Homecoming, Culture and Nostalgia: The City in Kushanava Choudhury's *The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta*

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Abstract

Khushanava Choudhury's first novel *The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta* (2017) is a lofty 235-page literary endeavour that delves into an author's genetic origins and feeling of belonging with the 'city of joy'. It is Choudhury's debutant narrative, which raises questions about both the substance and the structure of his mixed-genre non-fiction. The paper seeks to scrutinize the dynamic interrelationship between the urban space of Calcutta (Kolkata) with reference to the themes of homecoming, culture, and nostalgia in Choudhury's *The Epic City.* The urban space engendered by migration affects the author psychologically - through interweaving narratives to give us a raw portrayal of the city. The author is trying to attain the story of his vision for the city - how it pervades, impacts, and dramatically manipulates his daily life and also his wish to stay forever in his own city through the discussion of homecoming, culture and nostalgia.

Keywords: Communities; Culture; Ethnic; Homecoming; Nostalgia.

Kushanava Choudhury (1978-   ) is a young American author of Indian descent. He was born in New Jersey, spent his childhood in Calcutta and then moved with his Indian Scientist parents to the United States when he was twelve. The author and his family moved back twice each to the US and twice to Calcutta. Later on, after completing his graduation from Princeton University, he took up journalism for two years at *The Statesman* in Calcutta. He went on to obtain a Doctorate degree in Political Theory from Yale University. As an author, his writings have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Caravan*, and *The Statesman*. The journalism, the teaching, the research and the writing are all chunks of his identity and his perspective on the universe. Wit-

ty, polished, honest and insightful, *The Epic City: The World on the Streets of Calcutta* (*TEC…*) is Choudhury's first book and was shortlisted for the 2018 *Ondaatje Prize* and also for the *Stanford Dolman Travel Book of the Year*.

TEC… is dedicated to his friend Sumitro Basak, an artist. It is split into four sections, each of which is preceded by a brief prologue. A review of *The Epic City* reads thus: "the work, written in the first person, is a befuddling reflection on the link that connects the motif of migration with the return to home, sense of belonging, nostalgia and culture which he seeks to clarify through a blend of historicity, ethnography as well as witness and personal recollections" (Ray 50).

It thus becomes evident that *TEC…* is the author's attempt – using humour and wonder – to understand the city and his association with it. At the time working for *The Statesman*, Choudhury discovered the alleys of Calcutta which were unaffected by the time. His wandering narration attempts to trace homecoming, culture and nostalgia, all of which overwhelm the readers with the profundity of their impact on the writer's psyche. The narrative style is particularly complex due to the gaps and ambiguities in the method of storytelling, as well as the overflowing elements that are not easy to integrate properly within the fundamental concerns of the narrative.

Other writers and critics too have focused on the investigation and interpretation of the dialectic relationship between urban space, people and themes of the city. Shi and Zhu state in their article entitled 'Urban Space and Representation in Literary Study' (2018) that the writing presents the "urban imaginative reality» of the city. (223) This is reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre who opined in *The Production of Space* (1974) about urban spatial theory stating that "urban phenomenon and urban space are … a terrain on which various strategies clash" (2). He interprets urban space as "the place where people walk around, find themselves standing before and inside piles of objects, experience the intertwining threads of their activities until they become unrecognizable, entangled situations" (2). Choudhury uses the same approach of observation in his work that aims to capture the sense of urban spaces associating it with the themes of homecoming, culture and nostalgia. However, such an observation of the city brings forth the question of the role of the author in an urban space and how his life is affected by it.

'Homecoming' is about a person's return to his or her childhood home, with which he or she has a strong connection. Here, the term is used to suggest the author's recollection of his childhood home and the attendant feelings of nostalgia. The path from self-loss to self-recovery might

be referred to as a journey, an expedition from which one returns home. Choudhury follows the same path for his journey to his city, Calcutta. S.S. Raykar in her thesis '*Homecoming* through Postcolonial Literature…' (199 3) elaborates on how 'home' and 'homecoming' "is, for one thing, achieving a state of mind, a whole new set of perceptions of the external reality around one"(44). Choudhury is so attached and in love with his city that he writes, "When my foot touches down Maniktala More … when I see the familiar clock tower of Maniktala Market and the naked bulbs of the vegetable sellers squatting on the footpath outside, I know I am home" (TEC 20-21). Thus, Choudhury›s work is a homage to a city that transforms ruthlessly in front of his eyes and one that does not spare its citizens the pain of returning to an unrecognizably different past. Homecoming for him is not in the traditional sense of what the term denotes, because his city has already corroded and is irreparably damaged. However, he still yearns to go back home, but with misdirected nostalgia and distorted memories.

The paper further examines the literary metamorphosis of Calcutta from the colonial to the postcolonial period via the critical lens of nostalgia, as well as its shifting paradigms through time and space. The role of nostalgia as a tool of imperial rule, as well as its role in mediating the spatial link between the city and the self in literature, are addressed by studying the city. Theoretically, nostalgia serves as the foundation here.

Nostalgia's distinguishing components of location and time/ longing, nostos and algos, play a major part. In order to arrive at a consistent interpretation of nostalgia, home, and belonging, as used in the analysis of the selected work, the link between nostalgia, and home/ place and time has been addressed. Anuparna Mukherjee in her thesis entitled 'The Haunted City: Calcutta and the Legacy of Nostalgia' defines nostalgia as "one of the most persistent windows through which we see our pasts, and yet it is critiqued in literary and cultural discourses for sentimentalism" (2018). In *TEC.*., we see how the affective politics of nostalgic memories are in line with the growth of a colonial city and the enthralling mix of longing, yearning, and impacts associated with Calcutta - a metropolis straddling the traces of its colonial modernity as "Calcutta" - and a more recent postcolonial identity as "Kolkata," interrogating the problem of nostalgic yearning and its discursive liminality.

Choudhury presents the real image of the city. P. Raturi in her review of *TEC*… states: "That's nostalgia for those who have been in the city, not merely as tourists, but have lived there and felt frustrated by it" (Rev. *DNA* 2017). Nostalgia at its best goes beyond passive grieving for a lost utopia; it elicits a sense of what it is like to be in the company of some-

thing one has never had. Tracing the urban history of Calcutta through nostalgia, Choudhury comments on the deindustrialisation that resulted in 45,000 acres of abandoned industrial estate in India's fourth largest manufacturing hub— "a rust belt on the Ganga" (*TEC* 144), which remains "strewn with skeletons of its machine-age past" (ibid 145). He adds that "The stench of the canal brought back childhood memories of dead pigs floating in its black waters" (ibid 130). As Choudhury wanders around the city, solitary or with companions, especially the late artist, Sumitro Basak, he briefly flashes events from a past that was not part of his life - the sordid dark side of the historical records of Calcutta - and laments the collective amnesia about the great 20th-century tragedies that have disfigured the city: famines (1943 and others) thanks to the British and the Hindu-Muslim riots that transformed the city's geography.

It also evokes a particular 'sense of place' and the connection with the past is not a simple phenomenon of re-inventing and rejuvenating former history, but a larger domain of the politics of representation is intertwined with these notions. One of the school incidents has been shared by Choudhury in which he shares his nostalgia in the space of Calcutta, "mothers lined up along the schoolyards during lunchtime with hot fish curry and rice tiffins to spoon-feed their progeny. Since my mother worked as a scientist for much of my childhood, my tiffins were cold butter sandwiches carried from home, and I was spared this maternal attention" (*TEC* 72). This shows the writer's sentimentality as well as his missing of the childhood.

One of the most powerful factors in nostalgia has always been food. The is seen when Choudhury too shares about his love for 'kochuris', "Kochuris were the saving grace of my insomnia spells when I worked at *The Statesman*. At 6:30 a.m … Sir would bring in the paper and … send me to fetch kochuris" (29). He was taken to a young age recollection, which started the process that led to the memories of past things. In Choudhury's words, "The shrimp cutlets at Allen tasted like my childhood, only better. They were so delicious I could simply eat the batter alone. No filler, no skimping, no corners cut. It was a thing of beauty" (*TEC* 110). Besides homecoming and nostalgia, the other important theme in Choudhury's work is the city's Culture. The author has made connections between his work in culture, cultural identity and the cultural aspects of urban planning, suggesting that these connections are crucial for understanding how people interact with their settings and the many places they occupy.

Culture, it is frequently said, generates borders, not physically but geographically, demographically, regionally, and dialectically, and this is where the concept of 'we' and 'they' comes from. Cultural limits give rise to the controlled-controller relationship, which leads to the erosion of

cultural aesthetics and the violation of cultural policy, and eventually to power politics. Each city has a unique cultural past, and one of the goals of cultural sustainability is to revitalise and revivify everyday reality in order to preserve the worth of its cultural heritage.

Culture differs from one location to the next and from one nation to the other and it was the same in the case of Choudhury. Its growth is dependent on a historical process that takes place on a local, regional, or national scale. For example, we vary from the West in our greetings, clothes, eating habits, social and religious norms and activities. Choudhury brings his knowledge and emotions of pain with him when he travels from one country or culture to another. His cultural identity is likely to shift as he settles into the different society›s culture, which fosters a sense of belonging; he also tries to settle down through integration or biculturalism. This identity is a mishmash of both cultural gap and recognition with the cultural tradition.

Cities are the destination of ethnic diaspora immigration from both national and foreign sources, hence modern urban civilizations are heterogeneous in character. Every ethnic group establishes a cultural differentiation from another, which might distinguish them apart from other ethnic groups. In Choudhury's words, "Calcutta was a collection of the whims of the communities who migrated there and became rich – Bengali and British, as well as Armenians, Jewish, Marwari, Bohra Muslim, Haka Chinese, Punjabi, Gujarati, Portuguese, Greek and Dutch. In Phoolbagan, within walking distance from my house, there were graveyards of Jews and Greeks, Chinese and Bohras" (*TEC* 41). Community places like the "Sephardic synagogues, Armenian churches, and temples to the Jain saint Mahavir" (ibid) can be found in the diversely cultured Kolkata city. In this way, the multicultural community in an urban space forms a landscape mosaic with a lot of diversity.

In addition, the Marwari community established itself in Calcutta. Marwaris swarmed in the urban space of Burrabazar in ever-increasing numbers. Choudhury talks about the Marwaris' contribution in the past, "In the late nineteenth century, traders who came from the parched Marwar region of Rajasthan and got rich in Calcutta had built the Pareshnath … temples … four in all. The Marwaris, as they came to be called, became a dominant, and much maligned, business community in Calcutta" (*TEC* 168). Calcutta›s Jewish community formerly had a thriving population that enhanced the city socially, culturally, and commercially. The contribution of the Jews has also been presented in 'A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry' (2020) by S. Lodh who states that "The early Jewish settlers of Calcutta were mainly businessmen and they traded in

almost anything and everything" (1462).

In Calcutta or Kolkata, one can see the 'adda' culture in the urban space of the city which represents the Bengali society. When the British dominated India in the nineteenth century, adda became immensely popular in Bengal, where the 'zamindar' or landowners were accompanied by his moshabes or sycophants, spending time in idle talk. The Bangali adda today is succumbing to the relentless assault of modernity, social networking, and annual performance reviews at work. The number of addas has decreased substantially, owing to the culture's slow decline into a nostalgic past. The author longs not only for defunct locales and lost acquaintances but also for the adda sessions that he associated with those places and individuals during numerous important inward-looking times of nostalgia and/ or sorrow.

Choudhury is much affected by the urban space of the city and its culture that "Sweet Sunday Adda!" (156) becomes so vital to his voyage that he glorifies a literary hero - Syed Mujtaba Ali - the famous Bengali novelist who spoke multiple languages and whose prose came mainly out of the adda. Ali supposedly claimed that the pieces accumulated at addas taught him all he knew. "To read Mujtaba Ali is to always feel as if he is talking to you from across the table," Choudhury writes. "Whether he is drawing us into the world of Kabul's markets, Berlin's streets, or Cairo's cafes, he can make a reader feel as at home as we are at the local teashop adda" (157). Alternatively, *TEC* may be an elegantly disconnected collection of addas, yet with enough connecting cords to keep everything together. A city's culture and urban space are defined by how its native populations, dependent people, and tourists react to and interact with its people and society. As a result, culture and space are linked to a city's framework in celebrating city life via public events that bring multiple meanings of existence to life.

The next point for cultural discussion can be 'Durga pujo', a public event, in the urban space of Kolkata. Every year, the Durga Puja celebration creates thousands of Puja pandals, redefining the city's look. Choudhury adds, "At those pujos, I feel that Calcutta is mocking us – for leaving, for the hubris to think that something like a city and culture can be packaged and plopped" (116). These modifications are just transitory, lasting four days, despite a two-month involvement with the city space. Surprisingly, this physical pattern repeats itself year after year, even though the presentation undergoes change. This phenomenon prompts a broader investigation of how a city creates location and space to accommodate a public event, as well as its connections to culture and the urban community. This transitory urban change is a one-of-a-kind opportunity to exhibit a

specific public event linked to the city›s culture. To create and promote large-scale public events beyond religion, gender, class, demography, and political objectives, it is essential to comprehend the nature of the public ceremonies, their relationship to urban culture, and the visceral energy that they elicit. Kolkata's intangible legacy is a singular cultural phenomenon that manifests itself geographically, aesthetically, and architecturally via the creation of temporary public spaces that appropriate and modify the existing public-private sphere.

Choudhury also presents the city's pathetic condition in the physical form of Kali, "Kali became emblematic of the dark forces they felt seething here. Shocked and fascinated by Kali, whose long red tongue, black body and garland of skulls, peer out from every sweet-shop calendar and taxi dashboard, they saw in her the embodiment of the soul-crushing force of the city" (164). These spiritual rituals are represented in a specific spatial arrangement that includes appropriate art, architecture, and ambience. The more concrete problems, such as urban space and place, have been focused on in order to promote Durga Puja rituals and practices and create a distinct sense of a hallowed place—its cultural origins with its sacred as well as universal appeal to city residents.

Choudhury claims to be a non-believer and hence avoids spirituality in his travels, also mocking foreign visitors who flock to Bengal to visit the "dark goddess" (Kali). S. Bhattacharya conveys in his article that "Kolkata's Durga Puja is social, cultural and never adequately religious" and that "It is now a spectacle of global attention, one which is intrinsically linked to Bengali Hindus' cultural identity" (Rev. *The Wire* 2021). During Durga Puja, the city never sleeps, and many Muslims and Christians participate in the celebrations. Choudhury briefly abandons his cynicism and depression for optimism and hope since here is Calcutta at its most definitive when he asserts, "Another city rises during Durga Pujo, an epic city full of possibilities and visions, heroically redrawn" (*TEC* 117). Community groups have recently reinterpreted Durga Puja's potential as a means of enhancing imageability at the city-level, and it has turned into an integral component of Kolkata's culture. When these puja places (holy spaces) are plotted over the city structure and urban space and superimposed with diverse para (local neighbourhoods), the spatial pattern across the city becomes quite apparent.

In conclusion, it may do well to remember that homecoming stories are almost usually elegiac, and Choudhury's narrative is no exception. Choudhury, rather than being happy to dwell on the city's intellectual past, is far more receptive to being impacted by the urban space of Kolkata and the city's human experience. The allure of such metropolitan recollections is

long-lasting, and they usually prepare Choudhury to live a lifetime without losing his identity. He desires nothing except homeland, peace and contentment. From coping with the belated stirrings of ambition to combating the ever-present mood of feeling forlorn, his thoughts and desires are nostalgia personified – a euphemism, often for the world within him to negotiate and move on and the willingness never to forget it. Choudhury is like a tree with roots firmly planted in Kolkata and branches reaching out to the rest of the world. The author›s sight sweeps the Calcutta streets. The city is genuine, and its stagnant slow dance speaks for itself. Calcutta forces Choudhury to repeat its numerous discourses in a tale that moves at a fast speed. *TEC* is thus a literary barometer that measures the current status and changes in Calcutta's poetical environment.

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