

Construction of City Space and Class Identity in Shama Futehally's Novel *Tara Lane*

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Abstract

Post LPG (liberalization, privatization, and globalization) phase the divide between poor and rich has increasingly widened specifically in the Indian cities. Mumbai is no different. In fact, indiscriminate industrialisation and urbanisation have sharpened the distinction. Indeed, some of the most expensive and luxurious housing societies coexist side by side with some of the most deprived and overcrowded slums in Mumbai. Futehally's novel *Tara Lane* shows this ambivalence of the Mumbai city very realistically. This paper makes an attempt to study the reconstruction of the contemporary city space and broad class division in the Mumbai city as portrayed in Futehally's novel.

Keywords: City Space, Class conflict, Shama Futehally, Urbanization

“The city had always been a site of glaring inequality, but the immense wealth that began to be generated as a consequence of the neo-liberalization policies that had been so readily embraced by the elites sharpened the divide between the haves and have-nots even further. Today's Mumbai is simultaneously the home, as the cliché goes, of what is doubtless the most expensive private residence in the world and most likely the world's largest 'slum' population as well” (Lal, 2013, p. iv). Shama Futehally's novel *Tara Lane* not only reconstructs the Bombay city realistically but also foregrounds the material and social inequalities that are apparent in the contemporary Bombay city. She clearly portrays that urbanization and industrialization have divided the society into two halves: the rich people living in sprawling houses and the poor and marginalized are forced to live in depriving slums. Her novel stresses that class

differences are so stark and real in a metropolitan like Mumbai. In this paper, therefore, I will examine how the Bombay city has been reconstructed in Futehally's novel. Besides, I will also study the class divisions that are so real and widening in the city. Another interesting enquiry of the paper would be to examine the class neutral spaces such as Bombay locals and other public places and occasions of social intercourse such as marriage when people transcend their class positions even though momentarily.

The Bombay City in *Tara Lane*

The Bombay city has been part of various narratives. From Salman Rushdie to Rohinton Mistry various authors have vividly and realistically represented the city in their novels. Rushdie's first novel, *The Moor's Last Night* has representative depiction of the Bombay city. Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* also beautifully portrays the metropolitan city truthfully. Futehally in *Tara Lane* carries forward the legacy received from Rushdie and Mistry. The Bombay city unfolds itself throughout the novel occupying the central position in the narrative of the *Tara Lane*. Her literary representation is not singular rather she takes into account the perspectives of different classes of people who are residing and have been integral part of the city. She views the Bombay city as known for its riches and bounties but also the other side of it; the city that neglects the poor and the marginalised. The city as seen from the perspective of not only rich people but also the marginalised section of the city. Futehally also depicts the different parts of the metropolitan city from the most prominent locations to the dingiest localities; from some of the most expensive residences and bungalows to the most deprived and sordid slums. Thus, she tests the class distinction that engulfs the city into the poor and rich. Additionally, Futehally's novel reconstructs and records the functioning of the Bombay city naturalistically. From its people, its transport system, the industry, workers, rain, drought, roads, slum and slum population and their hardship to its government, the corrupt officials and its municipal councils.

First published in 1993 *Tara Lane* is a great reminiscence of Bombay city and its inhabitants during 1950s and 60s, the time where the novel is set. By setting the novel in a real location, Futehally vividly describes Bombay and its various places. The protagonist Tahera was born and brought up in Bombay. She attends her school here with her younger sister Munni and later is married in

the same city. All the events happen in this city only. The Bombay city, its places, its people, its way of life, its means of transport, its culture, its industries, its slums and its problems find prominence in the novel.

Written in the first-person narrative, the novel opens with the narrator describing Tara Lane. Tara Lane is a lane in the Bombay city, where the Mustaq family lives and is named after the protagonist Tahera which is shortened as Tara. Tara Lane is an ordinary lane in the Bombay city. It is “dusty and purposeless” and situated near “Kamal Film Studio” (Futehally, 2006, p. 9). On its right side is “a grey euphoria hedge with tiny thick cobwebs buried between its leaves” (Futehally, 2006, p. 9). Like most of the lanes of the Bombay city of 1960s, Tara Lane too has slums situated on its periphery. Poor industrial workers, the residents of these slums, live in what is famously called as 'Kholi'. The writer is very keen to observe minute details as she writes: “Behind the chickoo leaves was the kholi in which Samuel and Ayah lived” (Futehally, 2006, p. 9). The author has minutely observed the slum: “wooden edge of a string bed, the beautifully crack in the floor, the battered aluminium bowl” (Futehally, 2006, p. 9). The condition of drainage reminds of the poor sanitation of slum locality: “On either side of the small road there were narrow gutters of dark water carrying bits of paper” (Futehally, 2006, p. 10).

The City and the Slum

Slums, sociologist Ashis Nandy remarks, “are reminders that another India exists. The slums are reminders of the open wounds of a city. That reminder is painful” (2010, paras. 4-5). Does urbanization give rise to the slums? Sociologist argues that industrialization and urbanization marginalize the have-not population of the city. Slum is a bitter reality in all the cities of India and the world. Bombay city is no exception. Slum dwellers live side by side with the bourgeoisie class. Mustaq Saab, the owner of the factory and his family live in a posh locality but his domestic help as well as many factory workers live not far away from his house but they live in slum. Their condition is not good. Sanitation and water supply is not adequately provided. All of them are constantly in debt. After the strike in factory, many workers do not have money to buy ration for their family and they even face difficulty in getting the ration supply on credit. *Tara Lane* reveals and exposes the hard reality of urbanization and industrialization in metropolitan cities. It also exposes the

failure of Nehruvian development model when a large section of the population is deprived of even the basic amenities but a great chunk of the wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few. The slums of the Indian cities are reminder of the loopholes of the development model and the failed efforts of the government. Futehally shows how big the divide could be between the rich and the poor and between have and have-nots in the city like Bombay.

Bombay's social world, Gerard Heuze argues, has increasingly been bifurcated. At one side is the large, organized world of the upwardly mobile and aspiring middle class and elite, striving to retain the ideals and social parameters of modernity and order. At the other side is the informal world of the zoparpatt is (slums) and chawls (working class residences) where self-employment, marginalization, and exclusion are the fundamental social conditions. Although the story is recounted from the perspective of Tahera, the daughter of a mill owner, a greater part of the narrative is devoted to the description of slums and slum dwellers. The protagonist is extra sensitive to understand the problems faced and hardship endured by the marginalised. The domestic servants, the factory workers, other employees make the prominent part of the narrative of the novel. As Tahera recalls: "The slums around the station were a huge, menacing huddle, their roofs dark and dripping like witches' cowls" (Futehally, 2006, p. 19). Here she describes the slum habitation. The huts of the servants were on the hill. Earlier this place was sparsely populated but now it seemed to be packed with huts. Four glass jars meant it was a sweet-shop. Beside it was a pile of bicycle tyres and a few spokes, making it a cycle shop. Futehally devotes long passages to the description of overcrowded and deprived slum neighbourhoods and the living conditions of the working-class population who irrespective of their contribution to the industries in which they work, are forced to live in the most deprived spaces in a metropolitan like Mumbai:

At seven in the morning Bombay was oddly fresh, like a child's yawn. Beyond the trucks stretched a waste of mill-yards, enormous barren yards piled with cotton-waste, with perhaps an oily black wheel visible in a shed. The women and children who slept on the pavement were beginning to sit up, very still yet, their pink or green saris dim with dust, as in an old oil painting (Futehally, 2006, p. 101).

The trucks began to move and the car jerked forward. We passed the gates of the Chembur refinery, where workers were trooping in the early morning sun; then the slimy green swamp of water around which children squatted and trucks were washed, and women beat their washing on flat stones and chased away urinating dogs; on the far side was Bombay's largest slum; then the slimy water gave way to mangrove and finally to ragged patches of grass; and the highway became cleaner and swifter till it turned into a magnificent bridge which sped like a ribbon over a great silky sheet of sky-blue water. Never could I believe that this magnificence was so near our doomed and hopeless city, that the same trucks which passed the Chembur refinery so quickly reached a different world (Futehally, 2006, pp. 101-102).

“The slums around the station were a huge, menacing huddle, their roofs dark and dripping like witches' cowls” (Futehally, 2006, p. 19). The novel records the picture of the Bombay city of 1960s at the time when Pandit J. L Nehru was the Prime Minister of India. Like S. Shukla's *Raag Darbaari*, Futehally's *Tara Lane* also puts to test the Nehruvian development model. Various lanes, slums, kholis, are remarkable representations of the failed development efforts by the government. Even after two decades of the independence, no substantial improvement has been made in the lives of common men and women. As the protagonist goes to Borivili National Park, she passes “through worse lanes than Tara Lane”(Futehally, 2006, p. 17). She has “to pass bare-bottomed children and rows of smelly diesel trucks” and “to get through cars and trucks and bicycles which all barked absurdly at each other and didn't move”(Futehally, 2006, p. 17). She goes to another world when she sees “rows of cannas and long buffalo sheds” (Futehally, 2006, p. 17). This gives us a picture that no development has taken place in spite of the efforts of the government. Even government has been criticized by many characters of the novel; Ayah and Samuel often call it “gorement” sarcastically (Futehally, 2006, p. 12).

The Mushtaq family's sprawling house is surrounded by squalor of the slums. This makes the protagonist “feel deep down” (Futehally, 2006, p. 81). Tahera feels:

I fell, deep down that things can't be totally....they can't be.....real. I

mean,'I said desperately to my bewildered husband, for instance our lovely house and garden. When they are surrounded by such slums and such squalor..... they can't be real (Futehally, 2006, p. 81).

Thus, Tahera is not just able to notice this class division that is apparent but she is also disturbed by it. She always feels that “they can't really exist, or shouldn't exist” (Futehally, 2006, p. 82).

The Mushtaq Family

Eighteenth century English novelist Jane Austen in one of her letters once remarked about her technique of plot construction, “three or four families in a Country Village” was “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work” (as cited in Carter & McRae, 2016, p. 256). Austen's technique of novel writing was “the acute observation of society in microcosm” (Carter and John McRae, 2016, p. 256). Futehally seems to draw this technique from Austen. This is evident in *Tara Lane* as the novel mainly focuses on three or four families in the city of Bombay. It is primarily about the Mushtaq family, two or three housemaids and servants, and the factory workers who live in the nearby localities of the family residences.

The rich Mushtaq family is the owner of the factory that manufactures stationery of all sorts, where a substantial number of workers contribute to the company. The members of the family are class conscious and try to preserve their class prestige. They reside in posh locations; possess enormous wealth. However, the family surrenders its class identity when Munni and Tahera go to Ayah's hut carrying the sari and an envelope for Katreen's newly-born baby. There is also constant tension building up between Tahera and her husband Rizwan after the marriage. Rizwan is quite opposite to Tahera. Rizwan is class conscious and he makes every effort to counter the strike called by the factory workers' union.

Futehally often tests many characters through moral conundrum. Many fulfil the moral obligations quite considerably. For instance, Mushtaq, the patriarch of the family is honest and upright and upholds his integrity in spite of all circumstances. Hamida Khala considers him “wonderful” but “impractical” for the same reason (Futehally, 2006, p.137). However, no one discharges their moral obligations as does Tahera. In spite of all difficulties and adverse

circumstances she is adamant to be upright. She is never willing to give up and lose her “standard” (Futehally, 2006, p.126). She is thus incorruptible. The factory might be closed but she will not compromise with her integrity. From start to the end she will maintain that. For this she has often has fight and conflict with her husband Rizwan. But Rizwan is different. He is not shy to bribe anyone whether it is Irshadullah or the labour commissioner.

Dadi, the grandmother of the protagonist is representing the bourgeoisie. She is only concerned about her status and class and often mistrusts her servants. However, the family fortune falls at the end of the novel. The factory is liquidated. The family has to move into a smaller accommodation. It has to surrender its “standards” as the family income has dwindled (Futehally, 2006, p.126). They surrender their class and understand that there are people and class beyond their rank. The factory owner Mushtaq understands this fact quite clearly.

Class Divisions in *Tara Lane*

“Slums are parts of the city that constantly reminds us of our moral and social obligations” argues sociologist Ashis Nandy (2010, para. 5). Futehally carefully explores these obligations in her novel *Tara Lane*. *Tara Lane* portrays clearly the class divisions that a reap parent in the microcosm of the Bombay society. The narrow strip of Tara Lane separates the expensive mansions and overcrowded and deprived slums. At one side of the lane lives the elite Mushtaq family in sprawling mansion, who owns the stationery factory whereas the poor industrial labourers, servants, and housemaids live in congested and shabby slums at the other side of the lane. Dadi, the protagonist's grandmother and the wife of the founder of the factory lives separately “in an enormous mansion at the other end of the lane” (Futehally, 2006, p.13). The relationship between the two groups is characterized by class and money. Futehally observes the class divisions closely that shape the lane and contrasts the characters of both the classes throughout the novel. Tahera the protagonist and her sister Munni go to Montessori school by car whereas other children travel by bus. She recalls “we were only children who were brought to school in a chauffeur-driven car. The others came alone by bus” (Futehally, 2006, p. 16).

However, the poor and rich divide, the upper and lower or the haves and have-nots distinctions narrow when the slum dwellers work for the rich people as

domestic helps, drivers, or as vegetable vendors in the locality. Although the Mushtaq family, the owner of the factory (represented through Tahera and Munni) belong to the elite group of the society, yet they attend the wedding of Samuel and Katreen. Similarly, Tahera goes to see Katreen's ailing son and assists him financially. On these occasions, the class hierarchies become irrelevant paving way for expressing goodwill. Thus, both strong class divisions as well as smooth interface between the two classes can be seen in the novel.

Nonetheless, the class divisions widen again during the conflict between the factory union and the factory owners. The factory workers are on strike because the salary has not been paid. But the newly appointed Rizwan bribes the labour commissioner and other administrative officials to take action against the workers who are on the strike. Subsequently, the union leader Irshadullah is arrested by the police. He is handcuffed and sent to police station and thus the factory workers call off the strike. Thus, with the use of the force and unfair means, the strike is cracked. Now they are left on the mercy of the factory owners. However, the call by the union to suspend the work signifies the victory of working class. There will be no work till the enquiry is complete as the workers doubt that their union leader Irshadullah has been bribed to end the strike.

Nevertheless, the division narrows again when Katreen, the wife of Samuel, finds it difficult to even find a job as a housemaid. When Tahera and Munni visit her hut, she eagerly asks for a maid's job: "‘Bibi', she said, very low, 'after you are married, if you need someone to work in the house, you will not forget Katreen?'" (Futehally, 2006, p.77) Katreen's child is ill and she has no money to give him treatment. Samuel's salary has been cut due to the loan they had taken. It is the beginning of the month and she has no money and therefore has no choice but to ask Tahera for the money.

Transcending her class position Tahera is sympathetic to the factory workers and the maids and servants who work in the house. She is often disturbed by looking at the dismal condition of the slum dwellers and knowing about their plight. She couldn't stop herself from hugging or embracing her housemaid Katreen's child Anton. However, her parents are very class conscious. They always have in their mind that as part of an elite family they cannot mingle with the poor people. For instance, it is unimaginable for the Mushtaq family to

accept that Mushtaq himself went to the bank for money and sat beside the other peons. For Tahera's mother, it is against her status to go to buy the provisions herself. Tahera's parents cannot attend the wedding of their housemaid's daughter. Also, there is always a sense of mistrust for the servants. Tahera's grandmother (Dadi) always thinks that her housemaid Roshanbi steals sugar.

The class differences are further manifested in the types of houses they own or rent. The factory workers, servants, and maids live in poor and inadequate accommodation in a metropolitan like Bombay. Futehally meticulously describes the house of Mr. Gonsalvez, the typist of Mushtaq, where one room is alternatively used as a room and a kitchen: "His wife and two daughters were at stove, in the part of the room that was used as a kitchen" (Futehally, 2006, p.116). Few days of strike leave them in crisis as Mr. Gonsalvez, the factory owner Mushtaq's typist says to Tahera: "During the strike I told the children, yes, yes, today you get only rice without any dal. But now! Eat whatever you like, I tell them" (Futehally, 2006, p. 116)!

Mumbai, the erstwhile Bombay city, for centuries, has been a great centre of commerce and industry. The city began to be industrialised during the British colonial regime. The increasing industrialization led to large scale migration of workers to the city which greatly increased its population. People continued to come to urban centres for new opportunities. Numerous slums flourished to shelter and house the newly arrived migrants. This trend continued for decades. With the increasing industrialisation and growing working class population, class differences also gradually widened. Also, with stronger trade unions, the factory workers started to assert themselves which resulted into long strikes by the workers. This further aggravated the problem.

The Bombay Municipal Corporation is like a Victorian edifice which epitomizes the Bombay city. It is the centre of power and authority. For the uneducated slum dwellers, it is "Moonispalty" (Futehally, 2006, p. 149). The class difference merge here as people from all classes throng here to obtain documents and certificates of different kinds. Its "maze-like corridors, its smell of urine, its shabby wooden benches and its enormous dusty rooms" make it like any government and public place (Futehally, 2006, p. 148). Trucks are stretched across the long lane. The women and children who were sleeping on

the pavement are now beginning to wake up from the long slumber. Their clothes are covered with dust from the road. At Chembur refinery factory workers are gathering at the gate. On the far side, the trucks are washed and women are washing clothes. It is Bombay's largest slum where the rich-poor divide is so sharp and still growing.

In spite of the profound differences in their living quarters, the Bombay Locals make an excellent space of confluence of people from different class and rank. "Andheri local", 'Bandra local', 'Dadar-fast', and 'Ladies First'" are means of conveyance not only for the working-class people (Futehally, 2006, p. 51). Rather they are in some ways class neutral spaces. For instance, Tahera, the daughter of the mill owner, transcends her class position when she commutes by the Bombay locals to attend her college. The Bombay locals make the space where the rich, the middleclass and the poor are packed in the same compartment. Futehally writes: "They were a tight, anxious group of smartly-dressed secretaries and students, clutching their handbags against pickpockets and beggars, pulling down their skirts to hide the edge of a nylon petticoat, wiping anxiously at moist orange lipstick" (Futehally, 2006, p. 51). The compartment is so crowded that "there was never an inch to spare" (Futehally, 2006, p. 52). At one side is "the typist in the tight blue skirt" and at the other is the vender with "a large basket of fish or vegetables"(Futehally, 2006, p. 52). Thus, the Bombay locals merge the class differences in its day-to-day functioning.

Conclusion

Futehally's novel *Tara Lane* has received certain critical appreciations. Some critics found this novel too slow to start while others have appreciated her prose style. Rukun Advani observes, "Indeed there is so much grace and strength in her prose, so much that is apposite, poetic and unpretentious, that Futehally could have risked a less unambitious structure for her book. But perhaps she believes in the Schumacher school of fiction, which shows that small is beautiful, and that sentences carefully crafted can make a book stick in one's mind sooner than epic soap-operas" (2013, para. 10). Futehally's *Tara Lane* echoes the contemporary socio-political concerns that are apparent in the Indian society. Set in the Bombay city of 1950s and 60s the novel's themes of city and class identity coincide with the contemporary concerns of the Mumbai

city. She has exposed the hard reality of the development and progress that have been achieved during the industrialisation and urbanization of a metropolis like Mumbai. Futehally has also tried to portray that in a city like Bombay, there exist two types of India: 'Rich India' and 'Poor India'. That class division is one of the defining features of the contemporary Indian cities like Mumbai is clearly manifested in the novel. Like her second novel *Reaching Bombay Central*, *Tara Lane* also exposes the moral corruption that is so rampant in the society. The novel is particularly remarkable for the reconstruction of the Bombay city. Futehally realistically portrays the city, its people, its socio-political concerns, its means of transports and its minorities with remarkable observation and criticism.

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