

# The Freedom of the City in Janice Pariat's *Seahorse*

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**Abstract**—This paper examines how the city functions as a site of free expression in Janice Pariat's novel *Seahorse*. It analyses the development of the protagonist of the novel by drawing a parallel with his gradual trajectory towards the cities which is accompanied by an unfurling of his self. By accommodating minorities such as those of sexual and gender, the city becomes a canvass for the gradual discovery of the self for the character.

(Janice Pariat, *Seahorse, City, Queer, Freedom*)

The city has been a source of varied discourse since time immemorial. Deliberations on the city have been fraught with an overarching emphasis on images of distress and decay. This is seen in the discourse around cities that have often focused on its burgeoning crime, disorder, corruption, and filth. This tendency is also observed in the representation of the city in literature. However, there has also been a movement in the opposite direction where the discourse around cities has shifted to focus on its more sanguine qualities. This propulsion of a positive outlook on the city has been aided by the rise of globalisation and the gradual urbanisation of countries all over the world. Consequently, this tendency has also seeped into literary representations of the city. In these representations, the city becomes much more than a place, and is a space of free expression and finding of identity for the characters. This paper takes one such instance in the case of Khasi Anglophone writer Janice Pariat's novel *Seahorse*.

The novel has been read as a bildungsroman by some critics who have commented upon this aspect of the novel. The movement of the character across physical space has been read alongside a mapping of his mental movement over time. The instances in *Seahorse* can be read in terms of real and metaphoric journeys of the protagonist, Nehemiah, or Nem as he is referred to throughout most of the novel. The novel is primarily set in cities, and its milieu makes up the characters. The narrative is interspersed with fecund descriptions of the city that the characters inhabit and/or visit, that enrich the fervid encapsulations of the intense relationships within the fictive framework. This is also noted by Aruni Kashyap in his review of the book, stating "In her rich prose, the cities come alive with all their sensory details," (The Scroll).

This can be read in terms of the movement of the young protagonist from the erstwhile town of Shillong and his journey towards the cities as delineated by Chanda in the paper "The Young Man from the Provinces" which analyses the common motifs in the literature of the cities. He analyses the characteristic anxiety of young men moving towards cities from the hinterland in the hopes of a better future. The possibility that migration to urban centres usually presents to the protagonists of these city texts is that of socio-economic upliftment and finding a suitable subculture where they can belong if they are seen as 'deviant' in their little villages or towns. Thus, it is noticed in the case of Nem that his migration to the city is not only motivated by the desire for a better education and exposure to the world, but also by his parents' anxieties about his sexuality, which they and the society that they live in frown upon. The consequent hushing off of their son to a city far away is motivated by the fear of breaking conformity and thus reinforces the social controls in place which begin functioning at the level of the family itself, where any departure from the norm is seen as an aberration that must either be punished or exiled.

Nem's urban journey from his hometown to Delhi and then to London becomes keenly relevant in this context. This journey towards the metropolis is accompanied by Nem's gradual growth towards a self-expression that is not curtailed by constraints placed on him by societal norms ingrained over the years. This becomes especially significant due to Nem's queer identity, and the fabrication and presentation of a certain self in order to not upset such expectations. Goffman (1959) writes about the dramaturgy of social life and its various performances and fronts. With Nem's movement towards more cosmopolitan and heterogenous spaces of cities, he is able to shed the layers of these performances to a certain extent. He is able to move beyond the limits imposed upon him by the social codes of his hometown whose stark treatment of deviance is embodied in the example of his much beloved Lenny. A social reality that is constructed over time through the processes of internalisation and externalisation (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) but is set in time and unable to move and adapt beyond a certain point, becomes the cause of suffering for the people within that same social sett-up. Lenny's character becomes a cautionary knell against the rigid moral norms that are based on misguided ideas of normal and 'abnormal'. This steady progression of his character is concomitant to the trajectory of his friendships and romantic relationships. Nem's journey through several relationships mirrors his travels across cities and within those cities too. Thus, the various movements that Nem makes across cities is fraught with these possibilities of change—one that is rooted in the finding of a self-expression rooted in true self. For Nem, this shedding of his early rejection of himself and those he loved can be seen as a subsequent stage of socialisation (Zerubavel 1997), where his early prejudices ingrained through internalisation of social codes of his place lead to a greater acceptance of himself as he is exposed to different lived realities in the cities without the impending danger of punishments such as those back home.

The aspect of class is also a significant factor in the narrative as it is Nem's belongingness to a fairly middle to upper class family that allows him to escape into the throngs of the city and gain access to certain experiences without any or at least very few inhibitions which would otherwise be cordoned off from him due to his location within a fairly small town with certain socio-cultural norms in place. The lack of finances coupled with lack of exposure to other possibilities renders this option of moving to the fairly liberal city a non-option for others. Hence, here is to be noticed the double marginalisation of queer individuals from low-income groups living in conservative places. The case of his friend Lenny highlights this. Pariat often addresses the issues of class in her fiction, and this can especially be seen in some stories in her first collection, *Boats on Land*. Their already constrained realities are further impinged

upon by their lack of access to certain spaces within their resident towns/cities that allow for certain expression of their selves. The existence of cafes, bars, and underground culture within cities that are accommodating of supposed 'deviance' are also thus layered in their access due to this economic disparity between individuals.

However, even though Nem is able to leave his hometown and move to a more favourable city, he is still haunted by the memories of what he has left behind. This is especially pertinent of his friendship/relationship with Lenny. A queer individual could exist in the interstices, in the fluid identity of suppression as Nem did, and if they dared to trespass beyond the fervidly drawn lines of misguided propriety, they had to be disciplined. This is made explicit through the character of Lenny who is initially frowned upon, then socially ostracised, then through the violence of the normative machinery subjected to the horrid experience of conversion therapy. Thus, Nem's years of self-censorship due to the rigid social mores of his hometown make it difficult for him to move freely and express his deepest desires even once he has moved to the cities. It is to a certain extent Nem's past experiences with queerness and queerphobia that leads to his unease with self-expression. He is not comfortable in his body and unable to act upon his inclinations. A stunted bud in the flowering expanse of the city. This is exacerbated by the implicit censure extended by society, especially in his relatively small hometown through disapproving figures of authority such as his father. Thus, Aruni Kashyap continues in his review, "... memories of his hometown and his intense attraction for Nicholas perhaps makes him unable to have sustained and meaningful relationships with other women and men."

Nem's friendship with Lenny is shrouded in ambiguity, but it is the single most important bond for him in his formative years that comes to define his relationship with other people and his attitude towards desire and friendship. While there are hints of romantic interest on the part of both the characters, there is no overt mention of their attraction towards each other. It is only in Nem's expression of his inner landscape while describing himself in relation to Lenny that the reader is able to fathom his deep affection for Lenny. Here the following line becomes relevant to the exposition of Nem's inner state in the proximity of Lenny and the sense of excitement and exhilaration that it brings to him. Nem says, "When I was with him, though, time dissolved into insignificance. It lost its grasp, and loosened, unfurling endlessly as the sea" (Pariat 15). This deep longing is unable to surface due to the social controls in place. Nem's relationships from this point on become marked by their incompleteness, by their vulnerability to the constant risk of breakdown. Thus, even as he develops a deep bond with Nicholas, Nem is constantly aware of the fact that it could all disappear in a moment. His desiring has come to the surface in the relative safety of the city, but it is still not calmed by the security of sure bonds. He is still haunted by abrupt departures that have marked his life. Thus, Pariat writes, "When people leave unexpectedly. . . Nicholas, Lenny. . . you are left only with unanswered questions; they travel along with you, looping their way into your thoughts, becoming your intimate companions," (40).

Thus, Nem is seen to struggle with his own identity and is unable to come to terms with several parts of it. This is noticed in his propensity to hide, his evident discomfiture in gatherings as seen in the lines, "This is what the darkness does—it removes the burden of having to appear as we usually are. / I could see better than I ever had in daylight." (109) where again Nem's discomfort with his self, with being seen is made conspicuous to the reader. His knack for hiding, for disappearing is seen here. It is only during his relationship with Nicholas that he is truly able to bring about some parts of himself. He thus says, "What a peculiar sight it must have been" (102), while narrating Nicholas carrying him after his fall. This shows his feeling out of place and his discomfort with his own identity. He is still coming to terms with his attraction for Nicholas and even though his and Lenny's relationship are rife with undertones of homoeroticism, Nem is never outright about it. It is only the presence and the patient probing of the older Nicholas that brings him out of his stupor. Even though in a sense he was always aware and so were his parents for after Lenny's mishap, they were eager to ship him out to any city far away from home. Also, not necessarily out of any love or protective feeling towards him totally as they are also motivated by stigma and shame. By pretensions of image and prestige and to keep intact any and all façade of 'normalcy.'

It is only when he finally opens up to Nicholas and all that that experience has to offer him, that he finally comes to term with some parts of himself. It is as if some sort of freedom is gained by Nem that justifies his move to the city. Thus, he says of his encounter with Nicholas, "When he finally held me, it was shattering, somewhere in my chest. A weeping." (Pariat 113). The guilt from his upbringing and codes of conduct instilled in him that restrained him from acting out his desires are finally let go of here. He is no longer held back by them. Again, "He smiled and said my name, 'Nehemiah'," (114), where the act of calling one's lover's name indicating the intimacy between them, in the close proximity of their bodies in bed becomes a culmination of the ambling desire that Nem had held back for so long.

Thus, the movement towards cities make it possible for Nem to finally realise his true self. The ability to find similar people and be a part of a lived reality where self-expression is not curtailed by outdated ideas of customs, finally allows Nem to find freedom in the city.

#### References:

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