

Urban Subjectivities in Wendy Dickson's *A Hint of Jacaranda*

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Abstract

The paper engages with a specific aspect of the complex urban spaces of Bengaluru through an examination of a select urban narrative by Wendy Dickson, published in 2009. This aspect has to do with the commonly-held notion upheld in urban studies scholarship that, like many fast-growing cities of the Global South, Bengaluru's urban present and future have had, and continue to have, little engagement with its historical urban pasts. Through an analysis of Wendy M. Dickson's *A Hint of Jacaranda: Recollections of Beauty in the Ordinary*, my paper attempts to establish that this work offers an important counter-narrative of urban space which challenges the above perspective. The analysis will draw from frames of urban theory which focus on critical urban nostalgia and locality history, underscoring the importance of developing consciously gendered women-centric perspectives as well as the role of urban memory in shaping contemporary urban subjectivities in relation to Bengaluru's urban spaces.

Keywords: *urban subjectivity, critical urban nostalgia, locality history, gendered identity-spaces*

Within the discourses of critical urbanism, one of the most prominent motifs of discussion has been the ubiquitous influence of the "colonial urban footprint" on cities of the Global South; it has been often argued that "the umbilical cord of colonial influence is maintained in post-colonial cities", partly because of the absence of detailed city histories (Parnell 73). While these arguments are highly debatable in relation to the city of the erstwhile Bangalore or contemporary Bengaluru, it is more pertinent to observe that "cities rarely obliterate their past or have absolute control over their future development trajectories" (Parnell 73). In his essay "Imaginations of Bengaluru", Narendar Pani argues that in the development of Bangalore/Bengaluru as a city, there has been almost no dialogue between the city's histories and its present. Observing that one of the reasons for this is that the history of the city has been almost totally ignored, Pani avers that these two facts have had a strong impact on how Bangalore/Bengaluru has been imagined as a city by its dominant groups and the powers that be: "In the first decade of the twenty-first century Bengaluru shows few signs of a collective effort to recognise, let alone celebrate, its past. [...] Indeed, popular historical "accounts of the

city rarely get beyond strong doses of nostalgia” (4). In Pani’s argument, Bengaluru has never really been a city that was seeking its identity in its own past, mainly because the various dominant groups that have punctuated its tumultuous development over the centuries have had little reason to celebrate or delve too deeply into its past (5). In his assessment, each new regime that shaped a particular historical phase in the city located itself in the then periphery of the city:

From the Cantonment in the early nineteenth century to the public sector in the middle of the twentieth century to the information technology industry in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the emerging growth centres have always been located outside the boundaries of what was then the city. As the emerging economic powers put their own stamp on the city, they had no reason to celebrate earlier traditions that they were trying to replace. On the contrary, it helped to ignore the previous avatar of Bengaluru. And the best way to do so was to play down, if not completely ignore, the history of the city. (Pani 5)

In Pani’s argument, Bangalore (Bengaluru as it is now called) has developed a tendency to interpret the past not only in terms of the present, but also solely from the perspective of the dominant groups of the present; he further points out the irony of the fact that this disregard for the past distorts the perceptions of the present:

The imaginations that develop of the city invariably have little time for trends that may once have characterised the urban space, and are instead preoccupied with the dominant tendency at each point of time. The earlier trends may not have disappeared, but they no longer count for the imaginations of the city, or even for policy makers. (Pani 6)

It is precisely this perspective that the present paper attempts to engage with, assessing it in relation to the context of women’s writings on the multicultural pasts of Bengaluru, with a primary focus on the Cantonment area history and cultures thereof. Robert Home remarks, in his article “Shaping Cities of the Global South: Legal histories of planning and colonialism”, that the idea of a cantonment (a separate, self-sufficient camp for the military) was a particular product of the British in India, drawing upon older Indian traditions (77). Bengaluru did have a military past, the then city-space being characterised by the *kote* and the *pete* (Tipu Sultan’s fortress and the market area), before the coming of the British and their establishment of the cantonment, “in a direct effort to create a bit of foreign territory on local soil” (Pani 278). The cantonments “comprised largely self-contained communities, with separate infantry, cavalry and artillery quarters (subdivided between European and Indian), parade grounds, cemeteries, religious buildings, and bazaars; there were separate barracks for married and unmarried soldiers, and spacious residential plots for the European officers” (Home 77); as such, it was set up in Bangalore mainly to create a racially underscored socio-cultural distance, difference and separateness from Indians, represented symbolically by physical space. Pani further points out that although Bengaluru was a major trading and business centre before 1800, the establishment and growth of the Cantonment led to the ethos of the latter being representative of the city as a whole, attracting images like “Pensioners’ Paradise”; the fact that the old city remained an important trading centre and is so even today, was largely ignored (6). In this pattern of forgetting the pasts of the city, Pani continues, the rise of the public sector in the 1950s saw the disappearance of the Cantonment from any image of Bengaluru, though it was several decades before the areas of the Cantonment were truly integrated into the overall city (6). In more recent history, the rise of Information Technology has overlaid the city’s public sector and defence moorings, even though the

Indian Air Force runs the country's largest air show in Bengaluru (Pani 6). In Pani's overall argument, even the politico-linguistic debate around the nomenclature of Bengaluru remains a case in point in the trajectory of amnesia that has shaped the development of the city. In local parlance, the city had always been called Bengaluru (an elided version of the original mythical local Kannada name, Bendakaluru) until the British renamed it as Bangalore in 1799; it retained this name until early 2000s, when local authorities decided to unify the city's official English name (across languages) to Bengaluru (Pani 5-6), this decision coinciding with the rise of a politically heightened sense of regional and linguistic identity at that time.

Pani's call for the "need to revisit Bengaluru's history [...] to reopen the dialogue with the past in a way that is far less preoccupied with the present" (7) is an argument that is particularly relevant when applied to the context of women's writings on Bengaluru of the 20th and 21st centuries. In a larger research project, I have argued that a revisiting of contemporary women's narratives of the city's pasts will not only resuscitate the possibility of a dialogue with the urban present, but will also fill a gap in providing alternative constructions of the city which may counter the otherwise overwhelmingly male-predominated perceptions that have shaped it as an urban space. Here, I confine myself to an examination of one personal memoir by a contemporary woman writer, an urban native witness to many inflections of the city's changing images.

Wendy M. Dickson's *A Hint of Jacaranda: Recollections of Beauty in the Ordinary*, published in 2009, uses memory as its primary device in recreating the urban space of the Bangalore of the latter decades of the 20th century. Nostalgia and idealising sentiments are important factors that accentuate the role of memory in this little collection of anecdotes of Bangalore, simultaneously contributing to identity-formation in terms of urban citizenship and place-identity. In her work *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms*, Fran Tonkiss engages with the question of how individuals negotiate urban spaces at the levels of perception, memory and agency. She suggests that:

Alongside a conception of the city as defined by built forms or demographic facts, might be posed an alternative version that understands it in terms of modes of consciousness or experience. People's experience of the city is not only or always determined by larger social or economic structures, but also fashioned by their individual perceptions, mental maps, and spatial practices. (Tonkiss 113)

Dickson's work at once grounds itself within the urban identity-space of Bangalore city, by being punctuated throughout its diverse narrative strands by recurrent references to trees, a prominent historical marker of the urban ecological space of the Bangalore of her times. The jacaranda tree in particular stands out as a symbol of many things that the city-space stood for in her individual experience of it, and references to the once plentifully found jacaranda run throughout the book, taking on new significations in the telling. In the initial pages of her Introduction to the book, Dickson spells out the various shades of meaning that she ascribes to the jacaranda:

[...] the jacaranda tree is a symbol of so much that is precious and dear to me, a homegrown Bangalore girl. [...] it stands for the old Bangalore in which I was born and bred and which I dearly, dearly love, and which now exists mostly in memory. Time was, when these graceful trees could be found in the garden of every second elegant old colonial bungalow. They also adorned the sides of little streets which bore quaint names like Castle and Bride and Serpentine and those which recalled the days of the Raj, like Langford and Wellington and Edward. Little old Anglo-Indian ladies looked dainty and doll-like [...] in the shade of the delicate mauve blossoms (vii).

Associating the tree's annual bloom with Bangalore's brief spring in February, Dickson metaphorises the tree's characteristic deciduousness in spring (which coincides with its blooming) as an "important reminder of the death in life and life in death that is so central to the mystery of being, begetting and becoming" (viii). In Dickson's view, the tree was as much a "true-blue Bangalorean" as she felt herself to be, though it was originally imported from South America, while also being a "reminder of a time that was, in and around this city ... a time that was gentle, unhurried and graceful, in manner and mode of life" (viii). The jacaranda then becomes a recurrent motif in her narrative, which is full of diverse anecdotes based on her lived everyday experience of the old Bangalore of her times. It symbolises a time-space that is positioned binarily in her memory in relation to present times, which have made her Bangalore almost unrecognisable in terms of ecology as well as urban pace of life. In the olfactory memory detailing the neighbourhood bakery, a visual memory of the dhobi/presswallah cart, and a gustatory memory of the Kohinoor Hotel (associated with childhood Christmas season treats), Dickson remaps the urban space of old Bangalore according to her lived experience of it. Markers of the old Cantonment area such as Brigade Road, Commercial Street, St Patrick's Church are remapped in terms of her growing up years in which the experience of movie-going coloured her perceptions of these areas, in which her young star-struck fancies found free play in reconstituting them as movie-scenes. She revisits some of these places in contemporary physical space and time, understanding them as relics of a bygone past. Tonkiss observes that for Walter Benjamin the city was a complex site of perception and memory, and the meaning of urban spaces is bound up in individual and cultural memory; she points out that an attentiveness to the hidden, stray, dilapidated is a keynote in the Benjaminian framework of urban space (Tonkiss 120). Dickson's work is a perfect example of city space evoked through precisely memory of this kind, in which "the sense of material space was filtered through experience" (Tonkiss 120).

In her evocation of old Bangalore, Dickson steers clear of idealising the urban space she constructs through memory, even while speaking of a vestigial colonial influence on the city's green spaces, as also of a relative communal harmony that prevailed in her part of Bangalore at the time. Sentimentalising is an almost inevitable component of most urban narratives of nostalgia, and Dickson's work is no exception to this. However it does not obscure her perception of the economic and social inequalities that she had observed in times past, and which have arguably been greatly exacerbated in the initiation of the city into the contemporary development paradigm. Like all mega-cities of the global South, the processes of urbanisation in Bangalore that have fast transformed it from its erstwhile image of a sleepy Pensioners' Paradise to a seething IT global hub, have deeply impacted its urban ecology in terms of pre-existing socio-economic/gender inequalities, its once abundant green spaces, and its now highly-contested land ownership issues.

In her discussion of spatial subjectivity in the city, Tonkiss draws on the work of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, to consider how urban meanings are formed in memory and perception. Both, in Tonkiss's view, are concerned with the encounter between the individual and the sensory environment of the city. Benjamin's treatment of the city as a site of memory, Tonkiss explains, does not render the city-space "simply as the background to events in a life, but as an agent of memory, a store of meanings that belong as much to the place itself as they do to the individual who retraces their steps through it" (113-114). Dickson's construction of the Bangalore she grew up in conforms to this idea to a large extent, with each anecdote of one individual urban space revivifying another, with an associated memory. Writing about and placing on record her memories of Bangalore emerges as a description in which "the city is understood as a material form that embeds or encodes meaning, and which surrenders these in the form of fragments or clues, hints or echoes, symptomatic readings or the flashes of memory" (Tonkiss 114). Dickson's work

unconsciously uses both (voluntary as well as involuntary) forms of memory as distinguished in Proustian philosophy: there are “‘reconstructed moments’”; there are reminiscences, which are “‘immediate, delicious and total explosion of the memory’ which ‘allows one to escape from the present’ and ‘be reunited with the old days’” (Gervais-Lambony 366). For Dickson, the reconstructed moments are what she calls “jacaranda moments” (xi), which sometimes lead her to reminiscences, voiced in sections like “Tree Watch” or “A Sparrow Falls”.

In “Contentious Identities: Urban Space, cityness and citizenship”, Philippe Gervais-Lambony suggests that there are three things about the most generic and contemporary forms of urban citizen memories: a) that the nostalgia of city inhabitants is confronted with and accentuated by the acceleration of social and spatial changes; b) that parts of a city change at varying paces; and c) that proliferations of references to the past are tied to rapidly increasing processes of territorialisation (366-367). The first of these features is definitively part of Dickson’s narrative, and her negotiation of it is through the metaphorised image of the cork-tree blooms, ubiquitous in Bangalore, past and present. For Dickson, the flowers of the cork-tree serve as a representative of an alternative reality/temporal space against the violence of contemporary change. This symbolic reference to flowers is not to be dismissed as escapist; rather, it is instrumental in weaving a narrative of Bangalore that counters the largely male-dominated space of its urban development. Dickson’s narrative also remains highly sensitive to the deeply gendered urban inequities that marked her own youth in the city, and this consciousness feeds into her observations on the city’s urban growth in recent decades. In a section titled “Children of the Sun”, Dickson minutely observes the day-to-day living conditions of construction labourers, noting their intelligent understanding and resilience in relation to extreme poverty and the urban precarities thereof: “The wellspring of their freedom and joy is ... their ability to see the world in a grain of sand, while the rest of us are worn out from chasing the legendary pot of gold at the end of the rainbow” (55). Dickson’s narrative of Bengaluru’s changing urban image is arguably unique in its recognition and acknowledgement of class and gender inequities within the urban development paradigm. In a section titled “The Salt of the Earth”, Dickson’s observations of female fellow train travellers in her student days engender a painful consciousness of how her own urban self-identity is inevitably hierarchically structured by the privileges of class, noting the contrast between “...the drudgery of their domestic lives and the dreary prospect of an exhausting day ahead at an ill-paid job...” (26) and Dickson’s own relative easeful assurance that a hot supper awaits her at journey’s end (27).

Gervais-Lambony’s third point can also be understood in the context of gender in relation to urban space. It leads to the fact that such territorialisation (or even re-territorialisation) as has happened in Bangalore/Bengaluru in the last four decades as manifested through so-called urban development, has largely been appropriated by men. It is in this context that Dickson’s work can be seen as an important contribution to urban narratives of Bangalore, voicing an alternative perception of the urban space of the city through references to a past that exist only in her individual memory and lived experience. In Gervais-Lambony’s argument, urban residents’ memories become political issues, especially because city officialdom often produces discourses and spaces devoted to these memories (367).

In this context, it would not be out of place to say that Bangalore’s contemporary urban development has unhappily been based on an appropriation and aggressive marketing of “the memory of an idealized past” (Gervais-Lambony 367) with mainly immediate profit making as its agenda, with only lip service being paid to environmental and gender equalities in relation to reconfiguring the city’s urban space. Increasingly, images of the city’s

ecological past are being hijacked and commoditised within the meta-narratives of urban reconfigurations and in the urban development paradigm. It could be argued that in the context of these political and gendered implications in relation to re/territorialising urban space, Dickson's narrative gains tremendous significance in its offering a liberatory potential for the urban ecological future through a critical engagement with the urban nostalgic past of Bengaluru.

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