The Modern Café in Literature

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Abstract
The iconic mark of the modern café, coffee house, tavern, or bar-and-restaurant, on literature is inescapable, often revealing modernist images of freedom, conviviality, conversation, fashion, anonymity, ugliness, temptation, idealism, decadence, licentiousness, and political activism. The haunting presence of the café stands as an epitome of urban culture against which skeptics, intellectuals, lonely men, drunks, hoodlums and charlatans have constructed their identities. The cafe is a place to connect, advertise and find a mentor or publisher crossing national boundaries. The urban consumerism of city space also finds expression in the cafe culture of intoxication, forgetting and a ‘do-nothing syndrome,’ making or unmaking the lives of many writers and artists. Some writers have developed their writing sitting in cafes, while others have written about the café culture in their writings. The modernist French coffee houses and taverns of Paris in the early nineteenth century evolved into cafes of the early twentieth century, proliferating through the Continent, America and rest of the world. The evolving nature of the café gives us an
insight into the changing attitudes and life styles of modern and postmodern societies as represented in literature. It gives us an understanding of the great brotherhood of rationalists, doubters, misanthropes and idealists who have passionately talked about changing the world without taking any action. By observing characters in a café, it is possible to see the evolving social traditions and individual responses to distressing ontological and utopian questions. Many European, Russian, Japanese, American, and South Asian writers have congregated in modern cafes and created a global culture enriching both life and literature.

The cafe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries evolved as a home away from home, a study alcove, a place to be alone, to find company, participate in a social club and at times function as an editorial office impacting and transforming literature and art. The urban cafe represents the evanescence of life, an attitude of modernity, an island of self-composure, and a confessional intimacy that is central to the representation of emotion and reaction. A cafe scene in a work of art often draws attention to dialogue and character giving a sense of immediacy to oft-repeated themes like an evolving relationship, desire for seclusion or the creative process itself. Writers often use a particular cafe to draw out emotions and reactions of their character.

Early coffee houses emerged during the coffee trade between the Middle East-Safavid-Ottoman world and European city states together with the rise of urban modern architecture. Coffee houses soon became public spaces to converse, exchange views, get news and conduct trade. Sensitive souls like writers, philosophers, painters, bureaucrats, intellectuals, scholars and students spent a large portion of their time at cafes in artistic, intellectual and dialogical pursuits. Cafes in literature are invariably based on actual cafes bars, restaurants, taverns
where literary figures found a space to be alone in a crowd. Often cafes became a meeting place for discussion on political issues, intrigues or debates on matters of social concerns. Writers often used the café in their works to reveal specific traits of characters, a weltanschauung, or a philosophy of life.

Though cafes across the globe share the commonality of using public spaces for relaxation, some have evolved to cater to the needs of a particular clientele. There are literary cafes, ideological cafes, arts cafe, old people’s cafe, housewives’ cafe, social get-together cafes, student cafes, office-workers café and working-class cafes. Often a cafe may begin as an ideological cafe but evolve as an arts café or a literary café. A cafe may shut down and later open under a different name or management. The use of the café in a story becomes a literary stratagem to symbolize an era, ethos or emotion. Cafes create a space both for reflection and interaction. Both these twin activities shape our thought process and in some measure our identity. Young writers have benefited enormously from frequenting cafes by getting introduced to more established writers, editors and publishers. Cafes are psychological spaces for healing and renewal in a world spinning out of control.

**The Modern Café Culture of Intoxication and Forgetting**

The café in literature also symbolizes a consumer culture of intoxication and forgetting. One of the functions of modernity is the rise of urban spaces which are consumer-oriented not production-directed (Zukin, 1998 827). Just like the Parisian arcades of the early 19th century, the café was also a part of the “mass production of consumer goods” within “technologies of building” selling “dreams” (Benjamin, 2002 71-72). Individuals only possessed identity if they were consumers. They looked for public spaces like parks, restaurants, cafes to relax, interact, and reflect. They desired the space of the cafe to find drinks that
inebriated or intoxicated them. Through this process they converted their need to find a space into a desire to drink beverage or alcohol—“individuals are seemingly forced to behave in a certain way” (Clarke, 2003 21). The “unsettling character of a pervasive, mass consumer culture” often matched “the unsettled nature” of characters who frequented the cafes (Zukin, 1998, 828).

**Cafes Created a Global Culture of Dissent and Creativity**

The cafes of Paris cut across national boundaries and became havens for expatriate artists from different parts of the world, creating a global culture of dissent and creativity par excellence. The modern space of the café became symbolic of transience and ever-changing connection between home and city. The rise of a quick and dependable transport system—such as cars, trains and buses—linked the cramped urban living spaces with the clean public spaces of the cafe. Both the physical space of the café and transport system connecting it to places of living transform the artist’s relationship with his physical, emotional and creative environment. Andrew Thacker in his book *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* explores the subtle but evolving relationship between literary works and “material spaces of modernity” (Thacker, 2003 3).

Whether in words or painting the café in literature exudes an aura of loneliness in the midst of vitality and movement. It can be an oasis of good will or a stink hole of ill-tempered strangers. The night cafes frequented by drunks, hobos, prostitutes, hoodlums and night prowlers can be an urban hell or haven. The bewildering loneliness and gaze of Parisian café life captured by Edouard Manet in his famous painting ‘The Café-Concert of 1879’ represents the loneliness and yearning of every café customer. The waitress in the painting drinks a glass of beer, the woman smokes a cigarette, the man watches a performance; all three in
their separate world though part of a café concert. The blues, blacks and golds of
the painting create a subdued vitality in an almost lonely café life. Similarly, the
‘Night Café’ painted on canvas in 1888 by Vincent van Gogh portraying “three
drunks and derelicts” sitting or slumped on tables in a café in “sleep or stupor”
represents a “devil’s furnace” forever burning in an imbecilic discomfort (Harris,
1999 167-68).

Baudelaire—The Contingent and Immovable Aspects of a Café
The café in literature fixes its gaze on the narrator’s perception of what is taking
place in the story. The modern moment, with its emotional condition and
response, is recorded by the writer to communicate the bonhomie amidst the
singularity of each individual existence. Charles Baudelaire sees the modern
experience symbolized in the café as a juxtaposition of “the transient, the
fleeting, the contingent” against “the eternal and the immovable”. It is within this
space of flux and immovability that “the goddesses, the nymphs, and sultanas”
are portrayed and represented (Baudelaire, 1981 403). Often café life can be
rather boring and enervating. Baudelaire talks of the “despairing boredom,” the
“indolent postures” and “oriental fatalism” that the café gives rise to (Baudelaire,
1981 423). This apposition creates a strange disembodied feeling of helplessness
which is symptomatic of the modern temper.

Though the café could be a modernist version of a Kafka’s claustrophobic castle
or a Beckett’s empty stage it was also a sweet haven or a lonely oasis for the
troubled artist seeking escape from the cramped life of a modern western city.
Some artists built their art against the sordid reality of modernism. But
Baudelaire wanted the modern artist to represent the “heroism of modern life” in
art. At the turn of the twentieth century, the French cafes along the Boulevard du
Montparnasse became a site for the literary exile to express their modern angst,
artists like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Ford Maddox Ford, Hart Crane, Wyndham Lewis, Jean Rhys, and others. These literary exiles could understand the otherness of the other in a French café and sip the cup of alienation and compose their works on the café tables or their cramped living rooms. The French café became a symbol of the modernist movement in thought and literature which writers from America and the Continent wanted to emulate a bohemian life and experience religious freedom.

The Intellectual Discourse of Dostoevsky’s Russian Tavern

Most of Russian literature is also affected by the modernist icon of the cafe or the tavern. The literature is infused with animated discussions about ontological and philosophical questions in a tavern often with total strangers giving rise to an egalitarian culture of political activism which often began with ideas. Rebecca Beasley argues that the discussions at taverns or cafes created “a politically committed, culturally sophisticated activist” who suited the ethos of a rising modern nation (Beasley, 2005 29). In Brothers Karamazov (1880) Fyodor Dostoevsky reveals through young Aloysha Karamozov the aspirations of men who sit “drinking and talking” in Russian taverns.

‘Aloysha: I’m exactly the same little boy as you are, except that I’m not a novice. How have Russian boys handled things up to now? Take, for instance some stinking local tavern. They meet there and settle down in a corner. They’ve never seen each other before in their whole lives, and when they walk out the tavern they won’t see each other again for forty years. Well, then, are they going to argue about seizing the moment in the tavern? About none other than the universal questions: Is there a God, is there immortality? And those who do not, well, they would talk about socialism and anarchism, about transforming the whole mankind according to a new order, but it’s all
the same damned thing, the questions are all the same, only from the other end. And many, many of the most original Russian boys do nothing but talk about the eternal questions now, in our time. Isn’t it so’ (Dostoevsky, 2002 234).

The “stinking local tavern” becomes a public space of intellectual discourse for young Russian boys and creates an egalitarian culture in an urban environment. They discuss “universal questions,” questions related to the existence of God, “immortality,” “socialism,” “anarchism” and human transformation based on a “new order.” Aloysha brings out the crisis of faith in questions like “Is there a God” and “Is there immortality” that nineteenth century Russia suffered from. He also confronts the secular way of understanding the world—they “do nothing but talk.” Both the tones of mockery and skepticism underlie Dostoevsky’s treatment of modernity, “seizing the moment in the tavern”.

**The Italian Cafe**

The Italian Café too epitomized the modern temper where the cafe space became a meeting place for writers, artists and philosophers who often wrote some of their best works there. The Cafe Fiorio for example was established in Turin Italy in 1780 and served as an island of comfort for the intellectuals, artists and literati. With its coffee bar and brown-gold decor, it became an island of well-being providing a space to hide, relax and observe. Over the years it became a Machiavellian place of intrigue and reactionary politics with people in fashionable pigtails. The café was frequented by writers and artists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Giuseppe Culicchia and others.

**The Song of the Sad Café in McCullers**

In Carson McCullers the café world represents two contradictory intentions—the
search for company and desire to be left alone. The café provides an opportunity for McCullers characters to talk to others but the superficiality and crowd makes them retreat once again into their shell of loneliness. The decadent atmosphere of a provincial café or the frivolity of an urban café cannot mitigate the want and aloneness that characters feel in the company of others. The sense of helplessness that propel people to seek the refuge of the café is not mitigated upon encountering strange people and decadent atmosphere. The cafe reflects the general sense of loneliness and helplessness that McCullers world embodies. The sense of vulnerability and powerlessness becomes more apparent in McCullers than perhaps in William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, or Ernest Hemingway as McCullers sketches the psychological hurt, interior landscape as surreal prose, symbolic representation or memory flashbacks. In “The Ghosts of American Regionalism in Carson McCullers Novels” Mukesh Williams writes,

She believes that the more sensitive and persecuted you are the more you feel the banality of existence and the dreariness of landscape and fall a victim to a do-nothing syndrome. The sad cafes of her stories reveal the loneliness of men and women mesmerized by an event or hankering for new urban possibilities. Often her characters follow their own predilections and yearnings, seeking shadows to hide or a space to breathe. Undoubtedly the autobiographical element dominates the emotional and actual landscape of her stories. Living in a hot town like Columbus Georgia, McCullers hankered for the pleasures of big city like New York. (Williams, 2017 117).

McCullers cafes reveal the” banality of existence” and the “dreariness of landscape” that often creates a “do-nothing syndrome.” Her emotional understanding of New York City find expression in the New York Café sketched in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. From provincial “Georgia rooms” McCullers
could feel in her “inward mind” the “intimations” from the literatures of other countries; they generated a yearning in characters within the confines of a provincial existence.

The literary cafe in the west has always been imagined as seedy cafes with a questionable past like Carson McCullers or the Parisian cafe with late night bonhomie and quarrels. Often scholars, writers, artists, travelers and cosmopolites frequent such cafes interacting with the owners or barmen. The tone is invariably sad or ironic. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943) the working class dreariness floats to the surface with inimitable familiarity. The town catches the tedium of the people who live in it.

The town itself is dreary; not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two colored windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long… The winters here are short and raw, the summers white with glare and fiery hot. (McCullers, 1955 1).

The “miserable main street,” the raw winters and “fiery hot” summers will undoubtedly break down the human spirit. The customers of the sad cafe are nondescript working-class denizens emerging from their dull world into a dull cafe and then retreating into their dull world again. They fit into the dreary town as slow-moving clogs moving the mechanical cotton mills and finding solace in the solitary church. Who can blame them for what they are. Their ballad or song can only be sung by them.

But once there was ballad in the ‘sad’ cafes. McCullers hopes that the song of a remembered past could energize the dreary present. The cafe in *The Ballad of a
Sad Café is closed but once it resounded with “success and gaiety” of its owner Miss Amelia Evans and her hunchback Cousin Lymon (McCullers, 1951 2). Over the years they have become marginalized and lost their connection with the town. Hemingway and Faulkner also draw out the loneliness and marginalization of their characters, but McCullers provincial characters feel their marginalization more intensely as she reveals the stark details of the ‘do-nothing’ life of the South.

Most of the lonely men and women frequenting McCullers sad cafés yearn for the hustle and bustle of big cities like New York where they can realize their dreams. But the past pursues them in the urban landscape. The pretentious New York Café in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, is sad and pretentious where lonely customers seek an escape. The owner of the café Biff Bannon finds himself with drunks and hoodlums downstairs and his nagging wife upstairs (McCullers, 1981 15-17). Though is strange his suffering mirrors the suffering of his customers. The customers in McCullers cafes are more fleshed out, characters we can empathize with, not so with the waiters of the Spanish Café in Hemingway. McCullers’ cafes are not islands of escape in a nameless city but a counterpoint to the dreary provincial. McCullers cafes bring the private and public together but there is no pleasure in socializing. Life is always lived in a yearning for something beyond the provincialism of the moment.

**Hemingway’s Evil and Good Cafés**

Hemingway felt that a café should be warm, clean, erotic and friendly to offer itself as a literary refuge and a comfortable place to think, feel and write. It should not be a cesspool of sadness and inebriation but a wholesome and clean place. A western café can be a kind of coffee shop or a bar where people often drink beverages or strong drink throughout the day and turn it into a cesspool of
stale ideas or an enlivening place. People come to the café to escape something—the bad weather, writer’s block, suffocation of lived spaces, memories or ghosts. They want to escape the sewage of emotions, the humdrum of existence, and the meaninglessness life. They want to be lonely in a crowd and write about things from a distance. Contrary to what Stanley Berman believes the cafes and bars in Hemingway may function as architectural “querencia” a haunting presence, and an “allegorical” reference, but they are not without any “social dimension” (Berman, 2003 80). The disenchantment and connectedness with the world are necessary condition for the survival of a café.

In the 1920s Anglo-American writers and artists like T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Pablo Picasso frequented the Parisian café like the La Rotonde in the Montparnasse quarters to escape the tight-fisted morality and authoritarianism of the status quo. The modern café slowly emerged as a place of revolt and avant-garde ideas. Fledgling writers and artists, who wanted to network and write their short stories, plot their novels or sketch, often frequented such cafes.

Hemingway immortalized the French and Spanish cafés in his short stories like “A Well-Lighted Place,” “The Denunciation: and his novel The Sun Also Rises and poignant memoir of Paris like A Moveable Feast’s story “A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel” where people find a quiet space to write, get drunk or meet others. The quietude, eroticism or soporific atmosphere of the café creates a space for the artist to be creative or express his angst at the urban chaos.

The Evil Café des Amateurs and A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel
Hemingway’s poignant memoir of Paris in the 1920s, A Moveable Feast, introduces two different kinds of French cafés—one bad, the other good. In the
first section called “A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel” he introduces the “sad, evilly run” Café des Amateurs “where the drunkards of the quarter crowded together”. Hemingway “kept away from it because of the smell of dirty bodies and the sour smell of drunkenness.” The Amateurs is a “cesspool of the rue Mouffetard” that stank with the filth of “squat toilets” (3) In The Sun Also Rises Hemingway describes the same Café in a much kinder light. He sees through the window of the café a girl “cooking potato-chips in oil for an old man who stood holding a bottle of red wine on one hand” (Hemingway, 2006 83).

The story in “A Good Café on the Place St.-Michel” begins in bad weather which elicits an emotional response to the city and people to congregate in cafes. Hemingway writes,

All of the sadness of the city came suddenly with the first cold rains of winter, and there were no more tops to the high white houses as you walked but only the wet blackness of the street and the closed doors of the small shops, the midwife—second class—and the hotel where Verlaine had died where I had a room on the top floor where I worked (Hemingway, 2003 4).

The emotional history of the place gets connected to the literary history and Hemingway’s literary connection with Verlaine who once lived and died there.

Further down the essay Hemingway introduces a “good café” on the Place St.-Michel. He loved the ambience of the café and saw it as a metaphor of urban companionship and isolation.

It was a pleasant café, warm and clean and friendly, and I hung up my old waterproof on the coat rack to dry and put my worn and weathered felt hat on the rack about the bench and ordered a café au lait. The waiter brought it
and I took out a notebook from the pocket of the coat and a pencil and started to write. I was writing about up in Michigan and since it was a wild, cold, blowing day it was that sort of day in the story. I had already seen the end of fall come through boyhood, youth and young manhood, and in one place you could write about it better than in another. That was called transplanting yourself, I thought, and it could be as necessary with people as with other sorts of growing things. But in the story the boys were drinking and this made me thirsty and I ordered a rum St. Janes. This tasted wonderful on the cold day and I kept on writing, feeling very well and feeling the good Martinique rum warm me all through my body and my spirit (Hemingway, 2003 5).

It is possible to see the connection between drinking alone at a café and the act of writing a story. A girl “with a face fresh as a newly minted coin” walks in and sits by the window and the writer feels that she belongs” to him “now”. The eroticism of the moment and the idea of a one-night stand with her helps him to complete a “good” story. Afterwards he feels “sad and happy, as though [he] had made love” (Hemingway, 2003 6).

In the roman a clef novel The Sun Also Rises (1926) Hemingway creates the life story of an American expatriate Jake Barnes left incapacitated by war. Barnes becomes a part of the café society of Paris making friends and understanding the world of the Lost Generation filled with promiscuity and loneliness. Scenes from the cafes reveal female jealousy, loneliness, nostalgia, regret and community. He finds the freedom of Paris heart-warming when compared to religiosity of America. Early in the story Jake goes with his friend Robert Cohen and aging Frances to Café de Versailles for coffee. When Jake suggests to Robert that they go to Strasbourg where he knows a girl who “can show us the town” Frances
kicks him twice under the table. The kicks stop only when he changes his suggestion from Strasbourg to Bruges or Ardennes (13-14). Frances is growing old. She wants to marry Robert and does not want him to go away. In another scene Jake goes to Café de la Paix and to Café Napolitain to have coffee and “to have an aperitif and watch the evening crowd on the Boulevard” (21). At another instance Jake goes to meet Lady Brett Ashley at Hotel Crillon in the evening and not finding her takes a taxi to the Café Select. His regret of not meeting her gets lost in the magic of a Parisian evening:

Crossing the Seine I saw a string of barges being towed empty down the current, riding high the bargemen at the sweeps as they came towards the bridge. The river looked nice. It was always pleasant crossing bridges in Paris (48)

The popularity of cafes in Montparnasse is unmistakable; all taxi drivers know the place and what expatriates and tourists want:

No matter what café in Montparnasse you ask a taxi-driver to bring you to from the right bank of the river, they always take you to the Rotonde. Ten years from now it will probably be the Dome. It was near enough, anyway. I waked past the sad tables of the Rotonde to the Select. There were a few people inside at the bar, and outside, alone, sat Harvey Stone. He had a pile of saucers in front and he needed a shave (49).

The Rotonde was the great meeting place of any literary endeavor in Paris. But even here people like Harvey Stone can be lonely.
Spanish Cafes—the Best Cafes in the World

Hemingway’s Spanish cafes are well-lit and clean making lonely men feel comfortable. Both his short stories and novel *The Sun Also Rises* bring out the comforting ambience of a Spanish café. The economic depression, the angst of the lost generation after World War 1, disbelief in Christian ideas of stability and compassion made values of civility and concern for others were hard to uphold.

In *The Sun Also Rises* the freshness of a Spanish café makes the morning seem brighter and happier.

In the morning it was bright, and they were sprinkling the streets of the town and we all had breakfast in a café. Bayonne is a nice town. It is like a very clean Spanish town and it is on a big river (100).

The ‘sparkling’ and ‘clean’ Spanish town of Bayonne makes the café a comfortable place to go to.

“A Clean Well-Lighted Place” (1926) is another Spanish café that is a retreat for lost souls haunted by hypertension, insomnia and nada. The need to find a good café is always connected to light and freedom which Hemingway captures in this story through his unobtrusive iceberg style. The old man withdraws into shadows and even in the café finds a corner with shadows to hide. He wants to sit late into the night here “because he was deaf and now at the night it was quiet and he felt the difference (Hemingway, 1987 228).” He has enough money but his insomnia and loneliness does not allow him to spend it. He has recently attempted suicide but has been saved by his niece. The Spanish Café stands for all the good things in life. Carlos Baker calls the story a “triumph in the realm of practical aesthetics” and a “remarkable union of the naturalistic and the symbolic” where
“light, cleanliness and order” stand against the “dark chaos of society” (Baker, 1980 123-4). But the atmosphere of companionship and friendliness is tested at 3 am when the old man wants another drink. The two waiters quarrel if they should allow him to stay any longer.

The existential paradigm haunts human beings. Everyone must find his own truth and live by it. The old man, the old waiter and the young waiter represent the three stages of human existence where nada or nothingness plays an important role. Nada begins to work negatively when we lose the purpose to live; but turns positive when we seek nothing but pleasantness. Hemingway shows the emptiness of a purposeless existence through the silence between dialogues. The story of the café does not deal with description, narration or character but rudimentary dialogues. Life has no meaning if you do not give it meaning. The old waiter’s monologue is a commentary of our times:

It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and peasant. You do not want music. Certainly, you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada y peus nada y nada y peus nada. (Hemingway, 1987, 291)

The old man needed “nothing” except “light,” “cleanness, and “order.” And “nada y peus nada y nada y peus nada” —it does not cost nothing “nada.” Though the world of nada is throbbing on the margins of consciousness to throttle life, a clean and pleasant place can help mitigate its adverse effect. The
old man is seeking light from darkness of nothingness, he does not want to return to the darkness. Nada becomes the spiritual sound that fills the entire cosmos.

Faulkner immortalized the Montparnasse café in the story “A Portrait of Elmer”; it is here Elmer thought about his past Joseph Blotner tells us (Faulkner, 1981 610). The café has always been a place for rendezvous between the personal and social, creating a cunning divide between isolation and communication. But in literature the café becomes a device to reveal character or develop a story. The interaction of fictional characters at the café sets the mood, tone of voice, emotion and often reveals the hidden kinds in the personality of the characters.

Hemingway loved Spain, the Spanish way of life and the Spanish cafe In the 1920s he always visited Museo Chicote’s cocktail bar on Gran Via in Madrid to write and meet friends. He even put the Chicote’s in his short story “The Denunciation,” a story of cafe culture filled with intrigue, betrayal and cafe loyalty.

Chicote’s in the old days in Madrid was a place sort of like The Stork, without the music and the debutantes…It was a club only you didn’t have to pay any dues and you could pick a girl up there. It was the best bar in Spain, certainly, and I think one of the best bars in the world, and all of us that used to hang out there had a great affection for it.

Another thing was that the drinks were wonderful. If you ordered a martini it was made with the best gin that money could buy, and Chicote had a barrel whiskey that came from Scotland that was so much better than the advertised brands that it was pitiful to compare it with ordinary Scotch… Most of Chicote’s customers are on Franco’s side, but some of them are on the Government side. Because it was a very cheerful place, and because
really cheerful people are usually the bravest, and the bravest get killed quickest, a big part of Chicote’s old customers are now dead” (Hemingway, 2003 420-21).

Hemingway points out that all the “good guys went to Chicote’s” and often picked a “girl up there” (Hemingway, 2003 420). The erotic nature of the place, the “wonderful” drinks and the “really cheerful people” made Chicote’s the “best bars in the world”. One of the reasons Luis Delgado gets caught as a spy was that he was loyal to Chicote’s and went there to do business—“He could have done his business some place else” (Hemingway, 2003 428).

Again in the short story “The Butterfly and the Tank” Hemingway talks about the entering into Chicote’s as it started to rain:

The place was crowded. You couldn’t get near the bar and all the tables were full. It was full of smoke, singing, men in uniform, and the smell of wet leather coats, and they were handing drinks over a crowd that was three deep at the bar…You couldn’t hear yourself talk for the singing and I ordered a gin and Angostura and put it down against the rain. The place was really packed and everybody was very jolly; maybe getting just a little bit too jolly from the newly made Catalan liquor most of them were drinking (Hemingway, 2003 429).

Though the bar is crowded it is filled with jolly people and the liquor was good. The bar symbolizes the strength and power of the people even when they look weak and can be destroyed. The story also reveals the duality of vision—the censorship in public life and freedom of home. The bar is not just a place to drink but a place where freedom is cherished and preserved.
**Rhys Rotonde Café**

Jean Rhys in *Good Morning, Midnight* unhinges the notion of the Parisian café as a male preserve. Her postcolonial Dominican female identity reveals the symbols of male dominance in café culture. Sasha Jansen, the lonely poor woman frequents bars and cafes dominated by men filled with their patriarchy and class. She sips a cup of coffee in The Rotonde and fears that she may be thrown out if she sits too long or falls asleep.

The Rotonde was full of men reading newspapers on long sticks. Shabby men, not sneering, not taking any notice. Pictures on the wall.
The hands of the clock moving quickly. One hour, two hours, three hours… How long will they let me sit here? Not a drop of coffee left. The last drop was very cold and very bitter—very cold and bitter, the last drop. I have five francs, but I daren’t order another coffee. I must not spend it on that.
The colours of the picture melting into each other, my head back against the bench.
If I go to sleep they’ll turn me out. Perhaps they won’t but better not risk it (123-24).

Sasha’s painful experience of a café is in sharp contrast to other male writers like Hemingway and Zola.

**Lewis’ Bourgeois-Bohemia Café Culture**

Wyndham Lewis saw the café-centric culture of the expatriate as “Bourgeois-Bohemia” in his novel *Tarr*. He saw the cafes as “luminous caverns” that belonged to early twentieth Paris (77). He ridicules the expatriate society of Parisian Cafes, the Vienna Café on New Oxford Street in Bloomsbury, a place where he met Ezra Pound in 1910. His character Frederick Sorbert Tarr is an
English painter who frequents Parisian cafes to become an authentic voice of the “Bourgeois-Bohemia” café modernism. Lewis exposes his promiscuity and pseudo-intellectual values. He like others who frequent the cafes are fools:

It’s the same with the Café fools I have for friends—there’s a greek fool, a german fool, a russian fool—an english fool! There are no friends in this life any more than there are authentic ‘fiancées’… (19).

The foolish world of the café where there are no friends becomes apparent in Lewis. In McCullers the forlorn sadness of the café is apparent. Salman Rushdie creates a modern café in opposition to modernity ridiculing tradition and feudal ideas

The Shaandaar Café
Rushdie’s Shaandaar Café in The Satanic Verses is constructed against modernity, personifying the dragon, a black hole or a dragon’s fire. But the Cafe also can forgive the erring soul. The café is owned by Mr. Muhammad Sufyan a former schoolmaster from Bangladesh with myopic eyes. He claims to be quite learned answering philosophical questions about the “essence of the self,” the changing migration of the soul, cultural conflict and immigrant identity of South Asian in Britain (251, 285-86). Just like the proprietor the characters also cannot see clearly. They are moving in a make-belief world in London. In Chapter 3 (Part 7) as the story reaches its climax we discover the Shaandaar Café located is in flames. The city of London itself is burning like the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Gibreel Farishta is sleep-walking through the burning streets of London searching for his adversary Saladin Chamcha, Farishta carries a magical horn which sends a flame consuming those who are sinful. Prostitutes hamper for safety and pimps are charred to death. As Farishta sees the horn doing its
work he gets convinced that he is an angel. Saladin runs and disappears into the “open doorway” of the Café to escape the fury of Farishta. The Café is the “maw of the black hole;’ the horizon closes around it, all other possibilities fade, the universe shrinks to this solitary and irresistible point” (479). The world shrinks to this “maw of a black hole:”

The Café Shaandaar is breathing fire like a dragon as if waiting for a pestilence, the end of the world. Chamcha is running down the High Street in “camel coat with the silk collar” as if running away from a biblical apocalypse:

The ground floor is not as yet ablaze. He flings open the door to the stairs, and a scalding, pestilential wind drives him back. Dragon’s breath, he thinks. The landing is on fire; the flames reach in sheets from floor to ceiling. No possibility of advance (481).

But once Farishta sees Saladin pinned down under the burning debris, he saves Saladin. It is hard to answer the question “Of what type—angelic, satanic—was Farishta’s song” (482). The idea of forgiveness that a burning café gives rise to is the climax of the novel. Farishta risks “death with scarcely any hesitation, in a foolhardy rescue attempt” (482). Rushdie builds the café both as temptation and redemption.

The rise of cafes or coffee houses in India during the 1960s and 1970s both in the north and the south represented an inherent change in individual identity and society by creating surplus income and demand for a relaxing beverage. Modern education and industrial revolution in the twentieth century increased the standard of living of the urban middle class and created surplus income and a public space to relax, as it did in the eighteenth century in Europe. The arrival of
the coffee house created a bourgeois public space between home and office where discussions on socio-political and human living issues could take place. In post-independent India coffee drinking in coffee houses was associated with newfound leisure, a new creativity and a new modern identity free from the clutches of the Empire (Ahuja and Bhattacharya, 2012 2). In the last twenty years the literary café, the nature of literature itself, the appeal of the fine arts, and habits of learning and writing, spurred by digital technology and the Internet, have undergone a dramatic change not only in India but the rest of the world. Cafes or coffee houses in Indian metropolises which once catered to scholars, intellectuals, revolutionaries, Cambridge returnees, poets, university teachers, students, hoodlums, mafia and politicians have given way to the suave global Indian willing to spend a pretty penny for a cup of café au lait.

New coffee shops like Barista and Starbucks have replaced the dependable and cheap The South Indian Coffee House or the small coffee shop with jukebox technology. Paper cups and the urgency to leave have replaced the unhurried ambience of the Coffee House with their fat and heavy china cups. In India unlike in Europe cafes did not serve liquor so the ambience was rather different. The *mehfil or jamghat* of the Coffee House was not just a discussion venue but also a place for a student to hone his discursive talents or writer to test his work. The populist text in the form of memoirs, reminiscences, short stories or histories has acquired the status of cafes. The Internet has created to the early demise of the literary café culture by creating a virtual space of discussion.

**Murakami’s Japanese Café**

In Haruki Murakami the Japanese café is a loose term which is connected to a restaurant, coffee shop and bar, and occasionally to a hotel. It is a place where
relationships develop and personalities of characters revealed. Murakami uses actual cafes to place his fictional characters to give them authenticity and a sense of belongingness, a kind of roman la clef. His novels are high context dramas where context reveals the personalities of characters. The cafes also reflect an era gone by, the fin de siècle of the 1960s.

Murakami is a city man who knows the nooks and carries of the city he loves—Tokyo. His characters chart an evolving series of relationships in cafes, bars and restaurants to present a unique world of opportunities, interactions and relationship. In his novels innocent and not so innocent love seek refuge in bars and cafes. In a coming-of-age love story *The Norwegian Wood*, different kinds of love, characters Midori and Watanabe visit a Jazz Café Bar DUG near Isetan in Shinjuku. We assume they are regular visitors here. Its 1960s décor in browns once played live jazz but now pipes classical music through large speakers.

‘Where are you?’ Ueno Station. ‘Why don’t you meet me in Shinjuku? I’ll leave now!’

We set a time and place and hung up. When I got to DUG Midori was sitting at the far end of the counter with a drunk. She wore a man’s wrinkled white balmacaan, a thin yellow sweater, blue jeans, and two bracelets on one wrist. What’re you drinking? (NW, 220).

The anonymity in crowded Shinjuku and the cute desirability of Midori is captured in her dress and drink. The balmacaan has been in and out of fashion and continues to be so even in 2018. It is an imitable wear for Japanese girls who want to be casual and cute.

Again they go to the same bar-and-cafe in Shinjuku:
After German we caught a bus to Shinjuku and went to an underground bar called DUG behind the Kinokuniya bookshop. We each started with two vodka and tonics.

‘I come here once in a while,’ she said. ‘They don’t make you feel embarrassed to be drinking in the afternoon.’

‘Do you drink in the afternoon a lot?’

‘Sometimes,’ she said, rattling the ice in her glass. ‘Sometimes, when the world gets too hard to live in, I come here for a vodka and tonic.’

‘Does the world get hard to live in?’

‘Sometimes,’ said Midori. ‘I’ve got my own special little problems.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like family, like boyfriends, like irregular periods. Stuff.’ ‘So have another drink.’

‘I will.’

I beckoned to the waiter and ordered two more vodka and tonics.

‘Remember how, when you came over that Sunday, you kissed me?’ Midori asked. ‘I’ve been thinking about it. It was nice. Really nice.’

‘That’s nice.’

‘That’s nice,’ she mimicked. ‘The way you talk is so weird!’

‘It is?’

‘Anyway, I was thinking, that time. I was thinking how great it would be if that had been the first time in my life a boy had kissed me. If I could switch around the order of my life, I would absolutely, absolutely make that my first kiss. And then I would live the rest of my life thinking stuff like: Hey, I wonder whatever happened to that boy named Watanabe I gave my first kiss to on the laundry deck, now that he’s 58? Wouldn’t that be great?’

‘Yeah, really,’ I said, cracking a pistachio nut.
‘Hey, what is it with you? Why are you so spaced out? You still haven’t answered me.’

‘I probably still haven’t completely adapted to the world.’ I said after giving it some thought. ‘I don’t know, I feel like this isn’t the real world. The people, the scene: they just don’t seem real to me.’

Midori rested an elbow on the bar and looked at me. “There was something like that in a Jim Morrison song. I’m pretty sure” (NW, 168-69).

The lengthy paragraph quoted above revels the different personalities of 37-year old Toru Watanabe and young Midori in the ambience of the Jazz Café Bar DUG. Midori comes infrequently in the afternoon to drink vodka and tonics “when the world gets too hard to live in”. She has her own “special little problems” such as “family,” “boyfriends,” and “irregular periods.” Though Midori finds Watanabe somewhat “weird” she treasures his first kiss and wishes she had met him earlier; she wants to “switch around the order of my life.” Watanabe too feels the unreality of people and the world he lives in—the “people” and the “scene”. The scene reminds Midori of a Jim Morrison song “People are strange, when you are a stranger.”. Apart from being a moment of love it is also moment of remembering the entire history of regret and nostalgia of an era gone by. The Jazz Café Bar DUG works as reworking of memory, nostalgia and regret of the passing of the 1960s decade.

The quiet, somewhat expensive café in the voluminous novel 1Q84 is also an attempt to rewrite the history of Tokyo. A cram school teacher Tengo meets Fuka-Eri at Nakurumaya Café to seek her permission to rewrite her mysterious manuscript.

‘Good. I want you to go to the Nakurumaya Café in Shinjuku at six o’clock. I’ll reserve a table for you in the back where it’s quiet. It’ll be in my name
and on the company’s tab, so eat and drink as much as you like. The two of you can have a nice, long talk’ (52).

The café introduces us to the strange world of Tengo-Fuka and to the Orwellian-like world of Tokyo. After all the novel IQ84 is a kind of rendering of George Orwell’s 1984.

A reference to Hotel Okura in IQ84:

With its high ceiling and muted lighting, the capacious lobby of the Hotel Okura’s main building seemed like a huge, stylish cave. Against the cave walls, like the sighing of a disemboweled animal, bounced the muted conversations of people seated on the lobby’s sofas. The floor’s thick, soft carpeting could have been primeval moss on a far northern island. It absorbed the sound of footsteps into its endless span of accumulated time…

In this place so full of legend and suggestion, Aomame was truly out of place, with her pale blue cotton pants, simple white blouse, white sneakers, and blue Nike gym bag. She probably looked like a babysitter sent by her agency to work for a hotel guest, she thought, as she killed time sitting in a big easy chair. Oh well, I’m not here for socializing (487).

Hotel Okura’s iconic 1960s architectural décor of wood panels, stained glass, thick carpets is famous for omotenshi or Japanese hospitality where waiters move in tuxedos and kimonos. Here Aomame in the opening of the novel she executes a man with an icepick in his room and in the end, meets the shady underworld Leader.

In After Dark Mari and Takahashi meet at Denny’s in Jinnan, Shibuya district
about 10 minutes from Love Hotel Hill and have juicy steaks.

**O Henry’s Cafes**

O Henry’s cafes reveal the pretentiousness of café goers who are victims of their ego and provincialism. The Café exposes the mask and affectation of human beings. O Henry in his short story “A Cosmopolite in a Café” ironically describes a café where a man pretends to be a global citizen but gets into a fight with another man who criticizes the amenities in his hometown. The sordid loneliness and pretentiousness of café goers from East Side New York emerges in O Henry’s short stories.

I invoke your consideration of the scene—the marble-topped tables, the range of leather-upholstered wall seats, the gay company, the ladies dressed in demi-state toilets, speaking in an exquisite visible chorus of taste, economy, opulence or art; the sedulous and largess-loving garcons, the music wisely catering to all with its raids upon the composers; the mélange of talk and laughter—and, if you will, the Wurzburger in the tall glass cones that bend to your lips as a ripe cherry sways on its branch to the beak of a robber jay. I was told by a sculptor from Mauch Chunk that the scene was truly Parisian (6).

Even though the “marble-topped tables,” “the gay company” and the “mélange of talk and laughter” invoke a “truly Parisian” scene the provincial mindset is apparent.

In “The Poet and the Peasant” Bunco Harry meets a countryman at Eighth Avenue and advises him not to buy at a jewelry store; the countryman says he is just window shopping. Sensing an argument Harry invites him to a café for a
They went to a café frequented by men with smooth faces and shifty eyes, and sat at their drinks (187).

The “smooth faces and shifty eyes” represent the suave cunning of a café that O. Henry brings out in his café scenes.

The American café does not encapsulate a cosmopolitan urban culture but imitates a Parisian café in its provinciality. The café scene is described unerringly by O. Henry repeating itself day after day along the lines of a Parisian café.

Expression on these subjects was precipitated from E. Rushmore Coglan by the third corner to our table. While Coglan was describing to me the topography along the Siberian Railway the orchestra glided into a medley. The concluding air was ‘Dixie,’ and as the exhilarating notes tumbled forth they were almost overpowered by a great clapping of hands from almost every table. It is worth a paragraph to say that this remarkable scene can be witnessed every evening in numerous cafés in the City of New York. Tons of brew have been consumed over theories to account for it. Some have conjectured hastily that all Southerners in town hie themselves to cafés at nightfall. This applause of the ‘rebel’ air in a Northern city does puzzle a little; but it is not insolvable. The war with Spain, many years’ generous mint and water-melon crops, a few long-shot winners at the New Orleans racetrack, and the brilliant banquets given by the Indiana and Kansas citizens who compose the North Carolina Society, have made the South rather a ‘fad’ in Manhattan. Your manicure will lisp softly that your left forefinger reminds her so much of a gentleman’s in Richmond, Va. Oh, certainly; but many a lady has to work now—the war, you know (7).
In the story O. Henry talks of the imitative modernity and fashionable “‘rebel’ air” of New York cafes where the fake Parisian moment is “witnessed every evening in numerous cafes.”

In another short story “The Cop and the Anthem” O Henry describes a “glittering café” in New York filled with “the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm” that is good wine, women wearing fine silk apparel and human beings. Obviously, there is irony in the representation of the New York Café. Soapy, once a middle class but now homeless watches the glitter of wealthy New Yorkers gathering at the café.

Soapy left his bench and strolled out of the square and across the level sea of asphalt, where Broadway and Fifth Avenue flow together. Up Broadway he turned, and halted at a glittering café, where are gathered together nightly the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm (33).

Obviously in O. Henry the Café in a big American city symbolizes the pretentions of modernity, the class vulgarity and the underbelly of the big city. His stories show how the architectural space of the café is not a refuge from the hustle and bustle of urban life but an extension of urban pretense and superficiality.

**Orwell’s The Chestnut Tree Café**

The political implications of a cafe as a place of intrigue, rebellion or expression of free thought has also been exploited by writers the reveal the intellectual persuasion of their characters. The Chestnut Tree Cafe in George Orwell’s *1984* is meant as a last refuge for thought criminals like Rutherford before they are executed. The Chestnut Cafe is a dismal depressing place, devoid of love but at
times a refuge for lonely souls. Here Winston and Julia meet after they have betrayed each other and find a moment of freedom in each other’s company. A song is playing in the background representing their betrayal— “Under the spreading chestnut tree/I sold you and you sold me/ There lie they and here lie we/Under the spreading chestnut tree” (77).

There is a play on the word lie which means both lying down and to tell a lie, the latter meaning stands out in the world of Oceania. Symbolism run riot in Orwell. The chestnut tree plays ironically on notions of honesty and justice in the Chestnut Tree Cafe. The tele screen plays a song of betrayal.

The Chestnut Tree Café is a meeting place for “painters,” “musicians” and lost souls. However, it is “ill-omened” and it it policed by the status quo.

He said things that would have been unsaid, he had read too many books, he frequented the Chestnut Tree Cafe, haunt of painters and musicians. There was no law, not even an unwritten law, against frequenting the Chestnut Tree Cafe, yet the place was somehow ill-omened. The old, discredited leaders of the Party had been used to gather there before they were finally purged (55).

Orwell based his café on Soviet and London coffee shops meant for dissident intellectuals who did not want to be policed by the status quo or would-be writers who wanted to be hired by publishers of the Bloomsbury Street. The Bloomsbury Crowd gathered at the Café Royal in London but Orwell highly critical of the status quo did not go there. But obviously there are autobiographical elements in the story; Winston is young Orwell.

Once Winston’s love for Julia is over he discovers his new love in Big Brother. Then he wants to visit the Café.
He was overwhelmed by a desire not so much to get away from Julia as to get back to the Chestnut Tree Café, which had never seemed so attractive as at this moment. He had a nostalgic vision of his table corner, with the newspaper and the chessboard and the ever-flowing gin. Above all, it would be warm in there (293).

The Café becomes a refuge for lonely men who have lost hope in life. The nostalgia of a remembered corner at a cafe with a newspaper, chessboard and “ever-flowing gin” creates a feeling of warmth for the place.

**Zola’s Café Guerbois**

In his autobiographical novel *The Masterpiece* (1886) Zola sketches the ambience of Café Guerbois on the Rue des Batignolles in Montmartre which Manet sketched in Interior au Café Guerbois (1869) two decades ago.

The Café Baudequin was situated on the Boulevard des Batignolles, at the corner of the Rue Darcet. Without the least why or wherefore, it had been selected by the band as their meeting-place, though Gagniere alone lived in the neighborhood. They met there regularly on Sunday nights; and on Thursday afternoons, at about five o’clock, those who were then at liberty had made it a habit to look in for a moment. That day as the weather was fine and bright, the little tables outside under the awning were occupied by rows of customers, obstructing the footway. But the band hated all elbowing and public exhibition, so they jostled the other people in order to go inside, where all was deserted and cool (Zola, 52).

The ambience of the “deserted and cool” Café Baudequin makes it attractive as a “meeting place”. Both Zola and Manet frequented the Café Guerbois to discuss
techniques and methods of art and writing and clear their mind to arrive at a viable conclusion. In fact, the Impressionist movement was created entirely in the ambience of cafes. Zola captures the ethos of the café in his novel *The Masterpiece* (1886). Two friends, Claude and Sandoz are talking about the emptiness of past and future, the meaninglessness of trying to fill the void and without realizing wander into a café:

They left the restaurant, roamed about the streets, and foundered again in the depths of the café, where they philosophized. They had come by degrees to raking up the memories of their childhood, and this ended by filling their hearts with sadness. One o’clock in the morning struck when they decided to go home.

However, Sandoz talked about seeing Claude as far as the Rue Tonslaque. That August night was a superb on, the air was warm, the sky studded with stars.

And as they went the round by way of Quartier de L’Europe they passed before the old Cafe Baudequin on the Boulevard des Batignolles. It had changed hands three times. It was no longer arranged inside in the same manner as formerly; there were now a couple of billiard tables on the right hand; and several strata of customers had followed each other thither, one covering the other, so that the old frequenters had disappeared like buried nations. However, curiosity, the emotion they had derived from all the past things they had been raking up together, induced and to glance into the café through the open doorway. They wanted to see their table of yore on the left hand, right at the back of the room (Zola 243).

The two friends partake of the intellectual culture of roaming around at night and philosophizing. The café feeds on their memory and nostalgia as they
identify objects and artifacts from the past. But as they see ghosts from the past still in the café they get frightened (244).

Literature perforce reflects the intellectual temper, architectural spaces, changing tastes, new fashion, mental habits, emotional attitude, political ideology and social mores of an era gone by. But the café is not dead. It has gone in different direction—from the café and bar to café and fantasy. The modernist space created by the coffee house, café, tavern, bar and restaurant also shapes literature and society has given a new twist to theme and character. Writers and artists from across the world are deeply affected by the café culture calling it a ‘moving feast,’ a clean place, a black hole, an unreal space, a devil's furnace, a provincial club or activist tavern. They have not failed to represent the café in all its intellectual and architectural ramifications in their works. The café not only represented the modernist tendencies in literature but also created some of the modernist predispositions that we partake of today. Residues of the modernist café percolate into the stock market, the political parties, cyber cafes and the Internet. As the café rides the wings of digital technology and becomes globalized we not only have Starbucks but also digitized cafes and bars epitomized by Cosplay Maids, digitized music and walls.

NOTES

file:///C:/Users/m-will/Downloads/Thyssen_Coffee_House_Nov_2010.pdf

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