



## Reimagining the identity of ‘Bombay’ as a city: Interpreting Amrita Mahale’s *Milk Teeth*

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Abstract:

John Berger said, “Every city has a sex and age which has nothing to do with demography.” The association of literature and cities as urban spaces go way back. Since literature is the mirror of society, often in novels, we find the city as a character tracing its “space out of an urban geometry.” The changing temperament of how a city moulds itself with time is probably most accurately depicted in literature. On looking back, there are a few examples that come to mind - Charles Dickens, who painted a memorable image of London in the Victorian era through most of his novels. Then, there’s James Joyce’s Dublin and Henry James’ Venice and London, closer to home are Sunil Gangopadhyay’s *Pratidwandi* 1974 (The Adversary) and Sankar’s *Jana Aranya* 1973 (The Middle Man). All of them have delineated quite insightfully the feeling, the desire, and the liberty of a city.

In this paper, I aim to analyse how Amrita Mahale renders the transformation of Bombay to Mumbai in her novel *Milk Teeth* 2018, and how Bombay becomes one of the most important characters in her novel. I will also focus on how the city of Bombay, which nurtures dreams and yet, fosters inequities, helps Ira, the protagonist, deal with her rapidly changing life. More importantly, I wish to shed light on how Mahale has seen Bombay through a microscopic lens— making it more of a reflection of home in the truest sense, an arena which destabilises the private and public dichotomy and redefines the interpretation of space. D.N Benjamin points out, that home is “at once both concrete and abstract”; a place where one feels comfort for being in a known environment. This is exactly how Bombay shapes itself in the novel, which I aim to discuss in my paper. My paper will also trace the changing architecture and landscape of Bombay and the history associated with it. Focussing on the theories of Gaston Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*, Raymond Williams’ *The Culture of Cities* and other theories of cultural geography and cityscape, I seek to examine the novel.

**Keywords:** Urban space; cityscape; the identity of a city; urban transformation; architecture



## Introduction

Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, has been one of the earliest metropolitan cities in India. It is known as the city where dreams are manufactured, the city of the stars, but Mumbai is much more than that. Bombay is more than the sky-high buildings, the beautiful Marine Drive or the glittery B-town. Amrita Mahale's novel *Milk Teeth* focuses on the "other" Mumbai. She romanticises the gloomy sky, the Victorian Gothic Architecture and the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC). Mahale's Bombay is filled with the smell of roadside eateries, filter coffee and the delicious meat of Iranian restaurants. She also narrates the trauma of the post Babri Masjid Bombay, where violence runs high. Bombay and Mumbai refer to the same city but in *Milk Teeth*, Bombay is the city where there are old houses and its residents' lifestyle is not so opulent; Mumbai on the other hand is the city which has international fast-food chains, where people live in the nostalgia of the past while sitting in the balcony of their sky-high apartments.

The novel is set in the late 90s, 1990 to be exact. It is a key moment for the city as Bombay is slowly diffusing into Mumbai. Mahale juxtaposes the city's former architectural glory with the notion of a homogenised modern city. The novel follows Ira Kamat, a beat reporter in her mid-20s; her path is often crossed by Kartik and Kaiz, with whom she develops romantic affinities. We often find the city rests deep within the crevices of a character's mental life, something that happens over and again. However, in all this Bombay continues to be highlighted. Its complex historical palimpsest is razed giving way to a "monocultural, neoliberal Mumbai" [1]

My article attempts to find the flavours of Bombay that are generally often ignored. Bombay was a throbbing city back during the British period. It continues to be the economic hub even in the present times. My highlighted points will include the transformation of Bombay to Mumbai, and how the city metaphorically plays a role in the life of Ira. It will also include an account of Bombay's gastronomical history, the edifice of the city as well as the violence and the tragedy that the city had to undergo.

**"Salty hopefulness of gateway"** [2]



Bombay came into being in the nineteenth century. Initially it was a trading post of the East India Company which was transformed into a cosmopolitan hub of the British Empire. This resulted in the rapid economic growth of the city. Consequently, there occurred a development in terms of infrastructure of the city which was contemporaneous with that of London, Paris and Vienna. The island city continued to be expanded, an act which continued unhindered till the middle of the twentieth century. Post-independence, Bombay continued to be a global centre and was given the tag of being the commercial capital of India.

Vandana Baweja in her paper “Architecture and Urbanism in *Slumdog Millionaire*: From Bombay to Mumbai” has an interesting insight regarding the naming of the city. She says, “When the Portuguese first established it as a trading post in the sixteenth century, they called it *Ailha da boa vida* [the island of good life].” The city then came to be known by various names all of which point out to its diverse linguistic and cultural heritage. Bombay was its English name and Mumbai was its Konkani one.

Henry James in his novel *The Portrait Of A Lady*, while depicting Venice said, “The story of Venice's 'own life' seems to be a story of how the city 'owns' life- owns it and is reluctant to give it away to be spun down to lame phrases.”<sup>[3]</sup> Mahale similarly describes Bombay as “a light sleeper at best”<sup>[4]</sup>. Bombay wakes up to the sound of milk trucks on the street. At the same time, a local train starts running carrying in it “fisherwoman, flower sellers and sleepy revellers”<sup>[5]</sup>. Mumbai was built in layers, the farthest suburbs getting ready first. Mahale develops in this picture of a perfect city, where, by 10 a.m., the sound of honking cars, television and the shouting of pedestrians, all mix into one. It’s a distractingly ‘real’ place of loud evocative sounds.

Just like any other city, with a nonchalant Municipal Corporation, Bombay too smells of sewers; there are several open drains of “a green-grey sludge with a dull vitreous sheen.”<sup>[6]</sup> The muck might also be considered a metaphor of the city’s political tension which I will discuss later.

Mahale clearly distinguishes the not-so-subtle differences between South Bombay (SoBo) and the suburbs. The SoBo is much more sophisticated and can afford to live in the nostalgia of the bygone days, while the people from the suburbs like Ira, the novel’s protagonist, are leading a life of hustle. The reverie of the middle-class people is often broken by “shrill,



adolescent horns of rickshaws” [7] In fact, even the sea doesn’t smell alike in all places. Somewhere it’s hopeful, somewhere it stinks and somewhere else it rots.

The tempo, the rhythm of the city sometimes erupt violently – in the shape of a squabble gone wrong over shared space in local trains, clearly signifying the class struggle that sits heavily over the city.

**“Bombay of the past, of lore, and legend...” [8]**

Unlike other cities like Calcutta and Delhi, the architecture of Bombay is probably the most underappreciated of all, although it is quite iconic in its own right! As said before, the time when the British focused on the expansion of the city was the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and it was around this time that they started building the epochal structures of the city. All important buildings in Bombay were a result of the Victorian colonial building drive. The entire spate of buildings developed around *Maidan*, a large open ground now known as Oval *Maidan*. On its west lay the Arabian Sea. On the East of the *Maidan* lined up a series of buildings built in the Gothic Revival Style.

The Marine Drive, which is now synonymous with Mumbai, was constructed in the early twenties. Hence, the neo-Gothic structures around it were soon replaced by new buildings. “Marine Drive comprised a retaining wall that marked a sharp land-sea boundary, a promenade next to the retaining wall, and a vehicular boulevard east of the promenade. But Marine Drive also became identifiable on account of the Miami Beach-style Art Deco buildings that were built along its eastern edge.” [9] Though the new buildings became synonymous with identifying Mumbai as the economic capital, these, however, created a disruption in the view of the Arabian Sea from the *Maidan* – clearly pointing to the rapid development the city was undergoing.

In the novel, the architecture of Bombay is shown through the eyes of Kaiz, with whom Ira develops an intense romantic relationship that later scours her marriage and life in general. Kaiz worshipped the city, its glorious past. He researched about its mythology and called the city home: “a clichéd abstraction of tourist views; but also, at least potentially, a space where one might be welcomed as though into the intimate embrace of a love affair.” [10]

Mahale states the reason, “... you needed some a city to be able to worship it the way he did.” [11] To him, the modern architecture was without imagination and was soulless. “...the



Nariman Point were disjointed high-rises...”<sup>[12]</sup> As one reads the novel, one agrees that the city can be identified through its architecture. Distracting cacophony, cars, sky high buildings are common to all metropolitan cities. But one tends to relate a city with its architecture – the Victoria Memorial with Kolkata, the Taj Mahal with Agra. Ira, a beat reporter, on the contrary, has never had a chance to appreciate the nuances of Bombay. Once she starts taking notice, even the corporation hall, which she has visited a countless number of times before, begins to fascinate her. “Had the carved wooden ceiling always been this regal, she wondered. The honey glows on the mint walls- surely the bulbs had been changed that day.”<sup>[13]</sup> We are all Ira(s) in our own city, hustling through the town but never once taking in the beauty of our surroundings, unless compelled to.

#### **“Democratic eatery”<sup>[14]</sup>**

Food, too, constitutes a major part of Bombay. Not just the taste, it points to the history this city holds, the different cultures of people who have immigrated into the city and set up their own food cultures. Consumption of food is a very intimate and individual act. To transform it into a cultural marker or a cuisine, the food needs to be intellectualised and associated with specific religions, emotions and rituals.

Parsi and Irani food have made space within the cultural landscape of Mumbai. Trying out authentic Parsi cuisine is often considered to be part of the Bombay experience. Modern Iranis and Parsis are descendants of the Parsian Zoroastrians who migrated to India in different eras. The Parsis had established their cultural dominance from the very beginning. Since most of the Parsis and Iranians went into businesses of various sorts, they all settled in Bombay. In fact, the iconic Taj Hotel bears the imprint of its Parsi founder.

Parsis have never had any strict culinary customs and most of their delicacies include meat which made it all the more appealing to the other communities. By the end of the 19th century, Parsi cuisine became quite popular in Bombay. The Parsi food thus became a palimpsest of distinct cultures – Persian, Gujarati and European.

These cafes and restaurants thus became “Bombay’s first cosmopolitan spaces.”<sup>[15]</sup> It made no distinction and allowed people from all sectors of society. Poets were there and so were the prostitutes and so were the daily wagers. The presence of so many people proved two things. Firstly, how equitable were the Parsis as a race, and secondly, how welcoming the city



was. It truly is, as Mahale reiterates “beautiful chaos”.<sup>[16]</sup> being a ‘peaceful’ race, their food adjusted to the needs of the times. In terms of their “love of good food” Parsis and Iranis therefore rank quite high in the societal ladder.

The Irani cafes were, therefore, a space of leisure and loitering, a verb rarely heard in a city as fast as Bombay. The Udipi restaurants that sprang later as a counterpoint to these places provided quick services and cheap and casual settings. However, an owner of an Iranian restaurant says, “These fast food places – McDonalds and those Udipi chains. Lots of *janta* (masses) go to them, but when they want quality food they come to us. They know we have the best food. We may be slow, but you can’t beat the taste.”<sup>[17]</sup>

There are also Lebanese restaurants in and around the city. However, when they first appeared in Bombay they were subjected to discrimination on the basis of their appearances. They were considered to be abductors. People from well-to-do families were forbidden to enter those streets. Few decades later the Lebanese restaurants became the hidden gems of the city with their “window full of skewers on which roast chicken glistened...”<sup>[18]</sup>

Thus, it can be argued that, culinary habits, no matter of which culture, are always preserved. The middle class might be wary of the culture it represents, but never of its food. They would always be curious to try out new places, what can be referred to as “gastro-adventure”.<sup>[19]</sup> Globalisation has made this adventure far more alluring because globalisation has led to the advent of a hybrid food culture. Hence, while global and local terms become flexible, the term “authentic” loses its meaning.

**“...it came down to how you prayed...”** <sup>[20]</sup>

It is true that Bombay, and as a fact, the whole of India is a potboiler of various cultures, races, and religions. When so many people of various ethnicities live together there is bound to be agitation. So, once in a while anger and restlessness came out like lava; a lava so poisonous that it compelled everyone to rethink their identity.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992, a group of right-wing extremists demolished the Babri Masjid, in Ayodhya, which was built by Babur in 1527. It was done with the aim of establishing a *Ram-Mandir*, because apparently that particular spot was rumoured to be the birthplace of Ram. The consequence of this rattled the whole of India. Riots broke out everywhere. Thousands of innocents were victimised.



In the novel, we find, that during this period, Ira was dating Kaiz, who belonged to the Muslim community. They had very innocently taken a taxi when the Azaan started playing. The taxi driver began to insult the Muslims by comparing them to cockroaches and how they were going to survive everything. When he heard the name Kaiz, he sneered and went away. This incident alone proved how infectious the seed of hatred was that had been planted in the country. A particular religion was taken down and compared to a mere insect. And straight-out war was declared against them. This lens of religion became so opaque that it obstructed the way normal citizens lived in a city as huge as Bombay.

The tribulations did not end there. Soon after this, a series of bomb blasts happened in Bombay. Within a span of an hour, 13 bomb blasts happened in key locations of Bombay. Several more people were killed; the streets were once again drenched in blood, and so began the counter-blame. “Those *haraamis*, those *landayas*, this was their revenge for Babri.”<sup>[21]</sup>

After this, the attack stopped, because Bombay was then tired and “for most practical purposes”.<sup>[22]</sup> The blame was very efficiently passed on to terrorists and smugglers who wanted to cripple India. The attacks stopped in plain sight, truly. But hushed voices of fear, doubt, and anticipation began to grow. Flashing of religious symbols became more rampant. Politics entered the dining room of the middle class because an incident so heinous was bound to make it happen. The overall outcome of this savagery clearly pointed to how weak the administrative system of the country was.

### “Mumbai not Bombay”<sup>[22]</sup>

As aforementioned, this novel is written at a crucial juncture in the city. When Bombay was slowly transforming into Mumbai. In fact, the name of the novel, *Milk Teeth* is a simile where the new-born Mumbai has been compared to the milk teeth of a baby. Raymond Williams in his book, “The Country and the City” says about London “As London grew, dramatically, in the eighteenth century, it was being intensely observed, as a new kind of landscape, a new kind of society. Yet it was first difficult to separate what was new from the traditional images of the city.”<sup>[23]</sup>

On the same note, Mahale has described in the novel, that changes were visible all around the city. In fact, the novel begins with the conflict that *Asha Nivas* where Ira and others have lived for about three decades or more, was being proposed to be transformed into a high-end



complex. The building in the next block previously known as *Sundar Sadan*, was now called Belle View. Not only the people of the city but people from the suburbs owned cars as well.

All the features of a metropolis were getting incorporated into the city by the late 90s. “The city swarms intensely. The public haunt, /Full of each theme and warm with mixed discourse.”<sup>[24]</sup> The new complexes, that started emerging no longer had common Indian names, they were called Santorini, Belle View, and Eiffel Enclave; for that exotic foreign feel. However, the roots were strongly in place. Most of the buildings had service elevators so that the residents did not have to see the persons who ran their houses. “You could put all the French or Italian you wanted, but you couldn’t take Mumbai out of the buildings.”<sup>[25]</sup>

During another instance, Kartik and Ira were discussing how in their childhood they had a middle-class upbringing. It was to such an extent that they used to look at the Taj Hotel like some distant star, but they never had the thought that all it took was a push in the door. Their dreams were of sea facing apartments. Now that they have grown up, they have confidence that those dreams are quite within reach now. On a symbolic level, this also refers to the people of Bombay, with the strengthening of the economy, their dreams and aspirations were much closer to Earth. Even the middle-class people were flashing signs of wealth. History has witnessed, in various eras, as a city has started to adapt to industrialisation and globalisation, it has begun to expand, and with that came the fight over controlling that expansion. This is seen when the residents of *Asha Nivas* were threatened by a promoter or when Ira’s father concluded that his daughter’s character had been maligned with the evil scheme of removing them from getting flats.

The name Mumbai, however, felt different, on the tongue and many like Kartik still called the city by its old name. Kartik, too, like the city is juggling with his identity. He wants to break free into the vast world but cannot because of his inhibitions. Thus “Kartik weds Irawati”<sup>[26]</sup> makes him equally uncomfortable with pronouncing Mumbai instead of Bombay.

“The commerce brought into the public walk/ The busy merchant; the big warehouse built... This celebration combines a bourgeois sense of achieved production and trade with an Augustan sense of civilised order.”<sup>[27]</sup> This serves to explain the appearance of fast-food chains which serve burgers and other ready-to-eat food. Globalisation with time, made an imprint into the life of the people of Mumbai. Mumbai ultimately adapted and adjusted to the needs of time to make way for a better future.





## Conclusion

“The bloom of novelty has rubbed off’ is to see a different city appear in its place: “You desire to embrace it, to caress it, to possess it; and finally, a soft sense of possession grows up and your visit becomes a perpetual love affair.”<sup>[28]</sup> In this novel, we find the most realistic reflection of the island city and its suburbs. The glamour and the glitz have been put aside and the more realistic side of it has been shown. The city is not perfect, and neither are its residents, yet both have developed an unbreakable bond.

The city has healed Ira after her series of heartbreaks. She wishes she had been more than just a beat reporter, but that is where she finds herself the most. Exploring nooks and corners of the city, exposing scams and unruliness – she likes the work so much that she doesn’t want to leave her Mumbai and join Kaiz in San Francisco. She has made her home in Mumbai so much that it is like a living breathing concept, unlike Kaiz for whom the city is an abstraction - “A magical place with chaos in its code,”<sup>[29]</sup>

At the very end of the novel, we see Ira’s life has completely changed. She does not have the same dreams, she had some years back, but one thing is constant – her love for the city. When Kartik asks Ira to meet, the reason for which is not revealed, it can be assumed that Kartik wants to confess everything to Ira. They decide to meet at the walls near The Gateway, at sunset. The place and the time signifying, that probably, the wall between them is crumbling, and it’s the start of something good. As the large wave splashes water into Ira’s face, as readers we realise that this new beginning probably will not see Ira and Kartik together, but at least they each will obtain their much-deserved happiness.

Mahale's novel thus provides a nuanced and complex portrayal of Bombay's cultural identity, challenging the traditional narratives that have defined the city and its people.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Baweja, “Architecture and Urbanism in “Slumdog Millionaire”: From Bombay to Mumbai”, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2015), p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth* (Manipal: Westland Publications Private Limited, 2018), p. 274

<sup>3</sup> Walker, “Intimate Cities: “The Portrait of a Lady” and the Poetics of Metropolitan Space”, *Studies in the Novel* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2013), p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 84

<sup>5</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 84



- <sup>6</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 64  
<sup>7</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 43  
<sup>8</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 122  
<sup>9</sup> Baweja, "Architecture and Urbanism," p. 11  
<sup>10</sup> Walker, "Intimate Cities," p. 167  
<sup>11</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 12  
<sup>12</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 173  
<sup>13</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 119  
<sup>14</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, 123  
<sup>15</sup> Ibid 123  
<sup>16</sup> Ibid 123  
<sup>17</sup> Ibid 123  
<sup>18</sup> Raghavan, Asia, Singh, "Parsi Food, Identity, and Globalisation in 21st Century Mumbai", *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 31 (August 2015), p. 71  
<sup>19</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 127  
<sup>20</sup> Raghavan, Asia, Singh, "Parsi Food," p. 69  
<sup>21</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 144  
<sup>22</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 145  
<sup>23</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 185  
<sup>24</sup> Williams, *The Country and The City*, (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1973), p. 142  
<sup>25</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 31  
<sup>26</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 295  
<sup>27</sup> Williams, *The Country and The City*, (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1973), p. 143  
<sup>28</sup> Walker, "Intimate Cities," p. 166  
<sup>29</sup> Mahale, *Milk Teeth*, p. 308

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