



Research Paper

Configurations of Urban Fantasy in *No Trespassing*

Sindhu J.

(Professor, Department of English, Bangalore University, Bengaluru 560056)

ABSTRACT: *The paper focuses on the construction of urban fantasy in Brinda Narayan's novel No Trespassing, a novel that centres on an upmarket gated residential community in the metropolis of contemporary Bangalore. The phenomenon of urban sprawl in Bangalore since the 1990s has been prominently marked by both urban spread on the peripheries of the city as well as redevelopment within the built-up spaces of the city. The former aspect of urban growth has been characterised particularly by the development of gated residential communities by real estate agents and builders. These built-up urban projects, especially those on the outskirts of the growing city, are aggressively advertised and marketed as exclusive residential pockets which showcase an attractive combination of urban conveniences and amenities, while retaining the allure of original nature within their boundaries. These projections of urban residential space are underpinned by specific class connotations, in that they target particular upper-middle-class and ultra wealthy income groups, while also underscoring the implications of exclusivity, privacy and socio-cultural privilege that are concomitant with such projections. The ambience of these exclusive constructed urban spaces is packaged and marketed as the marker of class status and socio-cultural privilege to those who buy into it. The vocabulary structured around the physical constructions within such gated communities, as well as that of the out-of-this-world experience attributed to them in advertisements, is geared towards reconfiguring the mundane everyday business of living into something fantastical. This rhetoric, while projecting the esoteric and sybaritic as part of urban fantasy, characteristically denies and erases the socio-economic injustices upon which the fantasy inevitably rests. In Narayan's novel No Trespassing, the characteristic features of urban fantasy are showcased by Fantasia, a gated residential community in Whitefield, East Bangalore; however, this urban fantasy is deconstructed through the events in the novel to reveal its murky nexus with criminality, transforming the urban fantasy into a dystopic nightmare. The paper attempts a close reading of the novel's urban fantasy, exploring its nuances and socio-economic implications through the frames of urban development paradigms that have informed and shaped Bangalore's conurbation.*

KEYWORDS: Enclave urbanism, conurbation, urban fantasy.

Received 27 July, 2024; Revised 06 Aug., 2024; Accepted 08 Aug., 2024 © The author(s) 2024.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Urban growth in the city of Bengaluru in the last four decades (since the 1990s IT sector boom which catapulted the city into a global template of development) has been phenomenal, as well as poorly planned and executed. Real estate prices have soared to a point where the ordinary concept of housing as a basic human need (across class/caste/community/gender) has spiralled out of reach for most sections of society, while itself being metamorphosed into something unrecognisable: the mundane business of everyday life with a roof over one's head has been transformed into a fantastical experience by the vocabulary of urban developers/ builders, real estate agents, and other involved entities. Within Bengaluru's ever-increasing boundaries, built-up concrete spaces in the heart of the city are being aggressively reworked ("redeveloped") into condominiums that cater to the spiralling population pressure, residential spaces that are consumed by investors and out-of-state white-collar employees alike. As land availability within the city becomes scarcer, the thrust of the highly-charged and volatile real estate market has been concentrated on erstwhile outlying areas of the city in the last few decades. These peri-urban areas which are now completely transformed by urban sprawl, are marked particularly by the phenomenon of what Stallmeyer terms "enclave urbanism" (96). Enclave urbanism refers to a particular kind of conurbation in the form of exclusive gated residential spaces, with either apartment blocks or independent villas built with every imaginable civic amenity and other urban conveniences and luxuries. The most outstanding feature of enclave urbanism is its physical as well as socio-economic exclusivity, which is almost always projected as a marker of class status and prestige. A typical advertisement for enclave urbanism would carry

phrases like “exclusive townhouses”, “25+ recreational experiences”, “Clock tower and clubhouse”, “amphitheatre, multi-pool, multipurpose court, bowling alley, private garden, private terrace”, “location map legend”, etc (*Deccan Herald*, Sunday, 26 November 2023, No.326). As Stallmeyer has noted in his study of urban development in East Bengaluru, such residential complexes (with integrated related services and spaces) imply that an inhabitant need never actually move outside this (privileged and rarefied) space, unless it is to go to yet another such space (96). The rhetoric of such advertisements is geared towards fostering and sustaining an exclusivity which is largely class-based, but which also feeds into the aspirational values and caste/community/race affiliations within upper-middle classes and elite groups. In tracing the history of privatised exclusive urban housing developments in the peri-urban areas of Bengaluru, Janaki Nair observes that in the advertising of urban enclave features such as schools, community centres, club houses, swimming pools, children’s play areas, parks, gardens, and jogging tracks, what is actually being offered for sale is “[...] indeed a whole lifestyle behind protected walls” (161).

It is precisely this kind of constructed urban space that Fantasia, a gated residential enclave in Whitefield (a locality with its own colonial inception history based on racial exclusivity) and the central focus of *No Trespassing* (the novel under discussion), represents. Fantasia consists of a hundred acres with eighty Mediterranean villas set in four clusters each with an arresting view: Utopia (lake view), Arcadia (golf course view), Shangrila (forest view) and Eden (Zen garden view), a centrepiece dome-shaped clubhouse, sixty thousand square feet of air-conditioned extravagance with exceptional amenities (a squash court, an amphitheatre, and a well-stocked bar to go with the billiards table, apart from ‘standard’ ones like a swimming pool (Narayan, *NT* 6). The wooden arch over the entrance is inscribed “‘Fantasia: So Wildly Kusro’”, while the tagline of its builder-figure/brand name Kusro reads “‘So Wildly Kusro: A Rainbow Dale’” (Narayan, *NT* 321). Each villa costs two million dollars, while aspiring buyers are considered only if they have been invited by Kusro’s ‘selectors’. The former detail determines to a large extent the elite super-rich clique that ultimately forms the Fantasia residential community, while the latter aspect of invitation/selection further underscores the exclusivity in socio-cultural terms. The round-the-clock security service is powered by surveillance cameras all over the place, with guards crosschecking the credentials of every visitor before allowing them a single-point entry into Fantasia; they also have networked links with the inhabitants of the village/slum area beyond the walls of Fantasia, who come in daily to cater to the housekeeping and other miscellaneous services required by the Fantasia lifestyle. Fantasia epitomises modern urban fantasy: that “every builder of upper middle-class housing in Bangalore promotes the idea that what he is offering on sale is not mere housing but a ‘lifestyle’” (Nair 162). In Nair’s words, what builders of such exclusive urban spaces ultimately sell is the dream of successful planning itself (162). The socio-cultural fabric, as well as the carefully constructed atmosphere of these urban spaces (Fantasia being a prime example), are in themselves part of the commodity culture that residents buy into, and become active participants thereof. The “guarantee of homogenous social class and undisturbed enjoyment of privilege” (Nair 163) creates an exclusivity dependent upon physical separation as well as the kind of modern urban myth-making represented by Fantasia. Vedika and other women residents of Fantasia typify, in varying degrees, the upper middle-class woman citizen as a consumer/perpetuator of such constructed privilege: they effortlessly use the advantages of western culture while retaining a vaguely defined ‘Indianness’, a characteristic of the world of urban gated communities that accommodates “the peculiar logic of consumerist choice” (Srivastava 213).

The exclusivity is multi-dimensional: apart from promising a rarefied socio-cultural atmosphere, it also ensures a physical separation from the squalor, poverty and collapsed/inadequate urban state infrastructure outside its boundaries. In short, Fantasia and like urban spaces offer a dreamy “‘get away from it all’” (Nair 162) image, which has all the advantages of urban life (together with a packaged and controlled conceptualisation of nature) while simultaneously enabling residents to be well away from the noise, hubbub, crowding and other pressures of city life. Whatever had been the natural ecosystem prior to urbanisation, Nature itself (Fantasia being a prime example) is moulded to support these images of an elitist urban lifestyle which is marked in advertising rhetoric by notions of peace, tranquillity and sentimental evocations of pristine nature. Such constructed exclusivities constitute instances of urban fantasy within the phenomenon of enclave urbanism. Nair notes that the “conveniences and luxury services offered by builders evoke a variety of images that would appeal to the city élite ... there is the invocation of a pastoral idyll in such names as ‘Whispering Meadows’, ‘Whitefield Bougainvillea’, ‘Laughing Waters’, or ‘Nisarga’. These estates evoke images of lush green meadows, babbling brooks, and nature apart from toil in the city” (162). Further, Nair observes the elitist identification with invocations of European history embedded in the nomenclature of these urban fantasies: they have names like “‘Belvedere’, ‘Windermere’, ‘Prestige Acropolis’” (162). Present-day ads, like the one referred to earlier, reflects this characteristic to a nicety: an urban fantasy named “Provident Deansgate”, for example, urges buyers to “wake up to the sweet smell of blooming flowers, take a stroll on cobbled streets, soak up the vibe standing under a Victorian lamp post ... it’s time to live at Provident Deansgate ... start living the English life” (*Deccan Herald*, Sunday, 26 November 2023, No.326). Modern builders’ conscious affiliation to such

nomenclatures of colonialist genealogy is not just about invoking urban nostalgia; it is more a representation of “the spatial organization of the dominant managerial elites” and their “spatial forms [which are] aimed at unifying the symbolic environment of the elite around the world, thus superseding the historic specificity of each locale” (qtd. in Stallmeyer 95). The aspirational social fabric and atmosphere of Fantasia reflect these values fully.

Vedika, the protagonist of *NT* who hails from a relatively humbler middle class background, finds herself somewhat intimidated by her neighbours in Fantasia, doubting her own ability to fit in. Through a series of events, the idyllic urban fantasy she had consciously bought into begins to unravel in disturbing ways. Her son Sajan begins to have behavioural problems, chiefly consisting of a lack of mental concentration; she observes other Fantasia children indulging in perverted cruelty to animals and human playmates alike; even as she attempts to grapple with these puzzling matters, her son Sajan suddenly dies in an apparently freak accident through asphyxiation in the power generator room of Fantasia. The shock of this loss slowly recedes, making way for her conviction that her son had been murdered; she undertakes, against strong opposition from Fantasia’s residential committee and even from her own husband (who sees it as a waste of time), to find out the exact mystery of her child’s unnatural death. The convoluted plot of the novel ultimately leads her to discover nefarious underworld links between Kusro, the builder/cult figure of Fantasia and hitherto hazy elements from her own past. Her discoveries lead her to the realisation that the village/slum immediately outside Fantasia, from where all domestic services were accessed by Fantasia residents, was inhabited not by native locals, but by the displaced and dispossessed workers of Dhoolvansh, a village near Patna. These workers, once farmers with fertile land, were persuaded to sell to a mining company; they were ultimately dispossessed, dislocated, their water source poisoned with toxic lead effluents leading to widespread health problems, and behavioural disruptions in their children, one of them (a little girl) lynched to suppress their organised protests against the injustices and corruption of the mining company. Vedika finds out that her own father who had once served as the State Pollution Control Board scientist on the case, had taken bribes in the case. Her final discovery is that her son’s murder had been planned as part of an elaborate revenge on Fantasia by the Dhoolvansh victims; one of her most trusted neighbours Damini (a pretended Reiki healer), her substitute domestic help Mariamma (nanny to Vedika’s daughter Rhea), the milkman Venkaiah, the cart-iron man—all metamorphose from being recognised and accepted presences inside the gated community of Fantasia to inimical forces which topple its idyllic fantasy world, turning her living experience of it into a dystopic nightmare. The forest which had represented the much-marketed ‘pristine nature’ of Fantasia becomes the scene of sinister unnatural occurrences; Fantasia’s tight surveillance and internal security system fail Vedika, as they had her son; the gilded walls of her “cocoon” (*NT*, 277) home turn out to have high lead toxicity in the paint which have affected her own children and other residents’ as well; her frantic efforts to fight for accountability meet with opposition and social ostracism. Even when her investigations reveal that Damini had pushed and locked her son to his death into the smoky power backup room, and that toxic leaded paint had been used by the ‘builder’ Kusro (Damini’s brother) to coat the walls of Fantasia homes, she is categorically told that these are the phantasmagoria of her own bereaved maternal imagination; furthermore, the residents’ association of Fantasia energetically oppose the publicising of her discoveries, quoting the adverse effect it would have on the market value and ‘mystique’ of Fantasia.

My argument is that the urban fantasy showcased in this novel is not merely about the class-privileged socio-cultural props of enclave urbanism; more importantly, it is about its vicious and mostly unacknowledged connections with the violent socio-economic inequities that lie outside its high-walled boundaries. Vedika vaguely refers to this outside world of squalor and poverty as an “erstwhile village” (*NT* 66) which had existed before the onslaught of urbanisation, but this naive construct mirrors her unconsciousness of the murky inception history of Fantasia, connected as it is to the ironies of inequality outside the walls of its privileged space. The exclusivity offered by the fantasies within enclave urbanism is “protected by an architecture of fear – high walled compounds, 24-hour security, and restricted single point access – [so that] occupants find a refuge from the hurly-burly of political or social life, and a retreat into uninterrupted consumption” (Nair 163). In her analysis of the processes of modern enclave urbanism in Bengaluru, Nair points out that the advertised projections of builders/developers of urban privileged living (fantasies particularly marked by the motif of serenity) often successfully conceal the violence of acquisition (163). Fantasia’s privileged and entitled atmosphere is distorted and dismantled into a dystopic nightmare world punctuated by seemingly the most far-fetched and unreal premeditated revenge/crime, emanating from the violent injustices and inequities to which it is inevitably linked. Nair notes that a conspicuous consumption of successful planned privilege and exclusivity marks the ideal consumer of these urban fantasies; she argues, therefore, that these enclaves of privileged exclusivity represent “a retreat from politics itself” (163). Further, Nair observes that this physical separation from the uncertainties of politics is an indicator of how fragile such a constructed ‘peace’ may be, given that the urban fantasy which rests upon it is always-already confronted with, and constantly threatened by the “same deeply segmented social and economic life” (163) that prevails outside its physical world. Vedika’s agonised

discovery of Fantasia's realities is symbolised by her sudden realisation that the builder Kusro's much-vaunted tagline ("So Wildly Kusro: A Rainbow Dale") was actually an anagram for "Wow! Your Kids' Brains on Lead!") (NT 321). Significantly, this leads not any engagement with the injustices of the aggrieved Dhoolvansh community, but to a dismantling of life in Fantasia for Vedika and her family. Her eventual removal to Mumbai, albeit to a less pretentious and more plebeian residence, is an act of further distancing from political engagement.

II. CONCLUSION

The "new urban spatiality" (Burte 202) of gated communities, exemplified by modern urban spaces like Fantasia, almost always has a village/slum space created through violence, displacement and dispossession outside its guarded boundaries, as its inevitable "constitutive outside" (Nair, Afterword 231). And while there may be a physical, political, economic and socio-cultural separation between urban fantasy and its constitutive Other, paradoxically there are "intimate links between the planned and the unplanned" (Nair, Afterword 231). In the case of Fantasia, the 'village' conforms outwardly to this category of the constitutive other of enclave urbanism, while actually being as carefully planned a space with an ideology of revenge as its unifying factor, as Fantasia itself. The urban fantasy of enclave urbanism can be propped up only through its exclusivist, exclusionary and "territorialized forms of power, association and patronage" (Desai and Sanyal 9). This is amply demonstrated in the novel, with its title, *No Trespassing*, underscoring the construct further. Concomitantly, the village's ideology of revenge (manifested in premeditated crime) which distorts the urban fantasy of Fantasia into a dystopic nightmare can be read as a strategy of protest by which it defies "capitalist jubilation" (Nair Afterword 229). As such, it constitutes a serious inquiry into the complex predicaments of urban enclavism, especially in a fast-growing mega-city like Bengaluru. The "revanchist stand" (Desai and Sanyal 11) taken by the Dhoolvansh community begs the questions: (a) "What hope do these 'alternative'... strategies offer the urban poor of a determined and irreversible change in the conditions of their existence?" (Nair, Afterword 232); (b) Can the dystopic downturn of Fantasia (not excluding the crime-as-restitution involved) be construed as a protest by the urban poor, against their invisibilisation wrought by market forces in the context of urban real estate? (c) Does this form of protest, in turn, become a subversive resistance to "dominant forms of (urban) control", and therefore a demonstration of "disjunctive democracy" (Desai and Sanyal 10, 9)? (d) Does the urban utopian fantasy/dystopia dialectic in *No Trespassing* reflect the deeply troubled and increasingly challenged terrain of urban citizenship?

While "the nature of subaltern agency" (Desai and Sanyal 10) exhibited by the Dhoolvansh residents is both deadly and criminal, it exposes the pretensions of urban fantasy by attacking and dismantling its exclusivity, while pointing to the violent injustices on which that exclusivity is based. Thus, it could be argued that urban fantasy constitutes an important conceptual framework for understanding the vicissitudes of enclave urbanism, as illustrated in *No Trespassing*.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Burte, Himanshu. "Engine Urbanism". *Urbanizing Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities*, edited by Renu Desai and Romola Sanyal. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2012. 199-209.
- [2]. Desai, Renu and Romola Sanyal. "Urbanizing Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities". Introduction. Chapter 1. *Urbanizing Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities*, edited by Renu Desai and Romola Sanyal. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2012. 1-28.
- [3]. Nair, Janaki. "Afterword". *Urbanizing Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities*, edited by Renu Desai and Romola Sanyal. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2012. 229-236.
- [4]. ---. "Conceiving the City: Master Planning and Informal Power". *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century*. Oxford University Press, 2007. 121-165.
- [5]. Narayan, Brinda. *No Trespassing*. Tranquebar-Westland, 2019.
- [6]. Srivastava, Sanjay. "Post-national Urbanism: 'Ordinary' People, Capital and the State". *Urbanizing Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities*, edited by Renu Desai and Romola Sanyal. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2012. 210-221.
- [7]. Stallmeyer, John C. *Building Bangalore: Architecture and urban transformation in India's Silicon Valley*. Routledge Contemporary South Asia Series. 2011.