entrevista

desenho | Adriano Lobão Aragão

"Each immigrant is an epic in the making"

an Interview with **SUKETU MEHTA**
by **Tarso do Amaral de Souza Cruz**

Suketu Mehta is a Kolkata-born Indian writer. Despite being born in Kolkata in 1963, Mehta was raised in another major city from the Indian subcontinent: Bombay – now known as Mumbai[1]. In 1977, Mehta's family moved to the USA looking for better economic opportunities. Mehta has remained a US resident ever since.

Presently, besides working as an Associate Professor of Journalism at New York University, Mehta is a highly requested panelist, and an internationally awarded writer. Mehta's work has been featured in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic* and *Newsweek*. Nonetheless, it was with the launching of his first

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1   As Christopher Beam points out, in 1995, "the right-wing Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena won elections in the state of Maharashtra and presided over a coalition that took control of the state assembly. After the election, the party announced that the port city had been renamed after the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi, the city's patron deity. Federal agencies, local businesses, and newspapers were ordered to adopt the change". Online source: https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2008/12/why-did-bombay-become-mumbai.html, accessed on 10/05/2019.

book *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, in 2004, that Mehta's career took a decided upswing. Mehta received numerous awards, *Maximum City* was praised by critics and readers alike and became a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize.

One of the most striking qualities of *Maximum City* is precisely the imbrications between the narrative about the city of Bombay/Mumbai and Mehta's personal history. The work presents a hybrid narrative that blends autobiographical features with depictions of the city and its characters in a symbiotic text where the representations of the city and of Mehta himself intertwine and are mutually influential.

Throughout *Maximum City*, Mehta leads the reader into a journey through the depths of the currently most populous megalopolis in the world and introduces us to its characters: police officers, religious extremists, murderers, gangsters, Bollywood[2] stars, street poets, workers, bar dancers, and many more. By acquainting himself with all these citizens of Bombay, Mehta not only undergoes a journey through the city but also embarks on an odyssey of self-discovery.

In 2013, following the release of *Maximum City* in Brazil, Mehta was invited to be one of the keynote speakers of the Seminar Q+50, organized by the Brazilian Institute of Architects (IAB) and by the Brazilian Council of Architecture and Urbanism (CAU/BR). The seminar took place in Rio de Janeiro between February 27th and March 1st. As part of my PhD research, I got in contact with Mehta during his stay in Rio and interviewed him on March 4th.

The interview was fully transcribed and included as an integral part of the final version of my PhD dissertation *Exílios caminhantes: imbricações entre autorrepresentação e a narrativa de cidades nas literaturas de James Joyce e Suketu Mehta*. What follows below is an edited version of the transcript.

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2   According to the online version of the *Cambridge Dictionary*, Bollywood "is the centre of the Hindi film industry, based mainly in the Indian city of Mumbai". Online source: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bollywood, accessed on 10/05/2019.

Tarso: How was *Maximum City* received in India, In Mumbai?

Suketu Mehta: Very, very well. I didn't know how it would be received, because there's a great suspicion of non-resident Indians. They're called NRIs[3], diaspora Indians writing about India. There's been a lot of Indian writers, beginning with Salman Rushdie[4] and then going on to any number of writers who live abroad and come back to India to write. There've been a lot of novels like this, with this theme of 'the return of the exile' and 'the journey of self-discovery'. And often it's by people who grew up abroad and then come back to India and then have a problem with an arranged marriage or something. There are a lot of novels like this — not very good novels, often. So, when I wrote it and it came out, there wasn't any kind of tradition of narrative non-fiction in India. It was almost nothing. Now there's a lot.

T: After your book came out?

SM: After my book came out. It came out and it was a kind of surprise, I think, to Indians. For two reasons: one was that you could have an exile Indian who could come back and write about it in a way which felt authentic to Indians; and the second was just the genre of narrative non-fiction, which had been unknown to Indians until that time. It's still selling well. The clearest evidence is that it is pirated on the streets all the time. I was in Bombay and this kid came up to me to sell a copy of my book off from a taxi at the traffic light. This kid, street kid, he came up with my book and offered to sell my own book to me. And I said: 'How much is this?', and [he] said '₹ 600'. So I said: 'You know, I've written this book'. So [he said] 'Fine. If you've written it you can have it for 400'. Author's discount… So, in short, the book won India's top literary prize, it's called The Crossword Book Prize[5]. I can't think of a single bad review that I got in India, not one. And it's a country which is famous for being very

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3   "Non-Resident Indian: an Indian citizen or person of Indian origin living abroad". Online source: https://www.thefreedictionary.com/NRI , accessed on 25/03/2019.

4   "Salman Rushdie, in full Sir Ahmed Salman Rushdie, (born June 19, 1947, Bombay [now Mumbai], India), Indian-born British writer whose allegorical novels examine historical and philosophical issues by means of surreal characters, brooding humour, and an effusive and melodramatic prose style. His treatment of sensitive religious and political subjects made him a controversial figure". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Salman-Rushdie, accessed on 15/05/2019.

5   Mehta actually refers to the Crossword Book Awards, i.e. "any of a series of Indian literary awards established in 1998 by Indian book retailer Crossword, its stated aim being to create a prize equivalent to Western literary accolades such as the Booker Prize and the Pulitzer Prize". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/art/Crossword-Book-Awards, accessed on 25/03/2019. Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* won the 2005 Vodafone Crossword Book Award for best work of nonfiction.

feisty, very iconoclastic. Most books that are published will get a few bad reviews. I guess nothing like this had been done before.

T: Why did you decide to write something that was not a novel about India and with so many autobiographical elements to it?

SM: I began as a novelist. I went to a creative writing program from the University of Iowa, Writer's Workshop[6], very, very famous. Lots of novelists and poets have gone there. I went when I was very young. I was 21. I wanted to write fiction. I started writing short stories. But I got married when I graduated and had to support a family. So I started writing for computer publications, technical publications. Then I got into journalism. Not because I'd studied journalism, but as a way to make a living, to write articles. I started writing articles about India. One of the articles I wrote [was] for the British magazine called Granta[7]. It came out in [19]97. When that came out, a publisher in India, Penguin India[8], asked if I wanted to turn it into a book for him. But the Indian publishers pay very little of advance. So he spoke about my chapter to other publishers, namely, one publisher in America, Sonny Mehta[9], of Knopf[10]. Knopf is like

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6   "The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop was the first creative writing degree program in the United States, and since its founding in 1936, the program has been home to thousands of remarkable writers. The program claims among its graduates winners of virtually every major literary award, including seventeen winners of the Pulitzer Prize (most recently Paul Harding in 2010), six recent U.S. Poets Laureate, and numerous winners of the National Book Award, MacArthur Foundation Fellowships, and other major honors". Online source: https://writersworkshop.uiowa.edu/about, accessed on 26/04/2019.

7   "*Granta* magazine was founded in 1889 by students at Cambridge University as *The Granta*, a periodical of student politics, badinage and literary enterprise, named after the river that runs through the town. In this original incarnation it published the work of writers like A.A. Milne, Michael Frayn, Stevie Smith, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. In 1979, Bill Buford transformed *Granta* from a student publication to the literary quarterly it remains today". Online source: https://granta.com/About/, accessed on 25/03/2019.

8   "Granta magazine was founded in 1889 by students at Cambridge University as The Granta, a periodical of student politics, badinage and literary enterprise, named after the river that runs through the town. In this original incarnation it published the work of writers like A.A. Milne, Michael Frayn, Stevie Smith, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. In 1979, Bill Buford transformed Granta from a student publication to the literary quarterly it remains today". Online source: https://granta.com/About/, accessed on 25/03/2019.

9   "Sonny Mehta has been Editor In Chief and Chairman of Knopf Publishing Group, a Division of Random House, Inc. since February 2005. Mr. Mehta serves as a Member of Executive Committee at Random House, Inc. and served as its Member of The Executive Board". Online source: https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/person.asp?personId=21908321&privcapId=855562, accessed on 25/02/2019.

10 "Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. is a New York publishing house that was founded by Alfred A. Knopf Sr. and Blanche Knopf in 1915". Online source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_A._Knopf#CITEREFClaridge2016, accessed on 25/03/2019.

the Companhia das Letras[11] in America. There was a consortion of internet publishers that commissioned a book on Bombay. At the same time, I had 200 pages of the novel I was writing. The novel is called *Alphabet*. I sold the novel as well to all these publishers. They did a two-book deal. I was really enjoying writing the novel and I thought that I would finish the novel then I would go to Bombay and do the non-fiction book. But my American editor, Sonny Mehta, he advised me to do the non-fiction book first. So I moved to Bombay with my family. I thought I would get it done quickly. I moved in [19]98, but it took me until 2003 to finish the whole thing. It turned into this giant book. My book, the thing that you have here, is only half of the manuscript. I turned in a manuscript of 1667 pages to my editor. He stopped speaking to me for 9 months. When I wrote it I had no idea what I was going to do. I went there and I knew that I wanted to write it from a personal account of trying to go back home. Some of the books I had in mind were Joseph Mitchell[12], who was this great writer for *The New Yorker*[13], who wrote about New York; A. J. Liebling[14] also a local writer for *The New Yorker*, very funny; Ryszard Kapuściński[15], a Polish journalist; André Aciman[16], who wrote a memoir about growing up in Egypt, growing up Jewish in Egypt. Essentially I didn't know what I would do. I knew I would go and seek whoever I found interesting. At the time I was in Bombay there was a war between these two gangs – the underworld owns control with a lot of politics in Bombay. I found somebody who

11 "Companhia das Letras has the biggest market share of any publisher in Brazil according to Nielsen BookScan, after publishing 5,000 titles across fiction and non-fiction". Online source: https://www.thebookseller.com/news/brazilian-publisher-schwarcz-honoured-lbf-lifetime-achievement-award-486971, accessed on 25/03/2019.
12 "Joseph Mitchell (1908-1996) was a journalist and New Yorker writer". Online source: http://archives.nypl.org/mss/23209#bioghist, accessed on 26/04/2019.
13 "In 1925, Harold Ross established *The New Yorker* as a lighthearted, Manhattan-centric magazine – a 'fifteen-cent comic paper,' he called it. Today *The New Yorker* is considered by many to be the most influential magazine in the world, renowned for its in-depth reporting, political and cultural commentary, fiction, poetry, and humor. In addition to the weekly print magazine, *The New Yorker* has become a daily digital destination for news and cultural coverage by its staff writers and other contributors". Online source: https://www.newyorker.com/about/us, accessed on 26/04/2019.
14 Abbott Joseph Liebling, who lived between 1904 and 1963, was an "American journalist, who served as reporter and columnist for the New Yorker magazine from 1935-1963". Online source: http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM04613.html, accessed on 26/04/2019.
15 Ryszard Kapuściński is among "Poland's most prolific non-fiction writers, known for his incisive and very personal accounts of political and social upheavals across the world. Born in Pińsk, (today part of Belarus), in 1932, died in Warsaw on January 23, 2007". Online source: https://web.archive.org/web/20130609062127/http://www.culture.pl/web/english/resources-literature-full-page/-/eo_event_asset_publisher/eAN5/content/ryszard-kapuscinski, accessed on 26/04/2019.
16 André Aciman, who was born in 1951, "is the author of the novels *Harvard Square* (2013), *Eight White Nights* (2010), and *Call Me by Your Name* (2007), the memoir *Out of Egypt* (1995), and two books of essays. He is also the editor of *The Proust Project* (2004). He teaches comparative literature at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, where he directs the Writers' Institute". Online source: https://www.whiting.org/awards/winners/andre-aciman#/, accessed on 26/04/2019.

led me to the gangs and I could speak to people who were involved in violence. And at the same time I also found people in the film industry, in the police – all the people in the book – who were willing to speak. And I wasn't doing anything else. I wasn't teaching, I wasn't doing any other kind of journalism. I was free to just roam around the city. For two and a half year I just did that. I roamed around the city. And then I came back to America. All the interviews, all the research I had done I organized it in chapters and then, along with my editors, had to shape a book, that is, the structure of the book. I had no models for this kind of book. As I discover the city that was lost to me, I discover myself in a way. And at the end of it I find that it's possible for me to leave and go back to America, because most of my family is in America, my children. When it came out it became this kind of biography of a city. And since then there have been other books like that about other cities. I know this because publishers tell me that. In fact there was an article in *The Guardian*[17] recently by Amit Chaudhuri[18], who's written a book about Kolkata. He'd reviewed my book and his agent told him, just after my book came out, to write a book like my book, but about Kolkata. There's someone who's written a book of Johannesburg which says, like, it's like *Maximum City*, but for Johannesburg, another one for Beijing and on and on.

I think that there's a great deal of interesting cities worldwide now. And people want to read about cities. There's lots that's written about cities by urbanists, by sociologists, by historians, and there isn't, until recently, this kind of narrative non-fiction about cities. There are great novelists about the cities: Dickens[19], about London of course.

T: Balzac[20].

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17 "The Guardian, formerly (1821–1959) *The Manchester Guardian*, influential daily newspaper published in London, generally considered one of the United Kingdom's leading newspapers". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Guardian-British-newspaper, accessed on 09/04/2019.

18 Amit Chaudhuri, who was born in Calcutta, India, in 1962, "is professor of contemporary literature at UEA and the author of five novels, the latest of which is The Immortals". Online source: https://www.theguardian.com/profile/amit-chaudhuri, accessed on 09/04/2019.

19 "Charles Dickens, in full Charles John Huffam Dickens, (born February 7, 1812, Portsmouth, Hampshire, England – died June 9, 1870, Gad's Hill, near Chatham, Kent), English novelist, generally considered the greatest of the Victorian era. His many volumes include such works as *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*." Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Charles-Dickens-British-novelist, accessed on 15/05/2019.

20 "Honoré de Balzac, original name Honoré Balssa, (born May 20, 1799, Tours, France – died August 18, 1850, Paris), French literary artist who produced a vast number of novels and short stories collectively called *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*). He helped to establish the traditional form of the novel and is generally considered to be one of the greatest novelists of all time". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Honore-de-Balzac, Accessed on 15/05/2019.

SM: Balzac.

T: Joyce[21]**.**

SM: Yeah. There's Naguib Mahfouz[22] about Egypt. But this kind of non-fiction about cities is new. My book has a number of statistics about Bombay, and analysis of architecture and urbanism. That's why I was invited this time to a gathering of architects[23] who read very little fiction. But they find my book useful in understanding the urbanization of slums in Bombay. And they can learn lessons about what to do and what not to do in Rio. It's interesting the conferences and talks I get invited to. It's everything from anthropologists to sociologists, to urbanists, architects, film-makers…

T: And literature.

SM: And literature. Lots of literature.

T: Why this option for, besides writing about the city, writing about yourself as well, about your own personal history?

SM: That's the only way I know how to approach cities. I'm writing about New York now[24]. It's the same kind of mix of memoir, investigating journalism, travelogue, and essays on urbanism. I can't be objective about cities. I only want to write about two cities, really: Bombay and New York. And then I don't want to write about any other city. I want to go back to fiction. When I was writing about Bombay I thought it necessary to

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21 "James Joyce, in full James Augustine Aloysius Joyce, (born February 2, 1882, Dublin, Ireland – died January 13, 1941, Zürich, Switzerland), Irish novelist noted for his experimental use of language and exploration of new literary methods in such large works of fiction as *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939)". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Joyce, accessed on 15/05/2019.
22 Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz (1911 – 2006), Noble prize winner, was the author "of no fewer than thirty novels, more than a hundred short stories, and more than two hundred articles. Half of his novels have been made into films which have circulated throughout the Arabic-speaking world. […] his name is inevitably among the first mentioned in any literary discussion from Gibraltar to the Gulf". Online source: https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1988/mahfouz/biographical/, accessed on 09/04/2019.
23 Mehta refers to the Seminar Q+50, organized by the Brazilian Institute of Architects (IAB) and by the Brazilian Counsil of Architecture and Urbanism (CAU/BR). It took place in Rio de Janeiro between 27/02/2013 and 01/03/2013. Mehta was one the keynote speaker on 28/02/2013. It is possible to access the seminar program at http://www.iabrj.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/folder-prog-2.pdf, accessed on 26/04/2019.
24 According to Mehta's website, he is still "working on a nonfiction book about immigrants in contemporary New York, for which he was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship". Online source: http://www.suketumehta.com/about, accessed on 26/04/2019.

introduce myself to the reader first, so that you know who your spirit guide is in Bombay. I say: 'OK. Let me introduce myself to you. This is who I am, where I was born, how I grew up, how I met my wife'. For the first 50 pages what you read is: you get to know me, my personality, my eccentricities. Then I take you by the hand into the worlds of Bombay. So you know who you're going with. You know my biases, you know that it's a particular perspective. I say very clearly there are many Bombays. Into the writing of the book I wanted to find mine. So, it's clear that I'm not pronouncing any kind of judgement on Bombay or 'This is the definitive Bombay book'. This is my particular Bombay. And that works on my readers. People who had no interest in Bombay will read my book because they also want to go back to their childhoods. And it's a chronicle of a journey that one man takes into his past. I could not have written this book if I hadn't begun in fiction. There's also a memoir aspect of it, very important to my book. A woman named Katherine Boo[25], who's written a very good book about the Bombay slums called *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, which might win the Pulitzer Prize this year…[26] And she doesn't have herself in it at all. It's just a very good study of people in the slums, in one slum. Their lives. I respect that approach but I could never do that. If I have a scene about someone talking, I have to let the reader know that I wrote what I was feeling and what effect it had on me after I went back home. I think, for narrative reasons, it gets the reader to identify with the person. And then this very foreign city, Bombay, becomes a little less foreign. Because these are issues that everyone else has. All literature is about this, the particular becoming the universal. And the more points of identification the reader has with the author, the more inward he'll become in the book.

T: In *Maximum City* you write that the west is "the direction of the possible" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 122). Do you see the west, more particularly, The USA, New York, as 'the possible' and what would this possible be?

SM: When I say in my book 'west was the direction of the possible', it was a general idea for Bombay, which still applies, that the west — [it] could be

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25 Katherine Boo was "born August 12, 1964, native of Washington D.C., journalist and author known for writing about the poor and disadvantaged". Online source: https://lccn.loc.gov/n2011032232, accessed on 09/04/2019.

26 Although Katherine Boo had already won a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2000 (https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/washington-post-notably-work-katherine-boo, accessed on 26/04/2019), she did not win the Prize for *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*.

The USA, could be England, could be France, could be Brazil – is where there's the possibility of making money, of economic and social freedom. The city of Bombay was founded by people coming from the west, by the Portuguese and the British. When we grew up they taught us the west as this place where our dreams could be realized, if we moved there.

T: It's also possible to read the following passage in *Maximum City*: "the city I lost is retold into existence, through the telling of its story" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 38). Do you think that narratives have this power of recreating a city?

SM: Think about what happens when a migrant, let's say, from the village, from Bahia, he comes to São Paulo for the first time, then he goes back to some village in the North and he is telling all his neighbours and his friends about São Paulo, he's telling them about Paulista [Avenue][27], he's talking to them about, you know, the brothels, he's talking about the tall buildings… He's talking about how the people are. All of it is story-telling. There is an actual São Paulo and then there is a São Paulo of stories, which is spread all around Brazil. Similarly with Bombay: there's a real, physical Bombay and then there is the narrative Bombay. In my book, when I just went around and collected all these stories, there is now this book, that is called *Maximum City*, which now became an unofficial nickname for Bombay. It's like they call Rio 'villa maravillosa'…

T: Cidade maravilhosa.

SM: Cidade…

T: Big Apple.

SM: Yeah, Big Apple, Exactly. Bombay is now the Maximum City. It's become this way of understanding the city. People read about Bombay through my book, people who'd never been to Bombay and then they write to me about these characters. It's become this other thing, this myth of the city. By myth I mean it not in the sense of lie, but another incarnation, a literally narrative incarnation. But I've noticed that everyone who was

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27 "Paulista Avenue is the principal financial, economic and cultural center of São Paulo. It runs between the edges of the Center-South and West zones of the city and has many corporate offices, consulates, hotels, banks, educational and cultural centers, bookstores, several hospitals, cinemas, theaters, bars and restaurants". Online source: https://blog.scielo.org/en/2013/07/31/paulista-avenue-more-than-120-years-the-avenue-at-the-heart-of-sao-paulo/#.XN8SFqRv-00, Accessed on 17/05/2019.

in Bombay kept their sanity through narrative, through the story-telling about it. They explained the city to people back home and to each other and to themselves in this kind of continuous story-telling. The data is hard to find in Bombay, numbers. New York also has a magic component to it. But you can find all these details, sets of data, and numbers… And, so, the stories have a kind of solid kind of consistency. In Bombay, each Bombay had their own narrative, their own myth of it.

T: And how do you feel having coined a new nickname for Bombay?

SM: Great. I mean, I noticed that Bombay didn't really have a nickname. And people like this sense of expansiveness. My book is by no means just all praise about the city. At one point I say 'This fucking city should be bombed from the air'. Its maximum is everything, the good and the bad qualities. Like the ultimate urban experience. That's what I was trying to convey and I think they really get that.

T: At a certain point you write about homeless people and that homelessness is a condition. However, 'home' may refer to the place where you live, like the house where you live, and the city where you live…

SM: It's not just dwelling. There's 'dwelling', which is the physical structure in which you live, and there's 'homeless'. 'Homeless' could be an existential condition. You could have many dwellings but you have this lack of a sense of home, where your home belongs to, which city you belong to. It's a sense of belonging to a physical place and then there is the act of having a physical structure, literally a roof. So, there are many meanings of this word 'homeless' and I exploit some of them.

T: Do you think that diasporic subjects who live in transit are, in a sense, homeless?

SM: Well, we either have no home or too many homes. And too many homes can also put you in a sense of homelessness. I have a home in New York and when I go to Bombay I can stay in Bombay. I now have been coming to São Paulo increasingly, to London. Hitler had a term for Jews, was 'rootless cosmopolites'. And he says this with contempt. But, so many of us increasingly in the world belong to this category: we are

cosmopolitan, we live almost exclusively in cities, and we are rootless. We could transport us tomorrow and go to Rome and we would live pretty much the same as we do in São Paulo or Bombay. When I go to the cities I have my coffee, I write, I might have a good Indian lunch wherever I am, whatever city, and I could find the ingredients, I go out, I meet friends, I go to museums, I have a French wine, or a German beer, an Italian meal. And this could be constant all around the world. The daily routines of my day remain constant wherever I am. And it's possible now to have this sense of this global urban shifting class of not just rich but also poor people, who have to go to this city or that city for jobs, migrate legally or illegally.

T: And do you see this as something positive?

SM: I think so. I mean, certainly it can produce this 'citizen of the country of longing'. Belonging is for constancy. I look at people who have spent all their lives in one city with a kind of longing. Like: 'What would it have been like if I stayed in Kolkata all my life?'. I can't even imagine. And, then, when I look at them, sometimes, I envy their tremendous sense of belonging to one place. As they envy me, my confidence in living all around the planet. But, increasingly I feel that people will not have the choice of staying in one place all their lives. That mobility is survival.

T: There's a passage in _Maximum City_ in which you argue that you "have never believed in boundaries or patriotism" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 231). In the case of India, you claim that "These boundaries are British-made boundaries" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 231). However, when you write about the cinema in Hindi you refer to it the following way: "Here is our national language; here is our common song" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 352). How do you relate these two perspectives?

SM: When I said 'common' and 'national', it's actually not just Indians. It's also Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis, and also, I've been finding, Uzbeks, Greeks. Of course it's concentrated in India. Certainly in India and in Pakistan. I went to Pakistan, I wrote this article for _National Geographic_ on Bollywood. I found that 99% of the movies in a Pakistani DVD shop are Indian. The country that is supposed to be our greatest enemy is also singing this national song.

T: A song sung in Hindi[28]**.**

SM: What you call Bollywood is the Bombay film industry. And it's all in Hindi. There's also significant Tamil[29] film industry in the South. It's in the Tamil language[30], but that doesn't translate for much. Except, for some strange reason, in Japan, where Tamil movies, and particularly one Indian actor named Rajinikanth[31], he is like a god in Japan. But it's slightly different from the Bollywood films that are a global phenomenon and they are all in Hindi.

T: In *Maximum City*, one of the film directors you talk to says that to work in the Bollywood industry you had to speak English. The films, however, are not in English.

SM: No. Everyone speaks English in the top films, for the A films, the big budgets films. They've all gone to good colleges, either in India or abroad. They've come back and they are making Hindi language films. But the script conferences… there would be a little bit of Hindi thrown in, but most of it would be in English. And, yeah, it's a strange thing. Because that's again the one language that can unite someone coming from the south, and north, and the east, and the west. They wouldn't be able to understand each other's languages, the Indian languages. They could understand Hindi, but the younger generation particularly is all English.

T: When you write about cinema, you define it as "our flashlight into the darkest part of ourselves" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 348). Do you think that, like the cinema, your book could be a flashlight into the darkest parts of Bombay?

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28 "An Indic language of northern India, derived from Sanskrit and written in the Devanagari script. It is the fourth most widely spoken language in the world, with more than 250 million people speaking it as their first language". Online source: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/hindi, accessed on 17/05/2019.

29 "A member of a people inhabiting parts of southern India and Sri Lanka." Online source: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tamil, accessed on 17/05/2019.

30 "A Dravidian language spoken by Tamils in southern India, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. The language is more than 2,000 years old". Online source: https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/tamil, accessed on 17/05/2019.

31 "Rajnikanth, also spelled Rajnikant, original name Shivaji Rao Gaikwad, (born December 12, 1950, Bangalore, Mysore [now Bengaluru, Karnataka], India), Indian actor whose unique mannerisms and stylized line delivery made him one of the leading stars of Tamil cinema". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rajnikanth, accessed on 17/05/2019.

SM: Most of us never get to see another person kill someone else, or have sex with someone else. [The cinema] it's a voyeuristic media. We get to see things that we otherwise never would. So, yes. I lot of people read my book for voyeuristic purposes. They want to see the underworld inside a brothel in Bombay. They want to speak to a hitman. They're curious about Eros and Thanatos. And I don't mind at all if my book is read by voyeurs, because I also read books for voyeuristic [reasons]. I think it's OK to begin with the sensational to say 'Come with me and I'm gonna introduce you to people who kill other people and they tell you how they shot it. And there's all this blood in my book, and there's sex, as well. And I'm gonna introduce you to beautiful women who dance… and this book has stuff about their sex life'. Someone gets interested for the wrong reasons. But then I go deeper in the life of the bar dancer, I go into her family, and her father comes back, and the slums he grew up. With the hitman I speak about very mundane things that are not sensationalistic at all: how they would do the bathroom, or their relationship with their parents.

What I want to do is begin with the reader's basest instincts. Instincts that make us watch *telenovelas* or read a tabloid, which is a universal human instinct. I think all these great writers did that. Dickens did that, Balzac did that, Borges[32] did that. They often wrote about the underworld, the great hidden stream of the city. The people living on the margins.

In my original draft I had also a lot of stuff about the middle class and whatnot, which my editor cut out. And I have some stuff here about people who are not on the margins. Just regular people trying to make a living, like Girish[33] and his family working their way up in the slums. But the bias is towards these people living on the margins, people living on the edge. Because I come from this very bourgeois family and I became personally fascinated by these people who were willing to open their lives to me. And I found this strange sort of identification. The more I got to know them, the less the differences between us and them. Like the prostitutes, and the killers, and the cops. I found that in most ways they were like me or you or any reader. And I wanted to get to that point of identification where the extreme became familiar.

T: You also write about how you had problems at school, about how your childhood in Bombay wasn't particularly happy.

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32 "Jorge Luis Borges, (born August 24, 1899, Buenos Aires, Argentina – died June 14, 1986, Geneva, Switzerland), Argentine poet, essayist, and short-story writer whose works have become classics of 20th-century world literature". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jorge-Luis-Borges, accessed on 17/05/2019.

33 One of the characters Mehta gets acquainted with in *Maximum City*.

SM: No.

T: And when you write about the school there's this feeling of uneasiness. You refer to your "ghost time" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 443).

SM: Yeah. The ghost time. *Bhoot kaal*.

T: Could you talk a little bit about it?

SM: In Gujarati[34], which is my language, the name for the past, the past tense is '*bhoot kaal*', which literally means 'the ghost time'. This time which isn't here, it's not the present, it's not present, but it's not disappeared either. It lingers like ghosts.

T: What about your childhood? Why wasn't it that happy?

SM: Oh, why wasn't it happy? It was a brutal childhood. I went to very bad schools. And the teachers hit me. In Bombay, particularly, they hit me. In America they didn't hit me, but the other students were viciously racist. I was one of the first minorities in my school. I had almost no friends. I was scared all the time. My childhood was filled with this violence on the side of violence. And then there was this enormous shift when I was 14. Just when I was getting used to my school, getting used to my environment in Bombay, started to enjoy, I had friends, my family moves and took me into school. It was the nearest catholic school, where there was an atmosphere of anti-intellectualism. It was a white enclave in Queens[35], which had been surrounded by all these immigrants. And then I was the representative of all these other immigrant communities: for the Irish, and the Polish, and the German, and the Italian, Catholics, for me, and then later, my other non-Catholic friends, as the enemy. It was mostly about school. I was very, very unhappy at school. I was bullied through much of my childhood.

T: It called my attention because most of the times you refer to the past it's like something positive. But when you write about school…

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34 The term Gujarati may refer to "the Indo-Aryan language of Gujarat and neighboring regions in northwestern India" or to "a member of a people chiefly of Gujarat speaking the Gujarati language". Online source: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Gujarati, accessed on 17/05/2019.
35 "Queens is the easternmost and largest in area of the five boroughs of New York City, geographically adjacent to the borough of Brooklyn at the western end of Long Island". Online source: https://www.ny.gov/counties/queens, accessed on 17/05/2019.

SM: There's a personal childhood and then the childhood of the city, right? The city was a much better place when I was growing up, but my life was not. My life is definitely better now.

T: In *Maximum City*, the poet you talk to, Banbbanji[36], he sees Mumbai as a source for his poetry, for his art. You do as well, don't you? And, in a sense, you establish a connection with him.

SM: Yes. Exactly. I think of all my characters I feel closest to him. Because he was this 17-year-old kid all wide-eyed about the city... What he wanted to do was ridiculous: live on the streets of Bombay and write poetry. His poor parents were worried sick about him. But I found myself, I saw a younger me in him. And I found that we were both engaged in the same ridiculous enterprise: to try to create the city of narrative. In his case, in poetry, and in my case, in non-fiction, in prose. As we went around, I became fascinated by not just circumstances of his life, how he found food, but [by] his perceptions about the city. Because they were fresh and new. And then he would start giving me advice. He said 'You should call your doctors', 'You should write about these people'. It became this almost collegial exchange of views among two authors. And this is what I meant by saying you can find the most extreme characters. I had this nice big flat, and I was already married, and the two kids, and had been published, and had this publisher's commission me. And this complete kid… But we had this in common. I found this identification with him as I did with almost all of the other characters. I think that's very important, because you could judge many of the people that I met. I very consciously kept my judgements to myself. Even about the cops, and the hitmen, even when I didn't like them. I don't really talk about that in the book, because I don't believe it's my position to judge them. I think it's up to the reader to judge. There were some people I liked less than others. Others I downright hated. But I found enough of myself in most all of them. But I think it's very hard to write about someone that you truly despise, because why would you want to spend so much time with someone that you really hate? What a waste of your time. With Babbanji I found this very simple thing that connected us, that we were both in love with the city. The city was a muse for both of us.

T: There's a passage in *Maximum City* in which you argue that "The human spirit has not caught up to speed at which things change in cities. We began as a village species; we have not

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36 One of the characters Mehta gets acquainted with in *Maximum City*.

readjusted to city life" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 510-511). How do you think life in these huge cities affect human psyche?

SM: That's the basis of my inquiry. In my more recent essays I talk a lot about this. For most of our history as a species, we lived, as we started living, in communities, as this agrarian species. Our sense of time is the cycle of the seasons, it's not the i-phone. We get to know the people we grow up with in the village, we marry them, and we die with them. We know the same group of people all our lives. Now I might be with someone here on the next table, have a conversation with them, it could be a big conversation. For an hour. And then never see them again. Vanish. Our lives are composed of these transitory encounters. The people who actually mean something to us they grow up, they drift away, they go to other cities. And, increasingly, in the large cities like New York there are people who live alone in all senses of the word. There is almost no interaction with people beyond the transactions, buying and selling. This kind of culture of the city is new. But it's now increasingly a norm in the world.

The city is the biggest phenomenon of our time, through which you look at everything. It's urbanization. For the first time in the history of the world more people live in cities than in villages. And there's a stampede to the cities. In Brazil you have been urbanized for a while now. But it happened very quickly. In 20 years it went from 85% rural to 85% urban. Many of the tensions that you have in the favelas and all are because of this. Because people who come into the big cities still live the kind of village sense of living. There's this desperate need to form communities in the big cities. That's what the slums are all about. Even here, you call it '*comunidade*'. When you study a city, it's all about the formation or the attempt of the formation of that community.

T: The networks.

SM: The networks, yeah. These urban pathologies, like crime, can be explained as a failure to form communities.

T: By the end of the book, you write that India and the Indian civilization developed "the most exquisite consideration of the interior life" (MEHTA, 2005, p. 539). What exactly do you mean?

SM: Other civilizations looked not to science, but to technology. The

Portuguese in how to build by their ships, the British in how to build by their canons to fire at people, the French with chemistry. Indians focus on questions of the spirit. All the Indian religions, not only Hinduism[37], but also Islam[38], when it came to India, became a Sufi[39] religion about the inner life and communication with God. The caste system[40] which is really an examination of community, our relationship with other people, the hierarchies of order, social order, the correct way to behave towards one's elders, the purpose and meaning of life. Even the Indian peasant, after he works all day, in the evening he goes to the village temple and listens to The Epics. There are two great epics, the *Ramayana*[41] and the *Mahabharata*[42]. They're like the *Iliad*[43] and the *Odyssey*[44]. Through the lives of the people in the epics he will consider his own life, what it lacks… All of Indian philosophy is directed towards this. Like the chapter I have about the Jains[45], that goes to it. These diamond merchants, these very bourgeois people… I can't imagine a group of five software engineers in Silicon Valley[46] all suddenly becoming monks and nuns.

37 "Hinduism, major world religion originating on the Indian subcontinent and comprising several and varied systems of philosophy, belief, and ritual". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism, accessed on 17/05/2019.

38 "Islam, major world religion promulgated by the Prophet Muhammad in Arabia in the 7th century CE". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam, accessed on 17/05/2019.

39 The term Sufi refers to "an Islamic religious group that tries to become united with God by living a simple life and by praying and meditating". Online source: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sufi, accessed on 17/05/2019.

40 The caste system "divides Hindus into rigid hierarchical groups based on their karma (work) and dharma (the Hindi word for religion, but here it means duty) is generally accepted to be more than 3,000 years old". Online source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35650616, accessed on 17/05/2019.

41 "Ramayana, (Sanskrit: 'Rama's Journey') shorter of the two great epic poems of India, the other being the *Mahabharata* ('Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty'). The *Ramayana* was composed in Sanskrit, probably not before 300 bce, by the poet Valmiki and in its present form consists of some 24,000 couplets divided into seven books". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ramayana-Indian-epic, accessed on 17/05/2019.

42 "Mahabharata, (Sanskrit: 'Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty') one of the two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India (the other being the *Ramayana*). The *Mahabharata* is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded by Hindus as both a text about dharma (Hindu moral law) and a history (*itihasa*, literally 'that's what happened'). Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mahabharata, accessed on 17/05/2019.

43 "Iliad, epic poem in 24 books traditionally attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer. It takes the Trojan War as its subject, though the Greek warrior Achilles is its primary focus". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iliad-epic-poem-by-Homer, accessed on 17/05/2019.

44 "Odyssey, epic poem in 24 books traditionally attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer. The poem is the story of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, who wanders for 10 years (although the action of the poem covers only the final six weeks) trying to get home after the Trojan War". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Odyssey-epic-by-Homer, accessed on 17/05/2019.

45 Jains are adherents to Jainism, which is an "Indian religion teaching a path to spiritual purity and enlightenment through disciplined nonviolence (*ahimsa*, literally "noninjury") to all living creatures". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Jainism, accessed on 17/05/2019.

46 "Silicon Valley, industrial region around the southern shores of San Francisco Bay, California, U.S.,

In Bombay it's unusual, but it's not unheard of. There are many people that do this. And it goes encouraged by the community. There were some doubts, but even the community of other diamond merchants saw this as a great and noble pursuit and wish they could do this themselves. This is why India could not become a colonial power, or could not sail their ships, could not provide food for its people, because our focus of inquiry, of philosophical and intellectual inquiry was inward, rather than outward.

T: This idea of an exam of interior life you associate with this study of the spirit, right? It's not related to the theories of Freud[47] and this kind of study of inner life.

SM: No, that's a very different kind. You know, the Freudian study of the inner life is about post-unhappiness, which is not very important to Indians, or it's defined differently. For us it's about Moksha[48], which can come through good works. Basically, the idea is to escape the cycle of life and death and to merge with the eternal. That is, there is a greater truth beyond our every-day life and you don't need to get rid of your sexual hang-ups. It isn't really the most important thing, or having a better sex life, or being happy. It's ephemeral. The ultimate happiness is in releasing our spirit from a sense of individuality and merging in, and understanding our sense of oneness with everyone. The end of my book is this sense, this glimpse that I feel that all of these people are my flesh and my spirit.

T: Could you comment on the heritage from the British colonial times in India?

SM: Well, they gave us language, the railways, the justice system. There were many good things they gave to us. I think it could be argued that they

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with its intellectual centre at Palo Alto, home of Stanford University […]. Its name is derived from the dense concentration of electronics and computer companies that sprang up there since the mid-20th century, silicon being the base material of the semiconductors employed in computer circuits". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/place/Silicon-Valley-region-California, accessed on 17/05/2019.

47 "Sigmund Freud, (born May 6, 1856, Freiberg, Moravia, Austrian Empire [now Příbor, Czech Republic] – died September 23, 1939, London, England), Austrian neurologist, founder of psychoanalysis". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sigmund-Freud, accessed on 17/05/2019.

48 "Moksha, also spelled mokṣa, also called mukti, in Indian philosophy and religion, liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*). Derived from the Sanskrit word *muc* ('to free'), the term *moksha* literally means freedom from *samsara*. This concept of liberation or release is shared by a wide spectrum of religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism". Online source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/moksha-Indian-religion, accessed on 17/05/2019.

were a better colonial power than the Portuguese in Goa[49]. The Portuguese, when in Goa, they killed everyone who would not convert to Catholicism. The British basically weren't so much interested in saving souls, they just wanted money. At the same time, if you look at Indian industry before and after the British, the British definitely kept held back Indian industry because they wanted India to produce their raw materials and the industries could be in Britain. Many of our problems can be attributed to the British. Like the police. I talk about the police torture. There are all these British laws, which still are on the books, about sedition, about the powers of the police. In many ways the power structure of the country, of the penal code, still is a colonial power. It's meant not to be a democratic power structure, but the laws are meant to protect an alien country and its administration from a hostile local force.

T: Could you comment on this passage from an article of yours published in Newsweek: "Each immigrant is an epic in the making. Enticed here by the founding myth of the city, he's seeking to escape from history, personal and political"[50]?

SM: We all have a personal history and a political history. In Brazil, you would have your personal history of growing up in Rio, your family, etc. And then there's the political history of the dictatorship[51], the pacifications[52],

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49 "Goa is the classic example of Portuguese rule in India. Conquered and annexed from local tribes in 1510, the city of Goa became a major strategic port city for the Portuguese traders. Its location on the western coast of India made it a quasi-halfway point for the long journey from Western Europe to Eastern Asia […]. The influence of the Portuguese in Goa was so heavy that the state of Goa actually remained a colony of Portugal until it was invaded and annexed by India in 1961". Online source: http://hum54-15.omeka.fas.harvard.edu/exhibits/show/portuguese-india/goa-and-mumbai, accessed on 17/05/2019.

50 This passage is taken from the article "In NYC, Suketu Mehta Sees that Immigration Works". Available online at: https://www.newsweek.com/nycsuketu-mehta-sees-immigration-works-67543, accessed on 13/04/2019.

51 According to Marcos Napolitano, in Brazil, "between 1964 and 1985, the military was in direct command of the state, imposing indirectly elected generals as president. After overthrowing the reformist center-left government of João Goulart on March 31, 1964, the military installed a tutelary authoritarian regime to control civil society and the political system, serving as a political model for similar regimes in Latin America during the Cold War". Online source: https://oxfordre.com/latinamericanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.001.0001/acrefore-9780199366439-e-413, accessed on 17/05/2019.

52 According to Robson Rodrigues, the so-called process of 'pacification' was set into motion in Rio de Janeiro "through the installation of the UPPs [Pacifying Police Units] in areas under the control of violent armed groups. It began in 2008 with the occupation by the Military Police of the favela Santa Marta, in Botafogo, in the southern zone of Rio. The following year it would become the state's first UPP. […] the idea was that the police would remain and integrate with the local community: a completely unprecedented approach". Online source: https://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.dt/, accessed on 17/05/2019.

hyper-inflation[53], whatever. We all have two layers of history that we are struggling to escape from. And the people who come to New York, like my family, could be fleeing from a dictatorship, like the soviet Jews[54], or could just want to make more money, like my father. He had no political problem with India, but he had a sort of a personal thing. He wasn't making very much money in India. There are people who have both kinds of history. And maybe one of the reasons my father wasn't making much money in India was because of the kind of socialist structure of the country[55] that hated businessmen like him in Kolkata. And a sort of political party also played a role in his personal business. That's what I mean. I see the struggle and migration all over the world, whether it's a village to city, or a country to another, as the impetus, if they need, to escape history, personal and political.

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53 "Hyperinflation is when the prices of goods and services rise more than 50 percent a month". Online source: https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-hyperinflation-definition-causes-and-examples-3306097, accessed on 23/05/2019. According to Fernando de Holanda Barbosa e Tito Nícias Teixeira da Silva Filho, the Brazilian hyperinflation "started in the second half of the 1980s and ended in 1994". Online source: https://www.bcb.gov.br/pec/wps/ingl/wps166.pdf, accessed on 17/05/2019.

54 According to Anna Shternshis, "From 1948–1953, Soviet Jews experienced a great blow to their culture and lives […]. A wave of anti-Semitism swept the country. After Stalin's death, state and grassroots anti-Semitism, the absence of diplomatic relations with Israel after 1967 (complicated by the Cold War), and the general stagnation of the Soviet economy in the 1960s–1980s were important political factors that influenced the lives of Soviet Jews […]. With the support of the North American Jewish community, 163,000 exit visas were granted in the late 1960s–1970s. Starting from the mid-1980s, the Soviet borders relaxed its grip and Jews expressed the desire to leave and eventually were allowed to do so. Between 1988 and 2010, over 1.6 million Jews left the territory of the former Soviet Union and settled in Israel (over one million of that total number), the United States, Canada, Germany, and Australia". Online source:https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0077.xml, accessed on 23/05/2019.

55 According to Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. MetCalf (2013), in the 1980's, India had been living economically isolated from the rest of the world for about 50 years. A sequence of socialist governments would prevent more substantial economic changes. These changes would only take place in the 1990's, when the country would start to open its economy to foreign investments.