Conclusion

In a study of ‘images of the city in the crime novel’ (Jean-Noël Blanc, Polarville) the author writes that his analysis will bear, ‘not upon some supposed real city, situated somewhere in the world and which the crime novel would describe in the fashion of a touristic or geographic description, but rather upon the city of paper which the crime novel drafts: written, unreal, symbolic, coded’. But what the writer calls the ‘real city’ is never experienced simply as such, as separate from the ‘paper city’. At the same time that the city is experienced as a physically factual built environment, it is also, in the perception of its inhabitants, a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a television programme, a comic strip, and so on. (Burgin, Some Cities 175) (emphasis in original)

The “urban” in the subcontinent of India has only recently been the subject of serious scholarly study. Here, I have attempted to explore how Calcutta, a city that both demands and defies representations, is as much an imaginary space as it is physical. I argue that it is at the juncture of the real and unreal, the factual and fictional that the city uneasily sits, and thus, it is that space which needs to be examined. My work has also emphasised the need to replace monolithic structures like “The Indian City” with micro-narratives on different cities like Calcutta, Delhi or Mumbai. Calcutta is a curious city. In a way it is a city of the past, of old spatial and historical dimensions rather than an important node of national political economy. Calcutta is no Bangalore or Hyderabad, it is not even Mumbai or Delhi. History, memory and identity are its most trusted tools against flux and change.

My thesis began with an introduction which dealt with the history and the geography of the city of Calcutta. It recalled some of the important moments in the history of the city and traced the changes that have come about in the physical geography of the city. It very briefly
described the city’s origins and drew upon a variety of historical sources to sketch the growth of the city from its rural beginnings. Since most of the unique facets of the city have their roots in the colonial past, I have made an attempt to narrate the growth and spread of the Raj in Calcutta and its socio-cultural and political dimensions. This has also helped me to view the spatial dimensions of these developments, for instance the structuring of the landscape of the city into the “white” and the “black” spaces.

Since the “post-Independent” is both a consequence and a result of the “colonial”, my narrative has mentioned some of the significant moments of the city’s colonial past: the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the first Bengal Partition of 1905, the two World Wars and their socio-economic fallout, and so on. I have also looked in some detail at the Great Famine of 1943 which finds its reverberations in many of the texts I later deal with, for example the cinematic rendering of this tragic moment in Mrinal Sen’s Calcutta 71. The Independence of the country came at a great price for the city, as Calcutta was divided along communal lines. The Great Calcutta Killing left a deep chasm in the city’s psyche. The Partition that accompanied the ravages of communalism destroyed Calcutta’s physical amenities. Waves of refugees continued to lash on the city’s shores through the following decades and the resultant plight of both the city and its refugees find their expression in almost all the “texts” I read in this work – be it the “accented” films of Ritwik Ghatak or the “shadowlines” etched in Amitav Ghosh’s novels. My work considers the moment of Bengal Partition in 1947 and the resultant refugee influx to the city and the state as the defining moment in the city’s recent history. This experience, I argue, transcends even the momentous changes globalisation has brought into the city. For instance Sthaniya Sambaad, a film that narrates the effects of the new economics of the city, cannot but locate itself in the fragmented and fragmentary spaces inhabited by the refugees, who remain refugees in the city even decades after their arrival.
My first chapter looked at a brief sample of post-Independence (and pre-1988) Bengali novels to analyse their representations of the city, Calcutta. Here I might add a few lines justifying my decision to select the genre of the novel in my analyses of literary texts, both Bengali and English. The novel, as Bakhtin notes, “represents a non-specialist and ‘non-disciplined’ discourse that, in telling stories about people in recognisable worlds, picks up on all sorts of other more specialist discourses and cultural practices” (qtd. in Berger 85). Since the novel can be seen as the meeting point of various forms of “remembrances” and their narratives, I feel it is appropriate to privilege the genre for texts that bring out the various facets of the city. The image of the city that emerges in the narratives that I have looked at in this chapter is inhospitable and hostile to those who seek refuge in its fold. From Shanti to Aditya and Renu to Himadri, I have looked at a whole range of characters embedded in the matrix of a hostile city. Their predicaments are often reflections of the city’s rejection of their overtures. These narratives also describe displacements – geographical, economic, social – occasioned by political turbulence. They play out the binary of the urban versus the provincial (a displacement central to almost all these narratives). The city is often seen as asphyxiating and claustrophobic, an anti-thesis to the “locus amoenus”, which harks back to the “provincial”. But the characters stick on, struggling to carve out a space for themselves in the “urban”, often with tragic consequences. This trope is played out in many of the narratives here – be it the search for “home” of Himadri and Dhrubo, or, in another sense, Aditya’s struggle to speak for the city’s “encounter” victims, objects of police brutality.

The second chapter moved on to the post-1988 period and to Indian fiction in English. It focused on samples from four writers – Amitav Ghosh, Raj Kamal Jha, Indrajit Hazra and Amit Chaudhuri. I have tried to engage with various themes that emerge in the narratives’ engagement with the city space. In Amitav Ghosh, I have read themes of displacement and migration, through the landscape of a city that carries these burdens. The nameless narrator in
*The Shadow Lines* decodes in this landscape the various forms of refugee experience, mapping the city in elements “peculiar” to it – the locations of *adda*, the landscapes of failure defined in *bhadralok* terms and the intersection of the mythical and the real. The inscrutable, dark landscape of the chromosome of Calcutta, and the bewildered characters who try to decode it and fail, find their parallels in Jha’s sinister narratives of the city. The cry of the girl child that resounds through the city, I have argued, is the cry of the city itself. The soundscapes that emerge through narratives appear to stress silence rather than speech.

Hazra’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, on the other hand, breaks this silence and erupts in the image of a city set ablaze. I have read the theme of urban arson into this narrative and have argued that the burning of the Calcutta Book Fair is the burning of Calcutta itself. The lyrical renditions of the city in the singer-novelist Chaudhuri’s novels, bring out a whole range of images – from framing the city and the space of the home in the city as a “locus amoenus” to presenting the city as a cleansed space with its own exclusionary practices. Chaudhuri focuses on the “everyday” city. His characters, even when they venture out into the city, and become part of the anomic urban crowd, carefully maintain their distance. In all this, emerges the “city of the mind”, where the social space is as carefully constructed as Lefebvre’s proverbial “rich, layered pastry”.

The third chapter turns its attention to cinematic representation of the city and within that, to the Holy Trinity of neo-realist auteurs – Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. It looks at and “reads” a range of selected city films by these masters, and the space devoted to these cinematic narratives in my thesis, I hope, is justified by the varied images of the city that they bring out. Almost all these films frame a city in conflict, as they narrate historically and politically turbulent phases of the city of Calcutta. The conflicts brought out here are numerous – the women who go out into the city and defy patriarchy, the suburbs that empty out into the city, the rebellious young men and women who challenge the class structures of
the city, the conflicts born out of hunger and poverty, the struggle of child labourers, the
incongruous lives and value systems of the city’s middle classes. In all this, there emerges a
city that is both alluring and repellent. In the process, I have argued, Calcutta becomes not
one but many, the “cities” of Calcutta, multitudinous faces of a city that moulds itself in a
variety of forms.

The fourth chapter continues to engage with the representations of the city in films. It
looks beyond the Trinity, to the younger generation of filmmakers, born after Independence,
and beyond the 1970s to the present. The narrow focus here confines my analysis to selected
films of Aparna Sen, Anjan Dutt, and the director duo of Moinak Biswas and Arjun
Gourisaria. I have read both Aparna Sen and Anjan Dutt as representing the neo-
melodramatic tradition of filmmaking. These cinematic narratives, I have argued, shed all
pretensions of constructing a grand narrative of the city. Here, the city remains fragmented
and intensely personal. Even the “issues” of the “urban” experience narrated in these films –
the middle class woman’s struggle against constrictive spaces inside the home and the city,
the loneliness and pathos encoded in minority spaces, the fragmentation within migrant
communities, the overarching effects of globalisation – find their expressions in the personal
renderings and perceptions of these issues. These perceptions, I have argued, are as much the
city as the tangible physical “reality” of its space.

The fifth chapter looks at the “popular” as “texts” representing the city. Since there are
so many different forms of the popular, it is only possible to analyse in some detail a selected
segment of it. And I have selected two of the very “urban” forms of the popular –
advertisement hoardings or billboards that dot the skyscape of the city and urban folk music,
an almost “bardic” tradition unique to Calcutta. Again, I have selected the most famous three
solo singers for my analysis – Suman, Anjan Dutt and Nachiketa. I have not looked at the
Bengali rock bands, who are a very important part of this tradition, I confess, because of
limitations of space. In the case of the advertisement hoardings, I have had to limit myself to the ones that have come up since I began this work, in 2007. In my reading of the billboards that loom over the city, I have focused on the levelling of the heterogeneity that characterises the consumerist representations of the city. I have shown how the repeated use of certain images, the image of the Metropolitan building, for example, encodes those images with a certain representational value, and how consumerist culture taps into these codes. I treat the urban folk songs as an important cultural intervention in the representation of the city. They uncover the hegemonic city as they sift through the jungle of signifiers the city projects and they focus on individual stories of loss and loneliness, as the various songs discussed here prove.

The various faces of the city that come through in my five chapters constitute a heterogeneous space of representation. If the time-frame I have chosen is a continuity in terms of its historical, political and social dimensions, I would argue that they bring out the contexts of this representation. The hungry predator that emerges in the Bengali novels of the 1950s onwards is also a “lost” city that has taken in more refugees than it can contain. Considering this, perhaps it is no coincidence that in more realistic fictional representations in Bengali, the city becomes a hostile space that steadfastly refuses refuge. The cinematic representations of the “Trinity”, steeped as they are in the political struggles of the 1960s and the 70s, run parallel to this. My conclusion here is of course the contextual specificity of the representations – the city can never exist in a political vacuum. Even when conceived in the Indian English imagination, it cannot shed its moorings in real space and time. Whether attempting to sanitise the spaces of the city (in Ghosh’s attempt to cleanse the city of Naxalite violence or Chaudhuri’s rejection of the underclass space) or framing the city in the surreal mode (in Jha’s snow-washed Calcutta or Hazra’s borrowed, anachronistic fictional landscape of 72 Banamali Naskar Lane), the English novelists too make absences resonant. Through its
rejection, the context becomes more insistent, as, I hope, my analysis has shown. The fragmented, personal narratives of Aparna Sen or the nostalgia that comes through in the advertising billboards, referring to an “iconic” past, also bear witness to the contextual specificity of representation. The city takes its shape through the narrations’ engagement with that past and present context. This also applies to the “reader” of these images. My (the reader’s) position vis-a-vis the city has of course refashioned some of these representations.

This takes us back to the foundations of this study – the essentially subjective nature of the representation of the city. We must return to Victor Burgin, with whom this concluding section began. The city “is also, in the perception of its inhabitants, a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a television programme, a comic strip, and so on” (Burgin 175). At times, it is as subjective as the imaginary cartography of Mithi’s (of 15 Park Avenue) address in the city. A city represented is also a city remembered, a city experienced and perceived and a city dreamt of and hoped for.