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The Margins Made Visible: Calcutta, Poverty, and the Politics of Representation in Dominique Lapierre's *City of Joy*

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Abstract
Dominique Lapierre's City of Joy (1985) occupies a singular and contested position within the literature of the Global South. A French journalist's account of life in Anand Nagar - one of Calcutta's most densely populated slums - the novel-narrative navigates the treacherous terrain between humanitarian empathy and the politics of representation. This paper undertakes a comprehensive multi-theoretical analysis of *City of Joy*, bringing to bear the full spectrum of contemporary critical and literary theory: postcolonial criticism, Saidian Orientalism, Spivakian subaltern studies, Marxist and materialist analysis, feminist and gender theory, new historicism, narratological inquiry, Bakhtinian dialogics, reader-response theory, and humanist-existentialist perspectives. The aim is to demonstrate that while Lapierre's text is animated by a sincere philanthropic impulse, it simultaneously reproduces, complicates, and at times inadvertently subverts dominant ideological structures of representation. Through the interlocking lenses of these critical frameworks, the paper argues that *City of Joy* is not merely a document of poverty but a site of ideological and discursive struggle - a text that both marginalises and rescues its subjects, and whose enduring critical value lies precisely in the contradictions it cannot resolve.

Keywords: Calcutta, Urbanism, Margin, Postcolonialism, Politics.

I. Introduction: The Text as Contested Terrain

When Dominique Lapierre's *La Cité de la Joie* was published in French in 1985, and translated into English the following year, it became an international literary phenomenon. The book spent months on bestseller lists across Europe and North America, and the proceeds funded charitable work in Calcutta. Yet, almost from the moment of its publication, *City of Joy* became the subject of fierce academic and political debate. Bengali intellectuals, postcolonial scholars, and representatives of the very community that Lapierre depicted expressed discomfort - sometimes outrage - at the manner in which the narrative was constructed, and at the position from which the tale was told.

The novel follows three central figures: Hasari Pal, a peasant farmer from rural Bengal who migrates to Calcutta after ecological and economic devastation drives his family off their land; Max Loeb, a young American doctor who volunteers at a clinic in the Anand Nagar slum; and Stephan Kovalski, a Polish Catholic priest who takes a vow of poverty and lives among

the slum-dwellers. Around these characters, Lapierre weaves the lives of hundreds of peripheral figures - rickshaw-pullers, lepers, prostitutes, children, community leaders, goondas (gangsters), and political activists. The effect is an enormous sociological and literary canvas, one that is in turns moving, disturbing, romanticising, and unsettling.

The challenge of *City of Joy*, as this paper argues, is that no single critical theory is adequate to account for its complex mediations of poverty, identity, geography, and power. The text demands a pluralistic, dialogic methodology. What follows is an attempt to subject Lapierre's narrative to the full range of contemporary critical inquiry - not with the aim of dismantling the text's humanitarian value, but of rendering visible the ideological architectures within which that humanitarianism operates.

This is, at its heart, a study of representation: who speaks, for whom, from where, and to what end. In applying literary and critical theory to *City of Joy*, we are asking the most urgent questions that literature can pose: Whose reality is being described? Whose voice is being heard? And in making the margins visible, what kind of visibility - and what kind of power - is being extended?

II. Postcolonial Theory and the Burden of the Western Gaze

2.1 Said's *Orientalism* and the Construction of the Indian Other

The foundational text for any postcolonial reading of *City of Joy* remains Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), in which Said argues that the 'Orient' is not a naturally occurring geographical or cultural entity but a discursive construction produced by Western imperial epistemology. The Orient, Said contends, is created through a systematic network of interests, scholars, institutions, and texts that define the East as exotic, static, sensual, irrational, and in perpetual need of Western guidance and management.

In *City of Joy*, India - and specifically Calcutta - bears the weight of an Orientalist imaginary. From the opening pages, Lapierre constructs Calcutta as a city of extremity: a place beyond ordinary comprehension, a landscape so dense with suffering that it constitutes an almost metaphysical category. The descriptions of Anand Nagar - the 'city of joy' of the title - are simultaneously horrifying and rapturous. Lapierre writes of rats, floods, human waste, disease, and despair alongside an extraordinary vitality and communal love. This double move - casting the slum as both abject and transcendent - is a classically Orientalist gesture, rendering India as a place that exceeds rational Western frameworks and must be approached through affect and spiritual revelation rather than analytical understanding.

Max Loeb's arrival in Calcutta performs the Saidian drama with almost textbook precision. He comes to India alienated from his comfortable American life, searching for meaning. Calcutta, in this schema, becomes the site of Western self-discovery - a function that instrumentalises the suffering of its residents as a catalyst for a foreign protagonist's transformation. The poor of Anand Nagar exist, in this narrative logic, partly to teach the Westerner something. This is one of the most powerful charges postcolonial critics have levelled at the text: that the subjectivity of the Indian characters is ultimately subordinated to the spiritual and psychological journeys of the Western ones.

2.2 Homi Bhabha and the Space of Colonial Ambivalence

Homi Bhabha's theoretical framework in *The Location of Culture* (1994), particularly his concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and the Third Space, offers a productively different angle on *City of Joy*. For Bhabha, colonial discourse is never stable or monolithic; it is always riven by

ambivalence - the coloniser is simultaneously fascinated and repelled by the colonised, and this ambivalence creates spaces for subversion and agency that postcolonial subjects can inhabit.

The figure of Hasari Pal is particularly amenable to a Bhabhian reading. Hasari does not simply occupy the passive role of victimised subaltern. He is a man of ingenuity, humour, and extraordinary will. His negotiation of the rickshaw-puller's economy - a system that is both structurally oppressive and, within its own logic, a site of community formation - constitutes what Bhabha might call a form of colonial sly civility: an accommodation to power that does not capitulate entirely to it. Hasari's body - ravaged by tuberculosis, literally broken by the rickshaw - becomes the text's central metaphor for the violence of class and economic exploitation. Yet even as his body fails, his social relationships and moral agency persist, carving out what Bhabha would recognise as a Third Space: a hybrid zone of meaning-making that is neither purely the space of oppression nor of resistance, but something more complex and more alive.

Stephan Kovalski's project of total immersion in slum life similarly evokes the Bhabhian concept of mimicry, though with a crucial inversion: here it is the European who performs the role of the Indian poor, adopting their dress, diet, and living conditions. This cross-cultural mimicry is never simply successful or pure. Kovalski's whiteness, his European theology, and his access to resources that the slum-dwellers lack always mark him as different, even as he attempts cultural assimilation. The text's most honest moments are those in which this mimicry's incompleteness is acknowledged - moments that reveal the gap between the performative and the structural.

III. The Subaltern and the Question of Voice

3.1 Gayatri Spivak: "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's landmark essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) poses a question that cuts to the heart of *City of Joy*'s representational politics. Spivak's argument is not simply that subaltern people are silenced by power - though they are - but that the very structures of discourse and knowledge through which the subaltern might 'speak' are themselves shaped by the hegemonies that produce their marginality. When the subaltern speaks, they can only be heard within a system of representation that is always already ideologically laden.

In *City of Joy*, the subaltern characters - the slum-dwellers, the rickshaw-pullers, the women and children of Anand Nagar - are rendered present on the page through Lapierre's mediating narrative voice. Lapierre spent years in the slums conducting interviews, and the text is rich with the texture of lived experience. Yet the fundamental problem identified by Spivak remains: it is Lapierre - a French man, a journalist, a representative of global literary capital - who decides which stories are told, how they are framed, what is emphasised and what is omitted. The subaltern appear to speak, but they speak through a ventriloquist.

The character of Margareta, the woman who leads a community health initiative in Anand Nagar, offers an interesting counter-example. She is represented as a person of agency, intelligence, and initiative - a community leader who acts on behalf of her neighbours. Yet even Margareta's agency is ultimately narrated through the lens of her relationship with Kovalski, the European priest. Her subjectivity is defined and validated by its contact with the Western protagonist. This is, in Spivak's terms, a form of epistemic violence: not the violent erasure of the subaltern, but the more insidious process by which their agency is acknowledged only to be re-subordinated to a Eurocentric narrative logic.

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3.2 Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Historiography

The Subaltern Studies collectively in *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (published in 1982, edited by Ranjit Guha), founded by Ranajit Guha in the early 1980s, sought to recover the histories of those whom colonial and nationalist historiographies had left out: peasants, women, tribals, and the urban poor. Guha's insistence that subaltern consciousness must be read 'against the grain' of dominant historical narratives offers a productive methodology for approaching *City of Joy*.

Lapierre's text, for all its flaws, does contain what might be called proto-subaltern material: fragments of experience, oral tradition, and communal practice that exceed the dominant narrative frameworks within which they are embedded. The rituals of the slum - the festivals, the sharing of food, the collective response to flood and disease - are described with ethnographic specificity that allows the reader to perceive a social world operating according to its own internal logic and ethics. Reading these passages 'against the grain' of Lapierre's humanist-philanthropic framework reveals a community that is not simply awaiting the benevolence of Western helpers, but that has developed sophisticated strategies of survival, solidarity, and resistance.

IV. Marxist and Materialist Criticism: Class, Labour, and Ideology

4.1 The Political Economy of the Slum

A Marxist reading of *City of Joy* begins with the most elementary question: how is the poverty of Anand Nagar produced? Lapierre's text, for all its emotional richness, tends to naturalise poverty - to present it as a condition of existence rather than a product of specific historical and economic relationships. A materialist analysis, drawing on the Marxist tradition from Engels to Gramsci to the contemporary urban sociology of Mike Davis, insists that the slum is not a natural phenomenon but a structural consequence of capitalism's uneven development.

The rickshaw economy, which is central to Hasari Pal's experience, is a near-perfect illustration of what Marx called the extraction of surplus value. Hasari does not own his rickshaw; he rents it from a gomasta (middleman) who takes a substantial percentage of his earnings. The gomasta in turn is subordinate to a larger network of moneylenders, political operators, and property owners. Hasari's body - his labour-power - is commodified in the most literal sense: he is physically consumed by the work, developing tuberculosis as a direct consequence of the bodily demands of pulling a rickshaw through Calcutta's streets. The destruction of Hasari's body is not a narrative tragedy but an economic necessity: the rickshaw system requires the constant replenishment of labour because it destroys the labourers.

Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses is also relevant here. His ideology of the State Apparatuses are expressed in *Lenin and Philosophy of Other Essays* (1971). Lapierre's text, despite its critical intentions, functions in some respects as an ideological apparatus: it makes the suffering of the poor legible and emotionally accessible to Western readers, but within a framework that emphasises individual charity and spiritual response rather than structural political transformation. The solution that the narrative implicitly endorses - the heroic voluntarism of the doctor and the priest - is precisely the kind of individualist, philanthropic response that Marxist analysis identifies as a mechanism for managing rather than resolving the contradictions of capitalist inequality.

4.2 Gramsci and the Question of Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony in *Selection from the Prison Notebook* (written in 1929-1935, published in 1971 in English) - the process by which ruling-class ideology becomes the 'common sense' of the subaltern classes - is illuminating in the context of *City of Joy*. Many of the slum-dwellers in Lapierre's narrative have internalised the ideological frameworks of their oppression. The caste system, the political patronage networks, and the religious fatalism that appear in the text are all, in Gramscian terms, hegemonic formations: they are not simply external constraints imposed upon the poor, but structures of feeling and meaning through which the poor themselves understand their world.

Yet Gramsci also recognised that hegemony is never total - that there are always what he called 'good sense' elements within popular culture: practical wisdoms and collective memories that contain the seeds of counter-hegemonic consciousness. In *City of Joy*, these elements appear in the community's extraordinary capacity for mutual aid, in the political activism of characters like Aristotle John, the Communist Party organiser, and in the networks of solidarity that emerge in times of crisis. Lapierre's text renders these counter-hegemonic formations visible, even if it does not always theorise them as such.

V. Feminist and Gender Theory: Women at the Margins of the Margins

5.1 The Gendered Architecture of Poverty

If postcolonial theory reveals the racial and cultural axes of power in *City of Joy*, feminist criticism reveals the gendered ones. The women of Anand Nagar occupy a doubly marginalised position: they are poor and they are women in a patriarchal society, subject to forms of exploitation and violence that the novel's male protagonists - and, in important respects, Lapierre's narrative - cannot fully access.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential critique of Western feminist discourse is relevant here. In 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' (1984, later included in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* in 2013), Mohanty argues that much Western feminist writing constructs Third World women as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass of victims - powerless, tradition-bound, and awaiting liberation by enlightened Western (or Westernised) agency. *City of Joy*, despite its avoidance of overt feminist discourse, exhibits some of these tendencies. The women of the slum are often described in terms of their suffering - as wives of rickshaw-pullers, as mothers of malnourished children, as victims of domestic violence and caste discrimination - without the full complexity of their subjectivity being rendered visible.

The character of Padmini, Hasari's wife, is indicative. She is remarkable for her resilience and moral strength, yet the narrative consistently filters her experience through Hasari's perspective. Her inner life - her fears, her ambitions, her experience of gender-specific forms of poverty - remains largely inaccessible. This is a failure not of empathy but of structural access: Lapierre, as a male Western journalist, had limited access to the interior worlds of the women he sought to document, and this limitation is reflected in the text's gendered lacunae.

5.2 The Body, Sex Work, and Agency

The representation of sex work in *City of Joy* raises some of the most complex questions in feminist literary theory. The text includes accounts of women who have entered prostitution as a consequence of poverty, displacement, and the collapse of family structures. These accounts are presented with sympathy, but they risk reproducing the trope of the victimised prostitute - a figure whose sexuality is defined entirely by exploitation rather than by any form of agency or desire.

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Feminist theorists such as Kamala Kempadoo have argued in *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition* (published in 1998, edited by Kempadoo and Joe Doezema) that sex work in the Global South must be understood within the specific economic and social contexts that shape women's choices, and that frameworks which deny agency to sex workers - even in the name of feminist solidarity - risk reproducing the very paternalism they seek to critique. *City of Joy*'s treatment of the 'fallen women' of Anand Nagar oscillates between sympathy and a subtly moralising gaze that reflects the heteronormative Catholic values that shape Kovalski's perspective. The priest's compassion for the prostitutes of his neighbourhood is genuine, but it is a compassion that cannot fully relinquish its judgement of their condition as one of abjection rather than a complex negotiation of severely constrained choices.

VI. New Historicism and Cultural Materialism

6.1 The Text in Its Historical Moment

New Historicism, associated with Stephen Greenblatt (who expressed his thought in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* in 1980) and influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, insists on reading literary texts as embedded within the discursive formations of their historical moment rather than as transcendent aesthetic objects. For Greenblatt, texts both reflect and help to produce the power relations of their time; they are not outside of history but inside it, constituting part of the cultural 'negotiation' through which social meanings are produced and contested.

City of Joy was published in 1985, a moment of significant global ideological contestation. The Cold War was entering its final decade; structural adjustment programmes sponsored by the International Monetary Fund were beginning to reshape the economies of the Global South; India had recently emerged from the Emergency and was undergoing a complex negotiation between Nehruvian socialism, regional assertiveness, and an emerging market liberalism. Lapierre's text, with its emphasis on individual heroism and philanthropic voluntarism as responses to poverty, is consonant with the emerging neo-liberal common sense of the Reagan-Thatcher era: problems of systemic inequality are rendered as opportunities for individual virtue, and the appropriate response to poverty is charity rather than redistribution.

New Historicism also encourages attention to the 'anecdote' - the particular, concrete detail that anchors the text in its historical specificity. Lapierre's narrative is extraordinarily rich in anecdote: the story of a rickshaw-puller who saves for years to buy a piece of land, the account of a child's death from cholera, the description of a community festival. These anecdotes are not mere decoration; they are, in New Historicist terms, the sites where the text's ideological work is most intensely performed.

6.2 Cultural Materialism and the Politics of the Text

Cultural materialism, as developed by Raymond Williams in his seminal work, *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and elaborated by Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore in *Politcal Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1985), shares with New Historicism an interest in the historical embeddedness of texts, but adds a more explicitly political dimension: the aim of cultural materialist analysis is not simply to understand how texts reproduce power, but to identify the possibilities of resistance and transformation that they contain.

In *City of Joy*, the most productive material for a cultural materialist reading is the novel's engagement with political activism. Lapierre does not ignore the organised political response to poverty in Calcutta; extensive presence of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

in the city, the trade union activity of rickshaw-pullers, and the various community organisations that operate in Anand Nagar are all given some attention. These political formations represent what Williams would call 'emergent' cultural practices - new forms of collective organisation that challenge the dominant social order.

Yet the text's treatment of these formations is revealing. The Communist Party organiser, Aristotle John is portrayed as well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective - a figure whose political framework, for all its analytical power, lacks the spiritual dimension that Lapierre presents as necessary for genuine transformation. This prioritisation of spiritual over political response is itself a form of ideological work: it marginalises collective political action in favour of individual moral transformation, producing what cultural materialists would identify as a mystification of the structural causes of poverty.

VII. Narratology and the Poetics of Representation

7.1 Point of View and Narrative Authority

The narratological dimension of *City of Joy* is of fundamental critical importance. Lapierre employs an omniscient third-person narrator with what Gérard Genette in his foundational work, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (published in 1972 in French, in 1980 in English) would describe as internal focalization shifting between characters. This technique allows Lapierre to move between the perspectives of Hasari, Kovalski, and Max, and to claim privileged access to the interior lives of a vast array of peripheral characters. The narrative authority implied by omniscience is, in this context, profoundly ideological: it positions the narrator - and by extension, the European author - as the one who knows, the one who has access to all perspectives, including those of the subaltern.

This narratological construction produces what Mikhail Bakhtin would recognise as a monological text: a narrative in which one voice, one perspective, ultimately controls and adjudicates all others. Despite the multiplicity of characters and perspectives in *City of Joy*, they are all finally subordinated to the authority of Lapierre's humanitarian vision. The heteroglossia - the multiplicity of social languages and discourses - that Bakhtin identifies as characteristic of the novel as a form is present in *City of Joy*, but it is finally contained rather than liberated by the narrative.

7.2 The Rhetoric of the Real

City of Joy occupies a generic borderland between journalism, documentary narrative, and fiction. Lapierre draws on real people and real events, but he also employs the full arsenal of fictional technique: scene-setting, interiority, dialogue, suspense, and characterisation. This generic hybridity is both a strength and an ideological complication.

Roland Barthes's concept of the 'reality effect' is relevant here. In his essay 'The Reality Effect' (published in French in 1968, posthumously included in *The Rustle of Language* in 1984), Barthes argues that seemingly superfluous descriptive details in realist narrative function to produce an impression of reality - to signify that 'this is real.' In *City of Joy*, the extraordinary density of empirical detail - statistics about population density, descriptions of sanitation conditions, accounts of the wages paid to rickshaw-pullers - functions as a massive reality effect, authorising the narrative's claim to documentary truth. Yet Barthes reminds us that this effect is a rhetorical construction, not a transparent representation of reality. The 'real' of Anand Nagar that Lapierre presents is always already a textual production, shaped by narrative choices about selection, emphasis, and framing.

The use of real names (Kovalski is a lightly fictionalised version of the actual priest

Stephan Kovalski, who gave his blessing to the project) and real documentary evidence further complicates the text's status. Lapierre's narrative claims the moral authority of testimony - 'I was there, I spoke to these people, I witnessed this suffering' - while simultaneously exercising the fictional author's prerogative to construct, shape, and interpret experience. This double claim is itself a form of rhetorical power.

VIII. Bakhtinian Dialogics and the Polyphony of the Slum

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel as a site of dialogic encounter - where multiple voices, perspectives, and social languages engage in productive conflict - offers a generative framework for reading the social world of Anand Nagar. For Bakhtin, the best novels are those in which the author does not simply impose a single ideological perspective but allows the voices of characters to speak with genuine independence, to challenge each other and to resist the author's own worldview.

By this measure, *City of Joy* is both a success and a failure. Lapierre's most extraordinary achievement is his rendering of the voices of the slum's residents: the banter of the rickshaw-pullers at the tea stall, the arguments between neighbours about the allocation of water, the lamentations and festivities that punctuate the grinding daily routine. These passages have a genuine dialogic energy - they feel like real voices in real conflict, shaped by the specific social languages of Bengali working-class culture.

Yet Bakhtin also described what he called the 'authoritative word' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981-82) - the voice that claims final authority over meaning, that cannot be contested or relativised. In *City of Joy*, this authoritative word is the voice of religious transcendence, most clearly represented by Kovalski's Catholicism but also by the broader humanist-spiritual vision that the narrative endorses. This authoritative word finally domesticates the dialogic energy of the slum, providing a resolution - the triumph of love and community over suffering - that many of the novel's readers find comforting but that others, particularly those who continue to live in conditions like those of Anand Nagar, may find deeply inadequate.

What Bakhtin's framework helps us see is that *City of Joy* is most alive - most fully realised as a work of literature - in its moments of genuine dialogic conflict: when Hasari argues with a fellow rickshaw-puller about whether to join a strike; when Kovalski confronts the local goonda about the exploitation of a child; when a woman challenges a community meeting's decision about resource allocation. It is in these moments of unresolved social tension that the voices of the margin are most fully heard - not in the moments of spiritual resolution that the narrative ultimately privileges.

IX. Reader-Response Theory and the Politics of Affect

9.1 The Implied Reader and the Humanitarian Imaginary

Reader-response theory, associated with critics such as Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish (in *Is There a Text in This Clas? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, 1980), and Hans Robert Jauss, directs attention to the reader's role in the production of textual meaning. In his seminal book, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978) Iser opines that a text contains 'gaps' and 'indeterminacies' that the reader must fill in through the act of reading, and it is in this act of imaginative participation that meaning is produced. Jauss's concept of the 'horizon of expectations' in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) - the culturally and historically specific set of assumptions, values, and generic conventions that readers bring to a text - is

equally important.

City of Joy's implied reader is quite specifically a Western, middle-class, politically moderate reader who is assumed to have no direct experience of extreme poverty and who is expected to respond to the suffering depicted in the text with empathy, admiration, and a desire to help. The text constructs this implied reader through a series of rhetorical strategies: the use of comparative reference points drawn from Western experience; the emphasis on universal human emotions (parental love, friendship, grief, hope) as a bridge between the slum-dwellers' world and the reader's; and the narrative positioning of Max Loeb, the American doctor, as an identification figure - a character through whose eyes the Western reader can experience Anand Nagar's world.

The politics of this implied reader are significant. By constructing the text's primary audience as Western and affluent, Lapierre necessarily frames the poverty of Anand Nagar as an object of Western concern rather than as a political problem requiring structural change. The emotional response that the text solicits - a powerful combination of grief, admiration, and guilt - is one that, as scholars of humanitarian communications have argued, tends to generate charitable giving rather than political solidarity. The reader is moved, but moved toward philanthropy rather than toward the kind of political consciousness that would challenge the global economic arrangements that produce slums like Anand Nagar.

9.2 Affective Economies and the 'Poverty Porn' Debate

The concept of 'poverty porn' - a term that entered critical discourse in the late 1980s and has been applied to texts, films, and photographs that aestheticise or exploit the suffering of the poor for the emotional gratification of affluent audiences - is directly relevant to any assessment of *City of Joy*. The term is polemical and reductive, but it points to a real critical problem: the risk that representations of poverty, however sympathetically intended, may serve the psychological and ideological needs of those who consume them rather than the political interests of those who are represented.

Feminist theorist, Sara Ahmed's work on 'affective economies' helps to theorise this dynamic more precisely. In her scholarly book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) Ahmed argues that emotions - including sympathy, compassion, and guilt - do not simply flow from texts to readers but circulate within and between texts, bodies, and social formations, accumulating around particular objects and figures. The suffering poor of *City of Joy* become what Ahmed might call 'sticky' figures: they accumulate the affect of Western readers, generating intense emotional investment. But this emotional investment, Ahmed's framework suggests, can function as a kind of psychic currency that allows Western readers to feel morally situated - to feel themselves as empathetic and good - without this feeling necessarily translating into meaningful political action.

X. Humanist and Existentialist Dimensions

10.1 The Literature of Witness

Against all the ideological critiques that the preceding sections have levelled at *City of Joy*, it is important to acknowledge the humanist tradition within which Lapierre's text most consciously locates itself. The literature of witness - writing that testifies to conditions of extreme suffering, that insists on the full humanity of those who endure those conditions, and that demands that the reader confront the reality of others' pain - has a long and honourable history, from Dickens's industrial England to Primo Levi's Holocaust testimony to James Baldwin's accounts of racial violence in America.

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City of Joy belongs, at least in aspiration, to this tradition. Lapierre's sustained attention to the specific, embodied details of slum life - the weight of the rickshaw shafts, the smell of the drains, the particular quality of light in a one-room dwelling shared by an entire family - constitutes a genuine act of witness. Whatever the text's ideological complications, it insists on the full humanity of its subjects with a fervour and specificity that represents a significant moral and literary achievement.

10.2 Existentialist Motifs and the Absurd

The existentialist dimensions of *City of Joy* are most visible in its meditation on the question of meaning in the face of apparently meaningless suffering. Albert Camus's conception of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) - the collision between the human desire for meaning and the universe's indifference - resonates throughout Lapierre's narrative. The slum-dwellers of Anand Nagar live in conditions that might seem to render any search for meaning futile. Yet the text insists, repeatedly and with great passion, on the extraordinary capacity of human beings to generate meaning, community, and even joy in the midst of conditions that seem to preclude them.

This is the text's most powerful and most controversial claim. The suggestion that the residents of Anand Nagar can be said to inhabit a 'city of joy' has been criticised as sentimental mystification - a romanticisation of poverty that, however unintentionally, makes the suffering of the poor palatable to a Western audience. But it can also be read, in existentialist terms, as an assertion of human dignity against the forces that seek to reduce the poor to mere victims. The 'joy' of Lapierre's title is not the joy of comfort or plenty but the joy of Camus's Sisyphus: the defiant, purposeful engagement with life that represents the human spirit's refusal to be annihilated by circumstances.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist ethics (expressed in *Existentialism Is a Humanism* in 1946) - his insistence that human beings are defined not by their circumstances but by their choices, and that authentic existence requires the acknowledgement of radical freedom even in conditions of severe constraint - is also relevant here. The choices made by Hasari Pal, Kovalski, and the women and men of Anand Nagar are choices made within conditions of severe structural unfreedom. Yet they are genuine choices, and the text's insistence on their genuineness is its most important humanist contribution.

XI. Ecological and Spatial Theory: The Geography of the Margin

Henri Lefebvre's theorisation of space as socially produced - his argument in *The Production of Space* (1974) that space is not a neutral container for social relations but is itself produced by and constitutive of those relations - provides a final theoretical framework for reading City of Joy. The space of Anand Nagar, as Lapierre renders it, is an extraordinary instance of what Lefebvre calls 'differential space': a space that is produced by and against the dominant spatial logics of the city, that contains its own internal organisations, hierarchies, and rhythms.

The density of Anand Nagar - 70,000 people per square kilometre, a figure that Lapierre deploys repeatedly as both a factual datum and a rhetorical device - is not merely a demographic reality but a spatial production. It is the result of specific historical processes: colonial urban planning that concentrated the poor in certain districts; the mass migration of rural labourers driven off their land by agrarian capitalism; the real estate market that assigns minimal space to minimal economic value. The slum's spatial organisation - its lanes and communal water taps and shared cooking spaces - represents what Lefebvre would call a 'representational space': a lived, embodied experience of space that exceeds the abstract spatial logics of the

planner and the property developer.

Reading *City of Joy* through Lefebvre helps to see the slum not as a pathology - an aberrant space that represents the failure of modern urban development - but as a mode of spatial production in its own right, with its own logic, values, and forms of human organisation. This is a more genuinely respectful reading than the humanist-philanthropic vision that Lapierre tends to adopt: it acknowledges the agency and ingenuity of the slum-dwellers in producing their own space, rather than rendering them as mere victims awaiting improvement.

XII. Conclusion: The Inescapable Contradictions of Representation

City of Joy is a text that cannot be assessed simply or comfortably. It is at once a remarkable act of witness and a complex exercise in ideological reproduction; a genuine effort to render the human dignity of the very poor and a text that is structured by the power differentials it seeks to critique. The critical theories applied in this paper - postcolonial, subaltern, Marxist, feminist, new historicist, narratological, Bakhtinian, reader-response, existentialist, and spatial - each illuminate different dimensions of this contradictory, indispensable text.

What emerges from this multi-theoretical engagement is not a single, definitive judgement on *City of Joy* but a richer, more nuanced understanding of what is at stake in any act of cross-cultural representation. The politics of representation - the question of who speaks, for whom, and from what position of power - cannot be dissolved by good intentions or humanitarian feeling. They are structural questions, embedded in the material and discursive conditions within which texts are produced and received. Lapierre's text is important precisely because it makes these questions unavoidable.

The novel's enduring value, this paper suggests, lies in its capacity to be read against itself - to be used as a site for examining the very politics of representation that it both enacts and, at its best moments, illuminates. Read through the lenses of contemporary critical theory, *City of Joy* becomes something more than a sympathetic portrait of the poor; it becomes a map of the ideological terrain within which poverty is represented, managed, and made available for the moral consumption of the affluent world. This is its most important contribution to our understanding: not as a transparent window onto the lives of Calcutta's poor, but as a densely layered document of what happens when the margins are made visible through the mechanisms of dominant culture.

The *City of Joy*'s deepest irony is that the very act of making the margins visible - of rendering the slum legible to a global readership - is inseparable from the structures of power that produce the margin in the first place. The challenge for readers, critics, and future writers is to keep this irony in view: to honour the genuine ethical impulse that animates the text while refusing the comfortable resolution that it too often offers. Only by holding these tensions in productive suspension can we do justice to the full complexity of the lives that City of Joy seeks, however imperfectly, to represent.

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Bio-note

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