



**New**

ISSN:2582-7375

**LITERARIA**

**An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities**

**Volume 5 Issue 2**

**Aug - Sept, 2024**

**EDITORS:**

**DR TANMOY KUNDU**

**DR PARTHASARATHI MONDAL**

**ASSOCIATE EDITORS:**

**GOKUL S.**

**SUBHANKAR DUTTA**

**DIPRA SARKHEL**

**MOUMITA BALA**

**ACADEMIC EDITORS:**

**SOUGATA SAHOO**

**ZAHRA AHMAD**

**SAMPURNA CHOWDHURY**

**SINDHURA DUTTA**

**MITALI BHATTACHARYA**

**SANCHARI CHATTOPADHYAY**



# NEW LITERARIA

## CONTENT

### August-September 2024

Sl. No.	Name of the Contributors	Articles	Page No.
1.	Ramit Das	Playing the Pirate, Playing the Jew: Refiguring the Other(s) on the Early Modern English Stage	01-09
2.	Sadia Afreen	The Complexities of Transnational Identity and Nazneen's Concept of Agency in Monica Ali's <i>Brick Lane</i>	10-18
3.	Li Chunyi	Metaphors and the Integration of Faith and Reason in Ang Lee's <i>Life of Pi</i>	19-25
4.	Manjari Johri	Examining the Impact of Cinema on the Normalization of Queer and Sexual Minorities Through Kundalkar's <i>Cobalt Blue</i>	26-36
5.	J.R. Sackett	The Celtic Other in the Regionalist Poems of John Hewitt	37-46
6.	Partha Sarathi Mondal	'Dalit Aesthetics' through Poetic Rendering of Experience: A Study on Bengali Dalit Poetry	47-56
7.	Tapas Sarkar	Re-writing History and Myth as Re-creating Identities: A Study of Jibanananda Das's Narrative Technique	57-63
8.	Alankrita Bhattacharya	The Post-millennial Dalit Woman in Documentary: Traversing the Journey from Abasement to Agency in the Documentary <i>Daughters of Destiny</i> (2017)	64-73
9.	Kavya Nair K. S	Navigating Adolescent Liminality: A Critical Exploration of the Threshold Experiences in Abha Dawesar's <i>Babyji</i>	74-81
10.	Adithya P and Lal Surya S	Shape of Water: A Critical Analysis of Transcorporeal Existence in the Movie <i>Aavasavyuham</i>	82-89
11.	Aditi Bandyopadhyay	"Dead Paper": A Study of the Trauma of Therapeutic Fallacy in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"	90-98
12.	Mujaffar Hossain	Femininity Through the Lens: Narrating Sexual Politics and Women's Emancipation in <i>Parched</i> and <i>Lipstick Under my Burkha</i>	99-103
13.	Srestha Bhattacharya	Affect, Subjectivity and Everyday Resistance in Hasan Azizul Haque's <i>The Bird of Fire</i>	104-112
14.	Sahabuddin Ahamed	History and Narrative: A Postmodern Scrutiny of Salman Rushdie's <i>Midnight's Children</i>	113-121

15.	<b>Shivani Rana &amp; Dr. Anupriya Roy Srivastava</b>	<b>Unveiling Trauma in the Life Narrative of Transgender: A Study of Manobi Bandhopadhyay's <i>A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi</i></b>	<b>122-128</b>
16.	<b>Abhinandan Bag</b>	<b>Ghosts of Yesterday: Exploring the Intersections of Memory and Trauma in select children's writings of Sudha Murty</b>	<b>129-140</b>
17.	<b>Mahananda Biswas</b>	<b>City of Shadows: Space, Politics, and Cultural Decay in 1980s Calcutta in Saikat Majumdar's <i>The Firebird</i></b>	<b>141-151</b>
		<b>Book Review</b>	
18.	<b>Pragya Goswami</b>	<b><i>Anger in the Long Nineteenth Century: Critical Perspectives:</i> Edited by Ritushree Sengupta and Shouvik Narayan Hore</b>	<b>R01-R02</b>
		<b>Translation</b>	
19.	<b>Albrecht Classen</b>	<b>Der Stricker, <i>Der Pfaffe Amîs</i> – <i>The Priest Amîs</i></b>	<b>T01-T33</b>



---

## **City of Shadows: Space, Politics, and Cultural Decay in 1980s Calcutta in Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird***

**Mahananda Biswas**  
**Research Scholar in English,**  
**Department of English and Foreign Languages,**  
**Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh, Haryana, India**

---

### **Abstract**

Saikat Majumdar's novel *The Firebird* (2015) offers a richly layered portrait of Calcutta in the 1980s—a city negotiating the simultaneous pressures of political turbulence, economic decline, and cultural transformation. This paper explores how Majumdar deploys urban space as a living, breathing ideological construct that shapes the identities, desires, and destructions of its inhabitants. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope, and postcolonial urban studies, this paper argues that the novel's Calcutta is not merely a backdrop but an active agent in the narrative—a city whose crumbling theatre halls, election-graffiti-smeared alleyways, and conservative domestic interiors encode the tensions between artistic aspiration and social repression, individual selfhood and collective conformity, and the dying world of Bengali theatre and the rising tide of mass media culture. The paper traces how Majumdar's use of space, politics, and cultural decay converge to produce a portrait of a city in the shadow of its own former glory, dragging its inhabitants into its long decline.

**Keywords:** Urban Space, Cultural Decay, Bengali Theatre, Politics, Postcolonial City, Spatial Theory.

### **1. Introduction: The City as Protagonist**

In the landscape of contemporary Indian fiction in English, the city has emerged as far more than a geographic setting. It functions as a moral and political organism—registering in its very architecture and streets the anxieties, ambitions, and failures of the people who inhabit it. Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird* (2015), published in North America as *Play House* (2017), belongs to this tradition of urban fiction, yet distinguishes itself through the singular intensity with which it maps one particular city, Calcutta, at one particular historical moment—the mid-to-late 1980s—a period scarred by the aftermath of the Naxalite movement, the consolidation of Communist Party rule under the Left Front government, and the slow, painful collapse of the city's once-thriving theatre culture.

The novel traces the childhood and early adolescence of Oritro, called Ori, a ten-year-old boy growing up in a decaying north Calcutta household. His mother, Garima, is a stage actress whose passion for theatre brings her into devastating conflict with her conservative family and neighbourhood. The novel unfolds across a series of spaces—domestic interiors,

backstage corridors, sunlit lanes pasted over with election graffiti, and darkened theatre halls—each of which Majumdar renders with painstaking precision. These spaces are never neutral. They carry within them the ideological and cultural pressures of their historical moment, shaping Ori's psychology, determining Garima's fate, and narrating the slow death of an entire artistic tradition.

This paper argues that in *The Firebird*, Calcutta functions as the novel's true protagonist. The urban space of the city does not merely frame the story but drives it—its political atmosphere, decaying institutions, and shifting cultural values becoming the forces that determine what is possible for its characters and what is not. By reading Majumdar's novel through the theoretical frameworks of Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, and recent scholarship in postcolonial urban studies, this paper traces how space, politics, and cultural decay converge in the text to produce a haunting portrait of a city consuming itself from within.

The paper proceeds through five analytical movements. It first situates the novel within the historical context of 1980s Calcutta. It then reads the novel's domestic and public spaces as ideological constructs. The third section examines the political landscape and its infiltration of private life. The fourth section focuses on the death of Bengali theatre as the novel's central cultural crisis. The paper concludes by reflecting on Majumdar's narrative method and what the novel ultimately says about cities, art, and the people who dare to love both.

## **2. Historical Context: Calcutta in the 1980s**

To read *The Firebird* well, one must first understand the historical forces that shaped Calcutta in the decade in which it is set. By the mid-1980s, the city carried within its body the accumulated weight of several overlapping crises. The Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s—a revolutionary Communist uprising inspired by Mao Zedong—had swept through Bengal's urban youth, bringing with it political violence, student unrest, and a generation's disillusionment. Though the movement was brutally suppressed by the early 1970s, it left behind a political landscape permanently altered: a Left Front coalition government led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), which came to power in 1977 and would govern West Bengal for an unprecedented thirty-four years.

The Left Front's consolidation of power in Calcutta had paradoxical effects on the city's cultural life. On the one hand, the CPI(M) government was rhetorically committed to the arts and to working-class solidarity; on the other hand, its mechanisms of control—the party committee, the neighbourhood political boss, the ward-level functionary—created a pervasive culture of surveillance and conformity. The city's famously vibrant intellectual and artistic culture, associated with the Bengali Renaissance and the legacy of Rabindranath Tagore, Ritwik Ghatak, and Satyajit Ray, began to give way under the pressure of political clientelism and economic stagnation. The city's industry had been declining since the early 1970s, and by the 1980s, Calcutta had acquired a reputation—not entirely fair, but not entirely unearned—as a city of decay: crumbling infrastructure, power cuts, industrial strikes, and chronic unemployment.

It was within this broader context of political consolidation and cultural ambivalence that Bengali group theatre—the form of theatre Garima practises in the novel—underwent its most serious crisis. Bengali theatre had a long and distinguished history, from the nineteenth-century Bangla stage to the politically committed group theatre of the 1940s and 1950s associated with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). By the 1980s, however, group theatre was losing its audience to cinema and, increasingly, to television, which arrived in Bengali middle-class homes in precisely this period. The theatre halls of north Calcutta, once packed, began to thin. Funding dried up. Talented practitioners left for film or television. What remained was a culture in which the commitment to theatre carried an air of stubborn anachronism—admirable,

perhaps, but ultimately futile.

It is this Calcutta-politically saturated, economically exhausted, and culturally at the edge of a precipice-that Majumdar evokes in *The Firebird*. The novel does not treat this historical context as background information to be dispensed with in an opening chapter. Rather, it seeps through every page: in the election graffiti plastered over theatre posters, in the power cuts that darken domestic evenings, in the conversations about party allegiances that interrupt dinner tables, in the slow, sad arithmetic of falling theatre audiences. History in *The Firebird* is not something that happened before the story began. It is the atmosphere the story breathes.

### 3. Spatial Theory and the Novel's Architecture of Space

#### 3.1 Lefebvre and *The Production of Social Space*

Henri Lefebvre's foundational argument in *The Production of Space* (1974) is that space is not a neutral container in which social life takes place, but is itself produced by social relations and, in turn, produces them. For Lefebvre, space is simultaneously conceived (planned, represented), perceived (experienced through the body and the senses), and lived (inhabited with imagination and meaning). The three-dimensional interplay of these modalities produces what he calls the social space of any given culture. Applied to literary analysis, Lefebvre's framework invites us to read the spaces of a novel-its rooms, streets, buildings, and landscapes-as ideologically charged formations that actively shape, constrain, and occasionally liberate the subjectivities of the characters who move through them.

In *The Firebird*, this spatial logic is everywhere apparent. The once-grand north Calcutta house in which Ori and his extended family live is a conceived space of patriarchal authority and bourgeois respectability-a space designed to maintain social appearances even as its structural fabric crumbles. The theatre, by contrast, is a lived space of transformation and transgression, where Garima's body and voice are freed from the constraints that govern her domestic existence. The streets of the neighbourhood occupy an intermediate position-perceived spaces, registered through Ori's senses as sites of both fascination and menace, where the political and the cultural collide in the form of election graffiti layered over theatre posters.

Majumdar is attentive to the materiality of these spaces in a way that goes beyond mere descriptive realism. The crumbling plaster of the family home, the backstage odour of greasepaint and old wood, the dampness of political pamphlets stuck to lamppost-each of these details registers not only a sensory reality but a set of power relations. The house's decay indexes the decline of the old north Calcutta bhadralok class that built it; the theatre's backstage world signals both the magic and the marginality of artistic labour; the political graffiti on the street marks the appropriation of public space by party power. Space in this novel is, in Lefebvre's terms, thoroughly produced-by history, by class, by gender, and by the specific political economy of 1980s Calcutta.

#### 3.2 The Chronotope of the Decaying City

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* -the intrinsic connectedness of spatial and temporal relationships in the novel-offers a complementary lens. For Bakhtin, every genre of the novel has its characteristic chronotope: a distinctive fusion of time and space that shapes the meaning of the action and the development of character. In *The Firebird*, the dominant chronotope might be described as the decaying city, a space-time in which the present is always haunted by a richer past and shadowed by an impoverished future. The time of the novel is not progressive and developmental-it is elegiac and erosive. The theatre that Garima loves belongs to an era already passing; the house in which Ori grows up belongs to a class already in decline; the political optimism of the Left Front is already curdling into

clientelism and routine corruption.

This chronotope of decay structures the novel's emotional register. The dominant mood is not tragedy, which would imply a fall from a stable height, but rather elegy—a mourning for something beautiful that was already slipping away before the novel begins. Ori's coming of age takes place within this elegiac time: he inherits a world already diminished, and his psychological formation is shaped as much by what is absent or dying as by what is present and alive. The city's shadows are not cast by any single catastrophic event but by the slow, structural withdrawal of possibility—artistic, economic, social—from the lives of those who inhabit it.

### **3.3 Domestic Space as Ideological Battleground**

The most charged spatial confrontation in *The Firebird* occurs not in the theatre or the street but within the domestic space of the family home. The house is governed by the matriarch, referred to as Mummum, whose authority over its residents—particularly over Garima—is total and unrelenting. As one reviewer has noted, she is the quintessential grandmother who enforces strange rules with such force that they come to seem like natural laws. In spatial terms, the house under Mummum's governance is a space of compulsory femininity—a space in which a woman's proper identity is defined by her roles as wife, daughter-in-law, and mother, and in which any deviation from these roles is experienced as a threat to the collective honour of the household.

Garima's nightly departures for the theatre constitute a repeated transgression of the spatial logic of the home. Each time she leaves—dressed for the stage, carrying with her an identity that the house cannot contain—she violates the spatial contract that defines her proper place. The resentment and moral suspicion that her absences generate in the household are not simply expressions of individual prejudice; they are the ideological reflexes of a domestic space designed to police female mobility and desire. The house, in this reading, is not a shelter but a prison—and the theatre is not merely Garima's workplace but her escape, her counter-space, what Foucault would call a heterotopia in his essay, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias": a real space that contests and inverts the norms of the spaces that surround it.

For Ori, the domestic space is experienced with profound ambivalence. On the one hand, it is the only home he knows—the site of family warmth, childhood familiarity, and the grandmother's unyielding presence. On the other hand, it is the space that diminishes and suffocates his mother, that brands her profession shameful, and that demands of Ori himself a suppression of his own fascination with the theatrical world she inhabits. The house becomes, for Ori, a space in which love and resentment are inseparable—a space that forms him and deforms him simultaneously.

### **4. The Political Landscape: Party, Power, and the Street**

If the domestic space of *The Firebird* is governed by the internal logic of patriarchal respectability, the public space of the street of Calcutta is governed by an overlapping but distinct logic: the logic of Left Front political power. Majumdar renders the political atmosphere of 1980s Calcutta not through explicit polemic, but through the precise observation of spatial detail. The streets of Ori's neighbourhood are covered with the graffiti of competing political allegiances—party symbols, candidates' names, slogans in red—and this graffiti does not merely decorate the urban environment; it constitutes a continuous, visible assertion of political dominion over public space.

The political bullies who appear in the novel are not peripheral figures. They are the street-level agents of a party machine that has learned to translate electoral dominance into social control. In the Calcutta of the 1980s, the CPI(M)'s network of neighbourhood committees and para-level functionaries created a system of governance that extended deep

into everyday life: into disputes over property, over employment, over access to civic services, and-crucially for this novel-over the moral reputation of individuals and families. The fact that Garima's profession as an actress is publicly known, publicly displayed on theatre posters across the neighbourhood, makes her vulnerable to precisely this kind of para-level moral policing.

Majumdar captures this vulnerability through the spatial detail of the posters themselves. When Ori walks to school and sees his mother's name blazed across the neighbourhood in red and white letters, he experiences a complex emotion-pride clouded by shame, love shadowed by anxiety-that is fundamentally a spatial experience. His mother's identity has been inscribed in public space, and the public space of this particular neighbourhood is a space in which female theatrical performers are regarded with suspicion and moral condescension. The poster is simultaneously a celebration of Garima's artistry and an exposure of her transgression; its visibility in the street makes her name available to the judgement of every passerby.

The intersection of political culture and artistic culture in public space of the novel is not merely atmospheric. It speaks to a specific historical tension in Left Front Calcutta between the party's rhetorical commitment to culture as a vehicle of progressive politics and its practical tendency toward conformism and moral conservatism at the neighbourhood level. The CPI(M) leadership may have celebrated Tagore and the IPTA tradition in its official discourse; its para-level cadres, however, were often deeply conservative in their attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and artistic freedom. The result was a city in which political progressivism and social conservatism coexisted in uneasy, often hypocritical, proximity-and it is in this contradiction that Garima's fate, and the novel's central tension, are rooted.

Furthermore, Majumdar's depiction of political violence-the bullying, the intimidation, the casual exercise of power by those who control the streets-connects the novel to a broader tradition of Bengali literature and film that has grappled with the ethical costs of Left Front governance. Without naming specific events or becoming polemical, the novel registers the sense in which political power, when it colonises everyday space, tends to shrink the room available for artistic experiment, personal freedom, and moral complexity. The shadows of the novel's title are, in part, the shadows cast by this political colonisation of the city's life.

## 5. Cultural Decay: The Death of Bengali Theatre

### 5.1 Theatre as Sacred and Precarious Space

The theatre in *The Firebird* is, paradoxically, both the most vital and the most vulnerable space in the novel. It is vital because it is where Garima is most fully herself-where the constraints of domestic life and social convention fall away and she becomes, as one reviewer aptly puts it, an entity in its entirety. The stage is a space of ontological freedom: it permits identities that the street and the home forbid. But it is vulnerable because it depends for its existence on a cultural infrastructure-audiences, funding, theatrical tradition-that is rapidly eroding in the Calcutta of the 1980s.

Majumdar renders the theatre's interior as a space of extraordinary sensory richness: the red glow of the fire pit, the smell of greasepaint, the murmur of the audience in the dark, the backstage world of wigs and costumes and the camaraderie of set boys and hairdressers. These details are not merely atmospheric; they constitute a portrait of an entire subculture with its own hierarchies, its own rituals, its own economy of pleasure and devotion. But this richness is shadowed by fragility. The theatre that Garima and her colleagues inhabit is already fighting for survival against the cultural tides that are turning against it: the growing dominance of cinema, the arrival of television in Bengali middle-class homes, the declining willingness of a younger generation to sit in a theatre hall for two or three hours when they can watch entertainment at home.

The title of the novel-taken from the French play that Garima performs in-is itself a complex symbol. The firebird of myth is a creature of dazzling brilliance whose feathers bring both blessings and curses to those who possess them. It is simultaneously an image of creative incandescence and of destructive power. Applied to Bengali theatre, the image suggests both its historic brilliance-the revolutionary energy of the IPTA tradition, the commitment to theatre as a vehicle of social transformation-and its tendency toward self-destruction, its exhaustion of its own resources, its burning out. The theatre in the novel is, in every sense, a firebird: magnificent, impossible to ignore, and doomed.

## **5.2 The Economics and Politics of Cultural Decline**

The decline of Bengali group theatre in the 1980s was not simply a matter of changing tastes. It was also a function of the political economy of culture in Left Front Calcutta. Group theatres operated on minimal budgets, depending on volunteer labour, small ticket sales, and occasional government grants. As the Left Front government's priorities shifted over the course of the 1980s-toward rural land reform, toward industrial policy, toward the management of a complex and often contentious political coalition-direct support for the arts became less reliable. The result was a cultural ecosystem in which artistic commitment was increasingly a form of sacrifice: to work in group theatre in 1980s Calcutta was to accept poverty, social marginalisation, and the knowledge that your art form was losing its audience.

Majumdar captures this economic precarity through the material details of the theatrical world he depicts. The theatre companies in the novel are small, intimate, and clearly operating on the margins of financial viability. The backstage world-with its improvised costumes, its overworked technicians, its reliance on the goodwill of a small and devoted community-suggests an art form that survives through sheer collective will rather than institutional support. And the political dimension of this precarity is never far from the surface: the party that controls the street, the neighbourhood committee, the ward-level political boss-these are not forces that actively support the theatre, even when they rhetorically celebrate culture. For Garima and her colleagues, the political world of Calcutta in 1980s is, at best, indifferent to their work and, at worst, actively hostile to the social deviance that their artistic lives represent.

## **5.3 Ori's Obsession: Art, Desire, and Destruction**

The novel's most psychologically complex treatment of cultural decay is not in its depiction of the institutional decline of theatre, but in its portrait of Ori's tortured relationship with the art form his mother practises. Ori is simultaneously fascinated and repulsed by the theatre: drawn to its magic, its transformative power, its ability to make his mother into someone both more and less than herself; and yet consumed by an obsessive resentment of it, a hatred that gradually becomes the dominant force of his inner life.

This ambivalence is, at one level, the classic Oedipal drama of a boy struggling to negotiate his relationship with an absent and idealised mother. But Majumdar gives it a specifically cultural and spatial dimension. Ori's resentment of the theatre is inseparable from his resentment of the social meaning of the theatre-the way in which it exposes his mother to public censure, makes her the target of neighbourhood gossip, and forces him to grow up in the shadow of a shame he has not chosen and cannot escape. His hatred of the stage, in other words, is not simply a private emotional response; it is a response that has been shaped, conditioned, and ultimately colonised by the social and political values of the world he inhabits.

In this sense, Ori becomes a microcosm of the broader cultural dynamic the novel traces. Just as Calcutta's conservative social values-mediated through the neighbourhood, the family, and the political machine-are in the process of suffocating its theatrical culture, so the values of his household and neighbourhood are in the process of suffocating Ori's own incipient love of art. The destruction that Ori is drawn toward-the tearing of theatre posters, the pattern

of behaviour the novel identifies as heading toward catastrophe-is not simply psychological pathology. It is the internalisation of a cultural death wish: the city's slow suicide of its own artistic life, enacted in miniature through the psyche of a child.

## 6. Gender, Space, and the Artist's Body

One of the most powerful aspects of Majumdar's spatial imagination in *The Firebird* is his treatment of the female body as a site of cultural contestation. Garima's body-her presence on stage, her voice, her nocturnal departures from the domestic space, her visibility on theatre posters across the neighbourhood-is the central node around which the novel's conflicts revolve. The suspicion and resentment her profession evokes are not simply directed at the theatre as an institution; they are directed at what her theatrical practice does to and with her body: it makes it public, visible, available to the gaze of strangers, and-most threateningly-autonomous.

The moral logic that governs the novel's neighbourhood operates according to a spatial economy of female respectability: a woman's body, properly managed, should be confined to the domestic sphere, visible in public only under conditions of careful supervision. The actress who performs on stage before a paying audience violates this economy with every performance. She makes her body the instrument and the spectacle of her art, and in doing so she renders it, in the eyes of her neighbours, morally compromised. The label attached to her in the neighbourhood-whose content the novel obliquely renders-encodes this moral economy with devastating precision.

Majumdar is careful not to sentimentalise Garima's situation or to resolve its contradictions too neatly. Garima is not simply a victim of patriarchal oppression; she is also a woman whose artistic passion makes real demands on her son, who genuinely struggles with the costs of her choices, and whose relationship with the theatre is as complex as Ori's relationship with her. The novel refuses the comforting narrative of the martyred female artist in favour of a more uncomfortable portrait: a woman whose need for artistic self-expression is entirely legitimate and whose impact on those around her is, nonetheless, genuinely complicated.

This complexity is spatial as well as psychological. The theatre is Garima's space of freedom, but it is also the space that most clearly marks her as transgressive in the eyes of the society that judges her. The domestic space is the space that constrains and diminishes her, but it is also the space in which she is a mother, a daughter-in-law, a member of a human community. There is no pure outside to the spatial politics of gender in this novel: every space is shot through with contradiction, and Garima must navigate them all with the limited resources available to a woman of her class and historical moment.

## 7. The Firebird as Elegiac Novel: Narrative Form and Cultural Mourning

A consideration of *The Firebird's* themes of space, politics, and cultural decay would be incomplete without attention to the narrative form of the novel-the way in which Majumdar's prose style and narrative structure enact, as well as represent, the processes of decay and loss it chronicles. Critics have consistently noted the novel's quality of spare elegance: its prose is precise and imagistic, relying on carefully chosen sensory details to create atmospheric density without recourse to verbal excess. Lantz Fleming Miller has described it as "a masterpiece of subtlety and gentle ellipsis," noting that each sentence is a poem in itself.

This elliptical quality is not merely stylistic; it is ideological. The gaps, silences, and evasions of the prose mirror the gaps, silences, and evasions that structure the social world of the novel. What cannot be said in the family home-about Garima's profession, about Ori's father's absence, about the moral double standards that govern female reputation-finds its formal equivalent in what the novel chooses not to say directly. The reader, like Ori himself, is left to deduce meaning from what is withheld as much as from what is offered.

The novel's structure-organised around the stages of Ori's growing up, each section registering a deepening of his psychological entanglement with the theatre and his mother-gives the narrative an arc that is elegiac rather than progressive. There is no redemption at the end, no reconciliation that resolves the tensions the novel has accumulated. What there is, instead, is a deepening understanding of how thoroughly the forces of space, politics, and cultural decay have shaped the inner life of a child-and, through that child, the inner life of a city. The novel ends not with a flourish but with the quiet, desolate recognition that certain losses are irreversible.

Majumdar himself has spoken of the collapsed space-time of a child's perspective as central to the novel's narrative strategy. Ori's point of view is both limited and acute: limited because he lacks the adult conceptual vocabulary to name what he is experiencing, acute because his senses are tuned to a frequency of emotional truth that adult rationalisations tend to muffle. This child's perspective gives the novel its particular combination of emotional immediacy and thematic complexity: we feel the weight of Calcutta's shadows before we understand their political and cultural genealogy, and when we do understand it, the feeling only deepens.

## **8. The Postcolonial City and Its Discontents**

Situating *The Firebird* within the tradition of postcolonial urban fiction illuminates dimensions of the text that a purely literary or psychological reading might miss. Calcutta occupies a unique position in the postcolonial imagination: it was the capital of British India until 1911, the cradle of the Bengali Renaissance, and the birthplace of modern Indian literature, film, and theatre. The grandeur of this cultural inheritance is both the city's greatest resource and the most insidious source of its contemporary melancholy. For a city to have been, once, the cultural capital of the subcontinent is to carry the burden of that history into every subsequent moment of decline.

The north Calcutta of the novel-with its once-affluent families, its large deteriorating houses, its theatrical tradition, its complex relationship with political radicalism-is a space that registers this postcolonial condition with particular intensity. The bhadralok class that built the cultural institutions of Bengali modernity has been, by the 1980s, significantly diminished: economically weakened by the structural changes of post-independence India, politically displaced by the rise of a Left Front that claimed to speak for the working class, and culturally challenged by the same forces of mass media and globalisation that were transforming Indian culture more broadly. Ori's family is a metonym for this class: its once-fine house crumbling, its social pretensions maintained at increasing cost, its relationship to the cultural tradition it claims to value ambivalent and ultimately destructive.

The theatre, in this postcolonial context, carries a weight of historical meaning that goes beyond its function as Garima's workplace. Bengali group theatre was, historically, a vehicle of anti-colonial and progressive politics: the IPTA tradition, which produced some of the most important theatrical work of the twentieth century, was deeply committed to the use of art as a tool of social transformation. By the 1980s, this tradition has been reduced-in the world of the novel-to a marginalized, financially precarious, and socially stigmatised activity. The political progressivism that theatre once embodied has been appropriated by a party machine that uses the rhetoric of culture while doing little to sustain it. What remains is the shell of a tradition: beautiful, dedicated, and doomed.

This postcolonial dimension gives the novel's treatment of cultural decay a specifically political edge. The death of Bengali theatre in *The Firebird* is not simply the natural result of changing tastes or technological competition. It is also the result of a political culture that has failed to sustain the conditions-social, economic, institutional-in which artistic life can flourish. The shadows of the city in this novel are, in part, the shadows cast by the failures of postcolonial

governance: the failure to create a just and sustainable economy, the failure to protect public culture from the encroachments of commercial media, and the failure to extend to all its citizens-including its women, including its artists-the dignity and freedom that a progressive polity should guarantee.

## 9. Conclusion: What the Shadows Teach Us

Saikat Majumdar's *The Firebird* is, at its core, a novel about what happens to people-and to art-when the city that surrounds them is in the process of consuming itself. Through the precise, imagistic rendering of the spaces of 1980s Calcutta-its crumbling domestic interiors, its politically saturated streets, its struggling theatre halls-Majumdar constructs a portrait of urban life in which the personal and the political are inseparable, the aesthetic and the social are mutually constitutive, and the fate of individual characters is bound up with the fate of an entire cultural tradition.

The novel's central argument-if we can call it that-is spatial: that the city is not a neutral container but an active shaper of consciousness, desire, and possibility. The Calcutta of the 1980s, as Majumdar renders it, is a city whose spatial logic encodes a specific set of power relations: the patriarchal authority of the domestic space, the political dominion of the Left Front machine over public space, and the marginalisation of the theatre as a space of deviance and transgression. These power relations determine what Garima can and cannot be, what Ori can and cannot become, and what Bengali theatre can and cannot sustain.

The novel does not offer easy consolations. Garima's passion for her art does not save her from the social forces arrayed against her. Ori's love for his mother does not prevent the psychological damage that her situation-and his-inflicts on him. The theatre does not overcome the cultural and economic forces working against it. What the novel offers instead is something rarer and more valuable: the clarity of precise observation, the integrity of a narrative that refuses sentimentality or false resolution, and the beauty of a prose that honours, in its very texture, the cultural tradition it mourns.

In the end, *The Firebird* is a novel about cultural mourning-about what it means to love a city and a tradition that are in the process of dying, and to live within that dying as a daily, embodied experience. It asks its readers to attend to the shadows: to recognise, in the crumbling plaster of a Calcutta house, in the fading greasepaint of a backstage dressing room, in the election graffiti layered over a theatre poster, the outlines of a world that once was and is ceasing to be. This attentiveness-to space, to history, to the fragile and irreplaceable beauty of cultural life-is, perhaps, the novel's deepest gift.

Majumdar's Calcutta is, ultimately, a city of shadows not because it is a dark or despairing place, but because it is a city in transition: standing between a luminous past and an uncertain future, casting long shadows across the lives of everyone who inhabits it. To read *The Firebird* is to stand in those shadows and to understand, with something like grief, how much they contain.

## References

### Primary Source

- Majumdar, S. (2015). *The firebird*. Hachette India.  
(Also published as *Play house*. Permanent Press, 2017).

## Secondary Source

- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). Forms of time and of the chronotope in the novel. In M. Holquist (Ed.), *The dialogic imagination: Four essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans., pp. 84–258). University of Texas Press.
- Bandyopadhyay, S. (1983). The Calcutta theatre in the age of cultural transition. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 18(2), 45–62.
- Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press.
- Dasgupta, C. (1991). *The painted face: Studies in India's popular cinema*. Roli Books.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16(1), 22–27.
- Gooptu, S. (2010). *Bengali cinema: An other nation*. Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Blackwell.
- Majumdar, S. (2022). Writing through the collapsed space-time of a child's perspective. *The Punch Magazine*.
- Miller, L. F. (2016). Politics of sexual identity: How contemporary Indian literature dispels any need for differentiation. *The Punch Magazine*.
- Mukherjee, M. (1971). *The twice born fiction: Themes and techniques of the Indian novel in English*. Heinemann Educational Books.
- Roy, A. G., & Huat, C. B. (Eds.). (2012). *Travels of Bollywood cinema: From Bombay to LA*. Oxford University Press.
- Roy, S. (2007). *Beyond belief: India and the politics of postcolonial nationalism*. Duke University Press.
- Sarkar, S. (1983). *Modern India: 1885–1947*. Macmillan India.
- Soja, E. W. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. Verso.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). University of Illinois Press.
- Thrift, N. (1996). *Spatial formations*. Sage Publications.

## Bio-note

**Mahananda Biswas** is a doctoral research scholar in English at the Department of English and Foreign Languages, Central University of Haryana, Mahendragarh, Haryana, India with a deep academic focus on the postcolonial novels (written in original English language) that deals with the city of Calcutta/Kolkata. He has qualified for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) and eligibility for Assistant Professor in the National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) conducted by University Grants Commission. He has qualified State Eligibility Test (SET) in English as well as Central Teacher Eligibility Test (CTET) and State Teacher Eligibility Test. He taught English as a guest faculty for several years at Pt. Ravishankar Shukla University, Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India. He is a former student of University of Calcutta. His research area explores the representation of Calcutta in postcolonial English novels, examining how the city functions as more than a mere geographical backdrop. Calcutta - with its layered colonial history, its teeming subaltern life, and its unresolved tensions between tradition and modernity - emerges in postcolonial fiction as a dynamic site of memory, identity, and resistance. His study investigates how literary representations of Calcutta negotiate the legacies of British imperialism, partition, urban poverty, and cultural hybridity, ultimately revealing the city as a

living palimpsest of postcolonial experience.

**Email Id:** mahananda.mb@gmail.com

