



DICKENS AND CHANDRA: THE METROPOLITAN CITY IN FICTION

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ABSTRACT

When one thinks of the word “Crime” a series of questions regarding the place, type, legal agency, cause and consequence emanate simultaneously. The habitat is an important index to gauge the cause of crime and thereafter initiate measures to control its spread. In crime fiction, the scene of crime is mostly the point from which the narrative moves forward and therefore the exercise of investigating the crime-scene is actually a plunge in the past. In this article there will be a discussion on the domain of crime i.e. the city and how Dickens’ treatment of London as a sanctuary of crime has influenced Chandra’s modeling of Bombay in Sacred Games. Also, an attempt will be made to underline the extent to which the writers have explored the idea of city as a subject in their novels.

INTRODUCTION

London is to Charles Dickens what Paris is to Balzac and Dublin to Joyce. The city is the origin and the source of literary productivity for these novelists. In fact, London finds a mention in all of Dickens’ novels making him, thereby, a topographical novelist. Dickens described London as a magic lantern, a popular entertainment of the Victorian era, which projected images from slides. Of all Dickens’ character none played as important a role in his work as that of London itself. It fired his imagination and made him write. In a letter to John Forster, in 1846, Dickens wrote “a day in London sets me up and starts me; but outside of the city, the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern is IMMENSE!!”



In this extract several ideas about Dickens's London are crystallized – London is the most important character in his novels and it is also his Muse, inspiring him oblivious of the fatigue and despondency.

“The stone by which he was seated bore, in large characters, an intimation that it was just seventy miles from that spot to London. The name awakened a new train of ideas in the boy's mind. London! That great large place! Nobody not even Mr. Bumble – could ever find him there! He had often heard the old men in the work – house, too, say that no lad of spirit need want in London; and that there were ways of living in that vast city, which those who had been bred up in country parts had no idea of. It was the very place for a homeless boy, who must die in the streets unless someone helped him”. (59-60)

In this paragraph, London is significant for its capacity of accommodation. It is not only a hide-out for criminals but also a sanctuary for all those who are incapable of self-sustaining themselves. For Oliver, London offers the image of copiousness – a place where there is plenty of food for everyone. Vikram Chandra's portrayal of Bombay is very closely related to Dickens' approach to London; Chandra offers various perspectives on the city through his character's perception of it – a technique of exploring the contours and configuration of the city deftly employed by Charles Dickens. For Ganesh Gaitonde, Bombay is a springboard to accomplish his ambitions either by hook or crook:

Gaandu, if you want to live in the city you have to think ahead three turns, and look behind a lie to see the truth and then behind that truth to see the lie. And then, and then, if you want to live well, you need a bankroll. (35)

For Papa-ji (Sartaj Singh's father) the city was enormously crowded, compressed and full of squalor:

In this city, the rich had some room, and the middle class had less, and the poor had none. This is why Papa – ji had retired to Pune. He said he wanted to be able to wake up and look out long, to feel as if there was still some empty space in the world. (75)

Mary Mascarenas thought of Bombay as a place where one can be oneself independent of the compulsions of a closely – knit village life.

In this amiable mixing, to be alone in the city was to find companionship with a thousand strangers... But often, to be solitary, and free, was the gift she



wanted from Bombay. She had learned how to be alone, through dragging nights of terror and nostalgia, and now she prized her liberty. There was a certain temperate calm in being one's own person. (349)

Sartaj thought of Bombay as an indispensable companion, a place which keeps him occupied, both mentally and physically. His entire being is rooted in the city:

May be many years later, there would be a small house for Sartaj somewhere else. But right now he found it hard to imagine being away permanently from this messy, impossible city. A small holiday, now and then, was all Sartaj needed. (271)

Chandra appears to be a local chronicler as he narrates the history of modern Bombay. The voluminous novel traces the development of the city from mid 1960s to early parts of the millennium. The socio-economic transformation is represented through changes in fashion, technological revolution and most importantly through the changes in the kind of mobile handsets Gaitonde makes use of. In fact, the city is the most emphasized “character” in Sacred Games. The novel documents tectonic historical events like assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Shah Bano case, destruction of Babri Masjid, Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay and also the bomb blasts of 1993 which altered the political equations in Maharashtra. Like Dickens, Chandra shows that the city does not merely from the background rather it is a repository of dramatic action and a human landscape. The inevitability of Bombay is manifested only when characters are separated from it; Chandra shows that the city breathes life into people:

They become sullen. Their bodies missed Bombay. I know, because after a year away from Mumbai I still got attacks of yearning, I craved the spittle - strewn streets of that great whore of a city, while waking up I felt that pungent prickling of auto-exhaust and burning rubbish at the back of my nostrils, I heard that swelling rumble of traffic heard from a high hotel rooftop, that far sound that made you feel like a king. When you were far away from the jammed jumble of cars, and the thickets of slums, and the long loops of rail, and the swarms of people, and the radio music in bazaars, you could ache for the city. These were some afternoons when it felt like I was dying a little. Under the foreign sky I could feel my soul crumbling away, piece by piece. And I felt a loneliness I had never imagined, that I wouldn't have earlier believed could exist. Only after coming away from India did I realize that at home I had never been truly alone... Only after sailing away across these black waters had I known the meaning of this word: alone.” (538)



In Martin Chuzzlewit, Dickens had described the yearning felt by Mark Tapley and Martin for the homeland:

A year had passed, since those same spires and roof had faded from their eyes. It seemed to them, a dozen years. Some trifling changes, here and there, they called to mind; and wondered they were so few and slight. In health and fortune, prospect and resource, they came back poorer men than they had gone away. But it was home. And though home is a name, a word, it is a strong one, stronger than magician ever spoke, or spirit answered to, in strongest conjuration. (547)

One of the aspects of social realism in Dickens's novels is its detailed and picturesque description of London. The filthy side of human existence which was systematically ignored got a new lease of life in Dickens' writings. The major impact of which was that people started noticing the ghettos and subsequently were apprised of the pitiable situations of the disadvantaged classes. The habitations of the poor and underprivileged working-class represented the dark side of London which Dickens illuminated. Chandra, like Dickens has visualized the city (Bombay/London) in contrast and contradiction. In an interview, given to Rohan Joshi in U nlikely Pairings, Chandra shares his zeal for minute but observable descriptions of city landscape. Sacred Games shows these peculiarities in vast proportions:

Everything was smaller, closer, the pathways narrow between the uneven walls of cardboard and cloth and wood, the tumbling roofs covered with plastic. They were well into the Bengali Bura, which was the very poorest part of Navnagar. Most of the shacks were less than a man's standing height, and the citizens of the Bengali Bura sat in their doorways, tattered and ragged, and the barefooted children ran before the police party. On Katekar's face there was furious contempt for jhopadpatti -dwellers who let dirt and filth and garbage pile up not two feet from their own doors, who let their little daughters squat to make a mess exactly where their sons played. There are the people who ruin Mumbai... and live like animals here. (19)

The passage clearly outlines the condition of poor people in a Mumbai slum. Further, in Sacred Games, Chandra, like Dickens has undertaken an extensive survey of the entire city, knitting the length and breadth in narrative proportions; however the narrative also moves beyond Mumbai's boundaries.



“The houses in this part of Navnagar were old and well – established, all of them had good water connections and electricity. Many of them were two and three stories tall, with shops and workshops on the ground floor fronting the street.”(208)

Sartaj’s visit to Satguru Nagar Basti to investigate Mrs. Kamala Pandey’s case is described vividly:

Five hundred cramped little homes, brick and wood and plastic and tin making small spaces for many bodies. Kamble was probably one generation away from a home just like these, maybe two, but he had the superiority of the escapee, the emigrant... People lived here, and this was their life. Actually, this basti was better than many Sartaj had seen. The inhabitants had progressed, they had escaped the tattered lean-tos that new immigrants built, the temporary arrangements made out of discarded cardboard boxes... Sartaj had even seen a rank of five toilets near the front of the basti with a blue NGO placed over them. These were people moving up, slowly but surely. (613)

In his fictional as well as non-fictional works, Dickens has presented an impressionistic account of almost every mode of transportation available in the erstwhile era. The different forms of transportation offered distinct experiences for travellers and also for bystanders.

“It is very generally allowed that public conveyances afford an extensive field for amusement and observation.... Then on smooth roads people frequently get prosy, and tell long stories and even those who don’t talk, may have very unpleasant predilections.” (Omnibuses-Sketches by Boz).

It is one of the techniques through which Dickens explore the topography of the city from inside the coach, bus, railway carriage etc. It is a method to observe and scrutinize numerous nooks and corner of the whole landscape. In Sacred games, Sartaj’s official vehicle and later his motorcycle moves across the length and breadth of the city – Mumbai. Through his eyes mostly, Chandra seeks to examine and describe the enigmatic city of Mumbai.

Katekar drove with an easy grace that found the gaps in the traffic with balletic timing. Sartaj pushed his seat back and drowsily watched him change gears and snake the gypsy between trucks and autos with less than inches to spare... they had a clear stretch of road now, all the way up to the intersection at Karanth Chowk. They sped past clusters of apartment buildings to the right, ensconced behind a long grey wall, and on the left the untidy shacks of a basti opened doors directly on to the road. (14-15)



“Through the window a bus driver watched him dispassionately and when Sartaj met his glance he looked away, shifting in his high seat. Beyond him, a mannequin thrust her hip forward behind glass. Sartaj followed the shop windows and they receded into the glare of the sky, and he imagined the immense length of the island all of it struck and still in this multitudinous evening rush, clogged and moving in jerks and ricocheting little jumps.”(437)

Dorothy van Ghent has commented on the effects Dickens achieves by investing the life-less objects with animation and the other way round. She remarks critically that: “The animation of inanimate objects suggests both the quaint gaiety of a forbidden life, and an aggressiveness that has got out of control... the animate is treated as if it is a thing. It is as if the life absorbed by things had been drained out of people who have become incapable of humanity.” The incisive remark is suggestive of the ways Dickens uses to criticize the rabid industrial mechanization and its dehumanizing effects on living individuals. Since people are incapable of their humanity therefore it is obvious on their part to associate emotionally with inanimate objects and places around them. It is a means to compensate for the excessive alienation which has been induced by too much familiarization with materialistic existence. Sartaj Singh’s fascination with Mumbai and its distinct spots and localities is reflective of the urge of emotional affinity which he has for the city.

“Sartaj made it on to the train but barely, and he was unable to sleep through to Dadar Station as he usually did. Through dirtied glass, he watched the familiar darkening ridges slide by, outlined against the shape of his own face. He had made this journey many times, and loved it well, the long tunnel from Monkey hill to Nagnath which had so excited him as a child, the steep inclines and the sudden turns that swept back hillsides like stage curtains to reveal the astonishment of plummeting green valleys, and you felt an exhalation and wonder in your chest, and were glad you were going somewhere. He got it still, that little puff of excitement, but now it had inside itself a little twinge of loss and nostalgia. May be this was why people had kids, so that when you could no longer travel with your parents, your children made all train trips new again. Then you could watch the lights of Mumbai appear, and be fully happy that you were home.”(198)

Raymond Williams has remarked that Dickens was keen on linking people and objects as a conscious strategy to call attention to the enormous impact of city life on people. He also affirmed in his book, *The Country and the City* (1973) that Dickens had a love-hate relationship with the city. This aspect of Dickens’ treatment of city seems to have influenced Vikram Chandra intensely. Chandra’s Mumbai is notorious for its crime syndicate and



operations of underworld which is the hateful aspect of it. Additionally there is immense income and wealth inequality, massive poverty, unhygienic living conditions and degraded state of existence of majority of the people. Yet, Chandra reminds periodically in his novel that Mumbai is also a city of opportunity, vitality, hope and fulfillment. It is one “character” in his novel which is apparently imperishable and therefore the other characters constantly identify themselves with the city to get rid of their psychological ambivalence. Mumbai, as Chandra has drawn it, nourishes and sustains its diverse inhabitants. It not only harbors their ambitious but also drives it exceedingly because of the competitive environment.

Ambition had spread like an inescapable virus in those Harshad Mehta days, and there had been stock- market crashes and burst bubbles since, but the contagion had taken firm hold. Now these outsize aspirations were something like a universal condition. May be it was a form of health – after all, it gave you vim, zip, velocity. (200)

The love-hate attitude which Vikram Chandra manifests tends to capture the comprehensiveness and complexity of the idea of city – Mumbai. It encompasses the whole rhythm of existence – life on one end, death on the other and the interplay of these binaries constitute the panorama of literary exploration. Dickens made this a point in his writings, London is a microcosm of the world outside because of its variety, compositeness and resilience. Chandra drawing heavily from him, has shown these traits significantly so much so that one question which perturbed Sartaj all along the novel was why Gaitonde came back to Bombay? even when he knew about the threat to his life. In the end, Sartaj finds an explanation:

In the moment of our possession we lose those we love, to mortality, to time, to history, to themselves. What we have are these fragments of generosity, these gifts of faith and friendship and desire that we can give to each other... This is enough we are here and we will stay here. Perhaps Kulkarni was wrong about the people of Bombay, perhaps they would stay in the city even if they knew that a great fire was coming. Perhaps they would wait for the bomb in these tangled lanes, grown out of the earth without forethought or plan. People came here from gaon and vilayat, and they found a place to sit, they lay down on a dirty patch of land which shifted and settled to take them in, and then they lived. And so they would stay. (747)

Mumbaikar is a unique and impeccable identity which the city confers upon its inhabitants. Like Dickens’s London, Mumbai is a melting pot of composite identities. It houses both national and foreign immigrants like the Biharis, Tamils, Assamese, Marwaries and Bangladeshis etc. “Deva made two phone calls, and Sartaj knew he was tagging at his Tamil



connections across Navnagar, strumming them and listening to what came back. The Tamils had once been the feared newcomers into the city the ones denounced and hated by the Rakshaks as the threatening outsiders who supposedly jobs and land. Now they were old Mumbaikars” (209)

The inseparability of the two is highlighted evocatively:

“Where would home be when home was gone? Could you have a home away from home when there was no home? What would you long for, what would you dream of when you settled into sleep? When somebody asked where do you come from, what would you say? No, I couldn’t go anywhere, I couldn’t leave. I would stay right here, close to the field of battle, in it and I would stop Guruji, he was confident that I couldn’t stop him – ‘You can’t stop it’ - but I was Ganesh Gaitonde. He could see forwards and backwards in time, but I had escaped fate many times. I had beaten what was written, I had changed it. I had survived. Now I would survive again. I would save my home.” (800)

It is Gaitonde’s existential identification with Mumbai which categorically emphasizes the value and indispensability of it. Towards the end of the novel, he clings to Mumbai not because of its potential for wealth, criminal and political exploits but because he felt a kind of symbiotic kinship with it. Gaitonde owns Mumbai and in turn Mumbai owns Gaitonde.

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