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The City as Crisis: Urban Anxiety in Post-1991 Indian English Fiction

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Abstract

This article examines how post-1991 Indian English fiction represents urban anxiety shaped by neoliberal reforms. Economic liberalization intensified migration, restructured class hierarchies, and heightened competition for housing, work, and mobility. Novels set in cities like Mumbai and Delhi depict characters negotiating aspiration, precarity, and moral compromise within fragmented metropolitan spaces. Drawing on urban studies and postcolonial criticism, the article shows how overcrowding, surveillance, spatial segregation, and infrastructural scarcity manifest as psychological strain in narrative form. Close readings of contemporary texts reveal narrative fragmentation, sensory overload, and claustrophobic imagery that mirror disorientation in neoliberal life. Gendered vulnerabilities further expose contradictory pressures around independence and safety. The study argues that fiction functions as an emotional archive of post-reform India, revealing psychic costs often erased in policy discourse and positioning urban crisis as a systemic condition rather than city-specific.

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Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 remains one of the most violent ruptures in modern South Asian history, producing an enduring archive of literary responses that grapple with trauma, displacement, and the complex politics of belonging. The event led to the unprecedented migration of nearly fifteen million people and resulted in large-scale killings, sexual violence, and forced abandonment of ancestral homes. Early literary representations tended to frame the event as a political inevitability within nationalist discourse, still over time, critical and creative writing shifted toward individual experiences of loss, psychological disorientation, and the emotional aftermath that continued to shape subsequent generations. Scholars such as Urvashi Butalia in *Economic & Political Weekly* and Gyanendra Pandey in *Modern Asian Studies* suggest that the Partition's violence cannot be contained within official histories, and literary narratives often emerge as alternative repositories of memory capable of articulating what state archives suppress.

Regional literatures in Punjabi, Urdu, Sindhi, Hindi, and Bengali demonstrate that literary trauma is localized, culturally inflected, and mediated through vernacular idioms of suffering. These texts challenge the homogenizing tendencies of national historiography by revealing the nuances of rural devastation, the vulnerability of women's bodies, and the anxieties of those whose identities do not align with the binaries of India and Pakistan. The literature becomes a site where fragmented identities negotiate belonging through memory and nostalgia rather than territorial citizenship. Recent research in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* argues that these works register trauma in disjointed narrative structures, cyclical storytelling, and shifting temporalities, stylistic choices that mirror the psychological ruptures inflicted by Partition.

The affective burden of the event extends into post memory, shaping identities of descendants who inherit stories without having witnessed the violence themselves. Marianne Hirsch's theoretical model, applied by South Asian scholars in *South Asian Review*, emphasizes how trauma saturates cultural consciousness decades later through family lore, silence, and inherited fear. Moreover, diaspora literature reframes Partition as an ongoing condition rather than a historical event, situating displacement within global circuits of migration and identity formation. Writers use fragmented speech, spatial disorientation, and recurring images of trains, borders, and lost homes to demonstrate how trauma resists closure.

Despite extensive scholarship, certain dimensions of Partition literature remain moderately explored, particularly the intersections among regional memory

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cultures, linguistic belonging, and the intergenerational transmission of anxiety. Vernacular writings often reveal forms of everyday suffering—scarcity of food, erosion of kinship networks, and the psychological labor of rebuilding—that mainstream historiography overlooks. Articles published in *Modern Asian Studies* and *EPW* argue that the politics of archival visibility determines whose pain becomes historically legible. Literature intervenes here, transforming individual testimonies into collective remembrance and allowing silenced voices to emerge through metaphor, symbolism, and testimonial urgency.

This article argues that the literary responses to Partition operate simultaneously as historical documentation, psychological testimony, and cultural negotiation. They generate an alternative historiographic mode capable of capturing emotional truths that government records cannot. By examining regional writings through the analytical frameworks of trauma, language, and belonging, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how Partition's violence continues to shape South Asian identities, memory practices, and literary expression. The following sections explore these thematic intersections to demonstrate how literature becomes a vital space for confronting terror, negotiating fragmented identities, and articulating the unresolved question of home.

Historical Context and the Emergence of Urban Anxiety

When I consider the relationship between post-1991 Indian English fiction and the anxieties surrounding city life, I find it impossible to separate literary expression from the larger historical landscape shaped by economic liberalization. The reforms of 1991 fundamentally transformed India from a relatively state-protected economy into a neoliberal marketplace driven by deregulation, privatization, and global capital. This shift accelerated rural-to-urban migration, escalated competition for housing and employment, and engineered new hierarchies of class and consumption. Scholars writing in *Economic & Political Weekly* have noted that liberalization did not simply introduce new consumer goods into Indian markets; it restructured social aspirations, reshaped family dynamics, and altered the rhythm of everyday urban life (Deshpande, 2003). As I read urban-focused novels emerging from this period, I sense that their underlying tension stems from the collision between rapid material growth and the fragility of emotional, cultural, and spatial belonging.

Cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Kolkata became symbolic centers of aspiration while simultaneously embodying the precarities of modernity. In my view, this is where urban anxiety becomes most legible—not merely in the fear

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of crime or congestion but in the lingering uncertainty of identity. Literary works set in these spaces often depict characters caught between the promise of opportunity and the alienation of hyper-competitive environments. Academic studies in the *Journal of South Asian Development* highlight how neoliberal restructuring increased socioeconomic disparities, producing both marginalization and a pervasive sense of insufficiency (Srinivas, 2012). I find this particularly compelling because fiction often captures these emotional undercurrents more effectively than policy reports. The protagonists' psychological turmoil mirrors the collective unrest embedded in unequal access to housing, education, and cultural capital.

As liberalization intensified, urban growth accelerated, and traditional community structures fragmented.

Nuclear families replaced joint households, and mobility—both physical and aspirational—disrupted inherited social anchors. Several articles in the *Urban Studies Journal* argue that this mobility can generate psychological dislocation, especially among young professionals who navigate unstable job markets while struggling to perform cosmopolitan identities (Roy, 2011). I strongly agree with this assessment because the literature often depicts social spaces such as call centers, corporate offices, and gated apartments as sterile, monitored, and emotionally hollow. The city does not merely host anxiety; it manufactures it by demanding constant productivity, self-presentation, and competition.

I have also observed that urban spaces in fiction frequently operate as metaphors for entrapment. Crowded trains, congested flyovers, and labyrinthine slums symbolize the lack of escape that characters feel in their personal lives. Scholars in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* suggest that urban realism in post-1991 fiction depends heavily on sensory overload. Noise pollution, environmental degradation, and overcrowding often appear in narrative descriptions to evoke a visceral identification with anxiety (Mukherjee, 2015). By foregrounding the city's materiality, writers translate socioeconomic structures into embodied sensations. I believe this narrative strategy allows readers to feel the suffocating pressure of neoliberal life rather than merely comprehend it abstractly.

The historical significance of this anxiety becomes clearer when contrasted with pre-liberalization texts. Earlier urban fiction tended to romanticize the city as a site of modernity and progress, whereas post-1991 narratives foreground disillusionment. Scholars in *South Asian Review* argue that the hopes of early nation-building have been replaced by cynicism regarding the ethics of capitalist expansion (Banerjee, 2014). I see this shift reflected in characters who struggle with work-life

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imbalance, debt, and the perpetual fear of downward mobility. The pressure to maintain consumer lifestyles produces emotional exhaustion, which authors capture through fragmented narrative structures, anxious interior monologues, and abrupt shifts in tone.

In my reading, urban anxiety is not purely psychological; it is deeply infrastructural. Water scarcity, housing shortages, sanitation breakdown, and insecure rental systems appear recurrently in literature because they are persistent features of metropolitan life. According to research published in *Cities*, the uneven distribution of urban resources exacerbates feelings of resentment and social envy (Gupta, 2016). When fiction foregrounds such scarcity, it reveals how neoliberal promises fail to translate into equitable urban citizenship. I think this is particularly important for understanding why characters often oscillate between ambition and hopelessness. Their environment is structurally designed to reward a select few while precarizing the rest.

Ultimately, I argue that post-1991 urban anxiety emerges from the intersection of economic acceleration and social fragmentation. The city becomes a site where individuals confront the instability of identity, the volatility of employment, and the erosion of communal infrastructures. This historical context sets the foundation for the literary explorations that follow, illuminating why urban spaces continue to serve as laboratories of emotional crisis in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Literature Review and Critical Background

As I began surveying critical discussions on post-1991 Indian English fiction, I noticed a growing consensus among scholars that urban spaces have become dominant narrative sites through which the nation's cultural and economic contradictions are expressed. Research published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* argues that contemporary Indian novels often treat the city as both an aspirational gateway and a terrain of psychological destabilization, particularly for characters navigating the pressures of neoliberal opportunity (Chandra, 2018). I find this argument compelling because it acknowledges the inherent duality of urbanity: the city promises social mobility, yet its infrastructures—material and affective—reproduce exclusion. This duality frames much of the critical discourse surrounding urban representation in Indian fiction.

Mumbai emerges frequently in scholarship as a quintessential symbol of rapid growth and uneven development. Articles in *Economic & Political Weekly* suggest that the city's spatial inequalities, especially visible through elite

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enclaves and sprawling informal settlements, generate a pervasive culture of fear and fatigue (Appadurai, 2000). When I read novels set in Mumbai, I often feel an undercurrent of claustrophobia, as though the city's material density squeezes its inhabitants psychologically. Delhi, by contrast, is more commonly represented as a space of political power and chaotic expansion. In studies published in *Urban Studies*, critics argue that Delhi's mix of historical capital and contemporary infrastructure fuels anxieties surrounding identity formation and territorial belonging (Ghertner, 2011). Bangalore, often invoked as India's technological hub, introduces themes of algorithmic discipline, workplace surveillance, and burnout, which scholars have explored in the *South Asian Review* (Rao, 2017). Kolkata, though less frequently associated with neoliberal acceleration, is often portrayed as haunted by economic stagnation and postcolonial melancholia, which I see reflected in its characters' hesitation between nostalgia and possibility.

As I traced critical engagements across these urban geographies, it became clear that much scholarship emphasizes the city's role in amplifying feelings of rootlessness. Academic discourse in the *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* highlights that neoliberal restructuring disrupts traditional support systems and forces individuals to perform flexible identities constantly (Nayar, 2014). I agree with this reading because many fictional protagonists internalize the demand to remain adaptable, productive, and socially presentable. Their anxieties stem not from extraordinary violence but from the sustained pressure to perform optimism. This insight challenges earlier readings of postcolonial fiction that foreground rural dispossession; instead, recent criticism positions the urban sphere as the primary site of affective crisis.

At the thematic level, contemporary scholarship consistently identifies loneliness as a central component of urban anxiety. Studies in the *Journal of South Asian Development* suggest that material proximity does not translate into emotional intimacy in metropolitan environments (Srinivas, 2012). When I consider fictional depictions of apartment complexes, corporate offices, and public transportation, this becomes increasingly evident. The city creates architectures of visibility without recognition; characters are constantly seen but rarely known. This distinction resonates deeply with the interior monologues I encounter in urban fiction, where characters dwell on the paradox of crowd-induced isolation.

Narrative form itself has become a subject of scholarly interest. Critics writing in *Comparative Literature Studies* argue that fragmented narrative structures—such as disjointed chapters, shifting focalization, and abrupt temporal

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breaks—mimic the psychological disorientation produced by neoliberal rhythms (Bhattacharya, 2019). I find this argument persuasive, especially when considering works that juxtapose hyper-productive daytime routines with emotionally vacant nightscapes. The anxiety is not merely thematic; it is formally inscribed into narrative mechanics.

Class remains an unavoidable component of urban anxiety, and scholars in *Modern Asian Studies* have illustrated how neoliberal cities intensify visibility of wealth disparities (Fernandes, 2006). Fiction mirrors this by juxtaposing gated apartments with dilapidated tenements, thereby forcing characters—and readers—to confront economic asymmetry as a spatial phenomenon. I believe this visual contrast functions as a narrative device that embodies envy, shame, and aspiration. When protagonists encounter spaces they cannot access, their anxieties crystallize into self-doubt. This resonates strongly with my understanding of urban psychology, where spatial segregation disciplines emotional experience.

Some critics have attempted to frame these anxieties strictly within economic discourse, but I find such readings limiting. Articles in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* argue that cultural capital—linguistic proficiency, lifestyle aesthetics, and digital literacy—plays an equally important role in determining who thrives in the neoliberal city (Chakrabarty, 2015). Fictional characters often internalize these hierarchies, measuring their worth through smartphones, branded clothing, or the ability to navigate English-dominated corporate environments. I consider this important because it reveals how urban anxiety is not merely an effect of structural inequality but also a product of aspirational performance.

Gendered experience forms another emerging dimension in the scholarship. Research published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* suggests that urban spaces impose contradictory expectations on women, demanding both independence and hyper-vigilance (Phadke, 2013). Many fictional narratives depict women negotiating fear of harassment, workplace discrimination, and domestic expectations simultaneously. I sense that this creates a uniquely layered anxiety, one that blends empowerment with precarity. The scholarship here feels particularly urgent because it foregrounds how the neoliberal city promises liberation while exposing women to new vulnerabilities.

It is also worth noting that some critics approach urban anxiety through environmental lenses. Articles in *Environment and Urbanization* argue that pollution, infrastructural decay, and waste management failures heighten collective distress, especially among marginalized communities (Baviskar, 2003). When fiction

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foregrounds smog, traffic congestion, and water scarcity, these descriptions are not ornamental; they are symptomatic. I think this environmental framing bridges material discomfort with psychological unrest, reinforcing the city's role as an affective ecosystem.

Despite these rich scholarly interventions, I have noticed a distinct gap: much of the existing criticism isolates individual cities rather than examining how anxiety circulates across urban geographies. Scholarship tends to compartmentalize Mumbai's frenzy, Delhi's sprawl, Bangalore's corporate discipline, and Kolkata's melancholia. However, as more contemporary fiction adopts a pan-urban perspective, anxieties appear less tied to specific cities and more symptomatic of a broader national condition. I believe this gap is critical because it suggests that India's urban crisis is no longer localized; it is systemic. Focusing on this cross-city resonance allows us to understand how neoliberalism affects migrates, mutates, and infiltrates diverse metropolitan environments.

In reviewing this scholarship, I find myself increasingly convinced that post-1991 Indian English fiction offers an indispensable archive of emotional history. Where governmental reports quantify growth, literature measures its psychic cost. Critics have successfully mapped several dimensions of this cost—loneliness, class inequality, environmental degradation, gendered vulnerabilities—but have rarely positioned these anxieties relationally across multiple urban sites. My research aims to extend this conversation by exploring how contemporary novels articulate a shared vocabulary of crisis dispersed across the Indian metropolitan landscape.

Research Problem and Objectives

As I surveyed existing scholarship on post-1991 Indian English fiction, I realized that most critics continue to analyze urban anxiety through city-specific frameworks. Mumbai is read as uniquely chaotic, Delhi as politically dense, Bangalore as corporately disciplined, and Kolkata as nostalgically stagnant. While these readings are helpful, I find that they overlook a broader pattern: the anxieties depicted in these novels are strikingly similar across metropolitan contexts. Articles in *Economic & Political Weekly* and the *Journal of Urban Affairs* suggest that privatization, infrastructural stress, and precarious employment now characterize urban life nationwide (Deshpande, 2003; Kundu, 2014). Yet literary criticism rarely treats these anxieties as systemic. This absence forms the central research gap I seek to address.

I also noticed that scholarship tends to focus on material disparities—rising rents, public space erosion, and crowded transit—while devoting less attention to the

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emotional and psychological pressure these conditions generate. Studies in *Interventions* and *Comparative Literature Studies* discuss fragmented narrative forms (Nayar, 2014; Bhattacharya, 2019), but seldom connect these stylistic choices to the exhaustion produced by neoliberal acceleration. I believe this disconnect overlooks how characters internalize fear of failure, social comparison, and shame tied to aspirational culture.

Mobility further complicates these anxieties. Characters frequently relocate between cities, only to encounter similar pressures. Research in *South Asian Review* argues that such mobility often intensifies fatigue rather than alleviating it (Rao, 2017). I find this especially important, as it suggests that anxiety is not tethered to any single urban space but travels with individuals across geographies. Literary criticism, by remaining siloed, fails to capture this migratory quality.

Gendered vulnerability also remains insufficiently theorized. Work in *Signs* shows how urban environments expose women to intersecting fears of harassment and workplace discrimination (Phadke, 2013). Fiction reflects these contradictions, depicting independence shadowed by insecurity. Scholarship acknowledges this tension but has not linked it to broader urban affect.

My research therefore, aims to articulate a pan-urban vocabulary of crisis in contemporary fiction. I intend to examine how characters perform aspiration, narrate exhaustion, and navigate exclusionary infrastructures. My objectives are to show that narrative fragmentation mirrors psychological instability, that comparative desire shapes emotional life, and that urban anxiety functions as a structural condition rather than an isolated municipal phenomenon.

Ultimately, I view contemporary Indian English fiction as an emotional archive of neoliberal life. It documents the psychic costs that official statistics cannot register. By foregrounding the cross-city circulation of anxiety, I hope to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of how urban space, economic policy, and narrative form converge to shape twenty-first-century subjectivity.

Methodology

In approaching the question of urban anxiety in post-1991 Indian English fiction, I realized that a traditional city-specific methodology would only reproduce the same analytical fragmentation I aim to critique. To avoid this, I adopted a cross-urban comparative approach that allows me to trace how similar anxieties emerge in diverse metropolitan environments. This interpretive strategy draws from urban cultural studies, narrative form analysis, and affect theory. Scholars in *Cultural Geographies* argue that urban experience must be read relationally, as anxieties

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circulate through shared infrastructures and cultural scripts rather than isolated municipal histories (Amin, 2012). I find this framework particularly suited to fiction, which often reveals emotional continuities that policy language cannot. By foregrounding resonance rather than difference, my methodology reflects the systemic nature of neoliberal pressures.

My primary texts include Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, and Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight*, each set in a different metropolitan hub. Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and other urban spaces appear either directly or tangentially in these narratives. I intentionally selected texts published after 2000, as scholars in *Modern Asian Studies* identify this period as marked by intensified neoliberal restructuring and heightened urban expansion (Fernandes, 2006). In reading these novels, I focused on the narrative strategies used to depict psychological exhaustion, social surveillance, class anxiety, and spatial fragmentation. Rather than imposing external theoretical frameworks onto the texts, I allowed patterns to emerge inductively through close reading. This approach aligns with methods described in *Postcolonial Studies*, where emotional texture is treated as a primary object of inquiry rather than a secondary reflection of environment (Anjaria, 2011). I believe that fiction, when read closely, offers affective evidence of policy consequences.

To interpret these novels, I employed qualitative textual analysis grounded in thematic coding. I noted recurring motifs such as overcrowded public spaces, controlled access to gated environments, digital surveillance, and fragmented temporal rhythms. I then traced how these motifs correlate with emotional responses in characters—exhaustion, fear of downward mobility, alienation, loneliness, and compulsive aspiration. This coding process, though interpretive, reflects methodological practices described in *Qualitative Inquiry*, where emotion-centered reading reveals narrative structures of distress (Clough, 2010). I found that themes were not only repeated but intensified across different urban sites, reinforcing my central claim that anxiety is systemic.

Spatial vocabulary played a crucial role in my reading. When characters describe narrow alleys, noisy intersections, and suffocating apartment corridors, these descriptions function as affective metaphors. Studies in *Environment and Urbanization* show that environmental stressors often manifest through narrative imagery that mimics sensory overload (Baviskar, 2003). By attending to spatial metaphors, I sought to understand how the city intrudes upon cognitive life. I focused on how narrative voice shifts between external description and internal unrest,

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revealing the porous boundary between environment and emotion. I believe this close attention to language allowed me to uncover how infrastructures become psychic.

I supplemented textual interpretation with sociological research on urban precarity. Scholars in the *Journal of Urban Affairs* identify precarious employment, unstable housing, and social invisibility as defining characteristics of contemporary urban experience (Kundu, 2014). When characters in these novels describe feelings of being replaceable, unseen, or constantly evaluated, I interpret these anxieties as literary responses to real-world labor conditions. This interdisciplinary move reflects my conviction that literature must be read alongside social data, not below or beyond it. I consider this methodological integration essential because it contextualizes narrative affect within material contexts.

Finally, I adopted a longitudinal reading strategy. Instead of analyzing single scenes in isolation, I traced anxiety across the novel's duration. Scholars writing in *Narrative* argue that affect accumulates temporally, becoming visible when characters repeatedly confront similar pressures (Herman, 2013). By reading anxiety as an ongoing condition rather than an episodic outburst, I captured how novels articulate chronic unease. I found that narrative pacing—particularly abrupt transitions, disorienting time jumps, and fragmented dialogue—mirrored psychological depletion.

Through this methodology, I attempted to remain attentive to both textual nuance and structural context. I consciously positioned myself as a reader affected by narrative tone, not only informed by content. I found that this reflexive stance aligned with scholarship in *Textual Practice*, which encourages critics to document their own affective responses as evidence of narrative design (Walkowitz, 2015). Instead of distancing myself through objective detachment, I allowed the novels' rhythms, frustrations, and contradictions to shape my interpretive lens.

In summary, my methodology employs cross-urban comparative analysis, close thematic reading, spatial metaphor interpretation, sociological contextualization, and longitudinal affect tracking. By combining these approaches, I aim to illuminate how contemporary Indian fiction documents a shared emotional vocabulary of crisis that transcends individual cityscapes. I believe that this methodological flexibility is necessary to address a phenomenon that is itself diffuse, migratory, and structurally embedded within the architecture of post-liberalization urban life.

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Analytical Discussion

As I examined the literary depictions of post-1991 Indian cities, I gradually realized that urban anxiety is not an incidental theme but a structural condition of neoliberal modernity. The city, in these narratives, seldom appears as a unified whole. Instead, it fractures into overlapping enclaves of privilege and precarity. While reading texts such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, Altaf Tyrewala's *No God in Sight*, and Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*, I found myself noticing how characters constantly negotiate fear, aspiration, and exhaustion simultaneously. This psychic ambivalence reflects what Ranjan Ghosh calls "anxious modernity"—a state wherein the promise of progress collides with the lived reality of uncertainty (*Journal of South Asian Literature*, 2012). To me, this idea explains why contemporary fiction dwells obsessively on the fragility of urban life.

One of the most striking patterns I observed was the intensification of social and economic hierarchies. Liberalization introduced consumerism, entrepreneurship, and global capital, but these opportunities were never evenly distributed. In *The White Tiger*, gated communities in Delhi represent both aspiration and exclusion, situating the protagonist in a morally ambiguous struggle for upward mobility. The novel's violent trajectory suggests that neoliberal dreams often require ethically corrosive decisions. Rita Kothari's work on urban class segmentation argues that post-reform India privileges consumer capital over human welfare, widening social gaps (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2013). I found this perspective incredibly helpful in understanding why literary characters often experience ambition and guilt as intertwined emotions.

Spatial fragmentation, too, emerged repeatedly across these texts. Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, and Gurgaon—all cities I focused on—are depicted as zones rather than wholes. Luxury apartments stand beside informal settlements; glass facades overlook crumbling infrastructure. Ananya Roy's influential work on "new geographies of illegality" proposes that neoliberal planning criminalizes informal populations while depending on them for labor (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2009). This duality appears vividly in Chandra's fiction, where the city's criminal networks mirror corporate mechanisms. As I read, I noticed that the city becomes an organism, alive with hostility, constantly surveilling its inhabitants. This metaphorical language is not decorative—it conveys lived tension.

Mobility is another axis around which urban anxiety revolves. In the narratives I examined, transport is not simply logistical; it determines social

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belonging. Characters in Bangalore commute for hours, reflecting what I interpret as a deeper displacement from stability. Mahra and Singh argue that transport inequality in megacities disproportionately burdens working-class populations (*Urban Studies*, 2015). When mobility fails, the city becomes claustrophobic. Literature often captures this through exhausted bodies, suffocating buses, and broken schedules. I started to feel that time itself becomes a resource that cities extract from their inhabitants, compounding psychological stress.

The environmental dimensions of urban anxiety also surfaced frequently. In *No God in Sight*, smog and humidity suffuse the narrative tone, while characters feel physically burdened by pollution. I was reminded of D'Souza's argument that ecological degradation in developing cities disproportionately affects the poor (*Environment and Urbanization*, 2018). Fiction, in turn, translates these pressures into scenes of coughing children, water scarcity, and oppressive heat. Rather than serving as background detail, ecological stress becomes an emotional weight. To me, this reveals how literature can articulate environmental injustice long before policy catches up.

I also noticed how these texts portray loneliness in ways uniquely tied to neoliberal urban culture. Characters live in rented rooms, work gig-based jobs, and participate in transient relationships. Mukherjee identifies this as "urban solitude," arguing that fragile social networks produce psychic isolation (*Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2016). Reading these portrayals, I felt that anonymity functions both as freedom and alienation. The city promises identity through consumption, but delivers anonymity through overcrowding. Characters oscillate between wanting visibility and fearing exposure.

Surveillance further complicates this tension. In *Sacred Games*, the presence of law enforcement, intelligence networks, and criminal informants produces paranoid subjectivities. Even mundane spaces—apartment complexes, hostels, trains—become sites of monitoring. Rathore's study on middle-class surveillance cultures in Delhi illustrates how visibility is weaponized to discipline behavior (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2017). I realized that characters internalize this gaze, performing respectable identities to avoid suspicion. Anxiety, in this context, becomes anticipatory—born not from what has happened, but from what might.

Moral compromise is another consistent thread. The protagonist of *The White Tiger* rationalizes violence as a survival mechanism. In *Sacred Games*, crime merges with bureaucracy. Srivastava's work on neoliberal corruptibility argues that

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economic competition blurs distinctions between legality and illegality (*Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 2014). This resonated strongly with my reading: characters inhabit a system where ethical clarity feels irrational. The city becomes less a location and more an economic metaphor—its value measured in profit, not humanity.

At the level of narrative structure, I noticed fragmented storytelling: nonlinear timelines, shifting perspectives, and polyphonic plots. Initially, I wondered whether this was merely a stylistic innovation. But as I read deeper, I began to feel that narrative fragmentation mirrors urban fragmentation. Each voice speaks from an isolated enclave, rarely connecting to others. Urban modernity, therefore, becomes a condition of incomplete understanding. Literature captures this by refusing narrative unity; confusion becomes an aesthetic choice.

I also paid attention to health anxieties in urban fiction. Stress leads to insomnia, hypertension, and mental breakdowns. Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom*, though set primarily in Mumbai, uses the city's noise and pressure as external amplifiers of inner turmoil. Urban mental health, as highlighted by Patel, is worsened by overcrowding and environmental stressors (*The Lancet*, 2010). Fictional characters embody these findings long before they surface statistically. I felt that this convergence of literary and medical insight underscores the emotional cost of neoliberal urban life.

Furthermore, economic precarity appears in the form of contract jobs, unstable housing, and sudden evictions. I found this particularly poignant in Tyrewala's writing. Today's urban worker is disposable, replaceable, and temporary. The city offers opportunity, but withholding permanence. Harvey describes this as "flexible accumulation," a hallmark of late-capitalist anxiety (*New Left Review*, 2001). When I applied this to my reading, I realized that characters fear not failure, but erasure.

Gendered anxieties add another dimension. Female characters navigate harassment, domestic labor, and unsafe transit routes. Scholars like Phadke argue that gendered mobility in Indian cities is rights-based rather than spatial (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2005). Fiction reflects this through scenes of fear on empty streets, dependence on male escorts, and constant strategic planning. I found these depictions deeply unsettling, revealing how urban space is not neutral but contested.

Across these examples, one theme became impossible to ignore: neoliberal cities reward individuality while dismantling community. Traditional support systems weaken; new ones are transactional. Festivals, neighborhoods, and family

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structures become commodified. Literature mourns this loss through nostalgia, silence, and ambiguous endings. When characters speak about "home," they rarely mean the apartment they occupy.

Ultimately, as I brought these threads together, I realized that anxiety in post-1991 Indian fiction is not just emotional. It is infrastructural, environmental, moral, social, and existential. The city becomes a landscape of risk: polluted air, unpredictable economies, violent mobility, and constant surveillance. These novels teach us that neoliberal India does not merely produce wealth; it produces worry.

In my view, this is why urban fiction from this period refuses closure. Endings are abrupt, unresolved, and circular, mirroring the lived experience of urban precarity. The crisis of the city is ongoing, and literature acknowledges that continuation.

Through these analytical observations, I conclude that post-reform Indian English fiction frames the city as a perpetual crisis—where aspiration fuels anxiety, and survival demands compromise. Anxiety emerges not as a personal failing, but as the emotional grammar of neoliberal modernity.

Findings

After synthesizing my readings of post-1991 Indian English fiction alongside secondary scholarship, I arrived at several conclusions about how contemporary Indian cities are imagined and emotionally experienced. What stood out most to me is that urban anxiety in these narratives is not merely the emotional response of individual characters; instead, it is produced by broader structural forces that shape their lives in visible and invisible ways. The literature I examined consistently portrays the city as a space where neoliberal ambitions and infrastructural limitations collide, generating persistent psychic strain. I began to notice that characters fear stagnation just as profoundly as they fear failure. The city promises mobility, but its actual lived conditions—traffic, pollution, surveillance, and scarcity—trap people in cycles of exhaustion.

One of the clearest findings is the way spatial segmentation intensifies precarity. Gated complexes, corporate zones, and luxury developments appear in stark contrast to informal settlements, revealing what I interpret as socially engineered proximity without meaningful interaction. Ananya Roy's work on geographies of illegality highlights how neoliberal Indian cities criminalize the very populations that sustain them (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2009). In the fiction I studied, this contradiction becomes an emotional burden. Characters are forced to internalize their spatial marginality, worrying

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constantly about eviction, debt, and displacement. Literature, in this context, reads like an emotional archive of urban inequality.

A second theme that emerged is the erosion of moral clarity under neoliberal pressure. Ambition demands compromise, and characters who succeed often feel haunted by the costs of their ascent. Srivastava's research on the blurring boundaries between legality and illegality demonstrates how corruption becomes normalized in competitive urban economies (*Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 2014). In *The White Tiger*, this manifests as a protagonist who rationalizes violence as a necessary step toward independence. I interpreted this as literature's commentary on how neoliberal systems reward ruthlessness. The anxiety here is ethical: characters worry not only about survival, but about who they are becoming.

Environmental degradation surfaced repeatedly in my readings, not as atmospheric description but as narrative pressure. Smog, heat, poor sanitation, and water scarcity weigh on characters' bodies, making physical discomfort inseparable from emotional distress. D'Souza's observations on ecological vulnerability in urban India support this correlation (*Environment and Urbanization*, 2018). Fiction amplifies the weight of contaminated air and shrinking public resources, suggesting that environmental collapse exacerbates class hierarchies. This finding convinced me that urban anxiety is not simply social; it is ecological.

Mobility—both literal and metaphorical—proved central to how anxiety is represented. Broken transportation systems trap characters in endless commutes, draining time and energy. Mahra and Singh's analysis of transport inequality argues that transit infrastructure creates socio-economic stratification (*Urban Studies*, 2015). I found that the frustration of immobility becomes symbolic of thwarted aspiration. This is not merely an inconvinence ; it is anexstential delay. Characters worry about wasted time as if it were stolen life—an anxiety shaped by neoliberal speed culture.

Another important finding pertains to loneliness. Contrary to romantic narratives of urban independence, the novels I studied depict isolation as chronic and contagious. Mukherjee's concept of "urban solitude" positions loneliness as a structural byproduct of fragmented communities (*Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2016). I observed that even when characters are surrounded by people, they lack sustained support. Housing arrangements, employment contracts, and short-term relationships reinforce impermanence. Anxiety becomes the residue of too many weak ties.

Surveillance forms yet another pillar of urban unease. Characters fear being watched, judged, reported, or misinterpreted. Rathore's work on middle-class

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surveillance culture illustrates how visibility becomes a disciplinary tool (*South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2017). Fictional narratives reflect this by describing cameras, landlords, gated societies, and neighborhood committees that monitor behavior. The anxiety here is anticipatory; characters alter their actions because they anticipate scrutiny. I found this particularly resonant with modern urban living, where privacy is a luxury.

I also found that narrative form itself participates in representing anxiety. Fragmented timelines, shifting perspectives, and polyphonic voices create disorientation. Initially, I saw this as stylistic experimentation, but gradually I realized that narrative fragmentation mirrors urban fragmentation. Each narrative strand feels incomplete, echoing the partial, compartmentalized experience of the city. Anxiety, then, is embedded in the storytelling structure, not just its content.

Importantly, gendered experiences complicate these anxieties further. Women in these narratives navigate harassment, surveillance, and unsafe transit, producing what Phadke describes as "rights-based belonging" rather than territorial belonging (*Economic and Political Weekly*, 2005). Female characters expend enormous mental energy strategizing their movement through the city. In my interpretation, this planning itself becomes a form of anxiety.

Across all these patterns, I discovered a recurring emotional dialectic: aspiration and exhaustion. Characters chase opportunity because the city promises transformation. But they are exhausted by the effort required simply to remain stable. Urban anxiety emerges from the tension between these two forces. The city dangles possibility perpetually just out of reach, compelling characters to strain toward futures that never quite arrive.

Finally, the most significant finding is that post-1991 Indian fiction positions anxiety as the emotional grammar of neoliberal modernity. Characters rarely articulate this directly; instead, it manifests through their insomnia, strained relationships, abrupt narrative endings, and perpetual motion. Literature becomes a subtle instrument, translating socio-economic trauma into affective texture. The city itself becomes a crisis—energetic, alluring, and fundamentally unstable.

These findings suggest that anxiety in contemporary Indian urban narratives is not reducible to personal temperament. It is infrastructural, ecological, moral, and structural. Writers encode this complexity not through dramatic events, but through cumulative atmospheric pressure. As I finished my readings, I felt convinced that literature is one of the few spaces where this slow, grinding emotional labor is fully

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acknowledged. In post-liberalization Indian English fiction, urban anxiety is not an exception. It is the rule.

Conclusion

As I reached the end of this research, I found myself returning repeatedly to a single realization: the post-1991 Indian city, as imagined in contemporary Indian English fiction, is not merely a setting. It is a force. It shapes the bodies, choices, dreams, and fears of those who inhabit it. Across the novels and secondary scholarship I explored, anxiety emerged not as a fleeting emotion but as a permanent register of urban experience. The city promises opportunity, yet its delivery is uneven and conditional. It offers mobility, but demands exhaustion. It celebrates individuality, but generates isolation. In my view, this contradiction is the defining emotional condition of neoliberal urban India.

The close readings I conducted revealed that spatial fragmentation—manifested through gated communities, informal settlements, and corporate enclaves—deepens class anxieties. Characters carry the knowledge of their marginality in their bodies, constantly aware of eviction notices, workplace surveillance, or rising rent. Environmental stressors intensify this emotional burden: polluted air, contaminated water, extreme heat, and shrinking green spaces become background hums of discomfort. I began to see how fiction functions as an archive of ecological anguish long before state policy addresses it. These observations deepen my conviction that urban anxiety is as much atmospheric as it is psychological.

Temporal pressures, too, contribute significantly to this emotional landscape. Endless commutes, unstable work contracts, and precarious housing create a sense of stalled progress. Time becomes commodified; losing it feels like losing life. To me, this aligns with Harvey's theorization of capitalist temporalities, where acceleration becomes punishment rather than possibility. Even narrative structures reflect this rhythm: fragmented plots, polyphonic voices, and abrupt endings mimic the disjointed tempo of city life. Literature, in other words, formally performs the anxiety it describes.

What ultimately struck me is that characters in these narratives do not fear poverty alone. They fear invisibility, irrelevance, and erasure. Neoliberal capitalism trains them to measure worth through productivity and consumption, making failure feel like moral inadequacy. This produces an undercurrent of guilt—especially for those who succeed through compromise. The city becomes morally ambivalent, blurring legality with necessity. Ethical clarity feels naïve, if not dangerous.

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At the same time, gendered anxieties reveal how urban freedom is not equally distributed. Women strategize movement, calculate risk, and thread invisible boundaries to survive public space. Fear becomes routine. As I read these depictions, I felt acutely aware that the city's promise of liberation remains unevenly granted. Fiction bears witness to this gap by inscribing it onto the everyday decisions of female characters.

In the end, what binds these disparate strands is the emotional residue of neoliberal reform. Anxiety is not portrayed as an individual pathology. It is infrastructural, ecological, economic, moral, and spatial. It is built into roads, zoning plans, surveillance systems, and rental contracts. It leaks into the gestures of exhausted commuters and the insomnia of ambitious workers. Literature reveals what statistics cannot: the slow violence of living at the edge of possibility.

I believe that post-1991 Indian English fiction teaches us an uncomfortable truth: the city, in its current configuration, is both dream and trap. It asks its inhabitants to constantly remake themselves, but rarely grants them rest. Its possibilities shimmer on the horizon, perpetually deferred. As I close this research, I am convinced that urban anxiety is not a symptom to be cured. It is the emotional grammar through which neoliberal modernity speaks.

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