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## "SEARCH FOR HOME AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN *MAXIMUM CITY: BOMBAY LOST AND FOUND*"

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### ABSTRACT

There are various kinds of diasporas like Asian diaspora, European diaspora, African diaspora and the principal characteristics of diasporic writing are nostalgia, alienation, crisis of identity, search for home and etc. In the present paper the elements like search for home and identity crisis will be examined in a work written by the fiction writer and journalist Suketu Mehta, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. The author himself is the protagonist in his work, who left for New York in his youth and when returned; his remembered childhood does not exist. The identity crisis, searching for home and plight for the existence faced by the protagonist in the novel will be examined.

**Keywords:** Identity Crisis, Protagonist, Nostalgia

There are so many definitions of 'identity' but as Sudhish Kakar quoted in *Modern Indian Novel in English* - "at some places identity is referred to as a conscious sense of individual uniqueness,...and at yet another places as a sense of solidarity with a group's ideal" (Pathak,52) seems to be more relevant with the discussion about search for identity. Our identity is an amalgamation of both the cultural difference and identification with the cultural tradition and the lack of either generally results in a state of 'loss' in the minds of many Indians by developing a kind of feeling of superiority or inferiority to fulfill his dream of developing the colonial mentality among Indians.

Suketu Mehta is a writer who lives in New York, but Bombay is the city where he grew up. 'When I moved to New York,' he remembers, "I missed Bombay like an organ of my body." (Mehta, 8). It might be nostalgia that led him back to Bombay. The writer discovers the city of his past through the people who make up its present.

*Maximum City* is also a memoir of migration across cities. At one point, Mehta describes how when he was in high school, his father had shouted at him, 'When you were there, you wanted to come here. Now that you're here, you want to go back.' This was in New York, but it doesn't really matter; it could have been Bombay. The episode made Mehta aware of a truth about himself: "It was when I first realized I had a new nationality: citizen of the country of longing." (Mehta, 33)

But more than memoir, *Maximum City* serves as a record of a writer's engagement with the city he lived in his childhood. When Mehta went back to Bombay in 1998 with his wife and kids, twenty-one years after he had left, his foreign-born children began to suffer from a variety of illnesses. One of his sons contracted amebic dysentery. "The food and the water in Bombay, India's most modern city, are contaminated with shit. Amebic dysentery is transferred through shit. We have been feeding our son shit." (Mehta, 30)

The frantic realism of this passage, mixture of panic and exaggerated irony, is not unselfconscious. It doesn't simply reflect the visitor's nervous response to the sight of a man defecating in public in India. Rather, Mehta notes the obvious--he has seen men relieving themselves on the rocks by the sea every morning, and twice a day, when the tide washes out, he can smell from his window the stench that rises from those rocks and sweeps over the half-million-dollar flats that spread toward the east--and as a good journalist he goes and talks to people who can tell him more.

One of Mehta's informants is Prahlad Kakkar, who made *Bombay*, 'a film about shitting in the metropolis.' Kakkar explains, "Half the population doesn't have a toilet to shit in, so they shit outside. That's five million people. If they shit half a kilo each, that's two and a half million kilos of shit each and every day. The real story is what you don't see in the film. There are no shots of women shitting. They have to shit between two and five each morning, because it's the only time they get privacy." (Mehta 137-138)

According to Mehta, the problem is that the Indians lack 'civic sense.' The private spaces are perfect, the public ones intolerably dirty. As the government cannot make the physical city any better, it resorts to frequent changes in the names of its streets and crossroads. Mehta knows this too, but he seeks to complicate the picture further. He sees in the renaming of his beloved city the assertion of the poorer



people in Bombay, the Maharashtrian ghaties, those people who for him had so far generically been the 'servants.' One is tempted to say that the city was taken aback by those who don't have any toilets.

As Mehta points out, this is how the ghaties took revenge on us. They renamed everything after their politicians, and finally they renamed even the city. If they couldn't afford to live on our roads, they could at least occupy the road signs.

Mehta, at the railway station feels his individuality being crushed by the endless rush of bodies, Mehta discovers a vision of belonging. "All these ill-assorted people walking toward the giant clock on Churchgate: they are me; they are my body and my flesh. The crowd is the self, 14 million avatars of it, 14 million celebrations." (Mehta, 581) It is tempting to view such a declaration as a direct response and even a resistance to the fear about the loss of the self amid the 'white stream in and out of Churchgate Station'. But it is just as probable that Mehta's response is over determined by Bombay's own recent history. After the razing of a mosque by Hindus in Ayodhya in December 1992, riots broke out in Bombay. In January 1993, there were fresh clashes instigated by the Shiv Sena, and Muslims suffered terribly in that round of violence. Then, two months later, on March 12, which was a Friday, ten powerful bombs were detonated in the city by the Muslim underworld. *Maximum City* began as a story on the 1992-93 riots.

There is another way in which nothing human is alien to Mehta as a writer. He is comfortable in the company of murderers, or at least they are in his, since they offer him their stories. He asks a man who had set fire to a Muslim bread-seller during the riots, 'What does a man look like when he's on fire?' The rioter tells the writer: "A man on fire gets up, falls, runs for his life, falls, gets up, runs.... It is horror. Oil drips from his body, his eyes become huge.... Oil drips from him, water drips from him, white, white all over." (Mehta, 3)

Mehta writes about Monalisa-a bar girl from Bombay whom he met in a bar named Sapphire. Mehta writes that he was puzzled by the beer bars and couldn't understand why men spent large amounts of money there?

At the end of this, Mehta 'goes home' to the United States and at last he has found what he was looking for: a beautiful, varied, warm human nest, standing Tower of Babel whose inhabitants communicate in a dizzy mix of Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Urdu, Tamil and sometimes English.

Through it all - we hear Mehta's own story: of the mixture of love, frustration, fascination, and intense identification he feels for and with Bombay, as he tries to find home again after twenty-one years abroad.

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