

Social Architecture of the Slum A Reading of Arup Kumar Dutta's "The Wilted Flower"

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Abstract

Slums are generally viewed as significant paradoxes of modernity and often remain as the *unknown* and *unexplored* territory of human habitation. The space is seen as an important geographical foundation for understanding how human subjectivity is moulded by pervasive social reality. Study of this ambience has been arousing interest in different academic disciplines including the literature. In this article symbolic quality of the slum landscape that produces and sustains social meanings is analysed and interpreted through Arup Kumar Dutta's short story *The Wilted Flower*. Literature being a crucial mode of understanding life, Dutta's short story reflects a complex process of meaning-making through which the people of the slums comprehend their predicament and identity. Therefore, in this article, an attempt is made to analyse the slumscape through the word images in the story from a humanist geographic perspective. Critical perspective underlying subaltern and territorial marginalisation pervade the entire discussion.

Keywords: Slum, Social Architecture, Humanist Geography, Subaltern Territorial Marginalisation

1.0 Introduction

"There are no flowers at Bauri Gate." (Dutta 2013: 39).

Literature depicts personal lives in suggestive ways by perceiving and articulating the chaotic patterns of reality. The above mentioned line captures the essence of the article by introducing the readers to the power of literature in capturing the reality of the life of the inhabitants of Bauri Gate. Arup Kumar Dutta, in the short story *The Wilted Flower*, introduces the readers to the inhabitants of Bauri Gate, a part of the town with a dusty road where the dust and smell are compounded of sweat, urine, horse dung and exhaust fumes. Bauri Gate is represented as a condensation of hope, fear, looming death and uncertainty. The representation is conceptualised using the phrase "social architecture" which alludes to the art of structuring or building something with its specific characteristics. The term in the context of the present study foregrounds the human centric analyses and captures social life and organisation in the slum. The title *Social Architecture of the Slum* draws attention

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to the physical and social elements that constitute the identity of a *slum*. In other words, the article focuses on the slum landscape, which is constituted by physical and socio-cultural processes.

Arup Kumar Dutta, a well-known fiction writer from Assam of the contemporary period, foregrounds the multilayered social life in all its hues. A Padma Shri Awardee, Dutta is one of the region's well-known faces in English writing. The present article focuses on Dutta's representation of the urban life and reality by employing literary text as an alternative form of modelling urban complexity, thereby enabling different views and drawing attention to silenced dynamics. Evidently, the article is an attempt to foreground the writer's narration of Bauri Gate, a fictional slum and its inhabitants with focus on Dutta's usage of "word images" to present slumscape reality.

1.2 Theoretical considerations

Urban space has always been a focus of scholarly discourse. The glamour of the high-rise buildings of a city, however, fails to cover up for the physical squalor that exists therein. An all-encompassing view of a city incorporates both its glitzy centre and its outskirts, where people live in rundown shacks in appalling conditions. In addition to its physical components, a city is made up of a wide variety of social and geographic enclaves, each hosting its own set of social actors and practices.

As mentioned above, the humanist geography (Tuan 1976) approach has been adopted in the analysis of the slumscape. Humanists reject the reduction of space and place to mere geometrical concepts of surface and point. From a humanistic perspective, the meaning of a place is inseparable from the consciousness of those who inhabit it. The scope of place as a concept varies according to the extension of the thoughts, feelings and experiences that make the consciousness of inhabitants. In other words, the interpretation of the landscape as a carrier and repository of symbolic meaning is crucial to humanist geography. The geography of the place, which is constituted by the landscape and the people inhabiting it, has a profound influence in shaping the society and the perception of the place. Yi-fu Tuan (1977), Edward Relph (1976), and David Harvey (1973) are some of the known humanist geographers who are engaged with the socio-cultural aspects of place and space above geometrical perception and presentation as mentioned in Fabio Lando's (1977) *Fact and fiction: Geography and literature: A bibliographic Survey*. Tuan's (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Relph's (1976) *Place and Placelessness*, and Harvey's (1973) *The Social Justice and the City* are some of the seminal works on human geography.

1.3 Bauri Gate as a Physical and Social Space

Dutta's story presents a necessary form of social communication that unfolds life in the slums in all its reality. The strength of the story lies in foregrounding the plight of the people through concrete images which give a characteristic meaning to slum life. The objective qualities of the landscape evoked by Dutta's word images help in grasping and comprehending the subjective experiences associated with the slumscape. The tangible features of the landscape, along with the activities of human and the symbols and meanings attached to the landscape by human consciousness, constitute the totality of the slumscape of Bauri Gate.

Narrated by a fine arts student from an Indian city, Dutta's story depicts the lives of the city's impoverished. The story foregrounds the paradoxes of Independent India, which failed to meet the expectations of ordinary people and help them meet the minimum living standards. The story centres around the fictional setting of Bauri Gate, where the narrator observes the poverty-filled life of a migrant horse cart driver, Hazibaba, his wife and two sons. With his income along with that of his wife who is a part-time tailor and of his apprentice son, he could barely support the family to meet the two ends. The family's income is meagre and inconsistent, barely covering their basic needs. Hazibaba and his family are gripped by the cycle of poverty, escaping, which seems to be a far-fetched dream.

The identity of Bauri Gate, similar to other slums in the metropolis, is construed through dirt, squalor, smoke, congestion and disease. The story foregrounds the slum dwellers that migrate to the city in search of livelihood. Hazibaba is no exception. This trend of migration to urban space is a perennial phenomenon, and no doubt, the spaces like Bauri Gate are home to migratory workers, where cramped settlements became their only resort. Spaces like these are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the social and geographical landscape of the metropolis.

1.4 Depiction of life in Bauri Gate through “Word Images”

Word images refer to vivid description of places or situations. The story exemplifies the usage of powerful images to evoke the conditions faced by the inhabitants of the slum. The imagery employed by Dutta functions as a social commentary and unveils the darker facet of the urban life. The story's title, "The Wilted Flower" speaks of a twisted and lifeless flower. The title of the story is a significant word image employed by the writer that evokes the death, poverty and stink of Bauri Gate area. The setting of the story dates back to 1971, the post-independence era and presents a household ridden with all worldly problems. The walls of Bauri Gate are “streaked with the yellow of human urine and the red of pan juice spitting” (Dutta 2013:39). These graphic details are nauseating, and draw the attention of the readers towards the unhygienic living conditions that people of Bauri Gate live in. The physical description of the neighbourhood as well as the narrator's minute and close observation of the Hazibaba's family, provides the readers with an impression of a slum, which though superficially seems to be a bustling community, is ridden with life-threatening problems.

The omniscient narrator, in detailing with the environment, foregrounds the sinister and dreadful elements of the environment. Different varieties of flies buzz lazily over the heaps of horse dung and suck nectar from horse flanks. Further, these flies are inebriated with human sweat. Despite the dirt and stink, there resides a "lively bustling community" (Dutta 2013:40). Dutta employs images of “dust” and “smell” to hint at the unhygienic living condition of the slums. He also employs the "sweat" imagery to hint at the lack of water supply and the densely populated space. Further, the smell of urine and horse dung draws the attention of the readers to the lack of a proper sewage disposal system. Dutta also mentions the indisposed garbage, animal excreta, various kinds of flies, and choked drains bearing enough potential to harm the people inhabiting that space. However, despite this squalor, the poverty-stricken population perceives Bauri Gate as a place for nurturing their hopes and dreams of a bright future. In contrast, the author laments this, symbolically expressed through the story's title, “The Wilted Flower”. Dutta laments that in an environment like Bauri Gate, flowers won't bloom, and hence the flower is twisted

and lifeless. It signifies a bright future that did not materialise. The flowers, whose petals are tilted downwards, symbolise both hope and sadness. The residents of Bauri Gate are caught in this paradoxical condition where they nurture hope and dreams but fail to materialise them because of extreme poverty, illness and deprivation. The words defining Bauri Gate are heavy and sombre; they perfectly describe the drab condition of the Bauri Gate which is the crux of the story.

The "territorial stigmatisation" that Dutta emphasises in his characterisation of Bauri Gate is a notion developed by urban sociologist Loic Wacquant (2007:67). Wacquant's description of the place resonates with the stereotyped ingrained notions of a slum. However, it is significant to trace the numerous techniques of production of this stigmatisation. Slum residents' aspirations are constrained by the actuality of the symbolic defamation of the area in which they live.

The narrator, a student of Fine Arts, through his observation, unveils the seamy side of life. During his stay at Bauri Gate, he befriends Hazibaba and his family, who suffers from extreme deprivation and struggles to sustain his (Hazibaba's) family. The reader is informed about the economy of the household where Hazibaba, his wife and their horse are the breadwinners. Soon the horse dies, and this enhances the misery of the family. The condition of the family deteriorates when Hazibaba falls sick, and soon after, Pappu, their cretin-affected child, dies after a fatal road accident. The writer describes each shade of social agony with great precision. The family strives till the end. However, the author gives us an impression of their struggle being not worthy. The story stresses a sort of fatalism. The exploration of the theme of pain, poverty and struggle through the various characters is worth noting.

The youngest member of the family, Pappu, a cretin with a bulging forehead and grotesque physique, brings forth the misery of the family more prominently. Pappu, suffering from congenital thyroid deficiency, survives on regular doses of medicine. A sizeable portion of Hazibaba's income is spent on purchasing fodder for the horse and purchasing Pappu's medicine. His eldest son abandons his studies to work in a tea shop where he is offered free lunch and a few *annas* (currency unit, one-sixteenth of a rupee during colonial period when 16 annas or 64 paise made a rupee) for his daylong services. After the death of his horse, Hazibaba takes up the job of a porter at a railway station. However, the passengers did not recruit his services, and then he turned to the menial job of loading and unloading trucks carrying goods. The sudden loss of income led to Hazibaba's rise in anxiety and frayed temper, which disrupted the once "contended atmosphere of the house" (Dutta 2013: 42). The change in the economic condition of his family affected Hazibaba's relationship with his wife and children. His outbursts of anger and frustration contrast his former mild-mannered self. His children and wife are the victims of his unexpected bursts of anger. Eventually, carrying heavy loads debilitated his health, and he required more rest and healthy food. Here, Dutta, through all these travails of Hazibaba's life, foregrounds the vicious cycle of poverty in which the urban poor is trapped. The cycle of poverty refers to the never ending struggle and poverty that engulfs the poor. The author, in a way, hints at a kind of fatalism which is associated with the destiny of the urban poor people like Hazibaba. The utter helplessness leads them to accept their struggle as a part of their destiny. Hazibaba recognises his family troubles as his "kismet" or destiny. (Dutta 2013:41). The death of Pappu makes a strong statement about persistence in the worst circumstances. While reiterating his fatalistic philosophy, Hazibaba accepts his struggle as a part of his "kismet". Hazibaba's family dynamics bring

forth the utter helplessness and deprivation that the urban poor struggle with. This helplessness and the struggle of the poor are reflected in other literary works such as in *The City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre (1986) and *The Story that Must Not be Told* by Kavery Nambisan (2010). *The City of Joy* brings forth the struggle of the urban poor in slum in Kolkata. It highlights the never ending zeal of the slum dwellers. The other novel too, based on urban poor in slum highlights the responsibilities of the rich towards the poor.

Dutta, in the story, amalgamates various factors, including poverty, forced migration, environmental degradation, unemployment, dropping out of school, and illness. These factors all together contribute to drawing a comprehensive impression of a slum life. Landless rural poor like Hazibaba heads to the city with hope of economic sustenance. Poverty deprived them of proper food and shelter. Choked drains, garbage dumps, and human and animal defecation mark the urban slums, and Bauri Gate is no exception. Through Pappu's character, Dutta throws light on the prevalence of infectious and non-infectious diseases in the slums. Pappu, Hazibaba's youngest son is a cretin and suffers from congenital thyroid deficiency. He further foregrounds the limited access to healthcare facilities in the slums, resulting in a high infant mortality rate in the slums.

Pappu's death towards the end of the story foregrounds the insignificance of death in the face of struggle and hardships. While Pappu, after the accident, lies in a pool of blood, a vendor, taking advantage of the crowd, tries his tactics to sell nuts.

It is noteworthy that the author's description of the human experience of place is one significant dimension of the story that helps in the comprehension of slum life. This humanistic perspective of the author focuses on human action and the dynamics of relationships. The comprehension of Bauri Gate should not be restricted to a mere territory of human habitation. Rather, an amalgamation of subjectivity and objectivity constitutes the sense of space that Bauri Gate upholds. Here, Bauri Gate is not a mere geographical territory but an intensely subjective structuring of space. This notion of place, characterised by a profoundly personalised perception, is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space but also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of those people who have given it meaning. The residents of Bauri Gate and their family dynamics, including their socio-economic conditions, give meaning to the place. Bauri Gate is modelled by the culture of the people inhabiting it, the emotions, hopes and aspirations. This subjective understanding of the place would enable the readers to gain an inclusive perspective of Bauri Gate.

This understanding of a place is core to humanistic geography (Tuan 1976), which reflects upon geographical phenomena with the ultimate purpose of achieving a better understanding of human and his/her condition. The role of concepts and symbols in the creation of place and identity is crucial to humanistic geography. For instance, Bauri Gate achieves its identity as a "metropolitan slum" through bleak and dreary conditions captured by the author through the images of smell and dust.

The interpretation of human experience in its ambiguity, ambivalence, and complexity is crucial to humanist geography. Humanist geographers focus on the lives and experiences of the people that inhabit a space. The meaning of concepts, symbols, and aspirations are analysed as they pertain to space and place. When viewed from this perspective, the construction of the identity of Bauri Gate is not only a geographical or territorial concept but also involves a complex socio-cultural process. The story, when

viewed from the humanist perspective, is critical and reflective. The facts and descriptions of Bauri Gate speak of its people and their way of life which is different from the core urban life.

The pertinence of Dutta's writing resides in its power to amalgamate objectivity and subjectivity. These two elements lie at the basis of what is called a "sense of place". While doing so, Dutta introduces the reader to the critical and seamy side of life of the urban poor.

Thus, Dutta's story can be regarded as a typical representation of slums which raises significant questions on poverty and deterioration that demands immediate attention. Set in 1971, the story engages with crucial questions of poverty and uneven distribution of resources and power. The story foregrounds the marginal section of a cityscape who are left to fend for themselves, fighting against the dreary cycle of poverty. Dutta's portrayal of the social architecture of Bauri Gate embodies all the social factors, including poverty, environmental degradation, infant mortality rate, and unhygienic living conditions, to name a few. His word images help the readers to visualise the dreary living condition of Bauri Gate. Dutta's story can be seen as an ethical intervention foregrounding the need for ethical responses as academicians, intellectuals or responsible members of society towards this position of the subaltern. This responsibility lies in the hands of the people who have the agency and hence are not categorised as subalterns, which according to Ranajit Guha, are the elites, "dominate groups, foreign as well as indigenous" (Guha 1982: 8). However, though the desire to speak for someone else is an ethical gesture, it is fraught with its own dangers because the elite's own desires and self-interests might be represented as the interests of the subalterns, and ultimately, they turn out to be the victims of the hegemonic discourse. This reminds us of Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak"? (Spivak 1985: 67). In the essay, Spivak focuses on creating enabling conditions for the Subaltern where they are empowered and can speak for themselves. It would be crucial to try and learn from them and sensitise us towards their needs. Therefore, Dutta's story can be read as an effort to raise the consciousness of the readers towards the drab living conditions in the slum. It can be argued that Dutta, in the story, instead of merely speaking for the disempowered section, raises a serious concern in academia and urges an ethical response or perhaps a solution.

Another significant aspect of the story lies in the inevitability of the family's fate and Hazibaba's easy acceptance of that fate. Building on Spivak's notion of *speaking* as a generating discourse (where a discourse can be interpreted as meaningful utterance), it should be noted that within a certain society the power equations decide on what to be accepted as a discourse and what should be rejected. "Discourses", according to Foucault, are ways of constituting knowledge and subjectivity. (Foucault 1981: 65). It transmits and produces power. According to Spivak, people within the subaltern position cannot generate discourses of their desires and interests and form their self-identity. Hazibaba's predicament can be interpreted in this light. He is aware of the fact of occupying a marginal space where he lacks social and political agency to formulate his needs and desires. Here, more than the concern if the subaltern can speak, the story compels us to think if the subalterns will be *heard* if they speak at all. Their needs and desires, though spoken out, shall be appropriated through the power equations of the society, which in turn shall decide on their needs. Hence, he is left with no option but to accept his fate as *kismet* (destiny). (Dutta 2013:33).

1.5 Conclusion

Literary works play a significant role in voicing out unheard voices. What at first glance seems to be a basic, pitiful depiction of their appalling living conditions turns out upon closer inspection, to be raising serious concerns about their very identity and very reason for being. Dutta's description of the lives of the urban poor seems to present them as outcasts who are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty that rips them of their identity, desires and dreams. Dutta's vivid portrayal of the discrimination and slander suffered by the urban poor prompts us to ponder their very existence. The interpretations presented in this article on Dutta's writings are not rigid and are presented with the intention of encouraging alternative narratives on the same.

The social architecture of the slum presented in the article thus raises serious concerns which seek solutions. Dutta, through the narrative, asserts the significance and role of literature in portraying social reality as well the numerous suppressed and silenced aspects underneath. Narratives such as this should not be merely understood as describing the precarity and anarchic slum world but also as a crucial mode of foregrounding the need of alternative narratives to their predicament.

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