



Dichotomy of Individualism and Collectivism in *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*

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Abstract

Suketu Mehta is one of the most prolific writers of non-fiction writings emigrated to Newyork from Mumbai along with his family at the age of 14. In the year 1998 he returns to Mumbai and recaptures the maximity of it through various interviews of the local inhabitants and the emigrants from the country. Mehta encompasses these interviews in his narrative non-fictional book, Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found. This insider outsider perspective of Mumbai resembles with Dante's Inferno. This research paper basically aims at Mehta's portrayal of the megacity Mumbai along with the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism. It analyses how the city reciprocates with its inhabitants. It also takes in to account that how this metropolis, despite all its scarcity, is a center of attraction for people across the country to upgrade their living and working status. The way the city caters all its residents, bring forth the juxtaposition of individualism and collectivism.

Cultural research has become a recurring method of exploring the variegation of any specific place these days. Cultural research has different aspects and dimensions which define the ethnographic scenario of the chosen subject or site. Gerard Hendrik Hofstede, a 20th century Dutch social psychologist has proposed few dimensions of cultural study in his remarkable work *Culture's Consequences* (1980). According to Hofstede western world prefer individualism whereas eastern countries values collectivism. Individualism relates to 'I Consciousness' and collectivism connects with 'We Consciousness'. Collectivism and Individualism theory is one of the essential components of the cultural research. Integrity, harmony, solidarity of group, interdependence are the valued assets of collectivism. On the other hand individualism propagates the ideas of independence, personal identity, non-conformity etc. Identity, gender, power, uncertainty and time are few aspects by which Collectivistic and Individualistic approaches are regulated and altered in every society.

Suketu Mehta in his non-fiction book, *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) depicts the vivid picture of

the metropolis Mumbai. He visualises Bombay from insiders and outsiders view. How the city cherishes and crushes the hopes and aspirations of its people. Mehta says that Bombay is "just a way station, between paradise and hell. You came to pass through it." (P.14) This metropolis is viewed by people according to their comprehension and background. This Heptanesisa – the city of seven islands is a beautiful city and a composite of big buildings and slums. "The visual shock of Bombay is the shock of this juxtaposition." (p.15)

Mehta encompasses in his narration his personal Geography of Bombay and his confrontation with Mumbai after his return from New York. He also adds the interviews and discussions with native people of the city and the migrants from all over the country. All the characters including Mehta himself are oscillating some or other way in between collectivism and individualism. According to their financial status, awareness, education, power, gender and identity they are merging and sweeping with the rhythm of this metropolis. This non-fiction book in all its three parts details the kaleidoscopic frame of Bombay. Mehta has deliberately used the old name Bombay instead of Mumbai because he

is sensing the city through the lens of his childhood experience of Bombay.

When he returns after two decades he tries to research the old childhood fervour of the city which is replaced by the crude picture of Mumbai. As it has witnessed riots, blasts and many social and political upheavals, it has got its tinge changed which Mehta has hard time believing it. He returns with the sense of nostalgia but it turns into alienation. He says, "I was no longer a Bombayite; from now on, my experience of the city would be as an NRI, a non-resident Indian." (p.11) After returning from New York, he lost his sense of belongingness for the city and clashes with the feeling of alienation. When he was in New York his heart was craving for Bombay, every bit of time he had the longing for the city, he was missing Bombay "like an organ of my body." (p.8) He says that there are various colours of Bombay and he wanted to find his own Bombay. According to Mehta metropolitan cities are pathways to the dreams for social and economical balance and a city like Bombay is the "acclimation station." (p.17)

Mehta says cities are evolving through their culture, each city, like a nation, has its own culture so it should be defined as per its ethnicity. If we talk about a metropolis like Mumbai, it's a miniature of India as it has nourished migrants pan India. Bombay has the highest number of individuals accumulated at one sphere together in the world. Bombay is one of the most densely populated cities of the world due to this cultural and financial disparity is very obvious. With his return from New York to Mumbai Mehta battles his identity crisis, he tries to relocate his personal Geography of Bombay. As an NRI he was denied for the basic amenities of life in his own city. He struggles a lot to get an apartment; he has to pay a huge amount for it. But there was an identity flux. Although he was foreign returned but he has brown skin with this neither he was able to cherish the collective identity of Indians nor of an NRI. In Varanasi he was forbidden for the room in an inn on the same ground, he is having brown skin he might rape the white women.

He tells about his landlord who was a Palanpuri Jain and strict vegetarian. The landlord asked their castes before admitting them as his tenants and Mehta got discount on the account of being vegetarian. In Bombay money is God which defines individual identity at the same time people like Jain landlord are catering their caste and religious values to cherish collectivism. He says that city has also taught him to wait in queue for everything: to vote, to get a flat, to get a phone call, to go to the toilet. According to his experience India is a country of "No" and to survive in an overpopulated city like Bombay, one has to be used to with this crude system. Mehta finds the reason of Mumbai's

overpopulation that is the destitute of the Indian villages. If the countryside gets rich and prosper consequently it will fix the crisis of the cities. In a city like Bombay no one goes to bed with empty stomach. People in slum are content with the square meal deprived of water, sanitation and toilets.

He depicts that to get a gas cylinder he was asked to have an acquaintance with the member of Rajya Sabha. Mehta discovers dual identity with his return, with his brown skin he couldn't recognise himself as a complete English man in India and as an NRI he couldn't claim to be a native of the country. In order to survive in Bombay he has to resort to the collective identity of Bombayites leaving his individual identity of an NRI. He depicts about the struggle he faced in day to day life by saying "All this takes most of our waking time. It is a city hostile to outsiders or nostalgia-stuck returnees." (p.25)

He gave a sarcastic remark by saying "Bombay survived on the scam; we are all complicit. One who knows this ethics, makes money through scam and treated as respectable person. One who is really having business tactics, will surely follow the upward mobility and for this scam is a short cut." (p.28) Although Mehta's returns to Bombay and his survival in the city was a very unfavourable experience, it unravels the true picture of it. The country of 'No' might not become 'Yes' but one has to resist with this irresistible tinge of the city to get its true essence and colour.

The decisive factor defining individualism and collectivism is power which Mehta calls it Powertoni. The one who is in power asserts his ethnicity more efficiently. Likewise majority overpowers minority and claims his rights and authority powerfully. Mehta describes about the political party Shiv Sena and its members that the way they proclaim their religiousity and ethnicity over minorities. On the other hand the minority is also resisting its existence in its own way. Resultantly it gives birth to Hindu Muslim riots and the emergence of hitman and gangsters leading to the death of thousand innocent people. Thus the metropolis is divided in to two parts: Bombay of Muslims and Bombay of Hindus. Mehta takes the example of a boy name Sunil, who was a henchman of Joegshwari branch of the Shiv Sena.

Sunil justifies the act of immolation of a Muslim as revenge of communal rampage. Sunil along with five men did this act as they heard that in nearby chawl a Hindu family was brutally burned.. People like Sunil think that it is their selfless service to their community. They don't have any selfish motive behind this hatred. This is a way to resist their collective identity. On the other hand they don't mind mixing with the anti-community for their business purpose. Sunil who is a religious bigot, confirms the religion of the person before talking, at the same time he does his business exchanges with Muslim community. After riots and strife

also he eats with his Muslim clients to keep relations. Mehta says, "Bombayites understand that business comes first. They are individually multiple." (p.46) Number of riots resulted in making people alienated and fragmented in the city in which they were well and brought up. Mehta quotes Victor Hugo's statement that all great cities are schizophrenic. "Bombay has multiple personality disorder." (p.49) For survival commoners are tossing in between collectivism and individualism. He says, "When you were out in the city, if you got stopped your life depended on whether you answered to Ram or Rahim. Schizophrenia became a survival tactic." (p.49)

Many NGO's have tried to harmonise the beat of the city to demonstrate unity between Hindu and Muslim. Group called Mohalla Ekta Committee was formulated to join Hindus, Muslims and police so that they can prevent the emergence of riots at its beginning. Common folk still reminiscises the glorious past with nostalgic feelings that Bombay once had been a beautiful city containing harbour, several bays, creeks, rivers, hills. Now the city has become complex catering and harbouring multiple culture and identity. Apart from this varied identity, political and financial nexus has also contributed a lot to this complexity. The leading political party Shiv Sena terms itself as a "social service organization." (p.63) Sunil says that police and ministers favour them as they have *powertoni* is centralization of power and execution of it on the behalf of someone else. Muslim groups are divided in to various sub sects such as Dawoodi Bohras, Ismailis, Debobandis and Bareilvis, they usually hate each other but they also got united during riots for their collective identity. "The riots of 1992 and 1993 have created havoc to the ethnic and psychic life of the city, as it gave a sudden rise of two different worlds and the real catastrophe surged with slums.

Shiv Sena, Bal Keshav Thackeray upholds the biggest *powertoni* in Mumbai. His false pride was one of the reasons of the surge of the unrest and strife. A woman from Jogeshwari slums says that he is biased with Muslims. "If his paper doesn't have the word "Muslims" in its headline, it won't sell a single copy." (p.64) Uncertainty avoidance and unequal power distribution led the commoner frame their collective identity to resist their ethnicity. When the slum dwellers were proposed with urban redevelopment scheme, they resisted against it and the reason of their non-conformity was the sense of unity which they pose in slums. Although they are deprived of basic amenities of living, they are pacified with the spherical and cultural arena of the city which they have erected among themselves. For them empty rooms in the big cities are more horrifying than open gutters and filthy toilets.

Gender is the another medium to assert collective and individual identity. In the midst of social and political unrest Arifa Khan, taking a group of eight other women of Jogeshwari slum initiated an organization named Rahe-haq-The Right Path to address the common problems of slum to the authority. They took the issues of toilet, and water to the municipal office; resultantly few of the toilets were cleaned. They also took *pani morcha* for proper water supply and finally municipality increased water supply. The group was also approached by common people for the issue of riots. They got a large scale to work on various issues. The committee was also resolving the problems of divorce of Muslim women. They use to counsel the couples if there were the chances of settlement. The committee had a legal advisor to advice these women. Committee members say, "We listen to both the sides; we talk to orthodox people using religious arguments, then we get people back together. If the men are criminals, we take them to court." (p.58) The committee contained around fifteen women among them mostly were Muslims but not all. They transcended their religious identity to combat with social evils as being women they were confronting the situation of squalour, filth, impoverishment and social backwardness. With this they proclaimed their gender identity for this they had to confront opposition and curses of the society and their family members as well. They also set up a day care centre which was later taken up by the few boys of the slum at knifepoint for smoke, charas, hashish and ganja. These women later had to continue in a smaller room then requested to municipal corporation for a bigger room for a lock.

Mehta interviews and studies about the terrorist organization i.e. D-Company. A boy name Mohsin explains that their work is arranged and organized from Dubai. His weekly expenses are twenty thousand apart from that he also takes supari for which he gets two lakhs. If the person is non-Muslim, he kills him without thinking and if he is Muslim and if he is not wrong Mohsin returns the money to the company. Mohsin explains, "I'm doing this for Islam, During the riots, it was a matter of our *izzat*. If there had been no Hindu-Muslim issue, there would be no gangwar." (p.209) Mehta also depicts about an investigative journalist, Hussain Jaidi who continuously searches for truth and reveals the nexus of politics, crime and underworld.

Mehta also takes to mysterious and glimmering alley of Bollywood. He had protracted interviews with film-makers like Ram Gopal Verma and Mahesh Bhatt and had in-depth conversations with budding and struggling actors and stars which led to the discovery of harsh realities of the glamour of Bollywood. He also studies about bar culture, sexual corruption and the strife of bar dancers. He describes one

beautiful and famous dancers named 'Honey'. She is a transgender who is battling between her gender identity and the identity of bar dancers. Another dancer whom Mehta calls Monalisa, she is trying to resist her professional identity keeping her desire for marriage subsided. She says that nobody will love and marry her and now she has accepted her professional identity to earn financial stability for the family and for her own life. She says, "Behind every earner there are fifty eaters,"(p.297) But behind this professionalism and acceptance she is suffering from alienation and many a times she has done suicidal attempts. These struggling individuals signify the perseverance and strong will power to resist and emerge victoriously against all the oddities of Mumbai.

In the final section of the book Suketu Mehta identifies the affinity and bond between the city and its people. In Mumbai every individual is struggling hard between two aspects: collectivism and individualism. "A solitary human being here has two choices: He can be subsumed within the crowd, reduce himself to a cell of a larger organism or he can retain a stubborn, almost obdurate sense of his own individuality."(p.580) In order to strengthen the dream of the city one has to stay spirited and keeps on aspiring that's the beauty of the city beat. "The battle of Bombay is the battle of the self against the crowd."(p.580) Every individual some or the other way tries to identify himself with the collective society. The Muslim members of the D-Company identify themselves as the soldiers of quam. The Shiv Sena workers think themselves to be in the service of nation. All are "individually multiple, severally one".(p.580) In the final section of the book Mehta finds himself merging with city and vice-versa. He proclaims finally that an individual is an unit of collective mass identity and mass is the conglomeration of many individuals. This unending dichotomy of individualism and collectivism, is the quintessential part of this metropolis. "The battle is Man against the Meropolis."(p.580)

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