CHAPTER II

Cities of the Mind: Representation of Calcutta in the Novels of

Amitav Ghosh, Raj Kamal Jha, Indrajit Hazra

and Amit Chaudhuri

It should be no surprise that some of the earliest samples of Indian Writing in English were produced by Bengalis rooted in the urban milieu of Calcutta, given the colonial presence in the city and the consequent spread of the English language among the city’s elite. Raja Rammohan Roy was perhaps the first among the native urban elite to express himself in English. “The new intelligentsia represented by Raja Rammohan Roy, Dwarakanath Tagore and Baidyanath Mukherjee” (M.K. Ray 177) was perhaps the most influential in this regard and their use and promotion of English further facilitated the spread of the language in the city. Many Indian writers in English have emerged from the urban milieu of Calcutta – from Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Toru Dutt to Indrajit Hazra and Saikat Majumdar – and these writers have constantly negotiated the city and their perceptions of it in their works. This chapter looks at a very brief sample of post-Independence Indian writing in English to analyse its representations of the city. It focuses on four writers – Amitav Ghosh, Raj Kamal Jha, Indrajit Hazra and Amit Chaudhuri – and some of their narrative fiction.

Amitav Ghosh: The Shadow Lines and Calcutta Chromosome

He did not have to tell me where it was. I knew already, for the map was in my head.

(Ghosh, The Shadow Lines 56).
Amitav Ghosh’s celebrated novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988) begins with a short paragraph that describes a journey: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father’s aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib” (3). This is a much underplayed description of a journey that has enormous implications for the narrative of *The Shadow Lines* – a narrative about/of journeys. The novel, in very simple terms, is about the journey of a boy/narrator – growing up in Calcutta, and then moving to Delhi and London and his unique way of looking at the world – a trait which was gifted to him by his eccentric uncle, Tridib. A closer look at the narrative will reveal the spatial quality of the vector field, to borrow a concept from physics, of these journeys – *The Shadow Lines* is about journeys “away” and “to” Calcutta. A look at the chapter titles – “Going Away” and “Coming Away” – provides further evidence for this argument. In other words, at the centre of a complex grid of border crossings and cultural/spatial travels that make up this novel lies one city – Calcutta. This section will look at the representation of this city space and its cultural practices in the novel.

Let us begin our discussion with a look at the narrator himself. As we have specified above, *The Shadow Lines* traces the narrator’s journeys across vast and varied urban and cultural landscapes. His recollections regarding three generations of his relatives also consist of vast expanses of landscapes traversed in acts of migrations. The narrator himself, as Robert Dixon points out, finds a “dwelling in travel” (18). But it is his trajectories within the city that I am interested in. And I would argue that his journeys “away” from the city of Calcutta also traces his essential location in the caste/class hierarchies within the city, and consequently, become representations of the city that is written into his character.

Writing about *The Shadow Lines*, Meenakshi Mukherjee seeks to “emphasize the concreteness of the existential and emotional milieu in which Tridib and his reflected image –
the unnamed narrator – are situated” (259). This spatial/cultural milieu (Calcutta) and its cultural practices define the fate of the unnamed narrator. His family belongs to the class of the Bangali bhadralok – a class distinguished for its high culture, education and its essentially urban (read Calcutta) moorings. Ghosh carefully defines their values, beliefs and aspirations. For instance, note the narrator’s career graph. He goes to a good school in central Calcutta – most probably a missionary school. This is revealed through casual comments in the novel. The description of the route taken by his school bus when returning home on the day of the riot shows that his school is somewhere between Park Circus and Park Street, an area where most of the “good” English-medium Calcutta schools (like St. Xavier’s) are located. Again, his mathematics teacher is Mrs Anderson, an Anglo-Indian lady – a prominent figure in missionary schools in Calcutta. The narrator moves from Calcutta to Delhi for further education. Ghosh carefully locates the college that the narrator goes to on the Delhi University campus, and we recognise that it is St. Stephen’s College, Ghosh’s own alma mater, that is being described (92). The sprawling campus setting comes through unmistakeably in the spatial coordinates of Delhi. After Delhi, the narrator leaves for London. London is a dream destination for most Calcuttans – a sign of the “relentless educational compulsions” (Mukherjee 259) of his/her class and the residual effect of colonialism. These journeys, I argue, are mapped onto the narrator and they, in turn, map out the narrator’s Calcutta moorings.

The class aspirations of the Bengali bhadralok that have defined the trajectories of the narrator’s journeys “away” from home also find spatial representations within Calcutta. One way in which it comes through is in the representations of the dreaded “other” – in the representation of a landscape that stands for the failure to fulfil class aspirations, the bhadralok’s fall from grace. This fear of failure and its association with spaces is poignantly
revealed when the narrator and his family go to visit his grandmother’s relatives living in humble dwellings in Garia (in the deep south of the city):

It was true of course that I could not see the landscape or anything like it from my own window, but its presence was palpable everywhere in our house; I had grown up with it. It was the landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother’s voice when she drilled me for my examinations; it was to those slopes she pointed when she told me that if I didn’t study hard I would end up over there, that the only weapon people like us had was our brains and if we didn’t use them like claws to cling to what we’d got, that was where we’d end up, marooned in that landscape: I knew perfectly well that all it would take was a couple of failed examinations to put me where our relative was. (134)

The same fear is evoked in the grandmother’s distaste and fear of people occupying certain city spaces:

Part of the reason why my grandmother was so wary of him [Tridib] was that she had seen him a couple of times at the street corners around Gole Park [in south Calcutta] where we lived. She had a deep horror of the young men who spent their time at the street-corner addas and tea-stalls around there. All fail cases, she would sniff; think of their poor mothers, flung out on the dung-heaps, starving. (7)

This passage brings out a fascinating cityspace, perhaps, peculiar to the city of Calcutta – the space for adda. Adda is almost synonymous with Bengali culture. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay “Adda: A History of Sociality”, featured in Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, describes the phenomenon of adda “as something quintessentially Bengali, as an indispensable part of the Bengali character, or as an integral
part of such metaphysical notions as ‘life’ and ‘vitality’ for the Bengalis” (182). In fact, wherever there are Bengalis there is bound to be an *adda*. It is a friendly, casual conversation carried on at an informal gathering of like-minded people, who want to talk their hearts out as a means of relaxation during leisure hours. According to many Bengalis (like the narrator’s grandmother) it is a “flawed social practice”, a “practice that promotes sheer laziness in the population” (Chakrabarty 181). It is said that an easy way to spot your Bengali friend is to find out his *addakhana* or *thhek*, i.e., the place of *adda*. It may be a street-side tea-stall, it may be the football-club or the local-club of the *para* or the neighbourhood. The narrator maps out a landscape of *adda* through the streets and by-lanes of Calcutta, in search of Tridib – that “conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park”:

> But if I happened to hear that Tridib was around I would double back through the park and the back lanes. Someone would always be able to tell me where he was: he was a familiar figure within the floating, talkative population of students and would-be footballers and bank clerks and small-time politicos and all the rest would gravitate towards that conversation-loving stretch of road between Gariahat and Gole Park. (8)

As for Tridib, these *adda* sessions become occasions for mapping new territories through stories and anecdotes of far-flung places. Through his stories these locales get superimposed on that stretch of Calcutta:

> But occasionally, when he was in the mood and somebody happened to say something that made a breach in his vast reservoirs of abstruse information, he would begin to hold forth on all kinds of subjects – Mesopotamian stellae, East European jazz, the habits of arboreal apes, the
plays of Garcia Lorca, there seemed to be no end to the things he could
talk about. (8-9)

*The Shadow Lines* is a narrative that weaves an interesting grid of migrations in and out of Calcutta. Going further, I would argue that the narrative also brings out a view of Calcutta as a landscape fractured by forced migrations. Let us look at an extract that occurs at the beginning of the novel where the narrator describes how the streets where he grew up have changed over the years:

When I go past Gole Park now I often wonder whether that would happen today. I don’t know, I can’t tell: that world is closed to me, shut off by too many years spent away: Montu [his childhood friend and neighbour] went away to America years ago and Nathu Chaubey, I heard, went back to Banaras and started a hotel. When I walk past his paan-shop now . . . somehow, though the paan-shop hasn’t changed, I find myself doubting it. At that time, in the early ’sixties there were so few cars around that we thought nothing of playing football on the streets around the roundabout – making way occasionally for the number 9 . . . There were only a few scattered shacks on Gariahat Road then, put up by the earliest refugees from the east. Gole Park was considered to be more or less outside Calcutta: in school when I said I lived there the boys from central Calcutta would often ask me if I caught a train every morning as though I lived in some far-flung refugee camp on the border. (7-8)

In this one paragraph that occurs very early in the narrative, Ghosh tells us a lot about the narrator – apart from the obvious fact that he has stayed away from Calcutta for quite some
time, it hints that he and his family have migrated from Bangladesh. In its very few words, it encapsulates the history of displacements across the border and the inevitable demographic and cultural changes and the conflicts it wrought on the city. The paragraph maps out the sections of the city inhabited by the immigrants – the stretches that constitute “South Calcutta” (The narrator is curiously silent about North Calcutta.). The West Bengalis (or Ghotis, as the slang would have it) living in “Central and North Calcutta” would come to look at this landscape as a suburb, or as “some far-flung refugee camp on the border”. This landscape, the “other” of the bustling, “central city”, came to be associated with the squalor that represented the fate of the immigrants struggling to survive the scars of displacement. Krishna Dutta draws a vivid picture of this scene:

The refugees were camping in the streets, scratching a living by setting up tea shops and tiny kiosks selling cigarettes and *pan*. Listless and bored, they spat the blood-red juice from chewing *pan* all over the city’s walls and pavements, not bothering with a spittoon. Lacking any kind of sanitation, they defecated in the open gutters. Babies were born on the railway platform and open streets without much ado, let alone medical treatment. The streets were alive with rats, cockroaches and flies, and scavenging dogs and vultures. (172)

Many of those who had migrated to Calcutta before Partition had family connections and financial backing that helped them establish themselves as the *bhadralok* before the wave of impoverished immigrants began to lash on the shores of the city post Partition. And it was inevitable that they wanted to distinguish themselves from the poorer lot. Thus, this landscape becomes further fractured, as is reflected in the narrator’s grandmother:
My grandmother, looking out of her window in amazement, exclaimed:

When I last came here (Garia) ten years ago, there were rice-fields running alongside the road; it was the kind of place where rich Calcutta people built garden houses. And look at it now – as filthy as a babui’s nest. It’s all because of the refugees, flooding in like that.

Just like we did, said my father, to provoke her.

We’re not refugees, snapped my grandmother, on cue. We came long before Partition. (131)

Cities are manufactured in imagination, by popular discourse and writing. This point is elaborated by Tuomas Huttunen in his essay “Representation of London in The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh”. He cites Fredric Jameson’s discussion of the change from market to monopoly capital in “Cognitive Mapping”, where Jameson detects “a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience” (Jameson 158). Carrying this argument forward into literature, Huttunen says that the immediate experience of an individual subject, which according to Jameson was previously the primary raw material of fiction, is now reduced to only one of the sectors in the social world. What is more, the way this sector of immediate sense-perception is realised does not necessarily coincide with its actual socio-cultural present. He elaborates his point by showing how in The Shadow Lines, the representation of the narrator’s imaginary London is different from the lived experience of the other characters. Developing the same argument while discussing the representation of Calcutta in the novel, I will argue that this representation of Calcutta differs from and excludes certain lived experiences.
While speaking of London in *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator says, “I wanted to know England not as I saw her, but in her finest hour – every place chooses its own and to me it did not seem an accident that England had chosen hers in war” (57). If the London that Ghosh describes is the city in its finest hour, then the Calcutta that he speaks of is also the city in its finest hour – the 1960s’ Calcutta. It was time when Calcutta was most culturally vibrant – with the cultural scene in the city bustling with activity – but it was also the decade that witnessed the tragic Naxalite movement. It is the Calcutta that many would want to know and several refer to with a deep sense of nostalgia. However, though Ghosh describes much of the 60s’ Calcutta, he is silent about the Naxalite movement that shattered the city towards the end of the decade. It is a little strange that an observant and sensitive character like the narrator of the novel was not at all affected by this movement. One wonders whether this is an attempt to cleanse the cityscape of a kind of violence that left the city scarred for life. Is he intending to create a picture of Calcutta that is unmarked by the tragedy? However, this is not to say that Ghosh’s novel is censored of all violence. Rather it is a novel that exposes the face of brutality with ease. One instance of this is the narrator’s – then just a school boy returning from school with his friends – experience of the 1964 riots in the city. Interestingly, the narrative here contains little action. However, it conjures up a city space that is hauntingly still and menacing in its silence, a contrast to the lively, bustling urban world of normalcy:

Tublu shook my elbow and pointed at a rickshaw that had been pulled across the mouth of a narrow lane. The others saw it to and turned to stare. We couldn’t take our eyes off it, even after we left it far behind. There was no reason for us to stare: we saw rickshaws standing at untidy angles in the streets every time we went out. And yet we could not help staring at it: there was something about the angle at which it had been placed that
was eloquent of an intent we could not fathom: had it been put there to keep Muslims in or Hindus out? At that moment we could read the disarrangement of our universe in the perfectly ordinary angle of an abandoned rickshaw. (203)

The rickshaw, an innocuous everyday sight in the city space, turns into a menacing object fracturing the cityscape, into a boundary dividing the city along the lines of religion.

In *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), Ghosh continues to engage with the landscape of Calcutta. The Calcutta that Ghosh presents here is mainly the Calcutta of the 1990s – a period when the city was in the process of re-invention. It was a time when the city was realising its inadequacies and was desperately trying to re-create itself. And as in *The Shadow Lines*, here too the city is carefully mapped by Ghosh. When the character of Murugan is introduced, he is carefully worked into the landscape of the city. The passage is so accurate in its spatial specificities that anyone who is even slightly acquainted with the Calcutta roads will immediately locate Murugan:

Walking past St Paul’s Cathedral, on his first day in Calcutta, August 20, 1995, Murugan was caught unawares by a monsoon downpour. He was on his way to Presidency General Hospital, on Lower Circular Road, to look for the memorial to the British scientist Ronald Ross. (Ghosh, *The Calcutta Chromosome* 20)

Such references of the city abound in the novel. As in the case of *The Shadow Lines*, the narrative here continues to evoke landscapes that are specifically constructed to convey various images of the city. Some of these landscapes, one may argue, perpetuate stereotypes
associated with the landscape of Calcutta. Thus, for instance, we have Ghosh carefully constructing the landscapes of sinful desires erected on the debris of colonial ruins:

On Free School Street. I was walking past New Market, on my way home, when a guy came up to me and whispered in my ear. I guessed he was a pimp… It was irresistible. All I had was five rupees but that was enough. He led me down one of those thin alleys around Free School Street, just around the corner from the Armenian school, where William Thackeray was born. (237)

Interestingly, the spatial imagery of the city here, once again, ignores north Calcutta. The whole action of the novel unfolds between Chowringhee, Alipore, Gariahat, Rabindra Sadan, Kalighat, Robinson Street and PG Hospital. The narrative seems curiously inhibited about north Calcutta, while spreading itself over south and central Calcutta, areas of the city that have risen to economic prominence as well as hubs that were once the refuge of the migrant populations. Also, the Calcutta that finds representation in Ghosh is undoubtedly a very “Bengali” Calcutta. It is a landscape that is curiously cleansed of the non-Bengali populations. Yet, as statistics show more than 50 per cent of this bustling cosmopolitan city’s population comprise “non-Bengalis”. This term, a standard usage in Bengal, would scarcely be allowed in standard English, but indicates a Bengali insularity also typical of Calcutta.

Such people hardly find a place in Ghosh’s novels. The Shadow Lines has only two non-Bengali Calcuttans – Mrs Anderson (the narrator’s school teacher) and Nathu Chaubey, the paanwala – and they are quite forgettable in the entire scheme of the novel. The Calcutta Chromosome has only one non-Bengali Calcuttan – Mrs Aratounian. Murugan is from Calcutta but has lived away in New York for a long time and his is a character who cannot be localised, like the characters of Sonali and Urmila. The only reference to any migrant community is restricted to the Nepali workers at Romen Haldar’s construction site. This
makes the representation of Calcutta hardly cosmopolitan. This silence about, and the erasure of, the “others” of the city, one is compelled to argue, runs parallel to Ghosh’s attempt to recover a pristine urban landscape untouched by violence or invasions by the “other”, as seen in *The Shadow Lines*.

This romanticisation of the city, I argue, helps in the re-invention of Calcutta, but while doing so, Ghosh fuels the Western imagination of the exotic, oriental “other”. *The Calcutta Chromosome* has been dubbed as science fiction. The central thematic of the novel is built around the idea of the transmigration of souls. Ghosh vaguely refers to the fact that Mangala might have chanced upon a chromosome that enabled her to transmigrate. But this explanation is hardly scientific. The ceremony in which transmigration takes place is replete with elements that evoke the sense of the oriental “other” – cymbals, incense sticks, chants, trance, etc. The powerful character of Mangala is reminiscent of “Shakti” – the female principle – but in the way the West would see it. And the city – dark, mysterious and often menacing – inevitably has these elements inscribed in it. As the writer Phulboni mentions, he has “wandered the darkness of these streets, searching for the unseen presence that reigns over this presence.” In a sense, we encounter this same dark, mysterious city in the narratives of Raj Kamal Jha.

**Raj Kamal Jha: The Blue Bedspread and If You are Afraid of Heights**

As Father rolls his socks and puts them into his shoes, one by one, he can smell the city on his feet. (Jha, *If You are Afraid of Heights* 3)
This section of my chapter deals with Raj Kamal Jha’s two novels, *The Blue Bedspread* (1999) and *If You are Afraid of Heights* (2003) and the Calcutta that is represented in these two novels.

*The Blue Bedspread* takes place over the course of one night, in Calcutta. A man is woken up by a late-night phone call. His sister has died during childbirth and he is asked to take care of the orphaned child, his nephew, until adoptive parents can be notified. While the baby sleeps in the next room, the man begins to write down his memories of his sister and the childhood they spent together. As these memories take the form of a narrative, he uncovers unsettling secrets of his past, and seeks to come to terms with them. The novel begins with, “I could begin with my name, but forget it, why waste time, it doesn’t matter in this city of twelve million names” (3), where the city could be any city really, but it gains identity when the narrator says, “They are coming to take you soon, the man and the woman. They will give you everything you need; they will take you to the Alipore Zoo, to the Birla Planetarium . . .” (4). This is where we are certain that the novel is set in Calcutta. The exact co-ordinates of the house in which the man writes the story are given next, “We are on Main Circular Road, which connects the north to the south of the city, the airport to the station, and right through the day buses and trams, trucks and taxis keep passing by . . .” (5). Although there is no such road in Calcutta, the city creeps into the narrative in its everyday practices with, “There’s a circus in the city. All trams have black-and-yellow posters plastered onto their sides, I have been watching them all day: RAYMAN CIRCUS, TALA PARK, THREE SHOWS, ONE, FOUR AND SEVEN P.M.” (10). Thus, the city of Calcutta begins to be etched out in the narrative.

As the narrative unfurls the guilt and the silences of a childhood, the city slowly starts to reflect the psyche of the narrator. It becomes another signifier of the narrator’s effort to
exorcise the ghosts of his past. Perhaps, this is reflected in the way the narrator perceives the city, as a place of dirt and squalor, where his trousers and his shirt are not spared from the dirt of the “city’s fingerprints on the collar and the cuffs” (14). Even when the dirt is physically washed off, it does not seem to get off the psyche of the urban inhabitant, like the blood on Lady Macbeth’s hands. We realise here that it is not just “real” dirt that the narrator is describing, but dirt as a symbol of a murky past, a past that clings on and refuses to get off one’s back. Thus, the landscape of the city becomes a landscape of guilt and sin.

The city enters the narrative both as its backdrop and as a mirror that reflects the narrative, as a landscape that is constantly fashioned and refashioned in the mind/gaze of the characters. As Richard Lehan suggests in his study, *The City in Literature*, “the city as a physical place [gives] way to the city as a state of mind” (76). In an interesting passage, the narrator’s dream refashions one of the colonial edifices in the city into a site of longing and desire:

> Sometimes, in what seems like a dream, I see a marble palace, which looks like the Victoria Memorial, where she sits on a wrought-iron bench in the garden, one leg crossed over the other, regal and lonely. Swans glide past her on the grass, white against the blue of the city. (10)

The same city is jolted into a brute reality and is refashioned in the narrator’s gaze as a garbage dump. This latter landscape, in contrast to the passage above, signifies decay:

> Across the road, at the bus stop, the yellow light from the street lamps falls onto the garbage dump. It’s so far that I can’t make out what all it’s falling on, I can only imagine: cracked plastic buckets, tufts of hair from the combs in the neighbourhood, women’s hair, tangled and knotted, some dry, some oiled. Scraps
of newspaper, fish bones, vegetable peels. Nothing new, it’s been the same all these years, except that by now some of the clumps of hair have begun to gray.

(12)

The city framed as a garden where swans glide in the background of green grass and blue skies (specified as “the city in winter”) returns framed as a landscape of desire in the sister’s dreams, as one of the secrets that she shares with her brother (24), while the city on the night of her death is a landscape emptied of all meanings for the narrator: “Let the city pass us tonight because it has nothing to show, no longer does it have your mother, my sister. We shall not roll the windows down . . .” (17).

The most striking feature of the narrative of The Blue Bedspread is the haunting silence that runs through the narrative:

. . . silence sits in one corner of the house; when I move my head to the right, when I move it to the left, I can hear the stubble on my chin graze my collar, I can hear my breath, even the crick in my neck, some muscle being pulled, some bone rubbing against some other bone. (6)

This silence echoes through the narrative. We hear the narrator whisper the secrets of his childhood into our ears. There is a child sleeping in the other room. I read the landscape of the city, in this narrative, as a “soundscape” juxtaposed against this narrative of silence – at times, as a quiet presence and at some other moments, exploding over the silences as a deafening, teeming soundscape. As Jack Stewart notes in his study of soundscapes, “The urban soundscapes resonate with lives and purposes, articulated in the sonic expression, in various registers, of biorhythms, work, customs, commerce, voices, traffic, the non-stop pursuit of pleasure, success of survival” (130). They evoke characteristic activities and
sensations. The soundscapes of the city are fascinating because they bring out, within their sonic maps of the city, visual images. Drawing again on Stewart’s example of the contrastive images that a soundscape brings out – “the lulling calm after the bombardment involves contrastive visual and aural rhythms” (139) – it is interesting to note the phonic imagination that Jha brings into play to perceive the city as a multisensory reality. This is especially evident in the chapter “Maternity Ward”, where the city enters the silences of the ward as a soundscape:

From outside, she can faintly hear the car horns, the revving up of an engine, a man’s voice calling out loud. Someone coughs in the hall way: it’s the sweeper doing the rounds, and after a while, when road falls silent, she can hear the sounds of his mop on the marble floor, the slaps of his slippers. (109)

The silence of the house on Main Circular Road at midnight is described in contrast to the soundscape of a bustling city street of the day: “[T]he horns and the breaks, the angry passengers asking the driver to please slow down or stop, bus conductors coughing and spitting, jangling the bells, shouting their destinations in between” (5). The soundscapes of the city are also evoked by Jha in If You are Afraid of Heights, where a child’s cry resonates over the city, “like someone’s recorded it on a sophisticated tape, the kind they use in radio stations, and is now hiding in the shadows, playing the tape . . .” (10). Jha’s phonic imagination weaves images of the city that mirror the psyche of the narrative, the city is constantly constructed in myriad forms in this effort to create a sonic map of the city.

This is not to say that the novels shun realism or that the narrative ignores the “reality” of the city. The socio-political-economic realities of the city are very much reflected in its numerous vignettes. The hopeless present of the city is vividly brought out by the narrator, when he writes about the people who come to the American Center Library to escape the
frequent power cuts in the neighbourhoods, where they have to spend nights “fanning themselves with the rolled-up newspaper” (162). As they hear the air-conditioner hum, “through the drapes they can see flashes of the sun outside” (164). Half an hour later, they again go out of the American Center Library, to chart the familiar roads, to go to their own homes, “to wait for the power cut, to watch the clouds hurriedly travel across the moon” (165). So even when it is at times a surreal, unrecognizable Calcutta where snowfall is commonplace, Calcutta remains a “legible city” in the narrative. There are frequent references to College Street, Medical College, Park Street (the iconic landmarks of the city) and Durga Puja, which impress the presence of the city in the novel. It is a city teeming with people and one that allows no privacy. Such are the conditions that the only private place that lovers can find is the morgue of the Medical College. The vision Jha projects is morbid and to add to this morbidity, there are direct and cryptic references to incest and child abuse.

All these images and themes are replicated and magnified in Jha’s second venture – If You Are Afraid of Heights. More importantly for my study, the presence of Calcutta is more pronounced in this novel. If You Are Afraid of Heights begins thus: “Look at the picture on the cover, there’s a child, a girl in a red dress; there’s a bird, a crow in a blue white sky. And then there are a few things you cannot see” (Jha, If You are Afraid of Heights 1). Leading his readers, thus, into the narrative, Jha attempts to show them what they often “cannot see”, or rather, what they choose not to see, but what can be seen from a height. The novel, in a sense is all about narrating a city, the city of Calcutta. Jha refers to it as “the city”, and never names it, but there is no mistaking its identity. He lays down the usual markers: Park Street, Free School Street, Chittaranjan Avenue, Indian Airlines building, Maidan, the trams. He picks out the landmarks and then makes his characters chart out their little stories along these
landmarks. Once seen in this way the novel becomes a story about the city: a story about Calcutta, Jha’s Calcutta.

The Calcutta that Jha represents is a city of contrasts. It is a city that has two cities within it – a “dying city”, a “forty minute drive away from Maidan” where Amir lives in a building that “looks like a crying face” (24), and a new city whose landmark and symbol is the “Paradise Park”, a skyscraper that goes up “right in the centre of the Maidan” (18), a “beautiful flower” in the midst of a “sewer” (22). The lives of Amir and Rima (the names are identical but reversed) are offset by these two contrasting landscapes of the city. The “dying city” is also a city of mediocrity. This mediocre city is defined by the mediocre family, which is in a way, the city’s microcosm. This is a family of three: father, mother and daughter. “Father’s of medium height, medium age, medium weight, medium nose, medium eyes, everything medium. Even in colour he’s medium brown” (3). And the smell of the city clings to him as he returns home from work. He is an insensitive, authoritarian, frustrated man, working in an ordinary office, earning a meagre amount and can hope for no better life. The mother is a docile housewife, who might have had many dreams but could never express her desire to fulfil them. So she fills her day with household chores. Her dreams now long dead, she has no hope for a better life. The daughter, about eleven to twelve years of age, also has no better life to look forward to. She cries. People hear her cry but they ignore her. Her dreams are crushed by harsh realities. This is an ordinary family of this ordinary, mediocre city, the narrative suggests. There might be some alternatives. For example, the father could have lived the life of Amir, the post-office clerk who writes letters for those who can neither read nor write. For a brief moment he could have met a person like Rima. But Rima is a misfit in his world and so she returns to her ivory tower. The mother could have been Mala but again she would have hardly had much success. She would always be hounded by the
memories of the past. But the girl child is not even given an alternative. Her plight remains
the same. Her cries echo through the city. People ignore them or run away from them.

The symbol of the girl child is very interestingly deployed in the narrative. As an
eleven year old girl in a red dress, an easy prey in the insensitive city, she is reminiscent of
the figure of Little Red Riding Hood. Over the ages, the tale of Little Red Riding Hood has
attained a mythic status and has generated feminist debates (Orenstein 2003). The archetype
fits in well into Jha’s narrative. The rape and murder of the girl child in a red dress can be
linked to the attack on Red Riding Hood in the woods. The city of Calcutta thus becomes the
dark woods where predators lurk, like the wolf waiting to pounce on unsuspecting victims.
The little girl can be interpreted as a product of the city or as the city itself. The female body,
like land, has always been a site of contestation. As a product of the city, all that she receives
is neglect. In this context, she is a representative of all the abused children of the city. Their
fear and grief are neatly tucked away under the garb of civility. In fact, the city refuses to
acknowledge the atrocities on children by brushing them aside. This is best exemplified by
the inspector’s remark on the child-rape case. Mala questions him, “What about the rape? The
report says there were signs of sexual assault.” To this the inspector replies:

These things happen in north India, where some think that if you have sex
with a child, you get cured of your disease. You must have read about it,
but in these parts we don’t have that at all. People are much more
cultured, so I think the injuries were caused when she fell down the canal,
maybe some stones or something. (204-205)

This remark says it all. It also reveals the attitude that the city harbours towards the
“outsiders” and the perverse superiority complex that it suffers from.
The positioning of the girl child within the space of the ‘home’ is also significant. As many studies note, “What goes on in the domestic lives of homes and what happens in the neighbourhood including the city at large are closely connected. In their everyday life, children move in and between the spaces of home, street, town and the city. Norms and practices governing space in one arena have impact on another” (Christensen and O’Brien 4). The novel begins with the image of a girl child looking beyond her balcony, perhaps over the cityscape. She has her back towards the readers, and so we cannot see that “tears fill her eyes” (1). The child is worried and, as the final section of the narrative suggests, worried for her parents as a spate of suicides rock the city. It is interesting to note how the mother spatialises these curious happenings for the girl and how this worries her further: “I asked Mother about the deaths and she said people kill themselves when they are very sad, when they live in very sad houses and have nowhere to go. Which made me worried because if you stand at the bus stop and look at our house, it looks like a crying face” (252). I would argue that it is the city that the child is scared of and that the child inherits her worry about the cityscape from her parents: “After the first few incidents, people began talking in whispers... And when you walk by, especially if were not a grown up, these people would stop talking, afraid you might listen. For, Mother says, young people are the ones most likely to kill themselves (250). As Christensen notes, “Children can be seen to share their parents’ construction of the world outside the home as a place of risk and danger and they hold sometimes strongly ambivalent views about the safety of their city spaces” (4). Thus, we have the child here, with tears welling up in her eyes, looking for assurance from her friend seated on the crow circling above the city.

If we see the girl as a symbol of the city, then her cries become the cries of Calcutta, urging its citizens to take notice of her. The city is like the abused child thrown into the canal
to rot. The post-mortem report on the child becomes the description of the city: “assaulted and left to perish”. Like the child, there is no future for the city. This is the city that the narrator of *The Shadow Lines* is made to fear (Ghosh 134) – a dark place that he sees only from a distance. Jha takes us right into that place. His characters live, breathe and stagnate there. Jha brings alive the space of the house the small girl lives in, as a place of darkness, desolation and despair:

She’s standing on the balcony of a two-room flat in a building, from the street outside, looks like a crying face. Its windows are the eyes, half-closed by curtains, smudged and wrinkled. Rain, wind and sun of countless years have marked the wall, streaking it in several lines two of which look like tears, one falling below each window. The mouth is the balcony, curved down under the weight of iron railings, rusted and misshapen. Like the stained teeth of someone very sad.

The neighbourhood is seen as one of unmitigated mediocrity (30-31). When Jha shows us the interiors of one of these homes, the picture is complete. Though Amir’s house in particular is described here, it could be any home and every home in this “dying” city:

His toilet bowl is white, cracked in several places where his shit gets stuck so that even though he pours in half a bottle of acid every morning, the stains don’t go away. When he first moved in, this made him angry, so angry that one day he poured in an entire bottle, splashing some acid on his hand. . . . Amir pays two hundred and forty rupees as rent every month thanks to the City Tenancy Act of 1912 . . . forcing the house owners to strike back in their own petty ways. Perhaps, that’s why the pump that supplies water to his flat is switched off for most of the day and the light bulb in the staircase is rarely replaced. During the
rain, water leaks through the broken panes in the windows, his cement floor is cracked like skin in winter, there is sparking in his switchboard since the fuse wire is too thin, it blows at least twice every week. . . . At nights there are other little problems. Cockroaches crawl out of the drain on his balcony . . . (25–26)

The city’s refuse and rodents crawl into Amir’s hovel; the two spaces merge in their squalor and timelessness. These representations of lower-middle class Calcutta life, one could argue, inherit their traditions from the Kallol group of radical modernist poets and many others in Bengali literature after the 1930s (Sukanta Chaudhuri, *The Living City Vol II: The Present and Future* 230).

The infamous Calcutta rains are also a strong presence in the novel, as in *The Blue Bedspread*, where references to the rainy July evening recur through the narrative. The rains bring the filth of the city to the surface:

During the monsoon, however, water collects, heavy and foetid, its stink enters the houses to sit on clothes, sometimes on bedsheets and wet towels. And since the air is humid, the water takes a long time to dry, the stench stays for days and days until the town gets used to it. Like a patient in a hospital bed who soon learns, without any effort, how to live with the smell of disinfectant, the doctor’s gloves, the starch in the pillowcase, even her own sick breath, things she wouldn’t have tolerated when she was healthy. (139)

It is interesting how the narrative here frames the monsoon-haunted city, in comparison to a hospital ward. The image that emerges here is that of a “diseasescape”. Power cuts, better known as “load-shedding”, marked Calcutta in the 1980s. Calcuttans passed snide remarks about the name of the then Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, whose name meant “light”, though
ironically during his reign large parts of the city remained in darkness. The inhabitants of the city, the narrative suggests, are so used to these hours spent in darkness that they have learnt to live in darkness, learnt how to how to “measure” it, gauge and predict it and ultimately, survive it (212).

Paradise Park is one of the most intriguing images of If You are Afraid of Heights. Paradise Park brings out the face of a new Calcutta, not seen in most novels by Indian writers in English. The towering skyscraper is a kind of anomaly in this sordid “dying city”:

Paradise Park went up right in the centre of the Maidan, which, in the language of this city, means a sprawl of empty land. . . . Now this is the only space there is in a city where people live, five or six to one room, fifty or sixty to a bus stop, more than a thousand to a neighbourhood, these numbers increasing everyday and every night. That’s why people come here, slipping out of their homes, which is also the living room, which is also the dining room, away from the sound of a child crying, get into buses, and with their clothes wrinkled, wet with the sweat of strangers, they walk across the Maidan to watch the sky above, feel the grass below . . . . (19)

By placing the skyscraper bang in the middle of Maidan – an impossible cartographic image, for any Calcuttan – Jha is perhaps imagining the city differently, inverting and disturbing the spaces within the city, trying to break the monotony. Does not the building, at least for a while, break the monotony of Amir’s life, fill it with a new hope, till the point where the woman demands to see his house? Standing tall in the midst of a “dying city”, Paradise Park inspires a sense of awe and respect in the citizens of the city:
It was a special building, a building so special that if you stopped anyone on the street, man, woman or child, hungry or well fed, half naked or well dressed, asked them, Excuse me, which way is Paradise Park? Right there, in front of your eyes, you would see them change. You would see them lower their heads in respect, their eyes in fear, look you over from head to toe. Do little things that would make you squirm. (13)

In recent times, Calcutta’s landscape has undergone a major change. Flyovers, parks, high-rise buildings and shopping malls have changed the way the city looks and also changed the way citizens perceive the city. This change had been taking effect since the 1980s, a phenomenon I have discussed in the introductory chapter. The awe that these new structures induced in the citizens of Calcutta is similar to what Jha depicts as the reaction of the people to Paradise Park. We would do well to compare here, a fictitious newspaper report on Paradise Park from the novel with a real newspaper report on the opening of a new mall in Calcutta:

Paradise Park is like a beautiful flower . . . dropped in a sewer, the sludge flowering past, its petals untainted. So strong is this flowers fragrance . . . that it overwhelms the stink, the rats and the waste, the rotting garbage that our callous authorities so loftily turn their noses up at (22).

Marrying brand binge with bazaar buzz, cheek by jowl, emanating the zing and feel of a bustling downtown, with vibrant designs and a rich array of textures to entice the senses, and letting a butterfly sit on you. . . . That’s what City Centre, New Town, promises to be. (“Fusion mall eyes new pasture”, *The Telegraph*, 19 January 2006)
The two reports echo similar sentiments. The line between reality and fiction collapses. On the one hand, some newspaper reports rave about the “development” of Calcutta, other analyses see this “development” differently. These multiplexes, malls, cafes and flyovers are viewed as mere “facelifts”, built at the cost of marginalising the lower middle class and the poor. City spaces are always formed through human acts and interactions, as Henri Lefebvre suggests, and such acts are not acts of consensus. These are spaces of contest, which are created and given meaning to by actively ignoring the teeming millions of the poor and homeless residents of the city. The location of a particular building or the naming of a street or the area devoted to a structure, are decisions made by a chosen few. The conflicts over such spaces are represented in Jha’s novels, in the monotony and decay that continue to haunt the lives of the many who do not live in Paradise Park. And this is also accompanied by a sense of awe. As George Douglas’s work on skyscrapers suggests, “Skyscrapers do move people” (5). The case in point here is the immigrants arriving at New York in the early decades of the 20th century and looking upon the skyscrapers with awe. For them these tall buildings were a “tangible proof that here at last was a land of wealth” (Douglas 5).

But I would argue that the average Calcuttan has either not experienced the awe or moved beyond it. It is true that the swanky structures are imposing, even enticing. But there are possible sites of nascent rebellion inside these hegemonic structures, in these, in Lefebvre’s words, “representational spaces”. Any visitor to the City Centre mall in Salt Lake in Calcutta will note the motley groups of people dotting the steps and the sprawling lawns of the complex. They are no buyers or consumers, they probably have little money and are there just to hang around and chat, the addas having shifted their venue from roadside tea stalls to City Centre mall. The common Calcuttan has become comfortable in his new surroundings, and has made these alien structures his or her own. This is not to negate the overreaching,
overwhelming effects of globalisation. However, essentialising globalisation is also a sort of academic hegemony. Personal ethnographic narratives may have a counter point to make. The malls are vehicles of standardisation when they flatten out local idioms, cultures and replace them with imported names, for example. However, despite this hegemony, it is not a one-way process. The Calcutta malls have interpellated the *adda*-mongers into their neon-light precincts.

**Indrajit Hazra: *The Garden of Earthly Delights***

Arson often serves as an index of urban decay. (Hagan 259)

This section will discuss Indrajit Hazra’s second novel, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2003), and the presence of Calcutta in its narrative. Hazra’s first novel, *The Burnt Forehead of Max Saul* (2000), was an intriguing study of reality versus illusion, full of references to music and other art forms. Caught in a situation where nothing seems worthwhile, Hazra’s hero realises that he does not belong anywhere. The city in this novel is amorphous and the people that he encounters have a ghostly appearance. The line dividing reality and unreality collapses generating a sense of the uncanny and macabre. The characters’ lack of focus is in keeping with the faceless homeless crowd of a vast city. The city is never named – it could be any city in the West. However, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is clearly set in Calcutta. The city is carefully mapped and unmistakably recognised. Even the characters and events have recognisable histories.

*The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a slim and intriguing thriller. It is made up of two stories, which read like separate narratives: one told in first person narrative and the other in third person. The stories are told in alternating chapters named Hiren and Manik; which are
the names of the stories' protagonists. Hiren's story is set in Calcutta, more specifically in Banamali Naskar Lane, the famous street created by Premendra Mitra. Hazra borrows not only the setting from Mitra but also the characters of his fiction – the inhabitants of 72, Banamali Naskar Lane, the address of a men’s boarding-house, known in Calcutta as “mess”. The protagonist, Hiren, is an unemployed youth “whose education and family fortunes hovered between awful and miserable” (Hazra, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* 2). Hiren is ordinary in every sense. And yet, this ordinary man narrating his life with the inhabitants of a fictional world at 72, Banamali Naskar Lane, makes the “unusual decision” of “living together” with his girl friend. He suffers from insomnia and is a pyromaniac who is responsible for some of the major Calcutta fires like the fires at the Calcutta Book Fair, New Market and Firpo’s and he is also responsible for the fire that caused the death of his girl friend. After murdering Uma, which from his narration seems to be a result of his resentment against her, he moves back to 72, Banamali Naskar Lane with his “family” of co-tenants. At the end of the novel, he is betrayed by his fellow mess-mates and framed in a terrorist conspiracy. The story of Hiren runs parallel to that of Manik Basu, a famous writer who has signed a contract for five books in five years with the famous Kutir publishing house and has accepted payment from them. Manik’s story is played out in Prague and it ends in his death at the hands of Imra. The two stories have no apparent connection, other than the fact that both Manik and Hiren end up being a part of the same day's news report in a TV channel. Some readers may also link the two stories by considering Manik to be the author of Hiren's story.

Hazra’s novel borrows its name from the famous sixteenth-century triptych – *The Garden of Earthly Delights* – by the Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch. The name of the protagonist of the novel, Hirenmoy Bose, is reminiscent of the painter's name. In an interview *(Hindustan Times* web edition) Hazra said that in 1997 he had visited the Calcutta Book Fair
after the fire and had found a charred coffee table book with the picture of this triptych on it. The charred image of the book stayed in his mind, and generated the novel named after it. The Calcutta Book Fair fire plays an important part in the scheme of the novel.

Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516) was a prolific Dutch painter of the 15th and 16th centuries. Many of his works depict sin and issues of morality. Bosch used images of demons, half-human animals and machines to evoke fear and confusion, to portray the evil of man. The works contain complex, highly original, imaginative, and dense use of symbolic figures and iconography. He is said to have been an inspiration to the surrealist movement in the 20th century. In 1463, some 4000 houses in the town were destroyed by a catastrophic fire, which the 13-year-old Bosch may have witnessed. This might have been a contributing factor in his obsession with Hell. He became a popular painter and even received commissions from abroad (Koldeweij and Koldeweij 136). Hazra’s discovery of Bosch in the charred remains of the book fair, interestingly, runs parallel to the defining moment in Bosch’s life as an artist – when he witnessed the hellish fires that destroyed his home.

Bosch’s triptych represents a panoramic space. When read from left to right, the way triptychs were usually read in Bosch’s time, it represents man’s fall from grace. The left panel shows God presenting Eve to Adam. The central panel shows a landscape where nude male and female figures are shown engaged in sexual acts. This landscape is dotted with fantastical animals, oversized fruit and hybrid stone formations. The right panel shows hell, a “hellscape” where human beings undergo the torments of damnation. Peter S. Beagle describes the triptych as an “erotic derangement that turns us all into voyeurs, a place filled with the intoxicating air of perfect liberty” (Belting 7). This “place” (read space) of “derangement” and “intoxicating liberty”, finds its echoes in the representation of Calcutta in Hazra’s narrative. I argue that Hazra’s Calcutta, hidden behind the apparent apathy towards
the spaces outside their rented house displayed by Ghanada and his friends, is a city in decay, a space that has to be reborn in the fires of damnation. Ghanada talks about the recent fires that have erupted in the city:

Count, Gaur, just count the number of fires, the big fires in this city last few years . . . the fire at the restaurant at Ganguli Bagan, gutted beyond redemption, the newspaper office on Chowringhee, the fire that destroyed New Market and paved the way for the new New Market, and then the Firpo’s Market blaze. We are talking about big fires here . . . . (133-34)

The image that Ghanada conjures up is of a city ablaze, its landmarks set on fire. And he is quick to come up with a connecting anecdote about the Australian bush fires: “a ring of fire, like that fire that spreads after a terrible Hollywood explosion” (144). The dramatic presence of fire can be seen all through the narrative.

The image of the Calcutta Book Fair set ablaze is perhaps the most striking image of the city in the narrative. The Book Fair is a very important annual event in Calcutta. Biswajit Matilal, in his essay, “The Calcutta Book Fair” writes,

It would be simplistic to describe the Book Fair merely as a show. It is something more – ‘larger than life’, according to a publisher who participates regularly. The Fair is a time capsule of Calcutta’s life and culture, the three-hundred-year-young city’s tribute to itself. (Matilal 341)

The fair traditionally starts on the last Wednesday of January every year, and ends on the first Sunday of February. Its duration often includes the Saraswati Puja and for these ten days, the fair becomes a kind of pilgrimage spot for Calcuttans. From December onwards bits of information about the fair are fed to the Calcuttans through newspapers and TV news
channels. These appetizers come in the form of the announcements regarding fair dates, the theme of the fair, the number of stalls, the major participants and the year’s main attraction. Book lovers brave the milling crowds to be there. Food also is a significant element of the fair. It is one of the identity markers of Calcutta and Hazra strategically weaves it into his narrative:

This was a book fair, the bigger sort where people turned into insects without having to wake up from uneasy dreams, and just spent their legs travelling round and round, entering stalls as if they were digressions or consultations to footnotes. And they bought books. . . . I could smell something. . . . It was probably a roll shop. I turned a corner and, yes, it was a roll shop. After scanning the list of items painted on the planked-up kiosk . . . I opted for a single mutton roll. (95-97)

But Hazra does not speak about just any Calcutta Book Fair. He evokes the fair at a moment of crisis – during the Book Fair fire of 1997. This event, on 3 February 1997, left a lasting impression on the city. Almost a decade after the incident, the fire is still vividly remembered and every year, a two minute silence is observed before the official prize giving ceremony, in memory of the sole victim of the 1997 Calcutta Book Fair fire, Jiten Seal.

Hazra capitalises the importance of the Book Fair to the city to show his protagonist, Hiren, as responsible for the Book Fair fire: “I’ll screech back again to the point when the thought of burning down the book fair took shape in my head. I dipped in three fingers . . . into my shirt pocket to take out the lighter” (95). This is the first instance where Hiren admits his desire to burn the Book Fair and a few pages later we witness him in action:
I rolled the metal roller of my precious lighter and let the tall flame catch the cloth that made up the walls of the book stall I was in. I knew that the next stall’s wall was only a few feet away. . . . I walked out and entered the other relatively empty stall next door.

I lit another corner of another stall. Then another. And then another, and another and yet one more, until one added them all up, the fires became collaborators in some grand scheme. . . .

By now, the sheer size of the fire had created a breeze . . . that was hot, blistering and nearly liquid. This was when everyone realised that it would be wise to leave the burning fair ground . . . As I pushed and heaved my way out, I heard shrieks and shouts. I also felt the supremacy – that’s exactly the word I have in mind – of a big fire. (104-106)

This sequence of burning down the Book Fair opens up the novel to interpretation on various levels. Hiren’s actions reveal that he is a pyromaniac. Pyromania is an obsession with fire, and pyromaniacs start fires to induce euphoria. There have been several psychiatric studies (the most famous one being Geller’s) on pyromania since the 1850s and many of them attribute the cause of this mental disturbance to environmental influences, childhood experiences of abuse and repressed sexuality (Prins 61). Most of Hiren’s symptoms are those of a pyromaniac. He burns things for pleasure: “I burn things for pleasure. Simply put, I derive pleasure out of burning objects. I love gathering up things . . . and love the way they first glow . . . it is better than sex with anyone I have ever met” (55). Pleasure and euphoria seem to be the only guiding forces in Hiren’s acts of burning things. There is no apparent revenge associated with it. The Book Fair fire was not the first instance of his obsession. Hiren, as the character himself admits, has started fires several times before. He had burned
down his house with his girl friend in it, the school canteen room, vacant slum rooms on the bypass, a letter box and a broken pile of rickshaws. I would like to connect Hiren’s behaviour to one of the peculiar phenomena that most urban centres have long grappled with – the phenomenon of “urban arson”.

“Arson”, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* suggests, is “the criminal act of deliberately setting fire to property”. R.N. Davidson has delved deep into the environmental settings of acts of arson:

> Arson has two distinct environmental situations. Traditionally, it is one of the most typical rural offences. Nowadays, it is . . . rapidly becoming a widespread urban offence. Traditionally arson was regarded as a sign of severe mental disturbance in the arsonist, nowadays the motives may include insurance fraud and political gesture. (49)

Calcutta is no stranger to acts of arson. The city has seen violence directed at its landmarks during times of political unrest. For instance, Atul Kohli quotes Shankar Ghosh, a correspondent for *Times of India* at Calcutta during the turbulent days of Naxal violence in the 1970s, and describes the fear that reigned over the city when “no young man [in the city] could think of not being implicated in cases of arson” (Kohli 283).

James Brady’s fascinating study of the socio-economic dimensions of arson reveals how urban authorities are dependent on the “pyromania theory” of the “deviant individual as the fire setter” while combating urban arson:

> In looking for the “torch” investigators are heavily influenced by popularised images tracing back ultimately to deviance theory and ultimately to psychoanalytic literature on pyromania. The classic “pyro” is a well-recognised
figure who watches the flames from the shadows while engrossed in gleeful masturbation . . . arson is widely regarded as a crime of rage, jealousy, mental disorder and especially sexual perversity. (217)

Hiren’s trajectory within the novel fits well with this pyromaniac theory – he is a “classic pyro” of Freudian narratives. Hiren’s character, as it develops within the narrative, from the image of a voyeur – “In the mornings I would stare at her, at night I would think of her” (16) – to that of a pyromaniac – “ogling at the warm air” (55) – fully conforms to the traditional view of an arsonist. And the latent sexual deviance completes this picture: “I won’t say it’s better than sex. But it is better than sex with anyone I have ever met” (55). It is also significant that Hiren is, at the end, trapped in a terrorist plot. Klaus Wasmund sees “violence against property in the form of arson” as “the first step on the path leading to terrorist actions” (198). But one should, as Brady would suggest, still look at the socio-economics of Hiren’s actions to make sense of his rage against the city.

Hiren’s life, I would argue, is characterised by an alienation that is purely urban in nature. Throughout the novel, except for his friends and Ghanada in the mess, we hear of no other connections between Hiren and the world outside. Even the relationship with Uma is tenuous as the incident of the fire suggests. His apathy and withdrawal is clear in the narrative. Urban alienation is always foregrounded against the cityscape. As Caroline Bate suggests in her fascinating study of Samuel Ray Delany’s science fiction novel, *Dhalgren*, “urban alienation” is inevitably connected to the overwhelming totality of the city. Bate quotes Jameson to suggest that “urban alienation is directly proportional to the unmappability of cityscapes”. In other words, the “alienating city” is “above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves” (115). Bate proceeds to quote a passage from *Dhalgren*, and most
interestingly, this passage that brings out the inscrutability of the urban landscape is
dominated by the image of fire:

I go down a street, buildings are burning. I go down the same street the next day.
They are still burning. Two weeks later, I go down the same street and nothing
looks like it’s been burned at all. Maybe time is just running backwards here. Or
sideways. But that is impossible too. (115)

This alienation of Hiren is also reflected in his estrangement from himself as the narrator,
brought out by the fragmentary, self-reflexive narrative that constantly comments on itself:

“The space in front of a closed door is not an ideal place for one to narrate his own past. But
if I had to break the news of my personal desolation to Uma (it had to be packaged as
‘personal desolation’), I must, in pockets of flash, recollect, recollect” (11). What emerges
through the narrative of Hiren’s alienation, I argue, is an image of an “alienating city”.
Although never mentioned directly in the narrative, the sinister city is written over Hiren’s
narrative of his life in the city. His return to the mess is a withdrawal from the city to a space
fortified against the “public” (read city), to a space where “anywhere beyond the rooftop is a
public vista” (137).

The image of the books burning in the Book Fair has a striking symbolism. The burning
book has always been a very important symbol. History has several instances of book burning
– from the burning of the Nalanda University complex in 12th century AD by Bakhtiar Khilji
to the burning of copies of the Talmud in Paris. The image of the burning books has a special
symbolism when foregrounded against the city of Calcutta. Krishna Dutta in her book
Calcutta: A Cultural and Literary History (2003) has a section titled “The Cult of the Book”
(Dutta 44-45), where she explains the symbolic importance of books in the society of
Calcutta. Kolkata, Book City: Readings, Fragments, Images (2009) is another interesting
attempt to present an image of the city through its book vendors and book shops and its thriving culture of reading. The ‘Book’ is a thriving image of the city where printing, publishing and distribution started quite early under the colonial influence. Books are considered sacred and revered in the city. Thus, Hiren’s act of burning books can be interpreted as his rage lashing out against the city and its culture. He therefore becomes an anarchist, a symbol of the frustrated youth of the city.

As we have already discussed, Hazra borrows his characters from popular Bengali fiction – Ghanada and company at the mess – and makes them a part of his own work. Hazra does not pretend to conceal this; rather, he would want the readers to make the obvious association. He wants his work to draw its lineage from a particular tradition in Bengali literature. Characters such as Premendra Mitra’s Ghanada and Satyajit Ray’s Feluda are “paradigmatic fictional figures” who traditionally have held the younger generation spellbound by their encyclopaedic knowledge. These fictional figures follow a certain prototype that has a long tradition not only in fiction but in Calcutta’s culture. These figures have certain common distinguishing features – sharp wit, vast knowledge, charisma, love for travelling and loads of anecdotes. Ghanada is the teller of tall tales and is the cynosure of the adda-circle in the mess. Though his tales are far from believable, the other inmates are eager to part with their cigarettes and listen to them. However, Hazra subverts the character of Ghanada – I would argue, in keeping with the subversion of the city that I have read into the novel. He does not remain an endearing character who entertains his audience. He is no longer the virtuous soul who is forever ready to save humanity from unethical and dangerous scientific discoveries. By contrast, he is evil personified. He is a terrorist of sorts and masterminds a chain of fires in Calcutta. His stories no longer amuse and enthral and are clouded by Hiren’s suspicion from the very beginning.
The inclusion of Ghanada in Hazra’s novel also brings with it several other typical Calcutta images. The concept of the “mess” is one of them. “Messes” have now almost vanished from Calcutta, but they were a strong presence earlier and references to such establishments can be found in several Bengali novels and films. A “mess” is a men’s hostel or boarding-house of sorts. Such buildings lodged men from the towns and villages near Calcutta who worked in the city. They were exclusively “male” spaces. Women, apart from those who cleaned the rooms, were not allowed within them and were generally viewed as a potential danger to the balance and brotherhood in the mess. An interesting example of this male-bonding being threatened by a woman’s entry into the mess is the 1953 film 74½ (Sare Chuattor) starring Uttam Kumar, Suchitra Sen, Tulsi Chakroborty, Bhanu Gangopadhyay and Jahar Ray. The film presents some interesting parallels with Hazra’s novel. It is a comedy of errors which shows how the balance of the homosocial world of the mess-house is disturbed by the entry of a woman – Suchitra Sen. Her entry creates a stir among the men in the mess and her romance with Uttam Kumar, one of the inmates, leads to his falling out with other inmates. The differences are settled at the end of the film and the film ends in a wedding, arranged by the boarders of the Annapurna Boarding House. Hazra’s novel however, does not end with a happy resolution. The novel introduces the femme fatale – Uma – into this male world, and her entry into Hiren’s life jeopardizes and destabilises the world of the mess. The narrative seems to be suggesting that both Uma and Hiren have to suffer for this. The mess here, with its sinister characters and perverse machinations, quite contrary to Mitra’s world, bringing out a cityscape both sinister and dark.
And we relive the illusion . . . of inhabiting an extraordinary city.

(Amit Chaudhuri, “Kalighat Revisited” 281)

This section of my chapter looks at three of Amit Chaudhuri’s novels – *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Freedom Song* (1998) and *A New World* (2000) – to analyse their representations of Calcutta. Calcutta serves as the major site of action in all these novels. At the outset, it is interesting to note that, except in *Freedom Song*, in the other novels, the main characters arrive in Calcutta from some other location. They are always “visitors” from some other city, in some other part of the country or the world. At the beginning of *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Sandeep comes to Calcutta from Bombay. Much later in the novel, he makes a second trip to Calcutta, after a passage of one and a half years in narrative time. Interestingly, the author always presents him and his family, after their journey is done. They are seen to have always already reached Calcutta; they are never in Bombay or in transit. In *A New World*, Jayojit and his son Bonny arrive in Calcutta from Claremont. Like *A Strange and Sublime Address*, this novel also opens with these “outsiders” having reached Calcutta, and standing in front of their house in Calcutta. Though these are novels are about Calcutta, they register a visitor’s impressions of the city.

Sandeep perceives both the city of Calcutta and his uncle’s house in the city as sites of comfort and refuge. This prompts me to bring in the idea of “locus amoenus” into the reading of this novel. As Malcolm Andrews defines, “locus amoenus” is a place of refuge, safety, pleasure and survival; in Latin it means “a pleasant place”:

The “locus amoenus”, the pleasant place, was a phrase used in Classical and Renaissance times to refer to distinctly beautiful garden retreats. The phrase has
an obvious kinship with the ancient term, ‘*pleasance*’, which referred to the secluded pleasure grounds on a large garden estate. (53)

Andrews refers to the “therapeutic powers” of such landscapes. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Calcutta is seen as a place of plenitude, as compared to Bombay (Mumbai), in Sandeep’s consciousness. It is this city, a space with its own therapeutic powers, which heals him. The city of Calcutta signified to him the love, warmth and security of a family, and in this way, the city becomes a “locus amoenus” for him. Whereas in Bombay, “alone in the big apartment on the twenty-third floor, he was like Adam in charge of paradise…he was too much in the foreground. He hated being in the foreground” (Amit Chaudhuri, *A Strange and Sublime Address* 27). In perfect contrast to this state of prominence, he comes to Calcutta to be received into a complete family, with his uncle, aunt, two cousins and other relatives. The imaginative geography of Bombay comes back to him at odd moments, and this makes him “oddly unhappy without knowing why” (27). He has a threatened existence at both home and school (in Bombay), so much so that Bombay is not described in any detail, as opposed to Calcutta. The city of Bombay and the urban experience he has in the city act to separate the self from the imagination and creativity. His acts of imagination, like daydreaming about vacations in Calcutta, thus form sites of resistance. The reader is also told how Sandeep’s father is a busy executive, who “never had the time to go anywhere” (7). On the other hand, Sandeep’s Chhotomama, in Calcutta, whose “problems were more ordinary” (7), was always there for his sons. Even when later he comes to Calcutta with both his parents, he “deserts” his parents “shamelessly” in the comfort of Grand Hotel, and spends “days and nights at the old house with his cousins” (83). The word “desert” here establishes a curious power relation – it suggests that his parents are underprivileged in spite being in a five-star hotel, being away from the “locus amoenus”.
This is how the novel describes Sandeep’s feeling of security and peace in Calcutta:

“Sandeep, an only child, felt the shared background of brother and brother, and brother and sister, throw upon him a shade as that of the cool, expansive branches of a rooted banyan tree. He wandered in the shade, forgetting it was temporary” (7). Security is described here in botanical terms. This takes us back to Andrews’ definition of the “locus amoenus”. We may also connect it to the concept of “family trees”. Perhaps Chaudhuri here brings out the arboreal features of rootedness and branching, how a tree occupies space both underneath and above the ground. He extends the image to families, which give individuals a sense of rootedness while also giving them space and freedom to branch out. The image of the tree-shade also implies leaving the “built” space for a “natural” space. This naturalness endows the space with a sense of well being and solace. Chhotomama is described as “far from affluent”, but still a stay with him in Calcutta has the idyllic peace of a “locus amoenus” for Sandeep.

However, this Edenic security of space within the city crumbles when the narrative comes face-to-face with the “unspeakables” of the city, the garbage of the city that needs to be hidden away under the carpet of respectability. It is interesting to note how Chaudhuri’s narratives negotiate this reality. Adapting De Certeau, I would argue that in urban planning, all over the world, management is a process of elimination. Various forms of the “garbage” of the city (poverty, sickness, death, deviance) in a city are rejected by the functionalist administration. Likewise, in Chaudhuri’s narrated Calcutta, the millions of poor people who live along the seams of the city are erased. Though by and large he presents a “cleansed” space, there are times when he comments on these “other spaces”. In A Strange and Sublime Address, while the middle-class families plan drives to the Outram Ghat or listen to plays on the radio, the “surprising piece of empty land, which builders and contractors had somehow
overlooked” (13) in the locality, bounded on all sides by houses, serves as the ground for “seenema” viewing of “servants and their children, rickshawallas, people from the basti” (13). This space, “contained” by the middle class houses of the locality is the only space allocated for the entertainment of these people. Another contrast in the living conditions of the different classes of people in the city is brought out in the description of the winters in Calcutta:

As usual, the people of Calcutta did everything to excess; the streets had the air of a fancy-dress party as shawls and cardigans and jackets floated by solemnly. In the nights, when it became really cold, beggars set fire to old rubber tyres, and sat around the circles of slow flame to warm their hands. (82)

Calcutta, the narrative seems to admit, is an old city and one of many beggars and pavement-dwellers. But except in some passages, like the one mentioned above, Chaudhuri rarely makes references to this class of people. Even when the family in *A Strange and Sublime Address* makes its foray into the cityscape, they move around only in the elite sections of central and south Calcutta. The poor are considered dangerous, derelict and dirty, and hence the streets are cleared of such unwanted people who are repugnant to an aesthetically pleasing, planned urban setting. The “others”, I argue, are kept well out of the boundaries of the “locus amoenus” of the home and the city. This is reminiscent of the portrait of nineteenth-century England that John Urry presents. Urry describes how “there were whole areas of London through which no thoroughfares passed, and thus the “other” classes were “secluded from the observation and influence” of the upper classes (392).

In *A New World* the very busy public spaces of Calcutta, like Gariahat and Chowringhee, are described. In the streets and the lanes where people mingle, shop, stop to talk, and hurry through busy traffic, differences between social classes are seemingly
cancelled, or better still, put in temporary abeyance. Jayojit “walked down Chowringhee, one with a stream of people indistinguishable from office-goers” (Amit Chaudhuri, *A New World* 165). But there is scarcely an incident where Chaudhuri shows how Jayojit’s life intersects with a common man’s life. The descriptions of the city show the robust urban nature of Calcutta, with all its hustle and bustle, smoke, noise, processions and traffic-jams, but though Jayojit perambulates through all this, his interest in the people of this “developing” city is more academic than humane. There is very little effective connection between Jayojit, a representative of the educated, middle class *bhadralok* and the “garbage” of the city, people of the lower rungs of the societal ladder. He indulges in the occasional acts of charity – like giving a rupee coin to a beggar-boy – but largely, he remains isolated within his own class.

The driver of the taxi, in which he comes from the airport to his parents’ house, takes extra money from him, with “the coyness of a struggler taking something extra from a person he considers well-to-do” (4). Though he realises this, Jayojit does not say anything because he does not know what to say. Later, however, one of the first things he tells his father is that the “Bloody taxi diver took extra money” (7).

Jayojit is the ideal example of an arm-chair intellectual who fails to connect to the “other” city living on the margins. The narrative shuns all descriptions of the habitations of the poorer sections of the city, till they make a fleeting appearance towards the end of the novel. The day Jayojit and Bonny are leaving the city, on the way to the airport, the narrative registers the “shops in Park Circus, the occasional outbreaks of shanty settlements, the thatched huts along the bypass” (188). Interestingly, here Chaudhuri also describes the stench of these places, the stench of the “rubbish dump”, which Mrs Chatterjee counters by pressing “a handkerchief to her face”. Henri Lefebvre argues that the production of different spaces is
crucially bound up with smell. He writes, “Where an intimacy occurs between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, it must surely be the world of smell and the places where they reside” (197).

Like Jha’s sonic-city, Chaudhuri’s Calcutta is divided into smellscapes, which again organise and mobilise people’s feelings about particular spaces within the cityscape. Urry discusses the concept of domestic hygiene, as developed in the twentieth century, as “reinforcing class attitudes of social and moral superiority based upon smell” (394). He says, “The stigma of odor has provided a constant basis of stratification” (394). This happens in A New World in the passage where Mrs Chatterjee cannot tolerate the stench, in which many people carry on their daily lives. The “rubbish dump” is an inevitable product of urban-industrial society, but careful “zoning” by the urban planners has pushed it to the periphery of the city. Clearly, to the planners, the people who have lived or will live in these spaces do not matter. Just like the “refuse” they live in, they are also the “garbage” of the city, to be screened off from the genteel people of the city like Mrs Chatterjee. Chhaya, a cleaning woman in A Strange and Sublime Address, for example, lives “across the railway lines, in the clump of huts called the basti, from which the whiffs of excrement rose on windy days” (12).

Freedom Song is by far Chaudhuri’s most openly political novel. Though the world of this narrative remains essentially a mundane middle-class world, it portrays Bhaskar and his comrades, constant reminders that the city still produces young people involved in political activities to some extent. However, while these young men, at a local outpost, strive towards bringing about a classless society, in their own houses, class conflicts are unabashedly present. The city is seen as a cauldron seething with such class differences and conflicts. Nando, a servant in Khuku’s house, contracts tuberculosis. The narrative here conjures up a curious “disease-cape” of Calcutta. As David Sibley suggests, in representations “disease often combines with other signifiers of defilement” and that “has a role in defining the self
and in the construction of stereotypes. It is a mark of imperfection and carries a threat of contagion” (Sibley 24). For instance, dealing with Nando’s illness, the narrative suggests that “apparently it [TB] was still widespread in the bastis and areas these people lived in” (Amit Chaudhuri, *Freedom Song*). In this disease-scene, some spaces within the city (invariably, the bastis and the peripheries that contain the dumpyards) are supposed to be sites of diseases. This conception of public health and hygiene is inseparable from the conception of the spatial structure of a city. Just as Renu’s degenerating mental health in the novel *Lajja* is a threat to the city of order, Nando’s illness also has chaotic ramifications for the neatly structured city-space and hence has to be relegated from it.

Chaudhuri’s novels that I have taken up for discussion are all set in the early nineties, when cities like Calcutta and Bombay were changing dramatically. Due to rapid industrialisation, major migrations to the cities and the growth in population, there was a spatial reordering of the city itself. Inevitably these narratives indicate this race for space in terms of the suffocation and claustrophobia felt by sections of the population. In *A Strange and Sublime Address*, Bombay is seen as an “unreal” city of “swarms of lights in the evening, the hoods of tiny cars shining and vanishing in the sunlight during the daytime” (82). Calcutta is “house after house” like a “little island surrounded by smoke” (88). Sandeep equates living in Calcutta to living “inside a crater, the fumes putting you to sleep, each day the last day before the eruption” (88). In stark opposition is the area where the elderly couple lives – “off the main road.” It seemed that they had “moved forward in space and backward in time simultaneously.” Calcutta became “remote and unrecognizable; the city was no longer clearly demarcated from the folk-tale Bengal that surrounded it so thickly” (53). This place is described as a “little colony or village tied by a network of faint lanes”. When he sees this, Sandeep is taken back to Sylhet, as conjured up from memory by Shonamama, a world “made of small islands of consciousness” (53). This world was small, with a geographical
feature like a “mountain or a river” forming the border. Such clear contrasts place Calcutta above the suburban villages in terms of modernisation and urbanisation. But the author does not stretch the point too far. With his great sense of irony, he claims that on a day when the electric fans, telephones, taps and car engines all stop working one will realize how Calcutta is still “part of that primitive, terracotta landscape of Bengal . . . the Bengal of the bullock-cart and the earthen lamp” (31). What it has put up is merely a pretence, a sham, and it could any day return to its “original darkness”. Chaudhuri also pits the “nervous, toy-like city” against the fury of nature, as the city faces the ravages of the first “kal-baisakhi” storm of the season (59). Implied perhaps is the sympathy he has for the fast-vanishing pastoral Bengal, which cannot keep up with the pace of the modern city that Calcutta and its suburbs are becoming. Calcutta is seen as a site of transformation here, a site of contest between the old and the new, the ancient and the modern.

In *A New World*, Jayojit encounters a “building in the early stages of construction; clusters of rods coming out of the earth”. The watchman guarding the “still-skeletal structure” informs him that it would take one whole year to complete. He “could not make sense” of this slowness. The images Chaudhuri employs of a skeleton and “rods” emerging out of the earth (instead of vegetation which naturally comes out of earth) are deliberately used to communicate a sense of unease. The ecology of the city is no longer part of the natural order—it has been disturbed by the advent of modernity. Wherever Jayojit goes, he encounters “compact decorated spaces” of apartment buildings. Even his parents occupy a flat in one of the many “multi-storeyed building(s)” that have come up in the past few decades in Calcutta, and changed its skyscape forever. “The building’s a government project, so … there’s a great rush of middle class buyers” (60). Chaudhuri captures a city caught up in a wild frenzy to consume as much space as possible, narrating a reality we have encountered many a times in
my first chapter. All his descriptions of the city contain images of residential or office localities, veritable concrete jungles with not even a fallow piece of land, leave alone a public garden or an amusement park. The description of the Admiral’s financial problems as discussed between mother and son is juxtaposed with the spatial design of the small flat he lives in:

There was no real difference between the sitting and dining room; they were part of the same hall…. The architect had *thrown* the dining space on the side of the kitchen and the small corridor to the front door … while the hall was *pushed* into the interior, and was adjoined to the semi-outdoors of the verandah. (27)

(emphasis mine)

This juxtaposition not only reveals the inability of the middle class to afford adequate living space in a city like Calcutta, it also suggests the spatial compulsions that are constantly restricting and narrowing its existence.

*Freedom Song* too looks at this growth of the city in largely negative terms. The problem of space in a city with a growing population assumes huge proportions in the novel. Mini looks out from a window of her flat in the New Corporation Building:

The obscure lines of the gauze had become dark and sometimes a feather which had been stuck there might remain there until it had been worn away. That window opened onto the intricate jumble of lanes and terraces of North Calcutta, receding and approaching, mirroring and leading towards each other, and towards Girish Park and Vivekananda Road. (119)

Chaudhuri reminds us that this is not just the fate of north Calcutta, one of the oldest parts of the city. Khuku’s *Borda* (eldest brother) lives in Golf Green, and when Mini and Khuku take a trip to the place, it is described as a “maze of houses, predominantly off-white and red, with
scattered islands of green, dull facades, one lot of houses hiding from another” (82). Khuku lived in the “cool, neat, constricted South”. The word “constricted” suggests the lack of space in the city. The water tank of the next house was “perpetually visible from the window” of Khuku’s house, so close are the two neighbouring houses. Chaudhuri’s description of Mohit viewing Khuku’s neighbourhood reiterates the same view-point. The sameness of the “fronts of balconies and doors painted in white or green” is claustrophobic and disturbing to the eye. From Chaudhuri’s description of the city and his frustration with its spatial structure, we arrive at definite ideas about urban civic consciousness and ideas of “beauty” related to public spaces. Lord Wellesley’s street policy for Calcutta, minuted in 1803, and quoted in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Habitations of Modernity* (2002) embodies a connection between order and a particular aesthetic of the cityscape:

> In those quarters of the town occupied principally by the native inhabitants, the houses have been formed without order or regularity…every improvement…will tend to ameliorate the climate and to promote and secure…a just and salutary system of police. (66)

The “intricate jumble of lanes and terraces” that Chaudhuri described can be contrasted to the “immaculate order” that the Europeans demanded from Calcutta, as evidenced by Wellesley’s policy. Reading these two statements together, one could term Chaudhuri’s expectation from the city as “modernist”. Chakrabarty elaborates on such a stance, saying, “The outsider here is the observer who does not inhabit the conceptual or theoretical framework of the actor whom he or she observes. It is the observing position that I have tagged here as ‘modernist’” (69). Chaudhuri (and also, the characters who are always the visitors to the city) is here the “modernist” observer who comments on the space of the city and the inhabitant “actors” from the position of an outsider.
The Calcutta of the 1990s is also a city negotiating the changes that the free-market economy has brought into the cityscape. It is seen as an urban centre with spatial dispositions of wealth and poverty. As the city becomes increasingly aware of the West, even with “Jurassic Park” playing to full houses at Nandan Cinema, social inequality is shown to be multiplying exponentially. In *A New World*, the “faint smell of stale clothes and hair oil” coming from the maid servants is an indication of how Jayojit’s master-plan of “gradual liberalization” cannot affect the “monotony and fixedness” of the lives of the poor in the city.

In his eyes, the cityscape of Calcutta has changed inevitably in the wake of economic liberalisation; it is now a city full of advertisements, a city that has been exhorted, by advertisements, to “Celebrate with Asian Paints” (156). *Freedom Song* also pictures Calcutta as a site of struggle between forces of privatisation and the public sector economy. This conflict is represented by the fates of Manik and Mohit. Manik goes to Germany and there is a suggestion that he will not be coming back. Mohit, as the author describes, two years from the time of the story, “would be in America. Around him, the city decayed” (92). Puti, Mohit’s mother, like the grandmother in *The Shadow Lines*, does not want Mohit to grow up like Bhaskar, dabbling in politics. Hence the city seems to her like a “bad dream…with posters, and endless peeling political messages on the walls” (92). To people like Puti, the city seems like a site of resistance, refusing to change in sync with globalisation and liberalisation. The city’s industrial sector is seen as decaying. For instance, the narrative observes a factory located beyond Howrah, at the outskirts of Calcutta, which one reaches after passing places “that were neither towns nor outposts, but that had names”. The spatial coordinates here reflect a landscape of social and economic decay. This, I argue, is also a cartography of (under)development. In another instance, Chaudhuri equates the city of Calcutta and a company called Little’s, a “sick unit”:
In Little’s history, in fact, the history of Calcutta could be seen to have been written. First the company created by the Englishman of the same name eighty-five years ago; then the buying over of the company by an enterprising Bengali businessman…and what it was now, something that had a kind of life and breath, an existence, but not a real one. (89)

The narrative seems to suggest that it is inevitable that the representatives of the new generation, like Manik and Mohit, will escape to other cities, and become like Jayojit of A New World.

Henri Lefebvre, in The Production of Space, considers “streets” as important spaces as they bear traces of the “‘values’ assigned to particular routes: danger, safety, waiting, promise” (118). The natural space is thus changed and reorganised, by constructing these streets. Practical activity inscribes nature, implying a “particular representation of space” (117-18). In all his novels, Chaudhuri’s characters are seen to be walking or moving on the streets in cars/buses. Chhotomama takes the children out for a walk in A Strange and Sublime Address, while the city is enveloped in the darkness of a power-cut. They walk through the lanes, lined by houses giving out “smells of fish and boiled rice” (48). The road ends and branches off, and the narrower roads lead to a field, full of people they could not discern very clearly. On coming closer, they see it to be a heterogenous group: “college boys, schoolboys, couples, unemployed men, families, hawkers, groups of girls” (49). But just as they are about to join the shadowy, whispering figures, the lights came back, and the class distinctions are reinstated.

When they are driving through the city, past the bridge in Dhakuria, past Gol Park, past Gariahat, past Rashbehari Avenue, into Chowringhee, and finally to Park Street, Sandeep equates himself to a bird or a fish. Just as a bird or a fish could “float in their chosen
element,” Sandeep thought driving was the “only human equivalent of floating, of letting one’s legs rest and setting one’s body adrift” (15). Such activities could almost be termed voyeuristic, where Sandeep is at a distance from the city, and reads the city like a text. While in the car, the city becomes for him, in De Certeau’s words, “an optical artefact” (102). The panorama of the city turns the spectators, in this case Sandeep and his family, into “celestial eyes” (102). Such insularity, or almost autistic inability connect to other people in the city, is the problem that again brings out class hierarchies within the city. In A New World, Jayojit is seen going out into the city eight times, if one omits his arrival and departure. Though he most often walks, at times he travels in taxis. The mode of transport is important here, because while in a taxi, he is cocooned from the pedestrians; he is in, but not of, the crowd, gazing at the crowd from a distance of safety, without the unpleasant heat, smell or touch that characterise this “alive” city. So it is a sanitized kind of an exposure to the city that he allows himself and Bonny. The car, I argue, serves as a “locus amoenus”, set against the city streets, a space that wards off the “contagion” and “contamination” that the city may carry. The house, as Bachelard says, “shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard 6). And the city-streets symbolise the threatened existence of the day-dreamer, a fate avoided to some extent by travelling in automobiles. But when stuck in a traffic-jam, just behind a bus, Jayojit has to inhale the exhaust fumes. And while the driver seemed “unperturbed”, the passenger does not enjoy this attack of the city on the sanitised environment of the inside of the taxi. Jayojit’s elitism is evident in his frequent urges to go out for a breath of fresh air, which can be connected to the “pronounced rhetoric of the delights of the ‘open air’, air that did not smell of the city, for those apparently confined to living within nineteenth-century cities” (Urry 393).
As De Certeau argues, “spaces” are constructed into “places” by memories, feelings, social connection, cultural rules and conventions. This is an interesting trope that repeats itself in Chaudhuri’s narratives, where memory plays an important role in recreating or impinging one space in/on another. While the characters are at one place, they remember, go back to, get a feel of or reproduce another place there. Edward Said’s concept of “imaginative geography” presumes a familiar space which is “ours” as opposed to an unfamiliar terrain which is “theirs”. Said elaborates, “For there is no doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close and what is far away” (55). Whereas he uses this idea to understand the West’s conception of the Orient, I would use it to understand how the characters in Chaudhuri’s novels place familiar, comfortable zones against unfamiliar and uncomfortable zones.

In our analysis of the city Calcutta as a “locus amoenus” in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, we saw how Sandeep’s idyllic vacations in Calcutta are punctuated by fleeting moments when he recalls Bombay, where he felt “alone in the big apartment on the twenty-third floor”. I use this contrast to argue that in these moments, in Sandeep’s mind, the actual cartography of Calcutta is overlaid by the “non-rational” (in the words of Steve Pile in *Real Cities*) aspects of Bombay, an image of Bombay impinging on the space of Calcutta. Elsewhere, Sandeep remembers Shonamama’s words and travels to another spatio-temporal dimension, and here the space that he conjures up is of another country – “Sylhet is now in Bangladesh”. Shonamama’s memory of Sylhet gives Sandeep a sense of place and belonging. The young boy traces the movement of his ancestors in space-time scales, from Shonamama’s evocation (53). This finds a parallel in *The Shadow Lines* where Tha’mma sketches Dhaka for her grandson, in “faint, sepia-tainted pictures” (193). In *A New World*
Jayojit has a simultaneous feeling of acceptance/rejection and respect/disgust for Calcutta. The city “irritated” him, and it was like an “obstacle” for him. While his mind went back to the past, a time when he was married, and his body tried negotiating the difficult Calcutta traffic, he decided that the city “would give him the space for recoupment that he thought was necessary now” (51). But even when he sought shelter in Calcutta to heal his wounds, at sudden moments – for example, while he wandered about rather aimlessly in the city streets, where “everyone else, whatever they looked like, had somewhere to go to, or seemed to” – he revisits the imaginative geography of Claremont. While browsing through books at Gariahat, he remembers his colleagues at the University – “an Italian American called Antonio” (100) – while arguing with his mother, his mind goes back to how he and Amala had gone to Detroit for Durga Puja. While in Calcutta, the imaginative geography of Claremont comes to Jayojit’s mind accompanied by the sharp realisation of Amala’s absence. These moments constitute what Steve Pile calls the “non-rational” aspect of a city. It explains how we “feel” about living in a city, how the pain felt while living in a particular city is so deeply enmeshed with the cityscape. And this narrated city, I argue, is as real as the physical presence of Calcutta in a map of India.

This analysis brings us back to the point where we began this chapter. The city is not just a physical reality that expresses itself through built spaces, it is a state of mind. It is also an imagined space onto which the city dweller projects her/his innumerable desires and designs. We imagine our cities, and since our imagination is always “narrative”, we live in the cities that we narrate. And we arrive at the same point from which we began: “the map was in my head”.