

## When Skies Are Also Walls: Oindrila Mukherjee's *The Dream Builders*

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If we find ourselves in the basement of a building, our instinct will be to find a way out by traveling upward. We look for an elevator, the stairs. Arrows that progress in series which, if we follow correctly, will lead us to a place where we will be allowed to rise. This seems like the natural order of things. Plants burst the walls of their seeds in order to stretch upward. Small creatures climb to the top of small promontories in order to scout for food or danger. Humans see what other humans have, how other humans live, and they reach out toward it. Life progresses toward the sun.

If we find ourselves on the roof of a building—the penthouse rooftop garden: an aerie of fruit trees or rose-heavy trellises, pots carefully concealed by artful greenery, gardeners gone by early morning so as not to disturb the illusion of privacy—our instinct will be to find a way out by traveling downwards. We look for a grate or a grill that might conceal an elevator, a stairwell, an emergency escape. Quick, before we are seen, before we are expelled. This, too, seems like the natural order of things. A brief glimpse of paradise before our true selves lead us to exposure, banishment, conquest. We know our myths. All inclusion is temporary. Vista is a form of commerce. Skies are also walls.

These twin forces—the pressure to rise, the escape of the fall—are at work all throughout Mukherjee's meticulously crafted debut novel. Set in Hrishipur, a fictionalized city that closely resembles one of the thronging satellite cities that orbit New Delhi, *The Dream Builders* examines the impact of rapid large-scale globalization on a country whose infrastructure struggles to keep pace with its growth and whose generational class divisions thwart its people's ability to survive. While that sentence could easily be written about 21<sup>st</sup>

century America, this is an Indian book, uniquely about India's landscape, its people, its high-rises unfurling like sprouts thrusting from their seeds. Told in interludes and from the perspective of ten different characters, *The Dream Builders* follows the story of Maneka Roy, an English professor at a small American university, who returns to India to help her recently widowed father, Samiran, navigate his new life in the absence of his wife. Samiran and Maneka's mother moved to Hrishipur from their home in Kolkata, where Maneka was raised, so that Maneka's mother could fulfill her lifelong dream to become a teacher. They have sunk all their savings into the move, purchasing a flat in one of the slickly advertised developments that, in spite of years of promises and payments, has yet to be built. As Samiran navigates the complex and corrupt legal system in hopes of recouping some of the couple's down payment, Maneka reinserts herself into an Indian life that no longer fits the person she has become, but still speaks to the person she imagines she will be.

Maneka is aided in this effort by her wealthy childhood friend, Ramona, an icon of the kind of glamorous ease which Hrishipur offers to its upper class, who is nevertheless tormented by her own secret attraction to self-destruction. Nervous, insecure, reeling from a recent miscarriage and utterly oblivious to the life-and-death equations that are computed all around her, Ramona serves as a foil to Maneka's deliberate critique of Indian class structures which, for all its diligent post-Marxist ideology, still fails to see individual people as truly unique from each other. For Ramona the servants who drive her, cook for her, clean her home and wait upon her in countless other ways are somewhat interchangeable. While they may be relied upon, even treasured, they can also be replaced. For Maneka, who left India in her early twenties and has experienced her transition into adulthood abroad, the people she returns to are a theory that tests assumptions she holds from her childhood about loyalty versus value, individuality or belonging. The radical upheaval that is taking place inside Indian society is invisible to both Ramona and Maneka because they are both too far away to see it—Ramona because she is hovering above the groundswell on her fashionable fourteenth floor balcony, Maneka because her vision is obscured by the overlapping lenses of memory and distance.

From these central tensions unspool the stories that orbit Maneka and Ramona's friendship: Ramona's husband Salil, an international business mogul, who, despite having simpler aspirations towards happiness than his wife, is similarly hindered in its achievement; the beleaguered Pinky, a masseuse who provides exotic facials to Hrishipur's wealthy housewives and also collects their secrets; the radical Ashok, whose aspirations to make real art are thwarted by the seedy mendacity of his day gig as a wedding photographer; the seething Gopal, alienated by his disability from birth, who works as an electrician by day and a saboteur of all sorts of dreams under the cover of darkness; the resilient Chaya, Samiran's maid, who insists on the possibility of happiness in spite of all evidence to the contrary; and more

and more besides. The book contains an almost endless array of characters—more bodies, more hopes, more memories and lineages, more needs, desires, triumphs and devastating defeat—all of whom pass their days striving toward, shaking their fist at, or flinching beneath the golden Trump Towers sign (Coming Soon!) that dominates their horizon.

And what of Hrishipur? A city of aspiration and mirage, a place looped into an eternal cycle of becoming that does not seem capable of delivering its many promises to its citizens, but offers something else instead. Hrishipur—as much a character as any other in the novel—provides the currency by which the human characters purchase their lives: proximity. In some cases, this proximity is to each other and the transaction is more or less straightforward. Pinky, given a “vacation” from her job that threatens her family’s security, weaponizes her proximity to the secret lives of the Hrishipur elite as a means of survival. Ashok, similarly poised to see what should remain hidden, trades instead in a proximate authenticity to what can be seen as a real life, real desire, real need, yet still a life, desire and need that can be held at a sanitized distance. Other characters leverage the proximities offered by Hrishipur’s overlaid gridwork of streets for more abstruse ends. Chaya who wants love but finds, instead, a capacity for forgiveness; Gopal who wants community but is left with the satisfaction of annihilation; Ramona who wants for nothing but needs more space, more room, more time, more sky.

By the end of the novel, the book answers many of its overt questions. Ramona and Maneka’s story arcs are completed. The secondary characters, who have each in turn stepped into a main character role, have resolved their most central conflicts. Yet, just as we understand that the characters’ lives will continue after this point, filled with the questions that arise from the provisional answers the book provides, we, too, are left pondering. What if we have been in the basement of this building for a very long time, almost a lifetime, in fact? Do we even see the feet outside the windows anymore? Do we see the windows as anything other than tools to allow for the drying of laundry, the ingress of necessary light? And how did we get on the roof? Did we take a fortuitous wrong turn? Did we open a felicitously unlocked door and arrive, by happenstance, in this place that most certainly was not made for us? Is there another direction we can travel besides the ones in which we are compelled? Up or down, each is a form of escape, a negation of who we are in the place where we find ourselves when the first pages of the book (the life, the city, the dream) begins. No one has been here (basement, rooftop, balcony in between) all along, but whoever finds themselves here is supposed to think of the sky—sliver of sky, arc of sky, wide, howling expanse—as a kind of freedom, not another type of wall. Vista is a form of commerce. That much we know for sure. And on our global horizons, where the gold Trump Towers letters blink and gleam, it may not be one any of us can afford, no matter our abilities, no matter our shared needs.