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THE CITY AS PALIMPSEST: MEMORY, MIGRATION AND IDENTITY IN INDIAN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT
This research examines how Indian literature uses the city as a layered space where memory, migration and identity are constantly shaped and reshaped thoroughly. By comparing three major novels in English by Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy besides renowned and influential Urdu short stories by Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai, the study looks at many sides of urban life. It shows that cities like Delhi, Bombay/Mumbai and Calcutta/Kolkata are key places for working through not just national history and personal trauma, more than that it is also about community ties. It is observed that Rushdie's Delhi and Bombay reflect post-colonial nation building while Ghosh's Calcutta and Dhaka highlight fragile borders and memories whereas, Roy's Delhi offers a haven for those on the margins unlike, Manto's stories of Partition-torn Bombay and Delhi and Chughtai's focus on domestic urban life give a regional perspective on gendered and lived realities. The study finds that, across languages and time periods, the city stands out as the main setting for expressing India's complex and diverse identity.

KEYWORDS: *Indian literature, palimpsest, city, memory, migration, identity, Rushdie, Roy, Ghosh, Manto, Chughtai*

INTRODUCTION

The city has always occupied a central place in literature, often functioning as a microcosm where the grand narratives of history, politics and culture play themselves out as part and parcel of the everyday lives of the individuals. But in the case of a sub-continent like India, this particular role becomes more pronounced due to its unique urban trajectories. The ongoing transformation took place in India ranging from ancient centers of civilization through centuries of colonization and cataclysm of partition and especially, due to globalization and swift modernization. In this sense, the city is not merely a place, but a complex cultural-historical text. The metaphor of the palimpsest, which serves to describe a manuscript in which writing has been inscribed, erased and then inscribed again - while retaining faint traces of earlier words captures this feature exceedingly well. Cities, as Andreas Huyssen (2003) and other urban theorists remind us, are not static landscapes, but changeable archives. This is especially evident within the Indian context: the Mughal monuments sit side by side the British colonial architecture, while the glass and steel skyscrapers of neoliberal India rise up, seeking to obscure every trace of the past but never entirely succeeding. Memories of inter-communal harmony before Partition exist next to memories of violence; traditional bazaars exist next to sprawling malls and gated communities.

This work examines how palimpsestic attributes to literature are relevant to five influential Indian authors writing in both English and Urdu. Conflating the English fictional texts of Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy with the regionally-focused, Urdu writers Saadat Hasan Manto and Ismat Chughtai leads to a comparative approach, noting continuities and fractures in representations of the urban experience. Thus, Delhi, Bombay/Mumbai and Calcutta/Kolkata are not merely literary or real spaces, but are treated as active forces in constructing narratives of memory, migration, and identity.

The Urban Palimpsest

The concept of the palimpsest provides a critical lens for moving beyond a simplistic understanding of the city as a static container of events. Instead, it frames the city as a process, a dynamic text in a state of constant revision. As Huyssen (2003) argues in*Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, "Cities are palimpsests of space, and in them we can read the traces of past times and past uses of space, even as the city transforms itself before our very eyes" (p. 7). This reading is not passive; it is an act of archaeological excavation, often fraught with political and emotional charge.

For the Indian context, this palimpsestic model is essential for understanding the layered traumas and identities that define its urban centers. The Partition of 1947, which led to one of the largest mass migrations in history, fundamentally reshaped cities like Delhi and Karachi, imprinting them with a lasting legacy of displacement and loss (Pandey, 2001). Later events, such as the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, the Bombay riots of 1992-93, and ongoing struggles over urban space, represent new, violent inscriptions on the urban text. The literary texts discussed here engage in precisely this act of reading the city's layered past, revealing how personal and collective memories are embedded in its streets, neighborhoods, and monuments.

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Salman Rushdie's Bombay and Delhi: The Palimpsest of Nation-Building

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*(1981) is arguably the quintessential novel of the Indian post-colonial palimpsest. It is about the protagonist Saleem who seems to be "handcuffed to history" as his personal narrative is inseparably hooked to the birth and development of the nation. This national biography is written upon the surfaces of the two cities, Bombay and Delhi. Bombay has always been a city of innocence and wondrous hybridity for young Saleem with the co-existence of different communities. The European style bungalows inhabited by Indian families in the renowned Methwold's Estate seems to be a perfect symbol of colonial palimpsest: though British layer is slowly fading, yet the structure dictate the lives of the new inhabitants. Nonetheless, this vision of a cosmopolitan world is disrupted by the complexities of politics.

The rearrangement of states in Midnight's Children marks one of the earliest disruptions in Saleem's life. This erasure not only reflects the diminishing of Saleem's childhood environment but also symbolizes the larger upheavals and uncertainties encountered by a newly independent nation striving to redefine itself linguistically and culturally. Saleem's Bombay serves as a site of remembrance; "a place of personal loss and dislocation, [Saleem's Bombay] represents the greater loss and dislocation of a nation." (Nair, 2010, p. 45). For Saleem, Bombay is a fragile landscape of memory and identity, yet one that is likely only temporarily fragile due to the fluctuating nature of political changes in the state. When the focus moves to Delhi, the city's layered history reveals a clear political and violent aspect. While Delhi is undeniably a metropolis, it also serves as the nation's administrative hub where the narrative is crafted, altered, or obliterated, particularly reflecting the state's violence in the most striking ways.

As the protagonist's family moves to the magicians' colony and the wars in China and Pakistan, Saleem's attention is drawn to the way the city embodies marginalization and exclusion. As Sanjay Gandhi's bulldozers demolish the historic Muslim neighborhoods near Jama Masjid to create space for a new, government-approved and sanitized vision of modernity, the violence takes a peak with the emergency. Thus, Rushdie highlights how fragile the memories can be as the city always experiences the threat of erasure. Here, in the unstable realm of forgetfulness, Saleem is committed to reconstruct K and narrates how his disjointed tale turns out to be an act of opposition, which is also understood as a protective measure against the forces of official forgetting.

Amitav Ghosh's Transnational Cities: Memory and the Erasure of Borders

Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines (1988)* throws the palimpsest into a transnational frame as Rushdie's idea remains to be national. The idea of strict borders is often undermined in the novel, implying that Calcutta and Dhaka are parts of a single shattered urban consciousness rather than two separate and unconnected cities. The city of Dhaka is not just a physical location for the narrator who never visits instead, it happens to be a mental image and a palimpsest filled with oral histories and the stories of trauma passed down through the generations. It is due to this imagination, geography turns out to be an interior environment in which history and memory are inextricably linked.

The story revolves throughout around the theft of a holy relic in Kashmir which subsequently led to the communal riots that broke out in Calcutta and Dhaka in 1964. Ghosh with remarkable precision demonstrates the brittleness of borders by showcasing how violence in one location instantly spreads to another. He highlights how the grandmother is horrified to notice on how fragile the borders can be as she misunderstood them to be unbreakable on her visits to Dhaka. The grandmother finally realizes how sensitive borders can be on her travel to Dhaka during unrest, as she is confronted by the terrifying realization she had once held as absolute is in fact meaningless.

The violence and the collective emotions it ignites are so exact replicas of one another that differences dissolve into oneness. As Chakrabarty (2002)argues, Ghosh highlights that the boundary between Calcutta and Dhaka is a shadow line that the memories of a one city are woven into the fabric of the other.

The narrator's memory of his cousin Tridib who is killed during the Dhaka riots remains to be most poignant symbol of this palimpsest. "A place does not merely exist, that it has to be invented in one's imagination" (Ghosh, 1988) is a belief that Tridib had always imagined in him according to which, locations are never merely physical sites but rather creative constructions shaped by stories and memories. As a result, Dhaka becomes more than just a city on a map; it turns out to be remarkable by the past bloodshed and loss. It is how Ghosh demonstrates as the palimpsest penetrates the psychological landscapes of people and groups split by arbitrary boundaries bypassing physical geography.

Arundhati Roy's Delhi: The Heterotopic Palimpsest of the Marginalized

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) pushes the idea of the urban palimpsest to its most fragmented and contemporary form. Unlike Rushdie and Ghosh, Roy's Delhi is not so romanticized and cosmopolitan. Instead her narratives focus on a dense layering of countless, overlapping worlds. For Rushdie and Ghosh, the city was always grand and known for its history and cosmopolitan in nature. But Roy prefers to see the city through the lens of Anjum, a hijra; a Dalit rights activist and a Kashmiri militant. As Michel Foucault (1986) believes that it is how she creates a portrait of the city as a living palimpsest of heterotopias, which means that 'other spaces' that exist in the society but often operate their own rules, revealing both resistance and survival.

Khwabgah, an old Muslim enclave in Delhi which happens to be hidden gem within the city is where Anjum's quest starts. It is after a deep personal crisis, she decides to move out and prefers to live in a graveyard, transforming a place of mourning into

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resilience. She establishes the Jannat guesthouse over the time on the edge of the graveyard which is adjacent to protest site. Eventually, the same guesthouse represents a miniature palimpsest of the city as it offers shelter to hijras, orphans, political activists and all those who have been said to be invisible or 'socially dead.' As Srivastava (2019) thinks, 'Roy's novel maps a Delhi that is invisible to the powerful, a city of makeshift dwellings and resilient communities that persist beneath the glossy surface of the new India."

Roy draws a comparison between the ruthless violence of Kash mir, where governmental persecution leaves both land and peopl e scarred, and this small, delicate Delhi.Readers are reminded th at faraway wars haunt Delhi itself by characters like Tilottama a nd Musa, who bring these memories back into the city.As a resul t, Roy presents the modern Indian city as a disorganized, frequen tly brutal, yet profoundly human collection of different worlds.E ven the act of constructing a sense of belonging, such as Anjum' s Jannat, becomes a radical reworking of urban space within this broken terrain.

Regional Foundations: Manto and Chughtai' Visceral Urban Imprints

The novels in English language always owe a significant debt to the Urdu writers like Sadat Hasan Mmanto and Ismat Chughtai who encapsulated the direct, visceral impact of history on the urban body. Their brief stories provide the palimpsest its unadulterated, gritty texture which would be expanded into epic scales by later writers. Their short stories are often raw and unflinchingly honest providing the granular textures of lived realities; especially, textures that novelists would stretch across broader canvases to create sprawling narratives of cities and nations. These writers were not just documenting events, but they were mapping the ways in which history, violence and desire imprinted themselves onto the human body and the actual city, leaving scars that piled over and never removed palimpsest of pain and memory.

Post-partition stories of Manto like, *'Toba Tek Singh'* and *'The Return'* remain to be masterpieces in their exploration of urban trauma as his most loved Bombay city which he always celebrated for being cosmopolitan openness and vitality, turns out to be unrecognizable due to partition's violence. In *'Mozel'* the writer captures the devastating changes in the neighborhood names, subtle indications of the widespread ethnic cleansing that reshaped the city's topography with a heartbreaking simplicity. Everything that looked familiar and secure suddenly seems to be overwritten by fear and suspicion. *"The Cold Meat"* is one of the best examples of violence risen due to partition as it represents scars and mutilations caused directly to the body as discussed by Gopal (2001) Manto's stories resemble forensic reports, cataloguing with clinical precision the first bloody inscriptions of Partition on the urban text.

On the other hand, another renowned writer Ismat Chughtai keeps her focus into the domestic spaces of haveli and middle-class households. In stories such as 'The Quilt' (Latif), she illustrates how the city is not just an outward environment but more that that it is a highly gendered and constrained area by highlighting the social hypocrisies and suppressed desires that are concealed behind closed doors. Her female perceptions of modernity and freedom are shaped by their restricted mobility, which confines them to the metropolitan environment. The haveli itself becomes a layered text where respectability conceals prohibited wants, such as queer desires that subtly manifest themselves beneath daily routines. As Jalal (2013) rightly points out, Chughtai's work shows that the palimpsest of urban identity is shaped by the personal and intimate histories of women and oppressed populations as well as by significant historical events. The underlying truths of the city's identity are shaped by these hidden layers in the same way that the violence of the partition did.

CONCLUSION

The Indian city in literature has always been a profound palimpsest, right from the epic, nation encompassing cities of Rushdie and Ghosh to the shattered and Heterotopic Delhi of Roy and back to the brutally intimate Bombay and home settings of Manto and Chughtai. This comparative study throws light that the literary imagination returns to the city as an essential location for addressing the shared concerns of memory and migration, regardless of if it is articulated in the regional vernacular of Urdu or the cosmopolitan language of English.

The palimpsest is not a neutral metaphor but suggests conflict. Every new layer, whether it is capitalist progress, nationalist fervor communal violence or colonial modernity, of course, entails a violent act of erasure. However, these writers demonstrate that the past is never erased completely. Stories that people tell, spirits that stalk neighborhoods and the tenacity of communities like Anjum's Jannat Guest house tend to be examples of how it permeates society. Thus, the literary city turns out to be a site of constant negotiation where both individual and community identities are created and reconstructed in a never ending but agonizing and always essential to have conversation with the past. Reading the city always happens to be reading the story of India in all its sad and glorious complexity.

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