

My Bombay vs Your Bombay: An Exploration of Metropolitan Attitude Portrayed in Altaf Tyrewala's No God in Sight

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Abstract: The city is a heterogeneous space. It is home to large numbers of people belonging to diverse classes, religions, gender, and ethnicity. This paper is an exploration of the questions, what makes it possible for all the diverse groups to be able to call the same city their city? How does the city accommodate such a divergent population? Such questions will be explored through an interdisciplinary study of a particular metropolitan character, Rahul Adhikari, a Mumbaiite from Altaf Tyrewala's work *No God in Sight*. The character Rahul Adhikari is peculiar, as he differentiates the city of Bombay as he calls it, 'My Bombay' and 'Your Bombay'. Tyrewala addresses Rahul Adhikari as 'Siddhartha in denial', giving his character a religious colour. Hence the first part of the study is an analysis of the religious significance of his story. The second part will inspect how far the attitude of Rahul Adhikari can be equated to the 'blasé attitude' of metropolitan citizens which George Simmel claims is characteristic of city life. This will be done by inquiring how the diverse population of the city experiences the city and how they react to the multiplicity of sensory experiences the city exposes them to. Also, since the character under study traverses the city in his car, the effect of mobility on the social relations of the urban citizens will be investigated.

Keywords: city, blasé attitude, heterotopia, mobility, portable territory.

Introduction

Cities are densely populated areas rich with diverse cultures and daily happenings. The city keeps attracting multitudes towards its belly and there is space for all. What makes it possible for all these diverse groups to be able to call the same city their city? How does the city accommodate such a divergent population? This paper is an exploration of such questions through an interdisciplinary study of a particular metropolitan character, Rahul Adhikari, a Mumbaiite from Altaf Tyrewala's work *No God in Sight*.

Altaf Tyrewala in *No God in Sight* presents a bunch of random people and their life in contemporary Mumbai. Among the variety of characters, Rahul Adhikari is one distinct character, an upper-class hedonist who lives in and traverses the city in his carefully customized private space. Rahul keeps himself away from the unpleasantness of the city and mediates in a "differential space" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 52) which he calls "my Bombay"¹. (Tyrewala, 2005, p. 160) The space outside 'my Bombay', that is, the city outside his curated space is "your Bombay". (Tyrewala, 2005, p. 160) 'Your Bombay' is chaotic and in direct contrast to his Bombay where everything happens on time and people, sights, and even temperature is optimized according to his preference. He prefers not to look into the newspaper or out through the car window where the clamouring, 'steaming, shitting, spitting city' (Tyrewala, 2005, p. 161) presents itself. While he travels from his home to the office, Rahul consciously avoids the risk of looking at the "suffering" outside which could tan the "incalculable bliss" (Tyrewala, 2005, p. 161) of his Bombay. His car windows are deliberately blackened to mar the heat and sight of the outside world. On reaching his office in the glass-enclosed building, which is chilled and muted, he forsakes the existence of the alternate, the other² city.

Rahul Adhikari vs Siddhartha

The first part of this paper attempts a religious interpretation of the story. Rahul Adhikari's story is titled *Rahul Adhikari: Siddhartha in Denial*. Siddhartha was the previous name of Gautama Buddha³, the enlightened one. Siddhartha lived in a palace shielded from all the agonies of the world. When Siddhartha set out of the palace to see the outside world for the first time, he was

shocked by his encounter with human suffering. He was taken on the horse Kanthaka by his charioteer Chandraka. During his journey, he encountered four sights (of which one was the sight of a decaying corpse) which urged him to renounce all worldly comforts. Siddhartha left his palace, his son Rahula and his wife Yashodhara and travelled to the river Anomiya. From there he left his servant and horse behind, journeyed into the woods, and became a monk.

Here Tyrewala names his character Rahul Adhikari seemingly analogous with Siddhartha's son's name Rahula and the driver Chinu analogous with Chandaka, Siddhartha's charioteer. Tyrewala's character Rahul Adhikari is in sharp contrast with Siddhartha. Rahul too meditates, as demonstrated at an executive conference but not on the questions of suffering or birth and rebirth. He religiously sticks on to luxury and all worldly comforts and lives the life of a libertine.

Rahul excludes himself from his immediate surroundings and is indifferent to the hardships of the world. He chooses not to look at the chaotic city while he travels through the city in his Lancer car charioteered by Chinu. Rahul does not even look up when a beggar(suffering) knocks at his car window. It is Chinu who gives some change to the beggar who looked like a corpse and shudders whereas it was Siddhartha who shuddered at the sight of a corpse long ago. "Your Bombay wants a spare piece of mine" (Tyrewala, 2005, p. 161) is how Rahul responds to the incident. When Siddhartha had renounced the comforts of his palace to experience the world outside, Rahul Adhikari the narcissist, in contrast, reserves himself in his glass palace. He excludes himself from the outside world of suffering that is, 'Your Bombay'. He traverses the city in his car peering into his laptop screen. The chilling cold inside his car matches his coldness towards the outside world.

Rahul is Siddhartha in denial. Rahul is in denial of 'your Bombay' ie he is in denial of the sufferings and thereby in denial of enlightenment. He is in denial that there is pain along with pleasure in the world. He is denying the wholeness of experiences. Even his attempt at meditation is only a hollow exercise. He looks away from pain and ugliness. Rahul's car journey from home to the office through the city can be a metaphor for the rite of passage. In the rite of passage, one leaves the familiar, crosses a liminal, in-between stage, and reenters the community renewed. The liminal stage is a time of testing, learning, and growth. Here Rahul refuses to sympathize with the

world outside or learn from this stage but clings to his comfort zone and is delivered at the other end unchanged. According to Buddhist legend, prince Siddhartha crossed the river Anomiya and renounced the world becoming Buddha. Rahul Adhikari crosses the city, reaches his office which smells of ammonia, and shuts himself inside his room determined to deny the existence of ‘your Bombay’(suffering).

Multiple Spaces of the City

This second part of the paper attempts an exploration of the character from an urban point of view. Rahul Adhikari’s claim of ‘My Bombay’ can be seen as his affirmation of personal space within the city. The city is a heterogeneous space. It is home to large numbers of people belonging to diverse classes, religions, gender, and ethnicity. Won’t these people all be having their own ‘Bombays’ or ‘Mumbais’ as it can be differently called? What makes it possible for all the diverse groups to be able to call the same city their city? How does the city accommodate such a divergent population?

This question can be explored by studying and understanding ‘city’. In their edited work *Key Concepts in Urban Studies*, Gottdiener and Budd (2005) defined a city “as a bounded space that is densely settled and has a relatively large, culturally heterogeneous population” (p. 4) Here it is the city of Mumbai being scrutinized. The city of Mumbai is a place, which can be geographically located wherein contains a multiplicity of subjective spaces. The participants of the city experience the city space differently. City space can be absolute, abstract, differential, residual, personal, or private. Absolute space is the natural space whereas abstract space is laid on by the planners’ schemes. When different groups of people use a particular space differently, it becomes ‘differential space’. For example, the footpath used by pedestrians to walk will also be used by hawkers differently, to conduct business. Certain other spaces in the city like some shops or gated communities are ‘exclusive’ spaces that can be accessed only by a few. In the city, one can move around in a car which is a “portable private space”. (Madanipour, 2003, pp. 201-202) In this present era of telecommunication, one can also be in a virtual space while being anywhere in the city. It is this multiplicity of spaces the city offers in its geographical area, which makes it

possible to be used by such large varieties of crowds and make them able to call the city their city too.

At the same time, “the coming together of differences spatially can generate new mixtures or new divisive hostilities”. (Massey, 1999, p. 161) How do these people cope with such differences in the city? In the city, there is no dearth of happenings. What survival tactics do the city dwellers apply when the stimuli the city exerts on them are multifold?

Blasé Attitude: Survival Tactic

George Simmel (2017) argued that the indifference or the blasé attitude of the citizens is one of the characteristics of city life. He continues that, a metropolitan person in his everyday life will be exposed to a multiplicity of external and internal stimuli of economic, occupational, and social life which creates the sensory foundation of his mental life. To adjust to the shifts and contradictions of the events and to protect one’s inner life from the domination of the metropolis, the metropolitan take on a rational attitude or rather a blasé attitude which makes him insensitive to the numerous stimulations of the outside world. For Simmel (2017):

The mental attitude of the people of the metropolis to one another may be designated formally as one of reserve. If the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the same town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship, one would be completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition. (...) immersion into a chaos of unwished- for- suggestions would be unbearable. (p. 15)

According to Simmel, from this danger of metropolitan life, one is saved by ‘antipathy’ and ‘distantiation’. The sociologist Louis Wirth (1938) asserts that the larger the population, the more anonymous would the crowds be, the more formal and secondary the social relations would there be replacing the primary relations of a rural community where everybody knows everyone. In the city, ‘acquaintances’ tend to be made only for the sake of ‘utility’. For Wirth (1938), “the reserve, the indifference, and the blasé attitude which urbanites manifest in their relationships may thus be regarded as devices for immunizing themselves against the personal claims and

expectations of others”. (p. 12) Doreen Massey in *City Worlds* discusses Sennet and Jane Jacobs and points out that diversity in the city ‘does not prompt people to interact’, nor does proximity produce an ideal meeting place as envisioned by Jane Jacobs but rather a setting of indifference. “‘Strangeness’ to one another may simply be a condition of city life”. (1998, p. 86)

Personal Space and Distancing: My Bombay vs Your Bombay

In the case of the character Rahul Adhikari, he is consciously exercising his personal space and distancing. Ali Madanipour (2003) wrote:

Personal space is a subjective space around individuals... It is a piece of private space that individuals carry with them around wherever they go. That is why it is called ‘portable territory’ (Sommer, 1969:27) (...) An extension of personal space that can take a physical shape is the motor car, which in a sense is the ultimate portable territory. As we sit inside a box moving across the urban space, we carry around with us a personal space. (p. 20)

Rahul passes through the city from his home to his office in his Lancer car. For Rahul, the car is an extension of his private space. Rahul is in control of his experience of the city. According to John Urry, “the car’s significance is that it reconfigures civil society involving distinct ways of dwelling, traveling and socializing in and through an automobilised time-space”. (as cited in Thrift, 2004, p. 46) The car offers to penetrate the city space and at the same time allows Rahul to avoid participation in ordinary city life. “The communication from across the car while moving is mainly visual (...) Car allows its passengers a safe distance from others while going through a cinematic experience: a visual contact with passing scenes, where the viewer can remain detached from the unfolding story”. (Madanipour, 2003, p. 29) But for Rahul, the world outside the glass barriers is the other. He blocks out the unappealing visuals of the city by blackening his car glasses. He has the choice of whether or not to interact with the inhabitants of the city as he has assigned his chauffeur to deal with it while on travel. His life is an illustration of how the elites of the city remain aloof and out of view in the public. The car serves as a “protective bubble, a portable private space”. (Madanipour, 2003, pp. 201-202) “The barrier between individuals in the public space of

the city is (...) both the speed with which they pass through the city and the physical container which they inhabit in their passage". (Madanipour, 2003, p. 29) Rahul creates an exclusive space for himself aided by wealth and mobility.

Heterotopia of Compensation

In his essay *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Michael Foucault (1986) call the ship a heterotopia. "Think of the ship: it is a floating part of space, a placeless place, that lives by itself, closed in on itself and at the same time poised in the infinite ocean, and yet from port to port, tack by tack, from brothel to brothel (...) The ship is the heterotopia par excellence" (p. 27). Like the ship in the ocean, the car in the city space is a heterotopia. It is an alternate space, within the city space. By entering this heterotopia, Rahul excludes himself from the city space, while being in it. He navigates in a different space and time against the city scene. The car serves as a "heterotopia of compensation". (Foucault, 1986, p. 27) It compensates for the heat, pollution, suffering, and chaos of the city with air conditioning, blackened glass, and speed. Speed allows him to flow in a different space-time.

Strategic Indifference of Metropolitan Citizen

Frederic Engels in *Condition of the Working Class in England* responds to the indifference of the crowd in the streets of London where people pass each other without honouring the others with "so much as a glance". (1993, p. 37) His observation of the urban crowd is significant in the present context too. Engels (1993) observed that:

The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest, becomes the more repellent and offensive... "this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking...is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme (p. 37).

Louis Wirth (1938) too had an ambivalent position regarding the superficiality and anonymity of the city. He remarked that in the urban:

the individual gains, on the one hand, a certain degree of emancipation or freedom from the personal and emotional controls of intimate groups, he loses, on the other hand, the spontaneous self-expression, the morale and the sense of participation that comes with living in an integrated society. This constitutes essentially the state of *anomie*⁵ or the social void to which Durkheim alludes. (pp. 12-13).

Mobility and Social Relations

John Urry and Mimi Sheller (2000) argue that “mobility is the enemy of civility”. (p. 741) According to them, even though mobility is constitutive of democracy, “that freedom of movement enabled partly by motor cars has led to the collapse of the very distinction between what is private and what is public through transforming the flow of people in time-space scapes”. (p. 741) It has led to the “extension of human habitats” and “the opportunities to escape certain locales and to form new socialities”. (p. 742) “Automobility has reshaped citizenship and the public sphere” (p. 739). The car could provide its occupant “spatial and temporal dominance over surrounding environments, transforming what can be seen, heard, smelt (...) Such car-environment is a non-place” (p. 746) that floats freely in the cityscape. Amidst the public space of the city, the character owns his mobile private space where the outer world pours in only through his laptop as he is “insulated” and ““dwell-within-the-car”” (p. 746). Dwelling in his car, he fails to perceive the local details, talk to strangers, get in touch with local cultures, understand the local ways of life, or stop and experience each different place. Hence it can be rightly argued that automobility can result in isolation and exclusion.

In terms of his existence in the city, while traveling, Rahul Adhikari is present as well as absent. He is absent to the other participants of the city. For Hannah Arendt (2013):

To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an “objective” relationship with them that comes from related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself. (p. 58)

Conclusion

Rahul Adhikari's indifference to the co-inhabitants of the city can be explained as the characteristic blasé attitude of the city dweller, but consciously articulated with pride and malice. His relationship with the woman he sleeps with and the people whom he works with are secondary relations only. To conclude, the blasé attitude of the city dwellers is a necessary evil, a survival tactic. Altaf Tyrewala's character Rahul Adhikari's indifference to his fellow citizens is a hyperbolic expression of this attitude.

The religious and moral significance of the story is explicit and the naming of the story as *Rahul Adhikari: Siddhartha in Denial* is not accidental. Rahul's life when read in comparison to the life of the real Siddhartha, justify the title of his story. His indifference to and denial of suffering around him makes him Siddhartha in denial. The car, serves Rahul as his personal portable private space, his heterotopia of compensation, and enables him to keep himself aloof and exclusive. Thereby mobility too has a part in controlling his social relations in the city.

¹Notes

²Gautama Buddha is regarded as the founder of the world religion Buddhism. Born Siddhartha Gautama in ancient India, he received the name Buddha on attaining enlightenment.

³In general terms, the 'other' is anyone separate from one's self. "The existence of the other is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's place in the world" (Ashcroft et al, P. 154). The other city here is 'your Bombay'.

References

¹ Bombay is the old name of the city Mumbai. Even after the name change in 1995, the city is called by its old name by many. In a way denying to use the new name is a way of asserting one's right over the city.

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