



BUILDING THE DREAM, BREAKING THE CITY: URBAN ASPIRATIONS AND CLASS PRECARITY IN OINDRILA MUKHERJEE'S *THE DREAM BUILDERS*

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Abstract

Oindrila Mukherjee's The Dream Builders (2023) describes the struggles in modern India and its fictional city of Hrishipur where urbanization, sense of success and excessive class differences are in force. The article explores the impact of vivid images of construction and use of various narratives in the book on the message about urban illusory dreams. Urban life promises comfort with the help of luxury apartments, achievements in job issues, movement of people from place to place and status improvements; however, these dreams have their price in the form of hard work, old and invisible class system and gender roles construction. The author pays special attention to the connection between luxury buildings and the work and domestic help. The analysis of the lives of workers and wealthy residents elucidates the differences arising in the perception of the same urban place within different social strata. The return of Maneka Roy from the USA adds more complexity to the idea of globalization and resettlement which does not always mean a sense of safety. The research proves that Mukherjee highlights the role of aspiration but criticizes the urbanism that evaluates aspirations through the prism of materialism.

Keywords

Urbanization, Class Precarity, Urban Aspiration, Invisible Labour, Globalization, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Contemporary Indian fiction frequently engages with the transformations produced by urbanization, globalization and changing aspirations. Indian cities have increasingly become associated with economic opportunity, professional mobility, consumer culture and the promise of self-fashioning. Yet the material expansion of cities also produces unequal access to security, employment and social recognition. David Harvey's discussion of uneven geographical development is useful in understanding how capitalist development can produce concentrated spaces of wealth alongside differentiated forms of deprivation and insecurity (69–116). Literature can make these contradictions visible by placing individual experiences within the larger structures that shape them.

Oindrila Mukherjee's *The Dream Builders* (2023) enters this terrain through Hrishipur, a fictional city outside Delhi undergoing rapid transformation. The novel follows a group of interconnected characters whose lives occupy different positions within the city's social hierarchy. The narrative moves among Maneka, Ramona, Pinky, Chaya, Jessica, Ashok, Rajesh, Gopal, Salil and others, allowing the city to be viewed from multiple social locations. This polyphonic structure is central to Mukherjee's critique because Hrishipur does not have a single experience of modernity. Its buildings, malls, roads and luxury residences signify opportunity for some while representing labour, dependence or exclusion for others. The novel is likewise described as a



multi-perspective examination of class divisions, gender roles and survival in an increasingly Americanized India.

Existing critical responses to *The Dream Builders* have drawn attention to the novel's engagement with class divisions, gender, migration and the changing social landscape of contemporary India. Such readings establish the significance of Mukherjee's fictional city as a space in which the promises of modernity are experienced unevenly. However, the relationship between the novel's material architecture and its organization of labour deserves closer attention. The luxury apartment, construction site and domestic interior in the novel are not simply settings in which class differences become visible; they are spaces through which those differences are produced and maintained. This paper therefore shifts the focus from inequality as a thematic concern to the ways in which Mukherjee gives inequality a spatial and material form. By reading construction alongside domestic and service labour, the paper argues that the urban dream represented in the novel is not an individual achievement but a collective structure sustained through unequal relations of work, ownership and access.

The city itself becomes an important literary character. Maneka's arrival reveals a landscape of glass buildings, multinational corporations and expanding urban infrastructure. Her return from the United States makes her simultaneously familiar with and estranged from the India she encounters. Hrishipur appears modern and prosperous, but its polished surface conceals unfinished buildings, unstable investments and precarious lives.

The title *The Dream Builders* therefore carries a double meaning. It refers to those who construct the physical city as well as those who attempt to construct desirable lives within it. The novel asks an important question: who gets to build a dream, and whose labour makes that dream possible? This paper argues that Mukherjee uses the architecture of Hrishipur and the novel's shifting perspectives to reveal the class inequalities beneath contemporary urban aspiration. The city promises mobility, but the ability to convert aspiration into security remains unequally distributed.

Hrishipur and the Architecture of Aspiration:

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space provides a useful framework for reading Hrishipur. Space is not simply a neutral container in which social life occurs; it is produced through social relations and simultaneously participates in the organization of those relations (Lefebvre, 26). In *The Dream Builders*, Hrishipur demonstrates precisely this relationship between physical development and social hierarchy.

From Maneka's first encounter with the city, its modern architecture is associated with both attraction and estrangement. The skyline of glass and steel, multinational advertisements and expanding commercial spaces give Hrishipur the appearance of a global city. Yet the city also produces a sense of dislocation. Maneka has travelled thousands of miles from the United States, only to discover another landscape shaped by the influence of American capital and consumer culture. Trump Towers becomes the clearest symbol of this transformation. Ashok explains to Maneka that the land had once been farmland before real-estate developers began transforming it. The new development therefore does not simply add buildings to an existing city; it replaces an earlier landscape with a new economic imagination.

This transformation is significant because the novel places two different understandings of land alongside one another. The earlier agricultural landscape is associated with production and livelihood, whereas the new development converts land into an object of investment and consumption. The change therefore reflects more than physical urban expansion. It marks a shift in the meaning assigned to space itself. Land that once supported agricultural activity becomes valuable because of its potential to generate real-estate profit and social status. Mukherjee's



representation of this transformation reveals how urban aspiration is inseparable from processes of economic restructuring. The new city does not emerge upon an empty landscape; it is produced by replacing existing relationships between people and land with new relationships organized around property, investment and consumption.

The significance of Trump Towers lies in its ability to transform property into aspiration. Its luxurious interiors, swimming pools, landscaped surroundings and international associations promise not merely accommodation but a particular lifestyle. Salil describes purchasing a flat there as an "investment," while Ramona imagines the future residence as a more beautiful and complete version of the life she already possesses. Mukherjee consequently presents property as a form of social identity.

Yet the same symbol also reveals the fragility of this dream. Hrishipur contains numerous unfinished projects because developers have taken money from investors while failing to complete construction. Maneka's parents themselves become victims of this speculative urban economy when the apartment they purchased never materializes. The dream of property ownership thus becomes inseparable from financial risk.

The unfinished building consequently becomes an important counter-image to the completed luxury tower. A finished apartment can be marketed as evidence of stability, success and arrival, whereas an incomplete project exposes the uncertainty beneath the real-estate dream. Mukherjee thereby complicates the visual language of urban progress: construction suggests movement forward, but construction can also remain suspended, leaving investors and prospective residents caught between expectation and loss. The contrast is particularly important because the novel's title evokes building as a process of creating a future. Yet the incomplete structures of Hrishipur demonstrate that not every act of building produces a secure future. The city is full of dreams that remain unfinished.

Harvey's concept of uneven geographical development helps illuminate this contradiction. Urban investment does not produce uniform prosperity; it creates spaces in which wealth, infrastructure and security are unevenly distributed. In Hrishipur, spectacular towers rise beside unfinished projects and precarious settlements. The city therefore becomes an architectural representation of unequal development.

Mukherjee's title gains its full significance here. The city is being "built," but its construction does not guarantee collective progress. The physical expansion of Hrishipur produces a hierarchy between those who own the new spaces, those who work within them and those who remain outside them. The architecture of aspiration is therefore also architecture of exclusion.

Who Builds the Dream? Class and Invisible Labour:

If luxury developments represent the visible face of urban aspiration, Mukherjee repeatedly draws attention to the labour hidden behind that image. The novel refuses to present the city merely through the experiences of property owners and professionals. Instead, it shifts the narrative toward workers whose labour sustains the very lifestyle that affluent residents experience as effortless.

Chaya's position is especially revealing because her movement into Hrishipur is itself connected to the city's demand for service labour. Her arrival is not the movement of a privileged professional seeking opportunity in the global city; it is a movement shaped by economic necessity. The distinction is important to the novel's treatment of mobility. The same city that offers choice and consumption to affluent residents requires workers to move into it in order to perform the labour upon which that lifestyle depends. Migration into the city is therefore not experienced uniformly. For the privileged, mobility can signify freedom and self-realization; for precarious workers, it can signify the need to secure employment and survival.



Pinky's perspective is particularly important. Her work at the spa places her in intimate contact with wealthy women while keeping her socially subordinate to them. She listens to clients' private anxieties, massages their bodies and provides emotional as well as physical care, yet her own economic insecurity remains largely unnoticed. The contrast between the air-conditioned spaces of the spa and Pinky's cramped home reveals how class operates through comfort, time and bodily exhaustion. Her husband, Dilip, is a daily-wage labourer who struggles to find employment when construction projects stop. Mukherjee explicitly connects the instability of real-estate construction with the instability of working-class livelihoods.

Pinky's labour also demonstrates that invisibility is not restricted to physical work. Her occupation requires emotional labour as well. The wealthy women who visit the spa speak to her about their marriages, anxieties and private frustrations, turning her into a listener and temporary confidante. Yet the relationship remains economically unequal: the clients can disclose their problems without having to recognize Pinky's own circumstances. Her labour therefore involves both the body and the emotions. Mukherjee uses this asymmetry to reveal that service workers do not merely maintain the physical comfort of privileged households and lifestyles; they also absorb emotional burdens generated within those spaces. Their contribution remains valuable precisely because it is expected to disappear into the experience of service.

The novel makes the relationship between wealth and labour even more visible through Chaya. Having been brought to Hrishipur to work in a household, she encounters the city from the perspective of domestic service. Her understanding of the luxury development is fundamentally different from that of the people who will inhabit it. As she passes the American development, she realizes that wealthy residents will move into the completed building while workers like her will clean their toilets, cook their meals and possibly sleep in a small room somewhere on the property. (Mukherjee, 118). The same building therefore represents two completely different futures.

This is the central irony of the "dream builders." The people who physically sustain the city do not necessarily share in the prosperity they produce. Their labour is essential precisely because it becomes invisible. A clean apartment, prepared meal, landscaped residence or functioning luxury complex creates the illusion that comfort exists naturally. Mukherjee's multiple perspectives interrupt this illusion.

The novel's representation of domestic workers similarly reveals how class inequality operates within apparently private spaces. Near the end of the novel, Gopal observes a neighbourhood populated mainly by domestic helpers: maids, ayahs, drivers and sweepers. Their employers are absent, protected inside air-conditioned homes or cars, while the workers occupy the public spaces of the neighbourhood. Many of the ayahs are migrants who have travelled long distances to work in Hrishipur (Mukherjee, 220).

The physical separation between employers and workers becomes a metaphor for social invisibility. Both groups occupy the same city, but they experience radically different versions of it. The privileged inhabit protected interiors; workers move between those interiors, making them functional without receiving equivalent security.

The contrast becomes particularly sharp in the luxury development itself. When a model of a Trump Towers apartment is displayed, the audience is shown the living room, kitchen, balconies and even the servant's quarters as components of a desirable lifestyle. (Mukherjee, 143). The inclusion of servant space within the architecture of luxury is revealing: inequality is not external to the dream but built into it.

The significance of the servant quarters lies precisely in their proximity to luxury. The worker is not outside the privileged home but incorporated into its design in a carefully separated form. The architecture thus acknowledges the necessity of labour while simultaneously controlling its visibility. The resident's experience of comfort depends upon the presence of people whose



own living and working conditions are spatially minimized. Mukherjee's use of domestic architecture consequently extends the class argument beyond the contrast between rich and poor neighbourhoods. Inequality operates within the same structure, through divisions between rooms, functions and forms of access. The luxury apartment becomes a miniature version of the wider city: different classes occupy the same urban system but do not possess equal rights to its spaces.

Thus, class in *The Dream Builders* is not represented only through differences in income. It is embedded in access to space, comfort, time, mobility and recognition. The urban dream is relational: one person's privilege is sustained through another person's labour.

Gender, Migration and Unequal Belonging:

Class inequality in *The Dream Builders* intersects with gender and migration. Mukherjee's women occupy different positions within Hrishipur, but their experiences repeatedly demonstrate that material prosperity does not necessarily produce freedom. Ramona's life illustrates the contradictions of privilege. She inhabits the world of luxury housing, expensive services and social status, yet she experiences emotional isolation, marital dissatisfaction and intense pressure surrounding motherhood. Her desire for the new apartment is therefore not simply material. Trump Towers becomes a promise that something in her life might finally become complete. When Salil later considers selling the apartment, Ramona insists that it is "the only thing to look forward to" (Mukherjee, 258). Her attachment to property reveals how material aspiration can become a substitute for emotional fulfilment.

Ramona's attachment to the apartment also demonstrates how gender can shape the meaning of consumption. The desired home is not simply a financial asset; it becomes part of an imagined version of domestic happiness. Property appears capable of compensating for disappointments within marriage and family life. The urban dream therefore enters the private sphere, encouraging the belief that the acquisition of a better home can repair forms of dissatisfaction that are social and emotional rather than material. Mukherjee's treatment of Ramona consequently complicates the assumption that consumer aspiration is purely superficial. The desire for property has emotional roots, even as the novel exposes the limitations of expecting material possessions to resolve structural and personal inequalities.

Maneka offers a contrasting experience of mobility. She has achieved the professional and geographical mobility associated with globalization: she has lived in the United States, earned a PhD and become a professor. Yet her return to India unsettles rather than resolves her sense of belonging. At the airport and during her journey into Hrishipur, she encounters a city that is simultaneously familiar and foreign. The presence of American corporations and consumer spaces makes her recognize that the India she returns to has itself been transformed by globalization. Her position therefore complicates the assumption that mobility automatically produces freedom. Maneka can move between countries, but she remains emotionally caught between them. Her experience of belonging is unstable because geographical mobility has produced distance from the place she once understood as home.

The novel consequently presents globalization as unevenly experienced. For some characters, American influence represents investment, luxury and opportunity; for others, it produces displacement, aspiration or insecurity. Maneka's transnational mobility and Chaya's internal migration to Hrishipur are vastly different experiences, yet both reveal that movement does not guarantee belonging.

The contrast between Maneka and Chaya is particularly revealing because both are connected to movement but possess radically different forms of mobility. Maneka's international movement is supported by education, professional status and economic independence, whereas Chaya's movement is shaped by the need to find work. Their journeys therefore demonstrate that



mobility itself is classed. The ability to cross borders does not have the same meaning as the necessity of crossing regions for survival. By placing these experiences within the same narrative, Mukherjee prevents globalization from being understood solely as increased freedom of movement. Movement can be a privilege, an opportunity, a necessity or a form of displacement depending upon the social position of the person who moves.

Gender further complicates this relationship. The women in the novel are expected to negotiate marriage, motherhood, appearance, family and social reputation alongside economic aspiration. Even women with considerable class privilege remain constrained by these expectations. Mukherjee thus avoids presenting modernity as a simple transition from tradition to freedom. The contemporary city may provide new choices, but those choices remain shaped by class and gender.

Polyphony, Silence and the Unequal City:

Mukherjee's most important formal strategy is the novel's polyphonic structure. The story moves through multiple characters rather than giving the city a single central consciousness. This structure is not merely a stylistic choice; it allows social inequality to become visible through contrasting perspectives.

The same building can therefore mean different things to different characters. The significance of this technique lies in the refusal of a single authoritative interpretation of the city. If Hrishipur were presented only through the perspective of its affluent residents, its buildings could easily become uncomplicated symbols of progress. The shifting narrative instead produces a fragmented urban image. What appears desirable from one perspective can appear exploitative from another; what signifies security for one character can signify employment or dependence for another. Polyphony therefore performs the social argument of the novel at the level of form.

The structure of the narrative mirrors the unequal structure of the city by refusing to allow one social perspective to stand for the whole. To Ramona, Trump Towers represents beauty, security and aspiration. To investors, it represents financial opportunity. To construction workers, it provides employment. To Chaya, it represents a future in which she will continue serving the people who inhabit it. To Maneka, it becomes a symbol of the changing relationship between India and America.

This multiplication of perspectives prevents the reader from accepting any single version of urban progress. The privileged characters may see development as evidence of success, while workers encounter it as labour and uncertainty. Silence is equally important. Pinky's clients speak freely to her about their private lives, yet they rarely ask about hers. She becomes a listener whose labour includes absorbing the emotional burdens of privileged women. The imbalance is significant: the wealthy are given the space to speak, while the worker is expected to listen.

This distinction between speaking and listening also reflects the distribution of social power. Those with economic and social privilege possess greater freedom to define their own experiences publicly, whereas service workers are often expected to remain receptive rather than expressive. Mukherjee's decision to give narrative space to characters such as Pinky disrupts this arrangement. The novel does not merely tell readers that marginalised workers exist; it allows them to occupy consciousness within the narrative. Voice consequently becomes another form of access. Just as some characters possess greater access to desirable urban spaces, others possess greater access to the social authority to speak and be heard. The novel's polyphony challenges both forms of inequality.

Mukherjee's narrative reverses this hierarchy by giving Pinky her own perspective. The woman who is socially invisible within the city becomes visible within the novel. This is one of the political functions of polyphony: it allows readers to hear lives that the urban order itself tends



to marginalize. The novel therefore challenges the polished image of the modern city not through a single political statement but through juxtaposition. Luxury and labour, mobility and displacement, visibility and invisibility, aspiration and precarity exist beside one another.

Hrishipur's architecture consequently becomes a form of social narrative. Its towers display wealth, while its unfinished projects reveal failure. Its private interiors promise comfort, while its workers carry the burdens necessary to sustain them. The city appears to grow upward, but the novel repeatedly directs attention downward—to those who build, clean, drive, cook and serve.

Conclusion:

Oindrila Mukherjee's *The Dream Builders* presents urban India as a space where aspiration and inequality are produced together. Through Hrishipur's changing architecture, particularly the recurring image of Trump Towers, the novel reveals the seductive power of property, consumption and globalized urban culture. Yet it simultaneously exposes the unstable foundations beneath this dream.

Mukherjee's achievement lies in refusing to present aspiration as inherently false or undesirable. Her characters genuinely want better lives: secure homes, professional success, emotional fulfilment, mobility and recognition. The problem lies in an urban culture that increasingly defines such fulfilment through property, consumption and social status.

The novel's multiple perspectives expose what this culture conceals. Construction workers, domestic employees, drivers and service workers become essential to the production of the privileged city even though their own security remains uncertain. Chaya's recognition that workers will clean the homes of the wealthy, Pinky's experience of serving affluent clients and Gopal's observation of migrant domestic workers all demonstrate that urban prosperity depends upon an unequal organization of labour.

Maneka's return from the United States adds another dimension by showing that geographical and professional mobility cannot guarantee belonging. Her position between India and America reflects the broader instability of a city caught between older social structures and new global aspirations.

Read through the relationship between architecture and labour, the novel's central metaphor of building becomes deliberately unstable. Buildings can represent achievement, but they can also represent speculation, exclusion and dependence. Likewise, dreams can express genuine aspirations for security and fulfilment while remaining shaped by unequal social conditions. Mukherjee's achievement is to hold these two meanings together rather than reducing the urban dream to either celebration or condemnation.

Ultimately, *The Dream Builders* asks readers to look beyond the visible architecture of progress. A city cannot be understood only through its towers, malls and luxury residences. It must also be understood through the people who construct, clean, maintain and inhabit it under unequal conditions. The "dream builders" are therefore not simply those who own the dreams of the new city but those whose often-unrecognized labour makes those dreams possible. Mukherjee's Hrishipur reminds us that every glittering urban dream has a social cost—and that the most important stories of the city may belong to those who remain outside its polished image.

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