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Coding the Narrative and Decoding the City:
Urban Representation in Vikram Chandra's *Love and Longing in Bombay*

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Abstract:

        The tales that Chandra tells in the book *Love and Longing in Bombay* weaves together histories personal and collective; stories of the worldly and the other-worldly; stories that juxtapose histories and memories. The places receive their meaning through diverse kind of representational process. Chandra's narratives makes a hint at the urban spatial representations that shape the cultural perceptions of the urban individuals. Urban realities and their representations have a discursive nature. The selection and exclusion process that form part of everyday urban reality is a complex one. As Chandra sees, there is a cultural politics that actively involves in the process of deciding the importance of various cultural events. What is very special about the book *Love and Longing in Bombay* is the complex way by which Chandra attempts the coding of the stories and the decoding of the city simultaneously- decoding urban representations itself turns to be Chandra's strategy of narrating Bombay and coding its cultural geography.

Keywords: Bombay, Representation, interconnected place, urban place, linguistic representation, forms of power.

Introduction

        Vikram Chandra is a Bombay based writer and a professor of creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley. His literary fame mainly rests on unique narratives like *Red Earth and Pouring Rain: A Novel* (1995), *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997), *Sacred Games*(2006) and *Geek Sublime: Writing Fiction, Coding Software (2013)*. His *Love and Longing in Bombay,* a collection of five inter-connected short stories, was *published* in the year 1997. His *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book (Eurasia region) and was short-listed for the Guardian Fiction Prize. The book *Greek Sublime: The Beauty of Code, the Code of Beauty* was a finalist for the National Book Critics

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Circle Award, and the book *Sacred Games* won the Hutch Crossword prize for English Fiction.

Love and Longing in Bombay is a collection of five tales from Bombay life, namely "Dharma," "Shakti," "Kama," "Artha" and "Shanti". They bring about a ghost story, story of the feud between two socially ambitious women, an investigation story, a mystery tale and a love story. All these stories are tied together using a frame-tale technique. The stories in Chandra's book recalls Michael De Certeau' s theoretical arguments on the production of urban space and the numerous ways through which it is experienced – and 'written' – through the everyday practices of a city's inhabitants. The stories expose numerous interconnections that link seemingly distant urban places, and contradictions that divide the otherwise united places of the city. De Certeau places "the everyday" cultural practices against the "official" documentation and disciplinary activities. It was de Certeau's primary concern to differentiate between the 'concept city' and 'lived city' (95). The 'concept city' is 'mapped theoretical city' that is known, documented, and static, whereas the 'lived city', is unknowable, undocumented and dynamic. Everyday life in a city is juxtaposed against the larger workings of power. De Certeau argues that the resistant practices of everyday life manifest in the domain of power (95). The individual subject can personalize and appropriate (thereby make ambiguous) the clear and definite order given to cities. Every character in *Love and Longing in Bombay* seems to personalize and appropriate the city spaces that they inhabit.

The story "Dharma," brings a layer of Bombay life that is lived by a retired Major Antia and narrated by a person named Subramaniam, a civil servant, familiar with urban life stories. The story named "Shakti" exposes the power struggle as it is enacted in the daily urban spaces like luxury clubs and urban neighborhood. Presented as an investigation story, "Kama" explores the deep lying political power plays and ideological clashes that drive institutional spaces like home to sites of conflict. "Artha" explores the avenues of human spaces open to the advancement of technology. "Shanti" points at the heterotopic possibilities emerging from urban spaces where the boundaries may get dissolved in human connections that break all the man-made walls.

The city space is not a neutral carrier of meaning. A landscape cannot be a neutral agent or empty container: "It is clear that space is not neutral. Far from it! It is actively contested on a daily basis. Space can be contested in many ways: bloodily in wars, with litigation during the planning process, and subtly in the home and work place" (Teather 3). Place/ space is political as it embodies various divisions and political power relations. On the other hand, the spatial is always structured by the political (Johnson et al 114). The hierarchical power relations decide the dominant and marginalized places. The groups who have power to transform place or control culture and places are the 'dominating power'. (Anderson J. 54). Urban representations is one of the main indicators of the power struggle in the city. Urban place receives their meaning through numerous kinds of urban representations.

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Chandra's narrative demonstrates Certeau's conceptualities of the city space: "The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other" (Certeau 93). As depicted in in the book *Love and Longing in Bombay,* urban space is the consequence of urban dweller's writing processes. Intersecting writing processes are involved in the formation of the city. The character Shiv's reflections on the various news items in the newspaper *Times of India*, "the vast turbulence of the world, its fires and refugees and ruined cities," suggest both the representational nature of modern media and the interlinked nature of diverse geographical occurrences (234). Here as Chandra marks it, the place of representation acts as a network of relations too. The interlinked nature of spatiality that may be materialised through an individual urban subject is seen in the story named "Shanti," in the reference to the railway staff Frankie's way of collecting information about a lady by means of "a clandestine spy network" : "He told Shiv that he would use a network of assistant station masters throughout the country to find her, to trace her movements and predict her return" (248).

The places receive their meaning through diverse kind of representational process. Chandra's narratives make a hint at the urban spatial representations that shape the cultural perceptions of the urban individuals. Traditional media representations by means of newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, painting or the calendars and the modern electronic devices like Radio announcements, television, phone are referred in the course of the narratives. There is also indication of urban representations in the form of case report, American music, train announcements, etc. As Chandra puts it, each of them is a representational force that shape the spatial imagination of the people and decide their spatial experiences. For example, the picture of the local cricket star Ranjitsinhji in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* makes Soli and Jehangir to think that they would meet and make friends with Ranjitsinhji once they grow up. Their interest in cricket is fueled by their mother's comments on the picture too.

Devere kinds of urban representations are depicted by Chandra in the story named "Shakti," in offering a picture of an ordinary Bombay street: "The balcony filled up with journos full of horrific election-time tales from the interior, and the younger Maruti 1000 kind of stockbrokers, and also a certain hotel-trainee group who always said. Hamara group has the most fun, man . . ." (14). The gathering of heterogenous people with their diverse interests in politics, economics or nationalist spirit, opens up possibility of reading the city as a site of multiple representations. At the same time, the words, "So we had a sudden new crowd at the old bar", hints at rapidly changing urban landscape (164).

The narratives in the book expose readers to the multitude of mundane urban representations like stories, scandals, gossips and popular sayings, each of which add layers of meanings to everyday urban realities. Such occasions are evident in the popular sayings about the origin of Bombay mentioned in the beginning of the story "Shakti," the ghost affected bungalow in the story "Dharma" or the gossip around the character of Sheila in the

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story "Shakti" (33-34). These stories and chanting connect people and create alternate places of urban existence and social grouping. They also serve as the web of connection that operate through people occupying various classes and social layers (33).

For instance, the popular picture of the bungalow as a ghost infected one and the cultural impact of the same is hinted in the word of a character named Ramani, "*They say* it's unsellable . . . *They say* a Gujarati Seth bought it and died within the month" (emphasis added) (4). The phrase '*They say*' stands for the linguistic representation of the city. Such linguistic representation of the bungalow acts as the deciding force of the economic interactions in city's social space. Similarly, the housekeeper Thapa's words about the popular perception of the bungalow, "No one on this street will come near this place after dark. Everyone knows. They were telling me not to stay here" is suggestive of the alternative modes of urban representation (15-16). In contrast, the reference to the reports and the radio announcement during war times, "Elements of the Indian Para Brigade *are said to be* (emphasis added) in the outskirts of Sylhet. Pakistani troops are dug in . . ." hints at the planned, monotonous and the State-controlled systems of representation which still lacks a perfect ground of trustability (18).

Chandra draws the cartography of the city by shedding light on the sights, sounds, odors and the tactile realities. The diversity of the sounds range from natural and mechanical sounds like the sound of the sea, sound of the pigeons in the balcony, wailing sound, the sound of the rain, the sound of rushing water in the bathroom, the sound of the engines, creaking of the old house, sound of day and night in the city to multitude of human sounds including the sound of his urination, sighing sound, wailing sound, silences, sound of a struggle, the farting sound from between lovers' bodies and even the 'no sound' experience. Linguistic practices too decide the hierarchy of the urban social space. Thus, the upper-class lady Dolly Boatwalla pronounces her greeting word as "Ha-aaloo" (36); the way by which the character Sheila addresses her son is an affected kind of speech (38); upper class women's way of gossiping involves peculiar speech rhythms (39).

The hierarchical social layers also lay in connection with the geographical location and the interior arrangement, like the mansion in the Malabar Hill in the story "Shakti" with its unique spatiality of interior arrangement: "the big double doors inlaid with brass and then a carved wooden elephant's foot with walking sticks in it and a Ganesha that was chipped and old and grey stone . . . a long hall, past a study with a huge brown desk and a brass lamp, past a room full of leather-bound books and brown-and-red Kashmiri rugs . . ." (38). Economical practices are embodied in spatial arrangements and formations as indicated here.

The narrative makes reference to absences to speak about the presences. Thus the missing leg is the cause for the intense pain that Major General Jago Antia goes through; the presence of the ghost is the most felt presence in the bungalow where Major General Jago Antia lives; the missing childhood is the vivid reality Major General Jago Antia

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experiences in his encounter with the ghost; it is not his real name Jehangir Antia, but his nick name Jago Antia, that becomes very popular; it is not his living present, but the past memories that occupies the thoughts in his mind (3-32). In this way, Chandra draws the narrative by blurring the borders of the real and the unreal. The real is shadowed by the presence of the unreal. For example, while seeing the contour maps, covered with markers, and General Jago Antia's mind "moved easily among the mountains, seeing the units, the routes of supply, the staging areas" (7); Similarly it is the missing leg, that is the centre of the legend about General Jago Antia (5) and the "the lapse [that] made them [his fellow soldiers] believe in his strength all the more" (6). As Chandra puts it, the experience of the real is bordered by the perceptions and the unreal entities. Just like the present Mumbai moves along with its past- the colonial or the immediately post-colonial Bombay history, General Jago Antia's bungalow is marked with the active presence of a surreal ghost like presence, effecting changes in the physical bodies and social relations. Even the body bears along with it a memory of an absence – the "memory of his flesh" (8). In a sequence, Major Jago Antia's arrival at the city of Bombay after his military service is marked by the unique mixture of physical and the perceptional factors: "By the time the train pulled into Bombay Central, he felt as if he were covered not only with sweat and grit, but also with an oily film of recollection" (10). While 'sweat and grit' signals the physical aspect of spatial experience, 'recollection' suggests the psychological aspect of the spatial practices.

Chandra exhibits supreme kind of linguistic mastery in describing the ghostly presence in the bungalow. The phrases where with Chandra invokes the really felt presence of an unreal entity is a remarkable one: "voice far away," "a rush of motion," "the swish of feet on the ground," "outlined shape of shoes," "footprint appeared on the tile," and "a breath of air curled around his ankle" (12-13). Each of these phrases uniquely link the presence with absence, tangible with the intangible, and the physical with the metaphysical. Memory of one's past is just like the ghostly presence that clings to the bungalow.

Love and Longing in Bombay highlights the impossibility of representation in mirroring the same in the process of writing. An instance of the same is seen in describing the memories of the character Shiva about his brother Hari: he remembered the dark pearls of blood frozen on the pale skin. In the morgue he had found the cuts unbearable to look at, this damage, these rents in the surface and the lewd exposure of what lay underneath. Now he clung to the still shape as the only reality. It was the world stripped of all its fictions, this dead body on a grey stone slab, the smell. In only a minute or two, in a lane off Chandni Chowk, a whole life came to merely this, all of Hari's idealisms, his Congress
membership and his Nehru-worship, his belief in change and the careful
asceticism of his three khadi kurtas and his blushing appetite for mangoes, all of it gone to an odor of rot. (238)

Any attempt to describe a memory leads to layers and layers of events and places. It opens way to overlapping places of ideologies, places, names and occurences. To speak about something is to record many other connected things.

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Chandra makes a hint at the distance between reality and representation in the story "Kama" in detailing an encounter that Sartaj make himself part of: "Sartaj had been in the afternoon papers twice, both times for encounters with minor gangsters. . . . but he had never told Rahul about that, or about the small spot of urine on the front of his pants. His picture, a formal studio portrait with retouched lips, had been in Midday the same afternoon" (93). The reflections of the police officer Sartraj on the difference between his real experience during the encounter and representation of the same in the newspaper in the form of the report and his photograph exposes the huge gap between reality and representation.

Urban realities and their representations have a discursive nature. The selection and exclusion process that form part of everyday urban reality is a complex one. As Chandra sees, there is a cultural politics that actively involves in the process of deciding the importance of various cultural events. Thus some of the events may be treated with maximum importance, while some other events are treated as trivial. Police inspector Sartraj's reflection on a murder investigation in the story "Kama" indicates this: "So after all, on paper, it was going to be an open and quickly shut case, not even worth a headline in the afternoon papers . . ." (113). So there is an active politics involved in the nature of urban representation. They decide the degree of importance to be granted to various cultural events.

Conclusion

The tales that Chandra tells in the book *Love and Longing in Bombay* weaves together histories- personal and collective; stories of the worldly and the other-worldly; stories that juxtapose histories and memories. The Bombay the narrator introduces is not a monotonous recalling of the Metropolitan capital, but the lived spaces of streets and slums, bars and restaurants, houses and offices, fields and roads. The narrative voice's recalling of the events with all the minute details exposes the reader to the micro-places of urban existence. What is very special about the book *Love and Longing in Bombay* is the complex ways by which Chandra attempts the coding of the stories and the decoding of the city simultaneously- decoding urban representations itself turns to be Chandra's strategy of narrating Bombay and coding its cultural geography.

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