**Resisting re-orientalism in representation: Aman Sethi writes of Delhi.**

**Abstract**: The (re)presentation of India by Indian authors has been fairly well established these last three decades in the global literary scene of fiction written in English. More recently, non-fiction written in English has also been gaining momentum, but there has in fact been an overlooked, long-standing tradition of Indian social analysts producing sterling commentaries. In the best of that tradition which blurs the divide between the literary and journalistic, Aman Sethi writes with an almost disconcerting rawness of Delhi. In *A Free Man* (2012), Sethi crosses significant class boundaries to represent Delhi through the stories of the city’s itinerant labourers. Sethi readily involves himself in their welfare and lives, engaging more extensively with the subject, reducing the space between observer and the observed, and thereby deconstructing the alterity of subaltern representation. This article investigates whether such innovative methods of data collection and modes of representation are able to resist re-orientalism and address the crisis of authenticity in Indian writing in English (IWE); or whether re-orientalism will inexorably be reiterated as a result of the distance and difference in positionality between author and subject. To this end, this article focuses on representation via form, particularly that of the narrative in non-fiction. The article discusses the extent to which form and authorial intention to avoid strategic exoticism and staged marginality can circumvent the pitfalls of re-orientalism when representing the subaltern.

**Keywords:** Aman Sethi, Delhi, re-orientalism, authenticity, representation

For as long as I can remember, Delhi looked like a giant construction site inhabited by bulldozers, cranes, and massive columns of prefabricated concrete; but the rubble has masked the incredible changes and dislocations of factories, homes, and livelihoods that occurred as Delhi changed from a sleepy north Indian city into a glistening metropolis of a rising Asian superpower. Working-class settlements like Yamuna Pushta, Nangla Machi, and Sanjay Amar Colony were flattened by government demolition squads to make way for broader roads, bigger power stations, and the Commonwealth Games. (Sethi 2012, 38-39)

Drawing on published interviews and personal communications with the author Aman Sethi, this article interrogates his non-fictional literary representation of Delhi in *A Free Man* (2012) in relation to issues of politics and class, and considers this work of literature as a cultural artefact, particularly given the crisis of authenticity in Indian writing in English. The article draws on the understanding of literary texts “as active, instrumental contributions to the understanding of city-space that exhibit a dynamic interventionist aesthetic” (Boehmer and Davies 2015, 396). The issue of how Indian authors represent India in anglophone global literary fiction has been extensively discussed in academic study through the lens of both orientalism and re-orientalism. Re-orientalism is understood here as the perpetration and practice of Orientalism by Orientals. Although the Orient(al) is increasingly seizing the power of self-representation, this self-representation is not exempt from being partial, skewed, flawed and, more significantly, still Western-centric and postcolonial. Re-orientalism may challenge the meta-narratives of the West, but it can be complicit in setting up new meta-narratives and subalternizing other Orientals, and can thus be a complex and problematic terrain for Orientals to navigate.

One particular genre with good examples of re-orientalism is that of travel writing set in India and written in English, which has been well established by erudite authors of earlier generations, from Khushwant Singh, Rabindranath Tagore, and R.K. Narayan, to more contemporary literary lions such as V.S. Naipaul, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Ghosh, among others. Increasingly, after the turn of the century, growing numbers of diasporic Indian writers “return” to India to report on the swift changes happening there, notably Suketu Mehta (*Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, 2005), Amitava Kumar (*Husband of a Fanatic: A Personal Journal Through India, Pakistan, Love and Hate*, 2005; *Bombay, London, New York*, 2002), Akash Kapur (*India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India*, 2012), Amit Chaudhuri (*Calcutta: Two Years in the City*, 2013), Rana Dasgupta (*Capital: The Eruption of Delhi*, 2014). Their representations bring fresh and insightful details of an India in social and economic upheaval, with particular focus on its urban centres.

Although Indian cities have received substantial literary representation, Delhi seems to have been somewhat under-represented, often even disregarded, and not just in the literary representation of Indian cities: “[Bombay] straddled the nerve centre of Indian imagination […] Calcutta came next in the pecking order […] Down south, Madras reigned supreme […] Towards the end of the century, Bangalore shot to prominence as the Silicon Valley of Asia. Delhi languished in ignominy…” (Kapur 2016, 36). As Bill Ashcroft suggests, “no city has been a greater focus of literary writing than Bombay, which demonstrates the mobility and cosmopolitanism of the postcolonial city, and the fluidity, class disparity and ambivalent sense of home that has come the characterize diasporic populations” (2011, 497).[[1]](#footnote-1) Celebrated works both set in and exploring Bombay include Jeet Thayil’s *Narcopolis* (2012); Suketu Mehta’ (2004) *Maximum City*; Aravind Adiga’s (2011) *Last Man in Tower*; Anjali Joseph’s (2010) *Saraswati Park*; Katherine Boo’s (2012) *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*; Salman Rushdie’s (1981) *Midnight’s Children* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995); much of Rohinton Mistry’s writing including *Family Matters* (2001); likewise, much of Thrity Umrigar’s writing, such as *Bombay Time* (2001) and *The Space Between Us* (2006); Manil Suri’s (2001) *The Death of Vishnu* and *The City of Devi* (2013); Vikram Chandra’s (1997) *Love and Longing in Bombay*,and *Sacred Games* (2006); Manu Joseph’s (2010) *Serious Men*. More recently, other Indian cities such as Bangalore (Lavanya Sankaran’s (2005) *The Red Carpet* and *The Hope Factory* (2013)) and Amritsar (Rupa Bajwa’s (2004) *The Sari Shop*) have also featured in anglophone Indian writing, and there are still many predominantly Bengali writers on Calcutta/Kolkata: “In the world of Indian fiction in English, Calcutta is familiar turf. From Amitav Ghosh to Vikram Seth to Jhumpa Lahiri to Amit Chaudhuri, writers have visited the city by the Hooghly in their stories more than any other Indian metropolis. At a recent book reading in South Africa, a reader pointed out […] that a disproportionately large number of Indian authors writing in English are Bengalis who keep writing about Calcutta” (Dastidar 2008).

While Bombay and Calcutta have been extensively depicted, novels on Delhi have been fewer and further between. However, recently, there have been a few excellent and high profile non-fiction publications on Delhi and set in Delhi, such as William Dalrymple’s (1993) *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi* and Rana Dasgupta’s (2014) *Capital*, as well as works of fiction, such as Aravind Adiga’s (2008) (Booker Prize winning) *The White Tiger*, Akhil Sharma’s (2000) (Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and Whiting Writers' Award winning) *An Obedient Father*, and lighter popular literature such as Tarquin Hall’s Vish Puri (crime fiction) series, and Abha Dawesar’s (2005) *Babyji*. However, despite Delhi’s position as India’s capital, as one of the world’s most populous cities (estimates range from 18.6 to 25 million as its population doubled since 1990), its notorious reputation as India’s capital of crime and India’s most dangerous city, and as a city of migrants, Delhi lags a long way behind the rich and diverse representations of Bombay.

Aman Sethi’s (2011) *A Free Man* is a welcome addition to the literary representations of Delhi. On the surface, Sethi’s powerfully empathetic, often self-effacing approach differs from that of more traditional travelogues. In his work, such as in *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in small town India* (2007) for example, Pankaj Mishra’s acerbic, erudite, cynical account, and insightful commentary is filtered through the perspective of his class position, and privilege, a top-down approach. Likewise, in Rana Dasgupta’s *Capital*, the author concedes that the subjects of his book constitute the small minority of Delhi’s “flourishing bourgeoisie” (2015, 258). A journalist by trade,[[2]](#footnote-2) Sethi’s depiction of Delhi appears to be informed and led by his interviewees who are primarily itinerant labourers, in keeping with his wish to tell the story from a grassroots level.[[3]](#footnote-3) This article investigates how such a depiction goes beyond the “neo-colonial visage of the third world city as a disorderly and dysfunctional entity” (Detmers 2011, 484), a kind of representation that has dogged the urban imaginary in anglophone Indian writing, exoticizing “Dark India” by commodifying poverty. In his alternative representation of Delhi, Sethi aims to break away from the oft-occurring trope of dystopic Indian cities (Lau and Mendes 2012/13) such as we find for instance in Aravind Adiga’s novels, *The White Tiger* (2008), *Last Man In the Tower* (2011) *Between the Assassinations* (2010)) . Sethi’s non-fiction functions as one of those postcolonial texts that “navigate, decode and in some cases, reimagine the infrastructures that organize urban life” (Boehmer and Davies 2015, 395).

**The literary and urban contexts of *A Free Man*.**

In post-liberalization India, although there has been rapid emergence of dynamic urban corridors of growth and new urban clusters, “large swathes of [the country] are excluded from such dynamic developments, locked into old industrial bases and high unemployment and ‘exporting’ their skilled and unskilled labor to the economically dynamic urban areas” (Shaw 2012, 49). As such, cities increasingly receive large numbers of itinerant workers and domestic migrants, which *A Free Man* foregrounds. Literary representations are key to the imagining of Indian cities and urban India of the twenty-first century; as Gyan Prakash (2008) puts it, the city “is constituted by the interplay between its spaces and its imaginations. [ … ] The city is both the actual physical environment and the space we experience in novels, films, poetry, architectural design, political government, and ideology” (7). In fact, Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies go on to argue for the importance of the role of literary representations in the construction of a city and its identity, suggesting that they “stimulate different modes of spatial imagining”, and “ask searching questions of urban infrastructure” (2015, 395). The imagined geographies of Indian cities are perhaps particularly significant when they travel *outside* India, representing India, its social order, its value system, its cultural practices to a non-Indian readership, and thereby shaping and colouring the construction of urban Indian identity beyond the nation’s borders. Sethi’s *A Free Man* offers a representation of a little known facet of Delhi to the English-reading world, from the point of view of its working class and internal migrants, the itinerant labourers.

Ashcroft has argued that the city has been largely ignored in postcolonial studies because national mythologies are located in rural heartlands, whereas cities exist in an interstitial space between the nation and the world (Ashcroft 2011, 497). Moreover, urban environments are always in a state of flux (Thieme 2016), marked by “endless informal proliferations” (Sen 1975, cited in Sundaram 2010, 4), all appearing to be “similarly messy eruptions of global modernity” (Ashcroft 2011, 497). From this point of view, cities are perhaps not the best gauge of the national psyche. There are even concerns that the representations of Indian cities have been too polarized, depicting the extremes to the extent of eclipsing the gradations in between: “The images of urban dystopia and utopia act together to suppress the appearance of porosity, contradictions, and the promise of urban life” (Prakash 2008, 716). In Dasgupta’s celebrated work, *Capital*, the author explains the intriguing tension of representing Delhi through the prism of its past, which fatalistically seems to anticipate disaster: “Delhi’s writers have consistently seen it as a city of ruins and they have directed their creativity to expressing that particular spiritual emaciation that comes from being cut off from one’s own past. This is both the reality and the fantasy of Delhi: the city is always already destroyed” (Dasgupta 2015, 154). This perception of living in the aftermath, Dasgupta argues, has dominated the literature of this city.

Nonetheless, despite these concerns about the suitability of cities as representations of the nation, and the validity of the very representations of cities themselves, the value of studying the postcolonial city with all its metamorphoses is, as John Thieme argues, precisely because it “offer[s] a heightened instance of transformative pluralism, which provides a paradigm for a geography of city life that replaces older essentialist stereotypes” (2016, 179). These contentions are particularly true of Delhi, a city shaped by the influx of Partition migrants. As Dasgupta writes, “Modern Delhi was born out of the catastrophe of India’s partition, whose ravages turns its culture towards security and self-reliance” (2015, 3). Modern Delhi holds firmly to its old elite networks and traditions, despite, and perhaps because, of this constant influx of migrants. With reference to this exclusionary network, Ajay Gandhi explains that “[s]elective appropriation of Old Delhi excludes popular masses and hinges on classed codes, which signal intimacy with its culture yet disavow proximity to the unevenness and inconvenience of the actual place. This is a form of aspiration that nominally looks to the past but deepens a prospective sociality that is policed, segregated and has a steep price of admission” (2016, 347). He goes on to argue that it is the intermittent consumption of Old Delhi by the middle classes which affirms the notion of its urban authenticity, validating Old Delhi’s “discourse of cultural superiority” (ibid).

Dasgupta’s depiction of contemporary Delhi is lyrical and searching. According to him, “Delhi’s fantasies are feudal” (2015, 20); those at the bottom of the hierarchy maintain that hierarchy in the hope of one day enjoying the privileges of exemption from law and custom. Meanwhile, they assume that

the world is programmed to deny them everything, and that making a proper life will therefore require constant hustle – and manipulation of the rules. Everyone, myself included, uses bribes and connections to get the things they need – a visa, a driving license, a quick resolution of a legal case, a place in a school, a place on a guest list – and if this city seems obsessed with status it is for good reason: power, wealth and networks deliver an immeasurably easier and better life. (Dasgupta, 2015, 19).

Dasgupta concludes that at the core of Delhi’s soul is something “dark and fatal”, promising “terrible, forbidden pleasures”, manifesting a “cracked and volatile personality”; a violence that even newcomers sense and quickly adopt (206). Dasgupta’s Delhi is deeply corrupt, caught in the stranglehold of networks of influence and cronyism, from which the newcomers – the rural-to-urban migrants and itinerant labourers, the lowest of the working classes, such as those in Sethi’s work – are largely excluded, and who experience extreme dispossession. Sethi’s Delhi is no less dark, and ss one of Sethi’s interviewees describes it: “This is a brutal city, Aman bhai. This is a city that eats you raw – kaccha chaba jati hai” (2012, 114).

Anoteworthy and edgy aspect of Delhi is the fact that upper- and middle-classes constitute but a small minority, “situated in the middle of an ocean of poverty”, to which they owe their prosperity (Dasgupta 2015, 258). And thus those excluded from the echelons of privilege, and excluded even from consumption which aspires to the notion of these privileges, tap into the dark undercurrent of violence so close to Delhi’s surface, which erupts with frequency: “Delhi whispered promises, even to the purest souls, of violence and demonic pleasures*. Come to me, all ye who have been fucked*, it told them, *and I will show you how you can fuck others*” (Dasgupta 2015, 206).

Delhi’s itinerant labourers are largely drawn from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Exploitation of this cheap, commodified, and near-infinite resource for labour intensive industries of construction, mining, and manufacturing, has enriched Delhi (Dasgupta 2015, 258-259). Jan Breman and Ravi Agrawal (2002) describe these casual migrants as part of the “amorphous informal sector”, who gather in the mornings in specific places such as the crossroads, near railway stations and at bus stands, along markets and at the city’s entry point and under the clock tower, waiting to sell their skills, strength, and raw labour. While “[t]hose among them who have some skills are a little more confident”, and “[t]hose who have their own tools are a little more dignified”, Breman and Agrawal argue that “in the end, they are all mere commodities – to be haggled over, ‘purchased’ for the day or for the job, and taken away to the worksite” (2002, 128). This amorphous informal sector is further disadvantaged because “left to the unpredictability of lives at the urban fringe, kinship links, social ties, and cultural connections (constituting the backbone of the slum economy) dissolve into dysfunctionality” (Arabindoo 2011, 641). This is borne out in Sethi’s collected testimonies, where some itinerant workers lose touch with and are unable to maintain these social and familial connections largely as a result of their way of life and dire working and living conditions; sometimes their families have moved to another location and are no longer traceable. Ashraf loses contact with his family when he forgets his mother’s phone number and address, and she moved away thereafter. Satish too loses touch with his family:

Bina is a small town, and the numbers don’t change. But people do. People change and people move – from one house to another, from one mohalla to the next. Boxes are packed, trunks brought out from under the beds, telephone numbers surrendered [ … ]. They are circulated among new sets of relatives, new colleagues at work, new sons in different towns, new daughters now married and settled. But the old numbers are never forgotten; they lie in a tiny pocket diary carried in the inside pocket of a shirt worn in Bara Tooti. A phone number in a small town near a big railway station – waiting to be dialled once more, ten years too late.

“Hello, I’m calling from Delhi, can I speak to Lallan Singh?”

“I’m sorry, but this isn’t his number any more.” (Sethi 2012, 59)

Cut adrift from familial and social networks, these itinerant workers lose even that slender foothold in the fabric of their community, which also further compromises identity construction. Dasgupta argues that for these itinerant workers, the boom in the Indian economy worsened rather than improved their lives. The boom was part of a corporate take-over of the countryside, “which pitted big money against poor agricultural and tribal communities, turning rural India into a turbulent and volatile battleground” (Dasgupta 2015, 258-259).

Sethi’s interviewees and respondents are drawn from the endless and ill-used pool of itinerant workers. They become potentially one more menace of Delhi, a minority group just as estranged from the urban space they occupy as any other ethnic or religious groups. Bede Scott argues that sectarian violence reframes boundaries between communities, establishes distinctive ethno-religious enclaves, and reconfigures spaces, which then in turn alienates and displaces minorities, transforming them into “symbolic foreigners or ‘virtual’ refugees, permanently estranged from the urban space they occupy” (2008, 346). However, these casual labourers who inhabit the streets and pavements for want of better alternatives, are suitable voices to represent an authentic experience of Delhi (which is no less authentic than the cultural superiority of the discourse of Old Delhi), because “[i]n Delhi, the road is the place from which people define their image of the *entire city*”(Dasgupta 2015, 16).

**Resisting re-orientalism and reclaiming authenticity**

Representations of megacities of the developing world inevitably highlight the increasing urbanization of poverty, emphasising them as spaces “swollen with rural immigrants, [ … ] burgeoning with slums and squatter settlements” (Prakash 2008, 3). However, the writing *of* the poor is seldom *by* the poor, but is most usually by the social elite (Korte 2010/11; Lau and Mendes 2012/13).Representations of India’s urban poverty and its slums have proliferated in Indian writing in English, particularly in the last two decades. A counterpoint to “Shining India”, “Dark India” – the underbelly of Indian society, comprising corruption, exploitation, violence, abject poverty and dire need, crime, destitution, inequalities, servitude – has been well covered in a wide range of celebrated contemporary literary and journalistic texts, from as Aravind Adiga’s (2008) *The White Tiger* and *Between the Assassinations* (2008)*,* to Kavery Nambisan’s (2010) *The Story That Must Not Be Told* and Indra Sinha’s (2007) *Animal’s People,* and Katherine Boo’s (2012) *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*. While such texts have received attention and acclaim from an international (western) readership, they have gained perhaps a rather more mixed reception from the subcontinental readership.

It may seem as though *A Free Man* is part of this genre because it tells the stories of itinerant labourers who are part of the slum dwellers and pavement hangers-on, casual workers, and internal migrants who figure prominently in the work cited above. However, Sethi’s text is remarkable for having worked very hard and deliberately to avoid the re-orientalization of speaking for others, or exoticizing, essentializing, and commodifying poverty. While Sethi seems to have no objections to reviews of his work as an exposé on poverty, from the inception of his experimental project,[[4]](#footnote-4) he sets out to break away from what he calls “abjectivity”: “the tendency for narratives about the working class to deliberately and thoughtlessly describe entire ways of life as abject and hence worthy of examination only with the express purpose of transforming these lives” (Sethi pers. comm, 2016). Sethi explains that he focused on finding new forms of writing, which would be “deliberately non-interventionist and non-petitionary” (ibid).

In similar vein, just as Sethi refuses to indulge narratives of “abjectivity”, so too does he try to sidestep narratives of “aspiration”, where “aspiration” is couched in terms of the neo-liberal pursuit of highly individualistic and consumerist lifestyles, which in an extended 2015 interview, Sethi and Pankaj Mishra agreed was rampant in India and China in their rapid economic development. Sethi seems determined not to reiterate the binaries of a spiritual India versus an increasingly materialistic India, of public-spirited India verses growing individualism; “Instead, I have decided to try writing about the present without resorting to the shorthand of aspiration. I am interested to see what happens when journalists displace the centrality of aspiration in their writings, and look for another way to orient the structure of their texts. What are the questions we will ask? Perhaps a very different landscape shall emerge” (Mishra and Sethi, 2015). In seeking to depart from these conventions, Sethi works very hard to step away from re-orientalizing and essentializing Delhi and India, and through his choice of both form and content, seeks new and authentic ways of depiction.

Sethi’s refusal of binary thinking is reflected in his careful efforts to avoid the orientalist positioning of the poor as peripheral or different:

When people say you come from two different worlds, actually often we don’t come from two different worlds; we inhabit a certain ecosystem and we inhabit different parts of this ecosystem. And to pretend or to think or to conceptualize this as two separate planets that happen to revolve around the sun that is central Delhi, I don’t see how that’s helpful in any way. I think in some ways it does a disservice to the fact that lives are interconnected [ … ]. (Sethi in interview with Chiki Sarkar 2015)

Advocating against the convention of othering of the poor, Sethi would have his readers reconceptualize the divide between the haves and have-nots; he encourages his readers to reconfigure the cartography of their social imaginaries of Delhi by stressing inter-relatedness rather than difference. In a sense, Sethi’s work seems the reply to Anis Shivani’s (2006) complaint about “getting a second-hand, mediated India filtered through timeless orientalist lenses, but [ … ] not an India rooted even superficially in contemporary reality” (21). Sethi, whose data, although admittedly narativized in certain ways, is collected directly from the streets by interviewing (at length) the itinerant labourers, resolutely avoids strategic exoticism (Huggan, 2001). As he explains,

The kind of book I did not want to write was the kind of book which is focused on the horror of poverty, the kind of book that would have introduced Ashraf as the victim, the kind of book that presents poverty as a kind of trap, which people have no way of getting out of. [ … ] And always this sense of pity for people—the working class, the victims. That’s the kind of book I didn’t want to write. (Sethi in interview with Sandhu 2013)

Neither does Sethi indulge in a “staged marginality” (Huggan 2001, 87) which is complicit in “reconfirming an exoticising imperial gaze” (Huggan 2001, 81). Sethi, although self-declaredly not of the same class as his interviewees, strives neither to domesticate his subjects into being members of the deserving poor needing to be saved, nor yet to subalternize them by patronage. His reportage seems designed to offer fuller representation rather than further interpretation of Delhi.

Sethi’s narrative reportage strives to give Ashraf his own voice, avoiding re-orientalizing by mediating Ahsraf’s voice through Sethi’s own, by quoting Ashraf’s words verbatim at length, allowing Ashraf’s viewpoint to dominate in the narrative. From the first manifestation of *A Free Man* as a story in *Frontline*,[[5]](#footnote-5)“You can already hear Mohammed Ashraf's clear voice ringing through the piece; I was still searching for my own voice” (Sethi, pers. comm. 2016). Sethi’s representation not only provides a space and platform where Ashraf’s voice can be directly heard, but also defends Ashraf’s position and choices, insistently depicting his poverty as partly freedom:

Ashraf is free, but Ashraf is poor. You can’t really say they’re oppositional things, because Ashraf has chosen a life of making do with poverty, which allows him a certain world of freedom. And there’s nothing wrong with that. I think that if you decide to leave the world behind so that you can discover yourself, then that is freedom. And if you decide to leave that world to be free, then you are actually in a world of incredible hardship. (Sethi in interview with Sukhdev Sandhu 2013)

Brouillette (2014) points out that even in creative economies of neoliberal entrepreneurialism, freedom is not without troubling psychological effects, alienating impact, and reliance on a precarious underclass. For someone in Ashraf’s walk of life “freedom is not a comfortable space – but rather a hard fought condition that calls for considerable sacrifice” (Sethi in interview with Majid Maqbool 2014). Eventually, as the narrative unfolds, it appears Ashraf’s “freedom” comes at the cost of his prosperity, livelihood, and eventually, health and life.

Sethi’s method of data collection goes beyond interviewing the mazdoors (or labourers). He becomes involved in their lives, joins them to drink socially and travel with them, lends and/or gives them money, takes them to hospital and provides for their needs, and even involves his own friends and family in such transactions.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is intriguing that Sethi elected not to stay uninvolved or detached. It is to his credit that he recognized choosing detachment from his subjects would not necessarily add validity to his narrative, whereas choosing to involve himself in their lives lends greater depth and verisimilitude to his research. In his depiction of the mazdoors, Sethi unpacks for the uninitiated reader the nuances of this group with care and attention to detail: “A mazdoor is a general term used to describe any labourer, but mazdoori describes a much broader collection of professions”. As he goes on to explain, “A mistry, in any industry, is essentially an ‘expert’ [ … ] The beldaar is the mistry’s understudy [ … ] The raj mistry sits on the top of the hierarchy” (Sethi 2012, 13-14). The careful explanations initiate the reader into this complex world, ensuring a greater understanding which in turns brings a new respect for this strata of Delhi society as the subtleties emerge, and the reader learns to ‘read’ this alternative, previously unseen world, rather than regarding it merely as one homogenous mass. This too is a good technique for resisting re-orientalism, by familiarizing the unfamiliar and unknown, rendering the apparently chaotic orderly and, most importantly, marking the interesting distinctions, subtleties, and nuances of the typically dismissively othered masses.

However, despite Sethi’s textual efforts to avoid representing Delhi in over-simplified polarisations, he demonstrates that Ashraf, and possibly others like Ashraf, are keenly aware of the very real chasm between haves and have-nots. Sethi records Ashraf questioning how journalists portray human suffering as stories:

For you, all this is research: a boy tries to sell his kidney, you write it down in your notebook. A man goes crazy somewhere between Delhi and Bombay, you store it in your recorder. But for other people, this is life. There are pimps lurking at every corner, waiting to spirit you away if you so much as talk to them. Behind Jama Masjid, there used to be an organ market – anyone could go and offer to sell anything. I’ve heard of people selling their eyes, kidneys, bits of their liver – practically anything. Once they get into Delhi, people see the roads, the crowds, the cars, the madness; people lose their balance in this city.

At Koria Pull near the railway station, young sixteen- seventeen- eighteen-year-old boys are sold like cattle to be worked on fields in Punjab. Do you know that? (Sethi 2012, 114).

Ashraf depicts a Delhi that is unknown to the privileged, so far beyond their experiences that it does not figure on their radar of comprehension. Ashraf’s Delhi is one of ruthlessness; the city brutally commodifies and consumes the poor and the vulnerable, and dehumanizes them. He challenges the reporter’s privilege of looking at the lives of the poor and dispossessed through the lenses of ignorance and distance. His challenge (unintentionally) supports Sethi in avoiding some of the pitfalls of re-orientalizing. In fact, Ashraf’s challenge is not just to Sethi but to the entire middle- and upper-classes who largely constitute Sethi’s readership, to whom the suffering of the poor has but become an interesting narrative to be consumed.

Sethi is acutely aware of the limitations of his form to capture the reality he represents. Observingdiasporic Indians he met on a work trip to China, Sethi concludes that “[l]abour aspires to a fluid mobility of its own [ … ] but our narratives only produce heavy dreams of stability and voicelessness” (Sethi in conversation with Pankaj Mishra 2015). Sethi displays an intriguing level of self-awareness here, implying that the literary forms of representation available to us may not be equal to the task of actually representing, falling short by its lack of a matching “fluid mobility” to the reality. Sethi is insistent that it is important *A Free Man* is a work of non-fiction.

As a journalist, I am deeply invested in drawing sharp lines between fiction and non-fiction. [ … ] To describe *A Free Man* as a novel is to deny that a certain way to life exists. If it were a "novel" - it would be of a fairly annoying sort - a sort of earnest under-confident middle class social fantasy novel. Because it is non-fiction, it becomes an account of another way of being in the world. (Sethi pers. comm. 2016)

It would appear Sethi is arguing that non-fiction confers a different – perhaps greater – value, or in some way, carries greater weight. Indeed, fiction, and especially the novel, has long had to struggle against devaluation on grounds of lacking “truth”; according to Siti (2006), “the novel is the literary genre that has had to struggle the hardest with the question of truth” (109) Bahri (2003) argues that the problem is the “subjugation of story to information”, which in an age of globalization and commodification renders the postcolonial novel “particularly susceptible to the new order that privileges information and emphasizes the subjective idea at the expense of the ‘multiplicity’ that constitutes its truth content” (210). There is of course a danger in the privileging of reality, because reality “implies objectivity – the world itself rather than the author’s view of it” (Cruickshank 1970, 38), which is an objectivity some may assume non-fiction to have, by virtue of *being* non-fiction. And yet, as Sujata Sankranti (2004) puts it so cogently, “every story is a true story, and every true story is a story” (225).

There is no doubt there is a crisis of authenticity, or at the very least, an anxiety over authenticity of representation in Indian writing in English which Davies (2016) argues “continues to frame, if not underpin, Anglophone writings on twenty-first-century India” (121). He suggests that one solution of some authors has been to offer reportage rather than fiction. Comparing representations of Delhi in Adiga’s novels and Katherine Boo’s *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*, Davies points out that where the reception of Adiga’s novels was not without criticism and controversy, Boo was allowed more leeway as a result of her chosen genre; her critiques were sustained through the credibility of her research and the non-fiction form through which it was presented. Davies finds that

this novelistic formula has been reversed to produce a genre that has subsequently circumvented this anxiety. A proliferation of journalistic texts – what William Dalrymple calls “India’s new wave of non-fiction” (Dalrymple 2010) – has blurred conventional generic boundaries between documentary writing and conventional narratives, framing themselves as forms of “reportage” whilst the reading is more like novelistic prose. (Davies 2016, 120)

So, paradoxically, it is now fiction which is subject to greater strictures in terms of authenticity and wrangles over truth claims; whereas the narration of Delhi through non-fiction is apparently more likely to quell fears of its representation being skewed or re-orientalized.

Indeed, *A Free Man* also utilizes novelistic prose. It has often been called “narrative reportage”, marking its non-fiction status clearly, but also marking that it is characterized by the storytelling form. Perhaps Wiese (2015) is correct that in this age, such genres are the best representatives of truth claims, because hybrid (non)fictions are “narratives that play with the boundary that readers expect will delineate fiction from nonfiction in order to emphasize the difficulty of representing experience” (67). In revealing the workings behind the artefact of the text, it may be that making visible the jagged edges of the narrative quells the anxiety over authenticity, even if that is, in itself, no actual guarantee of authenticity. In fact, not only may authenticity not be guaranteed by such means, Davies (2016) criticises a trend he has observed in some non-fiction books about India written in English, where the second clause of their titles, in “astonishingly repetitive titular formula” (120), demonstrates the attempt to “grasp something of India’s ‘inner truth’” (121).[[7]](#footnote-7) It is to be wondered if the critiques of authenticity coupled with this desire to grasp something of India’s inner truth may not tempt some works of non-fiction into re-orientalisms in the pursuit of validification of both credentials and contents. In fact, Amit Chaudhuri even suspects that the question of authenticity is one which frightens writers, and claims the insider’s view is not necessarily the correct one (cited in Dastidar 2008).

**Issues of representation and re-orientalism reiterated**

It may be difficult to resist re-orientalizing, particularly in pursuit of authenticity, but as has been discussed above, providing the previously subalternized a voice and a hearing is a good technique: setting Mohammed Ashraf's clear voice “ringing through the piece”. By casting the “little people”, the previously disregarded, as protagonists, Sethi resists speaking for them and re-orientalizing them. Stuti Khanna (2016) marks this same successful technique in works of fiction also, such as in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger,* where “the burden of the story is placed upon the shoulders of characters who have traditionally occupied small, marginal roles in fiction – servants, shop assistants, minor traders and junior nurses” (117). Khanna explains that this allows the narrative to maintain plausibility while embracing even the ugly underbelly of a city, without having to resort – as narratives in the past have – to ingenious plots twists “to justify their entry into the twilight world of poverty, dereliction, crime and violence that importantly constitutes any burgeoning city in the global South” (Khanna 2016, 117). In considering the authenticity of the protagonist’s voice as well as the positionality of the author, Brouillette (2014) points out that the legitimacy of Adiga’s hold over Balram’s voice is precisely what creates the controversy which markets the book so well.

However, the employment of characters traditionally occupying marginal roles may not preclude the risk of re-orientalizing in other ways. Even when the “little people” (as Sethi notes) are given self-representation, *mis*presentation can still arise. Sethi would argue that allowing Ashraf’s voice to ring through is the guarantor of authenticity and a key part of the truth-claim of narrative non-fiction. But this would be over-simplistic because ultimately, the *selection* of Ashraf’s and the other voices in *A Free Man*, not to mention the editing of their stories, the angle and arrangement of narrative, the necessary inclusion and exclusion processes of research and representation, are Sethi’s interpretations of Delhi. It is possible that there is a certain romanticization of Ashraf’s “choices” in *A Free Man*. It could be that what Sethi reads as Ashraf’s choice – a sacrifice of security and affluence in order to maintain personal freedoms – may not have been quite as much in pursuit of those vaunted freedoms, as is framed. It is possible that Ashraf’s lifestyle could be, rather, the result of his lack of gumption, lack of self-discipline, lack of application, and just his inability and/or refusal to successfully negotiate the system he lives in. In his selected representation of this version of Ashraf – as a man who dares to be poor in order to maintain certain freedoms and is even willing to undergo incredible hardships as the price of his choice – may Sethi not be re-exoticizing Ashraf? Might this depiction of Ashraf, which is resolutely against depicting him as any kind of victim, have swung round instead to casting a somewhat heroic light on his marginal lifestyle? While most probably not intended as strategic exoticism, Sethi’s representation may yet be complicit in exoticizing in another manner. And yet, Sethi’s depiction of Ashraf is faithfully three-dimensional, showing a man who does not always make wise choices, who is not always reliable, whose judgement is not always sound, but who is articulate, persuasive, philosophical, intelligent, engaging. Sethi succeeds in bringing Ashraf to life, endearing him to the reader, warts and all; the risk is that he may have rendered Ashraf somewhat larger than life.

Although *A Free Man* is anything but gloom-ridden it is, nevertheless, a fairly grim depiction of Delhi: Rehaan, a well built, young, good natured villager working in Delhi as a load bearer (or palledar) falls off a ladder and dies after a being in a coma for a week; Lalloo, Ashraf’s friend, “died of pagalpam – madness” (Sethi 2012, 208); Nausheed fell six storeys to his death when painting a factory terrace; Satish, whom Aman manages to get admitted into a TB hospital because he was coughing up blood, eventually dies after three months later. Likewise, Nasir, Salim, and Shakeel are labourers tricked into forced surgeries. Although Ashraf’s death is not part of the novel, he died when the galleys of the book were being corrected, and there seems a recurrent theme here: flagging up the short life expectancies of itinerants. There is, in this volume, seldom a happy ending. The narratives are all doubtlessly faithfully recorded by Sethi. And yet, the refusal on Sethi’s part to see this as “the kind of book that presents poverty as a kind of trap” could be an inverse re-orientalism too. In his anxiety not to abjectivize this community or focus on their exploitation to the negligence of their humanity, Sethi may be accruing to them more agency than they actually have, swapping an older meta-narrative with a newer, but no less problematic, one. Re-orientalism, after all, has always been a reaction to orientalism, mimicking many of orientalism’s characteristics.

That said, even if creating new meta-narratives, Sethi’s writing is quite remarkable for his balancing of the lyrical with brutal reality in his depiction of Delhi:

a city splintering under the strain of a fundamental urban reconfiguration – a city of the exhausted, distressed, and restless, struggling with the uncertainties of eviction and unemployment; a city of twenty million histrionic personas resiliently absorbing the day’s glancing blows only to return to home and tenderly claw themselves to sleep. (2012, 42).

Sethi’s representation makes no bones about the harshness of Delhi’s conditions for its many workers, and highlights an awful beauty within the severity. *A Free Man* is an extremely valuable addition to the literary representations of Delhi, an excellent example of how “urban spaces are mapped in creative practice [which] can explore and negotiate, and at times disrupt and reconstruct that relationship” (Boehmer and Davies 2015, 395). To some extent, even if not entirely, Sethi deconstructs the power of the gaze, swapping the traditionally (unapologetically) privileged bird’s eye view of the writer-observer, for a far more democratized, powerfully empathetic, grass-roots, almost organically-evolved representation of Delhi. Sethi’s innovative style reduces the space between observer and subject, extending the alterity of subaltern representation. And if Sethi’s representations may yet not quite be entirely free from re-orientalizing, the author’s research, intent, and utilisation of form have all striven to avoid reiterating re-orientalisms.

The last word must be Sethi’s, of course. It is perhaps apt to conclude with the self-reflexivity which characterizes his writing and lends it further authenticity; a reflection in this case which not only addresses the issue of class head on, but with humility acknowledges the role of happenstance. By refusing to claim the superiority of the upper classes over the lower ones, Sethi thus actually succeeds to a degree in reducing the spaces of alterity:

Growing up in India, it was always very clear that essentially you are where you are because of an accident at birth. So I actually addressed the issue of “us and them” as some sort of game of chance, where I happen to be on this side of the microphone, you happen to be on that side of the microphone, I happen to be the one writing the book, you happen to be the one written about, but this is not something that either of us worked to establish, this is something that was apparent from the moment you were born, in some senses, in India. (Sarkar 2013)

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1. ‘Bombay’ rather than ‘Mumbai’ is used, in alignment with the authors’ own preferences and common usage. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Born in Mumbai in 1983, Sethi attended Sardar Patel Vidyalaya and St Stephen’s College (in Delhi). He studied journalism in Chennai, at the Asian College of Journalism, as well as at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. He is a correspondent for *The Hindu* and from 2012, was based in Addis Ababa as *The Hindu*’s African correspondent while researching and writing *A Free Man*. He is also an Associate Editor with the *Hindustan Times* in Delhi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sethi’s depiction of Delhi through the eyes of the itinerants and working classes is unusual but not unique: Akash Kapur’s (2012) almost contemporaneous *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India* for example, also draws from stories from a wide range of Indians, from those in urban settings (IT workers, consultants, call centre workers, scavengers) to those in the rural context (landlords, farmers, cow brokers). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Funded by an Independent Fellows Grant from SARAI, Centre for the Study of Developing Society. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.frontline.in/navigation/?type=static&page=flonnet&rdurl=fl2224/stories/20051202001408800.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For example, Sethi asks his sister to buy underwear and supplies for Satish in a TB hospital; he asks his banker friend Prithvi to pass Ashraf the 5000 rupees Aman is giving Ashraf to start his vegetable business on his discharge from hospital, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. His examples were Sonia Faleiro’s (2011) *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay’s Dance Bars;* Pavan Varma’s (2004) *Being Indian: Inside the Real India* ; Anand Giridharadas’s (2011) *India Calling: An Intimate Portrait of a Nation’s Remaking*; and Akash Kapur’s (2012) *India Becoming: A Portrait of Life in Modern India*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)