

Editor's Note

*The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?'*¹

Cities, big and small; modern and ancient; grand and modest, have offered themselves discursively as sites of intense intellectual and creative engagement. Be it Babylon or Nineveh; Athens or Sparta; London or New York; Kolkata or Dublin, the cities across the world have always served as deeply antinomical places with their fashionable neighbourhoods and gentrified locations cohabiting with impoverished ghettos and dark underbellies. As unqualified spaces, cities are also, to use an oxymoronic expression, constantly changing - worked upon by dynamic forces; altered, made, erased and remade. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1930 short story, 'Babylon Revisited', Charlie Wales' life and destiny are inextricably linked with the city of Paris where he found and lost his happiness just as the king Nebuchadnezzar found and lost his in Babylon. In the mythic time, the two cities fuse to form a vortex of happiness and loss. In his *Tableaux Parisiens* (1861), Baudelaire earmarked this paradoxical nature of urban living to give modernist literature the gift of a haunting vision of a city.

The eight essays in the seventh volume collectively negotiate with cities; with their heterogeneity and anomalies. Like the urban spaces this issue seeks to discuss, the essays have not been arranged in any particular order but form a crisscross of images and arguments to represent the palimpsestic existence in and of cities. Amrita Chakrabarti's essay on Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* explores the various ramifications of the queer culture in the Paris of interwar period and how the city became simultaneously a liberating factor and a victimising force. Dwelling

on the capitalist function and consumption pattern, Chakraborti interrogates the image of Paris as a genuine sanctuary for the 'inverts'. Aparna Singh's paper draws attention to a relatively new genre of writing—the post 9/11 literature with special focus on Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and H. M. Naqvi's *Home Boy*. Alienation, distrust and mistrust, confusion and anxiety, Singh argues, have created a new 'Urban Other' who needs to plot his memories and identity on the map of a familiar-turned hostile metropolis. This 'othering' is also an undercurrent in Debanjan Mitra's paper on Kashmir and the tenuous relationship Kashmiri Muslims as well as Kashmiri Pandits share with their homeland. As opposed to the cities so far discussed, Mitra's paper shifts the lens to urban settlements in the volatile border region of Kashmir where the concept of home becomes an ever elusive one. Psychologically unhinged by the traumatic events in their homeland, the netizens of Kashmir devise strategies such as silence to deal with their pain and suffering. Imagination and creativity become conduits for them to reconnect with their homes.

Breaking the formal boundaries of literature, Diksha Dhar's paper conflates city locales with cyberspace to create a discourse of the city as a performative arena for enactment of conflicts. Using the contentious and much debated issue of cow slaughter and lynching, Dhar juxtaposes the Dadri lynching case with the retaliation that followed, especially in Kolkata, to arrive at an understanding of how the city becomes a playfield for dissent and resistance. The city, usually, perceived as a *centre* of diverse human activities is also home to the immigrants and the marginalised and presents itself as a space that accommodates what is central as well as what is peripheral. This argument has been put forward by Janki Singh in her study of the Nepali short stories where Kathmandu becomes the home to migrants. New ways of seeing are developed as the outsiders offer trenchant criticisms of the existing structures of society and politics. Thus, it is the city in flux that has been dealt with in this paper.

Of all the figures inextricably associated with the city, the two

which stand out in the modernist literature the most are the flâneur and the detective. Somdatta Bhattacharya attempts a study of the post liberalization Bangalore/Bengaluru as evoked in Anita Nair's Borei Gowda series, with special emphasis on the last two novels of the series—*A Cut-Like Wound* and *Chain of Custody*. Bhattacharya traces the evolution of detective and crime fiction in literature and situates Nair's series within a long tradition of urban crime fiction. The police cum detective cum flâneur figure in these novels traverses the labyrinthine underbelly of Bangalore to delve into the corrupt and criminal structures present in it. It is the variegated nature of the city that makes it such a rich material for any kind of study. There is a constant see-sawing between order and disorder, law and lawlessness, permission and prohibition. Swati Chatterjee's paper scrutinises the home of the middle class Bengali household in the colonial period to discuss the various kinds of prohibition placed on the society. Using precepts of sensorial history, Chatterjee's essay focuses on the figure of the domestic help and tabooed food items to convey the deeply problematic relationship the city has with societal norms and regulations. In the last paper, Sreeradha Seth has brought the limelight back to a landmark modernist text—James Joyce's *Dubliners*. In *Dubliners*, the city not only provides a background but also assumes a strong individual identity—a sordid and decadent place that thwarts the romantic and transcendental aspirations of its people and pulls them down. Seth has used the binary of stagnancy and disruption to understand the strange apathy, embitterment and frustration that punctuate the lives and fates of the people living in Dublin.

The essays in this volume serve as an assemblage of various discourses, concepts and images associated with the city. Literature, sociology, history, architecture offer rich contexts for the constellation of essays in this issue and justify the broad theme, 'The Vision of the City in Modernist Literature'. Far from being an exhaustive study on the concept of the city in modernist literature, the primary aim of this issue is to rekindle a discussion on the city vis a vis emergent

disciplines like City Studies, Urban History and Urban Sociology. The tip of the iceberg has been touched and the promise of a submerged colossal structure remains!

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