

*Unseen City, The Psychic Lives of the Urban Poor*

Ankhi Mukherjee

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Ankhi Mukherjee's book is a remarkable exploration of the "psychic lives of the urban poor" in global cities (London, Mumbai, and New York, among others), which raises the key issue of the translatability of psychoanalytic constructs across cultures and contexts. Through an original interdisciplinary methodology, weaving together psychoanalytic theory, ethnographic fieldwork, and literary criticism, this work probes different perspectives on the mental health of those who have mostly been denied access to therapy. The investigation starts with an in-depth critique of classical and normative psychoanalysis and calls for the redrawing of its spatial boundaries outside the West. With Frantz Fanon, Mukherjee sheds light on the limitations of psychoanalysis' falsely universal concepts and its flawed approach to subaltern subjects' psyches, which have failed to account for the profound impact of racism and colonialism on mental health. The social determinations of alienation, often sidelined from classical psychoanalytic interpretation frameworks, need to be incorporated into therapeutic practices. Yet this critique does not imply the dismissal of psychoanalysis altogether. Throughout the book, Mukherjee's historicizing approach traces the origins and development of given categories such as fugue, transience, or trauma and shows how therapists around the world attempt to adapt them to culturally specific situations of impoverishment, displacement, and violence – as shown in the various instances of practical, historically relevant interpretation of patients' dreams (p. 37, 55, 211).

Mukherjee interrogates psychoanalytic categories in the light of both clinical and literary case studies, which, even if separated in distinct chapters, constantly echo each other. In each of the three sections of the book, one chapter examines the ways in which urban free clinics cure patients through "ad hoc short-term multimodal therapy, although psychoanalytically oriented" (p. 203). These "unconventional yet effective therapeutic scene[s]" (p. 203) range from London's intercultural therapy center (Chapter 2), through free clinics and mental health NGOs in Mumbai, Bangalore, Calcutta, and Chennai (Chapter 4), to New York's rehabilitation center for the unhoused and center for torture survivors (Chapter 6). What stands out from these detailed narratives is the analysts' pragmatic approach as well as their versatile role, which often implies tasks relating to education, welfare, and community building. In fact, therapists are as much at the center of the study as patients: their training and school of thought, their individual trajectories, often involving migration or a minoritarian position, profoundly affect their relationship to the patients and the cure itself. Such is the case of Aisha Abbasi, a Pakistani-born American analyst and author who shares her unsettling experience of

being put to test by an Indian patient after the Mumbai attacks of 2006 involving Pakistani terrorists (pp. 183-186).

As most readers of this journal will be interested in the literary aspect of the work, let me detail Mukherjee's approach to literature as a means "to illustrate the problem field of faulty psychoanalytic categories and [to] provide ways of imagining these categories anew (pp. 24-25). In the first chapters of each section, the author looks at the ways in which fiction (and occasionally nonfiction) explores the psychological troubles resulting from displacement, violence, and poverty while questioning therapists' positions and diagnoses. Chapter 1 focuses on Aminatta Forna's novels that impel the reader to realize "the incommensurability of the universal diagnostic and classificatory language of psychiatry with the quotidian and exceptional catastrophes in a brutalized postcolonial nation" (p. 39). In *The Memory of Love* (2010), a British psychiatrist in war-ridden Sierra Leone eventually learns not to categorize his patient's silences as psychological avoidance or inability to articulate her troubles but rather to read "muteness as strategy of containment in a nation space destabilised by outbreaks of extreme violence" (p. 45). In this novel as in others, the context of everyday violence also redraws the boundaries of the normal and the pathological and leads to an emphasis on resilience rather than victimhood when it comes to trauma: "you call it a disorder, my friend. We call it *life*," declares a Ghanaian psychiatrist in another of Forna's novels (p. 42).

The destabilizing of psychoanalytic categories also continues through Mukherjee's examination of nonfiction writings set in Mumbai in Chapter 3. Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012) and Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing* (2011) are read as unconventional narratives of urban poverty that rescue subaltern spaces from being imagined only as the fantasized, parasitic other of the postcolonial city. The author offers a compelling analysis of Faleiro's embodied, compassionate narrative of a bar-dancer's everyday life as "a realistic appraisal of prolonged and ongoing psychic violence faced by the precariat of the metropolitan sex industry" (p. 125). Rather than PTSD, the construct of CTS (continuous traumatic stress) helps us understand the bar-dancer's chronic experience of brutality in the uneven city. Chapter 5 argues that Teju Cole's *Open City* and Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*, among others, revisit the racist trope of migration as infestation through figures of city wanderers who appropriate urban space and excavate the repressed colonial history of global cities (whether Lagos or New York). These novels do not lend themselves to emancipatory or assimilationist readings but shed light on the characters' enduring alienation. Crucially, the book never naively argues for the restorative power of literature but rather considers it as a powerful way to think.

One might regret that the urban dimension is pushed into the background at times. The history of London, Mumbai, and New York is only briefly touched upon, and what actually ties up the case studies together seems to be postcolonial displacement, violence, and precarity rather than a common urban condition. Yet the in-depth analysis of

these cities' mental health institutions, their dispossessed inhabitants, and their cultural representations gives a relevant overview of their fractured landscapes.

However challenging summing up the book's immense contribution is, I would like to point to two main ways in which it adds to postcolonial urban literary studies. First, the comparative angle brings together "global cities" from the North and South, eschewing the trap of the incommensurability of the South. Second, while there are many works on the representation of urban poverty, Mukherjee's cross-fertilizing of textual analysis and psychoanalysis enables a rigorous interpretation of fictional characters' psychic lives in relation to the uneven urban space they navigate. The author's context-based approach never obscures the aesthetic specificities of these texts, as the close readings of Boo's terse rendering of slum-dwellers' introspections or Hage's stylistic "muchness" evidence. It thus opens up fascinating paths for comparative literary criticism across cultural contexts.