Decoding the Infrastructural Logic: An Analytical Reading of Tabish Khair's *Night of Happiness* and Manu Joseph's *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous*

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Abstract

This research article explores how the infrastructural logic, as portrayed in Manu Joseph's 2017 novel Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous and Tabish Khair's 2018 novel Night of Happiness, signals the uneven distribution of resources and unbalanced development in contemporary India. It also looks into the ways in which the political ideologies, cultural assumptions, and economic realities of contemporary India are encoded in the infrastructure of the country. The article further explores the ways in which these novels shed blazing light onto the unpalatable underside of the finely-grained political rhetoric of progress and security which ordains and fuels the flimsy and culpable infrastructure of the country.

Keywords: Development Discourse, Urbanization, Manu Joseph, Tabish Khair, Infrastructure, Segregationist Economy

Every socio-political infrastructure is both the cause and the effect of a particular way of social life and its political economy. This infrastructure is simultaneously physical reality, institutional presence, social phenomena, cultural practice, and symbolic gesture. The material, symbolic, and conceptual realization of infrastructures could be best identified in the urbanization projects. Every such project, with its elaborate use of the discourses of development and progress as its definition and justification, is an act of the image production of a State or an institution. The economic, sociopolitical, and intellectual infrastructures of any State would always be in dialogue with each other and these intricately-interlinked infrastructures are pivotal not only in defining the economic and political relations but in determining the socio-cultural postures of the State as well. In a country like India which is, as Ramachandra Guha has rightly observed "a land of unparalleled cultural diversity but also, less appealingly, of massive social disparities" (xix), any form of writing reflecting the socio-

political realities is an audacious political act. In writing Miss *Laila Armed and Dangerous* and *Night of Happiness* Manu Joseph and Tabish Khair daringly took up this act did justice to it in their own ways.

Interestingly enough, both Joseph and Khair place a Muslim character at the centre of their story and develop the plot around their life. In the process of demystifying the life of these intriguing central characters, the novels offer a vivid picture of the socio-political and economic realities of contemporary India. Apart from these thematic similarities both the novels share another common ground in its stylistic aspect as well. Joseph's *Miss Laila, Armed and Dangerous* and Khair's *Night of Happiness* display a laudable blend of literary flair and popular appeal as they maintain a thriller mood simultaneously when they valiantly address a range of issues and problems that are present and pressing today.

Joseph's loosely tied plot contains characters and events which take the readers onto intriguing directions. He kicks start the narrative as the young vlogger, Akhila Iyyer, comes across her neighbours standing terrified as an old building in their neighborhood crumbled down upon its inhabitants in Mumbai. The narrative, then, switches between the less tightly connected episodes of the political tycoon Professor Vaid's interference in the political and cultural developments in the country, his sporadic monitoring of Akhila, the ongoing rescue activity in the debris of the collapsed building in which Akhila takes part, and the mysterious journey of the eponymous Liala and her friend and employer Jamal who has been pursued by the police based on the oracular delirium of a man trapped in the debris. In the course of unfolding his politically charged thriller narrative, Joseph highlights the increasingly internalizing cultural prejudices and policing, and the ever-widening gap between the poor and the privileged vis-à-vis the harrowingly looming nationalistic sentiments in contemporary India.

Night of Happiness tells the story of the pragmatic entrepreneur Anil Mehrotra's cumbersome journey into the personal life of his lieutenant Ahmed. His journey dismantles contemporary Indian societies' religious and cultural prejudices, intolerance and the socio-economic inequalities beneath the fine-grained discourses of progress. The novel begins self-consciously in a five-star hotel room, acknowledging the least possibility of an average Indian citizen to reach there unless they are low-level employ in the hotel. Then the narrative gives a glimpse of the fast-thriving logistic business of Mehrotra and the elite social life of his wife who always likes to arrange some "five-star dinner to honor some literary prize winners" (Khair 18). Mehrotra's unstinting admiration for his polyglot, but reticent employ Ahmed gets the narrative into gear. However, Mehrotra's confrontation with Ahmed's 'absent wife' triggers the downfall of his confidence on Ahmed and eventually ends up in Mehrotra appointing a high-end private detective agency. The narrative then unfolds the privations and pathos of Ahmed's childhood and adulthood at Bodh-Gaya, in the state of Bihar. Years back when Ahmed got married to a non-Muslim woman named Roshni, the religious and cultural conservatism of his society surfaced and it culminated in his migration

to Mumbai and where he got hired by Mehrotra. Unfortunately, tragedy has not done with Ahmed yet, in Mumbai Roshni gets murdered in the hands of religious fanatics and it leaving Ahmed in the hazy space between sanity and insanity.

Fundamentalism, Surveillance, and the Public Inertia

Joseph and Khair displayed an acute sensitivity to the country's contemporary cultural and political developments as they delineate the prejudiced and deplorable treatment of Muslims not only by the State and non-State actors but by the common public as well. Moreover, the rise of the political superstar and the ensuring power aggrandizement and the growing pro-nationalists are at the heart of Joseph's narrative. Joseph's incredibly daring vlogger Akhila mocks the ruling party, its magisterial leader, stalwart supporters and its aggressive offshoots. As the narrative notes "[f]or all her charade, Miss Iyer is not a comedian…. She is something else, something more political" (Joseph 9). But the sharp critical edge of her political joke upsets the self-appointed cultural guardians of the country and quiet unsurprisingly the stalwarts pay her a remarkable visit.

> 'Can you tell us a joke,' one of them says. They punch her, slap her. One man kicks as though this is his specialilty. She catches a glimpse of one of them recording the assault on his phone. The crowd does not react. The firemen and cops don't' move. She begins to fight back, bites the ear of a thug, but they throw her away with ease (Joseph 20).

The nonchalant posture of the public and the police is alarming here. They neglect, if not enjoy, the spectacle of a young girl getting beaten up by the politically-empowered thugs. Moreover, the ineffectiveness and the reckless lassitude of the Country's most important apparatus to keep peace and order – the police department – signal the intensity of the appalling socio-political trajectory of the country. Joseph had portrayed the self-indulgent, complacent, and politically inert mass-consciousness in his earlier novels as well. However, in *Miss Laila*, he highlights an irrationally whiny society which has zero degree of critical reflection and action. Also, it is a disappointing fact that the people's idea about efficiency is highly mediated through the capitalist cultural assumptions. This distorted and prejudiced idea of competence becomes apparent as the residents scorn the firemen who had come to rescue those who are trapped in the debris.

> 'You are so fat, how can you call yourself a fireman,' a resident says in Marathi. It is true. The fireman is a bit large. Most of the firemen on the debris have enormous paunches. That is how they have always been…. But they can do things men of their shape are not expected to – they can even climb poles, and only slightly slower than monkeys (Joseph 18).

One comes across the prejudiced, complacent, and culpably silent public in Khair's novel too. In fact, they were the catalyst for all of Ahmed's tragedies including his drop out from

school, his uprooting from Bodh Gaya, his mother's unhappy last days, the tragic death of his wife and so on.

The unwarranted and unethical practices of surveillance on its central characters are yet another connecting thread between Joseph's and Khair's narrative. Surveillance is, in both the novels, the linchpin that pulls together the narrative and spins the story into different directions. In *Miss Laila*, there are two layers of surveillance: Prof. Ved's surveillance of Akhila and the RAW's and police's surveillance of Jamal and Laila. In *Night of Happiness* it is not the governmental body but a private agency undertakes the surveillance on its central character. However, Khair ingeniously unfolds the story as Mr Mehrotra's writing describing the information about the private life of Ahmed that he gathered through a private investigation agency. This assures even the reader's complicity in snooping on another person's life and who is no better than Mr Mehrotra. However, these surveillance practices fundamentally rubbish the democratic rights that have been guaranteed by the State. Moreover, these practices are informed and fuelled by the monitoring agent's prejudices, likings, animosities, dreams and nightmares.

Media, and the Urban Infrastructure

The narrative of *Miss Laila* further depicts the poor disaster management system and the self-serving, and socially-uncommitted media of the country. The narrative notes that, although the media people are gathered around the collapsed building, this tragedy would not make the headlines because "[a]ll news is going to be about Damodarbhai [the new political superstar and the Prime Minister of the country]. Also, the fallen building was a low-income kind of place" (Joseph, 15). Media, being driven by viewership and rating, are often focus on sensationalizing instead of safeguarding the democratic values and sensitizing the common folks about the lurking dangers in apparently benign socio-political developments. From media's point of view, celebrities like Damodarbhai are the best bait to catch large numbers of viewers and as Rein et al. said "a celebrity is a name which once made by the news, now makes news by itself" (qtd. in Redmond 938).

On the one hand, the country has burgeoning pro-nationalists, self-appointed cultural guardians and the poor people who are being lamented over by the hypocritical liberals and leftists and being overlooked by the mainstream media; on the other, it has the globalised economy which facilitates the free flow of capital. However, it is the lower-class and lower-middle-class people are the one who gets squeezed in the disjunction between the nationalist politics and the globalised economy. The ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-notes, in terms of their economic and social capital, has been projected in these novels although in subtle levels. The image of the Indian city of Mumbai, with its cramped buildings, overpopulated streets, and police barricades is a perfect of foil of another Mumbai of celebrities and celebrations, with salubrious dwellings, skyscrapers and, like Aravind Adiga's Delhi, portrayed in his brilliant novel *The White Tiger*, of chandeliers, shopping

malls, and servants. These buildings and spatial arrangements embody the logic and ideological undercurrents which plays a decisive role in the political economy of the country. As Edgar and Sedgwick notes:

> Building expresses the human capacity to organize the environment within which they live, in terms of locations that are meaningful, and thus to articulate and bound their cultural world. It may then be suggested that it is through architecture that particular cultures, as well as humanity as a whole, come to express and understand themselves" (23).

Joseph's narrative describes Mumbai city as the one where you can see "the crush of people and shine of the rich" (Joseph 104). Laila's too dwells in a very populated area where one could always see peoples "in the balconies, behind windows, on terraces and on the ground too". Laila and her sister Aisha once held a protractor at their arm's length and "found people in every angle, except angles 80 to 110" (106). However, the urban-centered development and the downfall of the agrarian economy are the two major reasons which led to the mass urban migration. As Adorno and Horkheimer noted as early as in the mid-1940s "[t]he huge gleaming towers that shoot up everywhere are outward signs of the ingenious planning of international concerns, towards which the entrepreneurial system…was already hastening" (406). The unequal development of the unban and the rural setting worked in tandem with the globalized capital and resulted not only in the creation of urban underdogs but ecological devastation as well. Joseph gives direct hints about the massive ecological erosion happening around. Although virtually silent on this issue in all other parts of his novel, at one point his narratives notes; "[o]utside, the world is ugly and prosperous. Giant factories stand where there used to be green fields. The air is grey and people are in the spells of purpose" (103). Khair's Mumbai also has its posh people and their glistering lifestyles and the metropolis also has its underdogs living under appalling condition with very minimal life chances. The novelist accentuates this undeniable feature of urban India through the elaborate description of the architectural features and the physical settings of the narrative. This is rather apparent as the narrator describes the place where the book publishers arrange banquet to "facilitate a son of the nation", who had won a major literary award, who is on his second trip to India.

> The hall was set for a buffet, two sides lined with silvery containers, some simmering over small flames, some still being installed. There were high round tables, without stools, on one side of the hall, close to the food tables, and chairs and sofas on another side…. Uniformed bearers were circulating with trays bearing elaborate snacks and drinks. The light from chandeliers, fashioned like strings of diamonds, was reflected off the real and false diamonds adoring many necks (Khair 40-41).

Comparing to his glossy world of fashion, luxury, golf club bantering and celebrations, Mehrotra finds Ahmed's dwelling grim as it has "too many roofs and no gardens or parks" and he does "feel sad and uneasy" (19, 20). However, Mehrotra is not an empathetic

philanthropist to dedicate his time and energy to work for the underprivileged; on the contrary, he enjoys his own luxurious comfort when he compares his life with the poor Other. In fact, Mehrotra's cultural prejudices surface as he says that the poor neighborhoods "exude a mix of sadness and threat" (21) in him. Although they are in the same geopolitical territory, the life chances of Mehrotra and Ahmed are incomparably different and Mehrotra notes "I thought of the distance from my house to Ahmed's colony, and though the two were roughly the same in kilometers, they seemed entirely incommensurate to me" (47).

Globalized Economy and Nationalized Politics: the Politics of Tourism and 'Modernization'

Khair's narrative also stresses the incompatibility between a globalized economy and nationalized politics. Mehrotra is confident that the economic problems might affect his business only if it is global or at least national in scale. Then the narrative sketches the new tourist destination; Bodh Gaya, where people depend upon the foreign money to win their bread. However, the disappointing fact is that these people are most likely to be affected by global or national economic crisis, in other words, they gain least and lost most in the globalized politico-economic system. "The season Ahmed started working for Hanif Ustad was a bad one economically. A vague global crisis, like some jealous invisible god, had blighted businesses and salaries in Maruganj too: many members of the society had less to spare, and hence they gave less work to Ammajaan" (Khair 80), the narrative notes. The tourist culture not only threw the economy of Bodh Gaya out of gear, but it seriously damaged the natural and cultural environment of the place too. Mehrotra notes the metamorphosis of Bodh Gaya into a typical tourist-economy hub during his second visit to the place:

> [T]he place was more crowded during my second trip, and it had a greater preponderance of bussed and chartered tourists, urbanized cafes and air-conditioned hotels, which had largely replaced the dhaba-joints, with benches and charpoys on the pavements or under flimsy awnings, and the hippie-like backpackers I recalled from my first trip (Khair 89).

The "modernisation" of the graveyard that Khair sketches in his narrative has a metonymic relationship with the whole development discourse on which much other political rhetorics are constructed. Ahmed's mother Ammajan, went into raptures as came to know that the grave, where her husband had been buried, was protected with newly built walls by the new management. Ahmed too was enthused about the new development and he says "[t]he walls prevent goats and dogs from entering, and there is even a gateman to keep loiterers out!" (Khair 104). However, the new management's real managing has shown its true colors as Ammajan is denied permission to enter into the graveyard since they find "[w]omen are too week and too soft-hearted to enter graveyards" (106). Khair ingeniously

employs this incident to signal the grand modernization project by which the economic and political upper crust edges out the disenfranchised urban underdogs further and further.

Infrastructure Logic and the Ideological Undercurrents

The word infrastructure is the combination of two words which came into prominence in the twentieth century. The prefix 'infra' has its root in Latin and meaning something 'below' and the word structure also came from Latin *strutura* meaning 'to build'. A critical analysis of the infrastructure could decode the 'below-build' or the underlying organizing principles and policies of a particular society. Both Joseph and Khair express the flaws in the socio-economic and cultural configurations of contemporary India by projecting its week and flimsy infrastructure. There are the glittering urban elite dwellings portrayed in contrast with the poverty and privations of the lower class life and business tycoons and political godfathers placed in contrast to the economically crippled and politically ignorant populace. There are the creaky and shit-infested railway tracks and suburban roads and the grandeur of national highways. There are stark communal and cultural prejudices which trigger unwarranted snooping into the private life of its central characters and the exclusivist and byzantine lifestyle of the political and economic upper crust. There are the self-appointed cultural guardians and hypocritical left-liberals and elite writers. There are educational institutions which seek to increase the docility, discipline, and employability of the students and to stamp down their dissident spirit.

Both the novel's spatial switch between the urban and the suburban parts of Mumbai and the character switch between the rich-rightwing Centre and the poor-Muslim Other are set to highlight the infrastructural, political and ideological undercurrents and the segregationist ethos in contemporary India. Aravind Adiga's had mastered this art of juxtaposing fundamental inequalities of the glossy 'incredible India' in his Booker Prize-winning novel *The Wight Tiger*, although his protagonist was not a Muslim but a lower-class man. Balaram Halwai's journey from Bihar to Delhi to Bangalore maps the less appealing sideshows of urbanization and the so-called development. As Andre Frankovits notes, "[e]conomic globalization has succeeded in putting development in the forefront of ideological battles over democratic principle" but its intensity doubles when this sort of strategic downplay of democratic principle occurs in a country like India which already has deeply entrenched undemocratic myths and practices like the caste system. Joseph and Khair, however, in their novels accentuate the layers of undemocratic, segregationist, and prejudiced ideological structure and epistemic pattern that inform the political economy and socio-cultural dispositions of the country. However, while accentuating the country's deeply internalized religious and cultural assumptions and prejudices, both Khair and Joseph assiduously map the infrastructural features of today's India and gesture towards the latent politics and segregationist ethos embedded in it.

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