Re-imagining Delhi as an Ordinary City: Siddharth Chowdhury's Quiet Revolution

Marianne Hillion

HAL Id: hal-03092759
https://hal.sorbonne-universite.fr/hal-03092759v1

Submitted on 2 Jan 2021

Re-imagining Delhi as an Ordinary City: Siddharth Chowdhury's Quiet Revolution

Marianne Hillion

This text was automatically generated on 29 January 2020.

Re-imagining Delhi as an Ordinary City: Siddharth Chowdhury's Quiet Revolution

Marianne Hillion

> Indian life is plural, garrulous, rambling, lacking a fixed centre, and the Indian novel must be the same. Delicacy, nuance and irony apparently belong properly to the domain of the English novel and to the rational traditions of the European Enlightenment. (Chaudhuri 2008, 115)

1   In his essay on the theories of the Indian novel after Rushdie, the writer and critic Amit Chaudhuri attempts to debunk this enduring *topos* of literary criticism, which mimetically connects a supposedly chaotic country with formal aspects of its literature: "Since India is a huge baggy monster, the Indian novels that accommodate it have to be baggy monsters as well" (114). This assumption is based on several misconceptions, among which the notion that the Indian novel in English has to represent India as a whole, and the canonization of Salman Rushdie as an emblem of Indian literature. In fact, Indian writing has often been read in the light of Rushdie's capacious epic novels, thus obscuring other aesthetics, genres, and languages.

2   This is particularly the case with the reception of post-1990s Indian urban writing, frequently narrowed down to the register of the monumental novel, which portrays Indian globalizing megacities as sprawling organisms beyond control.[1] Imbued with a Rushdian sense of profusion and excess, Suketu Mehta's, Rana Dasgupta's and Raj Kamal Jha's works, among others, do represent Indian metropolises as "huge baggy monsters," illegible maelstroms which defy all understanding. They regularly offer an all-encompassing view of the city and imagine its accelerated urban mutations as spectacular crises and cataclysmic eruptions, thus turning it into an exceptional space and a site of heroic struggle. These formal, scalar and thematic features delineate an epic geography of the Indian city,[2] which sometimes verges on the dystopic mode.

Madhurima Chakraborty argues that this dark epic paradigm, which focuses our attention on "intense moments of emergencies rather than [on] the everyday effects of historical situations" (Chakraborty 2017, 3), needs to be acknowledged as one representative mode among others. She does not deny that darkness has a substantial referent in South Asian cities but alerts us to the danger of this "bleak city imagery" (3) becoming a dominant mode of interpretation. The mimetic correspondence between the allegedly cacophonous nature of Indian cities and the narrative forms arising from them thus needs to be questioned.

3   In line with Chaudhuri's insistence on the heterogeneity of Indian writing, this article explores one alternative literary mode to that of the urban epic novel, challenging prevailing conceptions of Indian literature and cities. Writers such as Aman Sethi, Sampurna Chattarji and Siddharth Chowdhury map the shifting contours of Indian cities through a small-scale writing of ordinary urban life. Far from casting the advent of "New India" and its shining cities as a sudden catastrophe, these writers undermine the very notion of event by focusing on daily life in Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai, critically writing globalization through its everyday local effects rather than through macro-narratives of tumultuous convulsions. If both the urban epic and the urban ordinary are often intermingled in literary texts, my purpose in this article is to shed light on the latter and to scrutinise narratives which probe into the mundane realities of urban life in a subdued, unsentimental tone. These texts, ranging from short-stories to novels and literary reportages, also throw light on common yet eccentric people and spaces, often left out of urban literary maps. I consider this re-invention of Indian cities through an anti-spectacular prism as a surreptitious yet potent imaginative revolution.

4   This reading resonates with Jennifer Robinson's reflections on the need to examine cities of the global South as "ordinary cities" and to provincialize Eurocentric norms of urbanity, which endow non-Western cities with an irredeemable otherness and exclude them from the realm of modernity. Indeed, these narratives of urban banality minoritize two former trends of representation, associating Indian cities with the huge and the monstrous. First, Indian cities, especially Bombay and Calcutta, have largely been identified with their slums, a trend fuelled since the 1970s by Western literary, cinematographic and scholarly works (Lapierre 1985, Davis 2006, Boyle 2009, Boo 2012), and more recently by slum tourism (Dyson 2012). The second trend is the exaltation of rural life which, in the wake of Gandhism, pits the authentic harmonious "Indianness" of the village against the artificial, corrupt city, an antithesis which was perpetuated by literature and cinema until the 1980s (Shahani 1995, Khanna 2009, Nandy 2011). The writers of the ordinary city precisely blur this clear-cut opposition as they highlight the interweaving of the urban and the rural at the local level, and their emphasis on familiarity undermines the sensationalist image of the slum-city.

Siddharth Chowdhury's vernacular cosmopolitanism

5   Siddharth Chowdhury, a writer born in Patna[3] and living in Delhi, particularly engages in the unsettling of Indian urban and literary monumentality. Tinged with an unsentimental irony, his short stories and novels chronicle the daily life of drifting students and scholars, failed writers and corrupt middlemen making their way through Patna and Delhi, the "twin cities of [his] imagination" (Chowdhury 2016, 247). Chowdhury's imaginative geography of Delhi is both gritty and sophisticated,

combining popular and high-brow cultural references, constantly shifting between slang and bombastic style. Amitava Kumar and Tabish Khair, both diasporic writers and academics originally from Bihar (see Kumar 2015), praise Chowdhury's art of story-telling and his combination of provincial and cosmopolitan perspectives. Kumar evokes the author's "specific kind of cosmopolitanism" and his ability to depict life in the metropolis "with the eyes of someone from the margins" (Kumar 2016). Khair also emphasises Chowdhury's small-town vantage point and defines Chowdhury's first novel, *Patna Roughcut* (2005), as a "nukkad novel" (Khair 2006).[4] The bilingual phrase echoes the interweaving of English and Hindi in Chowdhury's writing but also renders its small-scale street view of urban life. This reading of Chowdhury's fiction is consistent with Khair's praise of small-town cosmopolitanism, a form of openness to difference which he often fails to see in metropolitan centres (Khair 2015).[5] Similarly, in his preface to the Routledge Classics edition of *The Location of Culture* (2004), Homi Bhabha opposes two types of cosmopolitical thinking: "vernacular cosmopolitanism" and "global cosmopolitanism." The latter, based on a privileged position, conceives of the world as a global village and is "founded on ideas of progress that are complicit with neo-liberal forms of governance, free market forces of competition" (XIV). Conversely, vernacular cosmopolitanism "measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective" and does not necessarily involve geographical movement, as it may be taken on by global migrants but also national minorities.[6] Bhabha connects vernacular cosmopolitanism with writers who experience globalization from the margins and create in a world-system which overlooks them. Significantly, he only points to the linguistic dimension of the vernacular when he mentions the Dalit poet Prakash Jadhav who writes of the homeless underclass of Bombay, both in Marathi and English, conflating an ornate language and the "demotic slang reminiscent of the Black Panther poets" (XXVI). With regard to the poem "Under Dadar Bridge," Bhabha states: "The language of the poem catches something of the spark of vernacular cosmopolitanism that I have been trying to explore" (XXIV). It is no coincidence if the "spark" comes from under the bridge, offering a "view of Bombay from beneath the arches of one of its landmarks" (XXIV) instead of the typical panoramic view of the city and its skyline on the sea. It is also from beneath that Chowdhury writes of Delhi, exploring low-life in the city margins and forgotten corners. Though he writes in English and about a national capital turned global city, I would argue that both his language and his position in Delhi make him a vernacular cosmopolitan writer. His transcultural imagination of the city is all the more remarkable as it is not related to diasporic mobility nor to a global audience, his books being published only in India.

6   My contention is that it is precisely through his singular version of vernacular cosmopolitanism that Chowdhury revisits Delhi as an ordinary city. He thus thwarts the triumphalist discourse of the "arrival" of a global urban India (Kaur and Hansen 2016) but also offers an alternative to the imagination of monstrous Indian cities. He does so in three different ways: through the minute documenting of daily life in the capital, the appropriation of commonplace hardboiled fiction codes to picture ordinary violence and the increasing sense of familiarity with the city.

Documenting Delhi from below

7   Chowdhury's literary cartography sets him apart from other Delhi Anglophone writers. First, his imaginative map of the capital is not geographically or socially all-encompassing, covering the entirety of Delhi's sprawling territory and its bewildering conjunction of extreme wealth and destitution, like Rana Dasgupta's and Arundhati Roy's epic texts. Nor does he emulate Anita Desai's or Khushwant Singh's post-Mughal melancholy mood and their delving into the city's fractured history. First, except for a few excursions to South Delhi, Chowdhury's literary landscape is geographically restricted to the northern fringes of Delhi: the University North Campus and its adjacent districts, and the two neighbourhoods of Daryaganj and Paharganj in Old Delhi. Chowdhury's urban world is also socially circumscribed, since it is almost exclusively peopled with Bihari middle-class ordinary characters, loitering in tea-shops, small clerks' rooms and dingy student hostels brimming with scandalous rumours. The capital is thus constructed through a small-town prism, and is somehow turned into a double of Patna. In fact, if Patna is set as a provincial counterpoint to Delhi, it also insinuates itself within the city through the characters' connections and habits.[7]

8   *Day Scholar* (2010), for instance, charts the trajectory of Hriday, an upper-caste middle-class young man from Patna discovering the decadent world of Delhi University in the 1990s. In the novel, the student hostel where the protagonist lives is full of Bihari students, thus appearing as a synecdoche of the "Patna diaspora in Delhi" (Kumar 2003). The protagonist's introduction to his landlord via his Patna mentor points to the strong ties between the province and the capital. According to the hostel's caretaker Jishnuda, it is actually owing to the landlord's preconceptions about Biharis that Hriday gets a room in the hostel: "Uncle has just one condition. The boys should primarily be Biharis. He seems to think that we are just like Gujjars.[8] Tough and callous. No need to disillusion him. So never in any circumstance prove yourself to be otherwise. Be tough, stupid and callous always" (Chowdhury 2016, 286). The text exposes the enduring stereotypes clinging to people from Bihar but also humorously twists them into identities to be strategically performed by Biharis themselves. In *The Patna Manual of Style*, the same opportunistic Jishnuda uses these stereotypes of endurance and callousness to get hired as an event manager.

9   Instead of the typical bewildering anonymity of the metropolis, the provincial narrator thus encounters a partly familiar world. The university area is imagined as a cluster of numerous urban villages, structured by closely-knit social and regional networks of solidarity and allegiances, occasionally enlivened by turf wars and peace-making protocols. The transplantation of provincial entertainment is described in a mock-ethnographic manner, highlighting Chowdhury's focus on the everyday regular rhythm of urban life:

> Like in most small towns of Bihar, when evening descends and people saunter off to the nearby railway junction for entertainment, so in Delhi University Biharis came out of their boroughs in Kamla Nagar, Vijay Nagar, Indira Vihar, Maurice Nagar, Mukherjee Nagar, Hakikat Nagar and myriad other nagars and vihars, and set out for Chhatra Marg. There they would dawdle for a couple of hours, have tea at Jai Jawan dhaba, meet their girlfriends at Miranda, or PG Women's or Meghdoot hostels, and thrash out "compromises" without any group coming to real blows. "Compromises" were usually about imagined slights to one's dignity concerning a

girl who was a "sister" even though the girl may not have known the guy but was from the same town [...]. Usually in ten minutes flat most "compromises" would be over. Then the leaders of the two groups would be summoned and asked to "shake hands karo" and then everybody would have tea at Jai Jawan. All very proper and civilized. (330–31)

The provincial railway junction is here replaced by the campus main road, which is turned into a stage for minutely explained rituals of mock-confrontations and negotiations between rival clans of the two towns. The proliferation of toponyms, the distinct local meaning of the word "compromise," the idiomatic conflation of English and untranslated Hindi in "shake hands karo"[9] and the humorous tone all evidence the mock-ethnographic aspect of the narrative. It also suggests that the tense atmosphere of masculine aggressiveness, far from being extra-ordinary, is part of Delhi Bihari students' everyday life. Chowdhury's mapping of students' everyday idleness and habits in the city contrasts with the archetypal representation of the city as an alienating whirlwind at odds with the slow rhythm of village life. His street-corner writing represents the university campus as a small town within a bigger town, pointing to the author's downsizing of Delhi. However, though geographically circumscribed, the campus is not depicted as a self-enclosed world, hermetically sealed off from the city and the country at large, as is usually the case with campus novels. The university students' union elections, for instance, are described as "the bonsai version of national elections" (392), revealing the connections of students' politics with national politics and characterising the campus as a miniature of Delhi, countering the monumental writing of the Indian capital.

10   The "concrete specificity" (356) of Chowdhury's narratives, fraught with actual place-names (Volga, Bercos restaurant), brand names (Yezdi motorbikes, Old Monk rum, Navy Cut cigarettes), and untranslated Hindi words (i.e. *astura* for razor), contribute to the realistic effect given by the text, capturing the peculiarities of a unique locality. Yet the emphasis on details and regular habits also points to the effects of globalization on urban life. The passing references to Adidas tracksuits or to the meeting of young lovers in the proliferating shopping malls obliquely signify the advent of a global leisure-oriented economy and the transformation of everyday life by these new global connections. Chowdhury's understated writing of globalizing Delhi thus departs from the epic imagination of urban mutations such as that of Rana Dasgupta's *Capital* (2014). Indeed, whereas Rana Dasgupta's essay on the city focuses on the bewildering rise to power of a new economic elite ("global cosmopolitans" in Bhabha's terms), Chowdhury takes on the common man's vantage point and voices the aspirations of ordinary (upper caste) middle classes, revealing the ruthless power struggle at work in the city:

Mrs Midha wanted her daughter to do well and she was saving money for her to do an MBA later on. What with economic liberalization and the markets opening up, India would need thousands of MBAs to manage all that wealth. "Just when I thought reservation[10] would make paupers of us, God has given us liberalization so that we as upper castes can hold our head high for some time more. Till they eventually catch up." (2016, 377–78)

Tinged with dark humour, this passage exhibits Mrs Midha's cynical opportunism, considering liberalization as a providential gift allowing the upper castes to perpetuate their privilege against a threatening "them" and political progressivism. The text conveys her callous voice through free indirect and direct speech and suggests that far from unsettling traditional hierarchies, liberalization and globalization only reinforce an iniquitous system of caste and privilege. It is through the vernacular, understood

both as local and common language, that mutations are rendered. Similarly, the post-1990s boom of leisure and real estate industries is embodied by the ascent of Zorawar Singh, hostel landlord, "mid-level political broker and property dealer" (415). A small-scale real estate and then event management businessman, Singh is one of Chowdhury's typical characters: an unheroic urban dweller and a small-time crook whose influence is limited to the campus neighbourhoods. His dubious economic success through petty crimes and corruption, helped by his connections with political power, is symbolised by the white government car which comes to pick him up now and then, a sign of "ultimate achievement" for the students (339). Chowdhury thus focuses on the daily life of petty criminals, average students, common individuals whose social trajectory is far from spectacular, at odds with the real estate magnates and businessmen whom Raj Kamal Jha and Rana Dasgupta portray in their Delhi narratives.

11   However vernacular Zorawar Singh seems to be, he also actually belongs to a cast of literary types: that of the ruthless yet mediocre crook found in hardboiled fiction. The sordid embedded story of his social climbing, told by Jishnuda, portrays him as a parodic gang lord and philanderer. Jishnuda's sensational tall-tale, full of graphic scenes of sex and violence, highlights the way in which Delhi is reinvented through the negotiation of popular literary tropes, which also gesture to an anti-epic literary geography.

Hardboiled Delhi

12   Although *Day Scholar* does not involve a proper investigation and crimes are more often talked about than committed, the novel's narrator confesses his voyeuristic curiosity and somehow becomes a private eye into the decadent world of Zorawar Singh and his hitmen, whom he identifies with "characters in a pulp novel with a lurid cover" (Chowdhury 2016, 371). The opening scene sets the tone as it closely depicts a moment of sexual intercourse between the hostel landlord and his mistress, scrutinised by the narrator and his friends. This peeping scene has been published in the collection of crime stories *Delhi Noir* (2009), hinting at Chowdhury's noir literary imagination of the capital. Repeated intertextual allusions to Hemingway, considered as the forefather of the genre, and to popular hardboiled fiction writers and characters such as James Hadley Chase, Travis McGee (John D. Macdonald's detective protagonist) and Lew Archer (by Ross Macdonald)[11] gesture to the author's transcultural sources of influence but also to his protagonist's reinvention of his surroundings through a hardboiled lens.

13   In fact, the novel's atmosphere of "casual violence, sleaziness and indolence" (Hasan 2011), the gang fights, the abundant use of slang and the self-conscious rewriting of stereotypical scenes of hardboiled fiction all point to Chowdhury's appropriation of this popular genre in order to imaginatively map the Indian megacity. If hardboiled crime fiction evidently focuses on violence, one of the genre's singularities is precisely to emphasise its ordinariness: in Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler's urban worlds, crime and corruption are not pictured as bewildering exceptions but are part and parcel of everyday life, seen through the unsentimental prism of disabused heroes. Thus, the affinity between Chowdhury's seedy urban world and that of hardboiled fiction only heightens his construction of Delhi as an ordinary city.

14   The similarities between the two writing contexts further substantiate the notion of scaling down urban tumult and violence: Dennis Porter refers to Chandler and Hammett as "chroniclers of a new urban reality" (2003, 95), representing a fast-evolving material environment shaped by the advent of industrial monopoly capitalism, a heightened class conflict, and the generalization of corruption and crime.[12] If the Indian post-1990s context is widely different, one cannot but see the resonances between the two periods and spaces. The parallel between the phases of emergence of industrial and post-industrial global capitalism is suggested by Rana Dasgupta in his essay on Delhi, in which he compares Delhi with Chicago and New York in the 1920s, referring to Martin Scorsese's films (Dasgupta 2014, 434), another ubiquitous tutelary figure in Chowdhury's writing.[13] Beyond the contextual intersection, the tonal proximity is striking: at odds with Dasgupta's spectacular rendering of the corrupt world of "New India," Chowdhury's gritty realism depicts this world from within, a world in which crime and corruption (in entrance examinations, in student union's elections, in real estate…) are the accepted norm.

15   The low life of Delhi University campus is either narrated through a mock-ethnographic mode, as pointed out earlier with the "compromise" customs, or through mock-dramatic scenes, such as this showdown between the godfather figure of Jishnuda and the alleged harasser of a "sister":

> We saw Jishnuda walk purposefully towards the couple, the astura gleaming in the orange glare of the street lamps, and as he reached the "sister," he pushed her gently away and swung his hand from left to right and back like a wide X mark, in a controlled arc. The boy looked surprised for a second and then covered his face as blood gushed out. Farid put the Rajdoot in gear, Vinodini Khan ran back into the hostel. The red bandhini chunri swirling in the air like a long-tailed kite. (Chowdhury 2016, 335)

The passage humorously emphasises both the spectacular aspect of the aggression and Jishnuda's casual mastery of violence, thus reading as a self-reflexive rewriting of a typical scene from hardboiled fiction or gangster film. Jishnuda's repeated demonstrations of physical force and shrewdness as well as his detached attitude cast him as the perfect embodiment of hardboiled manhood, which highly depends on dramatization and performance (Strychacz 1989, Abbott 2002). The confrontation setting, Jishnuda's perfectly controlled gestures, and the image of the vanishing girl followed by the birdlike swirling shawl ("bandhini chunri") all reveal the mock-heroic aspect of the scene. The heroic tonality is further deflated by the impression that the girl needs no protection at all: "to all purposes it looked to me that she was harassing the poor boy instead" (Chowdhury 2016, 334), thus twisting the canonical damsel-in-distress scenario. Once more, the codes of crime fiction are interwoven with vernacular elements ("astura," "Rajdoot," "bandhini chunri"), exemplifying the transcultural dimension of Chowdhury's urban landscape.

16   A similar comical twist is performed when the narrator's bold confrontational strategy, directly inspired by Jishnuda's advice and borrowed from a hardboiled fiction script, thoroughly fails: "'Come on, cut my wrists. I dare you to cut my wrists, you moron.' So Jishnuda did just that. He rushed over to my side and before Zorawar could stop him he had slashed my right wrist" (421). Young Hriday's attempt at impressing his master-turned-opponent and at mimicking a tough hitmen's rhetoric runs up against an unsparing reality, as Jishnuda takes his words at face value, abruptly changing the expected script. The tragi-comic effect is enhanced by the laconic monosyllabic

phrasing ("did just that") which mirrors Jishnuda's sharp blade and surprising brutality. If Jishnuda is fashioned after cynical unsentimental heroes, the narrator's failure also makes him an anti-hero type, that of the drifting youth, redolent of Salinger's Holden Caufield (*The Catcher in the Rye)* or Hemingway's loser figures (alcoholic Eddy in *To Have and Have Not,* Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*), two writers Chowdhury cites as major influences (Chowdhuri 2015b). The protagonist's imagination thus seems imbued with these codes, making the epic tonality appear as a mere lens through which a mundane urban reality is inflated. Indeed, eager to train his eye to close observation at first, Hriday gives up on Hemingway's school of fieldwork realism to indulge in complete invention, yielding to the tall-tale impulse animating the whole campus (Chowdhury 2016, 380).

17   Chowdhury's conversational tone and vibrant use of colloquial language, praised by critics as expressing the vernacular speech of Delhi, also echoes hardboiled fiction writers' use of local slang. Dennis Porter foregrounds the formal innovation brought about by Hammett for instance, arguing that, in the vein of Hemingway, "Hammett showed how the apparently ordinary, spoken American language could be made to transcend itself in the direction of a new urban poetry" (2003, 99). In Chowdhury's writing, Delhi's spoken language is re-invented through the characters' mix of Hindi and English as well as through their use of Hindi and American English slang, giving birth to a highly innovative urban literary idiom, drawing both on local and global linguistic sources. The importance of local colloquial speech in order to map the city is enhanced in *Day Scholar* as the novel dramatizes Hriday's initiation into the "magical world" (Chowdhury 2016, 294) of Shokeen Niwas through his learning of the city's racy local slang:

> "Hriday babu, just like every door has a dwarpal every chut has a chutpal. A chutpal never gets the chut just like the dwarpal rarely gets to sleep in the master bedroom. Every good girl needs at least one chutpal, to run errands for her and listen to her bitch about her mother." (333)

The coarse neologism based on the vulgar word for female genitals ("chut") and the suffix "pal" (meaning guard or protector in Hindi) conveys the sexist atmosphere (and the underlying fear of being subjugated by a woman) of the university but also suggests irreverence towards religion as "dwarpal" originally refers to tutelary deities. A similar attempt at rendering the voices of Delhi streets is made by Aman Sethi in his literary reportage on a Bihari labourer's quotidian life in *A Free Man,* although the author-narrator's outsider position is stressed throughout the book (which includes a glossary), thus differing from Chowdhury's insider vision in that respect.

Domesticating urban space

18   As *Day Scholar* unfolds, Hriday gradually relinquishes his epic imagination of the city to perceive Delhi's ordinariness. The epic construction of the city thus appears as a transitory phase or a delusory narrative. This awakening pattern gestures to another popular genre, that of the coming-of-age novel, mapping the protagonist's progress onto his increasing familiarity with the city. The term "bildungsroman" appears once in the novel in the narrator's father's mouth, to refer to the novel the narrator is writing, and numerous references to Dickens' *Great Expectation*s hint at the appropriation of the genre. The text delineates the narrator's shifting imagination of the city from his original fantasizing of Delhi as a modern Babylon to a disabused

perception of it. His moral and epistemological awakening is treated as the stripping of his crime fiction filter on urban life. The sulphurous Mrs Midha for instance, pictured as a loose "gangster's moll, like Helen" earlier, finally appears to him as "a regular middle-class mother with a somewhat complicated personal life" (412). The reference to Helen, the famous Hindi film vamp actress and dancer, adds another layer of cinematic intertext to Chowdhury's writing of the decadent city.

19   The transformation of the narrator's perception is also spatialized: Hriday leaves the "magical world" of Shokeen Niwas hostel to move to the neighbourhood of Hakikat Nagar: "I moved in without seeing the room because I liked the name of the colony. I needed a reality check" (422). In an obvious allegorical logic, the pun on the neighbourhood's name symbolically connects Hriday's new consciousness with his new environment.[14] The escape out of Zorawar and Jishnuda's sphere of influence signals the return to the ordinary city and the awareness that the heroic view of the city is a mere delusion. Through his exuberant tall-tales, Jidhnuda is indeed the main creator of the epic of Delhi North Campus, constantly peddling wild legends and sordid rumours about its inhabitants. This wilful delusion seems to stretch out to the whole campus, as the narrator states at the end of the novel: "In North Campus no one bothered about the truth anyway. They all had their own theories. They were all storytellers and I didn't feel like correcting them" (422). If the epic endures, it only does so as an acknowledged collective fantasy.

20   The character's learning trajectory, the systematic indication of the characters' college, the satirical outlook on students' short-lived romances, literary dreams and idleness are also redolent of the campus novel, a booming genre in the Indian Anglophone literary landscape (Bhagat 2004, Bagchi 2007, Mittal 2008). However, these popular novels usually focus on hardworking upper-middle class engineering students and enhance the campus as a refuge from the city's bustle, contrary to Chowdhury's seedy world. His unsentimental, self-reflexive tone also distinguishes him from this literary production.

21   The gradual distancing from the epic mode and domestication of urban space is even more palpable in Chowdhury's latest collection of interlinked stories, *The Patna Manual of Style,* in which the epic is constantly deflated, mocked or taken on by unpleasant characters. Chowdhury acknowledges the shift of tone between *Day Scholar* and *The Patna Manual of Style*: "But with this book, I wanted Hriday to be mellower, more contemplative, less angular" (Chowdhuri 2015c). Therefore, the reader is reacquainted with the former student, now an aspiring writer navigating a city he knows intimately. If the sense of the ordinary permeates the main narrator's voice, the collection is also full of quixotic characters, prompt to delusions and exaggerations, fully engrossed in an epic world of fiction. In "The Importer of Blondes" for instance, Jishnuda resurfaces and tells Hriday about his "violent love story" (13). Yet, the heroic tonality of the embedded story is distanced through Hriday's point of view, aware of Jishnuda's exuberant filmic imagination: "'You should write about me. I am quite a character,' Jishnuda said causally, a bemused smile on his face, eyes looking up at the Statesman House building. Heroic gaze into fading light" (Chowdhury 2016, 13). The character's conspicuously cinematic posing clearly suggests the narrator's reflexive distance. A last instance of the anti-epic mode of the collection is the story "Damsel in Distress," which satirises a narrow-minded provincial youth coming to Delhi. Told in the first person, it is a compressed satiric rewriting of a pattern used in *Day Scholar,* that of an anti-hero's

troubled encounter with the city. As the *topos* of the title suggests, the ostensibly unpleasant narrator (voicing anti-Muslim and castist prejudices) perceives the metropolis through his patriarchal chivalric norms and wants to save "heroines" from urban corruption, turning every encounter into an extraordinary adventure. The anti-hero's puritanical prejudices lead to highly comical misunderstandings, such as when he misguidedly disturbs a couple in a park at night, assuming the girl is being assaulted. [15] Coming from a northern state and ashamed of his "mofussil slowness" (59),[16] the narrator is however proud of his high caste, suggesting both a marginal and dominant position. His epic fantasies of power point to the epic as a self-centred naive projection. Therefore, through the sense of growing familiarity with the city and the exposure of epic flights of fancy as temporary delusions, *The Patna Manual of Style* signals a shift further away from the urban epic in Chowdhury's writing, achieving his quiet revolution in the representation of the contemporary Indian city.

22   The fact that this quiet revolution is completed in a collection of short-stories cannot be overlooked. *Day Scholar* as well as Chowdhury's first novel *Patna Roughcut* already challenged the novel form through their episodic structure, reading as a series of interlinked episodes. Chowdhury's aesthetic of the everyday and its associated downscaling of the megacity seem to be taken further through the shift to the short-story, a genre which tends to favour a restricted spatio-temporal scope, minor events, and, in the words of Hriday, "concrete specificity and not long-winded waffle" (Chowdhury 2016, 356). It raises the question of the influence of literary genres on the way places are envisaged, suggesting, in line with Amit Chaudhuri's identification of the novel with monumental "all-inclusiveness" (2008, 114), that the short-story form shapes Chowdhury's imaginative geography of the small and the ordinary.

23   His narratives create a small exclusive world, relying on the author's and readers' shared knowledge. The pleasure of recognition and the "shared nostalgia for a middle-class material culture" triggered by the constellation of Hindi words, brand names, and toponyms, is underlined by the critic Trisha Gupta and redolent of what Amitav Ghosh calls "a shared shorthand." Ghosh, who praised *Day Scholar* as an "enjoyable tale of life in Delhi University in the 1990s," uses "shared shorthand" to refer to his own writing style when he wrote for his Delhi friends, pitted against his writing for a global audience (2000). Resonating with Chowdhury's general downsizing strategy, the notion of shorthand is literally substantiated by his shortening of University college names ("Hindu" for Hindu College, "KMC" for Kirori Mal College), as well as his use of local Delhi slang and the absence of translation or explanation, the narrative thus remaining partly opaque to the foreign reader.

24   Accordingly, what makes Chowdhury's vernacular cosmopolitanism distinctive is the sense of familiarity with the city it conveys through the interweaving of local and global material, based on a first-hand knowledge of Delhi's vernacular geography, languages and cultures as well as on the reworking of Western literary and cinematic sources. His transcultural aesthetic of the urban everyday, primarily intended for an Indian multilingual readership, thus aptly chimes with Homi Bhabha's notion as it takes on a provincial point of view on the megacity and dwells in its northern fringes, focusing on inconspicuous spaces and characters. It conveys the urban common language while tinging Delhi with a self-reflexive hardboiled touch. Therefore, his view from under the bridge, in Prakash Jadhav's words, reconfigures our understanding of both Indian Anglophone writing and Indian globalizing megacities, offering a potent

alternative to the dominant register of the monumental novel and to the triumphalist and dystopian imaginations of Indian cities.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ABBOTT, Megan E. 2002. *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

BAGCHI, Amitabha. 2007. *Above Average.* Delhi: HarperCollins.

BHABHA, Homi. 2004. *The Location of Culture.* 1994. London: Routledge.

BHAGAT, Chetan. 2004. *Five Points Someone.* Delhi: Rupa.

BOO, Katherine. 2012. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum.* New York: Random House.

BOYLE, Danny. 2009. *Slumdog Millionaire.* Fox Searchlight Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, Pathé.

BRENNAN, Timothy. 1997. *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

CHAKRABORTY, Madhurima. 2017. "Introduction: Whose City?" In *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts: City Margins in South Asian Literature*, edited by Madhurima Chakraborty and Umme Al-Wazedi, 1–18. London: Routledge.

CHATTERJEE, Partha. 2002. "Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?" In *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, 171–92. New York: Columbia University Press.

CHAUDHURI, Amit. 2008. "'Huge Baggy Monster': Mimetic theories of the Indian Novel after Rushdie." In *Clearing a Space*, 113–21. London: Peter Lang.

CHOWDHURY, Siddharth. 2015a. *The Patna Manual of Style.* New Delhi: Aleph.

CHOWDHURY, Siddharth. 2015b, 9 May. Interview with Trisha Gupta. *Scroll.* http://scroll.in/article/726247/interview-is-fiction-writer-siddharth-chowdhury-creating-a-new-literary-form.

CHOWDHURY, Siddharth. 2015c, 7 November. "This is a Delhi book in many ways." Interview with Swati Daftuar. *The Hindu.* http://www.thehindu.com/books/literary-review/siddharth-chowdhury-on-the-patna-manual-of-style-shortlisted-for-the-hindu-prize-2015/article7854710.ece.

CHOWDHURY, Siddharth. 2016. *Ritwik and Hriday* (omnibus edition of *Diksha at St Martin's*, 2002; *Patna Roughcut*, 2005; *Day Scholar*, 2010). New Delhi: Aleph.

CUDDON, John. 2013. *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* 1977. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

DASGUPTA, Rana. 2014. *Capital: The Eruption of Delhi.* New York: Penguin.

DAVIS, Mike. 2006. *Planet of Slums.* London: Verso.

DUPONT, Véronique. 2011. "The Dream of Delhi as a Global City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies* 36, no. 3: 523–54.

DYSON, Peter. 2012. "Slum Tourism: Representing and Interpreting 'Reality' in Dharavi, Mumbai." *Tourism Geographies* 14, no. 2: 254–74.

FOX, Terry Curtis. 1984, September/October. "City Knights." *Film Comment* 20, no. 5: 30–49.

GHERTNER, D. Asher. 2016. *Rule by Aesthetic: World-Class City Making in Delhi.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GHOSH, Amitav. 2000, 21 May. "Writing Is Like Music." Interview with Banibrata Mahanta, Somdev Bani, and Namrata Rathore. *The Hindu.* http://www.thehindu.com/2000/05/21/stories/1321129n.htm.

GUPTA, Trisha. 2011. "Brilliant Tutorials." *Biblio* (March-April). http://kafila.online/2011/05/02/brilliant-tutorials-trisha-gupta-reviews-siddharth-chowdhurys-day-scholar/.

HASAN, Anjum. 2011. Praise for *Day Scholar.* Christmas List 2011. *Wasafiri* https://www.wasafiri.org/article/christmas-list-2011/.

KAUR, Ravinder, and Thomas Blom HANSEN. 2016. "Aesthetics of Arrival: Spectacle, Capital, Novelty in Post-reform India." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 23, no. 3: 265–75.

KHAIR, Tabish. 2006. "The Nukkad Novel." *Biblio* (January-February): 36.

KHAIR, Tabish. 2014. "The Bigness of Small Towns." In *Day's End Stories: Life after Sundown in Small Town India*, edited by Subuhi Jiwani, 18–36. Chennai: Tranquebar Press.

KHANNA, Stuti. 2009. "Postcolonial Politics of the Possible: City and Nation in the fiction of Salman Rushdie." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45, no. 4: 401–13. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449850903273598?journalCode=rjpw20.

KUMAR, Amitava. 2003, July-August. "Patna School of Cool." *Biblio*: 38.

KUMAR, Amitava. 2015. *A Matter of Rats: A Short Biography of Patna.* Delhi: Aleph.

KUMAR, Amitava. 2016, 3 January. "R.K. Narayan and more: The flavour of small towns in our novels." *The Hindustan Times.* http://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/your-voice-in-my-ear/story-1XQztUbdIe7dIT7fejIVsJ.html.

LAPIERRE, Dominique. 1985. *La Cité de la joie.* Paris: Laffont.

LOUISET, Odette. 2011. *L'oubli des villes de l'Inde.* Paris: Armand Colin.

MALREDDY, Pavan Kumar. 2011, December. "'Cosmopolitanism Within': The case of R.K Narayan's fictional Malgudi." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47, no. 5: 558–70.

MCCANN, Sean. 2000. *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

MITTAL, Parul A. 2008. *Heartbreaks & Dreams! The Girls @ IIT.* Delhi: Srishti.

MRINAL, Nilotpal. 2015. *Dark Horse: Ek Ankahi Dastan.* Delhi: Hind Yugm/Westland.

NANDY, Ashis. 2011. *An Ambiguous Journey to the City.* New-Delhi: Oxford University Press.

PORTER, Dennis. 2003. "The Private Eye." In *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Martin Priestman, 95–113. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ROBINSON, Jennifer. 2002. *Ordinary Cities, Between Modernity and Development.* London: Routledge.

SAWNEY, Hirsh. 2009. *Delhi Noir.* New York: Akashic.

SETHI, Aman. 2011. *A Free Man: A True Story of Life and Death in Delhi.* New York: Norton.

SHAHANI, Roshan G. 1995. "Polyphonous Voices in the City: Bombay's Indian-English Fiction." In *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*, edited by Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner, 99–112. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

STRYCHACZ, Thomas. 1989. "Dramatizations of Manhood in Hemingway." *American Literature* 61: 245-60.

NOTES

1. The 1991 liberalization reforms, opening up the Indian economy to private and foreign investments, profoundly altered the Indian urban landscape, both in material and in cultural terms. Under the influence of the "global city" model, large-scale spectacular urbanistic projects have been launched to turn Indian megacities into showcases of a new global prosperous India, often implying the invisibilization of already marginalized urban dwellers (see Chaterjee 2002, Dupont 2011, Ghertner 2016).

2. John Cuddon defines the epic as such: "a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes, incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history. Epics are often of national significance in the sense that they embody the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner" (1977, 239). I do not consider these texts as conventional epics but as narratives appropriating epic codes, on the level of form, theme, and scale.

3. The capital of the northern Indian state of Bihar.

4. *Nukkad* means "street corner" in Hindi.

5. This attempt at de-centering cosmopolitanism has to be located in the broader postcolonial critique of the term, which is said to be too often associated with a privileged position (Brennan 1997). Drawing on this critique, Pavan K. Malreddy reads R.K. Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi as an example of "vernacular cosmopolitanism," a place in which one can encounter foreignness at home, in which the local is "an active site of cultivating cosmopolitan ethics and experience" (2011, 567).

6. Bhabha gives the example of Muslims and Southern Indians attacked as non-citizens by the right-wing Hindu supremacist party Shiv Sena in Mumbai, but we could also think of Bihari migrants in Delhi, often marginalized and victims of discrimination and ethnic stereotypes.

7. If Chowdhury's urban world contrasts with that of other "Delhi novels" in English, it resonates with the atmosphere and setting of Hindi novels, such as *Dark Horse: Ek Ankahi Dastan* (2015), by Nilotpal Mrinal, which also focuses on Bihari students coming to Delhi to study and take the Indian civil services examinations.

8. An ethnic agricultural and pastoral community of India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

9. *Karo* is the imperative form of the verb *karna*, "to do," in Hindi.

10. "Reservation" refers to the Indian system of reserving seats in the various legislatures, to government jobs, and to enrolment in higher educational institutions to historically disadvantaged castes and tribes.

11. The direct reference to Ross Macdonald's detective (Chowdhury 2015a, 125) strengthens the connection between Chowdhury, the crime novel and the ordinary city as Mcdonald's writing distinctively slows down the pace of hardboiled fiction, his detective is even more detached than Hammett's Op and his clients are "precariously middle-class" (Fox 1984, 33).

12. About the historical context of emergence of hardboiled fiction, see McCann 2000.

13. Chowdhury pays tribute to Scorsese's films in his first book, humorously entitled *Diksha at St Martin's, diksha* being the Sanskrit word for "initiation," referring to a ceremony in which a guru initiates a student into his teaching, and St Martin referring to Scorsese. The novel recounts how the narrator recognises his Patna neighbourhood in Scorsese' New York as represented in *Mean Streets.*

14. *Hakikat* means "reality" in Hindi.

15. The comic episodes of mistaken intentions and identities are strongly redolent of the eponymous novel by P.G. Wodehouse (*Damsel in Distress,* 1919).

16. *Mofussil* means province in Hindi.

ABSTRACTS

At odds with the dystopic representation of globalizing Indian cities, Siddharth Chowdhury's fiction re-invents Delhi as an ordinary city. Based on Homi Bhabha's understanding of "vernacular cosmopolitanism," this article argues that Chowdhury's conversational prose, the small lens through which he looks at the globalizing capital of India, and his comic appropriation of hardboiled fiction and coming-of-age novel codes, construct a transcultural aesthetic of the urban everyday and a singular counterpoint both to the monstrous as well as the triumphalist imagination of the Indian city.

INDEX

Keywords: Chowdhury (Siddharth), Indian Writing in English, vernacular cosmopolitanism, global cities, the everyday

AUTHOR

MARIANNE HILLION

Sorbonne Université / University of Warwick
Marianne Hillion is a PhD candidate at Sorbonne University and the University of Warwick. Her doctoral research examines the literary geographies of the globalizing city in contemporary Indian Writing in English, drawing on fictional and nonfictional works by Rana Dasgupta, Arundhati Roy, Raj Kamal Jha, and Amit Chaudhuri, among others. She has published an article on Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* in *DESI* (*Diasporas : Études des Singularités Indiennes)* and has contributed to the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique des Littératures de l'Inde.*