance drew a significant number of immigrants from rural Bengal. The port enabled the export of handicraft products and agricultural goods to international markets while also acting as a gateway for the introduction of modern technologies into India.

By 1815, a ship repair workshop was established in Kolkata, paving the way for the development of shipbuilding units along the Hooghly River. This, in turn, contributed to the growth of a skilled labour force that later supported the emergence of engineering industries in the city. By 1872, British entrepreneurs had introduced modern tea plantations in Assam and Darjeeling. During the same period, British planters promoted the cultivation of jute and indigo in eastern India. Kolkata housed

the offices of these entrepreneurs and exporter houses, leading to the establishment of the Central Business District (CBD) at the heart of the city. By the 1850s, Kolkata had distinctly developed into two main zones: White Town, predominantly British and centred around Chowringhee; and Black Town, primarily Indian, focused around North Calcutta (Hardgrave 35).

During the 19th century, Kolkata became the epicentre of social reform, a movement widely recognized as the Bengal Renaissance. This era marked a golden period for the city, as new ideas and progressive social changes elevated the Bengali community to a position of prominence and influence among Indians. Alongside these social advancements, newer industries emerged, establishing Kolkata as a leader in India for metal-based engineering (Such as Bengal Iron Works, later known as Bengal Iron and Steel Company, 1874, and Hooghly Docking and Engineering Company, 1819), heavy chemical production (Bengal Chemical & Pharmaceutical Works,1892), and the pharmaceutical sector (Bengal Chemical & Pharmaceutical Works, 1901). Through these developments, Indian trading capital gradually evolved into an industrial capital to a significant degree.

The mid-19th century also saw the introduction of modern technologies in textiles and the establishment of processed jute units, alongside the development of a railway network connecting the city. The jute industry flourished along the Hooghly River, which became a hub for the growth of urban settlements. European trading posts and townships located at varying distances upstream contributed to the consolidation of the Kolkata conurbation. These advancements prompted British companies to make significant investments in infrastructure projects, further accelerating the city's growth. Railway tracks were constructed along both the banks of the Hooghly River, accompanied by the establishment of telegraph connections in

1851. With the rapid expansion of the railway network towards the mining areas of the Chota Nagpur Plateau, Kolkata rose to prominence as the financial capital of British India. In just 200 years, the city evolved into one of the world's major metropolises. The blending of British and Indian cultures gave rise to a new aristocratic class of urbane Indians. This elite group, primarily composed of upper-caste Hindus, included bureaucrats, professionals, avid newspaper readers, and Anglophiles. Members of this upper class were popularly referred to as *Babus*.

Kolkata was not only the country's economic powerhouse, but also her intellectual centre. Many progressive reforms and ideas were disseminated to other parts of the nation during this period. The region was politically active and dynamic, making it a focal point for nationalist movements. In 1883, Kolkata hosted the first national conference of the Indian National Association, marking the beginning of organized nationalist efforts in India (Stępień 58). Over time, the city became a hub for the Indian Independence movement with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. In response to the growing political unrest, the British Empire implemented the "divide and rule" policy, leading to the partition of Bengal in 1905 as a means of controlling political activity. However, this decision sparked widespread protests, culminating in the Swadeshi Movement, which called for the boycott of British goods.

The political upheaval, including revolutionary movements and the administrative challenges posed by Kolkata's marginal location led the British to move the capital to Delhi in 1911. As a result, government spending in Kolkata was significantly reduced, prompting the municipal authorities to take on a greater role in the city's urbanization efforts. To address these challenges, the government established the Calcutta Improvement Trust (CIT) in 1911 to oversee urban renewal

projects (Noorani 2002). However, during the First World War (1913-1917), funding to the CIT was nearly completely suspended. After the war, the organization resumed its activities and worked on improving infrastructure, including the construction of new roads, sewers, piped water lines, open spaces, market facilities, and expanded public transport services. The onset of the Second World War marked a difficult period for Kolkata. The city endured heavy bombing by Japanese air forces between 1942 and 1944, causing many residents to flee the city in fear for their safety. Several important institutions and educational establishments were relocated to rural Bengal (BBC 2005). After the decline of the Quit India Movement in 1943, Kolkata experienced a period of religious intolerance and violent upheaval. The demand for a separate state by the Muslim League in 1946, along with communal riots, resulted in the deaths of over 4,000 people in the city (Das 289). The socioeconomic conditions were dire at the time, and the people of Kolkata were anxiously awaiting independence.

On 15th August 1947, following the passage of the Indian Independence Act by the British Parliament, India gained independence. The country was partitioned into India and Pakistan along religious lines, which led to violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims in Kolkata. The partition triggered further violence and caused a demographic shift, with many Muslims migrating to East Pakistan, while millions of Hindus sought refuge in the city. While the rest of the country celebrated independence, it was a tragic event for Kolkata and West Bengal. Unlike the partition of Punjab in Western India, the partition of Bengal occurred without the corresponding transfer of property or people. Many destitute refugees flooded into West Bengal, with many settling in and around Kolkata. Some were able to purchase land and homes, but most became squatters, unable to even pay municipal taxes.

Hindu refugees arrived in waves after each failure of secular governance in Pakistan (Noorani 2002). This influx of refugees worsened the already strained urban infrastructure of Kolkata and its surrounding areas. The city quickly became overpopulated, leading to severe conditions for its residents. The lack of adequate housing, proper sanitation, and garbage disposal facilities only exacerbated the situation. Kolkata, once known as "the city of palaces," soon became synonymous with slums. To alleviate the overcrowding, new towns were planned on the left bank of the Hooghly River, with the hope that people would move away from the city's congested core. However, this vision was never realized, as few were willing to leave the heart of the city (Bardhan & Paul 2023).

In response to the growing population and overcrowding, a second attempt was made to develop a satellite township to the east of Kolkata, near the wetlands and swampy areas known as the Greater Calcutta Wetland. Expanding eastward required the reclamation of swampland and marshes using silt dragged from the Hooghly River. On 16th April 1962, Salt Lake City was officially established (Tošković 98). This initiative aimed to develop residential areas without altering or restructuring the city's core.

In the early 1960s, with technical support from the Ford Foundation of the USA, the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization (CMPO) was founded in 1967. During the 1960s and 1970s, Kolkata, along with the rest of Bengal, faced severe shortages in power, food, and shelter among the lower classes. This challenging environment led to the rise of different political ideologies, most notably the Naxalite Movement. The conditions also fostered the growth of Marxist ideologies in the region.

In the 1970s, Kolkata was once again hit by a massive influx of refugees due to the Civil War in East Pakistan, also known as the Bangladesh Liberation War. This brought around two lakh refugees to the city within a year, making it nearly impossible to address the urban infrastructure challenges. During this period, Kolkata faced severe hardship due to the large number of migrants from Bangladesh and the neglect of the central government in addressing the city's needs. The city's infrastructure proved inadequate for the growing population, leading to the expansion of unplanned suburbs. The central government's lack of attention to Kolkata further devastated its economy, with numerous industries shutting down and the poor state of Kolkata's port exacerbating the city's decline. In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi described Kolkata as a "dying city" (Follath 2005). From 1977 to 2011, West Bengal was governed by the Left Front, primarily led by the Communist Party of India (CPIM), marking the longest period of rule by a democratically elected communist government in the world. Kolkata became a significant stronghold for Indian Communism during this time.

Following the central government's introduction of the Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) policies, Kolkata's economy began to recover and gain momentum in the 1990s. Since the 2000s, the city's economy has been revitalized by the growth of the information technology services sector. Additionally, Kolkata has seen significant expansion in its manufacturing base (Chandrika Singh 154). In 2001, the city officially changed its name from Calcutta to Kolkata. Over the years, Kolkata has experienced both periods of decline and resurgence. Although its former glory has diminished, it remains the third most populous metropolitan city in India. The development of Kolkata continues to play a crucial role in driving the economic progress of the entire East India region.

Kolkata played a significant role in the rise of parallel and art-house cinema, with iconic filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, whose *Apu Trilogy* (*Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar*) is regarded as a defining moment in global cinema. His masterpieces like *Charulata* and *Shatranj Ke Khilari* further exemplify his brilliance. Ritwik Ghatak, a master of cinematic realism, brought to life powerful works like *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Subarnarekha*, which offer a poignant exploration of Bengal's socio-political landscape. Mrinal Sen, a key figure in the parallel cinema movement, made significant films like *Bhuvan Shome* and *Calcutta 71*, which reflected the region's political turmoil and societal issues. Contemporary filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh also made his mark with films such as *Chokher Bali* and *Unishe April*, delving into the intricacies of human emotions and relationships.

In literature, Kolkata has been the birthplace of literary geniuses like Rabindranath Tagore, who was honoured with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. His celebrated works, including *Gitanjali* and his timeless *Rabindra Sangeet*, have left an impact across the globe. The city also gave rise to literary luminaries such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, and Kazi Nazrul Islam, whose contributions have shaped Bengali literature.

Kolkata is also home to several Nobel Laureates, including Mother Teresa, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979 for her humanitarian efforts, and Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1998 for his groundbreaking work in welfare economics and social justice.

Literature Review

Desai's fiction delves into pressing contemporary issues while maintaining a strong connection to traditional values. Her narratives examine the emotional struggles of individuals navigating modern society, with a special emphasis on the

intricacies of human relationships. This universal theme not only appeals to readers across the globe but also serves as a rich foundation for critical exploration and analysis. Desai seeks to portray these issues without interference, presenting a novel as “a perpetual quest for reality” and “the most effective agent of moral imagination” in today's world, tackling the problems faced by humanity (Susheel 163). Desai often centres her themes on the challenges faced by individuals, such as crises of consciousness and the human condition. In one of her interviews, Desai shared, “I am more interested in peculiar and eccentric characters than in the average ones” (Jasbir 8).

Scholarly investigations of Desai’s works have offered various critical perspectives. Usha Bande’s *The Novels of Anita Desai* (1988) is a valuable work in which she extensively employs third-force psychology to analyse the struggles of Desai’s neurotic heroines. Sunaina Singh’s *The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study in Feminine Perspective* (1994) attempts to apply feminist theory to Desai’s works. Earlier comprehensive studies such as Meena Belliappa’s *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction* (1971), Jasbir Jain’s *Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai* (1977), and B. Ramachandra Rao’s *The Novels of Mrs. Anita Desai: A Study* (1977) have explored her style and the unique psychological portrayal of her anxiety-ridden protagonists. Ramesh Kumar Gupta in *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Feminist Perspective* and N. Raja Gopal in *A Critical Study of the Novels of Anita Desai* discuss the existentialist protagonists and existentialist themes in Desai’s works. However, in *Existentialism in Anita Desai’s Fire on the Mountain*, critics Sujith and Reddy poignantly expose the existential dilemmas that shape ordinary lives, immersed in cultural and social conflicts.

Madhusudan Prasad explores the existential themes and images reflected through the central characters of novels in *Anita Desai: The Novelist*.

The impact of marriage on women in Indian society has been a significant subject of scholarly inquiry in the novels of Desai. Mohini Sharma, in *Marital Discord in Anita Desai's Novels*, explores how marriage affects women more than men, noting that while marriage is a critical institution for both genders, it brings more drastic personal and societal changes for women. Sharma argues that marriage reinforces the male's position as the head of the family, leaving women to transform. This perspective aligns with Kajal Thakur's analysis in *The Concept of Man-Woman Relationship in Cry, the Peacock*, where she describes the emotional fragmentation and lack of meaning in the relationship between the protagonist and her husband. Thakur's work underscores the discord in marital relationships, portraying how the strain between husband and wife impacts the protagonist's mental and emotional stability.

Krishna Mitra's *The Images of Indian Woman in the Select Novels of Anita Desai* provides a vivid portrayal of the status of Indian women in Desai's works, emphasizing their complex roles within family and society. Arvind M. Nawale's *Anita Desai's Fiction: Themes and Techniques* offers a comprehensive review of the themes and narrative styles that characterize Desai's work. Nawale's exploration of Desai's themes, including alienation, identity crises, and the struggle for independence, reveals the psychological dimensions of her characters. Kajali Sharma, in *Symbolism in Anita Desai's Novels*, enriches the understanding of Desai's storytelling by examining the symbolic imagery that permeates her narratives, illustrating how symbols function to deepen the emotional and psychological complexity of the characters and themes.

In the realm of psychological analysis, Usha Rani's study, *Psychological Conflict in the Fiction of Anita Desai*, provides an insightful exploration of the psychological struggles faced by Desai's characters. Rani focuses on the fractured psyches of protagonists, mainly wives and mothers, shedding light on the inner turmoil these women experience.

Dr. R.K. Srivastava's examination of Desai's language and style, in his work *Anita Desai's Language and Style*, offers a nuanced understanding of her distinctive position among Indian novelists. Srivastava's remarks on Desai's stylistic refinement emphasize her ability to transform raw ideas into artistic expressions, making her prose both aesthetically rich and thematically thoughtful.

Critics have offered a wide range of interpretations of the novel *Voices in the City*. Remesh K. Srivastava in "Artists in *Voices in the City*" delves into the novel's character development, examining how each character contributes to the narrative. In "Heroism and Pathos in *Voices in the City*: A Thematic Study" S. K. Tikoo critiques the class divisions perpetuated by social conventions, highlighting the raw realism of the impoverished areas. Bande in the article "The Immeasurable Emptiness," focuses on the relationship between the characters Amla and Dharma in *Voices in the City*. Bhatta's paper, "Voices in The City: A Study of Monisha's Plight," specifically examines Monisha's predicament, while Bhatnagar argues that while the struggle for survival is harsh, each individual is responsible for their own suffering. Meena Belliappa in *Anita Desai: A Study of Her Fiction* discusses the psychological impact of urban life, particularly how the city influences the emotions of its inhabitants: "Through the impress of the city on these individuals and their associates, and the interplay of their emotional disturbances, a complex of experiences is created that is Calcutta" (28). Similarly, J. P. Tripathi in *The Mind and Art of Anita Desai*

emphasizes that Calcutta has “a depressive role in the lives of Nirode, Monisha, and Amla” (26-27) and it is an anarchic force that pushes them to the edge of destruction. These critical studies help to explore the diverse dimensions of Desai’s writings, solidifying her position as a significant voice in Indian English literature.

Several literary works have explored the dynamic and multifaceted nature of Kolkata, portraying it as a city of contrasts such as cultural richness and colonial legacy, intellectual vibrancy and social struggles, modernity, and decay. Rabindranath Tagore’s *Ghare Baire* examines nationalism and changing social structures. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s *Pather Panchali* captures rural-to-urban migration and Kolkata as both a land of opportunity and hardship. Manik Bandopadhyay’s *Padma Nadir Majhi* reflects the socio-economic struggles of marginalized communities, whereas Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Stories* and *Hajar Churashir Maa* highlight political turmoil, class struggles, and gender oppression in the city. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* presents Kolkata as a historical and political space, linking personal memories with larger narratives of Partition, while Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* examines the immigrant experience and nostalgia for Kolkata. Kolkata is often depicted as a colonial and postcolonial city with British architectural influences, an intellectual and revolutionary hub fostering political movements and artistic expression, and a chaotic urban space marked by economic disparity.

Numerous critical studies have examined the diverse themes in Anita Desai’s works, yet Kolkata’s distinct intellectual and cultural landscape remains relatively unexplored. This study examines how the city's essence is reflected through its characters and their interactions with urban space, revealing how these spatial dynamics shape the plot and influence the destinies of the protagonists.

Kolkata in *Voices in the City*

In *Voices in the City*, Desai portrays Kolkata as a powerful metaphor, reflecting its dual nature of allure and revulsion. While the city offers possibilities and challenges, it is also a space that can threaten and destroy. The novel captures various dimensions of Kolkata, weaving them into the lives of its characters. Kolkatais perceived differently by each character in the novel. The many dimensions of the city in *Voices in the City* mirror the psychological journeys of the main characters. Nirode embodies the struggles of a young Bengali caught in the turbulent waves of social change. For Nirode Kolkata is a symbol of lost youth, with the city's lack of significant opportunities gradually consuming his vitality. Monisha, Nirode's sister who is a sensitive, bewildered middle-class Bengali wife, is burdened by the pressures of family, in-laws, and societal expectations. She succumbs to these strains which leads her to commit suicide. In contrast, Amla, Nirode's younger sister finds a warm and welcoming side to the city when she arrives to explore a career in advertising but soon understands the dark side of the city. Kolkata, under the shadow of its goddess Kali, plays a dual role as both a creator and destroyer of identity.

Desai's deep connection with Kolkata and its influence on its people can be likened to Thomas Hardy's Wessex or R.K. Narayan's Malgudi. Narayan's Malgudi is a cosmopolitan town that feels familiar and close to home, where life unfolds in predictable routines often laced with humour (Kumar 562). In contrast, Hardy's Wessex, an imaginative recreation of South-Central England's landscapes, evokes a rural world brimming with dynamic life and intense emotional upheavals (Birch 349). Desai's portrayal of Kolkata, however, stands apart. Kolkata becomes a living, breathing entity that shapes the fates of its characters. It is a sprawling, chaotic, and polluted metropolis, pulsating with tension and unpredictability.

The novel is divided into four sections, each named after one of the key characters: ‘Nirode,’ ‘Monisha,’ ‘Amla,’ and ‘Mother’. While the structure highlights the perspectives of all four characters, the narrative is primarily focused on Nirode. The novel reflects a keen awareness of the changing social and political landscape in India, portraying the clash between traditional values and the new cultural forces at play (Vijaya 111). As described in the book’s blurb:

> *Voices in the City* presents an unforgettable tale of a bohemian brother and his two sisters navigating the shifting currents of evolving social values. Set against the backdrop of middle-class intellectuals in Calcutta, the story captures a transformative moment in Indian society, where the old ways are not entirely gone, yet the new ones are not fully realized. (258)

The novel effectively captures the impact of Kolkata on its residents focusing on the toll it takes on an Indian family living in the city. The blurb of the book highlights the negative consequences the metropolis has on them (Blurb of the book i-xii). Desai, having lived in Kolkata during the early 1960s, vividly conveys the city's sensory experiences, embracing its various moods throughout the seasons. In this sense, Kolkata becomes more than just a setting; it is a crucial force in the development of the novel's characters. Each character offers their own reflection on the city, which provides depth to the city’s image. Through Nirode’s eyes, we feel the city’s pulse,

> Fighting through the suffocating indifference of Howrah, Nirode strode across the bridge, dodging the thundering traffic that made the bridge tremble beneath him, like a tunnel of bones and steel. Trams screamed past him, and handcarts swerved wildly, driven by reckless urgency (8).

Nirode further unveils the essence of Kolkata as he steps off the bridge and into the overwhelming chaos of the city: “Stepping away from the bridge and into the dense blaze of light, sound, and smell that defined Calcutta, Nirode shouted, ‘Unfair, life is unfair!’ But his words seemed faint and pointless amidst the relentless noise of traffic and bustling commerce around him” (8-9). He continues by describing the river and the workers around it. The city’s dual nature is portrayed by its relentless urban activity and persistent connection to tradition. The contrast between the “subdued clamour” (9) of the river, with its workers unloading goods, and the “small island of stillness” (10) created by the Muslim boatmen’s prayer, emphasizes the tension between modernity and spirituality that defines Kolkata.

The description of the city states,

> Across the river, the city relentlessly announces itself with its neon and naptha lights, the hum and sudden screeches of machinery, and the low growls of people. But none of this is connected to the river, nor to the quiet islands that dot its waters (10).

It suggests the city’s industrial drive, while also observing its disconnection from the natural world and traditional practices. This division between the city and the river reflects how Kolkata’s identity is shaped by its economic hustle and its spiritual undercurrents, portraying a city where commerce and faith coexist but often fail to align.

Nirode represents the younger generation, who, instead of merely pursuing wealth, yearns for status and a position that grants him admiration, setting him apart and making him aloof from others. Desai’s portrayal of the harsh realities of contemporary India reflects how people leave their cities and villages, driven by the hope of a better life or the desire for fame. While many fail to achieve their

aspirations, some manage to realize their dreams, illustrating the complex and often challenging journey toward success. Like Nirode, many people spend their lives chasing unattainable goals and are trapped in a cycle of failure. Yet, these people never return to their roots. The vast city becomes like the jaws of a dragon-an entrance through which one can enter, but never escape. The allure of the lavish and extravagant lifestyle keeps them enchanted, holding them captive until their last breath.

Dharma, a painter who was once a close friend of Nirode and had an influence on Amla's life, chose to leave the city dramatically. He retreated to the quiet isolation of a walled garden surrounded by overgrown greenery. Yet, despite his physical departure, Dharma never completely severed the delicate, golden ties that bound him to Kolkata. These connections often drew him back, prompting reflection and questions about his relationship with the city (51). Nirode, describing Dharma, remarks, "He was born in Calcutta," and adds, "He will never be able to tear up his roots and transplant them. He needs Calcutta earth, the Calcutta air" (58). Dharma himself spoke of the city's darker side, saying, "…this was a poisoned city, and he who breathed its air was doomed" (64). This highlights the city's dual nature, portraying how, even when individuals attempt to escape its grip, they remain inexplicably tied to it, despite recognizing its toxic elements.

Monisha has also experienced the city similarly. Through her diary entries, she not only represents the city's inspiring ambiance for creative writing but also captures the essence of its character revealing the true nature of the city:

> …out on to the street- straight into the thick quilt of pungent blue smoke that rises from the countless fires that are lit on the city's pavements. Once the smoke clears, slowly, I see another face of this devil city, a face that broods

> over the smoldering fire- a dull, vacant, hopeless face. The rickshaw coolie, the street sweeper, the tanner, the beggar child with his limbs cut off at the joints, the refugee who litters the platform of Sealdah Station with his excitement and offspring- they share one face, one expression of tiredness, such overwhelming tiredness that even bitterness is merely passive and hopelessness makes the hand extend only feebly, then drop back without disappointment. Two faces- one rapacious, one weary- gaze at me from every direction. (119)

Monisha longs to connect with nature, seeking freedom and liberation for her soul. She says “And for a while I think there is, after all, some place in Calcutta where there is rest, a relief from claustrophobia” (121). The oppressive environment of the city leaves her feeling stifled, and she yearns for an escape from its suffocating confines. Living in a joint family, she has no personal space to call her own, intensifying her desire for solitude and tranquillity. She craves a space where she can experience peace and truly be herself. Monisha, overwhelmed by the futility of her life, cries out to the city of Kolkata,

> Do you hear me, City of Calcutta? City of Kali, goddess of Death? Not one word from you, I said, not a sound. No shriek, no groan, no cry. I come here for silence, my few moments of night silence, so cease your moaning and wailing a while—that never really frightened me, you know, you melodramatic old witch. (140)

Her words reflect a sense of frustration and exhaustion with both her marriage and her existence in the city. As an educated woman, Monisha feels stifled by the oppressive environment around her. The chaos and relentless noise of the city mirror the emptiness and dissatisfaction she experiences in her personal life. Trapped in a

loveless marriage, she longs to escape the confines of her current reality. Her yearning is not for grandeur or material wealth but for solitude—a quiet space where she can retreat into herself and find the peace of mind that eludes her. Monisha's plea to the city reveals her desire to withdraw from its demands and distractions, to step away from the clamour that only deepens her sense of alienation. She dreams of a sanctuary, a room of her own where she can rediscover a semblance of purpose and serenity, far removed from the relentless noise and turmoil of the world around her.

Amla arrived in Kolkata with high hopes of building her career. The first person she encountered in the city is Aunt Lila, who, during their conversation, subtly hinted at the city's darker aspects by remarking, "It is this city" (145). Aunt Lila further advised Amla, saying, "…it was inevitable and perhaps you will not let it oppress you but will enjoy your new job and independence." Amla, full of optimism, responded, "Calcutta doesn't oppress me in the least" (145). At that point, she was unaware of the challenges and hardships the city had in store for her. As time went on and difficulties arose, Amla found herself recalling Aunt Lila's forewarning. Reflecting on her aunt's words, Amla is described as "scraping with a fingernail at the bark less flesh of the tree in childish absorption" (152) while pondering the city's looming shadows. She began to understand the gravity of her aunt's caution. Initially, her impressions of Kolkata were formed by the lively streets she had travelled through earlier that day—streets bustling with river traffic, sheep grazing on the Maidan, majestic rain trees, historic business houses adorned with whimsical designs, and the chaotic yet spirited flow of vehicles along the city's lengthily named avenues (152).

However, as she settled into her new life, the city's oppressive nature gradually revealed itself. Even Aunt Lila's house, where she lived, seemed stifling. Amla observed that the garden, overshadowed by the city's ominous presence, exuded

more than just gloom. She described it as a place filled with "uneasy, dissatisfied spirits" whose sighs and complaints seemed to echo the city's grim past. These spirits appeared to warn the living about the city's grim realities- its tragic history, slow decay, pestilent swamps, and pervasive corruption. This corruption, she noted, seeped insidiously into every layer of life, from grand business houses to humble shacks, ultimately invading and breaking down the human spirit (152-153). Amla's reflections extended further as she remarked on the monstrous nature of the city. She felt it was devoid of any vibrant, healthy existence and instead harboured a shadowy, sinister life filled with moral decay. In her view, this city had entranced- or perhaps disillusioned- her sister and brother, leaving them both ensnared by its ominous grasp (153).

Amla, with a tone of sarcasm, remarks to Nirode, "This city, this city of yours, it conspires against all who wish to enjoy it, doesn't it?" (152). Her words reflect a growing disillusionment with Calcutta, a place she initially approached with hope but now finds stifling and antagonistic. The city, once seen as a space of opportunity and excitement, has revealed itself to be an oppressive force, actively working against those who dare to seek joy or fulfilment within its boundaries. Her remark encapsulates her frustration, not just with the city itself but also with the promises it seemed to hold.

Amla expresses her frustration to Nirode, saying, "I have to keep things a secret in this horrible city you told me was so wonderful" (185). She reflects on the harsh realities of Kolkata, explaining, "Here one must hide such things, cover up their weaknesses, protect their fragility, even destroy them if one doesn't want to see them get covered with filth and blood and rot. Nothing delicate can survive this" (185). The city's brutal nature seems to have left a deep impression on her, as she continues, "Then you must admit it is challenging to be asked to survive and live in a city where

it is so difficult to do so" (185). Amla's words convey the emotional toll of navigating the city's harshness, where vulnerability is seen as a liability. The need to mask one's sensitivity, lest the relentless chaos and corruption trample it, highlights the oppressive environment she finds herself in.

Later, she reflects on how her perspective has shifted since arriving in Kolkata. She realizes that her ability to voice such thoughts starkly contrasts with her former self. She wonders aloud if it is the city, her interactions with Nirode, or her acquaintance with Dharma that has brought about this transformation, pondering, "Before she had come to Calcutta, she would not have been able to speak in this fashion, and she wondered if it was the city or Nirode or knowing Dharma that had made her change" (208). This realization underscores the impact her experiences and relationships in the city have had on her sense of self and her outlook on life. In a heartfelt letter to Amla, their mother writes,

> It is my fault, of course, for not having kept the Calcutta house and kept you all with me, for having sold it and come to live alone in this secluded paradise which seems to have no channel of communication with your very real and rough lives in the city, away from me. (204)

Her words carry a tone of regret and self-blame, as she acknowledges the disconnect between her tranquil life and the harsh realities her children face in the city. The letter reflects her feelings of guilt for choosing solitude over staying connected to her family's struggles. She seems to recognize the widening gap between her sheltered existence and the challenges her children encounter in the unforgiving urban environment of Kolkata. This admission highlights her inner turmoil and longing to bridge the emotional and physical distance that has grown between them.

Through her words, she expresses both remorse and a yearning to reconnect with her family, despite the choices that have led to this separation.

The Search for Voices in *Voices in the City*

The Voice of Nirode

Voices in the City begins with Nirode's brother, Arun departing India for England to pursue higher education. Nirode works as a junior clerk at a newspaper office. His sister Monisha is married to Jiban, who is a government employee from a conventional middle-class joint family and she lives a restrictive domestic life. His younger sister Amla, trained as a commercial artist in Bombay, returns to Kolkata to work in an advertising agency. Their mother, now living in solitude after the father's death, embarks on an affair with retired Major Mr. Chaddha, much to Nirode's fury.

Nirode is a typical young Bengali characterized by repeated failures and an introspective nature. His life is marked by a series of failed ventures, including writing plays, launching a magazine, and running a bookstall selling counterfeit antique items. Initially employed as a clerk, Nirode later collaborates with his friends Sonny and Prof. Bose to launch a literary magazine called *Voice*. Despite their efforts, Nirode abandons the project, turning instead to writing, a pursuit that drives him into near-starvation. Aware of the futility of his new endeavour, he reflects, "a man for whom aloneness alone was the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring" (25). Despite this, his overconfidence drives him forward, leaving him with no way to turn back. When his attempt at writing proves unsuccessful, Nirode shifts his focus to running a bookstore. His first words in the novel, "I will have it...I will have it. You will see" (13), reflect his determination even after facing repeated failures. He adopts a philosophical outlook while discussing his past missteps with his friend David:

> I want to fail- quickly. Then I want to see if I have the spirit to start moving again towards my next failure. I want to move from failure to failure to failure, step by step, to rock bottom. I want to explore that depth. When you climb a ladder, all you find at the top is space; all you can do is leap off- fall to the bottom. I want to get there without that meaningless climbing. I want to descend quickly. (40)

Nirode, due to his constant failures in life, remains utterly detached from both his family and friends, showing no inclination to work under anyone's authority. Overwhelmed by isolation, he confesses to his friends that it might be better "…to leap out of the window and end it all instead of smearing this endless sticky glue of senselessness over the world. Better not to live" (13). He describes his father as a powerless alcoholic, leaving his mother to dominate their feudal household in Kalimpong, where he grew up. Nirode moves to Kolkata reluctantly, due to the complicated family dynamics, particularly his mother's relationship with Major Chaddha after the death of his father (37). In Kolkata, he embraces a Bohemian lifestyle. The Bohemian lifestyle began to take root in Kolkata in the early 20th century during the 1920s and 1930s. This period witnessed a burgeoning cultural and intellectual movement, with the city becoming a hub for artists, writers, and free thinkers who embraced unconventional lifestyles. The influence of European avant-garde movements, combined with Kolkata's rich colonial history and its role as a centre of political activism, fostered an environment conducive to the development of the Bohemian ethos (Times of India).

Nirode lacks a clear purpose in life. He is unable to distinguish the deeper meaning of life or fulfil his existential goals. His inner turmoil stems from a failure to understand himself, leaving him directionless. He yearns to transcend the dualities of

happiness and suffering, expressing, "Happiness, suffering- I want to be done with them, disregard them, see beyond them to the very end" (40). Nirode aspires to rise above the ordinary and carve a unique identity for himself. However, he is unable to do so.

When Dharma, his friend, suggests changes to *Voice*, Nirode dismisses the idea. His ego prevents him from accepting input, as he refuses to be dictated by anyone. He longs for absolute freedom, without restrictions. To him, reputation feels oppressive, like "a white-collar about your neck, stifling you. It's suffocating me" (93). Ironically, he longs for the magazine's failure rather than celebrating its success. As Madhu Jindal observes, Nirode's persistence in the face of repeated setbacks grants him "an abiding meaning of life" and a steadfast resolve to "fight against the social and commercial values of life which the city of Calcutta symbolises" (125).

Nirode is both a nonconformist and a man of inner strength. Desai is intrigued by Nirode because despite facing adversity and repeated failures, he remains true to himself. She explains, "There are those who can handle the situation and those who cannot. And my stories are generally about those who cannot. They find themselves trapped in situations over which they have no control" (Cry, the Peacock 15). Nirode struggles with a sense of purposelessness, finding neither fulfilment in friendships nor joy in relationships. Despite his resentment toward his mother, he remains emotionally tied to her. He prefers isolation over recognition, intentionally retreating himself from a conventional life and accepting misery over success.

The Voice of Monisha

Nirode's sister Monisha is an intelligent woman trapped in an unhappy marriage. Living in a joint family with her husband, Jiban, she finds her life devoid of emotional fulfilment. Her marriage is a mismatch, with Jiban failing to understand or

meet her deeper emotional needs. Desai vividly portrays the middle-class ethos and patriarchal dynamics within Jiban's family. There women are relegated to the roles of a submissive caregiver to their husbands, in-laws, and extended households. They are stripped of their individuality and identity. Monisha, unable to conform to this mould, feels like an outsider. In her diary, she reflects on these faceless, voiceless women, exposing the emptiness of their existence.

> I see many women, always Bengali women, who follow five paces behind their men. They wear saris of the dullest colours, beige and fawn and off-white, like the female birds in the cage, and there is something infinitely gentle, infinitely patient about their long eyes, the curve of their shoulders, their manner of walking, which arouses not aggressiveness in one as the women of the north do, but a protective feeling. (122)

The portrayal of Bengali women highlights the deep-rooted gender disparity in Kolkata, where their lives are marked by quiet acceptance and confinement. Desai captures this in her depiction of women who, in their muted existence, walk several paces behind the men, adorned in dull saris, symbolizing their invisibility and subjugation. She observes the quiet resignation etched into their existence, noting,

> The eyes of these silent Bengali women are not dead, but they anticipate death as they do everything, with resignation. There is no dignity in their death as in the death of that proud and glorious beast, but only a little melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth (122).

Her words convey a deep sense of melancholy, capturing the subdued and constrained lives of these women. Their silence is not an expression of strength but of endurance, as they navigate their lives devoid of dignity. She continues,

> I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred window of halfdark rooms, spending centuries washing clothes, kneading dough, and murmuring aloud verses from the Bhagvad-Gita and the Ramayana in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent in waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centered and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses in the old city...The eyes of these silent Bengali women are not dead, but they anticipate death as they do everything, with resignation. There is no dignity in their death as in the death of that proud and glorious beast, but only a little melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth. (122)

This image of women hidden behind barred windows and performing domestic tasks in isolation reflects the restrictive rules imposed on them by both societal norms and urban space. Drawing from Lefebvre’s concept of the Right to the City, women in Kolkata are denied their rights in the city, as they are excluded from the active, public spaces that define urban life. The city, in this context, becomes a site of male dominance, where women are confined to the private, domestic sphere and are denied full participation in the public and cultural life of the city. This lack of access to the city’s vibrant spaces further establishes their marginalization, ensuring that their voices remain unheard and unseen in the social and political narrative of the city.

Monisha yearns for a space she can call her own, a refuge that remains out of reach. She writes, “My black wardrobe, my family, my duties of serving fresh chapattis to the uncles as they eat, of listening to my mother-in-law as she tells me the remarkably many ways of cooking fish, of being Jiban’s wife” (113). She is not a

woman who finds satisfaction in material possessions like luxurious clothes or jewellery. Engaging in conversations about "my ovaries" (115) is far removed from her interests. When her sister-in-law Kalyani opens her wardrobe, she laughs, surprised to find books where saris are expected. it serves as a subtle reflection of Kolkata's intellectual and literary depth. The city recognized for its rich cultural and intellectual heritage, fosters an environment where knowledge and creativity flourish alongside traditional norms. This scene exemplifies the intersection of the city's intellectual vibrancy with the evolving roles of women, illustrating how Kolkata, as an urban space, supports the coexistence of intellectual pursuits and societal expectations, challenging conventional notions of femininity.

Surrounded by the constant bustle of the joint family, Monisha craves solitude, a longing that deepens her sense of isolation in the crowded household. In her diary, she writes,

> But less and less, there is privacy. Even my own room, which they regard at first as still bridal, now no longer is so. (The tubes are blocked, it is no good) and sisters-in-law lie across the four-poster, discussing my ovaries and theirs. Kalyani di throws open my wardrobe in order to inspect my saris. 'How many did you get at your wedding?' she asks. 'How many?' and sees my books. The whole wardrobe is full of books. To my perplexity, she laughs. She says, 'I got a hundred and eleven' and I am no longer perplexed: I see that, of course, she cannot know that there is nothing to laugh at in Kafka or Hopkins or Dostoyevsky or my Russian or French or Sanskrit dictionaries. But I wish they would leave me alone, sometimes, to read. (117)

For Monisha, her room and her wardrobe, which should represent her personal retreat, become symbols of her entrapment. Surrounded by the constant presence of

family members and subjected to their disturbing expectations, she longs for solitude which is a space where she can be herself. Monisha's struggle to carve out space for her thoughts and passions reflects a broader denial of women's agency in the urban environment. Women, especially in traditional and patriarchal setups, are often denied the right to create or occupy spaces that allow them to explore their individuality and intellectual pursuits. As Monisha's personal space is encroached upon, her identity becomes further constrained, with her desires and ambitions relegated to the margins of her existence. The lack of ownership over one's space, both physically and symbolically, is a denial of autonomy. It keeps women like Monisha in a constant state of emotional and psychological confinement.

Her longing for freedom is palpable. Monisha remarks, "Independence is too damned expensive" (132), acknowledging the high cost- both literal and figurative- of seeking autonomy in her situations. The bustling city around her, with its noise and chaos, offers no solace. She dreams of distance, imagining herself removed from the clamour. Looking out at the city, she writes, "The splendour of the city outspread below me, like a mantle that invites me to step on it" (140). At this moment, she yearns for an escape, a place far away where she won't be troubled by the continuous noises of urban life or the oppressive restrictions of her reality. Monisha's struggles echo this resignation.

After enduring multiple miscarriages and stillbirths (134), she finds herself trapped in a life devoid of fulfilment. Love is absent in her marriage with Jiban; instead, her days are defined by loneliness and a desperate, almost futile, drive to find meaning or success (137). She confesses, "I rarely see anyone outside this family now that Nirode has recovered and I am no longer granted the privilege of having the car

and driving out to see him" (137). This isolation further amplifies her despair, as her world feels increasingly confined within the walls of her joint family.

Monisha's life becomes unbearable due to a combination of factors: infertility, lack of privacy, an indifferent husband, and the pressures of managing a joint family. Her distress deepens due to Nirode's peculiar, self-isolating lifestyle, as she is unable to share her struggles with him. Despite his disregard for her letters and refusal to accept financial help for his treatment, Monisha is unable to ignore his suffering. In a desperate act, she secretly takes money from Jiban's funds to pay for Nirode's medical care. When confronted by Jiban, she is overwhelmed by guilt and shame. Jiban's accusatory question, "Why didn't you tell them (family members)? Why didn't you tell me before you took it?" (136), leaves her feeling humiliated. Unable to bear the emotional weight, Monisha tragically ends her life by setting herself on fire.

Sadhana Agarwal argues that Monisha's plight stems from societal norms that liken women to caged birds, stripped of freedom and individuality (101). Her tragic death underscores "the existential predicament of women as individuals" (Agarwal 68), shedding light on the struggles faced by women in oppressive environments. Desai's narratives often depict women trapped in the conflict between being victimized by men and depending on them in crucial moments (Chaudhari 78–80).

The Voice of Amla

In contrast to Monisha and Nirode, Amla is an artist who came to explore a fascinating career in Kolkata. In contrast to the others, Amla maintains a composed and well-balanced outlook on life. After receiving training as a commercial artist in Bombay, she moves to Kolkata to work for an advertising agency. She stays with her aunt Lila Chatterjee who encourages Amla to embrace her independence, saying, "…take pride in your independence, in this wonderful liberty you have of choosing

and undertaking a career, any career. Our country belongs to its men," but she adds with optimism, "but it won't always be so, not when there are girls like you…" (146). Her words reflect both the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society and the hope that the new generation will lead the way to change. She further highlights that Amla is privileged to be a part of this new era of freedom: "You belong to such a uniquely free generation- and that is something very new in our country. At last, we have won our freedom, and you can do as you choose" (148). Lila highlights the shift in societal norms that has allowed young women to pursue their dreams and find their paths. It was an opportunity that her generation could only dream of. Comparing Amla's life to her own, Lila acknowledges the progress that has been made, saying, "You are very different from my generation" (148). This echoes the limitations that she faced in her youth. Lila not only encourages Amla to seize the opportunities before her but also expresses hope for a future where women can prosper without the constraints of traditional gender roles.

After coming to Kolkata Amla meets Nirode and Monisha. Their misery takes her aback. She makes various attempts to involve them in her life, but ultimately, she finds herself unable to connect with them. Amla's initial excitement to live in Kolkata fades as she sees the true shades of life in the metropolis. Amla reflects,

> Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on? I see another face of this devil city, a face that broods over the smouldering fire - a dull, vacant, hopeless face. (116-117)

This indicates that the public spaces of the city are controlled by men and they impose limitations on women. Women are forced into roles dictated by tradition and

expectation. The lived experiences of these women reveal that space, instead of being a site of freedom, becomes a realm of restriction and alienation.

Amla contemplates Monisha's marriage. She is bewildered by the stark contrast between her sister's intellectual depth and her husband's uninspiring presence. She questions how Monisha ended up with a self-righteous moralist who mindlessly recites Burke, Wordsworth, Gandhi, and Tagore, yet lacks independence in thoughts and deeds. Amla wonders why their father selected Jiban as a groom for Monisha. She assumed it was simply because Jiban was the safest and most conventional choice, a man who promised stability without risk? (200). She doubted whether their father wanted to seek to control his daughters by placing them in secure but stifling marriages, ensuring they remained within the confines of societal expectations. Aunt Lila explains that the match was made within the rigid framework of societal norms. She notes that Monisha was married into a respectable, middle-class Congress family. Her parents knew that Jiban was completely incompatible with her intellectual and emotional needs. Yet, this mismatch made them the "right" choice in their father's eyes. He likely believed that such a stable and conventional setting would suppress Monisha's introspective and unconventional traits. They thought this would eventually steer her toward an "acceptable" life (201). This decision reflects the deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset in the society. A woman's dreams and individuality are disregarded for social respectability. Instead of recognizing Monisha's need for a partner who matched her depth and aspirations, her father saw marriage as a means to ensure she adapted to societal expectations. Gender bias is evident in how her fate was decided without any regard for her preferences.

Monisha's meek resignation to this fate speaks volumes about the oppressive nature of patriarchy. Her passive endurance is not necessarily a sign of consent but

rather an ingrained response to a system that offers no alternatives. Women are rarely given the space to question or resist. Monisha is no exception. Her silence is not submission but an acceptance of the roles imposed upon her, where rebelliousness is neither an option nor a path to freedom.

Aunt Lila mocks men's role in relationships, emphasizing their inadequacy in understanding women's emotional needs: "Men? But what do they know of the matters of the heart?" She continues, "They know nothing of course, inadequate at that as at everything else, but they like to imagine they run everything, so women ought to just go on and let them imagine it while they get on with the work" (202). This remark describes Lila's critical stance on the dynamics of male-dominated relationships, suggesting that women are left to bear the emotional burden while men cling to their false sense of control.

Amla felt a deep sense of sadness and alienation when she saw her sister Monisha seemed trapped in the confines of her marriage and the oppressive atmosphere of the city, a stark contrast to the vibrant, independent woman she once knew. Once when Amla went to visit her sister Monisha at her husband's home, they conversed for a while and it grew late. As Amla prepared to leave on her own, the family members of Monisha reacted with disbelief and concern, saying, "Impossible! At this hour of the day? A young woman travels alone by public transport? No, no, not in our house, such things are not done" (162). Their response underscores the protective, conservative attitudes that govern their lives. It indicates the constraints placed on women, even in seemingly ordinary situations. As a result, Amla was not allowed to travel alone, and the family made arrangements for her to be accompanied by others to ensure her safe return home. This illustrates the societal expectations and gender norms that restrict Amla's independence, reinforcing the idea that a woman,

even an educated and capable one like Amla, is still subject to the protective measures of those around her.

Amla and Nirode's sibling bond is filled with both affection and underlying tension. Amla often seeks Nirode's advice but feels disappointed by his inability to understand her deeper emotional struggles. When Amla shares that she came to Kolkata to work as a commercial artist in an advertising firm, she expresses her frustration with Nirode for not reading her letters. Nirode is surprised by seeing how quickly Amla has understood the oppressive nature of the city. Curious about Nirode's social life in the city, Amla asks, "Is it difficult to make friends in Calcutta?" (157). Nirode responds with a mocking smile, his expression tinged with sadness as he dismisses the idea of genuine, loyal friendships in the city. His response reflects the isolation that the city fosters, where superficial connections often replace deep, meaningful bonds, leaving Amla with a sense of the city's cold, transactional nature.

During her stay in Kolkata, Amla encounters Dharma, a self-taught painter who carries with him the burden of personal and societal struggles. Dharma initially painted only landscapes or scenes of nature, but after Amla began visiting him, he became interested in portraiture. Although Amla seems to attract him, it is evident that Dharma views her more as a model than as an individual, though he appears capable of understanding her deeply. This is essential for an artist, as true portraits require insight into the subject's soul. While Amla is initially drawn to Dharma, she soon realizes that falling in love with a married man would lead to nothing but heartache. Her decision to step away is influenced by both Nirode's resistance and, more importantly, her own practical sensibility. This action underscores her distinctive nature, setting her apart from Nirode and Monisha. She does not succumb to confusion or hopelessness, nor does she resort to suicide. As R.S. Singh observes,

Amla serves as a bridge between nature and society, demonstrating how both Kalimpong and Kolkata harm human relationships (33).

The Voice of Mother

The mother is deeply concerned about all her four children. She worries about Monisha's claustrophobic life in Jiban's family, Amla's new life in the city, and Arun's plans to settle in England with his lover who is a nurse, never to return. However, her greatest concern is for Nirode. She is willing to offer him help, but Nirode, resolute in his pride rejects her offers. In a letter to Amla, their mother confesses that her decision to leave the complex life of Kolkata to live in isolation may have created a distance between her and her children's struggles. Nirode's strained relationship with her is further evident in his rejection of her attempts to offer support, both emotionally and financially. He never read her letters or accepted her financial assistance. He disapproved of her relationship with Major Chadha after their father's death. Nirode believed that if his mother became involved with someone else, she would no longer give him the love he felt he deserved. These unresolved tensions within him show his resentment towards life.

Monisha's tragic suicide deeply impacts Amla and Nirode. Mother's composed response to this tragedy made Nirode tell Amla that,

> She is Kali, the goddess and the demon are one. She has watched the sacrifice and she is satisfied... See how still and controlled her lips and hands are because she has at last seized and mastered death- she has become Kali. (258)

Despite the death of her daughter, their mother remains calm and composed. This made her embody the figure of Kali, the goddess of both creation and destruction. Nirode continues to speak about their mother, stating,

> Mother- Kali is the mother of Bengal, she is the mother of us all. Once she has given birth to us, and now she must also deal with our deaths. I see now that she is everything we have been fighting against, you and Monisha and I. And she is also everything we have fought for. She is our consciousness and our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest- and all that is unmanifest. (258)

Nirode views the mother as a complex and contradictory force, representing both the good and the evil, the known and the unknown.

> She is not merely good, she is not merely evil- she is good and she is evil. She is our knowledge and our ignorance. She is everything to which we are attached, she is everything from which we will always be detached. She is reality and illusion, she is the world and she is maya. (259)

Nirode believes that their mother embodies Kali, and he feels that she would sentence him to death for his rebellion against her. The mother remains a mysterious figure whose true nature is never exposed. Despite her deep love for her children, she possesses an unyielding strength, remaining composed even after her daughter's death. Her resilience prevents her from being shattered by tragedy, yet her children struggle to understand her.

Relationships in Kolkata

The four central characters, Nirode, Monisha, Amla, and their mother offer distinct and complicated relationship dynamics. Each character's experiences and views provide a lens through which Desai explores different dimensions of their relationships.

Nirode consciously chooses to remain unmarried. His contempt for marriage is strikingly evident in his reflections, where he says that it is destructive. This could be seen in a part of the narrative which describes, "Marriage, bodies, touches and torture-

he shuddered- and indeed all that he had to do with marriage was destructive, negative and decadent. He could waste no time on it" (24). This rejection of traditional norms reflects his aversion to the societal constructs of intimacy and commitment. The relationship Nirode has with each character in the novel is complicated and strained. Right from the beginning of the novel, it becomes evident that Nirode harbours jealousy toward his younger brother. Nirode notices the strength and determination reflected in Arun which is absent in his life. The novel emphasizes the complex emotions he feels toward Arun which is a mix of love, hatred, and envy:

> Thinking how he envied Arun, how this envy was corroded with hate, and yet, how he loved him. But above all, he envied-oh, how he envied him- for being on the train, speeding away from this dark pandemonium into the openness and promise of the bare country, crossing the land from east to west, from the murky Bay of Bengal to the vast Arabian Sea, to board a ship and set sail. (20)

Nirode's jealousy stems from his perception that Arun was their father's favourite. He considered himself to be relegated to the role of a perpetual failure who is unable to escape his feelings of inadequacy and resentment.

Nirode's relationship with his sisters, Monisha and Amla, lacks warmth and affection. An undercurrent of hostility is seen in his attitude toward them. Amla finds her time spent living with her brother and sister disheartening. She reflects on her disappointment:

> The golden days of sunshine and daisies had come to an end. In the shadow of her enigmatic brother and spectral sister, there was no light- only the gloom of a rainy winter evening and the apathy of an ancient, unchanging river. (157).

Amla's realization emphasizes the emotional hostility and the sense of isolation she feels within her familial relationships.

Monisha's marriage to Jiban lacks contentment. The disparity in their temperaments creates a gulf between them. Monisha, with her intellectual and contemplative nature, finds it difficult to connect with Jiban. Jiban who is a realistic and ordinary man raised with patriarchal values is unable to understand the needs of his wife. Their relationship is further strained by the burdens imposed by the joint family in which they live. Monisha feels suffocated at Jiban's home and she notes,

> Look at me, my surroundings, my possessions. My black wardrobe, my family, my endless duties-serving fresh chapattis to the uncles as they eat, listening to my mother-in-law detail the many ways to cook fish, being Jiban's wife. If all this were swept away, what remained would be fragile, small, transparent, and vulnerable. But somehow, it would be easier to bear. (113)

The oppressive nature within the joint family is further echoed through the voice of a young boy who shares the house with Monisha. He expresses his frustration to her by saying,

> There are so many uncles, aunts, and cousins in this house, and all of them have guests and visitors constantly coming and going. If I try to talk to them, my father says, 'Go to your room and study.' If I stay in my room to study, my mother scolds me, 'Why don't you come and show some respect to them?' I end up knowing nothing, and they still complain that I know nothing. This joint family system is flawed; it makes it so hard to focus on my studies and pass my exams. Preparing for finals isn't easy-last year, twenty-seven boys from our school failed. (165)

Through these observations, the novel highlights the difficulties encountered by family members living in a joint family. Monisha began to retreat into her memories as a means of escaping her current reality. She vividly recalls her time with

Jiban at his previous posting when they were away from the oppressive confines of the city and the joint family. She records,

> The solitude of the jungles there, the shimmering shadows of the bamboo groves, and the ground scattered with large, fallen leaves. The serene majesty of the elephant we rode through the wilderness. Jiban away on tour, leaving me alone with myself- no visitors, no interruptions. (166)

Monisha is conscious of the vast emotional and cultural divide that exists between her and her husband's family. Her diary entries capture the internal struggles that she tries to fight and the bareness of her marital relationship.

> There is nothing in my bond with Jiban; it is marked only by loneliness and an unrelenting desperation to succeed. Once, it drove me into the most tumultuous pleasures and pains, fears and regrets, but it will never hold such power over me again. (167).

Through these reflections, Monisha's inner turmoil and the isolation she experiences in her married life are brought to light.

Unlike Nirode and Monisha, Amla is an artist by profession, who is eager to explore life to its fullest. When she comes to Kolkata to pursue her career, she meets her brother's friend Dharma who was also a painter. Their relationship begins as a friendship but soon Amla develops a romantic interest towards Dharma. Amla enjoyed spending time in his studio where they shared their artistic interests which brought them close. Dharma found inspiration in Amla and expressed a desire to capture her essence in a portrait. However, he fails to complete the painting. Gradually Amla began to see their bond for what it truly was. She realizes that her experiences with Dharma were:

> Only a portion of a dream world, real only by reflection. It had not been illuminated by the cheerful sun of her childhood but by the supernatural vision of those who live always underground, in the dark. Now she awoke to reality, and the curiously lustrous and isolated world of Dharma retreated to a bitter latitude. (230)

Her awakening to the truth is deepened when she discovers that Dharma is married and has a child. Amla learns about his wife, Gita Dev, who spends most of her time immersed in prayers. This revelation marks a turning point for Amla. She broke her relationship with Dharma, grounding her in the realities of life.

The mother is frequently referenced throughout the novel and she remains a mysterious figure. The mother's presence is felt strongly through her letters to her children. She shares her care and concern for each of them. However, Nirode harbours resentment towards her, suspecting her of having a relationship with Major Chadha after the death of their father. As a result, he rarely reads her letters and refuses to respond to them. He distances himself emotionally and rejects any financial support she might offer, despite his financial struggles.

The other siblings, in contrast, engage with their mother's letters, valuing her connection. The mother worries deeply about her children: Nirode, the wandering son struggling to find success; Monisha, whose intellectual brilliance is stifled by her suffocating life in a joint family with her husband Jiban; Arun, who has fallen for a nurse in England and seems unlikely to return; and Amla, the youngest, who is adjusting to life in Kolkata and its unfamiliar environment.

In a letter to Amla, the mother expresses regret for moving to Kalimpong, acknowledging that staying in Kolkata might have been better for her children's sake. After Monisha's tragic death, the mother displays a composed exterior, showing no

overt emotions. This stoicism unnerves Nirode, who is overwhelmed by a sense of fear. He perceives his mother as embodying dualities- both benevolent and malevolent, wisdom and ignorance, attachment and detachment. For him, she represents the eternal paradox of reality and illusion, the material and the spiritual. Reflecting on her essence, he concludes, “She is not merely good, she is not merely evil-she is both” (259). Nirode ultimately sees her as a manifestation of the goddess Kali. He envisions her as a force capable of passing judgment and even sentencing him to death.

The Thirdspace dynamics in Kolkata

In *Voices in the City*, Kolkata’s Firstspace is vividly portrayed through its busy streets, decaying colonial architecture, and bustling neighbourhoods. The city’s geography includes the Ganges River, Howrah station, and markets which form the physical backdrop against which the characters’ lives unfold. Kolkata’s streets and buildings symbolize the city’s struggle to reunite with its eminent past and its present realities. These structures are described in detail by Desai in her novel. For the siblings Nirode, Monisha, and Amla, the physicalness of Kolkata becomes an external manifestation of their internal conflicts. Nirode detects his life in the city of Kolkata:

> Calcutta, Calcutta- like rattle of the reckless train; Calcutta, Calcutta-the very pulse beat in its people’s veined wrists. The streets where slaughtered sheep hung beside bright tinsel tassels to adorn oiled black braids, and a syphilitic beggar and his entire syphilitic family came rolling down on borrows, like the survivors of an atomic blast, then paused to let a procession of beautifully laundered Bengalis in white carry their marigold decked Durga-or Lakshmi or Saraswati, or Kali-on their shoulders down to the Ganges, amidst drums and fevered chanting... Odors of naphtha, gasoline and rotting mangoes, cinders

> and frangipani, open gutters, and temple marigold mingled together. Calcutta, Calcutta, prayed for its victims, and Calcutta stirred as though in answer, as though it were a living spirit...The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death. (42-43)

The city's crowded streets and relentless activity also emphasize its chaotic nature. Desai's descriptions of Kolkata's noise, congestion, and vibrant public life capture its dynamism. She makes it a living entity that mirrors the characters' pulse and energy. For Nirode, the city's frantic pace parallels his inner turmoil and his existential anguish. While for Amla, Kolkata initially represents a world of possibilities but soon she realizes the underbelly of the city. However, the overwhelming presence of Firstspace often becomes a source of suffocation for Monisha. The domestic entrapment she undergoes mirrors the oppressive physical environment of the city. She writes in her diary,

> There is no diving underground in so overpopulated a burrow, even the sewers and gutters are chocked, they are full of. Of what? Of grime, darkness, poverty, disease? Is that what I mean- or the meretriciousness, the rapacity, the uneasy lassitude of conscience? Has this city a conscience at all, this Calcutta that holds its head between its knees and grins toothlessly up at me from beneath a bottom black with the dirt that it sits on?... There are no ethics in these houses of trade any more than there is anything aesthetic in the little plaster idols... I see another face of this devil city, a face that broods over the smouldering fire-a dull, vacant, hopeless face. The rickshaw coolie, the street sweeper, the tanner, the beggar child with his limbs cut off at the joints... two faces-one rapacious, one weary gaze at me from every direction. (116-117)

Monisha perceives Kolkata as a city of contradictions. She questions if the city even has a moral conscience. To her, the city is a devil who captures people and traps them between hope and despair. Monisha's comments on city life are remarkable for their accuracy:

> I am so tired of it, the crowd. In Calcutta, it is everywhere. Deceptively, it is a quiet crowd- passive, but distressed. Till there is reason for anger, and then a sullen yellow flame of bitterness and sarcasm starts up, and it is vicious, mordant. Not the anger that brings up two fistfuls of defiance, or makes the curved dagger flourish, but an anger that broods and festers like a pus-filled boil. This boil erupts, every now and then, now that the weather is so hot, the heart so parched. (120)

The city's presence becomes a mirror of the character's struggles. It reveals how these characters try to embrace the city even though they are entrapped in it. The descriptions of Kolkata city in the novel emphasize its dynamic physicality which shows it as a Firstspace.

Kolkata, as a former colonial capital, has a rich layered history to its credit. This history is not only visible in its architectural structure but also in the social structures and cultural ethos. For Nirode, Kolkata represents a space of intellectual richness and cultural vibrancy, yet it also symbolizes stagnation and failure. Nirode's friend Jit talks about Nirode that "… he's unique in this city of commerce. He's unique in this city of compromise and relative values." (178). The urban space has influenced his existential conflicts by inspiring and frustrating his creative desires.

For Monisha, the city's Secondspace is tied to the patriarchal norms and traditional values that govern her life. The domestic space of her husband's joint family home becomes a symbol of entrapment for her. In this space, she reflects on

her feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Her intellectual and emotional longing for freedom contrasts with the oppressive realities of her environment. Her reflections on Kolkata express her desire to be alienated from the city. Monisha struggles to reconcile the oppressive physical and social structures around her. She craves to be independent and have a space that she could call hers. Her emotional fragility and the struggles she faces in a rigidly traditional society make her life miserable in the city. In her husband's home, she felt trapped, as if she were in a prison more than a home. Monisha gradually lost the smart intelligent girl she used to be and was transformed into someone who she never wanted to be.

Amla on her arrival to Kolkata had a dreamy view of the city. She envisioned it as a vibrant cultural hub where she could carve out a meaningful identity and pursue an artistic career. However, her perception evolves as she encounters the stark realities beneath the city's surface. The artistic appeal she initially associated with Kolkata begins to clash with its moral contradiction. The promises that Amla thought that Kolkata offered fade under its lived realities, leaving Amla with a nuanced understanding of the city's dual nature.

The mother's interpretation of the city reflects both her sense of responsibility and regret as a parent. Through the letters to her children, she expresses a longing for familial unity. She expresses a sense of guilt for leaving Kolkata for Kalimpong, believing that she should have stayed to support her children. For her, Kolkata embodies her struggles of becoming a single mother, her responsibility to raise her children, and abandoning her desires. The city becomes a metaphor for her inner conflict. She performs a dual role as a nurturing figure and a source of unresolved tensions within the family. The mother's engagement with Kolkata as a Secondspace

reflects her complex, layered relationship with her children. The city becomes a projection of both her strengths and her vulnerabilities.

In *Voices in the City*, Kolkata's Thirdspace emerges as a complex entity that reflects and shapes the characters' internal conflicts and identities. Nirode perceives the city as both a tormentor and a mirror of his struggles. He describes it as an oppressive yet eerily alive space. While the city's physical decay mirrors his sense of personal failure, its cultural richness serves as a source of his inspiration and intellectual rendezvous. Nirode's rejection of conventional family ties and societal expectations further anchors him in a Thirdspace where the city serves as both a stage for his rebellion and a symbol of his entrapment. This hybrid space of lived experience captures the complexity of his relationship with Kolkata.

Trapped in the oppressive confines of her husband Jiban's joint family home, Monisha's daily existence reflects the claustrophobic domestic life. The monotony of household duties and a lack of understanding from those around her becomes a Thirdspace for Monisha where her reality and perception merge. Monisha's observations of Kolkata amplify her sense of entrapment and mirror her own feelings of stagnation and hopelessness. She yearns for freedom even though she is bound by societal expectations ultimately making her Thirdspace a reflection of her mental struggles and unfulfilled dreams.

Amla's journey in the city further illustrates the complexity of Thirdspace. Her initial fascination with Kolkata's artistic and cultural life reflects its vibrant potential, while her eventual disenchantment reveals the challenges posed by its patriarchal structures and societal constraints. Amla's journey becomes a negotiation between her creative aspirations and the city's complex, often oppressive, realities. Her lived

experience in the city makes Kolkata a deeply personal and transformative space for her.

To the mother, the city symbolizes her connection and separation from her family. The mother's composed response to Monisha's death and her resilience to societal pressures reflect her inner strength. In this Thirdspace, the mother embodies the paradox of nurturing and detachment just like the city.

The concepts of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace encapsulate the characters' struggles with identity, isolation, resilience, and survival portraying the city that serves as both a literal and metaphorical battleground for individuals to design their life.

Kolkata's Uniqueness amidst Stereotypes

Nirode, as an aspiring writer struggles to reconcile his ambitions with the harsh realities of the city. His perception of Kolkata as a city of broken dreams aligns perfectly with the stereotype of the city as a place of despair. In contrast, Monisha's life in a traditional joint family underscores another stereotype of Kolkata's stronghold of orthodox values. Her oppressive domestic life reinforces the notion of Kolkata as a space where personal freedoms are curtailed due to patriarchal values. While Amla, the youngest sibling, initially views the city with curiosity and optimism soon becomes disillusioned by its bleakness and deterioration.

Despite these stereotypes, Desai portrays Kolkata's distinctiveness. The city emerges as a dynamic space, exerting an influence on the characters' identities and choices. Kolkata's artistic setting provides a platform for aspiring artists to express their creativity. Nirode's engagement with the city's literary circles reflects Kolkata's role as a hub for intellectual discourse and discussions. Similarly, Amla's initial fascination with the city emphasizes its cultural richness and artistic nature. The novel

also captures the city’s resilience, evident in its ability to endure and adapt despite its defects. The chaotic streets and busy markets which are vividly described in the narrative, evoke a sense of hustle and bustle, countering the image of Kolkata as a withering city. This juxtaposition of deterioration and liveliness adds depth to the city’s character, making it more than just a collection of stereotypes.

Conclusion

In *Voices in the City*, Desai captures the essence of Kolkata which serves as the novel's setting and helps in the formation of characters in the novel. The city is depicted as a place overshadowed by despair, where human emotions, dreams, and individuality seem stifled. Yet, for those who have chosen to live there, it becomes an inescapable reality that would bind them to its chaotic pace.

Chapter 3

The City of Rallies

Introduction

Delhi has a rich historical legacy, having served as the seat of power for various dynasties throughout history. Today, it remains a vibrant metropolis, drawing people from all walks of life for cultural, educational, and economic opportunities while exhibiting stark social and economic disparities.

This chapter examines Delhi as represented in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, focusing on the portrayal of the Emergency period. This novel provides a nuanced critique of one of the most tumultuous political phases in India's post-independence history. Delhi is not merely a backdrop in the story, but an active entity reflecting the broader political upheaval of the time. The political turmoil of the Emergency, imposed between 1975 and 1977, is embedded in the urban space and greatly affects the lives of its citizens. The city's regime of fear, repression, and authoritarian control influences the lived experiences of the characters, shaping their navigation through the urban landscape in diverse ways.

The study delves into how the Emergency Period shaped relationships, social structures, and the space of the city, making it an essential aspect of understanding the interplay between political history and urban space. Through this exploration, the chapter aims to explore how the novel provides a compelling representation of Delhi as a city intertwined with governance, resistance, and survival, offering insights into the sociopolitical dynamics of the time.

History of Delhi

The earliest mention of a settlement in Delhi is found in the renowned epic, *Mahabharata*. This narrative revolves around the great war believed to have taken place

between two brothers of the Kuru dynasty: the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Kuru dynasty was an ancient clan in India. Archaeological evidence suggests that the story's backdrop dates back to approximately 1000 BCE, based on painted greyware artifacts unearthed at the site of their kingdom (Narain 9; Bhatnagar 30). The Pandavas' legendary capital, Indraprastha, is thought to have been situated along the Yamuna River in present-day Delhi (Ghosh xiii; Narain 8-9). Until recently, a village named Indarpat existed at the site (Narain 5).

According to Catherine B. Asher in *Epigraphic Indica*, Delhi has been continuously inhabited since at least the sixth century BC, although the authentic history of ancient Delhi is unavailable. Historical narratives of that period are predominantly derived from traditional accounts and scriptural sources. The etymology of Delhi remains uncertain, with various interpretations surrounding its origin and foundation. During the thirteenth century, Delhi, referred to as Arabic *Oahli* or Persian *Ohilli* (18), was recognized as the capital of the *Dar-ul-Mulk* of Hindustan. This term signified the capital of the entire kingdom of Hindustan or the territories of Hindustan, distinct from the regions of Hind, which often referred specifically to areas like Awadh and Delhi. The spatial significance of *Ohilli* evolved over time; for example, what was once known as Dhilli in relation to the Qutb complex came to be called "Old Ohilli" by the reign of Sultan Jalaluddin Khalji, while the Khalji city became known as *Shahr-i-Nau*, or the "New City" (20). Ibn Battuta described Delhi as,

> The city of Dihli is of vast extent and population, and made up now of four neighbouring and contiguous towns. One of them is the city called by this name, Dihli; it is the old city built by the infidels and captured in the year 584(A.D. 1188) ... I have myself seen this date inscribed on the mihrab of the great mosque there. He told me also that it had been captured by the Amir

> Qutb ai-Din Aibak, who was called by the title of Sipah Salar, the meaning of which is 'commander of the armies' who was one of the mamluks of the exalted Sultan Shihab ai-Din Muhammad ibn Sam the Ghurid, king of Ghazna and Khurasan, the same who conquered the kingdom of Ibrahim, son of the warrior Sultan Mahmud ibn Subuktakin, who began the conquest of India. (Gibb 320)

The name Delhi likely originates from *Ohilji* or *Dhili*, as well as the Sanskritized form *Ohilika* (Al-Umari, 35), derived from the vernacular *Ohilli* (Pushpa Prasad 13). The ancient town, constructed by idol worshippers, was also known as Yoginipura, named after *yoginis*, the tantric female deities, suggesting its significance as a site of pilgrimage (14). Another prevalent belief attributes the name to Raja Dhilu (or Dilu), who is said to have established a city in the region around 50 BCE and named it after himself. However, the precise period of his reign remains uncertain, and this explanation is not universally accepted.

Linguistic and historical interpretations suggest that the name "Delhi" may have originated from the Prakrit term *Dhillika*, meaning "loose," potentially referencing the city's foundations, or from *Dehali*, meaning "threshold," symbolizing its strategic location as an entry point to the Gangetic Plain (Cohen 513; Austin and Jasol). Given the absence of definitive historical evidence, the exact origins of the city's name continue to be contested within academic discourse.

Following the decline of Indraprastha, Delhi diminished to a provincial city during the reigns of the Mauryas and subsequent dynasties (Spear 5; Bhatnagar 31). The region regained prominence under the Tomar King Anangpal, who established a city in Delhi around 1020 AD, marking its reappearance in Indian history (Bhatnagar

32; Spear 5). Since then, the city has undergone cycles of destruction and reconstruction (Bhatnagar 32-35).

In 1192, Mohammed Ghori defeated Prithvi Raj Chauhan, initiating the rule of Muslim Sultans in Delhi. From that point, the city emerged as the political and administrative hub of the empire (Spear 6-7). After Ghori's death, the Delhi Sultanate was established by Qutab-ud-din Aibak, a regional governor of northern India. The kingdom's capital was situated in southern Delhi, where the Qutub Complex now stands as a major landmark. Among its attractions, the Qutub Minar is renowned as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Singh 42; "WHC List"). Following Aibak's dynasty, various Turkish dynasties, including the Tughlaq, Sayyid, and Lodi dynasties, ruled and declined in the region. During this period, significant Indo-Muslim cultural integration took place, leading to the emergence of Urdu as a language and Sikhism as a religion.

In the early 16th century, Babur launched invasions into northern India, ultimately establishing the Mughal dynasty in 1526 after multiple attempts. Babur, a Turko-Mongol Muslim from Central Asia, became the dynasty's founder. In 1648, the fifth Mughal emperor, Shah Jahan, built a new capital in Delhi, naming the fortified city Shahjahanabad after himself. However, the city's prosperity was short-lived as the Mughal Empire began to decline with the Marathas' military successes in the late 17th century. Subsequently, the British Empire extended its influence across India (Richard 12).

The British rule in India is divided into two phases: the East India Company's administration and the period of direct British governance. The Company's rule lasted until the Indian Rebellion of 1857, also known in India as the First War of Independence. After the rebellion, the British Raj was established, lasting until India's independence in 1947.

During the British Raj, Delhi underwent significant transformations. Initially, the colonial administration relocated its centre from Delhi to Calcutta, reducing Delhi's status to part of the Punjab Province in British India. The second major change occurred with the inauguration of the Delhi Railway Station in 1903. This advancement in transportation turned the city into a prominent trade hub for both wholesale and retail commerce across the subcontinent, a role it continues to play even today (Spear 20).

The third transformation was marked by the creation of New Delhi. In 1911, George V announced the relocation of the British Raj’s capital back to Delhi from Calcutta. Over the next two decades, New Delhi was constructed to the south of Shahjahanabad. This led to the older part of the city being referred to as Old Delhi, the Old City, and similar names.

The contrasting landscapes of Old Delhi and New Delhi reflect their distinct identities as their names suggest. Old Delhi, also known as Shahjahanabad, was founded by Emperor Shah Jahan in 1638 (Shah Jahan, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). It was built to serve as the new capital of the Mughal Empire, replacing Agra. The city was strategically situated along the banks of the Yamuna River, and its construction was a monumental task that included grand palaces, mosques, and marketplaces. It exemplifies a creative blend of Hindu and Muslim architectural influences. The “long sweeping curve” of the fort walls reflects Hindu design, while Persian influences are evident in the geometric layouts and symmetrical structures, including gardens and boulevards (Blake 157; Noe 239-243). The most famous landmark of Old Delhi is the Red Fort, which served as the imperial residence. The city is further characterized by its maze-like alleys, diverse land uses, and traditional housing styles (Sivaramakrishana 32). In contrast, New Delhi is renowned for its expansive avenues bordered by double rows of trees, spacious plazas, amphitheaters, and landscaped gardens Designed by the

British architect Edwin Lutyens during the colonial period, it is often referred to as "Lutyens' Delhi" (24).

Delhi gained independence from British rule in 1947. New Delhi was officially designated as the nation's capital. In 1955, the State Reorganization Commission recommended that "from the perspective of law and order, social life, trade and commerce, and public utility services, Old Delhi and New Delhi now form one unified entity, making it unrealistic to distinguish between the two" ((Planning Department 61-62). The Government of India accepted these recommendations, and Delhi was subsequently declared a Union Territory. It was later renamed and is now officially recognized as the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

The Partition of India brought significant demographic changes to the city. Nearly half of Delhi's Muslim population relocated to Pakistan, while thousands of Hindu and Sikh refugees from West Punjab, Sindh, and Kashmir sought shelter in Delhi. The government established temporary camps to house the refugees, primarily in areas such as Kingsway Camp, Tibia College, Karol Bagh, and Shahdara (Datta 445-446). Kingsway Camp was the largest, accommodating around 30,000 individuals. In 1970, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) renamed the area Guru Tegh Bahadur Nagar. However, many locals continue to refer to it as "Kingsway Camp," with a prominent market still called "Camp Market". Between 1947 and 1951, Delhi's population surged as refugees and rural labourers arrived searching for employment. This rapid growth transformed Delhi into the eighth-largest metropolis in the world by population ("Delhi Transformed").

While most middle-class Muslims migrated to Pakistan during the Partition, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds remained in India (Ehlers and Krafft 95). The local Muslim population still represents an economically marginalized

segment of society. In contrast, many Sikh refugees achieved success in business, often attributed to their strong work ethics and hard work (Channa 178; Datta 451). Datta elucidates the cultural and economic influence of Punjabi refugees on Delhi as follows:

> One might be tempted to exaggerate the role Panjabi refugees have played in the transformation of Delhi that has taken place since 1947. Even without the influx of Panjabis, the metropolitan area would have grown. And yet it is undeniable that the hardy Punjabi, displaced from Pakistan, has made a world of difference to the development of Delhi. (Datta 443)

Delhi today is defined by its racial, religious, and cultural diversity. This multiplicity often leads to conflicts of interest among various groups. For instance, the Anti-Sikh Riots of 1984 followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984. Another earlier example is the communal unrest between a Ramlila procession and a Muharram procession in 1886. On that occasion, both processions coincided on the same day, resulting in clashes between the two communities. In response to this, the British colonial administration imposed a ban on processions in Chandni Chowk (Narayani Gupta 131-134). These incidents highlight the potential for conflicts inherent in this heterogeneous city. The current peaceful coexistence in the city is a product of numerous compromises and adjustments made among its diverse groups.

In literature, Delhi has long been a fertile ground for writers who reflect the complexities of urban life and its socio-political dynamics. Notable writers like Khushwant Singh, Raja Rao, and Ismat Chughtai have contributed significantly to Indian literature, often drawing on the city's rich history, complex identities, and the convergence of tradition and modernity in their works. In cinema, Delhi is not only a central location in many Bollywood films but also a source of inspiration for filmmakers and storytellers. The city's diverse culture, historical backdrop, and vibrant

urban life have been vividly portrayed in popular films such as *Peepli Live* and *Delhi-6* ("Khwaja Ahmad Abbas"). Delhi can thus be seen as a space that embodies not only diversity but also the multifaceted intersection of art, culture, history, politics, and social dynamics, where various identities and narratives converge to shape the city's unique character.

Literature Review

The critical discourses on Sahgal's works speak volumes about the writer's extensive engagement with pertinent socio-political dilemmas of the time, and the intricacies of gender dynamics in addition to a detailed examination of her distinctive narrative techniques. Jasbir Jain's monograph *Nayantara Sahgal* (1978), later revised in 1994, initiated an exhaustive exploration of Sahgal's literary contributions as a novelist. Being the staunch political commentator that Sahgal is, her versatility as a writer has been pivotal in the production of significant non-fictional narratives. A.V. Krishna Rao's *Nayantara Sahgal: A Study of Her Fiction and Non-Fiction* offers a detailed analysis of both aspects of her oeuvre.

Comprehensive research, comparative and otherwise, has been undertaken on Sahgal's literary corpus to uncover the feminist consciousness and progressive stance on personal liberty as the defining features of her works. While Shyam M. Asnani, in *Critical Response to Indian English Fiction*, situates Sahgal's works within the larger context of Indian English literary traditions, Neena Arora's *Nayantara Sahgal and Doris Lessing: A Feminist Study in Comparison*, expands the analytical scope transnationally, drawing parallel and exploring the feminist undercurrents shared by both writers.

A nuanced exploration of the writer's employment of specific narrative techniques, thematic concerns and character development is undertaken by Harin

Majithia in *The Novels of Nayantara Sahgal: A Prismatic View.* Sahgal's approach to voicing perspectives that challenge or transcend the norm, particularly in her depiction of characters' relationships, —both extramarital and premarital —, has been examined by Deepak Kamboj in *Nayantara Sahgal: The Novelist and Her Themes.* Kamboj's emphasis falls on Sahgal's portrayal of such relationships as avenues for personal growth rather than as moral transgressions. Another recurring core theme in Sahgal's writing is the notion of personal liberty in the face of political crisis, as emphasized by Vijay Kumar Chawla, in "A Study of Individuals' Search for Freedom and Self-Realisation Theme in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal".

Furthermore, female agency, feminist consciousness, and the negotiation of identity within patriarchal structures are other central thematic concerns of Sahgal's works extensively explored by critics. Sahgal's female protagonists are not passive, voiceless figures but individuals who exercise agency, challenge traditional norms, and adeptly navigate personal and political upheavals.

Sankar and Neelakandan's *Postmodern Feminist Ideology in Nayantara Sahgal's Select Novels - A Critical Study*, and Vikas Raval's *Politics of Feminist/Female Writing: A Study of the Select Novels of Nayantara Sahgal* offer constructive Feminist and Postmodernist readings of Sahgal's novels. While the former examines the evolving rights and struggles of Sahgal's female characters across three generations the latter serves as a blatant critique of the patriarchal ideology that perpetuates the inequalities in sexual politics.

Literary scholarship exclusively focusing on the dominant traits of resilience and adaptability in Sahgal's female protagonists has also broadened the scope of research in this field. Beulah Ranjit Singh's *Sahgal's Female Protagonists: Storm in Chandigarh and The Day in Shadow*, serves as a critical commentary on the

progressive and resolute nature of Sahgal's women, shaped by their strong desire and capacity for transformation despite societal constraints. Similarly, Nagaraju Mudhiri, in *Extant Female Temperament in Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us*, highlights the perseverance and adaptability of Sahgal's women as they confront the rigid socio-political obstacles in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Furthermore, thematic concerns such as the evolution of individual consciousness and the assertion of identity have been the subject of extensive scholarly discourse. Notably, Harin Majithia, in *Voice and Vision of Nayantara Sahgal as Reflected in Her Novels* foregrounds the visibility of character evolution garnered through self-awareness and conscious assertion of identity. This interpretation aligns with Kartheeswari's *Feministic Perspectives in Storm in Chandigarh and Rich Like Us*, where Sahgal's narratives, centred on the complexities faced by mismatched couples, are examined in terms of the rise of a feminist consciousness in response to unanticipated and uncalled for relationship dilemmas.

The intersection of feminist ideals with social structures and human relationships has also been a central theme in critical discussions. Iftikhar Hussain Lone's article, *Feminist Conscience in Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh*, delves into the complexities of human relationships, analysing how Sahgal critiques orthodox social norms and advocates for a more liberal, unconventional approach to life. Similarly, S. K. Yadav, in *Feminism in India and Nayantara Sahgal's Exile and Sharpened Sensibility* (2013), explores the depiction of marriage and home as sites of both fulfilment and conflict. He argues that Sahgal portrays these spaces as arenas where traditional gender roles clash with women's pursuit of self-identity and independence, often resulting in a metaphorical exile.

Advancing this interpretive framework, B. P. Sinha, in his book *Feminist Concept: A Study of Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction*, critically evaluates the problematic dimension of gender dynamics that results in marginalization of women through feminist lens. His work also assumes a postmodern stand to Sahgal's feminist discourse, offering a nuanced analysis of how gendered power structures operate in her fiction.

Additionally, the interplay of personal and political themes in Sahgal's works has been the subject of critical examination. Notably, Ramesh Kumar Gupta's "The Existential Predicament: A Linchpin in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow"* (2002), is an exploratory take on Sahgal's vision of an egalitarian society where the parameters of gender equality prevail in both private and public spheres. Similarly, Tikoo, in his article "*The Day in Shadow*: An Experiment in Feminist Fiction*"*, delves into the feminist themes of the novel while critiquing the socio-political conditions it portrays.

Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* has been a subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny in terms of its narrative structure, thematic dimension, character dynamics, and feminist undertones. The focal point of analysis in A. Singh's "Rich Like Us: Point of View as Narrative Strategy," has been the narrative technique employed by Sahgal, to creatively structure human experiences and enable meaningful communication with readers. Similarly, Lakshmi Sinha's comparative study of Sahgal's six novels, in "Nayantara Sahgal's Select: From *A Time to Be Happy* to *Rich Like Us*," is insightful in terms of the observations made on the assertive stance taken by the female protagonists against pervasive social inequalities.

Furthermore, critically exploring the representation of female characters and their resilience in the face of personal and political turmoil has been S. Varalakshmi's

"*Rich Like Us*: An Analysis," and Kiranjeet Kaur's "Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*: A Thematic Analysis." Asha Choubey's study, "Be Your Own Hero(ine): A Case Study of Sahgal's Sonali Ronade," delves into the psychological conflicts and frustrations experienced by Sonali, while Laxman Yadav, in "Nayantara Sahgal's Pro-Feminist Approach," highlights Sonali's resolute and emotionally independent nature. Similarly, Subash Chander's article "Feminism in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*" is a thorough exploration of the feminist perspectives embedded in the novel.

The novel's critique of patriarchal dominance is another crucial theme explored by scholars. P. Madhurima Reddy, in "A Critical Study of Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*," offers a scathing critique of the dominating and self-indulging nature of male characters in both familial and societal structures.

While numerous critical studies have examined the diverse themes within the novel, few have focused on Delhi as its central setting—the very space where the narrative unfolds. This study investigates the spatial dimensions of Delhi during the Emergency, analysing how the city's socio-political landscape shapes the plot and influences the destinies of the characters.

Sahgal's Delhi

Sahgal has skilfully captured the lives and settings of Delhi's affluent and aristocratic circles in her writings. Viewing this world from multiple perspectives, she offers readers a dual lens on the life of the upper class. As an insider herself, Sahgal portrays these characters and their lifestyles without the emotional detachment or biases of an outsider. Her novels often centre around the lives of wealthy entrepreneurs, government ministers, and executives of multinational corporations.

Sahgal herself has remarked, "... Delhi was just a name to me, a city where I had never been and which I could never think of as home" (Sahgal, *Prison and*

Chocolate Cake 85). These wealthy elites are unaccustomed to Delhi's essence as Sahgal once was. However, her perspective on this class is not one of opposition or resentment. Having been born into a privileged family as the daughter of Madam Vijayalakshmi Pandit and the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sahgal had direct exposure to Delhi's elite circles. This proximity allowed her to authentically depict the opulent neighbourhoods and political landscapes that define the upper-class experience in Delhi. Her writings provide a vivid picture of a society where politicians, diplomats, industrialists, and wealthy businessmen coexist alongside middle-class employees, blue-collar workers, and the impoverished labour force.

According to Sahgal, Delhi is a city that offers comfort primarily to its high-ranking officials, ministers, diplomats, and wealthy residents. These privileged groups enjoy luxuries such as "spacious lawns" and "smoothly running facilities," while the general populace struggles with persistent water shortages, power failures during the boiling summers, and unbearable heat (Sahgal, *New Delhi Diarist* 42). This stark divide between the privileged and the general populace underscores Sahgal's nuanced exploration of Delhi as a city of contrasts.

Emergency in Delhi

In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal intricately portrays the turbulence of the Emergency period in Delhi. The novel delves into the personal and social upheavals experienced by its characters, shedding light on how this volatile era reshapes their world, while also critiquing the erosion of the Civil Services which was once a respected pillar of governance.

C. Vijaysree points out that "Nayantara Sahgal chooses a very effective narrative device for the authentic portrayal of the contemporary socio-political chaos- the double perspective- the omniscient author's stance is altered by the participant

narrator viewpoints" (26). In *Rich Like Us*, Sonali, the protagonist, speaks with a poised yet incisive tone, offering a critical reflection on the Emergency period in India. Analysing the political climate with a sense of disillusionment, she perceives the public as passive participants in a superficial spectacle, resigned to the looming dynastic rule and the collective silence that accompanies it. As Sonali remarks, "… the line between politics and public service had become so indistinct in recent years that it was almost non-existent. The two realms were hopelessly entangled, with politicians interfering in administration…" (23). This insight further emphasizes the erosion of democratic processes and the deepening crisis in governance that shapes the novel's narrative.

Sonali notices that "The Emergency had introduced unexpected twists to policy, making the world's largest democracy resemble the very dictatorships we had once looked down upon" (26). As a dedicated civil servant, she refuses to succumb to political pressure. Her training equipped her with the discernment to evaluate policies from the perspective of public welfare, and she firmly opposes any decision that might harm the people.

In her role as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industries, Sonali rejects the proposed Happyola project, asserting that it neither aligns with government policies nor addresses any urgent national need. Despite mounting pressure from influential political figures, she stands by her decision, arguing that the project would result in financial losses for the country and drain its foreign exchange reserves. Her defiance, however, comes at a cost. Eventually, she was demoted and transferred to Uttar Pradesh, her home state, where no position matching her rank was available. Adding insult to injury, her former classmate, Ravi Kachru, is promoted to the very position she was forced to vacate.

This experience deepens Sonali's skepticism of the bureaucracy, once regarded as the 'steel frame' of governance. She condemns its decline, lamenting how officials, in pursuit of personal gains, have aligned themselves with political leaders. She remarks bitterly, "We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule… So long as it didn't touch us, we played along, pretending the Empress' new clothes were beautiful" (23-24).

In due course, Sonali discovers the real purpose behind the Happyola project. It was merely a front to divert attention from unlawful foreign business dealings. She realizes that "Happyola, a child of the Emergency, held a blanket import license, secretly storing car manufacturing equipment below ground while producing a fizzy brown drink above" (50). Her resistance to corruption reflects Sahgal's own criticism of the authoritarian rule during the Emergency, a period in which the democratic ideals that had won India its independence were ripped apart.

Through Sonali's character, Sahgal exposes the unethical nexus between politicians and bureaucrats that led to a moral crisis in governance. Yet, Sonali remains a person representing integrity in a compromised system. In an interview with Varalakshmi, Sahgal acknowledges this, stating, "She is a complete invention; she is my dream of what somebody would have done at that time" (13).

Ravi Kachru, a character who engages fervently in political manoeuvres, evolves into the "chief explainer of the Emergency" (31). He uses complex socio-economic terms while he speaks which makes his explanations hard to understand, not only for the general public but also for experts outside their own areas of study. The novel examines how civil servants are compelled to execute the unethical and irrational demands of their political leaders. It unveils the objectives of the Emergency and its impact on the lives of ordinary citizens.

A lawyer in the story provides a professional perspective, stating, "The constitution would have to be drastically amended, if not re-written, to give madam powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interest she had been battling against since infancy" (94). Here, "Madam" refers to the Prime Minister of India during the Emergency. This emphasizes the subtle yet significant protest against the Emergency, even within the authorities.

The supporters of the government referred to as "courtiers," idealized Emergency as a golden age under the leadership of "Mother-Tsar" (95). The implementation of the twenty-point program is accompanied by orchestrated rallies and delegations publicly expressing their admiration for the Prime Minister (81). The ironic tone in the narrative becomes evident in the description of this process:

> And the Emergency was so popular. You could tell by the delegations of teachers, lawyers, school children, and so on and so forth who went every day to congratulate the PM for declaring it… The general public were taken to the lawn. She took a chair and sat looking at the wall above the heads of those facing her… There wasn't time before an audience with the leader to think about anything because at any minute the door might open and the next person be asked to go in. (81)

The assertion of power during the Emergency significantly curtailed individual freedoms and suppressed dissent. The subjugation of figures like Kishori Lal and Jayaprakash Narayan asses the human cost of such oppression. Kishori Lal, a former researcher turned shopkeeper, struggles to cope with the trauma of being brutally whipped without justification, symbolizing the indiscriminate violence inflicted on ordinary citizens. He reflects on his suffering, stating, "Thank heavens whips were not what one calls torture" (207). However, the narrator exposes the

horrors of state-sanctioned brutality, referencing reports from Amnesty International that detail the global exchange of torture techniques across ideologies (207).

Henri Lefebvre's Right to the City theory becomes crucial in understanding how the Emergency stripped citizens of their fundamental rights. Lefebvre argues that urban inhabitants should have control over their spaces, actively shaping their cities rather than being subjected to hierarchical governance. However, during the Emergency, this right was denied. Political repression, mass sterilizations, and forced evictions were extensive, demonstrating how urban spaces were weaponized to serve state interests rather than the needs of the people. Sonali's horror at the treatment of prisoners, where police used acid-dipped needles to blind them, underscores the brutality of state control. She questions whether society's passive acceptance of such cruelty reflects "a collective will to cowardice" (35). The Emergency transformed cities into arenas of fear rather than spaces of empowerment, directly contradicting Lefebvre's vision of urban life as a space for participation and freedom.

Ram, a businessman rooted in traditional ethics, is married to two women: Mona, a devout and loyal Indian wife, and Rose, a foreigner who gradually assimilates into Indian traditions. Ram and Mona had a son, Dev who hated Rose. Dev violently attacks his father, leaving Ram paralyzed. Dev's insatiable greed for wealth leads him to commit forgery, withdrawing a significant sum of money and achieving overnight success. Rose critiques this unethical rise with biting sarcasm: "What you call entre-preneur-ship, how you pronounce it, is one minute you're nothing and the next minute, you're an entre-preneur and a bloomin' millionaire. Where's all this money come from all of a sudden, I'd like to know? I like maharajas better" (12). The city, rather than being an inclusive space of collective participation, is monopolized by those in power, reinforcing exclusionary systems. The Emergency

amplifies this injustice by favouring individuals like Dev, who manipulate financial structures to consolidate wealth while silencing rebel voices.

Rose, who uncovers the illicit storage of “black” money funnelled through “dummy companies and dealers who are going to exhibit the car when some models are ready” (236), becomes a direct threat to these corrupt operations. Her murder staged as a suicide, exemplifies how the city is shaped by intimidation rather than democratic access. The crime is executed seamlessly, with no one daring to question it, reflecting how political dominance erases accountability.

The urban elite manipulate both physical and symbolic spaces to maintain control. Dev’s unchecked rise, his ability to dictate narratives, and the silencing of Rose illustrate how urban space is not just a neutral backdrop but a product of hegemonic forces. Nishi, Dev’s submissive wife- whose name itself signifies “night”- further highlights this dynamic by justifying Rose’s alleged suicide to Sonali, leaving her with “a freezing baffling anger” (252). The city, instead of being a space of participation and justice, becomes a site where power is entrenched, and those who challenge it are eliminated. The urban landscapes turn out not to be merely physical entities but are continually produced and reproduced by the socio-political forces that govern them.

Another tragic victim of the oppressive Emergency depicted in the novel is the beggar, who serves as a stark reminder of the era’s brutality. He symbolizes the “citizen broken on the wheel for remembering their rights” (258) who reflects the suppression of marginalized voices. Once a sharecropper, he was subjected to horrific violence when a landlord’s men amputated his hand alongside another labourer, as a warning to those asserting their right to a fair share of the harvest. This act of cruelty underscores the systematic denial of the Right to the City, which advocates for

equitable participation in urban life. Instead of enjoying democratic access to resources, the beggar is reduced to a figure of suffering, cast out from the same socio-economic structures that should have protected him. Sonali, witnessing his plight, questions the deception of political change: "Power had changed hands, but what else had changed where he lived? If ever there had been an emergency, it was this" (258). Her reflection reveals how the Emergency deepened existing inequalities rather than addressing them.

The beggar serves as a touchstone, revealing the true nature of the people around him. Nishi reacts with fear and disgust, screaming and retreating from his presence, while Rose, in contrast, shows empathy by offering him food. Sonali, describes him as "the only sane person around" (221), and listens to him with deep compassion, empathising with his suffering as an injustice inflicted upon the powerless. Her kindness goes beyond passive sympathy as she helps him acquire artificial hands, transforming him into "a confident candidate for a new future with artificial hands" (257). This act aligns with Lefebvre's vision of reclaiming the Right to the City, where the marginalized regain power over their lives despite systemic oppression. Ultimately, the beggar becomes a living embodiment of the Emergency, representing both resilience and struggle for justice. The novel critiques how authoritarian rule denies the most vulnerable their right to urban life, reinforcing the idea that true change must extend beyond political transitions to include genuine social justice.

Negotiating Domestic Spaces

In *Rich Like Us*, the struggles begin from home. Here, home is more than just a shelter; it is a contested space where gender roles and power structures are negotiated. According to Lefebvre, space is both a product and a means of social

reproduction and in *Rich Like Us*, the home becomes a site where patriarchal authority and women empowerment collide. Homi Bhabha, drawing from Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and the World* explores the idea of the *unhomely*, where the boundaries between private and public spaces become blurred, creating a fragmented and disorienting experience. This overlapping of home and world reshapes the understanding of space, leading to an intersection of the intimate and the socio-political spaces. The novel navigates the dynamics of domestic space, where a significant portion of the action unfolds. Women in the novel must navigate this space, actively constructing and reconstructing their identities, as the home is not a place of stability but of constant renegotiation.

This spatial complexity reinforces the experiences of female characters, who exist in a liminal state both at home and in exile, neither fully belonging nor entirely excluded. The blurring of home and world reflects the broader socio-political reality of postcolonial India, where traditional structures are challenged by modern aspirations. As Lefebvre theorizes, space is not static but dynamic, shaped by historical and social forces. In Sahgal's narrative, the home embodies this dynamism, serving as both a personal refuge and a political battleground, reflecting the struggles of identity, independence, and power in society. Sonali's relationship with space demonstrates this pressure. Though she defines herself through her career rather than marriage, she still desires a personal space that reflects her identity: "I wanted my part of the house to look as different as possible from Kiran and Neel's... All I wanted was my own kind of rooms" (52). However, in a shared domestic space, individual requirements clash. Sonali's childhood was marked by a similar contestation of space, with her parents frequently disagreeing over household goods (168). This spatial tension extends beyond the physical structure of her home, as the political domination

of the Emergency affects the very space of her speech and self-expression. Sonali's sense of uncanniness emerges not just from her domestic space but from the larger political space of the nation. Her home, both a literal and figurative space, is marked by a sense of alienation.

Rose is aware of the connection between home and homeland while also navigating the complexities of space. The tension between her home and the political space of postcolonial India is central to her experience. Rose recognizes the manipulation of space by those in power, noting the lies and distortions used to justify autocratic rule. Her move to India is an attempt to find a home that contrasts sharply with the emotionally and materially deprived space of her upbringing (63). Yet, as she enters this new space, she encounters the difficulties of reconciling her desires with the expectations placed upon her by the political and social setting of postcolonial India. The physical and metaphorical spaces she inhabits which include the domestic space of her marriage, the national landscape of India during the Emergency, and the internal spaces of her identity are all in tension, mirroring the fragmented nature of postcolonial subjectivity.

In both Sonali and Rose's experiences, the concept of space is deeply intertwined with their sense of self and their relationships to both the private and public spaces. The home becomes a site of contestation, where personal identities are shaped and reshaped against the backdrop of larger political and social forces. The spatial dynamics in *Rich Like Us* reveal how the unhomely, in both literal and figurative terms, becomes a defining feature of existence. The private space of the home becomes a place where the complexities of national, social, and personal identities are negotiated and contested.

Initially, Rose perceives the house as a sanctuary that nurtures dreams and offers solace from the world's miseries. She imagines it as a space that fosters continuity and shields one from life's turmoil, embodying both body and soul (22). However, as Joshua Price, a British officer in the novel observes, the home is not simply a refuge for the women whose labour sustains it. Instead, it is a site of multifaceted experiences, where men find asylum, but women confront deeper struggles (23). Rose's idealized vision of home proves deceptive, as she quickly realizes that privacy and peacefulness remain out of reach. Soon she acknowledges the absence of personal space in the house in Lahore, even as it eventually becomes a place she identifies as home. Its high ceilings and interconnected rooms deny solitude, interpreting the domestic space as a fragmented and contested space. Despite their physical separation, Mona and Dev occupy the ground floor while Rose isolates herself upstairs. The sounds of Mona's religious gatherings constantly intrude upon the echoes of Ram's cocktail parties (229). There is a convergence of overlapping spatial practices, where domesticity becomes a battleground for cultural and ideological conflict.

Ironically, it is not the private domain of the home but the public space of the shop that Rose, as the second wife of Ram, can claim as her own (98). Lefebvre in the *Right to the City* explains how social hierarchies shape spatial practices, defining who has control over space and who remains marginalized. The home, often regarded as a place of identity formation, typically serves as a site of exclusion for women like Rose, reinforcing rigid socio-cultural boundaries. In contrast, the shop which is a public space becomes a site enabling Rose to carve out her own identity. Her act of engaging with Ram's father, Lalaji, within this public space becomes pivotal in her transition into the domestic space. Once she gains recognition in the shop, she is

formally acknowledged as “bahu” (daughter-in-law), a title that cements her position within the domestic structure (118). This moment of spatial negotiation is crucial for Rose’s broader acceptance into the Indian national identity, distancing her from her colonial past (127).

The house in Lahore transcends its role as a mere dwelling to become a microcosm of the nation itself, reflecting shifting socio-political dynamics. Lalaji’s prayer meetings create an inclusive space where distinctions between class and status momentarily dissolve. In these gatherings, the elite and the working class coexist, blurring conventional hierarchies (127-128). Lefebvre’s theory suggests that such moments of spatial reconfiguration exemplify how spaces are socially produced and how their meanings evolve through human interactions.

The home, typically structured to reinforce socioeconomic divisions, thus transforms into an intersectional site where class boundaries temporarily erode. It functions as both a private and a public space, reshaping the social fabric by nurturing temporary unity among diverse individuals. In *Rich Like Us,* the differences in private and domestic spaces lead to deep conflicts that spill over into the public space, resulting in extreme consequences, including murder. In this context, political power shapes the characters’ familial lives. Dev’s access to political influence grants him immunity within the household. The home becomes a space where individuals competing for power showcase their adherence to expected social and political norms. As a result, the distinction between public and private life gradually dissolves, fostering an environment of control and oppression. Hence every aspect of life becomes subject to public scrutiny, especially for the women in the novel.

Aijaz Ahmad, an activist linked to India's left-wing political movement, argues, that the nation is “a terrain of struggle” (27), follows that the home, as a

smaller reflection of this nation, also transforms into a battleground. The dinner scene where Sonali seeks legal advice for Rose illustrates the difficulty of even private dissent, emphasizing how the state's control and influence extend into the family domain. This dinner mirrors an earlier scene in the novel, where Neuman formalizes his business deal with Dev over dinner, much to Rose's displeasure. The nation, akin to a prison, seems to be under constant surveillance, and it is the destruction of privacy that prevents the familial injustice of Rose's mistreatment by Dev from being addressed.

Dynamics of Relationships

The novel delves into the complexities of interracial marriage and polygamy through Rose, a British woman who marries Ram, an Indian businessman. Her struggles to adjust to a new culture are intensified by the fact that Ram is already married to Mona. Sahgal intricately explores the challenges that arise within such relationships, illustrating the emotional and social dilemmas faced by individuals navigating multiple identities.

Ram and Rose's interracial marriage is depicted with both its romantic allure and inherent struggles. As the only son of a wealthy Indian businessman, Ram encounters Rose, a lower-middle-class shop assistant, while traveling in London. Enchanted by her beauty and strong-willed nature, he quickly forms an attachment to her, despite already being married. Rose, engaged at the time to Freddie, a factory worker, finds herself torn between her existing relationship and the promise of love with Ram. Her parents vehemently oppose the match, recognizing the risks involved in such a union. However, Freddie, understanding her emotional turmoil, silently supports her decision despite his own heartbreak.

Ram persuades Rose that his religion permits him to take multiple wives, easing her concerns about his existing marriage. Preoccupied by the idea of love exceeding boundaries, she ultimately chooses to leave behind her home, family, and dreams, embarking on a journey to India with Ram. However, she insists on a formal wedding before fully committing, holding on to her values as she adapts to a foreign culture.

Once in India, Rose quickly realizes that Ram, who had seemed progressive and open-minded in London, conforms to traditional Indian family structures in Delhi. While she had imagined a new life with him, she is instead forced into the reality of a joint family, as Ram refuses her request to establish a separate household. He justifies his stance by explaining that the Hindu Undivided Family is not merely a social arrangement but a deeply ingrained institution that cannot be broken (53). Rose, feeling displaced and trapped, must come to terms with the cultural and emotional isolation she faces in this unfamiliar environment.

Sahgal skilfully depicts the hostility between Rose and Mona, Ram's first wife, who perceives Rose as an intruder disrupting the established family order. Their strained relationship emphasizes the larger theme of patriarchal dominance, where societal norms pit women against each other while reinforcing male authority within both familial and social hierarchies. Later on, Mona and Rose became friends.

For Ram, polygamy is not merely a personal preference but an institution firmly grounded in cultural and religious traditions, one that he accepts wholeheartedly as both natural and justified. Rose, however, raised in a Christian household, struggles to reconcile her beliefs with the expectations of Hindu marriage. Though initially resistant, she ultimately submits to the reality of being Ram's second wife, recognizing that her new life offers both challenges and certain securities.

Practical concerns also shape her decision because returning to London would mean facing economic hardship and an uncertain future. Yet, her life in Delhi is far from easy. The city's rigid social norms and politically charged atmosphere only heighten her feelings of displacement. Torn between the desire for independence and the responsibilities imposed upon her as a wife and daughter-in-law, she finds herself caught between two contrasting worlds that is British and Indian. The city's historical tensions and anti-British sentiment further complex her alienation, intensifying her struggle for identity and belonging.

Despite the hardships, Rose attempts to carve out a space for herself within Ram's household. She tries to form a bond with Dev, Mona's son, in hopes of finding some semblance of belonging. However, Mona and Lalaji remain indifferent leaving her efforts unreciprocated. Her emotions are a balance of hope and despair in which she finds brief moments of solace but is always aware of the precariousness of her position.

The business she and Ram establish together offers a rare opportunity for connection, allowing them to share a common purpose. Yet, as time passes, the realization of Ram's true nature unsettles her. His attraction to Marcella, a strikingly beautiful and socially influential woman, creates an additional strain on their already fragile marriage. Unlike Rose, who agonizes over their relationship, Ram sees no conflict in his affections. His lack of pleasure only heightens Rose's vulnerability, deepening her sense of estrangement in an environment where she already feels like an outsider.

Living in Delhi, a city constantly evolving in response to political and social upheavals, magnifies Rose's feelings of alienation. The vastness of the city, combined with its layered cultural dynamics, reinforces the emotional and psychological

distance between her and Ram. She finds herself unable to articulate her emotions or confront the growing rift in their relationship: “What word was there to say? Who was to blame? … There was nothing, nothing to be done about it. She did not have even everyday words to pick and choose from; much less words to break spells” (90). The tension between her British heritage and the anti-colonial sentiment pervading Indian society only adds to her sense of not belonging, leaving her emotionally stranded in a world she cannot fully call her own.

Ram’s open affair with Marcella deepens Rose’s feelings of exclusion, reinforcing her status as an outsider within her own marriage. As Ram grows increasingly withdrawn, even neglecting their shared business, Marcella’s eventual departure forces him to return to Rose. Though she finds brief solace in his renewed presence, his continued entanglement with Marcella makes it clear that their relationship remains fragile.

In her early years in India, Rose struggles to gain acceptance within Ram’s household. Both Mona and Lalaji, his father, initially reject her, viewing her as a trespasser. Even Ram, during his infatuation with Marcella, distances himself from her, further isolating Rose. However, Rose refuses to succumb to despite the emotional and social inequalities she faces whereas Ram enjoys privilege and autonomy while she remains dependent.

Over time, Rose bridges the emotional and social divides within her new family. Through sheer determination and authenticity, she gains the reluctant acceptance of Mona and Lalaji. By affirming her individuality and demanding recognition, she reshapes her place within the household. Her relationships extend beyond Ram’s immediate family and she forms meaningful connections with Ram’s friends, Zafar and Keshav, and later with Keshav’s daughter, Sonali. Mona, once a

rival, ultimately acknowledges Rose's sincerity. Their relationship transforms when Rose intervenes to prevent Mona from committing suicide, an act of compassion that fosters genuine sisterhood between them. This moment marks a turning point, as Mona begins to confide in Rose, sharing her own struggles with Ram and the constraints of their marriage.

As time progresses, the dynamic between Ram, Mona, and Rose shifts toward a fragile yet evolving unit. Rose's growing self-confidence allows her to navigate personal losses with resilience, including the devastating news of her parents' deaths. In an unexpected display of solidarity, Mona and Lalaji grieve alongside her, forging a deeper familial connection. What began as a relationship marked by rivalry and resentment transforms into a sincere bond, with Rose and Mona eventually regarding each other as close confidantes. Sahgal captures this transformation with emotional depth, illustrating how empathy and mutual understanding can redefine relationships.

Beyond her immediate family, Rose's capacity for forming meaningful connections extends to others around her. Sonali, who sees Rose as both a maternal figure and a trusted confidante, finds comfort in her guidance. Rose's compassion also reaches Dev's wife, Nishi, as well as the marginalized individuals she encounters, such as a beggar, demonstrating her ability to connect with people across different social spheres.

After over two decades of marriage to Ram, Rose begins to feel increasingly alienated due to his selfish and polygamous tendencies. It leaves her emotionally drained and isolated. The death of Mona deepens this sense of loss, and Rose's inability to establish a meaningful connection with Mona's son, Dev, exacerbates her emotional isolation. Dev's antagonism towards Rose escalates, culminating in threats against her and fraudulent withdrawals from the joint bank accounts of Rose and

Ram. In these moments of deceit and betrayal, Rose is confronted with a painful realization of her isolation: “The secrecy more than anything told her how much she had irretrievably lost, how alone she was” (215).

As Rose begins to gather the courage to address her grievances and seek justice, she is brutally murdered by Dev’s associates in the tomb near her residence. Sonali, who understands Rose's essence, mourns deeply for her untimely death. She reflects on Rose’s rare ability to express warmth and affection to those around her, recognizing that her kindness was apparent in every encounter, even with strangers. Their relationship is built on shared experiences of marginalization which was Rose as a foreign woman in India and Sonali as a civil servant sidelined by the political corruption of the Emergency.

Gendered Space

Rich Like Us critiques the failure of the post-independent Indian state to wipe off the deep-rooted patriarchal structures that continue to dominate society. Despite the country’s independence, it remains largely controlled by political and social elites, leaving the marginalized, especially women, feeling abandoned by the very system meant to uplift them. The novel starkly portrays the struggles of its central female characters- Sonali, Rose, Mona, and Nishi- whose lives are shaped by the intersection of patriarchy and declaration of emergency which fail to protect or promote women's rights and welfare.

These women exist within a gendered space, where both the societal and political structures limit their freedom and access to opportunities. The state, as described in the novel, excludes them from critical decision-making processes, and this systemic oppression reinforces their marginalization. The denial of their fundamental rights, such as political participation, access to property, and equality

before the law, probe the state's role in sustaining patriarchal dominance. Rose, Sonali, Mona, and Nishi are subjected to the confines of male-dominated spaces within their families, reinforcing their roles as secondary citizens.

Rose's journey into Ram's household is shaped by exclusion and subordination. Although she has been with Ram for more than twenty years, she was never fully accepted within his family. Ram's father refuses to acknowledge her, while Mona, sees her as an encroacher. This rejection reinforces the patriarchal notion that a woman's legitimacy in a household is dictated by traditional norms rather than emotional or legal bonds. As the novel unfolds, Rose finds herself in a financially unstable position. Ram has left no legal documents ensuring her financial security. Instead, she is forced to rely on Dev, Ram's son, who not only neglects his father's well-being but also exploits Rose's vulnerability. He forges his father's signature to withdraw large sums of money for the Happyola project, using his political connections to shield himself from accountability. The bank manager, though aware of Dev's fraudulent activities, remains silent due to Dev's growing influence as a businessman with close ties to 'Madam's son' (103). This highlights how financial institutions and political networks uphold male privilege, allowing men like Dev to exploit power structures without consequence.

In this novel "Madam," a powerful yet controversial leader, is widely understood to represent the Prime Minister of India during the Emergency. Despite being a woman in a position of immense authority, Madam's rule does not translate into empowerment for other women. Instead, she operates within a deeply patriarchal political structure, reinforcing authoritarian control rather than challenging gender inequalities. Her leadership exposes the paradox of a female head of state in a society where women, like Rose and Sonali, continue to struggle against systemic oppression

and marginalization. Sahgal uses this contrast to expose how political power does not necessarily equate to gender progress, as Madam upholds the very institutions that suppress females and reinforce existing hierarchies.

Sonali attempts to help Rose by consulting a lawyer who confirms that a widow has equal property rights. However, he refuses to take up the case, fearing the repercussions of challenging Dev, given his exalted status during the Emergency (103). This reflects how legal institutions, rather than serving justice, often reinforce male dominance by prioritizing the interests of powerful men over women's rights. Furthermore, the lawyer openly supports constitutional amendments that would grant 'Madam' absolute authority, even at the cost of democratic principles. His assertion that "the Constitution would have to be drastically amended… to transfer more powers to fight down the turbulent forces" (103) exposes how political narratives can be manipulated to serve male-dominated structures while superficially appearing to empower a female leader. In reality, the consolidation of power benefits men like Dev and his political allies rather than women.

The contrast between male and female agency is further emphasized through Ravi Kachru's introspection. Initially a supporter of the Emergency, Ravi begins to question his role in enabling corruption, realizing, "It's got beyond me" (269). However, unlike Rose and Sonali, Ravi retains the privilege of reviewing his stand and seeking redemption. This reflects a broader societal pattern where men have the flexibility to navigate and even challenge power structures, while women remain trapped within them.

The murder of Rose and the professional downfall of Sonali analyse how systemic oppression operates, ensuring that women remain powerless while men manipulate political and economic structures to their advantage. Despite belonging to

different social and national backgrounds, both women find themselves marginalized and silenced by the same forces of dominance and control.

Rose's fate highlights the vulnerability of women in a male-dominated family structure. She is forced to accept "Whatever meagre settlement Dev was willing to make… Once Ram was gone, it could happen tomorrow, she'd be entirely at Dev's mercy, having to beg for every penny" (279-280). This financial dependence strips her of independence, making her vulnerable to men who view her as a hindrance rather than an individual with rights. The moment she demands her fair share, Dev resolves to murder her, demonstrating how women who assert themselves are perceived as threats in patriarchal systems. Her brutal murder at the hands of Dev's men signifies the ultimate silencing of a woman who, despite all the odds, refused to accept complete erasure. The dominance of men is effectively illustrated in *Feminist Concept: A Study of Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction* as,

> The reason is simple: the male domination and cultural psyche are ingrained in the orthodox social norms. Women are still fighting for their voice and liberty. They are asserting their identity. The liberation of women is superficial. They are not liberated in the true sense of the term. In India and even in the West, the cultural and social problems concerning women persist. (Sinha 10)

Sonali's response to Rose's death further reinforces the inescapable gendered hierarchies within political and institutional structures. She recognizes that Rose's murder is "plain" (286), yet she also understands that justice will never be served, as the perpetrators are protected by their influence. The irony of Dev being elevated to a cabinet minister at the very moment of Rose's murder reflects the normalization of male freedom. He ascends the ranks of power while erasing any woman who challenges his authority. This echoes Neuman, an English businessman's observation

at the beginning of the novel: “This Emergency is just what we needed. It’s going to be very good for business” (2). The Emergency, which granted power to a female leader, encouraged patriarchal control, empowering men like Dev while silencing women like Rose.

Sonali’s emotional devastation following Rose’s murder reflects the profound impact of power and political agendas on individual lives, transcending the lens of male supremacy. Rose’s murder, orchestrated by Dev as part of a larger political scam, underscores how authority and political machinations disrupt personal relationships and dictate survival in society.

The handless beggar, the only witness to the crime, articulates the unrestricted power of the elite, stating, “It is their raj around here. They do what they like” (290). The word *raj* evokes colonial rule, drawing a parallel between the oppression faced under foreign rule and the tyranny exercised by male-dominated establishments within independent India.

Sonali’s comparison of Rose’s murder to *sati* further exposes how gendered oppression transcends time and cultural shifts. In *sati*, women were expected to self-immolate upon their husbands’ deaths, reinforcing the notion that their existence was tied entirely to the men in their lives. Sahgal explains in her interview with Varalakshmi that “Dev gets rid of her because he doesn’t want her around. She is dangerous to him. So it is almost worse form of ‘Sati’” (16). Here, Rose does not walk into the fire of her own will; instead, she is forcibly removed, much like the historical *sati* victims who were thrown back into the flames when they attempted to escape. The document Sonali finds about her great-grandmother’s forced *sati* serves as a haunting reminder of this recurring pattern. Women, whether in the past or the present, are sacrificed to maintain male dominance.

The Emergency, rather than bringing progressive change, exposes the deep-rooted misogyny in governance and law enforcement. Sonali's alienation from the system is complete when she realizes that "power and authority" are "so nakedly displayed" (31) to crush opposition. Despite her qualifications and professional standing, she finds herself at odds with the political order, choosing to resign rather than compromise her ethics. Her shift to historical research and her collaboration with Marcella and Brian on an art exhibition suggests a withdrawal from the corrupt structures that uphold male dominance. However, her decision also reflects the limited choices available to women who resist patriarchy. Rather than reforming the system from within, Sonali is forced to step away entirely.

The novel critiques the way women, regardless of nationality or social standing, are considered disposable when they threaten the ambitions of powerful men. Through physical violence, economic control, or institutional suppression, the structures that govern society ensure that men retain dominance while women continue to struggle for justice, recognition, and survival.

Navigating Delhi's Thirdspace

In Rich Like Us, the city of Delhi during the Emergency period can be analysed through Edward Soja's concepts of Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. The characters' experiences of Firstspace are deeply rooted in the socio-political setting in Delhi during the Emergency in India. Sonali's daily life within the physical structures of the government offices reflects the oppressive reality of the Emergency. The bureaucratic spaces she works in are not merely functional; they represent the authoritarian control that permeates the government and its institutions. The controlled milieu of these spaces mirrors her experience of being sidelined by political corruption. The physical space of her office becomes an extension of the power

dynamics she faces which constantly monitors her every move and restricts her professional freedom.

Similarly, Rose's experience of Firstspace in her home, where she lives with Ram and his family, is physically and emotionally constricting. As an outsider in a foreign land, she is constantly reminded of her separation from the cultural and social fabric of India. The streets of Delhi, with their stark divisions of class and the overwhelming political tension, further deepen her sense of displacement. This physical space, while offering a resemblance of domesticity, also becomes a symbol of her isolation and marginalization in a country where she does not fully belong.

For Dev, Firstspace represents his privileges marked by his luxurious home and elite social circles, which separate him from the struggles of the lower classes. His physical space is symbolic of his detachment from the political turmoil around him, as he enjoys the comfort and privilege afforded by his wealth and status. In contrast, Ram's Firstspace is shaped by a more complex interaction of privilege and limitation, especially in the context of his role within his family and society. Ram's domestic spaces are shared with Rose and Mona hence they become sites of tension and contradiction where control and patriarchal values collide.

The Secondspace is seen in the characters' perceptions of Delhi as a place of power and threat. During the Emergency period (1975-77), the Indian government, under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, sought to project an image of order, control, and stability in the capital city of Delhi. In this context, Secondspace refers to how Delhi was ideologically and politically constructed. The city's landscape was framed to align with the government's vision of authority. Urban spaces were planned, controlled, and used to send specific messages, emphasizing unity and discipline. For Sonali, who witnesses and experiences political corruption firsthand, this Secondspace of Delhi is

problematic. She is aware of the disparity between the city's conceptual representation which is the idealized, sanitized image presented by the state, and the reality of life during the Emergency. Sonali sees how the state's efforts to control and reshape the city's spaces are not just physical but symbolic, used to maintain power and suppress opposition.

The Secondspace of Delhi, as Sonali understands it, is an ideological construct that represents the government's need to maintain control over the urban space and its inhabitants. However, the more Sonali reflects on the political realities around her, the more she sees how the government's portrayal of the city as orderly and stable hides the deep-seated corruption and authoritarianism that define daily life for its citizens.

Similarly, Rose, a British woman in love with Ram, an Indian, envisioned Delhi as an exotic city full of historical grandeur and cultural charm, a vision shaped by Ram's romanticized portrayal of the city before she arrived. She envisioned the Secondspace of Delhi as a city that embodies the opulence of its imperial past, where colonial architecture mingles with modern developments, creating a cosmopolitan, yet rooted urban landscape. She also saw Delhi as a city of privilege and power. She imagined it as a place where the elite had access to luxurious lifestyles, high-society gatherings, and prestige- a space where she, too, might belong, especially given her connection to Ram who was a successful businessman and a member of the upper class.

When Rose decides to marry Ram and move to Delhi it symbolizes her embrace of the Secondspace vision that she has of the city. She believes that moving to Delhi will enable her to live in an elite social circle and be immersed in the grandeur of the city's political and cultural life. This vision aligns with her expectations of a privileged and controlled urban space, one where she can carve out

her own role in the city's sophisticated social fabric. Her perception of Delhi is one where status, power, and high-society life come together, offering her a sense of belonging within a city that she believes will offer her an elite lifestyle.

For Ram, Delhi is a city of opportunity and power. As a successful businessman, he sees the city through a lens shaped by privilege and elite connections. He views Delhi's Secondspace as a place where political and social elites gather, where wealth, influence, and status are attainable through the right connections and by navigating the corridors of power. Ram's perspective is rooted in his belief that Delhi represents the centre of India's political and economic power, offering opportunities to those with ambition and the right social standing. As for Dev's perception of Delhi's Secondspace, he views the city as a land of opportunity, but not in the idealistic or conventional sense. He sees it as a place to exploit and manipulate for his personal gain. To him, Delhi's Secondspace is a realm devoid of morality, where power, money, and status can be attained through manipulation and ruthlessness.

In Delhi, during the Emergency, Thirdspace became a powerful lens for understanding how space is socially constructed and lived. For Sonali, Delhi's Thirdspace is a site of power struggles, cynicism, and resistance. As a civil servant, she initially believes in the promise of an efficient and just bureaucracy, where merit and integrity can sustain the system. However, the Emergency period (1975-77) shatters this belief, exposing the corrupt nexus of power, privilege, and suppression that governs the city. She is sidelined from her career for refusing to obey with the government's authoritarian rule, turning Delhi into a space of alienation rather than ambition.

Unlike the Secondspace vision of Delhi as a city of structured power and prestige, Thirdspace reveals the contradictions, where the façade of order conceals oppression, and where resistance coexists with submission. She experiences the lived reality of repression, witnessing how opposition is crushed, voices are silenced, and political survival depends on complicity. Her personal life mirrors this fragmentation. She is both an insider and an outsider, privileged by class yet marginalized for her principles. Through Sonali, Delhi's Thirdspace emerges as a contested terrain, where the promise of democracy is undone by authoritarian control, yet where individuals like her continue to question, resist, and assert agency, however constrained.

For Rose, an Englishwoman who marries Ram and moves to India, Delhi's Thirdspace is a realm of clashing realities and cultural dissonance. She arrives with an idealized vision of the city as a place of grandeur, wealth, and high society, believing she will be embraced into its elite circles through her marriage. However, the lived reality starkly contradicts this perception. As a foreign woman in a rigidly patriarchal and hierarchical society, she never fully belongs- neither within the family, where she is seen as an intruder, nor in the social structure, where she lacks cultural legitimacy.

Her experience of Delhi's Thirdspace is defined by exclusion and struggle. The city does not offer her the romanticized belonging she once imagined but instead becomes a site of domestic confinement, loneliness, and social alienation. Within the household, she is treated as an outsider, failing to conform to the expectations of an obedient, submissive Indian wife. Even in wider society, her presence is tolerated rather than accepted, reinforcing her status as someone caught between two worlds- neither fully English nor fully Indian.

Ram understands that Delhi rewards those who engage in moral compromises, forcing him to balance business ethics with political allegiance. His marriage to Rose,

an Englishwoman, is part of this strategy, reflecting his attempt to merge personal desire with social prestige in an evolving, post-colonial Delhi. However, for Ram Delhi's Thirdspace is both enabling and constraining- a space of power but also entrapment. On the other hand, for Dev, Delhi's Thirdspace is a brutal, amoral landscape, where survival and dominance are dictated by manipulation, corruption, and self-interest. Unlike Ram, who works within the system, Dev represents a younger, more aggressive generation that sees Delhi as a city to be exploited without restraint. He does not see the city as a cultural or historical space but as a terrain where power is seized, not earned. His murder of Rose, driven by financial greed and personal resentment, exposes the Thirdspace reality of Delhi- a city where violence, betrayal, and unchecked ambition thrive under the surface of wealth and power.

Thus, *Rich Like Us* presents Delhi not just as a backdrop for personal stories, but as a dynamic space where political power, social class, and personal identities are constantly in flux. The city's Firstspace (physicality), Secondspace (ideology), and Thirdspace (lived experience) are intricately woven together to shape the characters' journeys, making Delhi a key player in the narrative.

Uniqueness and Stereotypes of Delhi

Sahgal portrays Delhi as a city shaped by historical, political, and social forces, where both its stereotypes and its unique features are intricately woven into the fabric of the narrative. The city is depicted not just as a physical space but as a symbol of power, politics, and identity. By examining the stereotypes and uniqueness of Delhi, Sahgal critiques the prevailing urban perceptions while also offering a nuanced portrayal of the city's multifaceted nature.

Delhi is often stereotyped as the political capital of India, a city of power, bureaucracy, and authority. This stereotype is heavily reinforced in *Rich Like Us*,

where the city becomes synonymous with the institutionalized structures of governance, the site of India's political heart. For example, Sonali's perception of Delhi is shaped by its position as the centre of political power. Her interactions with the elite in Delhi expose the city's association with state bureaucracy. Her father, embodying the political elite, considers the city a place where the destiny of the nation is shaped, a space that is "hopelessly mixed" with conflicting political ideologies (28). This reflects the stereotype of Delhi as a city dominated by the elite, with its political machinations continuously shaping the lives of those who reside in it.

Moreover, the stereotypical image of Delhi as a space for politicians is reinforced during the Emergency period. The city's political setting is shaped by control, surveillance, and centralized power under Indira Gandhi's regime in the 1970s. Sonali's awareness of the political setting is indicative of how Delhi's role as a space where power dynamics are deep-rooted. As she reflects on the Emergency, it becomes clear that the city is a locus for authority and control. The bureaucratic structures of Delhi reinforce its image as a city where political power is concentrated and personal freedoms are often compromised.

While the stereotypical image of Delhi as a space of power prevails, Sahgal also portrays it as a city of immense cultural confluence and personal identity struggles. Delhi's unique cultural complexity is highlighted through the characters' relationships with their own identities and each other. Sonali's complicated relationship with her mother's Kashmiri heritage and her preference for her Maharashtrian father's identity (55-57) epitomize Delhi's role as a space where individuals grapple with their regional, familial, and national identities. This cultural complexity is further explored through the character of Rose, who is a foreigner who comes to India in search of an urban elite life and eventually gets marginalized.

Rose's role in sheltering the armless beggar (75) examines the disparities within the city. Her efforts to provide comfort to the beggar speak to Delhi's potential for compassion amidst its political coldness, making the city a site of both privilege and disparity. Furthermore, Zafar's story introduces another layer of Delhi's uniqueness in the context of post-partition identity. His move to Pakistan after Partition (72) illustrates the city's role as a site where political ideologies intersect with personal identity. Despite his deep intellectual connections with Ram, Zafar's eventual alignment with Pakistan's military government shows how Delhi is a space where personal relationships and political allegiances can fracture, further complicating the city's identity.

The novel challenges conventional stereotypes of Delhi, presenting it as a city where political, personal, and cultural identities intersect in complex and often contradictory ways. Through her nuanced portrayal of the city, Sahgal invites readers to reconsider their understanding of Delhi, not just as the political capital of India, but as a space where power, identity, and human experience are constantly in flux.

Conclusion

Delhi acts as a significant character in shaping the identities and trajectories of the characters in *Rich Like Us*. Sahgal's depiction of the city intricately intertwines its political upheavals during the Emergency, with the emotional and social struggles of the individuals. Delhi in the narrative underscores how urban spaces shape and redefine personal and collective identities, illustrating the deep connections between a place and its people.

Chapter 4

The City of Dreams

Introduction

Mumbai, previously known as Bombay, the capital of Maharashtra, is the city of dreams (Mayanagri). Novels set in Mumbai examine how the city's history i.e. socio-political and financial history, has shaped the personal narratives of its citizens. It reveals a persistent link between the identity of the city and that of its citizens. It also portrays how an individual's personal life helps shape the city space. Arjun Appadurai observes in the article "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai" that,

> Cities like Mumbai have no clear place in the stories told so far that link late capitalism, globalization, post-Fordism, and the growing dematerialization of capital. Their history is uneven in the sense made commonsensical by a certain critical tradition in Marxism. It is also characterized by disjunct, yet adjacent, histories and temporalities. (631)

According to Kelly A. Minerva, Mumbai novels show the artifice and agency required to build the amalgams of public and private (i.e. political and historical) narratives that consist of the post-colonial identities of the city. These public narratives strive to construct several Mumbais while also helping to establish a dominant, authoritative version of Mumbai to be hegemonic (113). Roshan G. Shahani argues that "Bombay novels engage with the theme of urban alienation caused by city's economy and politics and brings out the struggle between cosmopolitanism and parochialism of the city" (1251). Priyamvada Gopal states "Most of the writers who write on Bombay challenge the readers to understand its inherent narrative contradictions" (117). Priyamvada goes on to argue that "the city

portrays its colonial and postcolonial features, its cosmopolitanism and parochialism, its poverty and its riches” (117). Manish Chalana in his work *Of Mills and Malls: The Future of Urban Industrial Heritage in Neoliberal Mumbai,* rightly observes,

> The case of Mumbai is particularly noteworthy. As the “Gateway of India,” the city is the undisputed financial and entertainment capital of the nation. It is one of the largest and densest cities in the world, with 19 million people living in its metropolitan area. The city’s-built environments include a variety of indigenous and colonial districts and several other hybrid places that interpret colonial modernity in myriad ways. (3)

Mumbai serves as both a beacon of opportunity and a space of disillusionment. In Shobhaa De’s *Socialite Evenings*, the city emerges as a complex urban landscape that simultaneously nurtures ambitions and enforces social constraints. This chapter critically examines the portrayal of Mumbai in the novel, exploring how the city shapes the identities, relationships, and desires of its inhabitants.

The uniqueness of this chapter lies in its approach to viewing the city not merely as a backdrop but as an active force that dictates the lives of its residents. Mumbai presents itself as a land of endless possibilities, drawing individuals with promises of success, wealth, and reinvention. However, the city does not guarantee the fulfilment of dreams—it only offers glimpses of prosperity to a select few, while many are left struggling in its unforgiving underbelly. Yet, the city's allure persists, as people remain captivated by tales of success, often ignoring the countless others who struggle and disappear into its shadows. By focusing on *Socialite Evenings*, a novel that intricately captures the interplay between social mobility, gender dynamics, and urban alienation, this study seeks to unravel the layered realities of Mumbai.

History of Mumbai

Mumbai earlier known as Bombay's earliest inhabitants was a group of fishermen community known as the Koli (Bapat 6). The discovery of Paleolithic stone tools in Kandivali in greater Bombay suggests that people have lived in this region since the Quaternary period (Ghosh 134). It was a part of Asoka's empire during the third century BCE. In the second century CE, Ptolemy, the Greek-born Egyptian astronomer and geographer referred to it as Heptanesia. During the 6th and 8th centuries CE, the Chalukyas governed the city, leaving their mark on Elephant Island (Gharapuri) (Bombay Gazetteer 11). The Konkan coast Shilahara Chiefs governed it from the 9th to the 13th century CE (Dwivedi 10). It was probably during this period that the Walkeswar Temple at Malabar Point was constructed (11). In 1294 CE, the Khilji dynasty of Hindustan launched attacks from the north, leading to the founding of Mahikavati (Mahim) on Bombay Island under the Yadavas of Devagiri (12). Today's Mumbai is home to descendants of these settlers. Most of the island's place names originate from this time. When Muslim invaders took control of the island in 1348 CE, Bombay was included in the Gujarati kingdom (David M. 22). In 1597 CE, Portugues tried and failed to conquer Mahin. In 1534, Sultan Bahadur Shah, the ruler of Gujarat, granted the island to the Portuguese (Bombay Gazetteer 11). Charles II, the reigning monarch of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and Catherine of Braganza, the daughter of the Portuguese ruler, settled their marriage by placing Bombay under British rule in 1661 CE. Later in 1668, the monarch gave it to the East India Company (Dwivedi 14).

After being taken over by the East India Company, Bombay was discovered to be less of a value when compared to Kolkata and Chennai. Bombay served only as a means of sustaining a position on the West Coast. The Marathas led by Chhatrapati

Shivaji, ruled over the regions surrounding Bombay and extending eastward. The dominant groups on the mainland were the territorial princes in Gujarat to the northwest and the Mughals in the north. The Portuguese, Dutch, Marathas, and Mughals had an interest in Bombay. Their naval power was greater than that of the British. At the beginning of the 19th century, external factors stimulated the city's expansion which stagnated till then. Bombay began to expand because of the decline of Mughal control in Delhi. The rivalry between the Mughals and Marathas, along with instability in Gujarat, compelled artisans and merchants to seek refuge in Bombay. Bombay prospered when the Maratha empire was destroyed and trade and communication were established with the mainland.

The first spinning and weaving mill was founded in 1857. By 1860, Bombay had grown to be India's largest cotton market (Bombay Gazetteer 11). It had a significant increase in cotton trade when Britain's cotton supplies were cut off due to the American Civil War. However, by the end of the Civil War, the cotton prices declined. By then Bombay had established itself as a major hub for import trade. The Suez Canal opened in 1869, making trading with Britain and Europe easier which culminated in the prosperity of the city.

In 1896 the plague broke out due to population increase and unhygienic circumstances (Dwivedi 15). The City Improvement Trust was initiated in reaction to these issues to provide additional areas for settlement and build homes for the artisan classes (Bombay Gazetteer 12). In 1918, an ambitious plan was proposed to build a sea wall in Black Bay to reclaim 1,300 acres of land. However, it was not completed until the construction of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Road (Marine Drive) from Nariman Point to Malabar Point after World War II. It became the first two-way highway of its kind in India (Bombay Gazetteer 12). After World War II, residential

quarters construction started in the suburbs and the Greater Bombay suburbs were included in the governance of the city of Bombay via a municipal corporation (Bombay Gazetteer 12).

The city served as the capital of the Bombay Presidency (province) during British rule. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became a centre for Indian National and South Asian regional political activities. It hosted the first session of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which emphasized pro-Indian and anti-British sentiments until Independence. The Congress later passed the “Quit India Resolution” in 1942 demanding total independence for India, eventually attained in 1947. Bombay saw the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement, a violent Maratha protest, in 1956 and 1960, against the two languages that make up the state of Mumbai: Gujarati and Marathi. This protest was a result of British imperialism. In 1960, due to these protests, the state was partitioned into present-day Gujarat and Maharashtra. Bombay became the capital of Maharashtra in the same year.

In the early 1960s, most of the businesses and industries in the city were owned by the Gujarati and Marwari communities. The migrants from South India preferred white-collar jobs to business. The Portuguese term Bom Bahia, which translates to “Good Bay,” is said to have been the source of the British pronunciation of the name Bombay. The post-colonials reclaimed Marathi City by naming it as Mumbai. The Shiv Sena founded by Bal Thackery, was the impetus behind the official name change. Bal Thackery, a cartoonist from Bombay, founded the Shiv Sena on 19th June 1966 as a protest against the marginalization of the Marathi people in their home state. The Sena’s goal was to reclaim Maharashtra and its capital city for indigenous Hindu Marathas, irrespective of the number of people of other communities residing in the city. They aimed to shield the native Hindu Maharashtrians from the influence

of the West. The cadres participated in several attacks on South Indian communities during the 1960s and 1970s. They damaged South Indian restaurants and pressured employers to hire Marathis for employment. The same tale of hostility and estrangement now targets Biharis and Uttar Pradesh migrants, who are accused of stealing the Marathi people's jobs and livelihood (Thackeray 2001)

Following Independence in 1947, a wave of decolonization swept the country resulting in the name change from Bombay to Mumbai in 1995. The Marathi pride and the reclamation of heritage from the colonizers are supposed to be embodied in this name change. The renaming of the city has had an impact on the life of Mumbaikars. The image of the city became exclusive and intolerable after the renaming. Regaining the areas that the British Empire had once defined was an attempt to embrace a post-colonial identity in the nation and its cities. The spaces were renamed to accomplish the goal. Regional chauvinism was pushed throughout the renaming process, giving preference to one specific indigenous cultural tradition over others. This attempt was made not only by the Hindutva politicians for post-colonial hegemony but also by anti-colonial nationalists who attempted to define nationalism after independence.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid also known as the Mosque of Babur in Ayodhya in 1992 created sectarian riots in Mumbai and across India that continued until early 1993 claiming hundreds of lives. Mumbai had many terrorist strikes in the early years of the twenty-first century. The two most prominent ones were the bombing of a train in 2006 and the simultaneous siege of multiple metropolitan spots in 2008. The 2006 Mumbai train bombings took place on 11th July. Seven blasts occurred targeting local trains mainly on the Western Line which led to 187 deaths and hundreds got injuries. The 2008 Mumbai attacks from 26th to 29th November,

involved multiple locations like the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel and Leopold Café resulting in 164 deaths.

India was under British rule when the Indian film industry now referred to as "Bollywood" Emerged. The film industry flourished in Bombay and hence the largest cinema studio in the city, Bombay Talkies was established in 1934 by the husband-and-wife team of Himanshu Rai and Devika Rani. Their intention was to create "reformist pictures for a self-consciously modernizing India" (Debashree Mukherjee 132). Today Bollywood has gained international recognition and the movies made in this industry are celebrated worldwide (Sharma).

Mumbai served as the grey market and was a major hub for smuggling due to its importance as a trading hub during British rule. Due to this, corrupt officials and criminals were drawn to Mumbai, where they established themselves as a centre for illicit activities. This is how the Mumbai Mafia, aka the Mumbai Underworld, came to power. The Mumbai underworld engages in a wide range of illegal operations. These include money laundering, drug trafficking, smuggling, and protection and extortion networks. Piracy and counterfeiting have also been associated with the underworld which still prevails (Thomas 2014)

Mumbai's resilient and diverse history is reflected in its evolution from a cluster of islands to a bustling metropolis. As a centre of business, culture, and innovation, Mumbai keeps developing as it pays tribute to its vibrant past and rich legacy while encapsulating India's growth.

Literature Review

Jasbir Jain has emphasized the role of women writers in his article "Towards the 21st century: The writing of the 1990's" saying that "To come out of the

postcolonial phase would automatically mark a shift in relationships, transforming them from dependent, subordinate ones to self-confident and equal ones" (23). De is one such author who has broken all stereotypes and spoken vocally about anything and everything. For readers seeking to explore the New India in literature, she is a socio-literary pioneer. De describes the events in her novels with candour and open-mindedness. She has given a realistic portrayal of society with all its flaws and weaknesses. De through her works has examined how modern society is and shows the dominant conservatism that exists behind the cover of morality. Shashi Tharoor remarks that De portrays "an India almost no one has written about within the covers of a novel" (16) and Sagarika Ghose claims that De's works portray the modern Indian sensibility and bring out the new India. Ghose observes:

> The point is that as far as those hungry to see New India in print are concerned, she is a literary and sociological pioneer… De's work dispenses with the quest for an Indian identity and centres around the world she knows, the people she meets, and the conversations she has. (13)

Deviating from the conventional patriarchal thought process, De believes that for women to establish their identity in society, they must assert their independence. K. K. Sinha observes that in our fast-paced society, De stands out as one of the foremost writers portraying man-woman relationships in urban metropolitan India, while also advocating for the equal and fair treatment of women. She also portrays New Women as effortlessly stylish but focused, ambitious, professional, and in control who are determined to accomplish their goal single-mindedly and even alone if needed (98). Veteran Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan remarks that as a person and as a renowned journalist and writer, De has been frank, fearless, candid, explicit,

unambiguous, and straightforward ("Shobhaa De's Memoir"). The well-acclaimed Indian writer Amitav Ghosh remarks,

> Shobhaa De is a wonderfully inventive writer whose pioneering experiments with Indian English led to the birth of a whole new idiom of desi expression. She is also a woman of unflinching courage who stood up to bullies and chauvinists of many kinds. She is a national treasure. ("Shobhaa De's Memoir")

Many critics have acclaimed her unique style of writing. David Davidar viewed her works as an earnest attempt at "Discovering India through Indian eyes" (43). While Ghose observes about De, "She is India's first determinedly anti-intellectual woman writer in English, who has the guts and, equally importantly, the looks to create an alternative to the metropolitan high-brow literary establishment" (13). Jaydipsinh Dodiya in his book *The Fiction of Shobhaa De's Critical Studies* tries to dive deep into De's imaginary world. He portrays De as a skilful storyteller whose writings are quite intricate. De can identify the marginalization and displacement of women in society and through her literature she makes an effort to reverse this trend.

No other female writer has likely received as much criticism for their work as De. Some critics have criticised her writing referring to it as a "bodice ripper" (Sudhir Kumar 187) and a "filthy, semi-literate, semi-autobiographical airport-slush novelette" (Dwyer 118). The erotic content in her novels has drawn criticism since it depicts women discussing their sexual, emotional, and spiritual dissatisfaction with their spouses and dissolving families, which is against the basic principles of Indian culture.

However, other critics view her as a writer and radical feminist pointing out that the "…inappropriate criticism surrounding these books is due to the fact that De

has introduced a new form of writing in [Indian] English" (Dwyer 117). Anita Myles upon a thorough examination of De's novels noted that she seems to be writing about women's lives in a strong, unrestrained, and unconventional manner. It is likely due to her candid style and bold language that she has been labelled a porn writer (30). According to Tripti Karekatti, De despite evoking the image of a well-read woman writer with a particular stance on women's issues, she tries to reinforce the majority of traditional patriarchal assumptions about women and their needs and desires in her novels (Karekatti 110).

Women characters in De's novels exhibit resilience, challenge traditional norms, and break stereotypes. These women are strong and independent, and boldly navigate the complexities of modern Indian society. Sonia Lingthoujam in her book *Image of the New Women in the Novels of Shobhaa De* remarks that "Life according to these women is to be lived as they desire. They have money and power and anything else hardly matters. They hate men towering over them. They demand equality with them." (36). In the article "Search for Self and Identity in the Novels of Shobhaa De," Neeraj Kumar illustrates how De through her writings how she values the uniqueness and dignity of women and exposes the sexual discrimination happening in society.

R. Gupta in "Freedom from Social Bondage in Shobhaa De's Sisters and Strange Obsession" states that De's writings are an excellent complement to the field of Popular fiction writing. He does not find De's women excessively emotional. Rather, they choose to live a life rebelling against the conventional portrayal of Indian women. De's women have created their own codes of conduct in opposition to the constraints of conventional society (124). Sharad Shrivastav in "The Aberration I, Shobha De in *The New Woman in Indian English Fiction*" observes that most of De's

female characters are socially and economically independent. They are equal to men in every aspect of life. These women compete with men in all fields of life which include power, position, and sexuality. De portrays a negative or undesirable aspect of their personality, which ultimately transforms them into 'aberrations' (82). In "Anti-Feminism in Shobha De: A Study of the Women Characters in *Starry Nights*" Nivedita Maitra perceives that the women of De have been liberated from the constraints of the "feminine self", which includes roles such as obedient daughter, devoted wife, loving mother, and responsible social being. The women in her novels come from the "tinsel town" where everything appears glamours yet their personal lives are full of dark corners and gloomy corridors (162).

De's novels intricately explored the heterosexual relationships of characters. Krishnan Avtar Aggarwal in *Indian Writing in English: A Critical Study* claims that the women characters in De's novels tend to be in heterosexual relationships due to their immaturity, inexperience, and neglect from their husbands (223). Even though both men and women got involved in heterosexual relationships, they were not ready to accept the infidelity of their partner. In the article "Shobhaa De: The Writer and Feminism", Bhaskar A. Shukla observes that the women portrayed by De are unafraid to exhibit their sexuality and they do not tolerate the infidelity of their partners and with great gusto, they break all sexual taboos (211). Sandhiya Rani Dash claims in her article "A Woman More Sinned than Sinning: A Study of *Starry Nights*" that De's writings are seen as repugnant and strange since she is a woman and people are not used to hearing women discuss sex so frankly and candidly (172). In "The Novels of Shobhaa De: A Feminist Study" Shivike Verma remarks that in traditional Indian society, De has raised sexuality as a weapon and a problem for women. She believes that in a society controlled by men, most women's issues are sex-oriented or sex-

centred. De's female characters are rebellious, free from the bonds of society and her spouse. She is a 'New woman' and 'a liberated human being' (192).

Readers are given a glimpse into the opulent world of elite people and their lifestyle in De's novels. From glamorous socialites to powerful businessmen and popular actors, her stories navigate through the upper-class society of contemporary urban India. As Priya Wanjari suggests, De depicts the lives of young men and women, primarily from the wealthy upper class, who no longer prioritize loyalty and stability in relationships (197). Bijay Kumar Das observes that De portrays her characters as they truly are, rather than how they should be. She delves into the inner lives of independent upper-class women in society, disregarding traditional ideas of morality and purity in love. Her focus is primarily on the relationships of young, wealthy upper-class individuals who no longer hold loyalty and consistency in high regard. The characters are depicted for their true selves, not for the ideals they might have embodied (166).

De shows the complexities of marital relationships and addresses the issues of love, infidelity, and societal expectations through her narratives. She sheds light on the impact of societal pressures, isolation, anxiety, and the pursuit of happiness within the confines of marriage. R. S. Pathak in *Modern Indian Novel in English* (1999), remarks that the institution of marriage holds unparalleled significance in the lives of youngsters in India. De's women shatter all sexual taboos and question the notions of respectability associated with marriage. They demand a life to live equal to men. De explores several facets of the lives and struggles of an urban woman. Pratibha Gupta in her article "A Social Semiotic Study of Narratives" states that De's style captures the rebellious spirit of New Woman. Traditional mythologies of gender relationships are challenged, questioned, and revised. They question their life that is imposed by

fairy tales, customs, and histories. Through this, they are assessing their own authority and power. De is compared to a long-blocked river that has been freed, washing away everything in her way (35).

De's works have been extensively analysed by numerous scholars. This study delves into how the unique cultural fabric of Bombay, where individuals from diverse backgrounds converge, transforms the city into a dynamic entity. It further examines how this interplay between the city and its inhabitants shapes the narrative and influences the destinies of the characters.

Mumbai City in *Socialite Evenings*

Mumbai stands out as a prominent character in most of De's novels. It could be considered as the "Wessex" of De which acts as a catalyst for the humble dreams of ordinary people for a better life (Mira 1997). De herself told in an interview given to *The Peacock Magazine* regarding Mumbai that,

> "There are a thousand Bombays. Each day is a discovery. Bombay is a chameleon that changes by the minute. I love the challenge my city throws. Bombay is impossible to decode or capture in words. That's what makes it extraordinary and enigmatic." (The Peacock Magazine 2019)

Cities play an important role in bringing the characters alive. De has depicted modern hi-fi metropolises such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi, and so on in her novels since these cities provide the characters with independence and give them the freedom to express themselves fearlessly. Karuna, the protagonist of De's maiden novel *Socialite Evenings* (1989) is a character who evolves in such a manner. At the novel's outset, we see her as a well-known socialite living in Mumbai who is bold and self-sufficient. To flee from the worries that she was facing, she decided to write a memoir. While narrating her life in her book Karuna prefers not to

begin with her childhood since she does not find anything interesting during that phase. She merely says "I was born in a dusty clinic in Satara, a remote village in Maharashtra…" (1). Karuna did not like the village life and she said "The move to the big city came at just the right time- for me" (7). Chalse Keith Maisels, in his seminal work *The Emergence of Civilization: From Hunting and Gathering to Agriculture, Cities and the State in the Near-East*, argues that cities developed only when small farming villages grew larger. Cities developed from villages keep elements of their rural roots while blending traditional culture with modern urban lifestyle. These cities often feature historic architecture, local festivals, and communal values reflective of their rural origin (124). Karuna initially thought that the city was entirely distinct from the village. However, she later realizes that the city retains its rural roots.

Mumbai to De is where modernity merges seamlessly with India's heritage. It is where paradoxes co-exist compatibly. Where the sophisticated socialite consumes caviar just like an urchin tucking into the tangy crunchy snack, bhel puri, exclusive to Mumbai. Mumbai is a vibrant mash-up of cultures, a vibrant mix of people and aspirations, and a mysterious combination of guts and gore. The city has an attitude of its own and for that reason, Mumbai is as fierce and irresistible even today ("Shobha De's Bombay").

People from many places migrate to the city of Mumbai in search of a better life and livelihood. Hence Mumbai is a mongrel city with several immigrants. Karuna's family was no different. They moved from Satara to Mumbai and the shift to the city brought a huge change in them, "…we were country bumpkins transplanted for the first time into the impersonalities of big city life" (7). They arrived during the city's least appealing mid-monsoon season, but as soon as they stepped off the filthy train and onto the muddy platform at Bombay Central, Karuna knew she had found a

place she could truly call 'my' city. Bombay was dirty, overcrowded, impersonal, and entirely wonderful for her (7). Karuna and her family were supposed to stay in a crummy 'transit flat' in Ghatkopar while the allotted one was being revamped for them. Ghatkopar is a suburb in eastern Mumbai with arid hills in the distance, smoky factories belching chemicals, mosquito-ridden swamps, and Kutcha roads. Everybody else hated the place. But Karuna was absolutely in love with Mumbai (7). Mumbai has left a lasting impression on Karuna. She says, "Bombay- it is Bombay which has shaped me into what I am now and it's the story of Bombay I want to tell" (1). The urban theorist, Edward Soja observed that space is referred to as that which is 'directly *lived*' (67) and inhabited by those who aim to decipher and 'actively transform the worlds we live in' (67). Here Karuna yearns to live in Mumbai and transform herself into a Bombayite. She wanted to create a space for herself in the metropolis. On the other hand, her parents were not ready to embrace Mumbai the way Karuna did so they forbade her from doing many things that she wanted to explore in the city. Karuna knew that Mumbai was a world of possibilities and a melting pot of opportunities. She says "I preferred to discover Bombay and Bombayites." (8) and for that, she immersed herself in the city seeking connections, experiences, and exposure to urban life.

Her entire perspective shifts and she begins to dream of a future in modelling and movies when she meets Anjali, an edgy and sophisticated lady with ties in the fashion and film industries. Karuna is thrown into a world of glitz and pleasure she has never experienced before, and she finds herself drawn to it and unable to reject it. She indulges in an affair and finally gets married with the thought of settling her life comfortably with a rich man. As Puri states, 'marriage and motherhood give women the "good girl" status in society. Any deviation from these roles is considered

inappropriate and is negatively sanctioned' (Puri 136). The middle-class mindset in Karuna wanted to maintain a good girl status and hence she decided to get married to a random rich guy. The decision to get married was welcomed wholeheartedly by her parents since that would not spoil their reputation in society. After her marriage, Karuna realizes that her life is boring and mundane. To escape from reality, she has a romantic involvement with Krish, a married man and close friend of her husband, as a means of overcoming her insatiable sexual restlessness. "…after all, every person has something or the other to hide in a city like Bombay" (351). Karuna soon finds herself pregnant, and when her husband questions the child's authenticity, it causes a crisis in her life that ultimately proves to be a turning point. She revolts against her spouse when he files for divorce because she is filled with righteous wrath. Anjali gave Karuna the much-needed moral support and guidance when she decided to terminate the pregnancy, even though doctors told her that she could not conceive ever again. The people residing in Mumbai usually never interfered, helped, or cared about anybody (364) but Anjali was Karuna's rock in her time of greatest need.

The divorce was an eye-opener for Karuna which allowed her to build a life on her very own. After the divorce, she happens to meet her ex-boyfriend Krish and he tells her "A grown-up girl, all alone in the big bad world" (293). Here Krish is referring to Karuna being alone in the big bad city of Mumbai which could be dangerous for her. Like many other cities, Mumbai is also a large city with people of different cultures who coexist. The dense population in Mumbai city has led to poverty, unemployment, and homelessness which have led those people who are poor in the city to engage in illicit activities transforming Mumbai into a city with a perilous reputation.

While the city provides opportunities and possibilities, some people find solace, meaning, and a sense of belonging in the simplicity of rural life. Karuna's friend Ritu as a part of the therapy began to spend time gardening. She went to the small village near Mussoorie where the air was clean and sweet and she felt energetic and alive planting seeds and watching them grow. When she returns to Mumbai she says "I really miss all that in this wretched city" (284) to her friends. The complexities of urban life are a sharp contrast to the simplicity of country life. Although cities provide convenience, they also bring with them a fast-paced stressful lifestyle.

Mumbai has an exceptionally high cost of living due to various reasons. Daily expenses, education, health care, living expenses, lifestyle choices, and social activities in Mumbai make life in the city expensive. "I couldn't afford to live in Bombay" (376) was the response of Ranbir Roy who was Karuna's friend to the question of whether he was coming to India since he was not happy with his professional life abroad. Karuna also finds it expensive to live in Mumbai soon after her divorce. Like most people who struggle to meet both ends, she too had to take up odd jobs for survival.

Mumbai as a lived space

Mumbai is a city shaped by its middle-class population, from the packed alleyways of Dharavi to the posh areas of Powai and Bandra. The Middle class of Mumbai constitutes a diverse and dynamic segment within the city's social fabric. This group represents the city's liveliness and resilience in the face of urban issues. These people come from diverse backgrounds, careers, and goals. In the novel, Karuna observes that "India's middle class spend two-thirds of their lives trying to achieve- the step up to the glories of the rich and famous" (35).

In a middle-class household the term Luxury is considered a dirty word. They consider that education is one of the greatest things a person can achieve in life. Parents see education as the only means of securing better opportunities and upgrading the economic status of their children. Karuna says in her childhood "We were trained to regard everything that was not 'basic' and 'essential' as frivolous and wasteful. The key word is austerity. Discipline and denial were the highest prized virtues" (36). In Mumbai, the middle-class balances dreams with day-to-day realities. Despite the difficulties they face in life, they strive to ensure their families' well-being and hope for a brighter future for their children.

Once Karuna's best friend and a socialite, Anjali decided to visit Karuna's home. Karuna lived in shabby middle-class condition which she was not proud of. She thinks about what Anjali would think about her after visiting her home. She thinks, "I hoped she would be disgusted with my middle-classness and decide to stop seeing me" (34). Karuna felt sad and ashamed of her family due to their middle-class status. She was ashamed of herself for bringing Anjali to her home (34). But Anjali did not feel weird to be at Karuna's home. She did not judge her or make fun of her living conditions because she hails from a similar background. Her father was a doctor. She grew up in a less posh locality of Mumbai. She had gone to New Era school which was not an English medium convent school. Karuna says "Anjali's background wasn't all that different from my own" (35). "Behind that woman-of-the-world, blasé façade was just an unsure, Gujarati girl, trying hard to fit into a world in which she would always be regarded as an alien and an intruder. Which feeling I identified with quite naturally" (40). So, she was able to relate to Karuna's feelings. While Karuna was ashamed of her roots Anjali was able to go back to her roots when she visited Karuna's home.

After marriage, Karuna entered into a high socialite life but still, she was unable to get rid of her middle-class lifestyle. In childhood, she had to share an ugly Godrej cupboard with her sister. The only way of separating their belongings was to tie the clothes up in individual lots. But even after Karuna's marriage, she continued to do the same thing even though she had plenty of cupboards. Her jewels were not taken proper care and it was just thrown in the drawer. This shows that she is unaware of how to handle expensive jewellery since she is not used to it. Here, Karuna's middle-class customs intertwine with her attempts to embrace her new social role.

Karuna remembers her husband's words, "You are so afraid of your middle-classness aren't you. You were born into the wrong bracket. You think like a memsaab, try and behave like one, but scratch the surface- and your true colours show" (298). He talks about how middle-class people often like old things that are not thrown out instead they are kept in the house even though it is of no use and until products are fully used up, they won't be thrown away. Being friendly and familiar with servants is part of middle-class culture and this was seen in Karuna. Even though Karuna has imbibed a lot from the socialite culture at times her middle-class nature is exhibited which could be easily identified.

After Karuna's divorce, she faced the harsh reality of life. "And here I was- no money, no job, no nothing" (290). She did not want to go back to her life before marriage. She says "…I just wasn't cut out to be middle class, lower middle class" (297). She had to travel by bus which she was not used to and she was not interested in the small talk of the women who travelled with her. Karuna claims that the life she was dealing with at that time was something that she never wanted to lead. She says "…all the while feels sick at being there, forced into a lifestyle that I'd rejected twenty years ago" (298). She is aware of how the socialites look down upon the

middle-class people. Even though middle-class people are rational, calculative, judicious, and realistic in their day-to-day lives this is not accepted or appreciated by the upper class. Karuna knows that even though she pretends to be a socialite deep down she still has middle-class values within her. Although she adopts the mannerisms and lifestyle of a socialite, the values and habits of her upbringing remain an inseparable part of her identity.

Family Dynamics & Parental Bond in Urban Area

Indian parents have a distinctive parenting style. They place a strong emphasis on academic excellence, traditional values, family honour, societal expectation, and respect for achievers. Father is considered as the head of the family and decisions are taken only by him. Karuna's parents were typical Indian parents. Her mother always prioritized her father, whether during mealtimes or at any other time (5). Their father decided to move to Mumbai and he did not even enquire with anybody in his family because all the other members of his family were women. After moving to Mumbai when Karuna showed her interest in being a model her father responded by saying "Girls from decent families do not cheapen themselves by going in for such things" (6). When Karuna started modelling, her father was furious to see her photos. He screamed at Karuna stating that she had disgraced the family and she should not do it ever again. "No Brahmin girl has ever stooped so low" (20) said Karuna's father when he saw her modelling pictures. To this mother responded "Do you know what people think of model-girls? They are no better than prostitutes" (31). Mother continues by stating "You'll ruin your whole life… your future. No decent man will marry you" (31). Mankekar notes that middle-class Indian families see single young women as "good daughters," consistently yielding to the authority of their patriarchal

households, as these women are expected to live under the protective control of their families until they marry (118). Karuna's parents were rooted in this thought.

When Karuna tried to persuade her parents that modelling was merely a hobby, her mother responded by recalling that, in her time, girls engaged in activities like cooking, knitting, crocheting, embroidery, and making rangoli which were considered hobbies. Some even collected stamps or learned to draw. She ultimately asserted that what Karuna was pursuing could not be called a hobby (32). Even though Karuna was not given the liberty by her parents to decide things on her own she decided to fight for herself and continued to do modelling. Karuna should have received support from her family in pursuing her dreams. A family's role should be to nurture and empower a child, not to suffocate them. Children must feel free to express themselves and share openly everything within the family. However, Karuna doesn't experience that freedom, raising the question of whether her family becomes the initial source of oppression for her as a woman. As R. S. Rajan expresses,

> It [the family]…. is the major, if not primary site of women's oppression. For it is within the family that girl-children experience their first feelings of rejection or discrimination on account of their sex, where they may be required to perform hard domestic labour, denied the freedom to come and go, married off, frequently without their consent and on payment of dowry, and then subjected to the vicissitudes of married life, which would include harassment by in-laws, marital discord, unwanted pregnancies, domestic drudgery, and the continuing cycle of the burden of girl-children of their own (80).

There is a noticeable disparity in India between the status of men and women. It is typical in India that the father is the sole breadwinner of the family and the

mother is supposed to do the household chores and take care of the children. If a child achieves success, the father is credited for it, but if the child becomes a rebel, the mother is held accountable. Karuna's father was no exception he always blamed his wife for their children's mistakes (6). She also confirms that "I couldn't imagine Mother asking Father to explain himself over anything" (50). Father decided and they followed (36). That was the power that the father had in the family. He was never questioned and his decisions were final. Karuna's father always says "A person must have discipline and regular habits" (12). Karuna felt like being in an army camp whenever she was home with her parents. She wanted to liberate herself from this torture. She says "My own father was an autocrat and disciplinarian" (41). "The time for listening to music was also strictly rationed and entirely at our parents' whim" (37). This shows how much she was suffocated by her father's rule in her home. When Karuna was in college she says "… my parents who watched my every move" (15) shows the involvement of her parents in her life. They had even disapproved of Bunty, who was Karuna's first love interest. This establishes that "… modernization has transformed Indian life in many ways but obviously it has not altered the Indian perceptions of family and family values radically" (Subramaniam and Gayathiri 4).

Karuna also speaks about the partiality that her parents showed towards their children. She points out that it is one of the reasons why she was not close with her sisters. "… it was the inevitable comparisons that arise in families that drove us further apart" (222). Her parents considered Swati as the intelligent and moral one while Karuna was labelled as the rebel.

The only instance when Karuna's father was proud of her was when she got married. He said, "Good Family, Prominent people, comfortable life. He validates that Karuna's husband is a good man and is extremely busy" (70). Karuna thought "If my

marriage pleased them so much, made them so proud, I reasoned, it must be a pretty terrific marriage" (70). Marriage holds immense significance in the eyes of Indian parents. "…the young daughter's socialization is designed to equip her for the demands of her adult roles as a wife and daughter-in-law" (Assay and, et.al 68). Indian parents do not agree to a woman leaving her husband at any cost even though the husband has committed a mistake. To them, divorce is an unacceptable word. When Karuna's eldest sister Swati divorced her father responded by saying "Parents do not go and sit around in their daughter's home" (126). Even though Swati was going through a rough time, she was not even supported or consoled by her parents. After hearing of Swati's divorce, Karuna said to her mother "It's a good thing she didn't have children…. the children always come off the worst in a divorce" (126) and her mother agreed to that statement. To Indian parents, a marriage is considered successful only if there are children. Karuna and her husband had decided that they would never have children since both did not want to take up such a big responsibility in life. But Karuna's mother even after knowing this fact continues to ask her "Why don't you have a proper check-up?" and "Do you get your periods regularly?" (127). She is blaming Karuna for not having children even though it is a decision taken together by the couple. It has rightly been said, "The idea of womanhood in India is motherhood – that marvellous, unselfish, all suffering, ever forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow" (Sil 71).

Karuna had a sister Alak who was reserved and moody most of the time. She shared a strangely intense relationship with her father even though they hardly spoke with each other. The validation she received from her father was of great importance to her and she would wait for hours to see his reaction to things that she does for him. When Alak's condition worsened Karuna's mother told her that "I think- and your

father also thinks- that she is afraid of men- you know- of marriage because it involves having a relationship with a man" (239). Here to establish a point the mother says the father also thinks the same. She has a feeling that if it is just her thought it won't be considered worthy. Karuna told her mother that she could ask all these questions to Alak by herself to which her mother responded "No-how can I ask her such a thing. I feel ashamed" (240). Mother considers asking about the sexuality of their child is something to be ashamed of and parents are not supposed to talk about all these things to children. When Alak's situation worsened her parents were deeply affected. Karuna says "Her condition continued to be a cause for grave concern and it destroyed my parents. They withdrew into a self-created whirlpool of guilt and spent most of their time blaming themselves for Alak's fate" (243). Karuna's parents were "Numb and afraid to face anyone, they remained closed at home, listening to taped discourses and praying between serials" (243). This is the mental state of most Indian parents when their children face some adversity in life.

Karuna's marriage was devoid of happiness and she soon fell into a relationship with her husband's friend Krish. She was curious about what her parents especially her father would think when they discovered her affair with Krish. She thought that they would "Ask me never to set foot in their home? … Or would they blame themselves instead- on a hair shirt and wonder, 'Where did we go wrong?'" (214). It is usual for Indian parents to be dramatic and blame themselves for all the mistakes that their kids make.

When Karuna's husband came to know about her affair with Krish he immediately flew to London to see her and confronted her regarding the matter. But before going to meet her, he went to her parents to reveal to them their daughter's infidelity. By informing Karuna's parents he wanted to put guilt in her parents' mind

for raising a daughter with such low standards and also wanted to make sure that Karuna doesn't get any support from her parents from there on. But to his surprise their reaction was strange. In his words "They did not seem to care at all. Any other parent would have been shocked or at least pretend to be. They went on watching television as if I wasn't there" (231). This incident reveals that Karuna's parents were not ready to take the blame for the mistakes committed by their daughter. To them, once a girl is married off then her husband must take up the responsibilities of whatever the wife does. They pretended to be indifferent to avoid taking up responsibility for their daughter in any manner.

Karuna's husband continues accusing her by saying "My mother had told me at the very beginning- "Find out more about this girl and her family. Are they like us? Will they fit in? will she?" (229). This shows the typical Indian wedding in which marriage is not between two individuals but two families. The woman always has to fit into the groom's family only then she is considered worthy to be married. The rural or urban setting does not change this notion in India. In India, parents have a huge role in finding the perfect partner for their children. Ranbir Roy a reporter from *The Washington Times* and Karuna's love interest talks about his marriage which was arranged by his parents. He says he was a Brahmin boy who married a "good Brahmin girl" selected by the parents. More than the groom liking the bride and vice versa, how the family of the groom likes the bride matters the most.

Karuna's husband had a strong connection with his mother. He is seen taking advice from his mother seriously and doing things according to her will. The only thing he did against the will of his mother was to get married to Karuna. When he found out Karuna's relationship with Krish he insisted that their marriage ought to be called off. Karuna was shocked to hear this because he had decided it along with his

mother. To this Karuna replies "But this involves our lives, our future- where does your mother come into it? How could you talk about this with her before telling me?" (266). After the Venice trip, Karuna's husband visited the lawyer immediately and got to know about the formalities of divorce. Even though in London he behaved like an understanding person in his heart he had many other plans. "This was something he had worked out systematically and in consultation with his mother" (266). That's the strong connection that he had with his mother.

Soon Karuna realized that her husband was filing for divorce and when Karun began to sink into reality she thought about "… where I'd live, and how I'd break the news to my parents. I didn't want to live with them" (267). She was hesitant regarding how her parents would take the news of divorce and whether her parents would accept what she had done so she packed a few of her things and went to Anjali's home. Anjali decides to help Karuna. Karuna later called her parents and informed them of the situation. To this, her father responds that whatever she has done is unacceptable and nobody in their family shall do such a thing. She must pay the price for her mistake. He also said "We're old people and we cannot help you. You were the one who wanted to marry your husband, it was your decision. Now we don't want to get involved. We have only a few years left to us, let us live them as peacefully as we can" (270).

After Karuna's divorce, she gets involved with the director Girish Sridhar. When Girish proposed, Karuna revealed this to her mother and she was ok with it. Immediately Karuna asked about her father's opinion. To this mother responds "… he doesn't understand people who do not work for the Government. Or who are in different professions. He can understand doctors, officers, engineers, chartered accountants- even certain types of business people" (339). This is the thought process

that Indian middle-class parents have. They approve only respectable jobs with stable incomes. Since Girish was a director, her father was not sure how stable he was to look after Karuna. He doubts whether they can be trusted and do they keep their families happy. Karuna was not intending to get married to Girish since she didn't feel the urge to do so. But Karuna's parents say "…we thought, your father and I, that you were planning on getting married again" (340). To them, if a man proposes to a woman, then the next step is to get married. But Karuna is a self-liberated woman and she won't jump into something without giving a proper thought. Girish asks Karuna via Kunal to live with them since Varun has tarnished her name. He wanted to get married to her. Even though Karuna loved Girish she was unable to find a solid reason to marry him.

Living with her parents during a crisis opened a new dimension for Karuna. She says "I felt like a responsible, caring daughter for the first time in my life. They needed me. And I needed them" (335). Her parents did not have a son to look after them in their old age and they also had an invalid daughter Alak to cope with. Each day she sees her parents struggle to survive and she is unable to abandon them at this point. In India when children get older and be on their own feet it is their responsibility that they must look after their parents. But to this notion Karuna's mother says "You must not have the obligation that you should look after us. We can look after ourselves" (340). This is not usually said in Indian households. Children are always treated as children even when they turn into adults. But here Karuna's mother has embraced the Western ideology to set her children free without taking the burden of taking care of them. She also says "…it is your life now. You are old enough and more experienced in these matters. But we also believe in parents' instincts. Nobody else in the world can have your well-being at heart in the same way-remember that.

Before we die, we want to see you secure and at peace" (341). When mother understood that Karuna did not intend to marry Girish, she asked her to let him know about it so that he could move on with his life instead of getting stuck in a meaningless relationship. Karuna does not see herself marrying again so she tells Girish about her intentions and after that, they drift apart.

Anjali, Karuna's best friend was a middle-class half-Jain and half-Hindu girl who had parents like Karuna's parents. Anjali's husband Abe was from a large joint family and his widowed mother was the only one to whom he was intimidated. His mother was a strong woman with an imposing personality. It was difficult for Anjali to adjust to it during the first few years (42). But it was always the women who had to adjust everything for the men. Anjali's father was so strict and cold that she does not even remember a moment in her life in which she was affectionately taken care of by her father. Anger and disapproval were the only emotions expressed by him (41). Karuna was able to relate to her turmoil. It was considered that being strict parents was the best parenting technique. Indian parents consider being affectionate with one's children to be damaging which eventually leads to negative outcomes in their development. When Anjali's father passed away, she was not welcome at the funeral and other associated functions. Her mother had been quite clear in saying that having a divorced daughter is an embarrassment to her. She had instructed Anjali to avoid Besana, which is followed two days after the funeral where the women in the family receive mourners. Anjali's mother says "We have suffered enough because of you" (119). Mother says that father got his initial heart attack when Anjali's marriage to Abe, who was a Muslim. Now when he came to know about Anjali's divorce it killed him says her mother. She concludes by saying "It is our misfortune to have such a daughter. But that is fate. Now, do us one last favour- stay away" (119). Hence Anjali

is "hounded out of her own home, she had nowhere to go, no one, with the possible exception of me, to turn to" (120). The last ray of hope in Anjali's life was Karuna.

Anjali and Abe's only daughter Mimi (Mumtaz) suffered a lot due to her parents. Abe's nature of affairs with other women was traumatic for Mimi and humiliating for Anjali. Anjali after her divorce meeting other men was not acceptable to Mimi. Still, she adjusted all that for the sake of the choice of her mother. Mimi did not get proper care and attention from her parents since her childhood hence she found happiness in using drugs. Soon usage of drugs went out of control and she was sent to rehab. Anjali extended as much help as she could to get her on her feet. A spoiled insecure childhood destroyed Mimi a lot.

After the divorce, Karuna's ex-husband began living together with Winnie. But soon things turned against him and he ran towards Karuna for advice. The thing that troubled him the most was "Something happened after Winnie came on the scene. We stopped communicating. Mother and I" (325). This shows that even after turning into an adult Karuna's ex-husband heavily depended upon his mother for everything. When that stops, he is unable to accept the change and cope with the situation.

Relationships in the City

In *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism* Desmond Harding quotes Lewis Mumford who remarks:

> The city is the form and symbol of an integrated social relationship. It's the seat of the temple, the market, the hall of justice, the academy of learning. It's here where human experience is transformed into viable signs, symbols, patterns of conduct and systems of order. (5)

The city is a hub where human interactions shape and refine societal values and orders. This dynamic space is explored by the characters in the novel fostering a

collective and shared space. Karuna realizes that in her family she is restricted within the boundaries of gender by being considered just as a daughter. But soon she understands she is more than just a wife, a sister, and a daughter. Karuna states,

> We were an exhausted generation of wives with no dreams left. Like our mothers before us, despite the pretensions of our unmarried youth, we concentrated on the lives of our growing children…Karuna was sure didn't want to have children. We lived through them, a vicarious, precarious existence. We clung on to the status quo of being 'Shrimati so and so', and we refused to take risks. (73)

This makes Karuna like a bird that has escaped its cage and attempts to live a limitless existence where the sky is its only restriction. Mother had advised Karuna on the eve of marriage day "Marriage is nothing to get excited or worried about. It's just something to get used to" (76). Marriage, which placed a great load on her inside the family structure, destroyed Karuna's sense of independence and made her feel unstable, anxious, and inferior. Karuna says "My marriage went sour because I'd married the wrong man for the wrong reasons at the wrong time. My husband was not a villain. He was just an average Indian husband- unexciting, uninspiring, untutored" (73). In the marriage, Karuna was expected to serve as the family's slave rather than be free. The writer has purposefully drawn attention to how a woman transitions from a marital relationship into an illicit relationship. Like Karuna, the other female characters Anjali and Ritu are also too fixated on their marriages, which causes tension in their relationships with their husbands.

Karuna found it challenging to confine herself solely to the role of a spouse. She could not fulfil the role of the ideal wife and that made her question herself. She thinks, "I wasn't wife material" (79). "I guess I was not like other wives. And did not

wish to be. It was on that night that I decided to stop pretending that everything was fine- to myself at any rate" (95). Karuna felt like going back to college and wanted to learn anthropology. But her husband considered it as a joke and did not give her consent to chase her dream. Instead, he tells Karuna to learn from his mother "Look at my mother. If you spent more time with her, you would learn how to run an efficient home" (107). Karuna's husband wanted Karuna to be just like his mother. However, the mother-in-law did not like Karuna since she was not the daughter-in-law that she had expected to have. She used to advise Karuna on how to run a home, how to deal with the servants, and how to take care of money. Soon Karuna began to feel that she was a well-trained Indian wife (110). Karuna wondered why she was unable to get out of the marriage which was not meant for her. She envied her elder sister for showing the guts to break free from an unhappy relationship. As usual, she thought she should break free from her chains but some spark had been extinguished in her (127). Karuna never felt the freedom to make decisions. She used to say "I have to call my husband first" (136). Whatever she does and wherever she goes she must inform her husband and seek permission.

To get over her boredom, Anjali suggests Karuna to establish relationships outside of her marriage. Karuna's friend Ritu agrees with Anjali and says, "If you can have both- a boring husband in the home and an exciting lover on the sidelines- perfect" (212). Karuna entered an extramarital affair out of a need for love, attention, and excitement. She tells about her affair with Krish, "It was one hell of a way to make a pass and start an affair" (209). But she soon realized that the only purpose of an extramarital affair was to quench sexual cravings. She hopes for unconditional love from Krish during their extramarital affair, but she fails in winning his heart. Karuna's husband discovered her extramarital affair with Krish leading to their divorce.

Following the divorce, she engaged in a relationship with Girish and Ranbir which was also short-lived.

Indian women are expected to be housewives who do not have any independent identities. This makes them rely entirely on their husbands who are the breadwinners of the family. Likewise, Karuna is completely reliant on her husband for everything. Hence to become independent and free she indulges in extramarital affairs. Despite being a member of a higher social class, Karuna is no different from any other woman who still seeks permission from their male spouses for everything.

The author further described the psychological component of a man-woman relationship, emphasizing that marriage is a union of the mind as well as the body. In the novel, Karuna's spouse has not been able to satisfy her emotional and physical needs. Thus, she does not feel content in her marital relationship. Karuna's constant drive to meet her needs is revealed in all of her interactions with her husband. However, she was intimidated by her spouse rather than understanding her.

Both Swati and Alaka experienced abuse in their relationship just like Karuna. While working as an engineer, Swati had to experience marital problems owing to her husband's extramarital affair with an English woman. All the women in the novel experience sexual harassment from men in their relationships and are even occasionally beaten up by them. Karuna’s friend Ritu's husband physically tortures and abuses her without any reason. After experiencing intolerable humiliation and sexual abuse, Ritu files for divorce from her husband. Even after her divorce, she is still physically exploited in her second marriage to a Don named Gul.

Karuna’s friend Anjali after divorcing her husband Abe, who was a womanizer, indulged in several extramarital relationships. Finally, she marries Kumar, but Kumar breaks down on the wedding night and confesses that he is gay and he also

talks about his partner Murty. Anjali tells Karuna "He told me I would have to accept him in our life- like his previous wives had" (152). She also confesses her expectation about her second marriage "I was really looking forward to a proper married life with a proper husband and a proper home" (153). Karuna advises Anjali to relax and make friends with Kumar because "Gay do make excellent friends" (153) to this Anjali responds "He's just a straight guy who prefers boys- that's all" (153). Anjali sank into the reality of the life that she must lead with her husband.

Marriage is a societal construct that formalizes the union of two individuals. It serves as the foundation of families and provides a framework for social stability. The fundamental purpose of marriage revolves around companionship, understanding, and support for each other. When Karuna's sister Alak was exhibiting behavioural issues, her parents thought of getting her married because they believed "Marriage cures everything" (242). When Anjali was going through a divorce she was struggling to accept a life without a man. She tells Karuna, "I'm not strong enough. I will die if I have to face the world alone without a man by my side" (62). Anjali is a product of a patriarchal society that has instilled the thought that a woman is complete only with a man by her side. Soon after Anjali's divorce, she tells Karuna, "I need a man" (72) which shows that she cannot live her life alone. She is unable to think about an independent life and she craves a partner. Karuna thought, "I was struck in an increasingly meaningless marriage. And she in a meaningless divorce" (72). Hence in the novel, the relationship between a man and a woman is complex and dynamic which gives new dimensions to the urban space.

Gendered Space in *Socialite Evenings*

De’s female characters faced a range of difficulties in their pursuit of self-identity and respect since they came from different origins, had different experiences, and faced different obstacles in life. As Soja observes,

> Urban spatiality was seen as oppressively gendered in much the same way that the cityscape was shown to be structured by the exploitative class relations of capitalism and the discriminatory geographical effects of racism, the two other major channels of radical modernist urban critique developing over the same period in the spatial disciplines. (*Thridspace* 109)

De takes great care to ensure that each character and their characteristics are unique, to demonstrate that gender issues cannot be generalized. Anjali tells Karuna about her life after marrying Abe. She says “We were reduced to being marginal people. Everything that mattered to us was trivialized. The message was ‘you don’t really count, except in the context of my priorities’” (78). Men often assume that women's needs are secondary to their own, believing that women should be thankful to men for providing them with a roof over their heads and regular meals (78). This is how men try to make women feel subjugated. Anjali also tells men feel threatened by self-sufficient women. “They prefer girls like me- dependant dolls” (78). Anjali had to act in that way but Karuna was not ready to do so. Karuna says “Sometimes I’d gravitate to the men’s section. Yes, we were usually as segregated as people under an apartheid regime” (95), showing how much, she urges to gain freedom and independence like a man.

Men are privileged to live a life of their choice while women are not given that space. Applying Lefebvre’s concept of the Right to the City within this context, it becomes evident that even the elite women in De’s narrative are denied access to the full potential of urban spaces. Their lives, shaped and controlled by societal norms

and gendered expectations, stand in stark contrast to the right of all people, especially marginalized groups, to reclaim and reshape the spaces they inhabit. The city ought to function as a space of independence, empowerment, and equality for Karuna and Anjali; however, they are forced to live under patriarchal norms imposed by society.

Soja makes a distinction between "space" and "spatiality." According to him, the former represents objective material forms, while the latter, he pointed out, "this physical space has been a misleading epistemological foundation…Space itself may be primordially given, but the organization and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation, and experience" (80). Soja's concept of spatiality emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between space and society. The home is a dynamic place where familial ties, individual identity, and experiences converge. It acts as a place of emotional attachment, safety, and belongingness. The idea of "home" is paradoxical in the city of Mumbai. In this city, people get together or share their lives not because of love or connection but because of necessity. A home must be built up of mutual love, understanding, and affection. The Mumbai that De portrays in her novels is destitute of love and emotions, which would eventually lead to homelessness. Karuna belongs to a big family and she never got a space of her own in her home. As soon as she becomes a teenager, she liberates herself and decides to define her space. She tells her first boyfriend Bunty "I had stumbled on something called 'privacy', 'space', to give it its Stateside name- a concept that didn't exist in my home. 'I need space,'" (59). Karuna wanted to have a space of her own that she did not get in her home. She longed for privacy and she wanted a space in which she could retreat from the demands of life. Her then-boyfriend was puzzled to hear her demand. For a woman to demand space was not something that he had heard about. He asked her, "'What do you mean- "space"?'" to which she replied "You know-

SPACE- I need my own space. I feel claustrophobic. I need to find myself" (59). Karuna believes that the space that she yearns for would help her find the lost version of herself. She married a rich socialite believing that she would be able to get the space that she always craved. But after marriage, Karuna went to her husband's home and there also she did not receive a space as her own. One day when Karuna's friend comes to visit Karuna at her husband's home she tells Karuna "… you don't really think this as your home, do you? And that shows…. You merely park yourself in it, because you have no place to go… And you feel trapped" (98). This indicates Karuna's inner turmoil for not having a space that she could truly call hers at any point in her life.

Women are expected to dress up, be fashionable, and be showpieces for their husbands to show off in public. Karuna hated the parties and dressing up which her husband always disapproved of. Karuna's friend Ritu shares a tip that she uses in her life to get whatever she needs as a wife. "I let him think he is superior" (100) says Ritu. She advices Karuna "Call your husband 'darling', at least in front of his friends. Pamper him in public. Press his feet sometimes. All this works like jaadu" (101). She says "…that men, like dogs, could be conditioned through reward and punishment. It was a lesson I'd never forget" (101). Here to some extent, women are forced to manipulate their husbands to satisfy their needs. Men are ready to do anything for a woman only if she surrenders herself completely, depends on him for everything, and never questions his decisions.

When Krish, Karuna's husband's friend met him after a long time, Karuna's husband introduced his wife as "Meet the old girl, Krish" (204). He did not even have the courtesy to introduce Karuna properly at least by mentioning her name. This shows that he does not respect Karuna as an individual. To this Karuna thinks "I

deeply resented the husband's patronizing tone. I hated being referred to as 'the old girl', it made me feel like a bag of bones." (204). Karuna's husband continues the conversation with Krish saying "Come home with us. Pot-luck- don't know what the old girl has rustled up but it will be edible" (204). Karuna's husband doesn't even realize that he is insulting his wife in front of a person whom she has just met. He laughs out loud treating it as a joke but Karuna feels deeply hurt by her husband's behaviour but he never knew about it. In a patriarchal setup, it is the man who subverts the woman's role to a stereotype. Karuna's husband is a male chauvinist who tries to subjugate her identity by cunningly taking away from her the need for independence. She derogatorily calls him "Black Label". Despite his intellectual inadequacy and non-reciprocity, he does what husbands do the best which is to throw her the running expenses of the house and occupy her body as his territory just to show who is the boss. Karuna saw around her "Women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single, it wasn't such a big deal" (72) yet she remained trapped in her unhappy married life.

Since Karuna is not in a content relationship with her husband she soon falls for Krish. But Krish was a married man and a womanizer. Karuna began to understand the true nature of Krish, "His lack of commitment, his insensitivity, his selfishness, the way he had absolute control over my emotional life, his power over me. Yes, I hated him for all this" (216). She revealed her affair with Krish to Swati, Karuna's sister and Swati did not approve of her affair. Swati says, "Mother used to say, "It's all right if a woman married above her, but a man never should" (221). Women have the privilege to marry above their status in society. She would be considered lucky if she got a wealthy husband. But if a man marries above his status,

it is said that the man must suffer and lay under the woman's feet. Society expects men to be superior to women in all aspects of life.

When Karuna's husband came to know about her affair with Krish he said "… I'm prepared to give you one more chance. I'm not a mean man. You've been a good wife. I don't really have any major complaints against you" (226). He was ready to forgive provided Karuna stopped her affair with Krish. "… you are human, you have sinned, but I must be generous and forgive you" (227). But Karuna's husband had planned to divorce her and this was just a gimmick. Men manipulate women by giving them hope that they are ready to forgive mistakes but in reality, they keep it with them to use it against her in the perfect situation. When Karuna came home from her Venice trip and came to know that she was pregnant the true nature of her husband was revealed. He said that the child does not belong to him and he would like to end his marriage with Karuna. All the promises that he had given her during the Venice trip vanished into thin air. He claims "All you women- you're just the same. You have no gratitude, no loyalty, nothing. Think of yourself all the time, that's all" (185). Here Karuna's husband generalizes women by saying all women are selfish, who think only about themselves, and have no loyalty or gratitude for anything to anybody. He contemptuously views Karuna's friends as worthless, seeing them as just like her and incapable of guiding her to be a perfect wife. Then he compares Karuna to an ideal woman who goes for jobs and earns money, bears children, looks after them, and is considered actual wife material. Whenever the husband checks on Karuna, she reads books all the time and never does household chores. She heard him out without reacting for it was obvious that there would be no way he could bring himself to see things from her point of view. (185). That's how women silence themselves when they feel they shall never be heard. She was sick of her marriage and she still doesn't know

why she married him. She had never loved him and she knows that her husband doesn't have a clue what sort of a woman she is (227).

Men living in the cities don't put in an effort to understand the intricacies of their partner's personality which eventually contributes to straining their relationship. Karuna's husband continues to shower his thoughts and says, "I'm cursing myself for being such a fool- but, like I told my mother, these women changed you. You were not like them when we got married, otherwise, I would never have married you" (228). Karuna's husband blames her friends for changing her into the person she is now because he is not ready to blame himself for marrying her and also to accept that she too has a personality of her own. Karuna responds to this "Maybe you wanted to feel superior" (228). In a relationship, women are supposed to forgive if the man shows any signs of infidelity. But here when Karuna had a relationship outside her marriage which she ended, her husband was unable to forgive and forget her deeds. Lefebvre's Right to the City advocates for the right to define one's own space and to be free from external constraints. In this context, Karuna's right to personal space, to evolve and make her own decisions, is denied. Her relationship is not a space of mutual respect and understanding, but rather a space where her individuality is suppressed, echoing the denial of women's rights to control their own identities within both the city and their personal lives.

Karuna's statement "You never cared to understand me as a woman" (228) has immense depth. It is extremely hard to understand what a woman has to undergo in life. More than materialistic things they want an emotional connection with their partners. They expect to be seen and listened to. But here Karuna's husband considers himself superior to her and thinks that she must do things according to his whims and fancies. He tells her she cannot come back to the house and he cannot pretend that

nothing has happened. He also says that his mother won't accept her at any cost after coming to know about all the things Karuna has done. To this, Karuna snaps by saying she did not marry his mother and things should be discussed and sorted out between the couple and not the parents. Karuna's husband concludes by saying that Krish is never going to leave his wife for Karuna. In front of society, men need a wife but behind the curtains, they are ok to have multiple relationships. He also tells Karuna "You don't have a job. You can't support yourself. I'm not going to give you a dime and I don't think your parents are going to welcome you with open arms" (231). By revealing all this Karuna's husband mentally destroys her and makes her fall into deep despair. He also reveals the mindset of certain men after marriage.

Karuna's sister, Alak was in a state of hysteria, and she remembered what her mother told her about Alak's first menstruation. Alak thought she was going to die and insisted on calling her father immediately. When the father came to know about the situation, he said the mother hadn't prepared the girls for these changes and that it was a mother's duty to handle a daughter at a time like this (240). The society proclaims that mothers play a crucial role in shaping the experiences and perspectives of their daughters. They bear the primary responsibility for guiding and supporting their daughters in various challenges. Men prefer not to be directly involved in issues related to women and if something goes wrong with the child the blame is completely put on the mother's shoulders. It should be noted that all members of society are crucial for creating a supportive and inclusive environment for women and only that could make women feel empowered.

"A woman cannot live alone. It is not safe… A woman needs a man's protection" (340). This is a perspective rooted in traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Such a statement told by Karuna's mother tends to imply that a woman's

safety and well-being are inherently linked to the presence of a man. This notion ought to be challenged because women are capable of leading independent and fulfilling lives of their own. Women should be empowered with education, financial independence, and equal opportunities. With all this, they could navigate life independently fostering self-reliance and resilience. This is the thought that every woman ought to be taught in her house.

Parents perceive marriage as a safeguard against societal challenges and they believe that it offers a woman companionship, support, and stability. Karuna's mother says "… we would like to see you settled in our lifetime. Your father and I both feel a woman's real place is in her husband's home. Not in her parents" (340). Here her mother does not want Karuna to stay independent and be happy in her own home. They expect her to get married and be in her husband's home.

> It [the family] defines women's identity, literally by conferring upon them the name of the father/husband, by inscribing them within its own class-caste-and religion-defi ned identity, and by prescribing the social roles that they will play, in familial terms: daughter, wife, mother. (Rajan 80)

Women like Karuna should be empowered to redefine their roles outside the traditional confines of marriage and family. The city, in this sense, should not only be a physical space but also a metaphorical one, where women have the right to redefine themselves, live independently, and carve out lives of their own rather than being confined to predefined roles. Women should be taught from an early age, the value of self-reliance, education, and financial independence so that they can navigate life on their own terms, just as the city should be a space where they have the freedom to live without patriarchal control.

Mother speaks about the privilege that girls nowadays have. She says "Nowadays you girls are lucky-you can choose. You meet so many men" (340-341). She compares it with her own life. Mother didn't have the option to meet men and choose one among them. She must have married someone whom her family thought might be good for her. Mother insists "Take your time, but marry. And marry the right one- that is important" (341). Leading a single independent life is out of the question for Karuna's mother. Marrying someone must be the thing that Karuna must focus on in life is what she ultimately tells. Karuna is unable to accept what her mother is trying to tell. She questions her mother by asking

> …why does security rest with a man? I feel confident now that I can look after myself. I am earning as much as any man. I have a roof over my head. I don't really have any responsibilities. I am at peace with myself. I'm not answerable to anyone. I don't feel like complicating my life by getting into a second marriage. (341)

Karuna has a clear vision for her life and remains unconvinced by her mother's perspective. She refuses to accept that marriage is the ultimate goal in life instead she stands firm in her beliefs. She is not swayed by traditional views that prioritize marriage. Even though Karuna gets a proposal from Girish, who is affluent and well-settled, and by marrying him she knows that her life will be settled, still she rejects the proposal. She is not ready to make "sacrifices" (341) at least for the time being by marrying someone again just for money.

When Karuna's mother comes to know that Karuna is not interested in marrying Girish she says "He looks lonely. So does his son. They both require the presence of a woman in their lives" (342). Here Mother is trying to establish the fact that men cannot live without a woman. Men need women to make their lives

complete. If Karuna does not intend to marry Girish, her mother asks her to let him know about it so that they can move on with their life instead of getting stuck in a meaningless relationship.

Men can feel vulnerable when they face unexpected challenging situations. When Anjali got humiliated at Varun's party, without consoling and helping her, Kumar left the place. Karuna was the one who stood with her during this time. When Karuna spoke against Kumar for what he did, Anjali defended Kumar stating "He's a weak man. He can't handle scenes. He has to escape. He didn't mean it. He ran away because he was so embarrassed. I understand him" (367). By this statement, it's being stated that men just like women become vulnerable at times. Society always tries to portray men as fearless and bold. But there are times in which men tend to expose their emotional struggles. Regardless of gender, everyone has the right to express their vulnerable side. Just as women have been historically denied the freedom to assert their independence, men too are constrained by rigid gender norms that dictate how they should behave, feel, and express themselves. The city, as a space of freedom and equality, should allow all individuals, regardless of gender, to access the emotional terrain of their lives, and to express vulnerability without fear of judgment.

After Karuna's divorce, she began to work as a freelancer in the advertising field. She met several men after her divorce and she reflects, "…men would zoom in hungrily, not because they found me irresistible- oh no- but because they imagined I was 'available'" (378). Men around her wanted to be with her just because she was divorced. They often tell that she is a free bird and she has nothing to lose. But here she says that even though she was a free bird she was selective in choosing her partner. Even though she met many men she did not feel the urge to marry any of them. She was disappointed that she could not make her parents happy since their

only wish was to see her marry. But at the same time, she had decided that she would not make a hasty decision about anything for her parents.

Towards the end of the novel Ranbir Roy, a reporter from Washington comes and meets Karuna. He about his marriage "And like any other Indian man, his wife had been converted into a fixture in his apartment" (371). He claims that after marriage his wife had become a constant in his house just like utensils in a kitchen. Karuna began developing feelings for him even though he was a married man. Ranbir knew about it and he said to her "Here you are, to all appearances a well-brought-up, conservative Hindu woman, wrapped up in yards and yards of sari, propositioning a married man and trying to break up his marriage" (376). Here the woman is been considered as the seductress who is trying to ruin marriages. But Ranbir is equally responsible for being flirtatious with Karuna even though he is married. But Ranbir tactfully blames Karuna and tries to portray him as the victim. Soon Ranbir finds Karuna's life interesting when he comes to know more about it. He wanted to do a documentary based on her life. He says "…do an update on the status of the urban Indian woman" (378). She could fill it with everything that had happened in her life, making it a true reflection of urban Indian women. To this Karuna says that she has decided to write the book before the documentary because she says "I've always wanted to write one" (380). This shows a profound evolution in Karuna's character. Karuna has found her voice and is unapologetically pursuing her passion. Her ability to stand up for herself signifies her personal growth and breaking away from societal expectations.

Mumbai as a Thirdspace

Mumbai, as depicted in De's *Socialite Evenings,* represents a city that is much more than just a physical entity. Through Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace,

Mumbai could be explored as a complex, multidimensional setting, and a hybrid space where the social, physical, and mental realms converge to influence the characters' identities and lives.

In *Socialite Evenings*, Mumbai's Firstspace is depicted through its diverse neighbourhoods and landmarks. The remote village Satara (1), shops in Hyde Park (24), Bhavnagar (38), and Willingdon Club (69) are all major spaces of action in the novel. This physicality of Mumbai is crucial to understanding its residents' daily struggles and goals.

For Karuna, the protagonist, Mumbai's Firstspace is a place of both limitation and opportunity. Her own life unfolds across various urban settings: the modest, middle-class home of in Satara (1) her upbringing contrasts sharply with the elite spaces she later inhabits as she rises in social status. This separation between the city's wealthy and working middle-class reflects the socioeconomic divides within Mumbai. Physical spaces, such as Karuna's childhood home in Satara, serve as reminders of her humble past and contribute to her ambivalence toward her new life. These physical locales symbolize a world of hope and dreams which is a contrast to the glamorous but shallow socialite culture she later encounters. The physical spaces Karuna inhabits initially which include her home, social circles, and public spaces- imposed restrictions on her freedom and dreams. These constraints prevented her from fully pursuing her ambitions, as she is often expected to prioritize family obligations and adhere to cultural norms. But later on, Mumbai offers her opportunities for self-expression, equipping her to break free from societal norms and making it a space of potential and growth. Through Mumbai's Firstspace, De highlights the pressure of living in a fast-paced, often hostile atmosphere that affects the relationships and identities of characters. The city acts as both a site of

opportunity and a place of alienation. The characters' interactions in these spaces mould them and the space they interact in a new dimension.

In *Socialite Evenings*, the city of Mumbai is conceptualized as a space that fulfils the dreams of individuals who dream of a better life. Karuna, who grows up in a conservative middle-class household, imagines Mumbai as a place of freedom and glamour. For her, becoming part of the social elite is equivalent to escaping the restrictions of her upbringing. She is drawn to the city's posh restaurants, high-society gatherings, and elite clubs. These were the spaces that represented the possibility of reinvention and regaining a new life for Karuna. Her perception of Mumbai as a site of endless opportunities fuels her desire to enter the world of the socialites. However, the Secondspace vision of Mumbai is eventually transformed, as Karuna becomes entangled in the socialite culture she realizes the insecurities, superficialities, and personal dissatisfactions of the people living there. Her friendship with Anjali, a former middle-class girl who has also joined high society, emphasizes the shared understanding of these spaces. The city they imagined was full of potential, but the Mumbai they lived in proved to be a space fraught with challenges, social hierarchies, and inequalities that altered their original vision. As the characters navigated the city, their mental depictions evolved, reshaped by the lived experiences within the physical and social spaces of Mumbai.

The complexity of a city like Mumbai truly unfolds, blending its concrete realities with the dreams of its inhabitants. Karuna's middle-class upbringing and her desire to embrace a high-profile glamorous lifestyle mirror the struggles where personal desires and societal expectations often clash, revealing the multifaceted nature of the city itself.

For Karuna, Thirdspace represents a blend of her modest upbringing and her current socialite persona. She finds herself negotiating her place in this space but she is unable to fully embrace the elite world while feeling disconnected from her middle-class roots. This tension is seen when Anjali visits Karuna's modest home, a moment that forces both women to confront their roots and retrospect the performative nature of their lives in the elite social circles. While Anjali appears unfazed by Karuna's home, Karuna feels exposed, as though her "middle-classness" is an indelible mark, an element of her lived space that she cannot fully escape. Karuna continues habits from her middle-class days, such as organizing her belongings in bundles rather than displaying them even after she became a socialite. This personal space is a mix of her hybrid identity. Her husband criticizes her inability to let go of her "middle-classness," which he perceives as incompatible with their social status. Yet, her behaviour underscores the persistence of lived experience in shaping how she navigates the elite world.

After her divorce, Karuna is forced back into the world she wanted to leave, grappling with the discord between her middle-class upbringing and the socialite lifestyle she adopted. Her journey through the city examines the futility of escaping one's origins and the depth of lived realities in urban space. She resents returning to a life she had rejected, but ultimately, this middle-class familiarity comes to the rescue when her dreams where shattered.

In *Socialite Evenings* Mumbai is not a static backdrop but an active player in Karuna's life. It turns into a force that moulds her experiences, shapes her identity, and lays bare her insecurities. Illustrating Soja's notion of Thirdspace in Mumbai portrayed by De reveals that urban spaces are multidimensional and they are inseparable from the experiences of those who inhabit them. For all its residents, the

city's physical spaces, its vibrant dreams, and the daily negotiations of its inhabitants converge to produce a space that is liberating and unique. Karuna's journey analyses the inevitable blending of past and present in urban life, where one's identity cannot simply be rewritten but is continuously shaped by the city's dynamic structure. Through *Socialite Evenings*, De provides a thoughtful insight into Mumbai as an intricate, layered city that defines its people as much as they seek to define themselves within it.

Stereotypes and Uniqueness of Mumbai

One of the most persistent stereotypes about Mumbai is that it is a city of wealth, glamour, and socialites. It is considered as a place where the rich and famous flaunt their wealth and live lives of luxury. In *Socialite Evenings,* De explores this stereotype through the protagonist Karuna who escalation into the world of Mumbai's elite. Karuna from a middle-class background enters the glamourous world of Mumbai with a bunch of hopes and dreams. Slowly she fulfils her desires and turns into a socialite. Mumbai's affluent classes live in spaces that appear both geographically and socially isolated from the rest of the city, creating the image of a metropolis split between the haves and the have-nots. The glamorous lifestyle Karuna enters embodies the stereotype of Mumbai. In this city, the privileged enjoy an opulent life at a distance from the struggles of the working classes.

However, De exposes this stereotype to reveal the shallowness and uncertainty that often accompany such lifestyles. Characters like Anjali, who projects an image of independence and confidence, are haunted by a desire to be loved and to fit into a world they feel alienated from. Despite their wealth, they are insecure, constantly competing for status and recognition, revealing a lifestyle that is as fragile as its glamour. By exposing the superficiality behind Mumbai's socialites, De offers a

nuanced perspective, suggesting that the stereotype of Mumbai as a glamorous city is a disguise to mask its dark side.

Another stereotype of Mumbai is its association with the “aspiring middle class”. This is evident in Karuna’s upbringing and is reflected in the values instilled in her as a young girl. For instance, her parents are strict and value discipline, traits associated with Mumbai’s middle class. They view luxury as superficial and consider education the key to improving social status. This aligns with the stereotypical image of the middle-class Mumbaikar who is practical, disciplined, and willing to make sacrifices for a better future.

While *Socialite Evenings* touches upon widely held stereotypes, it also examines what makes Mumbai unique. Mumbai is a city where extreme wealth and extreme poverty coexist. It is a place where the dreams of millions converge and where resilience is a way of life. In the novel, Mumbai’s diversity is reflected in the backgrounds of the characters. Each character comes from different social, cultural, and economic segments of society. The coexistence of these different worlds within a single city is a testament to Mumbai’s unique identity. Mumbai is turned into a place where anyone can attempt to build a new life, regardless of their background. Despite the challenges and hardships that many of its residents face, Mumbai continues to thrive, adapt, and evolve. This resilience is reflected in the middle-class characters in *Socialite Evenings,* who strive to improve their lives despite limited resources. Even Karuna, who is initially embarrassed by her middle-class background, finds strength in the values she has inherited from her family. Her parents’ emphasis on sacrifice, discipline, and rationality equips her with the resilience needed to navigate the uncertainties of her socialite lifestyle. Mumbai’s unique character lies in this blend of pursuit and perseverance, where people confront difficulties without losing hope.

Mumbai’s reputation as a city where dreams can come true is not just a stereotype; it is a defining feature of the city. This is a city where people come to reinvent and redefine themselves. Karuna’s journey exemplifies this trait, as she moves from a modest upbringing to a glamorous socialite life.

Through *Socialite Evenings*, De presents Mumbai as a city that embodies both stereotypes and complex realities. Mumbai is a place where dreams are chased yet not always fulfilled. It is a space where individuals are constantly navigating their identities. The city’s uniqueness lies in its ability to hold these contradictions and create a dynamic multifaceted environment. Mumbai reveals the strengths and vulnerabilities of its residents. De’s depiction of Mumbai is not a static setting, but a living paradox. It is a space where dreams coexist with disillusionment, wealth with poverty, and ambition with social constraints. Through *Socialite Evenings*, De captures the essence of Mumbai, a city that resists simple definitions and leaves a lasting impact on those who seek to define themselves within it.

Conclusion

De’s *Socialite Evenings* portrays Mumbai as a dynamic city that shapes the identities and relationships of its residents. Through the experiences of Karuna and other characters, the novel reveals how the city’s diverse spaces influence the ambitions, family bonds, and identity of the characters. Mumbai is not just a backdrop but a character, reflecting the contradictions between success and struggle. Ultimately, *Socialite Evenings* presents a multifaceted view of Mumbai, where the city’s evolving spaces influence the lives of those who inhabit it.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Susan Merrill Squier has expressed,

> The city has a special significance in the works of women writers because- as women- they have a unique relationship to the urban environment, whether it is considered as an actual place, as a symbol of culture, or as the nexus of concepts and values determining woman's place in history and society. (4)

Urban spaces are often sites of freedom and restriction. As people navigate the complex social structures within a city, their roles in it get redefined. The city becomes a symbol of representing modernity, diversity, multiculturalism, power, ambition, and innovations. It also embodies resistance, inequality, subjugation, and alienation that dictate the position of an individual in the city.

Women writers explore these dynamics by portraying cities as spaces where power, ambition, gender, struggle, and diversity traverse with an individual. The limitations imposed on an individual in domestic and professional spaces become a powerful force that mould and define their identities. These constraints create a huge impact on the characters' lives. However, the city also offers opportunities for their independence and self-discovery challenging those restrictions. By writing about cities, these women writers engage not only with the history and culture of the city but also question the power structures and values that have defined a woman's space in both literature and life.

Summary of the Analysis

The cities of Kolkata, Delhi, and Mumbai, depicted in the works of Anita Desai's *Voices in the City*, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, and Shobhaa De's *Socialite Evenings*, are far more than mere settings for the narratives. These cities

evolve into living entities that profoundly influence the characters by shaping their identities, lifestyles, resilience, relationships, and destinies. Each city, with its unique socio-political and cultural backdrop, serves as a dynamic force that creates an impact on the lives of characters. In these novels, urban spaces transcend their physicality by becoming an active contributor to the character's psychological and emotional struggles. The cities are not just spaces of living, but they shape the characters' journeys within the complexities of post-independence India.

In *Voices in the City*, Kolkata emerges as a city embedded in colonial and traditional structures. This multifaceted urban space of Kolkata has significantly influenced the lives of the characters, Nirode, Monisha, Amla, and their mother. It moulded their emotional and psychological battles within a space marked by tradition, values, intellectual pursuits, and gendered expectations. The city becomes a battleground where modernity clashes with traditional customs. Family obligations and societal expectations restrict the personal growth of the characters. The intellectual heritage of Kolkata does not equate to liberation and freedom for its inhabitants.

Kolkata, a city renowned for its intellectual vibrancy, artistic depth, and literary heritage, paradoxically imposes a deep sense of entrapment on those who seek to navigate its space. The city's cultural richness provides a platform for individuals like Amla, an artist; Monisha, an intellectual; and Nirode, a writer—each embodying a fragment of Kolkata's identity. However, while offering opportunities for creative and intellectual pursuits, this space also becomes a site of disillusionment and struggle. Nirode, dismayed by failure, finds himself ensnared in the contradictions of ambition and despair, mirroring the city's own dichotomy of intelligence and hardship. Monisha, trapped within the rigid confines of patriarchy, suffocates under

societal expectations that deny her independence despite her intellectual depth. Amla, though artistic and ambitious, is ultimately bound by the city's conservative values that restrict her potential. Their experiences serve as a microcosm of Kolkata itself—a space that fosters creativity and thought yet simultaneously imposes limitations dictated by entrenched social structures.

The city's intellectual and cultural allure, while captivating, fails to provide true liberation. It reinforces the reality that both men and women grapple with constraints, though women face a deeper marginalization that curtails their dreams. This contradiction exposes the city's dual character, functioning simultaneously as an incubator of ideas and an agent of suppression. In doing so, it plays a pivotal role in shaping the destinies of its inhabitants in multifaceted ways.

Nayantara Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* portrays Delhi during the Emergency period. The city emerges as a space that merges an individual's identity with the political structure. The oppressive forces imposed by the government intersect with the daily struggles of its inhabitants. The lives of Sonali, a government official, and Rose, a foreigner married into an Indian family become intertwined with the political turmoil of that time. Delhi becomes a microcosm of the authoritarian state. To survive in this city depended upon an individual's ability to navigate systemic inequalities, political alliances, and gendered dynamics.

Delhi, as portrayed in *Rich Like Us*, is inseparable from the political turmoil of the Emergency period, becoming both a physical space and an active force that shapes the identities and experiences of its inhabitants. The Emergency, a defining moment in India's history, manifests in the city's structures, influencing the way its residents navigate their existence. Politics permeates Delhi's urban landscape, and through this space, the intersection of power, gender, and identity is observed.

For women like Sonali and Rose, the city magnifies gendered oppression, reinforcing patriarchal structures even as it offers opportunities for empowerment. Sonali, despite her education and career as a government official, is caught in a bureaucratic system that stifles her independence. The authoritarian regime further restricts her, curbing not just her professional aspirations but also her personal freedom. Her struggle illustrates how political authority and patriarchy intertwine to limit women's agency.

Similarly, Rose, an outsider married into an Indian family, faces a different but equally restrictive experience. Her identity is shaped by cultural expectations that dictate her role within the household. The political climate of Delhi during the Emergency intensifies these constraints, confining her to a space where she must constantly negotiate her identity within the rigid boundaries set by both family and society. The bureaucratic and political structures of the city become mechanisms through which her autonomy is diminished, reinforcing the idea that regardless of nationality, women are subjected to gendered limitations in urban spaces.

In contrast, men like Ram and Dev navigate Delhi from a position of privilege and power. Ram, as a member of the urban elite, benefits from the very system that oppresses others. He engages with the city's political machinery, upholding power while compromising his ethical values. Dev, on the other hand, sees Delhi as a space where morality is secondary to ambition. The political turbulence of the Emergency provides him with the perfect environment to pursue wealth and influence without constraints. Their experiences express how the city allows men to redefine their identities in response to power structures, while women are forced to contend with systemic oppression.

Ultimately, *Rich Like Us* presents Delhi as a microcosm of the nation's political climate, where the Emergency not only shapes the city but also dictates the destinies of its inhabitants. Politics is embedded in the very fabric of the city, and through its turbulent landscape, the novel reveals how individuals are moulded by the urban space they inhabit.

Mumbai in *Socialite Evenings* is portrayed as a city brimming with opportunity and aspiration. But beneath its glittering surface lies a space filled with competition, materialism, jealousy, betrayal, and alienation. This paradoxical urban space shapes the lives and identities of the novel's central characters, Karuna and Anjali. Coming from a middle-class background they navigate the high-society life that Mumbai offers. In the lives of Karuna and Anjali while in pursuit of social status and material success, they began to lose their true identity.

Mumbai emerges as a space of reinvention, where individuals seek to escape their past and carve out new identities. The city, often seen as the land of dreams, draws people with the promise of success, yet it does not guarantee the fulfilment of those aspirations. While a few manage to achieve wealth and fame, many are pushed into the city's underbelly, struggling to survive in its unforgiving landscape. The divide between the affluent and the less privileged is stark—opportunities are dictated by wealth, leaving the marginalized to grapple with the harsh realities of Mumbai's lower strata.

For women, the city presents both possibilities and limitations. They strive for independence, yet their worth is often defined by appearance, relationships, and societal approval. Gendered expectations restrain their independence, forcing them to navigate a space that both tempts and restrains. In *Socialite Evenings*, Karuna's journey exposes this paradox. She seeks self-discovery but remains entangled in the

city's superficial glamour. Relationships, whether romantic or familial, are fragile and often lack emotional depth. Marriages are hollow, with extramarital affairs offering little more than a momentary escape from disillusionment.

Despite its challenges, people continue to believe in Mumbai's potential, focusing on success stories while overlooking the countless dreams left unfulfilled. The city inspires ambition but refuses to take responsibility for broken aspirations, leaving its inhabitants in an endless cycle of hope and despair.

Kolkata, Delhi, and Mumbai, as depicted in *Voices in the City*, *Rich Like Us*, and *Socialite Evenings*, transcend their roles as mere settings to become active forces shaping the identities, struggles, and aspirations of their inhabitants. Each city embodies distinct socio-political and cultural realities, influencing the trajectory of the characters' lives. While they share common themes of class struggle, gendered experiences, broken relationships, and the search for identity, the way these elements manifest varies across urban settings.

Ultimately, these cities, with their unique historical and social contexts, serve as dynamic entities that shape the lives of their residents. Kolkata stifles through cultural expectation, Delhi dominates through political turmoil, and Mumbai entraps through materialistic allure. These urban spaces not only reflect but actively mould the evolving class structures, gender dynamics, and socio-political tensions of post-independence India, illustrating that cities are not just settings but active forces that shape lives.

Relevance of the study

This study contributes significantly to contemporary discussions in urban space. Cities have always been an important part of the narrative, from the ancient cities shown in Homer's works to the current metropolises described in literature

(Smiths 46; Jones 113). Employing pertinent theoretical frameworks, new avenues for future research were opened. This research explores how urban spaces influence the identity and experiences of their inhabitants.

Literature captures urban life through its rich narratives and vivid descriptions, giving the readers an insight into the complexities of living in a city (Johnson 24). In the context of rapid urbanization and globalization, this research is apposite in providing an analysis of how these global phenomena shape and are reflected in literary narratives. The study broadens our understanding of how socio-political structures impact social interactions. This research enriches the discourse on urban studies, emphasizing the importance of literature as a lens through which contemporary urban challenges and dynamics can be comprehended. This study serves as a foundation for future inquiries into the evolving nature of cities and their representation in literature.

Limitations of the study

This study provides an exploration of urban experiences through the works of select women writers, offering a nuanced understanding of these narratives from their unique perspectives. While the analysis is limited to specific major cities in India, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of urban themes within these contexts. By concentrating on the literature produced by women, the study reveals how their voices articulate the complexities of urban space.

Although the research does not encompass diverse urban experiences across different cultures or periods, nor does it compare rural and urban narratives, it establishes a solid foundation for understanding key urban themes. The insights gained from this highlight significant issues such as identity, resilience, belonging, social dynamics, and the influence of urban space on personal experiences.

This study enriches the discourse on urban narratives and paves the way for further research that could expand the scope and generalizability of urban studies. Future inquiries may incorporate a broader range of cultural contexts and periods, nurturing a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of urban life and its representation in literature.

Platforms for Further Study

Urban space offers ample scope to be explored in literature. Though many researchers have examined this genre, there is a need to explore and expose the importance of urban space in unexplored cities. Philosophical inquiries into spatial experience can deepen the understanding of urban spaces. Research on spatial temporality reflects cultural and historical shifts, revealing its effect on narrative structure and thematic evolution in literature. Interdisciplinary approaches could augment perspectives on environmental issues happening within the city. Research on disability in urban spaces can hone inclusivity discourse. Longitudinal studies could track changes in city depictions across literary periods. The following chapter titled "Recommendations" is an attempt to throw some light upon the topic for further study.

Conclusion

The cities of Kolkata, Delhi, and Mumbai, each exhibit unique dimensions of urban life while remaining interconnected in many of their spatial dynamics. Each city serves not merely as a backdrop but as an active participant in shaping and reshaping the destinies of its characters. By exploring the spaces of each city, the complex lived realities of urban spaces were revealed.

Chapter 6

Recommendations

Research on urban studies gives ample opportunities to explore the complexities of city life and its representation in literature. Studies on philosophical inquiries into spatial experience can deepen our knowledge of how individuals interact with urban spaces. This study focuses on the intricate relationships between people and the spaces they inhabit. It also reveals how interactions in these spaces shape an individual's identity and belongingness.

Examining spatial temporality can offer insights into how time and space intersect in urban narratives. Researchers can explore the cultural and historical evolutions in a city over different periods. The changes brought about by globalization, modernization, and industrialization in the city can be examined.

Interdisciplinary approaches can bring a holistic approach to the research. Perspectives on environmental issues and their impact on city life could also be taken for study. Urban sustainability, climate change, and public health issues could be addressed by integrating insights from sociology, geography, and environmental studies. Research on disability in urban spaces can hone the discourse on inclusivity. It would encourage a re-thinking of urban design and policies to accommodate all its inhabitants.

Longitudinal studies tracking changes in the depiction of cities across literary periods could be investigated. Researchers can examine how globalization, digitalization, and social media shape urban culture and how they are represented in literature via human experience. A comparative study of urban and rural spaces is yet another topic involving numerous questions to debate. Research can be carried out on the impact and depiction of violence in urban spaces. Likewise, in-depth semiotic

research analysing the city as a system of signs, spatial codes, urban myths, and gendered semiotics could be explored. Ecocriticism can be employed to evaluate literary texts by illustrating the environmental issues portrayed in them.

The area of urban spaces furnishes numerous intriguing topics to investigate. They offer new avenues to explore and extend possibilities for interdisciplinary approaches implementing gender studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and narratology. The present study attempts to explore the urban spaces in the novels of select Indian women writers and there are myriad techniques of expression which are unexplored territories that can promote a better understanding of the medium.

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