

Reimagining City Space from the Margins: Ambition, Exclusion, and Psychogeography in Kunal Basu's *Kalkatta*

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Abstract

This article discusses contemporary Indian novelist Kunal Basu's novel *Kalkatta* (2015), and seeks to understand the dynamic interrelation between city space and human beings in Calcutta in particular and in India in general. It explores the marginalisation and concomitant exclusion of non-Bengali people in the city under the ethnic domination of Bengali people and culture. A psychogeographical reading of the text suggests that the non-Bengali as well as the have-nots or urban poor in Calcutta suffer from discrimination due to an unequal distribution of resources. The setting of Basu's novel is Calcutta's Zakaria Street where cars fail to enter, young boys are trapped into gangs, girls fear slipping into prostitution, and mothers' dreams fade into harsh reality. Through investigating the lives of the marginalised in Zakaria Street as depicted in *Kalkatta*, this article critiques the corollary adverse impacts of unbridled urbanisation, whimsical capitalism, and the hierarchical power structure on the city's non-Bengali community.

Keywords

Kunal Basu, Calcutta, the urban elite, psychogeography, the urban poor

Introduction

The exploration and interpretation of the dialectic interrelation between city space and human beings have drawn the attention of writers and critics alike. The reasons for unrestrained fascination for the city can be explained by understanding its fundamental nature. It

is a place of mystery, the site of the unexpected, full of agitations and ferments, of multiple liberties, opportunities, and alienations; of passions and repressions; of cosmopolitanism and extreme parochialisms; of violence, innovation, and reaction. (Harvey 29)

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The theoretical interpretation of space and its reimagining in literature had evolved in the 1960s. The traditional understanding of space as “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile” (Foucault 70) is often relegated to produce the idea of space as a social product, a *lived* space. Theorists such as Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), Henri Lefebvre (1901-91), Deleuze (1925-95), Guattari (1930-92), Tuan (1930-), Foucault (1926-84), Jameson (1934-), and Harvey (1935-) had successfully ushered in a “spatial turn” (Soja 16), which is “towards the world itself, towards an understanding of our lives as situated in a mobile array of social and spatial relations” (Tally 16-17). Theorists have employed a legion of interdisciplinary approaches, including history, geography, architecture, sociology, and economics, to discern the inter-relations between space and human lives.

One such perspective of investigating the shifting duality of the human-space relationship, which is continuously redefined through the temporal axis, is psychogeography. The origin of psychogeography – “the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of urban place” (Coverley 10) – can be traced to diverse movements such as the avant-garde, surrealism, the lettrist group, and the Situationist International. Guy Debord, a key member of Situationist International, defines psychogeography thus:

The word *psychogeography*, suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate.... *Psychogeography* could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The adjective *psychogeographical*, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (qtd. in Coverley 88-89)

Psychogeography is, for Debord, the meeting point of psychology and geography, and a critical lens to record and interpret the emotional and behavioural impact of urban space on individual consciousness. The results of such investigations and records can be used to promote the construction of a new urban environment that “both reflects and facilitates the desires of the inhabitants of this future city, the transformation of which is to be conducted by those people skilled in psychogeographical techniques” (Coverley 89). From the outset, the Situationist International (1957-72) worked to become a radical political organisation keen to overthrow and replace what it saw as the

predominantly bourgeois nature of Western society.

The term, *literary psychogeography*, coined by van Tijen, can fundamentally be seen as a manifestation of psychogeography in literature. While psychogeography, according to Tijen, “is the art that tries to record and understand the influence of the outer environment on the human mind and vice versa,” literary psychogeography is

the expression of this phenomena [*sic*] in literature, whereby literature is taken in its widest possible sense: any writing that manages to capture the influence of a particular part of a city or landscape on the human mind, or a person's projection of inner feelings or moods onto the outer environment. Well versed literary texts, poetry, novels or theatre plays, but also popular fiction, comic books, journalistic writing, songs, films, official reports and advertisement slogans, all these can have fragments or passages that capture ‘psycho-geographic moments’ in [a] descriptive text. All these scattered text fragments, when put together, will make it possible to ‘read’ the life story of the (city) landscape, to ‘map’ its changes of atmosphere and mood. (Tijen n.p.)

Hence, literary psychogeography or psychogeographical writings, primarily psychogeography in written form, contain elements describing a mood produced by geographical surroundings, or, vice versa. Though the theorisation of psychogeography took place in the 1950s, the basic elements of psychogeography can easily be located in the works of Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), William Blake (1757-1827), Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94), Alfred Watkins (1855-1935), and Arthur Machen (1863-1947) in England, and Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) in France (Coverley). Contemporary successful writers of psychogeography include Iain Sinclair (1943-), Peter Ackroyd (1949-), Will Self (1961-) who engage with psychogeography in their literary works in a multidimensional way. As Löffler states:

As the individual mind has no limits and geographical surroundings can be influenced by a myriad of factors, producing a number of different atmospheres or ‘situations,’ psychogeographical writings and, concomitantly, urban imaginaries, can take innumerable forms. (52)

Nevertheless, an avid reader of psychogeographical writings can discern a common link among the practitioners of literary psychogeography in their insistence “upon the importance of the unique nature of place, entering into an intimate dialogue with the city spaces they inhabit” (Green 29). It is outright infeasible to confine multifaceted literary psychogeography within certain

characteristics and it would be banal to assert that all psychogeographical writers adumbrate analogous features of literary psychogeography in their writings to render their “intimate dialogue” with city spaces. However, according to Coverley, the salient features of psychogeographical writings include:

urban wandering, the imaginative reworking of the city, the otherworldly sense of [the] spirit of place, the unexpected insights and juxtapositions created by aimless drifting, the new ways of experiencing familiar surroundings. (31)

These features along with the traditional perspective of the collision of psychology and geography will be employed in this article to interpret the portrayal of Calcutta in Kunal Basu’s (1956-) novel *Kalkatta* (2015).

Calcutta, Kolkata, Kalkatta: Whose City Is It?

In literary psychogeography, according to Coverley, “the topography of the city is refashioned through the imaginative force of the writer” (16). The naming of Basu’s novel after *Kalkatta*, as pronounced by the non-Bengali people residing in the city, shrewdly hints at the refashioning of Calcutta (the anglicised pronunciation) or Kolkata (as Bengali people love to call it). Calcutta or Kolkata, represented by insiders and outsiders alike, is seen as a city populated by Bengali people, known for the Bengali intelligentsia, and redolent with Bengali culture. With the title *Kalkatta*, Basu has sought to hammer the fantasy of seeing Calcutta as a place *for* Bengali people only and re-imagines the binary opposition of centre/periphery, Bengali/non-Bengali, powerful/marginalised in the spatial context of the city. Calcutta, whose 56% of population comes from the non-Bengali community (Basu, “Kalkatta, A Book on Life of Gigolo by Kunal Basu Launched”), can hardly be a one-dimensional city for one community. Basu’s story revolves around Jamshed Alam, a Bihari Muslim refugee from Bangladesh, who reaches Calcutta with his parents and a lame sister to fulfil the dream of his mother to become a true Kalkatta-wallah but ultimately turns into a gigolo, a male sex worker. They find a place to stay at Zakaria Street with the aid of their distant relative, Uncle Mushtak, an influential leader of the then ruling communist party of West Bengal. Jamshed alias Jami growing up at Zakaria Street with poverty, ambition, and frustration is the staple thematic preoccupation in the fiction. True to a psychogeographical fiction, the story is unfurled through the subjective experiences of the protagonist, Jami. Being encouraged by his mother, Jami dreams of becoming a Kalkatta-wallah. What sort of a Kalkatta-wallah do Jami and his mother aspire to be? The Kalkatta-wallah, according to them, would be educated at a reputed school, would secure a well-paid government job, and occupy a house of their

own with maids to serve them. However, Jami's friend, Anirban Mitra, a true Kalkatta-wallah as per Jami's conjecture, jibes at the concept of a true Kalkatta-wallah by satirically cataloguing a bunch of derogatory features associated with the term. As he says:

Rule number one, you have to believe that you know everything.... Number two, you must accept that rumours are more important than facts.... Rule number three requires that you make a grand gesture every now and then.... And you must remember to have a low enough ambition to be envious of all those with higher ones. (*Kalkatta* 67)

Quite significantly, Basu's long love-hate relationship with his *own* city finds projection through Anirban's comment on Calcuttans. The city which once known for nurturing Renaissance thoughts is currently lacking inquisitive rationality. Surface-level banality coupled with artificial bragging of knowing everything has become a ubiquitous feature of many Calcuttans. This gradual decline of intellectual ambience is aired by Anirban's criticism of the contemporary Kalkatta-wallah.

Basu trenchantly criticises the inaccessibility of marginalised people like Jami to the posh city space when he narrates the outings of Jami and his friends to watch football matches. At the end of matches, they love to loiter about the city to escape the drab life at Zakaria Street only to realise that they are considered outsiders and intruders. Jami recalls:

Win or lose a match, we enjoyed leaving Zakaria Street, escaping the smell of dead cows and pigeon droppings to visit the city centre. It was a dreamland: roads as wide as rivers with foreign names like Esplanade, Park Street, Red Road. No dirty lanes, no slums, no horns blowing, just a perfect Englishtan. (*Kalkatta* 41)

Calcutta, a "perfect Englishtan," denies access to foreigners like Jami and his friends who do not belong to the dominant culture of the city and consequently, lose the right to enter the city space. Jami's Bengali friend, Anirban, once lent him a book enriched with the historical records of the origin and growth of the city and photographs of a bygone age. The reading of the book enables Jami to know that the streets of Calcutta were named after English people before they had been renamed into Bengali names: "It amused me to read the street names, I mean the old English names before they were changed to Bengali ones" (*Kalkatta* 73). The naming of streets is crucial to understand the prevalent power structure of society. Disregarding the local sentiment, the British colonial administration named the streets of Calcutta after power-wielding British officers. With the disappearance of British rulers,

names of various places and streets are changed after eminent national personalities and in keeping with local sentiments.

However, such naming has often given birth to ghettos of specific communities that can turn out, in the long run, to be detrimental to the cordial spirit of coexistence in the city space. Studies on the politics of naming places have clearly projected its proximity to social exclusion: “Toponyms, like all place representations, are expressive and constitutive of the politics of citizenship, conferring a greater degree of belonging to certain groups over others” (Alderman and Inwood 212). The simple act of naming can formulate a hierarchy of belongingness among the residents of a particular society. Jami wishes to be a Kalkatta-wallah because he considers himself an outsider to the city. To become a Kalkatta-wallah is intrinsically associated with climbing the power structure. Jami’s belief system is constructed by the prevalence of the autonomy of Bengali culture in the city. Conversely, if we critically engage with understanding this ghettoisation of Zakaria Street, we are sure to discover that it has given birth to nonchalance of culturally dominant people towards the powerless. The problems of Zakaria Street where cars fail to enter are seen as specific to a community that inhabits the margins of the culturally and financially dominant spaces of the same city. Due to his budding friendship with ex-colleague Mandira, Jami attends a meeting of a poetry group at Mandira’s house. He finds the high-flown philosophical and intellectual discussions by the poets on refugees and exiles to be based on theoretical abstraction devoid of any real life experience. Jami gradually understands that a “Kalkatta-wallah has learnt to drive his thoughts away from things that hang like a cloud over Zakaria Street” (*Kalkatta* 219). The poets who could have worked as a catalyst to usher a change in society have become oblivious to the glaring problems of a place which does not belong to them. Basu’s criticism of the attitude of sophisticated and well-to-do city people towards the marginalised living at Zakaria Street reaches its height in his artistic narration of the reverse side of Jami’s approach to his residential place after his success as a gigolo. When he frequently visits the expensive shopping malls, posh restaurants, and lavish hotel rooms with his customer, Monica, Jami finds himself to be a stranger to Zakaria Street. As he says: “Just a few months with her had turned me into a stranger in Number 14, living like a refugee in my own family” (*Kalkatta* 96). The analogy of “refugee” is quite significant in the context of the narrative, as Jami’s family comes to Calcutta as refugees from Bangladesh. Jami, initially an outsider to the city, metamorphoses into an insider and in turn, evinces the nonchalant attitude of city dwellers to the poverty-stricken areas. However, Jami’s metamorphosis into an insider to the city enables him to experience the city in its totality along with the changes taking place there.

Changing City, Changing Lives

The critical engagement with city as reflected in psychogeographical writings is permeated with an awareness of *genius loci* or “spirit of place” through which “landscape, whether urban or rural, can be imbued with a sense of the histories of previous inhabitants and the events that have been played out against them” (Coverley 33). However, the authors may offer a vision of a place shaped according to their own peculiar imaginary topography. Far from offering his own topography, Basu resorts to name real places, record real historical events, and describe the real life lived in Calcutta to vivify the city.

Undeniably, city space as represented in literature is bound to be a representation as well as interpretation of real space due to the incorporation of subjective experiences in the construction of literary space. To understand the interrelation between real and literary space, the concept of “threefold mimesis” by Ricoeur can be employed. The concept, as elaborated in *Time and Narrative* (1984), hinges on three types of mimesis: *mimesis*₁, *mimesis*₂, and *mimesis*₃. *Mimesis*₁, which talks of a prior knowledge about the real place before giving it a shape in literary work, can be described as *prefiguration*. The author is required to possess a pre-understanding of the real space and subjective experiences of the same for constructing the literary space. *Mimesis*₂, which is all about creating the literary space by dint of exploiting the subjective experiences of the author, can be seen as *configuration*. The act of writing which strategically arranges the narrative elements derived from subjective experiences of the author to convert the real space into literary space is the cardinal issue of *Mimesis*₂. Finally, *Mimesis*₃ “marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader” (Ricoeur 71) and affects the formation and understanding of the real world. As “[t]he represented world, however realistic and truthful, can never be ... identical with the real world it represents” (Bakhtin 86), the literary manifestation of city creates an autonomous reality. Literary representations of cities construct something new that emerges from the interrelation between reality and fictional representations of the latter.

Basu's Calcutta as seen through the eyes of the internal focaliser, Jamshed Alam, is undoubtedly a representation and interpretation of the city. Nevertheless, the names of places such as Dharmatala, Park Street, Red Road, Ballygunge, Alipore, Keyatola, Kalabagan, Rajabazar, and Lalbazaar; monuments such as Victoria Memorial, Nakhoda Mosque, and the mausoleum of Job Charnock; food places such as Café Rex, Planters Club, Nahoum's bakery, Flury's, and King's Oven; hotels like Grand Hotel; markets such as New Market, Metro Market, Burrabazar, Bowbazaar, and Chandni Chowk; and social events like the historical defeat of Communist Party in 2011 after the long rule of thirty four years – all successfully formulate the *genius loci*.

True to the spirit of psychogeography, Basu's *Kalkatta* is found to record the transformations taking place in the city space in the form of

extension of geographical areas, demolition of private homes for the erection of multi-storey complexes, creation of super markets in places of small shops, and computers snatching jobs of old unskilled workers. In his poem, "Boast of Quietness," Jorge Luis Borges, while deploring the unbridled growth of cities, writes, "The tall unknowable city takes over the countryside" (43). It is undoubtedly a sordid reality that urbanisation has perennially sought to devour villages. Again, the rise of capitalism is synonymous with industrialisation and urbanisation, as Allen Scott has rightly pointed out: "Wherever capitalism makes its historical and geographical appearance, peculiar patterns and rising levels of urbanisation invariably ensue" (1465). The city, Calcutta, is no exception to this interrelation between capitalism and urban development. Basu has aesthetically captured the devastating force of urbanisation which is keen on consuming the villages in its desire for expanding the city space. When Jami and his "party" Monica go for an outing to the Sundarbans, the latter points out to Jami: "Calcutta grows a mile every month. Soon there won't be any borders, everyone will live in Calcutta, everyone will go around in cars and autos, everyone will die from smoke" (*Kalkatta* 99). The tongue-in-cheek approach of Basu towards rapid urbanisation and its corollary effect on the environment in the form of smoke-emitting factories and automobiles can hardly evade the eyes of readers. The growth of the city, as represented in *Kalkatta*, becomes analogous with the exclusion of a group of people who fail either to purchase the facilities offered by the city or to cope with the inevitable changes. However, such development of the city brings forth the question whether selective people will be slowly terminated in a city space or the administrative heads of the city would take the onus of facilitating that selective group in a city in an inclusive manner. Barring this social exclusion, the expansion of city space inevitably calls for a discussion on the psychological impact of topography on its residents.

Personality of Topography, Topographical Personality

In his definition of psychogeography, Guy Debord has given much importance to understanding the dynamics of interrelation between city space and human beings from the perspective of the collision of geography and psychology. Debord's purpose was to record the emotional and behavioural impact of urban space upon individual consciousness to promote the construction of a new urban environment that both reflect and facilitate the desires of the inhabitants of the future city. The famous Canadian geographer David Ley comments on the reciprocal relationship between environments and behaviour, stating

a neighbourhood takes its character from the values and life-styles of its residents; however, reciprocally, its personality is also a context that acts to reinforce and narrow a range of human responses. (143)

Scholars of the behavioural approach to geography have undertaken innumerable researches² to understand the influence of “personality” of urban settings on individual and group behaviour.

In *Kalkatta*, Jami's subjective experiences of Calcutta are not bereft of such behavioural impact of topography on the human mind. While the high flyover crowded with cars inculcates in Jami the high ambition of becoming a Kalkatta-wallah, his residence reminds him of his limitations. To Jami's imagination, “The houses of Zakaria Street looked like a row of beggars, waiting bowl in hand, for someone to put out the lights and drive them away” (*Kalkatta* 57). Jami's meeting with Monica, who shrewdly leads him to the profession of a gigolo, brings changes in his lifestyle with dining at posh restaurants and wearing expensive clothes. However, Jami realises soon that the flamboyance of city life is draining him of his humane feelings and turning him into a mannequin. He reflects: “Being with her [Monica], I felt like a model displayed in a shop window” (*Kalkatta* 85). One day during her tryst with Jami, Monica expresses her admiration for a foreign city, Dubai, which “is so much better than Calcutta. There's nothing there, absolutely nothing, to remind you of anything that you may want to forget.... No beggars, no garbage, not even a single mosquito!” (*Kalkatta* 116).

Monica hankers after such a city which will not “remind” her of the adversities of city life. If Monica desires for such a city which would be devoid of inequality and marginalisation, her wish is invariably commendable. However, the problem lies in the duality of her expression which may suggest that she demands a city which will not “remind” her of the sordid reality of inequality and injustice embedded in city life. In the context of behavioural geography, the hiding of slums, beggars, vagabonds, and homeless people in a city is an issue of heated debate. Quite interestingly, the biggest shopping mall of Delhi is adjacent to the largest slum of the city. A huge wall is erected to segregate the two *cities* and not to remind the buyers of anything that they may want to forget. Sanjay Srivastava in his book, *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community, and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon* (2015), studies the complex dynamics of Delhi and its citizens. However, his study becomes relevant to all the cities of India, as Rosheen Kabraji in his review of Srivastava's book comments: “For the sake of building ‘global cities,’ ‘smart cities’ and ‘resilient cities,’ one segment of the population, the urban poor who make up a significant percentage of India's metropolises, is being segregated from the others” (233).

² For example: Paul Knox and Steven Pinch, *Urban Social Geography: An Introduction* (6th ed. [2010]).

The city thriving on consumerist culture hardly possesses any sympathy for those who fail to appear as best consumers. As topography can have humungous impact on human psychology, the authority has always sought to control it. The novel *Kalkatta* has undoubtedly touched upon a very sensitive issue associated with incessant urbanisation and concomitant social exclusion of poor people. Some topographical references in the text can be analysed as foregrounding the emotional bankruptcy of so-called materially aristocratic people. Jami's subjective experience of the topographical features of Monica's villa which "looked exactly like an old photo of a British house" (*Kalkatta* 138) is one such instance. The "British house" of Monica and her industrialist husband, Bikash Goswami, is indicative of their colonising mentality over marginalised people. Bikash loves to "tear down the old houses" (*Kalkatta* 143) to earn money, and Monica with her husband's money purchases branded clothes and watches for her gigolo partners. The behavioural impact of urban life on the inhabitants of city becomes evident in another instance when Champaka Massage Parlor, the place of Jami's work, is on the verge of closure. The owner of the parlor, Swati madam, decides to demolish the parlor to start a kindergarten school which will eventually lead to the expulsion of the workers. However, all the masseurs excluding Rani have planned of their future; and Tito, the lover of one of the workers, is of the view that Swati madam would surely find Rani a safe job. No one is assured by his prediction because they know that "Kalkatta wasn't a village. Here everyone looked out for themselves, not for others" (*Kalkatta* 234). Calcutta, being a metropolis, can hardly inculcate in its citizens the selfless love and altruistic solidarity that predominantly characterise village life. Urbanites are taught to compete for life and proceed in every sector without pondering over ethical and moral issues.

Another malicious consequence of high-speed and competitive city life is increasing loneliness among people. The growing number of prostitutes and gigolos in the city space can be seen as an offshoot of solitary urban life. All the customers of Jami are found to be eager to tell stories of their lives and sometimes, they hire him only to vent out their throttled emotions. When Jami's most reliable friend Ani backstabs him by helping his girlfriend Raka Sen write a cover story for a magazine on Jami under the title of the "Gigolo King of Calcutta," a heart-broken Jami hardly finds anyone to share his woes. The urbanites hardly possess enough time, patience, and empathy to listen to his life story which was destined to be doomed from the very day of his landing foot in Calcutta. A desperate Jami visits the tomb of Job Charnock, the contested founder of Calcutta, to tell him everything:

[H]ere I was standing before the founder, the great-great-great-great-grandfather of every Kalkatta-wallah, the man who'd seen it all from his tomb, if he could see that is, to tell him the full story of the life of a

failed Kalkatta-wallah. Only he would care to listen.... Only Charnock would have the patience to listen. (*Kalkatta* 293)

This urge of Jami graphically paints the hollowness of city people who do not “care to listen” to fellow urban dwellers’ sufferings and troubles. He vehemently criticises the city space for robbing its residents of fundamental human qualities. Charnock seems to possess the patience as Jami loves to consider him to be a marginalised personality who is totally forgotten by the Calcuttans. Like Charnock, Jami can be conjectured as an explorer with the passion of exploring new spaces in the existing city and he does so by walking down the street.

Walking Streets, Exploring City

The motif of walking, be it in the sense of *flâneur* like observation or in the political sense of subverting the autonomy of automobile, has played a cardinal role in psychogeographical writings. The concept of *flâneur* as elaborated by Baudelaire in his *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) and popularised by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* (written between 1927 and 1940, published posthumously in 1999) is fundamentally associated with a person’s leisure walking without destination and with artistic recording of events played out in the backdrop of city space. When members of the Situationist International revived the concept of *flâneur*, they looked at it in a different way. They sought to incorporate the sense of strategy and political motivation within the walking of the *flâneur*. Their cherished coinage for *flâneur* was that of *dérive* which may lack a clear destination but is not without a purpose. On the contrary,

The *dériveur* is conducting a psychogeographical investigation and is expected to return home having noted the ways in which the areas traversed resonate with particular moods and ambiances. The results of this fieldwork form the basis for the situationist refashioning of the city. (Coverley 96)

The process of *dérive*, a strategic device for reconstructing the city, places the walker in a subversive position of a revolutionary following a political agenda of challenging the autonomy of city space. Though Jami, due to his professional demand as a gigolo, spends much time in private cars of his parties and in grand hotels and private villas, he is sporadically seen to walk on the street during his distressed mental condition. These walks enable him to encounter countless destitute people like prostitutes, beggars, lepers, mad men, and gigolos. Psychogeography reiterates the importance of walking at the time of the reign of automobile, as walking offers the opportunity to observe and understand the life of the marginalised section living in slums or pedestal areas. The

architecture of roads and the prevalent traffic rules invariably deny our engagement with street dwellers. To engage with their mode of living as well as to understand the corollary adverse effects of urbanisation on human beings, walking is of paramount importance.

In this context, Certeau's distinction between *voyeur* and *walker* as illustrated in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) deserves special mention. While the *walker* is invested with a street-level perspective, the *voyeur* living in skyscrapers possesses a panoptical god-like view. The *voyeur* looking down-below from up-above perceives the city as a vast totality. He is

lifted out of the city's grasp. [His] body is no longer clasped by the streets.... When [he] goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators.... His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. (Certeau 92)

In contrast, Certeau's *walkers* at street-level "live 'down below'.... They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write" (Certeau 93). The *voyeur* by observing the city as a harmonious whole fails to identify separate identities and in turn, suppresses the marginalised. The *walker*, on the other hand, with his first-hand experiences of the city creates a highly dynamic interaction between him and his spatial surroundings leading to the exploration of street life.

When Jami is on the way with his family to see Galaxy Tours and Travels, where he starts his career as a subagent, he comes to a flyover and poetically comments:

It was true the city looked different from a height – the whites whiter, trees greener – dirty colours fading away. There were fewer people too, and the air was cooler like a winter draught through an open window. 'Smells like Bihar,' Abbu said. (*Kalkatta* 54)

To the *voyeur* Jami, the city appears to be devoid of its harsh realities of environmental degradation and explosion of population. Even the problems of marginalised people do not surface to Jami's father who feels the city as Bihar, his native place, before fleeing to East Pakistan during Partition of 1947. The banality of the perspective of a *voyeur* who fails to notice the seamy side of city life becomes evident here. The city space, seen through Jami's eyes as he is walking back to Zakaria Street at late night after attending an elite get together at Monica's posh villa, is shorn off the positivity of the perspective of a *voyeur*.

The *walker* Jami experiences the harsh reality of city space which thrives on inequality, injustice, and atrocities against the marginalised section. He explores:

The empty streets were full of drunks and pickpockets counting up their day's earnings...A cry came from a closed window. Someone banged loudly on a door, setting off a pair of howling cats. A leper drunk thirstily from a hydrant, wearing a necklace of tin cans to warn pedestrians of his frightful disease. A one-legged beggar waited for him to finish before having a drink himself. I left the open road to walk on the pavement, picking my way over sleeping bodies. (*Kalkatta* 145)

The contrast between pulsating life at Monica's villa and the poverty-stricken frozen life of the street at late night is immense.

Blind faith in capitalism coupled with unbridled urbanisation has strategically marginalised a group of people in the city space. The oft-repeated concept of Darwinian *Natural Selection* is spuriously employed by powerful people in a city to substantiate the injustice meted out to the poor. Jami's friend, Anirban, satirically reminds him of the same in the context of Calcutta: "It's much better to let only a few enjoy the best of Kolkata and the rest dream about what they might be missing. It's called Natural Selection" (*Kalkatta* 159). The term *Natural Selection* replaced with Spenserian *survival of the fittest* by Charles Darwin (1809-82) in the fifth edition of *On the Origin of Species* (1859, Fifth Edition 1869) on the request of Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) (Darwin Correspondence Project), suggests that the struggle for natural resources allows individuals with certain physical and mental traits to succeed more frequently than others. In the Darwinian concept, the fittest will survive obviously not because they possess the best physical shape; rather they are "better designed for an immediate local environment" (Gould 99).

The preachers of Social Darwinism deliberately misinterpreted Darwinian *Natural Selection* to propagate that through unrestrained competition social evolution would automatically produce prosperity and personal liberty unparalleled in human history. The adherents of Social Darwinism, like Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), Francis Galton (1822-1911), and Walter Bagehot (1826-77) in England; Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) and William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) in America; and Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) in Germany – all believed some people to be superior to others due to their inherent characteristics, and moral attributes such as diligence, determination, creativity, and patience. They justified the imbalances of power between individuals and races as some people are fitter to survive than others. While in *Natural Selection*, Nature bountifully offers her resources to all the available species, Social Darwinism despite its tall claim of individual success fails to provide all the citizens with equal opportunities for success. The source of inequality lies not in

the paucity of talents within an individual, rather in the failure of the authority to extend facilities to develop individual talents.

In the context of the present story, this concept of capitalism is significant to understand Jami's failure to become a Kalkatta-wallah despite his desperate attempts to be so. After he meets Mandira, a colleague from Galaxy, and her son, Pablo who is suffering from cancer, Jami decides to leave behind his profession of a gigolo. The self-effacing love for Pablo encourages Jami to lead the life of a gentleman. However, the moot question which comes out to the forefront is the manner and path of doing so. Knowing of Jami's profession when Mandira does not keep any connection with him, Jami is extremely eager to tell her the reason for choosing the profession of a gigolo. In a monologue, Jami poignantly locates the source of his failure to grab a respectable job in the city in the destiny of being brought up in a refugee family. As he says: "The *real* story, I'd tell her, hadn't started with Monica but the day Abbu left Geneva [a refugee camp in Dhaka for Bihari Muslims] to take us across the border to Kalkatta" (*Kalkatta* 307). Jami's life adroitly brings forth the duality of city which fosters people to dream high but ultimately reminds that dreams can come true for a select few. From the cover design onwards, the text of *Kalkatta* has repeatedly exploited the image of street dogs to predict the failure of marginalised people like Jami in the backdrop of burgeoning economic inequality in the city space. The death of Jami hit by a running taxi draws a connecting line between the inevitable fates of Jami and street dogs. As Jami narrates:

Just like our first night at Number 14, I'd seen a giant form taking off noisily from the branches. It had silenced the dogs, but not the screeching tyres of the Devil taxi setting off down the lane in a headlong rush to complete one last errand. Thus far, I had managed to stay clear of its path but had known that it'd come calling some day. It'd be impossible to avoid that moment, because of the pain that would've numbed all other sensations by then. None though, could've spotted the danger, until the Devil's breath was too close, burning hot over my face. The blow was unexpected. It shot me off my feet like a rocket, sending me up and flying high, higher even than the gulmohtar. (*Kalkatta* 309)

The act of walking ultimately turns out to be fatal for Jami and can be seen as a literary trope in the text to discover the life at the margins and to understand the city space from the margins.

Conclusion

The understanding and interpretation of Jami's experiences in Calcutta as

narrated in *Kalkatta* enable a discerning reader to discover the insidious cultural domination of one ethnic group over the other. Jami's aspiration of becoming a true Kalkatta-wallah can be analysed in terms of his desire to climb in the power structure topped by a typical coterie of people. However, Jami's failure to become successful in city space in the form of a coveted Kalkatta-wallah can be linked to unethical capitalism which thrives on unequal distribution of resources among the citizens of a city.

Jami's upbringing in a poverty-stricken, excluded and ignored area of a city is intrinsically linked with his failure. A psychogeographical reading of the text helps us comprehend the politics of cultural domination, the exclusionary character of urbanisation, and the shrewd tactics of capitalism in formulating the hierarchy among citizens of a city space. The literary truth as discussed in *Kalkatta* is actually inclusive of the real life experiences that most people in a metropolitan city in contemporary India undeniably confront. A close reading of the text in juxtaposition with various theoretical perspectives of psychogeography encourages a reader to think and question the adversities of unsympathetic urbanisation, autonomy of capitalism and the concomitant hierarchical power structure pervasive in the city space.

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