



City, Self, and Spectacle: Urban Psyche in Desai and Hussain

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Received: June 05, 2025

Revised & Accepted: July 06, 2025

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Abstract

Background: City Studies has emerged as a highly interdisciplinary academic field, addressing critical issues such as urban development, social inequality, globalization, and the impact of technology on urban life. This study examines the urban psyche depicted in Anita Desai's "The Farewell Party" (1980) and Intizar Hussain's "Noise" (2014).

Methods: Both stories are set in unspecified South Asian urban environments and explore the complex relationship between individuals and the modern city. The analysis focuses on the psychological effects of social dynamics, urban isolation, fleeting connections, and urban anxieties, as articulated through Simmel's concepts.

Result: Desai's story illustrates how a farewell party becomes a stage for superficial social interactions, revealing hidden emotions and tensions among city dwellers. This aligns with Simmel's notion of the 'blasé attitude,' which serves to maintain social equilibrium. Hussain's story portrays the city as a source of noise and chaos, reflecting Simmel's idea of the metropolis as a cause of psychological stress.

Conclusion: Both narratives exemplify Simmel's concept of the urban psyche, where individuals grapple with loneliness, performative relationships, and the sensory overload of modern urban environments.

Novelty: This study highlights how Desai and Hussain's works provide literary insights into the psychological challenges posed by metropolitan life, reinforcing Simmel's theories on urban mental life.

Keywords: alienation, blasé attitude, city studies, metropolis, mental life, psychological stress, spectacle, urban psyche



Introduction

With the advancement of human society and civilizations, people have shifted their settlement from rural areas to urban areas. This study analyzes [Anita Desai's "The Farewell Party" \(1980\)](#) and [Intizar Hussain's "Noise" \(2014\)](#) with the critical lens of [George Simmel's urban psyche \(1950\)](#). It highlights the universal urban anxieties —namely, loneliness, sensory overload, and the struggle for authenticity —in the modern metropolitan environment of these two South Asian narratives.

Desai's story depicts a farewell party in an unnamed small town in India. It reveals the intricate social dynamics and the concealed emotions of its residents. The party becomes a spectacle for social interactions within a closely knit community. In contrast, Hussain's story delves into the city's anxieties and uncertainties, reflecting the inner turmoil of its inhabitants. The story talks about two unnamed men's desperate search for tranquility in a chaotic and noisy city environment. Both stories explore universal urban anxieties and psychological stress. The city becomes a place or spectacle for expressing individual self. City life reflects individual's fragmented and alienated experience in the modern urban setting.

George Simmel is known for his theories on modernity, social interactions, and the psychological effects of city life. "The Metropolis and Mental Life" is a seminal essay by Simmel, initially published in 1903 as part of a broader collection on urban sociology. He provides a theoretical framework for understanding urban life, including the psychological complexities of urban opportunities, as well as challenges related to alienation and social fragmentation. The city is full of noise, crowds, chaos, conflict, sophistication, buildings, parks, highways, etc. People are often described as being indifferent, independent, intellectual, alienated, superficial, and self-motivated. This creates a complex social, economic, cultural, and political ambiance. Such indifferent, unencouraging, and detached psychic urban life reflects a blasé attitude. This study examines two short stories by Desai and Hussain through the critical lens of Simmel's concept of the blasé attitude, which comprises six key elements.

Review of Literature

Cities and settlements have been closely intertwined for a long time; literary works of art reflect the people and lifestyles of their respective societies and cultures. Nowadays, migration from rural to urban areas is increasing in many parts of the world, driven by the desire for a better life. [Desai's "The Farewell Party" \(1980\)](#) and [Hussain's "Noise" \(2014\)](#) attracted the attention of many critics regarding the messages they convey. Here are critical insights from critics, readers, and scholars on these texts.

The gathering of the neighbors at a farewell party contains people of diverse natures and behaviors. [Patil \(2014\)](#) observes, "Their talks, their behaviors all lead to a moment of crisis at which the Romans realize the hollowness, the hypocrisy and insincerity of the social life. They suddenly realize people professing sincerity which they do not feel" (p. 27). They experience moments of crisis and holiness in social conversations. The story portrays the atmosphere of emotions and sentimentality, as "Mrs. Raman's associations with her neighbors are quite deep and long-lasting ... the shorter fiction has a predominant delineation of the



feminine sensibility" ([Sharma, 2004, p. 58](#)). The invitees seem to have fleeting relationships with one another. Desai can also be viewed from a feminist perspective. In an interview, she said, "No, because when I started writing, I was not even aware of such a concept of feminism, And I don't have much patience with the theory that it's women who suffer" ([Bliss, 1988, p. 25](#)). She writes about female and feminine issues, often being unaware of feminism.

[Salgado \(1996\)](#) observes the story collection from the characters' perspective, noting that "The stories describe potential and partial illumination ... by yoking of character's renewed awareness" (p. 104). Desai selects typical characters in stories to relate to the common Indian society. Desai's short story collection, *Games at Twilight*, often portrays individuals struggling with societal expectations. "In her short stories, she has taken up themes like the tension between convention and explanation, family solidarity and individualism, social requirements and impersonal factors like death and art" ([Tandon, 2008, p. 87](#)). Desai creates ambiguity in her depiction of characters. [Wayne \(1996\)](#) argues that "*The Farewell Party* draws attention to the temporality and transience of a suspended state of consciousness. This fluid form destabilizes the potential for a unified focus or moral center" (p. 107). In this way, the stories depict spiritual and emotional conflict generated by characters' self-reflection, social obligations, and material demands. [Desai's "The Farewell Party" \(1980\)](#) explores the issues of aging and displacement. The story presents a nuanced portrayal of human interactions, highlighting both social obligations and personal authenticity.

Likewise, Hussain, a Pakistani Urdu fiction writer's novel *Basti*, describes the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. [Usman et al. \(2022\)](#) state that "the novel is about post-colonial ideas of displacement and dilemma ... the people felt themselves estranged, displaced and in the dilemma of identity" (p. 1). After partition, people lived in chaos, searching for their identity. Their past experiences help them move forward. "The creative world presented in them is part of tradition formed from diverse elements - memories, beliefs, dreams, visions, legends, stories from oral tradition, superstition and mythology" ([Memon, 1981, p. 73](#)). This offers practical ideas for enhancing people's lives and activities. [Shafi \(2022\)](#) argues that "his works (fiction and non-fiction writings) echo past and through it he, primarily, traces civilization to dig out the buried Islamic culture" (p. 5). He analyzes his religion in his works.

Hussain's *Basti* portrayed the 1971 political tension and the 1947 Division of India and Pakistan. "The novel looks at issues like identity, displacement, and the sociopolitical changes people went through at this raging time in history" ([Hussain, 2024, p. 16](#)). In this way, Hussain's writing delves into the lives and identities of the people in his novels and stories. The present study offers valuable insights into Desai's depiction of social dynamics, the atmosphere of emotions and sentimentality, feminine sensibility, the portrayal of typical Indian characters, and individuals' struggles with societal expectations, particularly in "[The Farewell Party](#)" (1980). Other readers and critics examine the temporality and transience of the characters' consciousness, as well as the issues of aging and loss of identity, in her texts. In the same way, Hussain's novels and short stories reflect post-colonial ideas of displacement and dilemma, search of traditions, analysis of Islamic culture, and socio-political changes. Only limited



scholarships exist at Desai's "The Farewell Party" (1980) and Hussain's "Noise" (2014). This paper presents a comparative study of these texts by applying [Simmel's concept of the urban psyche](#) to explore the city consciousness of people in two cities, India and Pakistan. This study fills the gap by providing a serious analysis of people's blasé attitude in these short stories.

Simmel's Blasé Attitude

Social, cultural, infrastructural, and technological advancement greatly influences city settlement. It has become the center of attraction for a comfortable and prosperous life, despite being entangled with numerous social, cultural, and technological advancements in daily life. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) provides a foundational sociological lens for understanding urban life and psychology. Simmel's concept of blasé attitude clarifies the urban psyche of city people. "The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed, contrasting stimulations of the nerves ... An incapacity thus emerges to react to new sensations with the appropriate energy" ([Simmel, 1950, p. 414](#)). The fast-paced and ever-changing experiences of city life constantly overstimulate city dwellers, causing them to become blasé, emotionally dull, or indifferent. They stop responding because the nerves get pushed hard. The mind is constantly being pulled in different directions without rest.

A blasé attitude refers to being unimpressed, indifferent, or bored with things that might excite or interest others. It is an active survival strategy in cities. It is not only an apathy but also a sensory adaptation. It is caused by urban overstimulation, which [Simmel \(1950\)](#) defines as "the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" (p. 410). There is a brief explanation of the key elements of Simmel's concept of the blasé attitude. City dwellers often have mixed feelings about their lives in the city due to the urban opportunities and challenges they face. People constantly encounter noise, lights, crowds, and new experiences in urban life. This creates a kind of emotional numbness known as a blasé attitude. Thus, it is a defense mechanism against sensory overload.

Urban dwellers prioritize material relations over emotional attachments. They deal with each other using logic and reason rather than emotions and personal feelings. As [Simmel \(1950\)](#) observes, "The metropolitan type of man reacts with his head instead of his heart" (p. 410). They aim to be efficient, practical, and business-like rather than emotionally connected. "Relationships and reactions result from logical operations, rather than genuine individuality" (p. 411). They think more than they feel in a fast-paced life of strangers in urban social situations. This shift towards thinking over feeling can be observed in two ways: the distance between people and the prevalence of short-lived relationships. On the one hand, city people often act cold or distant. Simmel describes "the mutual strangeness and repulsion which will break into hatred and fight at the moment of closure contact" (p. 415). This distance can even turn into anger or conflict because people may appear friendly on the outside but may also be keeping track of social benefits or status. On the other hand, city relationships do not last long. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) refers to them as "discontinuous" (p. 416), and they often begin and end abruptly. In this way, urbanites replace emotional attachments with calculated rational interactions.



[Simmel \(1950\)](#) sees a blasé attitude with capitalist urbanization. Money mirrors the blasé attitude by reducing qualitative differences to quantitative values. "Money economy and the dominance of the intellect are intrinsically connected ... Money is concerned only with what is common to all: it reduces all quality and individuality to 'How much?'" (pp. 411-12). In a money-based or urban society, everything is judged by its price rather than its qualities. Money treats all things equally. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) says money "hallows out" (p. 414). The actual value of things in capitalist urban society is that everything is turned into a product with a certain price. Moreover, this flattens our experiences and emotions, leading to emotional numbness. Thus, capitalism's homogenizing effects on human experiences are reflected in the blasé attitude.

In urban environments, residents often live independently, avoiding emotional closeness. They prefer and use emotional detachment to protect and enjoy their personal space and freedom. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) states, "This reserve with its overtone of hidden aversion appears in turn as the form or the cloak of a more general mental phenomenon of the metropolis; it grants the individual a kind and an amount of personal freedom" (p. 416). The urbanites cultivate emotional detachment to protect their autonomy. Remaining or staying reserved means keeping their distance and hiding true feelings because strangers surround them, and they do not often recognize their neighbors. "One frequently doesn't know by sight those who have been neighbors for years" (p. 415). This helps to avoid potential conflict and allows people to live without interference. The emotional distance not only provides freedom but also leads to alienation and loneliness. Simmel notes, "nowhere feels as lonely as in the metropolitan crowd" (p. 418). So, city dwellers enjoy independence, but they also lose emotional attachments at the same time.

Urban relationships are short-lived and contextual. They do not last long or go deeper. They live with a sense of indifference to protect themselves from the strangers or neighbors around them. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) observes, "The sphere of indifference is large, but latent antipathy protects against indiscriminate suggestibility" (p. 416). This emotional detachment leads urbanites to engage in superficial and performative interactions. People may smile, chat, or act friendly in many social gatherings, but they rarely last long. Such types of connections and relationships reflect the temporary and surface-level nature of city life.

City people live their lives according to their choices. They enjoy freedom and stay independent. The more they live independently, the less they care deeply about the world around them. This personal independence comes at a cost. [Simmel \(1950\)](#) argues, "The metropolitan man is free ... but this freedom is paid for with the devaluation of the objective world" (p. 418). They gain independence but lose their communal bond. This is a problem of modern urban life because the more autonomous they become, the more isolated they feel. In this way, city life provides people with space to be themselves, but it also leads them to become increasingly disconnected from others. This is the paradox of freedom in modernity: gaining freedom while losing a sense of belonging. Thus, the blasé attitude reveals modernity's transaction between autonomy and alienation.



Blasé Attitude in Desai and Hussain

[Desai's \(1980\)](#) story, "The Farewell Party," revolves around a lawn party on a dark, moonless summer night, where the guests interact with one another. Bina, the protagonist, feels uneasy and startled by the chaotic and overwhelming environment of the party. "The party was to be held on the lawn: on these dry summer nights, one could plan a lawn party and be certain of the weather ... but she had not realized that there would be no moon and therefore it would be very dark" ([Desai, 1980, p. 82](#)). The dark setting, because of the absence of the moon, and the unpredictable social interactions of the guests reflect sudden and overwhelming impressions of urban life. The atmosphere is further intensified by alcoholic consumption when the guests are "wandering about with a glass in one hand and a plate of cheese biscuits in another" (p. 82). Not only the adults but also "the children ... making themselves tipsy on Fanta and Coca-Cola, the girls giggling in a multicolored huddle and the boys swaggering around the record player ... exactly like experienced cocktail party guests" (p. 89-90). Adults indulge in alcoholic drinks, and children indulge in sugary beverages. This kind of social interaction mirrors the overwhelming conditions of urban life, gradually leading to emotional numbness.

[Hussain's \(2014\)](#) story, "Noise" depicts an urban setting where the characters are disturbed by the constant noise and overcrowding. The two unnamed male characters are fed up with the chaotic and noisy city atmosphere. Their exclamation, "Yarr, there is so much noise here!" (p. 85) reflects their irritation. The description of "fewer teacups and more people" ([2014, Hussain, p. 85](#)) around a table conveys suffocating proximity. Their psychological stress reaches its extreme when the "buses, cars, taxis, rickshaws and most of all, scooters ... there was a veritable storm of traffic!" ([Hussain, 2014, p. 86](#)). The noise becomes inescapable when the electronic devices are turned on: "On one side there was the transistor, on the other the tape recorder. Noise on our left, noise on our right" (p. 88). This rapid crowding of changing images and sounds exhausts the mental capacity of the townspeople. The pervasive noise causes acute stress and creates an atmosphere of desensitization. It reflects the urban blasé attitude.

Desai's story presents Bina as an isolated woman because she spends most of her time caring for her disabled child, and Miss Dutta is a hyper-efficient social organizer. Both represent the emotionally detached transactional nature of urban life. Bina lives an emotionally detached urban life. "She was a frigid and friendless woman... her care for her spastic child was so intense and so desperate that a relationship with doctors was purely professional" (p. 83). She has no time to engage in the town's social life, which revolves around games and parties. "The town had scarcely come to know her for its life turned in the jovial circles of mahjong bridge, coffee parties ... for these Bina had a kind of sad contempt" (p. 83). She looks down at them with a kind of sad pity or disapproval. The town people's trivial concerns, such as "the screw of a golden earring disappearing down the bathroom sink" (p. 87), and their shallow camaraderie reflect the metropolis's "discontinuous relationships" ([Simmel, 1950, p. 416](#)), where connections lack depth. Miss Dutta, on the other hand, represents rational social interactions. "Miss Dutta was the town busy-body, secretary and chairman of more committees than he could count ... Miss Dutta was nothing if not versatile" ([Desai, 1980, p. 92](#)). Her



identity as a versatile leader reflects a preference for urban choice over intimacy. Her numerous roles are short-lived and transactional, which reinforces her blasé attitude.

[Hussain \(2014\)](#) depicts impersonal urban environments where meaningful connections are rare. People often ignore significant events around them and instead engage in superficial interactions. Urban space is full of "such blithe people ... they were sitting around and talking as though nothing had happened" (p. 85). They are insensitive and emotionally detached people. City dwellers are often psychologically distant, even when nearby. They are emotionally isolated in urban life, as the two male characters say, "We will find no haven in this city today" (p. 88). They cannot communicate thoughtfully and efficiently because "the noise all around is such that no one can hear what the other has to say" (p. 88). It has reduced their interactions to superficial exchanges. They are detached from each other. They are "cut off from the rest of the world" (p. 89). Thus, the story portrays social relations in which noise, indifference, and isolation impact human connections.

[Desai \(1980\)](#) discusses a social gathering where corporate representatives and their wives interact carefully. It describes "the wives of men who represented various mercantile companies in the town - Imperial Tobacco, Brooke Bond, Esso ... inside (their circle) were subtle graduations of importance" (p. 86). They identify themselves not according to their social relations but according to their affiliations with commercial brands. Their husband's corporate affiliations define their status. Social bonds are commodified, and people greet each other with performative camaraderie, as seen in "poor Raman was placed in one of the lower ranks of the company's hierarchy ... his cigarettes ... struck a note of bad taste amongst these fastidious men" (p. 90). Raman's marginalized position highlights the significant role money plays in society. His lower rank and lower income render him an outsider. It shows how urban society judges' people by "How much?" rather than "Who?" ([Simmel, 1950, p. 411](#)). Their camaraderie is a performance devoid of genuine connection in capitalist urban spaces. Thus, corporate branding supplements personal identity, and emotions are flattened in exchange for status.

Hussain's narrative shows our society, where material positions determine personal relationships in domestic life. The story describes how personal relationships and positions are treated like commodities. The two male characters interact: "We must listen to our radio, too. But, anyway, you have not indulged in these entanglements. No radio, no TV. Wives are known to collect such things ... And wife and children are an entanglement, too" ([Hussain, 2014, p. 88-89](#)). It illustrates how money and resources shape emotional bonds in a society driven by financial considerations. The urban capitalist society reduces human bonds to transactions and status. Familial responsibilities are often framed as financial burdens rather than emotional attachments, leading to emotional numbness, where close relationships are evaluated through the cold logic of acquisition and status.

[Desai \(1980\)](#) creates characters whose distance from the lively, casual atmosphere at the party made them uninterested in the town's shallow social gatherings. They prefer appearances to real feelings. They are not frank and open but keep their distance and remain



reserved. The neighbors interact with superficial chats. "They had never been more than nodded to over the hedge, waved to in passing cars or spoken to about anything other than their children, dogs, flowers and gardens" (p. 95). This helps them avoid conflicts and interference. It provides freedom as well as alienation. In this way, the story reveals urban life, where people get independence but lose emotional attachments.

Hussain's (2014) story is about urban characters experiencing isolation despite living in proximity. The observation that "it's very quiet here. It seems as though we have come into a jungle" (p. 89) shows urban isolation. The quiet apartment blocks are likened to a jungle, where physical closeness coexists with emotional wilderness. Despite years of proximity, the neighbors remain strangers. "It's not a Mohalla, it's a block of flats" (p. 89) reflects an impersonal urban structure, where city dwellers prefer privacy over community. Hence, the story mirrors the metropolitan dilemma: social distance creates autonomy and isolation at the same time.

"The Farewell Party" (1980) captures fleeting social interactions at a social gathering where the individuals are involved in performative exchanges. The effusive expression "Oh, I did not know you had arrived. I have been looking for you" (Desai, 1980, p. 83) conveys the transient nature of urban relationships, where enthusiasm masks genuine connection. The feigned engagement of the urbanites can be observed in "Is it true you are leaving us, Bina? How can you be so cruel? And if it were a woman guest, the words were that much more effusive" (p. 83). This hyperbolic farewell reveals a theatrical intimacy, where relationships are momentary and fleeting. The narrative portrays urban socialization, which emphasizes a cycle of temporary performances. It reflects the emotional economy of city life: maximum spectacle, minimum substance.

Hussain's "Noise" (2014) depicts a transient urban ambiance where characters share physical proximity but remain emotionally disconnected. Some characteristics of metropolitan relationships are brief interactions, silent observation, passing strangers, and confused exchanges. The characters sit together but in silence. "The two of us looked on in silence (Hussain, 2014, p. 87), which reveals the concept of urban indifference. It is a common metropolitan tendency to maintain emotional distance in shared spaces. The disjointed nature of metropolitan socialization is evident in the exclamation, "Yaar, there is a lot of confusion" (p. 90). This is an example of the superficiality of urban exchanges. Hence, the story shows city life is full of short, shallow relationships. People often prioritize convenience over genuine connection when interacting with one another.

Desai's (1980) story begins with the protagonist's romantic vision of the party. "She had thought happily of how the roses would bloom and of the stars, and perhaps even fireflies ... but she had not realized that there would be no moon" (p. 82). This reflects the illusion of urban freedom. She dreams of a beautiful, magical party at the beginning but finds only darkness, like empty urban freedom. Urbanites experience both the privileges and the loneliness that come with urban independence. "Raman wondered uneasily at this opening of floodgates in his own family ... Was it the darkness all about them ... that made them act ... with such a lack of



inhibitions" (p. 94). The farewell party is unusual for the Romans because they are typically reserved and private. This creates an emotional vacuum, leaving individuals unprepared for intimacy. Urban freedom is like a double-edged sword, where individuals both lose and gain something simultaneously. The neighbors "sat on the veranda steps, smoking and yawning ... the eyes of our listeners ... glazed with tears that were compounded equally of drink, relief and regret" (p. 97). The characters gain control over their lives but lose the capacity for meaningful experiences.

The characters in Hussain's "Noise" simultaneously experience autonomy and alienation. Ironically, the isolation in underlying urban independence is revealed in "Good for you, you live in peace" (p. 89). The peaceful solitude in the city is a form of emotional detachment from the community. Loneliness is inherent in urban autonomy, and the characters exist in self-imposed exile, free from social constraints. The two male characters find themselves alone in "sitting here, it seems as though we are cut off from the rest of the world" (p. 89). Modern society has institutionalized loneliness, making disconnection inevitable. Modern people's physical proximity without true communion is absorbed when the two men say, "We sat in silence and drank our tea" (p. 92). In the city, individual freedom has created collective loneliness.

Loneliness in Cities in Desai and Hussain

Life in cities can be exciting, but it can also be lonely. [Desai's "The Farewell Party" \(1980\)](#) and [Hussain's "Noise" \(2014\)](#) portray the sad, isolated, and mentally tense city life. This resembles [Simmel's \(1950\)](#) idea that cities make people tired, distant, and fake. Both stories reveal the hidden secrets of modern urban living, highlighting that freedom often comes with loneliness and that connections are transient. Desai's story describes fake and fleeting interactions between people, even if the neighbors are busy with gossip, smiles, excitement, and fun at a party. The party becomes a spectacle where the neighbors perform social roles without real feelings. They enjoy independence but suffer in silence. Similarly, Hussain's story presents a chaotic city life where the two male characters search for peace but find noise everywhere. They are numb to chaos, accepting it as usual and ordinary in the city.

Features like broken conversations, shallow friendships, an overwhelming and noisy ambiance, freedom without comfort, money-driven relationships, and independence without warmth reveal the urban psyche. Both Desai and Hussain draw a dreary but honest picture of city life. The city is not only a place of opportunities but also a place where people struggle with loneliness, stress, and fake relationships. Modern cities force people to live with emotional numbness. The stories depict urban life as a double-edged sword, where people enjoy freedom but lose emotional attachments.

Acknowledgments

This paper is the outcome of "Rethinking Cities Across South Asia-III," an initiative of Dr. Komal Phuyal from the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal. I express my gratitude to Prof. Dr. Amma Raj Joshi, former Vice Chancellor of Far Western University, Kanchanpur, Nepal. Prof. Joshi is the patron of the Research Initiative. I



acknowledge the mentorship of Dr. Phuyal from the conceptualization stage to the final preparation of the manuscript.

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