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**FROM SOIL TO SKYLINE: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS
OF URBAN AND RURAL CONFLICTS**

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1. INTRODUCTION

In literature the settings of rural areas and urban areas often represent two very different ways of life. Writers use these places as symbols to express bigger ideas. The village, or what we may call the “soil,” usually stands for tradition, strong cultural roots, and a deep sense of belonging. Life in rural areas is often shown as simple, peaceful, and connected to nature and community values. On the other hand, the city, or “skyline,” symbolizes modern progress, individual dreams, and ambition. Cities are fast growing and full of opportunities, but they can also make people feel isolated or lost in the crowd.

Writers explore how these spaces shape people’s lives and their emotions. Literature becomes a powerful tool to show how these two worlds - rural and urban are not only different but in conflict. These differences shows wider changes in society, such as shifts in culture, identity, and the way people think and behave.

As societies change due to migration, industrialization, and environmental damage, literature captures the worries and stress people feel because of these transformations. This tension between the rural and the urban isn’t just about physical distance, it also shows deeper opposites, such as: Tradition versus Modernity, Simplicity versus Complexity, Community versus Individualism and Harmony versus Chaos.

Life in the countryside or rural areas has often been presented in a very positive way in many literary traditions. Writers have frequently romanticized rural life, describing it as peaceful, beautiful and



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ideal - while often overlooking the challenges that people face in such settings. This romantic approach to rural life is found in both Indian and Western literary works, where the village or countryside is imagined as a symbol of simplicity, harmony, and closeness to nature.

During the Romantic period of the 18th and 19th centuries, poets like William Wordsworth celebrated the countryside and believed that nature and rural life brought people closer to truth and spiritual peace. Wordsworth saw nature as a powerful teacher and one that could heal the human soul and offer a sense of purity and calm, unlike the noisy, polluted, and morally corrupt urban world. For the Romantics, the countryside was not just a place but a source of inspiration and emotional depth.

Rabindranath Tagore, one of India's most respected writers, also reflected on the beauty of rural life in many of his stories. In works like *Postmaster*, he describes how a man from the city is emotionally transformed by his experience in a small village. The simplicity and kindness of the rural people touch his heart in a way that city life never could. However, Tagore was careful not to completely idealize rural life. He showed that people from urban areas often misunderstand villages, viewing them as magical or exotic without seeing the real issues like poverty, social inequality, and stagnation. While he appreciated the emotional and cultural richness of village life, he also acknowledged its hardships and limitations.

Munshi Premchand, a leading Hindi-Urdu writer, offered a more realistic and grounded portrayal of rural India. In his famous novel *Godaan*, he tells the story of Hori, a poor farmer who struggles to maintain his land and dignity in the face of economic hardship and colonial exploitation. Premchand does not shy away from showing the pain and injustice that rural people suffer. Yet, he also presents the rural world as emotionally rich and deeply connected to cultural identity. For Premchand, the land is more than just a means of survival - it carries emotional weight, symbolizing family ties, personal honor, and the traditions passed down through generations. The "soil" in his stories becomes a powerful symbol of identity and belonging.

In English literature, the writer Thomas Hardy presents a similar perspective from a Western context. Hardy's novels often focus on rural England and the impact of modernization on traditional village life. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the countryside is described in poetic and beautiful terms, but it is also a place of sorrow and loss. Hardy shows how rural communities are being torn apart by the forces of industrialization and social change. Machines, cities, and new economic systems slowly replace the old ways of life, creating a sense of disconnection and sadness. His work highlights the emotional cost of progress and the quiet destruction of once-thriving rural cultures.

As more people began leaving villages and moving into cities, especially during times of political, social, or economic change, literature started to explore the realities of urban life in deeper and more honest ways. Cities were no longer just seen as places of success and progress, they became spaces of emotional struggle, moral confusion and personal loss. While urban areas often symbolize opportunity, fast life, and ambition, they are also marked by isolation, fragmentation of community and ethical dilemmas. Literature from both India and other parts of the world reflects these contradictions in powerful ways.



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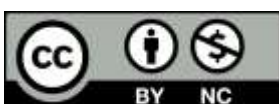
One of the most striking examples of this can be seen in the works of Saadat Hasan Manto, who vividly captured the harsh truths of urban life in Bombay (now Mumbai). In stories like *Kali Shalwar* and *Toba Tek Singh*, Manto uncovers the suffering of the poor, the exploited, and the mentally disturbed. *Kali Shalwar* reveals how a woman struggles to maintain her dignity while living in a world that constantly judges and rejects her. *Toba Tek Singh*, written in the aftermath of the Partition of India, paints a haunting picture of displacement and madness. Through these narratives, Manto shows how cities, especially during times of upheaval, become places of emotional chaos and deep personal loss. The Partition, in particular, forced large numbers of people to migrate, turning cities into crowded spaces full of fragmented lives and uncertain futures.

In contemporary Indian English literature, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* presents a harsh critique of the divide between rural poverty and urban wealth. The novel tells the story of Balram Halwai, a man born in a poor village who rises to become a successful entrepreneur in the city but only through lies, betrayal, and murder. His journey is not heroic but disturbing. It shows how those who come from rural backgrounds are often forced to abandon their moral values to survive in the ruthless environment of modern cities. Adiga's portrayal of urban life exposes the illusion of fairness in cities. He challenges the idea that anyone can succeed through hard work alone and reveals how rural migrants are often caught in exploitation. Balram's transformation from a loyal servant to a calculating businessman illustrates the emotional and ethical damage caused by this shift from the "soil" of the village to the "skyline" of the city.

This theme is not limited to Indian literature. Writers across the world have also explored the mental and moral struggles of life in urban settings. For example, Charles Dickens, in his novel *Oliver Twist*, shows how the city of London is a place filled with crime, poverty, and danger. The young orphan Oliver is exposed to the dark side of city life, where he faces cruelty and corruption instead of the safety and care one might expect. Similarly, Fyodor Dostoevsky, in *Notes from Underground*, presents the city as a deeply isolating and psychologically damaging space. The narrator of the novel is a lonely man who feels cut off from society, trapped in his thoughts, and increasingly bitter about the world around him. Both Dickens and Dostoevsky highlight the emotional toll that urban life takes, especially on those who are already vulnerable or uprooted from simpler, rural environments.

Migration plays a central role in the narrative of rural and urban conflict. It usually begins with a sense of hope when people leave their homes in villages or small towns dreaming of a better life in the city. However, this journey often leads to a sense of displacement. Many migrants experience emotional and cultural confusion, as they struggle to adjust to a new world. Postcolonial and diasporic literature explore this theme in depth.

One such writer is Jhumpa Lahiri, whose short stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* explore the emotional impact of migration on Indian and Indian-American characters. In her stories, rural customs and values often seem out of place in urban or foreign settings. Characters long for a lost home, whether it is a village in Bengal or a small town in Bihar - but find that their cultural roots no longer hold meaning in their new lives. This longing for home becomes more than just a memory; it



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symbolizes a deeper emotional and cultural loss. Lahiri's characters are not just living in a new land but they are also living in a state of in-betweenness, where they do not fully belong to either the past or the present.

In contrast, Mahasweta Devi's stories, such as *Draupadi* and *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*, deal with a different kind of migration. She writes about tribal communities in India who are forced to leave their lands because of development projects, mining, and industrialization. In these works, the displacement is not voluntary, it is a result of government policies and corporate greed. Devi shows how these tribal people, deeply connected to their land, are seen as obstacles to progress and treated as disposable. The conflict in her stories is not just between the rural and the urban - it is between two worldviews: one that values profit and expansion, and another that values tradition, nature and community.

Similar themes of forced migration and emotional dislocation are also explored in the works of Toni Morrison. In novels like *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*, she focuses on the African American experience of moving from the rural South to the urban North in the United States. These characters often carry with them the trauma of racism, poverty, and historical injustice. Morrison shows that the cities they move to are not always places of freedom or opportunity. Instead, they become spaces of alienation, where the characters feel disconnected from their roots and unsure of their identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, a young girl struggles with self-worth and cultural rejection, while in *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist's journey to reconnect with his ancestral past becomes a powerful exploration of identity and belonging.

Rural life holds valuable cultural knowledge, traditions, and wisdom passed down through generations. These include folklore, oral stories, local customs, and indigenous ways of understanding the world. Such traditions are deeply rooted in the daily life of rural communities. However, when modern urban ways of life start to spread into these areas, they often threaten to replace or erase these cultural treasures. Urban development tends to promote uniformity which can harm the unique and diverse traditions of rural societies.

This idea is strongly reflected in the Kannada novel *Kusumabale* by Devanuru Mahadeva. In this novel, the storytelling is shaped by oral traditions - myths, memories, and spoken histories that are passed down from one generation to the next. These stories don't follow the typical modern, city-based logic or structure. Instead, they are emotional, symbolic, and full of local meaning. Mahadeva shows that rural life is not simple or backward, it is rich, layered, and full of cultural strength. The novel becomes a form of protest, defending the unique identity of village communities and their right to tell their own stories in their own way.

Similarly, in *The River Between* by Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, we see how colonial rule and the push for urbanization disrupted traditional African village life. The story is set in a Kikuyu community and focuses on a young man who is caught between two worlds. On one side, he belongs to his tribe, with its rituals, beliefs, and customs. On the other side, he is drawn to the education and lifestyle offered by the British colonizers. This inner struggle represents a larger conflict between the



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values of rural tradition and the demands of modern, city-based society. The novel explores how difficult it is to balance these two identities without losing one's roots.

Cities often grow and develop by using the resources of rural areas. For example, they depend on the countryside for water, food, labor, and even land. As cities expand, they take more and more from rural regions, often leaving those areas poorer or damaged. This creates an ecological imbalance, where the needs of the city come at the cost of the well-being of the village.

Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* explores this issue by setting the story in the Sundarbans - a group of islands in the Bay of Bengal, known for their rich biodiversity and vulnerable ecosystem. In this region, people struggle to survive between the forces of nature and the demands of environmental conservation. The novel brings together many layers like rural and urban life, human needs and animal rights, the past and the future. Ghosh shows how rising sea levels and climate change not only affect the land but also challenge people's sense of "home." In this story, the idea of belonging becomes complicated when survival itself is at risk. The book makes us think about how environmental issues are deeply connected to the rural-urban divide.

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* presents another powerful example of how urban-based industries can harm rural lives. The novel is inspired by the real-life Bhopal gas tragedy, where a chemical plant in a small town leaked poisonous gas, killing thousands and affecting many more. In the book, the narrator, called "Animal," is a victim of the disaster. His body and life are permanently changed because of the negligence of a multinational company. The novel strongly criticizes how industrial projects can destroy entire communities when they are not planned with care or responsibility. It questions the idea that urban growth is always good, and asks us to think about who really pays the price for such development.

In modernist literature, the city is often shown in a negative light. For example, in T.S. Eliot's famous poem *The Waste Land*, the city is not a place of growth or energy. Instead, it feels lifeless, broken, and depressing. The city is described as spiritually empty and emotionally cold. There is no sense of connection or belonging. People are lost in routine, and their lives seem meaningless. In this way, the city stands in complete contrast to the countryside, which is often imagined as natural, whole, and full of life.

However, in postmodern literature, this sharp difference between city and village begins to fade. Writers no longer treat one as good and the other as bad. Instead, they show both urban and rural spaces as complex, mixed, and full of contradictions. For instance, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the story moves through different parts of India, combining city life with rural scenes. Rushdie does not glorify either space. Both are shown as chaotic and changing, filled with fantasy, history, and politics. Similarly, in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, the city of Bombay is portrayed through the lives of drug addicts, artists, and wanderers. The city becomes a strange, dream-like place where reality and imagination mix.

In Conclusion, the literary journey from soil to skyline reveals more than a mere shift in physical landscape - it uncovers a deeper and painful transformation of identities, values, and lived



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experiences. Rural and urban spaces in literature are not fixed binaries but dynamic terrains where tradition meets modernity, memory clashes with progress, and rootedness contends with mobility. Writers like Premchand and Tagore evoke the dignity and decay of village life, while authors such as Aravind Adiga and Jhumpa Lahiri expose the alienation and fractured identities in sprawling urban environments.

Migration, ecological degradation, and globalization further complicate these spaces, rendering the urban-rural divide a site of cultural conflict and negotiation. Folklore and oral traditions emerge as vital counter-narratives, preserving indigenous wisdom even as modern cities seek to erase them. Through nuanced storytelling, literature becomes a cultural archive and a moral compass, recording the consequences of unchecked development and dislocation.

As contemporary literature increasingly resists rigid spatial classifications, it invites us to see the soil and the skyline not as opposing realms, but as interwoven landscapes that reflect the human condition in flux. In bridging this divide, literature compels us to imagine new possibilities of coexistence, rooted both in memory and movement, tradition and transformation.

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