

Mumbai as muse

Cappuccino Dusk

By Kankana Basu

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Window Seat: Rush Hour Stories From The City

By Jahnvi Acharekar

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NAINTARA MAYA OBEROI

More so than any other city, Mumbai attracts a cinematic style of literary description where the visual dominates and commands, if only momentarily; literally, a kind of flash fiction. Throughout a longstanding literary tradition—from Manto's stark cinematic frames to the tongue-in-cheek Bollywood of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, to Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* and Vikram Chandra's entire oeuvre—there seems to be a suggestion that Mumbai is a series of refracting contradictions that cannot be accommodated in one singular narrative. So not only is there a dauntingly large corpus of Mumbai-related literature to contend with, writers often choose to write not just one consolidated plot or a single linear narrative, but a range of subplots, chaotic and unmappable. In addition, fictional Bombay usually generously fulfils every expectation you might have of it, embracing stereotypes of movement and hustle, lack of space, the spectacular schism between poverty and huge wealth, and the city's hankering for spectacle itself. It is impossible, for example, to think of the historical, almost curatorial impulse that informs much writing about Calcutta and Delhi, as being applicable to Bombay; this is a city incapable of standing still to be measured, curated and mourned.

Kankana Basu's *Cappuccino Dusk* and Jahnvi Acharekar's *Window Seat: Rush-Hour Stories From The City* usher us into Mumbai's multiple worlds in very different ways, with varying success. While *Cappuccino Dusk* zooms in on the Banerjee family, *Window Seat's* 30-odd stories are quickly etched sketches of different lives in the metropolis.

Cappuccino Dusk's engaging introduction presents the Banerjees on board the Gyaneshwari Express, en route to their new home in Mumbai; but then, having set itself up as a novel about encountering Mumbai, it disconcertingly skips over the initial moments of encounter. Chapter One brings us straight to Five Years Later, in a quick cut that leaves the reader feeling vaguely cheated. Feeling our way uncertainly across this gap, we find that Som, the oldest son, runs the family-owned tabloid *Noon Voice*, while Siddharth, the younger son, is about to begin a college course in architecture, dreaming of rebuilding the chaos of Bombay. There are also the Banerjee women, of whom Basu is surprisingly dismissive: Ira Banerjee, the mother, is allotted a measure of interiority, but does not escape being called "woolly-headed", while the daughters Bonny ("A staunch feminist streak added to the hormonal confusion") and college-going Mishti ("not very bright, but as sweet as her nickname, and wanted only to look pretty and hook all the boys") receive no such kindness.

Over the years the family collects around this core such satellite characters such as Mustafa Saifee, an architecture student determined to fail, Bubla Basu, a lonely 30-year-old woman, and Dibyendu Ganguly, a bellowing second cousin, all of whom gather for the daily ritual of evening coffee at the Banerjees' transplanted *adda*. Dramatising the ordinariness of

their brushes with Mumbai without venturing too far into it, the novel lulls us into a sense of languor, but just as we begin to become involved in the details of their everyday lives—Siddharth's architectural scholarship, Mishti's hair colour, Bonny's seemingly hopeless marriage prospects, and Som's office colleagues—we are swept into perplexing melodrama.

Maltesh, *Noon Voice's* cartoonist, is accidentally taken hostage by a pro-wildlife group of brigands bent on attacking poachers (which comically makes them poacher-poaching poachers), one of whom turns out to be his long-lost father. Meanwhile, Malati Iyer, the sub-editor, finds herself in a car with a ticking bomb, and heroically drives into a lake so as to save

all relation to the earnest but tedious Banerjees).

The novel does not venture much into the city itself, focusing on the synecdoche-like drawing room, where the characters find refuge from the ugly hustle of Mumbai. Though Basu's narrative seems to mimic the haphazardness of the city, the constant drift between undeveloped characters leaves us sadly unable to focus on anyone's interiority, and therefore unable to invest in their lives.

Meanwhile, the stories in *Window Seat* create a compelling, if piecemeal portrait of Mumbai. Collage-like and disjunctured, Acharekar's collection appears deliberately designed to prevent us from navigating Mumbai

Kankana Basu and Jahnvi Acharekar both appear to be attempting to stay within the Bombay tradition of fragmented, shifting narratives. Though characters in both books try to reveal themselves to the reader independently, without the support of the narrative voice, Mumbai itself—immense, spectacular and deliberately schizoid—remains always just out of reach

the crowd around her. To be entirely fair to Basu, this sudden leap from domesticity to car bombs and jungle interludes does allow us to exit the drawing room, but it is far too incongruous to be successful.

Basu's writing style is unostentatious but self-conscious and the dialogue appears somewhat 'authored'. What is particularly grating is the Banerjees' fixation on explicitly announcing who they are: "This sort of thing is not acceptable in a middle class Bengali family" or "Yes, Bonny, that's no way for a Bengali girl to speak." The Banerjees are, inarguably, a middle-class Bengali family, but this reiteration seems not to convey any interior anxiety about how Bengali they really remain after all these years in Mumbai, but only to make them caricature themselves. They try hard, but one can't help constantly yearning for a glimpse of the infinitely more endearing, scandalous, couplet-juggling Chatterjees from Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (who can only be imagined disclaiming

with ease, giving us a subtly disarrayed series of glimpses instead. The entire collection is reminiscent of the vignette form, in its pictorial sense ("vignette: a picture, as an engraving or photograph, that shades off gradually into the surrounding paper"), leaving us with a single, almost cinematic image, surrounded by a blurry, indistinct edge.

Acharekar's spare, delicate sketches are peopled by startling characters—housewives, advertising executives, strippers, out-of-work-models, real estate agents—and set in inventively varied spaces—girls' hostels, cybercafés, beauty salons, suburban *bastis* and Bombay Central station. While the stories remain separate and unrelated to each other in the first section, 'Mumbai Montage', the second, called 'Mumbai Medley', allows them to skirt one another, with people inhabiting the same spaces for split-seconds, almost but not quite coming together.

Characters gain resonance quickly and casually over the two or three pages

allotted to them as they scramble for meaningful plots in which to make themselves at home. Like Sakshi, in the eponymous "Sakshi", who finds herself turning from her exhausting morning to "a vision of the shimmering mirrorwork sea darkened by condominium shadows which darken its surface dazzle" for quietude, they take what they can from this draining, exhilarating city.

Intriguingly, Acharekar does not employ the obvious ventriloquist's technique, choosing instead a window-seat vantage point from which the core of the characters' stories often hovers just out of reach.

Violence slashes through at unexpected moments. "A Good Riot", for example, is a chillingly matter-of-fact account of a riot in a slum colony, which begins when a Hindu boy's temple is bruised by another young resident. Acharekar is deadpan in her use of the pun ("Purushottam is quick to point out that the origin lay in his quiet tolerance of a bruised temple"), admirably resisting the urge to beat it to death, or even make it a central motif. Instead, she cuts the riot of the title down to size:

The mosque is now a bustling shakha of the leading political party. Ram, formerly employed as a clerk here, is presently dreaming of standing for elections. Purushottam and his uncle Laxman will follow suit. All in all, it was a good riot.

Acharekar is at her best when using wry, subtle humour to underline her often ironic take on life's quirks. In "Lily's Wedding", sisters Lila and Sandhya, who pose as Lily and Sandy to be able to live in a 'Strictly For Catholics' colony, are preparing for Lila, alias Lily's wedding to Mike, who really is Catholic. Acharekar writes, "She would be a part of the community she had grown so comfortable with over the years. Not in her wildest dreams had she imagined a white wedding for herself. Mike called it her altar ego."

Acharekar is specific about the places her protagonists find themselves in, appropriately so for a densely-packed city where a few square inches where you can anchor yourself are incalculably precious. "Home for Christmas", halfway through the book, echoes the search for meaningful space, through a young South Bombay couple's search for a house, aided by the intrepid Mr. Pinto ("Why run helter-skelter when we can give you shelter?"). Though the narrative resists mapping the house-hunt physically, it provides a companionable portrait of Mumbai, in the unexpected friendship between lonely Mr. Pinto and the young duo, both of whom come to stand in for each other's larger families and communities.

Basu and Acharekar both appear to be attempting to stay within the Bombay tradition of fragmented, shifting narratives, but *Cappuccino Dusk* is less a book on Mumbai and more a meditation on an alternative space that exists within the city but has little to do with it. *Window Seat's* inhabitants, jostling with each other for space, are more clearly located within the city. Though characters in both books frequently try to reveal themselves to the reader independently, without the support of the narrative voice, Mumbai itself—immense, spectacular and deliberately schizoid—remains always just out of reach. ■