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The City as A Postcolonial Archive: Urban Memory, Marginality and Power in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry and Neel Mukherjee

Ms. Shivangi Jain[1], Prof. (Dr.) Kamlesh Chaurasia[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundelkhand University, Chhatarpur (M.P.), India
[2]Professor, Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundelkhand University, Chhatarpur (M.P.), India

Abstract

This paper investigates how the urban landscapes of Bombay/Mumbai and Kolkata function as postcolonial archives in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry and Neel Mukherjee. Through a combined framework of postcolonial theory, urban spatial analysis, and memory studies. The study argues that the city operates as a living repository of contested histories, social inequalities, and marginalized voices. Examining Mistry's A Fine Balance, Such a Long Journey, and Family Matters, alongside Mukherjee's The Lives of Others, the analysis reveals how both authors use realist and politically engaged storytelling to expose the layers of violence, survival, memory, and power inscribed into the everyday spaces of Indian metropolitan life. By positioning the city as an archive shaped by state control, subaltern struggle, and the interplay of collective memory and erasure. The paper highlights how literature functions as an alternative mode of historical preservation capable of recording those lives and experiences excluded from official historical narratives.

Keywords: Postcolonial city, urban memory, marginality, Rohinton Mistry, Neel Mukherjee.

1. INTRODUCTION

The postcolonial city has long been a central concern in Indian English fiction, emerging not only as a geographical site but as a dynamic, politically charged space shaped by historical trauma, rapid modernization, and social inequality. As Henri Lefebvre argues, space is never neutral; it is produced through social relations, institutional power, and everyday practices [18]. In the Indian context, cities such as Bombay and Kolkata carry complex legacies of colonial administration, communal tensions, forced migrations, and uneven development, making them fertile ground for literary exploration [16]. Rohinton Mistry and Neel Mukherjee, writing from diasporic and postcolonial perspectives, treat the city as a layered text—one filled with memories, ruins, silences, and ongoing struggles. Their fiction goes beyond mere representation of urban life; it interrogates how the city becomes a repository of unofficial histories, marginalised experiences, and violent transformations [21][23]. For both authors, the city houses the everyday negotiations of working-class labourers, displaced populations, middle-class families, and political activists. Such lives often remain absent from state archives, making literature a crucial medium through which these narratives become visible.

By examining how both authors depict the urban poor, institutional corruption, political movements, and the fragility of communal relations, this paper situates Bombay and Kolkata as postcolonial archives—

dynamic spaces where power, memory, and resistance intersect [3][14]. Through this lens, the city becomes not only a backdrop but an active participant in shaping human experience.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on the postcolonial city has increasingly emphasised its role as a contested terrain marked by competing narratives and institutional power. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin highlight how postcolonial writing reclaims colonized spaces by rewriting dominant histories through the voices of everyday subjects [3]. Edward Soja's notion of "third space" establishes the city as simultaneously physical, imagined, and lived—an idea crucial for understanding Mistry's and Mukherjee's intricate mapping of urban life [7].

Studies on Indian urban fiction often foreground the city as a site of inequality. Suvir Kaul discusses how postcolonial fiction grapples with violence, displacement, and the erosion of communal relations in metropolitan spaces [16]. Elleke Boehmer examines how the urban landscape carries the residues of colonial governance, shaping the movement and agency of characters [5]. In the context of Bombay, Roshan G. Shahani and Peter Morey have shown how Mistry's realism captures the political excesses of the Emergency, especially its impact on slum dwellers and migrant workers [21]. Critics such as Priyamvada Gopal, Sharmila Sen, and Anjali Nerlekar analyse Neel Mukherjee's fiction as a powerful excavation of class hierarchy, political radicalism, and the ethics of representation [14][28][25]. Mukherjee's narratives, particularly The Lives of Others, are frequently discussed within the contexts of Naxalism, environmental degradation, and the disintegration of the Bengali bhadralok class. However, little comparative work examines Mistry and Mukherjee together, particularly through the framing of the city as a postcolonial archive [12]. This paper contributes to that critical gap by foregrounding how both authors construct the city as a repository of competing memories and suppressed histories, thereby challenging state-driven narratives of progress and modernity.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs a three-part interdisciplinary theoretical framework.

3.1. Postcolonial Theory

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "unhomely" facilitates an understanding of how characters experience alienation within their own cities, where familiar spaces become suffused with fear, instability, or state surveillance [4]. Gayatri Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?", becomes crucial in understanding how characters such as beggars, migrant labourers, and politically invisible citizens in these novels articulate—or are denied—their place in urban memory [29]. Appadurai's theories of modernity, uncertainty, and urban precarity further illuminate how globalization intensifies marginalization [1][2].

3.2. Urban Spatial Theory

Henri Lefebvre's proposition that space is socially produced helps unpack the structural inequalities shaping Bombay's slums, chawls, apartments, and markets [18]. Edward Soja's "spatial justice" underscores how the distribution of resources and mobility within cities reflects institutional power [7]. Michel de Certeau's theorization of everyday practices—such as walking, navigating, resisting—offers insight into how Mistry's and Mukherjee's characters reclaim or re-signify oppressive urban spaces [10].

3.3. Memory and Archival Theory

Pierre Nora's concept of lieux de mémoire and Jacques Derrida's Archive Fever highlight the politics of remembering and forgetting [30]. The city becomes an archive not because of official records but through

physical spaces that store collective memory—slums, old houses, factories, railways, and political offices [26]. These theoretical strands together allow the city to be read as a living repository of suppressed histories.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1 Rohinton Mistry: Bombay as a Landscape of Precarity, Violence, and Fragile Hope

In A Fine Balance, Mistry offers a devastating portrayal of Bombay during the Emergency. The slum demolitions, sterilisation campaigns, and forced labour camps represent the state's attempt to control, discipline, and reshape urban space [19]. Characters such as Ishvar, Omprakash, and Dukhi Mochi embody the subaltern's vulnerability within these violent transformations. Their movement across the city—railway stations, alleys, municipal offices—reveals how Bombay functions as an archive of state brutality [11].

In Such a Long Journey, Mistry examines how communal politics and corruption infiltrate everyday life. Gustad Noble's experiences reflect how private memory and public political upheaval become entwined [21]. Locations such as Khodadad Building, the bank, and the wall with political graffiti serve as living archival sites, recording anxieties about national identity, economic uncertainty, and shifting communal relations [27].

Family Matters foregrounds aging, memory, and domesticity within the city. Through the Parsi community's declining communal spaces and the challenges of urban caregiving, Mistry presents Bombay as a repository not only of political violence but of fragile cultural continuity [20].

4.2 Neel Mukherjee: Kolkata as a Palimpsest of Class Conflict, Revolution, and Silenced Histories

Mukherjee's The Lives of Others portrays Kolkata and rural Bengal as intertwined landscapes of exploitation and rebellion [23]. The Ghosh family's crumbling North Kolkata home symbolizes a city weighed down by memories of famine, Partition, industrial decline, and ideological struggle. Supratik's involvement in the Naxalite movement and his letters serve as grassroots archives of revolutionary desire, hunger, and injustice [12].

Mukherjee's attention to jute mills, overcrowded bastees, and polluted rivers reveals the environmental and economic violence that shapes Kolkata [22]. These spaces carry accumulated histories of labour exploitation and failed welfare structures. Through multiple narrative voices, Mukherjee constructs a densely layered urban archive that exposes the ruptures within India's postcolonial modernity.

4.3 Bringing Mistry and Mukherjee Together

Both writers:

- portray cities as unstable sites shaped by political authoritarianism and capitalist restructuring; [7][27].
- foreground working-class struggles and experiences erased from official histories; [29].
- use domestic spaces—kitchens, corridors, courtyards—as micro-archives of memory; [20][23].
- highlight how movement through the city becomes a form of resistance, survival, or testimony [10]. Together, their fiction demonstrates how the postcolonial city becomes an active archival entity, recording histories of violence, resilience, and change.

5. Discussion

The city operates as both a visible and invisible archive. Official records overlook the poor and politically marginalized, making literature a counter-archive preserving suppressed histories [29][12]. Cities also

materialize violence through demolished slums, decaying buildings, and polluted zones, but simultaneously function as sites of resilience [26][10].

Urban memory in these works is fragmented, multi-vocal, and contested. It is shaped by those who traverse the city and those immobilized by its structures [30].

6. Conclusion

Mistry and Mukherjee's fiction position the postcolonial city as a contested archive shaped by memory, marginality, and power. Their works highlight the fragility of urban space and the lived experiences of marginalized groups [18][21]. The city is both a site of repression and a repository of alternative memories, continually rewritten by its inhabitants [23][25]. Urban fiction thus functions as an intervention in postcolonial historiography, preserving subaltern memory and challenging hegemonic narratives while illuminating spatial justice, ethics, and resistance [29]. the conclusion emphasizes that the postcolonial city is not merely a static backdrop but a dynamic, living entity reflecting historical traumas, political unrest, and social stratification. By engaging with the daily lives of diverse inhabitants—from working-class labourers to middle-class families—the fiction reveals the interplay between personal memory and collective urban experience. Moreover, the works illustrate how literature archives intangible aspects of city life, including hope, resilience, and subtle forms of resistance, which might otherwise remain invisible in official histories.

Finally, Mistry and Mukherjee demonstrate that cities embody layered narratives of power, exclusion, and survival. Their stories encourage readers to reconceptualize urban spaces as complex archives where every street, building, and community carries memory and meaning. This expanded understanding of the city as a postcolonial archive underscores the importance of urban literature in fostering empathy, historical awareness, and critical reflection on social justice and human experience.

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Author Biography

I, Shivangi Jain is a PhD scholar in English Literature at Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundelkhand University, Chhatarpur (M.P.). And with the collaboration of my supervisor the second author who equally contributed for this paper Dr. Kamlesh Chaurasia, she is a professor of Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundelkhand University, Chhatarpur (M.P.).

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