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## MULTICULTURALISM AND HOTEL NARRATIVE: A HARMONIOUS BLEND OF DIVERSITY AT HOTEL SHAHJAHAN IN SANKAR'S CHOWRINGHEE

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**Abstract:** The 'Hotel Shahjahan', one of the largest hotels in Calcutta is the most significant landmark in Sankar's classic creation Chowringhee, bringing together various cultures, traditions, rituals, essences, and lifestyles under an umbrella. The novel is a colourful collage of various plots revolving around characters from different countries, communities, and colours. It witnesses the live celluloid of multiple and multicultural individuals. Post-independent Indian society could not easily get rid of the British cultural influence, though it could not have been possible. Being the capital of India for almost half of a century during the British regime, Calcutta turned into the cultural capital of the country. Mani Shankar Mukherjee epitomizes this melting pot of multiculturalism in his legendary creation Chowringhee. The blend of different languages, cuisines, and customs creates a unique ambiance that celebrates diversity and fosters understanding among communities. Marco Polo from far Greece, British citizen Susan Munro and musician P.C. Gomez, Rosie from the farthest corner of Africa, an elderly American lady Dr Sutherland or Byron, Jimmy, Mr. Claybar encountered Sata Bose, Mr. Madhav Pakrashi, Mr. Agrawal, Mr. Chatterjee, Kaberi Guha and many characters of typical Indians communities. This article is an attempt to investigate and analyze the characters from several cultures in the novel highlighting the fragments of their lives associated with the 'Hotel Shahjahan'.

**Key Words:** Multiculturalism, hotel narrative, diversity, society, Calcutta



## Introduction:

In an undeniably interconnected world, multiculturalism has turned into a fundamental part of cultural turn of events and attachment. This idea, which advances the appreciation and consideration of different social foundations, tracks down a novel and energetic articulation in the hospitality industry, particularly within the narrative of hotels. Hotels, as microcosms of worldwide cooperation, act as essential spaces where multiculturalism is not just noticed however celebrated, offering a residing story of variety and incorporation. Hotels have forever been something more than just places to sleep; they are center points of social and cultural exchange. Visitors from various parts of the world bring their unique customs, languages, and traditions, transforming hotels into melting pots of cultural diversity. This dynamic environment gives fruitful grounds for the standards of multiculturalism to flourish, as hotels endeavor to make comprehensive spaces that regard and commend the different foundations of their visitors and staff.

The hotel, a transient home for voyagers, has for quite some time been a strong setting in writing. Its unique nature, a mix of public and confidential spaces, secrecy, and fleetingness makes it a rich background for investigating subjects of character, change, and cultural standards. From classics to contemporary stories, the hotel narrative fills in as a microcosm of human experience, uncovering the intricacies of character and plot inside the limits of a brief house. The idea of the hotel narrative in writing can be followed back to the ascent of urbanization and travel in the nineteenth century. As urban communities developed and travel turned out to be more open, hotels arose as fundamental organizations, giving shelter as well as a setting for social interactions and individual change. Early examples incorporate works like Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) and *The American* (1877), where the hotel functions as a stage for the exploration of cultural clashes and personal identity.

In the twentieth century, the hotel narrative developed to reflect changing social elements. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) highlights the Plaza Hotel as a site of conflict and disclosure, embodying the luxury and moral equivocalness of thundering twenties. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) involves hotel as transient spaces featuring the unreasonable and slippery nature of Humbert's obsession. The advancement of the lodging account mirrors cultural changes, adjusting to the period's social and social scenes. Hotels are quintessential liminal spaces and edges between the natural and the unexplored world. This liminality permits characters to get out of their daily existences and participate in ways of behaving they could some way or other keep away from. In Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch* (2006), post-war London hotels act as shelters for characters wrestling with misfortune, love, and personality in an impacting world. The transient idea of lodgings considers brief reexamination, making a space where the typical guidelines do not matter.



Ian Almond in his scholarly document “The Hotel Narrative in Turkish, Mexican, and Bengali Fiction” mentions,

...there is something quite curious about the hotel. In a way, it is a collection, a box of stories. I think what is curious about the hotel narrative is that it addresses simultaneously the question of the micro and the macro. So, on the one hand, it is an accommodation of a whole series of miniature existences, and in a sense, it reflects the hotel itself. The hotel is an accommodation of the particularities of individual existences. I mean, in many ways, what is interesting about the hotel, in a macro political sense, is that it is on the cusp of a series of overlapping paradigms within modernity. (Almond 8)

Terri Mullholland rightly mentions in her review article titled “Hotel Narratives: Emma Short, Mobility and the Hotel in Modern Literature: Passing Through” by Palgrave Macmillan in 2019:

In this compelling new study of the role of the hotel in the modern world, Emma Short demonstrates how ‘as a space of dynamic movement’ (21), the hotel embodies the mobility that comes to characterize modernity. More importantly, Short argues that a spatial examination of the hotel in literature encourages a reconsideration of these mobilities are produced, and by whom, and interrogates the assumptions about gender, class, and sexuality that are often implicit in the conflation of mobility with modernity. [...] Short’s originality is in the concept of the ‘hotel narrative’ as a means of shaping ‘narrative form and structure’ through spatial and textual movement. Short is less concerned with the various ways in which authors employ the space of the hotel, and how they use this space to inform and construct their narratives. (Mullholland 344)

There is seemingly little reference to hotels in the “standard accommodation” of the Standard Edition of Freud. We might expect a reasonable number of allusions in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), especially given that relatively early in the book Freud characterizes the dream as

...a sort of holiday (PFL 4: 153); but hotels are, in truth, few and far between there. The hotel might be said to function, in fact, as a sort of unanalyzed remainder, at once curiously superfluous and insufficiently attended to...It is a question of the shifting place of rooms, the enigmatic narrative “suite of rooms” through which the reader is led, the peregrinator series of stop overs that structure Freud’s writing. It would be possible to pursue an extensive survey of *The Interpretation* in this fashion, for it is a very roomy book, a veritable dream-ledger of rooms. At one moment he evokes a sense of the dream itself as a room: “The interpretation of dreams,” he remarks, “is like a window through which we can get a glimpse of the interior of that apparatus” (Royle 4).

The hotel offers itself as the ideal literary setting, enabling authors to bring disparate characters together and often acting as a microcosm of society. All of this is thanks to the mobility with which the hotel is necessarily characterised and defined. Charting the gradual shift in the early



nineteenth century from coaching hotels to hotels in Britain, Short highlights the significance of the growing rail network in the nineteenth century to the advent of the hotel, and its place in literature. Mobility is also inherent in the hotel at an architectural level. The spaces within the hotel are arranged according to the movements of its guests and the staff who serve them, rendering it a space that is both produced and continually constituted by mobility. (Short 3)

The novel *Chowringhee* starts with the beautiful quotation of A.C. Maffen,

“Our life is but a winter’s day:

Some only breakfast and away

Others to dhoteler stay and are full fed;

The oldest man but sups and goes to bed:

He that goes soonest has the least to pay.”

The story starts with the setting of the hotel which is located at Esplanade in the then Calcutta, India. In the beghoteling of the story the author salutes Lord Curzon, the British Viceroy who played a significant role to make the then Calcutta, hence the protagonist of the story salutes him at the outset of the story. Multicultural effect starts at this point, although the city Calcutta in the eastern part of the country India, at the farthest part of the eastern hemisphere of the globe touched with the global effect due to British colonization.

Despotopoulou in a scholarly article “Hotels in Literature” very rightly mentions:

The literary hotel emerges as a complex cultural phenomenon cultivating urban subjectivity and disclosing many of the aporias of early twentieth-century city life. From the metropolitan hearts of New York, London, and Paris to the cultural capital of Florence and the colonial phantasmagoria of Cairo, hotels are represented as new, temporary anchors which counter the idea of permanent roots and contribute to the development of new urban identities. Having (both literally and metaphorically) imposed itself on the urban landscape, the literary hotel challenges the boundary between public and private and is marked for its emotive potential, invoking transgression while simultaneously safeguarding tradition and propriety. (907)

What is perhaps most interesting is that the hotel is a moment of alienation. It is where one purchase alienation, one can obtain for a limited amount of time, space, and a time to separate oneself at own expense from the community. So, for all these different reasons, the hotel tells a great deal about larger issues, and socio-political frameworks, and indeed even theological and philosophical questions. This article tries to examine what the function of the hotel is in the narrative of Sankar in the novel *Chowringhee*, what role it has, what implications – political, psychological, existential – it has, and to what extent hotel narratives, from the novel reflect transcultural patterns of modernity, and the transcultural mechanisms of modernity’s project. Hotel narratives here, what is meant in the text has the hotel as the center of its narrative. The



hotel narrative is not simply a narrative, which has a hotel playing a function in the background, in a peripheral way.

The story is set during the 1950s in Chowringhee. The narrator Shankar is an aggressive young fellow who used to work as a secretary for an English lawyer. Notwithstanding, when the lawyer out of nowhere bites the dust, Shankar becomes jobless and is compelled to sell wastepaper bushels house to house. At some point, while resting in a local park and pondering his future, Shankar experiences Byron, a close buddy who is stunned by Shankar's drop into destitution. Byron assists Shankar with getting some work at the Shahjahan Hotel, one of Calcutta's most established and most renowned lodgings. At the hotel, Shankar gets to know Sata Bose, the central secretary, and in the end turns into his fundamental right hand and close friend. The hotel manager, Marco Polo, likewise starts to appreciate Shankar, entrusting him with additional obligations. The novel spins around the existence of the hotel's visitors, performers, and incessant guests. It additionally reveals insight into the nasty underside of Calcutta's avarice, obscure arrangements, and despicable ways of behaving. All through the story, love assumes a focal part, frequently with sad results.

The anonymity of hotel gives characters a canvas to investigate and, in some cases, change their personalities. In Arthur Hailey's *Lodging* (1965), the existences of visitors and staff entwine, revealing hidden aspects of their characters and provoking critical changes. The novel *Cowringhee* reverberates the same as:

The philanthropic society was an international organization. Those who were hosting the banquet had recently started the Calcutta chapter. Mr. Agrawalla, Mr. Langford and Khan Bahadur Huq stood before the counter to welcome the guests. Agrawal was in national dress- *bandhgala* and *churidar*. Langford was in formal Western evening attire, while the Khan Bahadur had not ignored his Mughal tradition. They were all busy people, with lots of problems of their own. They did not want for places to enjoy themselves either. But they had put aside their personal problems, sacrificed their individual pleasures only to spend the evening in the hotel for the greater good of society, the nation and the world. (Sankar 176)

A harmonious blend of diversity is very apparent in the following quotes uttered by the protagonist Sankar.

What I'd read about the freedom movement – the tyranny of the British, the differences between Hindus and Muslims – all seemed untrue. Guest list in hand, Agarwalla whispered something in Langford's ear, who burst into laughter and leaned heavily on him. It didn't take long for the wave of that laughter to reach the Khan Bahadur, with the result that three civilizations became one before my very eyes. (Sankar 176)

Despite being places filled with people, hotels frequently summon a feeling of seclusion. Stephen Ruler's *The Shining* (1977) intensifies this subject, with the Overlook Hotel's creepy detachment driving Jack Torrance to frenzy. On the other hand, lodgings can likewise cultivate



startling associations, as in Wes Anderson's film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), where the unusual setting unites a bright cast of characters. In *Cowringhee*, such incidents are found too.

I apologize for my conduct that evening, I've read and heard a lot of terrible things about Calcutta, but it's a different with all of you. I should have told you that very day, but I couldn't. I was born in Williams Lane - my father's name was Robert Adam, my mother's Jane Grey. The child whose life was saved thanks to the kindness of the local boys of Williams Lane, whom Father Sutherland took back to England with him, was also given the right to use the priest's name. That's why I had wanted to spend my last night in Calcutta in Shahjahan Hotel – thanks to your kindness, the dream was fulfilled. (Sankar 139)

A hotel is a world where isolation and alienation are very pertinent, where sentiments have no value. Shankar says, "The world in which I moved about thanks to Byron, Marco Polo and Bose-da was one where people were familiar with just two objects: the wallet and checkbook." (Sankar 142)

In many narratives, the hotel itself takes on the role of a character, with its architecture, history, and atmosphere significantly influencing the story. This personification of the hotel can add a layer of depth to the narrative, as seen in Daphne du Maurier's *Jamaica Hotel* (1936), where the hotel's dark, foreboding presence shapes the protagonist's journey and the novel's tone. In this novel,

...Silverton met Robbie as well. He told him, 'Once a barmaid, always a barmaid. We pay a fortune to bring in women from England, and then the Adelphi and Hotel de Europe lure them away with more money – only to throw them out when their youth is on the wane, when their eyes lose their luster. These women then get their tailors to tighten their clothes and queue up at Kidderpore. At the docks, Africa, Asia and Europe mingle and become one; the British and the Africa stand shoulder to shoulder. (Sankar 124)

Silverton tried to scare her.

You're inviting disaster, Jane, you have no idea how dangerous this city is. Those who beg and plead with you for a glimpse of your sweet smile at the Shahjahan bar are transformed once they're out on the road. They have their own society, with rules even stricter than those of the Hindus. Women who stay up all night selling liquor have no place there. (Sankar 123)

... "I saw before me seven hundred eyes suddenly come alive with expectation. Almost without my knowing it, the world slipped out: 'Ladies and gentlemen.' Though I couldn't find a real lady in the hall that evening, I repeated, 'Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. On this splendid evening at Shahjahan Hotel we hope you have been savouring the cuisine of our French chef, and the wines carefully chosen from several countries. I now





present to you Connie- you have seen many women in your eventful lives, but she is the woman, the only one of her kind created by God in this century.” (Sankar 198)

In the context of globalization, hotels play an essential part as nodes in a worldwide network of travel and trade. They contribute to the worldwide movement of people and ideas by facilitating economic and cultural interchange. Assessment is done on how international conferences and travel patterns affect the hotel sector. The impact of global events on the hotel industry is analyzed by the receptionist Sata Bose through the character Dr Sutherland ‘ a foreigner, good-looking, six feet tall, impressively built as if moulded in Dorman Long Steel’ doctor who is representing the World Health Organization.

“The sun does set occasionally on the British Empire, sir but the lights never go out in a hotel. Nothing close down here- but haven’t they told you how long you have to work?” (Sankar 32) “Chowringhee lay ahead, Here, day and night were interchangeable. The immaculately dressed Chowringhee, radiant in her youth, had just stepped on to the floor at the nightclub.” (Sankar 33)

Hotel Shahajahan is an interesting place where different people and stories come together because they are temporary places to stay. “Over the centuries, thousands of people have set foot on this city cursed by history. Many arrived penniless but went on to amass wealth and glory. They were of varying descents, spoke different languages, followed diverse customs and cultures- but all of them had the same end in view. And Time assiduously swept the known and unknown, the rich the poor, the native and the foreigner alike into the dustbin of oblivion.” (Sankar 34)

Hotels, which range from opulent five-star hotels to small roadside inns, represent a microcosm of society by uniting individuals from diverse origins and fostering a melting pot of cultures. This essay explores the narrative potential of hotels by looking at how they are used as locations of diversity and cultural fusion in literature, film, and real-world situations.

“ As an adult she [Miss Munro] had tried to be independent – first selling cakes at a Swiss confectionery near New Market. But her passion was music, her fascination was with fame – she was even prepared to sing for free in restaurants. She had got into this one with great difficulty. It was very hard at first, standing in the shop all day selling cakes then going straight to the restaurant, where she got dressed- there was no time to go back home. Yet it was the sort of place that didn’t believe in luxuries like ladies’ toilets. Asking a waiter to keep guard, she had to use the common toilets. Asking a waiter to keep guard, she had to use the common toilet, the smell almost making her throw up.



Silverton invited me to the bar on the evening of the twenty-second. Hoteliers normally don't invite people, but my relationship with Silverton was a little different, he did invite me occasionally. That night the bar and dining room at Shahjahan couldn't have held one more guest. Young men with the best of manners and the worst of intentions were present – but the new girls didn't take the stage. (Sankar 118)

J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, an immigrant from France, in his view, Americans who carry with them industrial skills are “Western pilgrims”.

He first described The Melting Pot theory by raising the demographic homogeneity of the United States by mentioning, “individuals of all nations.... melted into a new race of men, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (St. John de Crevecoeur, 1782, para. 5).

In the novel Chowringhee, protagonist Shankar witnessed the same through the life of Dr Sutherland. “Hobbs was waiting for us – his arms wide open in welcome. ‘Barmaid?’ The old man seemed to have gone back to some distant past at our question. ‘Those days are lost forever, never to return. There's is only one person who could have answered that question- Mrs. Brockway, wife of Father Brockway of the Union Chapel,’ he said almost to himself.” (Sankar 113)

His attempt to ‘unearthed the secrets of Chowringhee’ for himself to dig and struck golden untold stories of Shahjahan Hotel which includes the melding of individualities, comprising any qualities of interloper religion and race, down an impact furnace.

“The day we can make the mute past talk, the world will be transformed. Only historians will be in trouble; they might even lose their jobs. All that will be needed instead of research scholars and professors is an operator.” (Sankar 113)

Multiculturalism includes variety and serene concurrence as it points at libertarianism. Be that as it may, the early modern English view of multiculturalism included a struggle for empowerment. In essence, its objective was not fundamentally to acknowledge and value contrasts concerning faith, ethnicity, and culture but to squeeze the Other into an ordered progression that would bring financial advantages to the English.

‘Our story is intimately connected with the Suez Canal,’ said Hobbs. ‘Before it was built, those reckless adventures went around the Cape of Good Hope to come to Calcutta. In the absence of hotels, they spent the nights in barges at Chandpal Ghat. No blue-eyed beauty came running across the ocean to entertain them, so if the craving got really bad, they had to quench their thirst





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with the strictly Indian variety. ‘Then, in 1762, William Parker decided to open a bar for the entertainment of Calcutta’s gentlemen. (Sankar 114)

The half-clownish Anglo-Indian manager Marco Polo perceived the variety in his life through the coloured prism of the Shahjahan Hotel. It is as fascinating a story as that of the boy from the aristocratic family in Venice who, in the second half of the thirteenth century appears quite a contented man... ‘A two-thousand rupee job!’ One outcome of the war in Europe is that there were not too many competent people left and those who are do not come cheap. If you want to run a big hotel well, you cannot get a manager at that salary these days. In Rangoon, he earned not only the same amount but also commissions on sales.

“...‘But Marco Polo didn’t have things easy all his life. His father was a Greek innkeeper in the Middle East who had set off with his meagre savings, his wife and newborn son on a voyage. Many a heartbreak awaited them. Arriving at an Arab town, they put up for the night at a hotel, but they did not have to pay the bill – in fact, they didn’t even manage to come out of that hotel room, because a devastating earthquake flattened the entire town that day. People from all over the world came forward to help the ill-fated town where several thousand people were supposed to have been trapped in the debris and died.” (Sankar 47) ...

The hotel narrative remains a versatile and compelling literary device, offering a unique lens through which to explore human behavior, societal norms, and personal transformation. As a microcosm of the world, the hotel provides a space where stories converge and diverge, creating a rich tapestry that reflects the complexities of life. Whether through the lens of isolation, identity, or societal reflection, the hotel in literature continues to captivate and intrigue, offering endless possibilities for storytelling. Representations of hotels in literary texts from the 1890s to the 1950s are not only harbingers of the spatiality of literature, but also point to the distinctly modernist thematic that these spaces embody. The hotel as the point of convergence of counter dynamics such as privacy and publicity and internationalism versus nationalism reveals the cultural tensions amid these hotel communities. As miniatures of society, hotels also emphasize the valences and fluidity of modern identity, the transgressive potential of hotel spaces, as well as the complex imperial nexus between the metropolis and the colonial periphery. These urban hotels transform the banality of the quotidian through their emotive potential and by offering the promise of escape. Fostering a variety of mental and emotional states ranging from exile to estrangement, queer sheltering to female transgression or displacement, and colonial subordination to imperial decadence, the literary hotel comes forth in its vast array of protean incarnations and its plural, often conflicting and contradictory, manifestations that underscore its (critically neglected) centrality in the experience of urban modernity.



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