

Imagining the Community of Beggars and Homeless:

Constructing the Paradigmatic Third World City

Prakash Kona *

prakashkona@gmail.com

Abstract

In movies like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) directed by Danny Boyle we see an orientalist discourse at work where knowledge lies in the power to define how the others live. The third world city of Mumbai is constructed within the oriental discourse for the benefit of the western gaze; the gaze that shows the city as not only practically unlivable but also dirty, dysfunctional and dangerous on a day-to-day basis. Contrarily, movies produced primarily for Indian diasporas living abroad especially in the West and the Indian middle classes show India as a nation with western-style development where you do not necessarily have to confront poverty and homelessness.

My argument is that both the points of view are neo-colonial in character with a strong classist dimension because they are either representative of what the western bourgeoisie expects to see in the third world or how the nationalist bourgeoisie, which Franz Fanon views as the complementary other of the west, would like to present itself to the Eurocentric gaze. Both these perspectives are exclusionary in how they construct the paradigmatic third world city.

My paper intends to examine the politics of exclusion that goes into defining cities like Mumbai and Delhi; the beggars and the homeless not only occupy the landscape of the senses but they also define the “physical” experience of belonging to the city. While the marginalization of the beggars and the homeless by mainstream media and film makers is deliberate, the fact remains that no one forgets the *smells* of street life that are made possible through the existence of the poor who, although rendered invisible, define the stage through their presence as working classes.

Key Words: City, Nation, Exploitation, Revolution, Third World, Beggars, Homeless

The Nation-State and the City-State

While critiquing Gellner’s view that nationalism “invents nations,” the point of view “that Gellner is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates 'invention' to 'fabrication' and 'falsity', rather than to 'imagining' and 'creation,'” (7) Benedict Anderson makes a subtle distinction between invention as opposed to imagination. The imagined community in Anderson’s view is closer to the understanding of what a nation is rather than an *invented* community. Anderson goes on to insist that the nation “is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (8). The imagined community is an organic and natural one – an emotional reality, as opposed to the invented community which is a set

of interests coming together to achieve a common target. One imagines his or her sense of being and belonging. One does not invent those feelings associated with the sense of reality that comes with belonging.

While there is fertile ground to argue for nations as imagined communities it is hard to imagine a nation where some degree of conscious *invention* as in “fabrication” and “falsity” does not play a role in keeping people bound together. At the end of the day what enables a person to feel that he or she belongs to a group except for external characteristics such as language and ethnicity that have been internalized over a period of time! There is a conscious decision that is made when one gives his or her consent to this belonging. This becomes clear in what characteristics we think of in order to exclude those who do not belong to our group. Interestingly, most of those characteristics are of a negative, stereotypical nature especially when we are looking at minority groups or the working classes. Where there is no invention the notion of ideology becomes a meaningless one. To deny the role of invention is to reject the role of ideologies in legitimizing repression. Eric Hobsbawm notes that

while the Jews, scattered throughout the world for some millennia, never ceased to identify themselves, wherever they were, as members of a special people quite distinct from the various brands of non-believers among whom they lived, at no stage...does this seem to have implied a serious desire for a Jewish political state, let alone a territorial state, until a Jewish nationalism was *invented* at the very end of the nineteenth century by analogy with the newfangled western nationalism. (47) [My italics]

My point is that the aspect of invention forms the basis of the imagination of a community in the making of a nation. Where there is no space for invention, nations would exist purely at the level of fantasy fiction. If Jewish nationalism was not “invented” the possibility of imagining a community that lead to the formation of the state of Israel seems an unlikely option. The most important characteristic in the making of nation is that the community that imagines is also one that excludes. Where there is no exclusion of the “others” – a broad term meant to denote sections of people deprived of social and political power, the possibility of imagining a community is a distant one. I intend to make two points here: one is that the idea of a community carries within it an element of invention; another is that the borders of a community are drawn with reference to insiders or those who belong as opposed to outsiders or those who do not belong. Anderson himself acknowledges that “No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (7). We cannot have a nation that is truly representative of humankind as a whole because then it would not be a nation in the first place. The historical experience in the making of a nation itself has always been an exclusionary one. None other than Saint Joan says of the English, “They are only men. God made them just like us; but He gave them their own country and their own language; and it is not His will that they should come into our country and try to speak our language.” I’m not accusing Saint Joan of being exclusionary in any sense of the term because she is arguing from the point of view of resistance; however the political position that God gave the English a country of their own and therefore they should not be in France to occupy it contains a seed of exclusion within it.

The thesis of my paper is built on the statement that: To imagine a *community* is necessarily to invent that which must also be excluded. Where the politics of exclusion is not deeply rooted in the soil of collective imagination, it is impossible to realize the formation of a nation. A similar kind of a process is at work in how we perceive the “city-state” which I define as a miniature version of the nation-state because it replicates the power-relations in a more concentrated space. This does not mean that a city-state is not governed by characteristics peculiar to urban life in terms of anonymity and alienation. The urban spaces far from being autonomous are very much within the surveillance mechanisms of the state. The notion of a city-state is a political construct meant to embody within the city the ideological and repressive state apparatuses. David Harvey makes the point that “The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire” (*NLR* 23). Likewise the kind of a nation-state we would like to have cannot be divorced from the rights it gives individuals to make changes that are compatible with the long-term goals of a community. Through the idea of a city-state I intend to bring together the idea of a nation as a community within the parameters of city life. Harvey adds:

The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (*NLR* 23)

The freedom to “make and remake cities and ourselves is” also the freedom to imagine and re-imagine the kinds of communities we would like to inhabit as human persons or as individual citizens. The city-state, where the city is inseparable from the larger functioning of the state (though not to be confused with the autonomous city-states of Ancient Greece for instance) and might replicate some of the features of the state itself through an internalization of power relations, is the site where imagination battles exclusion on a day-to-day basis. The point where one imagines oneself as belonging to the national community is also the point where one is drawing the borders that separate “us” from “them.” Imagination does not transcend these divisions built along various fault lines – class and gender being the most important of them. Region, religion, race, caste, language and ethnicity as not far behind in the exclusionary battles. Nowhere is this battle between diverse discourses and ways of life more evident than in the “paradigmatic” third world city – I mean, the city with all the features associated with third world life in its colonial condition, the most important being dirt, disease and danger.

Rise of the “third world” city: Dirt, Disease and Danger

The purity-pollution divide peculiar to casteism in the South Asian cultural landscape as a form of social stratification based on birth, is relatively true in a broad sense of the racist divide as well. The former has religious as well as the sanction of the social order and the latter the blessings of science. While casteism is peculiar to the Hindu social order, racism is more global in the denigration of the so-called “colored” races of the world. These are broad generalizations that need to be researched deeper in order to discover

comparative bases and could end up being meaningless unless substantiated with concrete examples. In *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* Jane Jacobs makes the valid observation that

Old models of urban development which placed the colonial city as a mid-point in an evolution from pre-modern to modern have outlived their usefulness. It is not that the distinction between core and periphery, haves and have-nots, has gone away—it is devastatingly present. But the ‘where’ of this geography is increasingly confused: First World cities have their Third World neighbourhoods, global cities have their parochial underbellies, colonial cities have their postcolonial fantasies. Urban transformations such as gentrification, consumption spectacles and heritage developments, are regularly understood as postmodern. But these spectacles of postmodernity are entwined in a politics of race and nation which cannot be thought of constructively without recourse to the imperial inheritances and postcolonial imperatives that inhabit the present. (158).

Given the nature of a global economy driven by “power elites,” the “imperial inheritances” and the “postcolonial imperatives” are trapped in a seesaw game, where the stability of one presumes the instability of the other. In other words, the attempt to preserve the heritage of an imperial colonial order somewhere also implies that colonialism continues in one form or the other. What we call western lifestyles as embodied in powerful currencies such as the dollar and the euro are possible because of third world poverty and suffering thanks to a weak and ineffectual state that is incapable of carrying through the welfare function and chooses instead to repress the masses. Race, nation and caste enter the

fray in order to be accommodated within the domains of power through the discourses of region and class.

The point I wish to dwell upon in this paper is that while there is a third world in the so-called first world where people are forced to live in near-poverty conditions and there are pockets of the first world in the third world where people can afford to live in western lifestyles, what distinguishes third world life in general is the visible presence of a street culture which is intricately wound up with a street-based political economy. The street is an important space where diverse interests lay claim to power from the police to the protestors against state violence. The media to a large extent focuses on the street because it is here that the possibility of any mass-based upheaval can be clearly observed. To be able to throw light on street life is to be able to get to the pulse of the city-state. The paradigmatic third world city dwells within the parameters defined by the streets.

In the orientalist imagination the cultural and political life of the streets creates an aura that is often interpreted in terms of the three Ds called: dirt, disease and danger. The sensual life, the sensible life, the sensuous life – everything connected with the senses ultimately must also be dirty, diseased and dangerous. There is a notion of vulnerability associated with the streets for the western tourist who comes from a more protected space that guarantees some kind of security. The Indian who makes for a brilliant programmer or the Indian who is a good doctor – is an achiever of technical perfection and exists in a different space apart from the raw worlds of the senses as embodied in street life that popular cinema is never tired of exploiting for the sentimental appeal it has with the middle

and working class audiences. His or her “success” is connected to their being in the West as immigrants where the success is respected – but never to the fact that the third world is capable of producing an alternative argument in terms of the kind of human resource that is generated. The image of the paradigmatic third world city whether Mumbai or New Delhi in the “western” racist consciousness is about the “pollution” – both physical and metaphysical in its social and cultural condition. The pollution is symptomatic because it is combined with the overpopulation and the oppressive heat of countless vehicles on the street. The deeper malaise is seen as lack of order or complete chaos as opposed to the orderliness of an average American city where littering the streets might carry a fine. The image of a third world street is that of a potential social outbreak in the making. That these cities are dangerously chaotic owing to a disorderly population that cannot be governed except through repression is portrayed as reality by the orientalist mindset.

Likewise the image of the city in the casteist which is combined with classist consciousness of the local elites is about keeping the “pure” away from the “polluted.” In the latter sense the home is retained as a sacred space that ought to be kept clean at all times while the streets are looked down as the other that must be kept a distance and whose influence ought to be disallowed from infecting the home. The home and the street are fighting an emotional and spiritual battle with one another and in popular cinema as in life inevitably the home is expected to win. The street in the mindset of the colonized is viewed as homeless space and the abandoned poor usually are presumed to inhabit these spaces. The lack of basic toilet amenities and the use of the street for purposes of relieving oneself add to the sense of homelessness of the street. That a street is not a home is a platitude.

More importantly the street becomes a stage for the others, the left outs and castaways to declare their sense of alienation. Both the views in their own ways acknowledge the purity and pollution divide – that acts as a definitive barrier to seeing the city as a fluid entity. The fact that cities have two sides in stark opposition to one another, a brighter Apollonian side embodied in shopping malls and pubs as opposed to the darker Dionysian side as seen in the underbelly where the police are battling it out with the mafias is somehow seen as reflective of city life in the third world. Back in the 19th century itself Baudelaire reflecting on the dual aspect of city life says of Paris in one of his poems

“The Seven Old Men,”

Swarming city - city gorged with dreams,

where ghosts by day accost the passer-by,

where secrets run in these defiled canals

like blood that gushes through a giant's veins' (92)

Baudelaire acknowledges that the life of the 19th century city which in strange ways resembles the 21st century third world city is an experience of the senses more than anything else. This metaphorical resemblance throws light on the fact that colonialism which was at its peak in the heart of the 19th century conceived the cities of the third world in some sense making them what they are today. The orientalism of Baudelaire is redirected to look at Paris as the paradigmatic city with alienating features made possible through the industrial revolution and colonialism. The dirt, disease and danger elements can be viewed

in Baudelaire's imagined community of Paris. Further Baudelaire connects the life of the inhabitants of the city with what is the city itself. Therefore, he says in another of his poems "The Swan," "no human heart / changes half so fast as a city's face" (90). In providing an insight into the life of the senses that makes the city what it is Baudelaire is also conscious of the fact that this particular "life" of the cities is of no interest to those who make plans of beautification. The beautification plans are not different from the attempts by the political order to control the streets which form the lifelines of the city. As Rosemary Lloyd observes in her book *Charles Baudelaire*:

Determined not to be overthrown by yet another revolution, and equally certain that he wanted to continue the building projects of his uncle, Napoleon iii set Baron Haussman in charge of an ambitious project of public works that would widen the narrow streets, thus making it more difficult to build barricades across them; provide larger vistas through the city, which would both beautify it and make it easier to police; and, by creating more housing for the middle and upper classes, would force the poorer population to move to the edges of the city where they posed less of a threat. What we now see as the classic heart of Paris is really a political program written in stone. (79)

The attempt to dissociate the city from the life of the senses is a part of the political program involved in the remaking of 19th century Western European cities which is the agenda of the colonial governments at home in order to legitimize the oppression in the colonies. What we call the paradigmatic third world city is a city with colonial features inherited from the 19th century. The colonial element in terms of preserving the status quo

of class relations is retained as part and parcel of the government functioning in the postcolonial world as well. Colonialism in one form or another is the background to the paradigmatic third world city which is demonized in its state of utter degradation as in the images created for the western tourist or idealized to show a sanitized “clean” and orderly face to the city that is also in some sense “westernized” for reasons that are obvious. The colonial element in the attempts to beautify parts of the cities becomes accentuated because as Fanon observes, the Western bourgeoisie is the complementary other of the nationalist bourgeoisie. Both are involved actively in suppressing the possibility of a social revolution that could disrupt the exploiting classes in the west as well as in the third world. This is what brings together the 19th century Paris in the poems of Baudelaire and the 21st century third world cities such as Mumbai or New Delhi because the beautification is colonial-oriental as is the suppression through a carefully mapped program of military control of the city streets. In addition, the de-sensifying of the third world city as in taking away the direct contact with the raw lively smells on the streets through the consumerist mall culture which is a protected space is a political program meant to give the cities the “constructed” look of civilization. The civilizing mission of the colonized does not end with colonialism. It continues as part of the agenda of bourgeois postcolonial governments.

In the realm of the senses: A city that resists before it revolts

The aesthetics of city life in relation to the downtrodden classes is about the realm of the senses. The project of alienating the senses and turning the cities into vast malls where everything is out of the realm of the senses but within the reach of consumption

provided you can pay for it has to be seen as an important part of the globalization discourse. If globalization is to be understood as another form of colonialism in which as part of the “colonial legacy,” “economically developed and dominant nations invariably set the standards and constitute the model against which others are evaluated or evaluate themselves” (Krishna 4), we need to examine the points of resistance from which the poor are able to make their demands to a decent life. The narrative of resistance is important because it reveals that globalization is not a unilateral process but a two-way street wherein the poor are able to articulate an argument keeping their goals in mind. However, in the context of the third world we need to realize that the underdevelopment is an ideologically framed one because it is seen as if time stopped once these countries were colonized by the West and what followed after was merely an imitation of everything that happened or is happening as development in the first world nations of Europe and America. As Krishna notes:

To this view, it is *not* a coincidence that the growing inequality of the world in recent centuries was coeval with conquest and colonialism; and development *should* always be understood as taking place in an interconnected world economy rather than within nation-states. This approach argues that development and underdevelopment are simultaneous and interrelated global processes best understood at the level of an integrated world economy. The word *underdevelopment* is crucial in this regard. It suggests that the third world was not *undeveloped* during the centuries in which countries like Britain, the United States, or Germany achieved their take-offs, but was actively *underdeveloped* during that time. (16)

The other side to the developed versus underdeveloped argument is the failure to observe that a social order and a political economy are functioning in the third world despite the fact that there are serious problems with the state and government machinery in delivering goods to the weaker sections of the masses as part of its avowed aim of providing welfare to the citizens. This is apart from the fact that western imperialism through the intervention of World Bank and IMF continue to dominate and distort the possibilities of serious change along socialist lines in much of the third world. As much as it is true that the “third world” is a colonial creation it is equally true that the western imagination needs the third world as a set of presumptions to legitimize the bourgeois nationalist state in the West. The active “underdevelopment” of the third world is promoted through an ideological rendering which sees the city as a *sick* place incapable of recovery. In the nationalist imagination the native bourgeoisie eager to look respectable in the face of western media and seeking some of the benefits of globalization is more than glad to subserve the larger interests of the western corporate states who assure them of protection in the face of local rebellions.

In the city that resists as opposed to one that openly revolts thus invoking the possibility of a massive repression, we see acts of subversion by the poor that are used to turn the street from a negative uninhabitable domain to something that is politically, socially and economically useful to the downtrodden classes. Sleeping on the streets is peculiarly true of almost any city or town in India owing to the by and large warm weather that makes it possible to do so. This is one instance where the beggars and homeless are able to preserve themselves. To those who believe that a lot of pollution is created in the

process of using the streets night after night as means of rest, the solution lies in the bigger picture where large scale changes in the economy are necessary in order to accommodate the poor within mainstream society. An open revolt or armed insurrection against the establishment is almost impossible in the cities. There is a self-defeating mechanism opposed to open revolts in the very nature of street living. The very subsistence of the poor is intertwined with the street. Any revolt would demand that everything be put at stake which is not possible for the working classes to do so except to risk the possibility of being brutally crushed under the weight of reprisal. In his tract *Geurilla Warfare* Che Guevara says that “In underdeveloped America the countryside is the basic area for armed fighting.” He further adds as a “third proposition” that:

It ought to be noted by those who maintain dogmatically that the struggle of the masses is centered in city movements, entirely forgetting the immense participation of the country people in the life of all the underdeveloped parts of America. Of course, the struggles of the city masses of organized workers should not be underrated; but their real possibilities of engaging in armed struggle must be carefully analyzed where the guarantees which customarily adorn our constitutions are suspended or ignored. In these conditions the illegal workers' movements face enormous dangers. They must function secretly without arms. The situation in the open country is not so difficult. There, in places beyond the reach of the repressive forces, the inhabitants can be supported by the armed guerrillas.

An open revolution of the kind Che espouses seems veritably impossible in the cities though it is the spaces of the cities that are “home” to the homeless and the beggars.

The politics of perception with regard to the imagined communities of the beggars and the homeless is an issue not completely disconnected from the politics of resistance that we could see among these groups. Do those who beg and are homeless qualify as “working classes” with the potential to organize themselves as “masses” or are they outside the domain of such a description? My point is that where they are not incapable of work as in being old, disabled or sick they actually *are* the working classes who have descended into a state of abysmal poverty. On a more realistic note not everyone who works for a living comes under the working classes. We are still talking about those who do not own the means of production and must sell their labor for bare minimum wages. Usually the beggars and the homeless (which again is an umbrella term that would include anyone or everyone who spends his or her night on the street for lack of any other proper shelter) belong to families or groups that are working classes or involved in work of some kind or the other. More importantly “begging” by definition as a source of income is part of the work they do. The case of the “homeless” might however be trickier to comprehend either because they could be mentally deranged though harmless individuals abandoned by their families and without the institutional space of the asylum to accommodate them owing to overpopulation or they could be runaways from the country looking for work and a space to exist in the cities. Their direct contact with the massive vehicular and other forms of pollution leaves little space for romanticizing them except in the Indian movie context. Ironically their invisibility is conspicuous as daylight the reason being that they manifest as victims of colonial forms of globalization the consequences of the deliberate underdevelopment of the third world. The observation that Krishna makes “that capitalist

development and colonial conquest or domination were coeval historical processes that were and are intimately related” (3) is in essence what globalization and neocolonialism are all about. Jane Jacobs uses a less fashionable term called “imperialism” while throwing light on the relationship between “space” and the “imperial project.”

The ‘real worlds’ of this book are of course not simply material worlds. Imaginary and material geographies are not incommensurate, nor is one simply the product, a disempowered surplus, of the other. They are complexly intertwined and mutually constitutive. Together they gave energy and drive to the territorialisations that constitute imperialism. Together they have created the most painfully uneven geographies of advantage and disadvantage. The social construction of space is part of the very machinery of imperialism. In the name of the imperial project, space is evaluated and overlain with desire: creating homely landscapes out of ‘alien’ territories, drawing distant lands into the maps of empire, establishing ordered grids of occupation. These spatial events did not simply supplement the economic drive of imperialism, they made it make sense; they took it from the visioned to the embodied, from the global reach of desire to the local technologies of occupation. They established the beginnings of that most permanent legacy of imperialism: the contest between that which, through space itself, has been ‘naturalised’ and that which has been made ‘illegitimate’. (158)

The developed areas within the city states of the third world are neocolonial spaces that justify the basic logic of imperialism which is an ideology of economic occupation. The role of resistance is that it operates at a local level before it turns into a revolution at a

more global level. My point is that the presence of the beggars and the homeless on the streets is part of the anti-aesthetic discourse because the aestheticizing is about giving the image of a space where the former do not exist. The imperial project is about occupying spaces and disinfecting them of potential threats from within the social order. These images take two forms: either they glamorize a social setting to fit in with western touristic requirements or they attempt to bring the so-called stark reality into focus by projecting the poor as if time has come to a standstill since the colonial heydays and no real change is happening at the bottom. By projecting the poor as the reality of the third world the developed nations hope to escape the reality of poverty at home. They wish to tell the poor back home that their condition is far better than that of the poor in the third world.

A social revolution rooted in the realm of the senses conspires to defeat the imperial project; unlike the Haussmanized streets of western cities where boulevards replace narrow streets, the third world street languishes in the past; globalization replaces the bottle but does not change the wine and the streets “mean” as ever, culturally incomprehensible to themselves, trapped in a political economy where their autonomy is lost with each passing hour, the suffocating sense of powerlessness – everything adds to a politics of resistance. Enormous radical potential for social transformation through a revolution is vested in these streets because they’re inhabited by men and women distant from the achievements of globalization. The street is not a metaphor in the paradigmatic city of the third world but a fact of town and city life. The street is the pulse of civil society and to understand the street is to understand the role of social change. The mobile phone exists but to promote the most

primitive of agendas, not to democratize as no technology ever does unless it moves from the monopoly of the few to collective hands.

My point is that interestingly social workers or missionaries working at the ground level with the marginalized peoples and groups might have a stronger intuition in what the role of the beggars and the homeless actually could be in resisting oppression. The central point however is that the neocolonial view espoused by Indians who reject the existence of these peoples as important to an understanding of the city or the orientalist view of the *Slumdog millionaire* type which views the Indian cities as incapable of social and political transformation – therefore the prominent presence of the beggars and the homeless on the streets – both are equally fallacious. They refuse to see these groups as “working” classes though we need to redefine and rethink what “class” is all about when it comes to the beggars and the homeless. Once we do that we see that in the construction of the paradigmatic third world city though from a mainstream perspective these people are either objects of pity, humor or contempt, they are in fact serious avenues for an emotional resistance – given their physical proximity to street life that even banal and stereotypical Indian movies are willing to acknowledge. In imagining these groups as a community or a “nation” we might actually be creating an understanding leading to a social revolution preceded by a resistance based in the realm of the senses.

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* Prakash Kona is a writer, teacher and researcher working as Associate Professor at the Department of English Literature, The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India. He is the author of *Conjurer of Nights* [poetry: 2012, Waterloo Press, Hove, UK]; *Nunc Stans* [Creative Non-fiction: 2009, Crossing Chaos enigmatic ink, Ontario, Canada], *Pearls of an Unstrung Necklace* [Fiction: 2005, Fugue State Press, New York] and *Streets that Smell of Dying Roses* [Experimental Fiction: 2003, Fugue State Press, New York].

