

Beyond Postcolonialism:
The Urban and Social Realist Turn in Indian and Nigerian
Literatures

by

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Abstract

Twenty-first century literatures of megacities like Mumbai and Lagos are moving away from the postcolonial condition ascribed to them. Since writing back to the Empire is no longer commensurate with the more accurate representation of their cities, contemporary literatures of Mumbai and Lagos are shifting towards fresh engagements with the extant issues of the present time. Literary trends in India and Nigeria demonstrate an urban turn and a social realist focus on the socio-political landscape of our times that include corruption, inequality and exclusion, unemployment, informal settlements, sanitation, infrastructure, and dysfunctional institutions. While the causes of many of these plights are rooted in colonial practices, their ongoing surge and impact remain debilitating. Contemporary authors continue to acknowledge the colonial histories of the cities they narrate; however, they are now bringing awareness to the present-day problems instead of dwelling on past injustices. These recent narratives, in a genre Ulka Anjaria terms ‘the new social realism,’ disrupt the comfort zones of middle-classes and aim to stir this group and others into reevaluating their personal and societal actions. I argue that the twenty-first century literary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos, employing diverse and innovative styles, implicate their audience in the perpetuation of prevalent urban problems. Through creative styles and unsettling aesthetics, contemporary city literatures reveal a new social consciousness of the immediate reality. The main corpus examined in this dissertation consists of urban novels and short stories published in the twenty-first century while also drawing from well-established Indian and Nigerian authors’ earlier works. I examine the narratives of corruption, formal and informal neighbourhoods, and infrastructure and traffic in *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry, *Welcome to Lagos* by Chibundu Onuzo, *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind

Adiga, *Graceland* by Chris Abani, *Breathless in Bombay* by Murzban F. Shroff, *No God in Sight* by Altaf Tyrewala, *Lagoon* by Nnedi Okorafor, and “Birdsong” and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie. With an emphasis on the present-day, these contemporary urban narratives of Mumbai and Lagos offer social commentary and disrupt what has become habitual, familiar, and unseen.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|------------|
| <i>Abstract</i> | <i>ii</i> |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | <i>iv</i> |
| <i>Introduction</i> | <i>1</i> |
| <i>Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities - Mumbai and Lagos</i> | <i>35</i> |
| <i>Chapter 2: Corruption Narratives</i> | <i>83</i> |
| <i>Chapter 3: Dualities in the City - Formal and Informal Neighbourhoods</i> | <i>135</i> |
| <i>Chapter 4: Traffic and Infrastructure</i> | <i>183</i> |
| <i>Conclusion</i> | <i>262</i> |
| <i>Works Cited</i> | <i>270</i> |

Introduction

‘Postcolonial’ is essentially a term that describes you as a negative. I mean, when I think of the world that I grew up to inhabit, my dominant memory of it is not that it was trying to be a successor state to a colony; it was trying to create its own reality, which today is the reality that we do inhabit.

— Amitav Ghosh

The histories of Mumbai¹ and Lagos, and likewise the nations of India and Nigeria, or the other formerly colonized societies around the world, do not begin—or end—with their colonization. Neither their colonization nor their postcoloniality can comprise the whole of their identities. Mumbai and Lagos existed, in all their richness, long before colonialism ‘invented’ them. The authors of literary fiction born after the end of colonization—in many cases, born decades after their nation’s independence—may not see themselves and their contemporaries as postcolonial, and this new perspective reflects in their work. As Amitav Ghosh suggests in the epigraph above, contemporary authors may choose to focus on the reality they live in (qtd. in V.T. Kumar 104). While it is undeniable that colonization and ongoing decolonization are aspects of a nation’s existence and a significant portion of its histories, prevailing postcolonial literary criticism may no longer be sufficient to understand its full present, as well as its recent

¹ In 1995, Maharashtra state government officially changed Bombay’s name to Mumbai. The name change by the state government of the time—Shiv Sena, a Hindu-fundamentalist party in coalition with another right-wing group, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—was controversial. It was seen as a sectarian move that would create a less-inclusive existence for the city inhabitants. Shiv Sena had previously incited violence against Muslims and the name change favoured the city’s Hindu origins. I use ‘Bombay’ and ‘Mumbai’ to refer to the pre- and post-name-change periods, respectively. If the text under study prefers one name over the other, that choice is respected. In some cases, to indicate the continuity of the history of the city ‘Bombay/Mumbai’ is used.

past that came after the independence. One fictional character's rhetorical and scornful question regarding the “period called Discovery-of-India” may be a pertinent query for all colonized places: “how could we be discovered when we were not covered before?” (Rushdie *Moor* 4). Similarly, Chinua Achebe found it imperative to counter the European misrepresentation of Africa as a “Primordial Void” by telling the world that “Africa had a history, a religion, [and] a civilization” (qtd. in Burt 357-58). Earlier decades after the independence saw postcolonial literatures “[assert] themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (Ashcroft et al. 2). Elleke Boehmer describes a postcolonial text as one which “critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship. It is writing that sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives” (3). Therefore, by definition, postcolonial writing had to first set the story straight and dismantle the images created by the colonizers. The challenge was “to create a known and familiar landscape that [did] not perpetuate orientalist imagery and myths” (Alter 14). The best examples of this effort are found in the works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore in India, and Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka in Nigeria. Writing on the fiftieth year of India's independence from the British rule, Stephen Alter asserts that while the early years of decolonization produced a postcolonial discourse in literature, “with the perspective of fifty years,” aesthetic questions “have acquired a contemporary resonance and immediacy” (14). The focus of this dissertation is this very “contemporary resonance and immediacy” present in the twenty-first century literatures of Mumbai and Lagos. Today, an avid reader of contemporary novels of India and Nigeria easily detects a transformation in their narratives.² The ever-present

² My working definition of the word ‘contemporary’ in this dissertation corresponds to its most common meaning: referring to the present time and to the recent past. It is difficult to set and enforce temporal boundaries, and a word

weight of colonial history notwithstanding, there is a shift of focus in postcolonial city literatures. A new momentum has emerged in depicting the social ills of the present, such as corruption, inequality and exclusion, unemployment, informal settlements, sanitation, infrastructure, and dysfunctional institutions. These new literary narratives, in a genre Ulka Anjaria terms as “the new social realism,” (“Realist” 115) are disrupting the comfort zones of middle-classes³ and striving to stir them into action. I argue that the twenty-first century narrative literatures of Mumbai and Lagos implicate their audience and compel them to re-think their complacency regarding the predicaments their cities face.

In India and Nigeria, the remnants of the colonial past abound, particularly in architecture and street names, as well as in institutional and educational structures. Needless to say, these vestiges of colonialism come up in contemporary literatures of Mumbai and Lagos. The references to colonialism may be required for the plot, the setting or the historical background. They are also employed as deliberate critiques of colonialism. It is not the intention of the

like ‘contemporary’ is even harder to define since it has a category and an era of its own in the art world at large. The primary texts I have chosen to examine in this dissertation have all been published in the twenty-first century. For this reason, in some instances, ‘contemporary works’ may correspond to ‘twenty-first century works.’ I recognize that this is also less than ideal since the first two decades of the twenty-first century I refer to will become ‘early twenty-first century’ in a few decades. Sule Egya employs the term “modern craft” (*Nature* 3) which, I understand, corresponds to my use of ‘contemporary works.’ If I had to provide a date after which literary works may be called ‘contemporary,’ then I would suggest 1982 for Mumbai, when Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* was published. Nigerian literary authors are often categorized in three temporal groups: first, second and third generation authors. The works I study in this dissertation fall into the third generation writing category which is said to have started in mid-1980s.

³ Anjaria, in her essay “Realist Hieroglyphics: Aravind Adiga and the New Social Novel” which has inspired the argument of this dissertation, suggests that, in India, the middle class is the prime target for the new social realist novel because of their politicization, upward mobility, consumerism and so on. Adiga, himself a member of the middle class, has also critiqued India’s middle class in interviews (Jeffries). In Nigeria, Helon Habila argues that there is a growing middle class, and its members prefer to read about daily issues (qtd. in Edoro). While I recognize that the middle class does not make up the entire readership of Mumbai or Lagos, I believe a significant percentage of readers who may have the time and money to read, and who may also be convinced to act for the betterment of their city, belong to the middle class.

twenty-first century authors to ignore their history. They appropriately acknowledge painful abuse or injustice when their narratives call for it. In a short story titled “Birdsong,” while using the metaphor of Lagos traffic to portray a woman stuck in a futile relationship, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addresses the extant colonial residues. The narrator of the story explains that she meets her married lover “mostly in his house in Victoria Island—a faded-white house, with its quiet grandeur and airy spaces, which was built during British colonial rule and sat in a compound full of fruit trees, the enclosing wall wreathed in creeping bougainvillea” (97). This short excerpt reveals several details, one of which is that the neighbourhood is named after Queen Victoria who was an ambitious colonialist; during her reign of almost 64 years, the British Empire was at its height. Victoria Island is an upscale neighbourhood of Lagos where most of the land was appropriated through the demolition of the slum village called Maroko. The lovers meet at an opulent walled house built for the elite colonizers. In passages like this one, readers are reminded of the city’s history and its present reality. In the story, the prohibited love of the couple works as a metaphor for the illegitimate presence of this colonial mansion in Lagos, in other words, the colonization in general. The physical wall around the house was meant to separate the colonizers and the locals, and now it is being used to isolate a clandestine affair. Inside, the couple is protected from the disapproval of the society outside; a metaphor for the colonized and the colonizer. Their happiness behind the walls is not sustainable, and the problematic relationship comes to an end just like the colonization came to an end. This short story, which is further explored as a traffic narrative in chapter 4, can be read as an allegory of colonization as Lagos’s colonial past parallels the narrator’s personal relationship.

Another example of the denunciation of colonialism in contemporary literatures is found in Helon Habila’s debut novel *Waiting for an Angel*. Employing an innovative form that switches

perspectives from one chapter to the other as well as telling the story in reverse chronological order, *Waiting for an Angel* primarily focuses on Lagos's and Nigeria's ordeals under consecutive military rules, as well as growing corruption, poverty, and inequality. In addition to these daily struggles, there are also jabs at colonialism and its remaining relics. In one scene of the creatively-connected episodes, residents and shop owners of Morgan Street gather to protest their impoverishment. A speaker addresses the crowd by saying "from today, we refuse to be known as Morgan Street," and continues:

We don't know who Morgan was—some colonial administrator, perhaps, a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state. No, that name is too grand for us. We are poor, neglected people. If we were to choose a name for ourselves, we'd choose a plain and simple one, something that reflects our reality. We do not know who Morgan is or was, but we do know what poverty is. We live with it daily. (174)

He declares, to the cheers of the crowd, that their street will be henceforth called Poverty Street. This reference to the colonial past, as the leader of the protestors suggests, is "a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state" (174). Nonetheless, Habila's novel is a contemporary urban narrative that mainly deals with current issues. Elsewhere, referring to African short fiction, Habila has noted the "thematic and stylistic shifts over the decades" (Introduction vii). As John Marx remarks, "[s]omething has happened to postcolonial fiction" (409). Literary priorities have changed. In the Nigerian context, it has been noted that the third-generation writers—those who were born after the independence—do not have to deconstruct the colonialist "master narrative," and this "departure from [the] ur-text is, arguably, the most significant distinguishing feature of Nigeria's third-generation poetry and fiction" (Adesanmi and Dunton 15-16). Searching for new forms of engagement with the readers, many contemporary narratives' principal goal now is to

highlight the ‘postcolonial’ city’s current challenges and to imagine solutions. If, in the early days of independence, city narratives were able to help “shape national community” (Marx 411), then they can do so once again, and help shape the present and the future of Mumbai and Lagos.

I chose Mumbai and Lagos for my dissertation mainly for two reasons: Firstly, these two cities have an impressive literary output, both in quantity and quality. The abundance of literary texts coming out of Mumbai and Lagos is in agreement with Bill Ashcroft’s assertion that “[t]he function of cities in literary production is central” (“Urbanism” 499). If we switch the places of “the function of cities” and “literary production” in Ashcroft’s statement, the resulting tenet would still be true: the literary production in cities is essential. Odia Ofeimun, for one, claims that “[a] city’s fall from [greatness] is indexed by the non-accession to literary culture” (141). Both Mumbai and Lagos have a discernable literary culture, and as Ofeimun recommends, they do not “keep [their] knowledge industry in stasis” (141). Art and literature put a city in conversation with the rest of the world. This is the wonder of Mumbai and Lagos; through their literatures, they are in an ongoing international exchange. Teju Cole, who is the author of a renowned city novel, *Open City*, believes that art plays a role in bringing about global communication. Cole suggests that “[l]iterature, music, visual arts, theater, film” engender “a meaningful forum for interacting with the world. So that Molière’s work can appear onstage in Lagos, as Soyinka’s appears in London” (*Every Day* 87). Abundant literary activities of Mumbai and Lagos, which are summarized in the next chapter, contribute to their global city status.

Secondly, Mumbai and Lagos were at the forefront of their nations’ colonization by the British. While the two cities are very different in culture, politics, economics, and society, they have a few characteristics in common aside from the shared historical transformation and the suffering caused by the British colonization: they are the most populated cities of their countries,

as well as being among the largest conurbations in the world. They are also large port cities. Their proximity to the ocean is a focal point in literature, and their beaches are often featured in contemporary narratives. While Mumbai and Lagos's waterfront status is one of the reasons for their attraction and vibrancy, it also makes them vulnerable to flooding which the literatures of these cities engage with. The port-town aspect of Mumbai and Lagos is further examined in the next chapter. "Diversity (social spatial) and unevenness of power are both universal in cities" (Finch xiii), and Mumbai and Lagos are arguably prime examples of multiplicity and socio-economic dichotomies. In addition to their constant growth, Mumbai and Lagos are also among those cities which experience consequential socio-economic and politic transitions and fluctuations. Within the timeframes of the works examined in this dissertation, both Mumbai and Lagos went through significant upheavals some of which are summarized in the next chapter.

The main corpus studied in this dissertation consists of Mumbai novels *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry,⁴ *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga, *Breathless in Bombay* by Murzban F. Shroff, and *No God in Sight* by Altaf Tyrewala; and Lagos novels *Welcome to Lagos* by Chibundu Onuzo, *Graceland* by Chris Abani, *Lagoon* by Nnedi Okorafor, and "Birdsong" and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. As well as referring to other contemporary authors' works such as Neel Mukherjee's *A State of Freedom*, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, and Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*, I also draw from well-established Indian and Nigerian authors' earlier works including Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Soyinka's drama *The Road*. Twenty-first century narratives of Mumbai and Lagos reveal that many contemporary

⁴ Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975 and he currently lives in Toronto. My colleagues at the Symbiosis International University in Pune, India were amused when I told them that Mistry was our—Canada's—author. Very generously, they accepted to share the honour. In *Family Matters*, there is an excerpt about the protagonist Yezad's application to immigrate to Canada. He and his family are rejected, and Yezad pens a bitter letter of rebuttal.

novels call attention to *all* political, social, and economic issues from traffic to housing, from crime to health care, from media to treatment of servants. Contemporary city novels, while acknowledging the fact that the present moment is still informed by the multiple histories of their nations, are moving beyond what Ashcroft had called “the contest between the nation and empire” (“Urbanism 497). Today, we see more attention given to the day-to-day problems, or, as Sarita, the heroine in Manil Suri’s *The City of Devi* calls them, the “urban tribulation, like water shortages or corruption” (16). Among the present-day urban concerns of the literatures of Mumbai and Lagos deal with, I have chosen to explore the topics of extortion and corruption; dichotomy of informal settlements and opulent gated communities; and traffic and infrastructure.

More Urban, More Social Realist, Less Postcolonial

This dissertation asserts that contemporary literatures of India and Nigeria exhibit an urban and a social realist turn while at the same time signalling a departure from the postcolonial. Most of the works I engage with in my research can be examined within the “new social realism” framework put forth by Anjaria (“Realist” 114). While Anjaria formulates new social realism within the context of Indian literature, contemporary Nigerian literature also conforms to this form through its investment in the issues of the present and its distinct urban focus. Anjaria describes new social realism as “a mode that dialectically transcends early twentieth-century progressive writing” and one that “draw[s] attention to social inequities in India today” (“Realist” 114). Necessarily, the colonial past informs the contemporary moment, and postcolonial theory has served literary criticism well for decades. However, the postcolonial methodology alone may no longer be sufficient in interpreting the representations of more recent socio-political concerns such as globalism and climate change. Anjaria argues that the new social realism of contemporary literatures “revises the mimetic fallacy of earlier movements in social

realism yet maintains a commitment to representing social injustices through a materialist lens” as well as leaving room for “changing political and literary landscapes under globalization whose futures are as yet unknown” (“Realist” 115). My research indicates that the formal qualities of this new mode also play a significant role in the vitalization of contemporary literatures of Mumbai and Lagos. The new social realist narratives are urban, urgent, and stylistically new and exciting.⁵ In accordance with Anjaria’s argument, new social realist literatures anticipate that the future will undoubtedly bring in yet-unknown literary trends and socio-political changes. This new mode of contemporary literary narratives exhibits a flexibility to adapt to those shifts. Another characteristic of the new social realism is its recognition of the entertainment value that allows for an easier connection with the globalized and technologized readers of our times. Therefore, I posit that this new fresh contemporary social realism differs from the early twentieth-century social realism both thematically and stylistically. The earlier version of social realism of a time when independence was imminent concerned itself mostly with nationalism and ‘writing back’ to the colonizers. “For novelists of the 1930s,” Anjaria elaborates, “ideals such as humanism and historical self-awakening were centrally important to how they imagined themselves in the context of the nation-to-come” (*Realism* 28). The earlier mode employed a “nationalist consciousness” (*Realism* 2), and it was less about literary aesthetics than a political tool (*Realism* 4). Anjaria has good reason to suggest that “contemporary readers” may not find those earlier realist works as “aesthetically satisfying” as today’s Mumbai and Lagos literatures which “reconcile the opposing meanings of realism and modernism, realism and allegory, or

⁵ I have also found Lez Cooke’s articulation of the new social realism useful. While he describes the new social realism within the context of British television drama, his observations are also applicable to literature. He differentiates the new social realism from the classic social realism by emphasizing its reworked and updated form that is better suited for the audiences of the twenty-first century (189, 194). This ‘renewed’ social realism engages with the lived reality without becoming pedantic or forsaking the entertainment value.

history and the future” (Anjaria, *Realism* 28). In this century, narratives of Mumbai and Lagos come in multiple literary styles and genres. Kenyan author and scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o once said that he “was tired of the realism of the Victorian novel which is the model that influenced the early [African] Anglophone novel” (Okorafor, “Organic” 283). Similarly, Indian and Nigerian contemporary authors may be finding older forms stale and ill-equipped to excite present-day readers, or to deal properly with current realities.

The authors of the twenty-first century experiment with new ways of writing the social realist novel, and the contemporary literatures of Mumbai and Lagos also exhibit some blurring of the genres. Many of the works studied in this dissertation make use of real and imaginary texts in the forms of news items, advertisements, street signs, plaques, letters, posters, books, movies and television shows. For example, Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* incorporates excerpts from a fictional newspaper into the storyline. Abani’s *Graceland* starts each chapter with a page from the diary of the protagonist Elvis’s late mother. These inserts detail kola nut rituals, Igbo recipes and the benefits of medicinal herbs of Nigeria. Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* is a metafictional text containing multiple stories that unfold an overarching plot in reverse chronological order. Neel Mukherjee’s *A State of Freedom* loosely connects its five stories that blur the lines between autobiography and fiction. Teju Cole’s *Every Day Is for the Thief*⁶ is a crossover between narrative nonfiction and travelogue. Okri combines satire, allegory, surrealism, tragedy and magic realism in a short story titled “Stars of the New Curfew.” Suri’s *The City of Devi* is set in

⁶ This work is marketed as a novel, and there is a warning on the Random House edition’s copyright page that it is a work of fiction. But it reads more like a narration of personal experiences, and can be considered a work of creative nonfiction. When asked about this, Cole explains that he “find[s] the stern distinction between fiction and nonfiction odd. It’s not at all a natural way of splitting up narrated experience, just as we don’t go around the museum looking for fictional or nonfictional paintings” (*Known* 79). This is one example of the ‘blurring of genres’ I will highlight throughout this dissertation.

near-future Mumbai and can be analyzed as a dystopian literature as well as through the lens of queer theory. Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* "is an epic crime thriller" that integrates "words from most of India's regional languages alongside English, Sanskrit terms, Bombay street slang and Hindi song lyrics" (Chambers 45). Chandra calls his novel, a 947-page tome, a "noir text" (qtd. in Chambers 46) which is, at the same time, a social realist work exposing the underbelly of Mumbai. Likewise, Gregory David Roberts's *Shantaram* depict gangsters and narrate dark affairs where human life is not worth much. Even as the latter two Mumbai novels "are being marketed as pulp fiction" (Minerva, "Mumbai" 30), the social commentary they offer through the depictions of living conditions in informal settlements and the engagement with other urban issues is invaluable. Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*, a distinct city novel set in Lagos, is admittedly not a social realist work, nonetheless, it not only provides social criticism on the problems of the city, but also engages in crucial ecocriticism. Okorafor, who calls her book an "organic fantasy" ("Organic" 278),⁷ employs African mythology to represent ongoing issues of fraud, traffic and environmental pollution, all the while when Lagos is being invaded by aliens. Contemporary novels like *Sacred Games*, *Shantaram* and *Lagoon* bring "genre fiction" into "the novel's centuries-long preoccupation with city life" (Marx 409). Another exciting new work is Altaf Tyrewala's first novel *No God in Sight* which has a unique structure: the chain of narration passes onto a new character by a mere mention of their name. Adichie's *Americanah* switches its narrative between several locales to contrast the formations of transnational identities inside Nigeria as well as in diasporic settings abroad. There are also other narrative forms: Sonia

⁷ Okorafor recounts a couple of her own experiences which have found their ways, in fantastical forms, in her stories. She considers this leap from real life to fantasy fiction to be at the "heart of organic fantasy." She explains that, while fantasy, in general, "has the power to make something familiar strange," her version of fantasy, what she terms the "organic fantasy," "blooms directly from the soil of the real" ("Organic" 278). She remarks that the magic in her texts sprout "naturally, organically" ("Organic" 284).

Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing*, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*, and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* are literary reportages. Most of these works employ hybrid styles and blend other formats in their narratives rendering the social realism of contemporary city literatures aesthetically attractive and socially beneficial to the twenty-first century readers. Gabriele Rippl argues that contemporary novels experiment with form and style to better compete with the new, and mostly visual, media of our times (266). While most contemporary literary works reiterate the colonial past as the root cause of many of the extant issues, they nonetheless keep the main focus on self-criticism and appeal to the consciousness of their readers for the betterment of their societies. There is now emerging scholarship that offers literary criticism that does not primarily engage with postcolonial theory.⁸

There were even earlier attempts to free literature from what Alter calls "the shackles of colonialism" (15) as exemplified by Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories about life in Bombay in the 1930s and 1940s, and Cyprian Ekwensi's novels and stories about Nigerian city life in the 1950s and 1960s. Referring to "texts from North and West Africa," Seth Graebner makes the assertion that the authors of postcolonial city literatures "during and immediately after the colonial period not only represented city spaces and urban concerns but also participated in the elaboration of urban culture across and beyond the continent" (198). He goes on to posit that "we may expect literary texts to grow ever more important as a means of understanding city life" (198). Literary texts have indeed become even more crucial to understanding the complexities of

⁸ In addition to infrastructuralism, Africanfuturism and other forms of literary criticism that are explored in the following chapters, a couple of recent scholarly works that also employ different lenses are Gabriele Rippl's "The Cultural Work of Ekphrasis in Contemporary Anglophone Transcultural Novels" which examines "writers' interventions in the field of aesthetics" through use of "ekphrasis as a self-reflexive writing mode" (265), and Lauren Mason's "Leaving Lagos: Intertextuality and Images in Chris Abani's *Graceland*" which probes "the deployment of visual media" and "images of other urban spaces" in Lagos narratives.

contemporary city life, and in this quest, urban narratives do not necessarily exhibit postcolonial characteristics. After the independence of India in 1947, and Nigeria in 1960, and particularly towards the end of the twentieth century, the initial engagements with the day-to-day lives of city dwellers increased. Okri, for example, starting with *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) which primarily deals with corruption, wrote multiple Lagos novels focusing on the urban. Others, such as Buchi Emecheta and Chinyere Nwogwa continued the trend. Lagos narratives started to concentrate on real-time problems throughout the remainder of the century narrating oppressive military rules and demolished settlements. In India, a similar contemporary concern toward the end of the century was exemplified in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai. Through the first two decades of the twenty-first century, young authors started to represent more of the existing social ills and contemporary issues, while migrating from rural to urban settings at the same time. Today, literatures of postcolonial megacities—such as contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos—are demonstrating a trend that diverges from the critique of colonialism and shifts towards a fresh engagement with the current issues of their cities. The direction of literary production coming out of Mumbai and Lagos indicates an engagement with the ongoing issues of corruption, inequality and exclusion, unemployment, informal settlements, sanitation, infrastructure, and dysfunctional institutions.

In addition to their quest to create innovative new forms and relevant content, contemporary Indian and Nigerian authors also strive to employ pragmatic and genuine self-critique in their writings. Aijaz Ahmad explains that the turn to autocriticism had started some time ago:

A critique of others (anti-colonial nationalism) receded even further into the background, entirely overtaken now by an even harsher critique of ourselves. The major fictions of the 50s and 60s—the shorter fictions of Manto, Bedi, Intezar Hussein; the novels of Qurrat ul

Ain, Khadija Mastoor, Abdullah Hussein—came out of that refusal to forgive what we ourselves had done and were still doing, in one way or another, to our own polity. (119)

The hope and purpose of some twenty-first century authors of Mumbai and Lagos is a new political awakening; a social consciousness that will shake the middle-classes out of their conformity and postcolonial lethargy. Author of multiple social realist novels, Adiga, whose *Last Man in Tower* is examined in chapter 3, argues that the middle-classes “think of themselves still as the victims of colonial rule.” He urges them “to get beyond [the victim mentality] as Indians and take responsibility for what is holding us back” (qtd. in Jeffries). Correspondingly, Chielozona Eze encourages the Nigerian readers “to redirect attention to the self, with the intention of enhancing critical moral stances in society” (102). Referring to Soyinka’s address at the 1967 Afro-Scandinavian Writer’s Conference in Stockholm, Eze remembers how Soyinka called for a liberation “from the fascination with the past because that obsession leads to the ‘destruction of the will to action,’ which inevitably leads to ‘the total collapse of ideals, the collapse of humanity itself’” (102). In Eze’s interpretation, Soyinka “asks every Nigerian, every member of the assembled tribes, to turn their gazes inward and imagine the implication of their individual actions for their world and their community” (103). This inward gaze and the re-evaluation of individual actions are what the contemporary urban narratives try to engender. In the following chapters, I try to demonstrate that recent Mumbai and Lagos novels and short stories provoke the readers to question their own choices and contrast them to those made by the fictional characters. The readers of these texts may rethink their personal responsibilities to the society, or they may see that they are complacent in the propagation of some of the issues.

In 1989, Bill Ashcroft et al. had argued that, “beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics,” the literatures of a long list of colonized places had one thing in common which

was, they explained, the fact that “they [had] emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (2). At the present time, one would be hard pressed to accept that this overly-homogenizing statement has continuing validity. Today, the tension with the imperial power can be studied through other lenses such as neocolonialism and racism. It can be argued that the contemporary city literatures of India and Nigeria have more pressing concerns and more aesthetically exciting topics than refuting the misrepresentation that still continues in the North. Emma Dawson Varughese notes that “recently published texts are engaged in new departures which seemingly appear to be taking us away from the classic ‘post-colonial’ text,” and suggests that it might be useful to “move the terminology ‘forward’, *away* from the label of ‘postcolonial’” (15). Dawson Varughese posits that the interest in “putative subalternity to a former colonial power” is decreasing (17), and this dissertation aims to contribute to that debate by offering ‘beyond postcolonial’ as a phrase that may better suit the literary trends of our times. Twenty-first century authors of Mumbai and Lagos do not see themselves, or their readers, as ‘postcolonial individuals.’ In the works of Rohinton Mistry, Aravind Adiga, Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chibundu Onuzo, and other contemporary authors, we find explicit references to the colonial past that serve as historic facts; however, these texts do not possess the postcolonial attributes as defined above. It seems that “the modes of knowledge production in the postcolonial register,” as Hamid Dabashi argues, have “exhausted themselves” (6). Dabashi points out to “a declaration of independence, not just from the condition of postcoloniality, but from the limited and now exhausted epistemics it had historically occasioned” (2). I argue that the novels

examined in this dissertation have moved “beyond the limits of the condition called ‘postcoloniality’” (Dabashi 2).

As the literatures of formerly colonized cities turn their attention to the present, the fact that there are *multiple* histories becomes more significant. The colonial history is only one part of India and Nigeria’s, Mumbai and Lagos’s layered histories; as Amit Chaudhuri would have said, history did not stop at the independence.⁹ After independence, India went through the violent aftermath of the Partition which separated India and Pakistan; Indira Gandhi’s brutal ‘rule by decree’ during the nation-wide Emergency; ethnic divisions instigated by far-right movements and riots that caused thousands of deaths; multiple domestic and foreign acts of terrorism; and many other significant historic events. Nigeria, after its independence had numerous coups d’état and counter-coups; a succession of military rules which violated human rights and impoverished the country; the Biafran war which ended with casualties adding up to one million; and the ongoing unrest at the Niger Delta in connection to the oil extraction.¹⁰ In contemporary narratives, these recent events have taken over postcolonial concerns even if the root cause of some of these troubles rests with colonization. David Davidar’s *The Solitude of Emperors* deals

⁹ This is in reference to a remark Chaudhuri made when he was explaining the “constructive narrative” they were taught in school. This narrative “told a story of key moments, … [such as] the Quit India Movement, Partition, Independence. At this point the narrative stopped, as if history had ceased to exist with Partition and Independence. But it had not ceased; it had probably become ourselves” (“Partition as Exile” 92). Elsewhere, Chaudhuri made similar comments: “History may not have ended, but the Nehruvian era had” (“My New Perspective”).

¹⁰ In 2020, at the time this dissertation is being written, as part of a Nigerian movement called End SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad)—known in the social media as #EndSARS—mass protests are taking place in Lagos and other major Nigerian cities. On 20 October 2020, in Lagos, Nigerian Army opened fire on unarmed protestors. What is now known as the Lekki Toll Gate Massacre, this aggression by the army towards its own citizens resulted in disputed number of deaths and injuries. Just as Babri Masjid and other terrorist attacks have appeared in Mumbai narratives, in accordance with this dissertation’s argument, #EndSARS is already finding its way into contemporary literatures of Lagos and other Nigerian cities. Two examples are: *End SARS Rhythms*, a poetry collection edited by Terseer Sam Baki and Wole Adedoyin, and an ongoing collaborative titled “Soro Soke: When Poetry Speaks Up,” led by Jumoke Verissimo and James Yékú.

specifically with the violent riots that shook up Bombay after the Hindu fundamentalists demolished the Babri Masjid in the city of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh state. Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* illustrates Lagos life under the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha. In contemporary times, even lighter topics like Mumbai's film industry or Lagos's night life have more currency in literature than writing back to the global North. As globalization complicates concepts of nations and nationalities, contemporary writing focuses on the current and diverse experiences in megacities. Mumbai and Lagos, as the largest cities in their countries, have representational value. Poet and essayist Ofeimun points out that "[t]he more the diversities are threshed into a common image, the more intense the experiences they yield; and the more they enlarge our consciousness and capacity to create" (11). This explains the tremendous force, abundance, and originality with which the narratives of Mumbai and Lagos, two diverse and over-populated megacities, are burgeoning.

The social realist focus on current events coincides with the twenty-first century's around-the-clock information dissemination through varied forms of media. It would be difficult for contemporary authors to not pay attention to the news, or the current trend whether it is cultural, social, economic or political. Rushdie had acknowledged, as early as in 1985, that he was "unable to avoid political issues." As he points out, "the distance between individuals and affairs of State is now so small that it no longer seems possible to write novels that ignore the public sphere" (*Imaginary* 376). As fiction engages with the public sphere more and more, the common mood and desire for rectification increase. Afterall, "redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it" (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 14). Contemporary authors cannot help but engage with current affairs due in part to the ubiquity of varied global medias.

Yet the recent focus on the present does not mean that the colonial histories of Mumbai and Lagos have vanished from literature or that there is an attempt to dehistoricize these cities. Their colonial past is connected to their present. Amitav Ghosh calls history “the unseen dimension.” He believes that the depth of the story comes from history. Both the reader and the writer, he argues, must be aware of this depth, this unseen dimension without which the stories are reduced “to a certain flatness” (qtd. in V.T. Kumar 105). History, being as significant as an unseen dimension, Ghosh accepts that, yes, “there was a colonialism before, who can deny?” However, he goes on to underline that India’s current reality (distinct from the other postcolonial societies which all have their own separate and unique realities) is the one “that we do inhabit” (105). While this dissertation maintains that the trend in contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos is to focus on the current realities their denizens inhabit at this point in time, there are still many novels, such as historical fiction written by Ghosh and others, that continue to educate new generations about the harm colonization caused.¹¹

Does favouring urban centres over the countryside and small town narratives disenfranchise the rural concerns? It is true that city narratives do not address some of the issues that are specific to villages or small towns. However, some of the city problems, such as corruption and infrastructure, are experienced in the rural areas too. As Shahani asserts “[t]he city brings the writer close to power-structures which can supply them with the site and focus of their interrogation” (101). Indeed, the books examined in this dissertation make use of the urban setting to draw attention to difficulties that are actually experienced by millions of others around

¹¹ Interestingly, Ghosh does not consider himself as a post-colonial writer. “In many of his public announcements,” Anshuman Mondal explains, “Ghosh has disavowed the idea that his work is a representative example of postcolonialism, or that he is a ‘post-colonial’ writer; indeed, he has claimed that he does not really know what the term means” (2). As quoted in the epigraph at the top of this introduction, Ghosh objects to the negative description that comes with the term ‘postcolonial’ (qtd. V. T. Kumar 105).

the country. The large populations of Mumbai and Lagos—about twenty million each¹²—make their narratives universal, both within their nations and around the world. “[A] particular aspect of Indian reality,” Shahani posits, is “its urban cosmopolitanism” (101). About 35% of Indian population is living in the cities. The “urban cosmopolitanism” is also true for Nigeria where over 52% of the population is located in urban centres. Narratives based in Mumbai and Lagos represent a significant portion of India and Nigeria, respectively. Habila argues that “Lagos is Nigeria in microcosm, and there is no understanding the country without understanding the city” (“Welcome”), and this parallels Shahani’s suggestion that “the complex range and plurality” of Bombay is possibly “more representative of the complex plurality of India” than any other place (100). Therefore, city narratives, with renewed aesthetic modes, convey a larger portion of contemporary realities than just the urban life.

What Has Literature Got to Do with It?

This dissertation argues that literature has a role to play in shaping societies for the better. Contemporary urban literatures are capable of initiating change, especially among the middle-class readers who may have the time and the means to read, as well as to engage in social and political activism. In addition to creating awareness regarding issues of our times such as inequalities and exclusions, overburdened infrastructures, or environmental concerns, contemporary literary narratives also compel self-awareness. Through contemporary works, middle-class readers may be driven to question their own individual convictions and behaviours by learning something about themselves. Ghosh stresses that, for him, “the novel is *the* form that

¹² Marx cautions that the population figures “can be a tease,” arguing that “no one believes that urbanization stops at [the] municipal borders” (409).

synthesizes all kinds of expression.” It is a form that encapsulates “the most complete utterance that a human being is capable of,” a form that is uniquely suited to render “what individual characters feel as they experience history.” He argues that “history or anthropology” cannot provide the personal state-of-mind of a character as they move through time. He believes that “novels can synthesize geology, history, personal relationships, emotion, everything” (qtd. in V.T. Kumar 103). In addition to the novel, it should be noted, alternative narrative forms, such as short stories, as well as other literary genres like drama and poetry also create empathy and awareness. The novel, because its long form allows the development of multi-dimensional characters, offers a deeper look into human experiences. In addition, a novel’s plot, especially one that is captivating, can be sustained for an extended period of time, thereby increasing the impact on the reader. All texts—from social media posts to television advertisements, from songs to movies—contribute to the discourse; however, narrative literature is better suited to motivate society to improvement. Decades ago, Hayden White had argued that there was “value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events” (27), and that consumers of texts preferred “a story with well-marked beginning, middle, and end phases” (6). More recently, Ann Rigney, building on White’s theorization, clarified the “role played by narrative structures in the recollection of events.” She explains that since events do not occur in “the form of a story,” their narrativization comprises of “shaping experience into an intelligible pattern with a beginning, middle and end, and with an economy of antipathy and sympathy centered on particular human figures” (347). “[P]roducers of fiction,” Rigney argues, “have creative, specifically literary skills that help give an added aesthetic value to their work. This aesthetic dimension” helps attract readers and keep them engrossed even if they do not have “a prior interest in the topic.” Rigney concludes that “[s]tories stick” (347) thanks to their “aesthetic and narrative staying power”

(352). In addition to the staying power, narrative literature has more accessibility than history books, research or scholarly articles, and more longevity than news items, social media or cinematic narratives. Furthermore, the readers' involvement—drawing on their own experience, memory, perception, and reasoning—strengthen the literary impact.

Achebe, in an essay titled “What Has Literature Got to Do with It?”¹³ (*Hopes* 154), makes a strong case for literature in all its forms, from oral storytelling to poetry, as a tool for reforming the self and the society. In his endorsement of imagination in narrative literature, he starts with a question regarding the bleak period in Nigerian history that impoverished the nation between 1970 and 1983,

a snatching of defeat from the jaws of victory, if one considers how nearly 100,000 million *naira* went through our hands like so much sand through the fingers of a child at play on the beach. How do we begin to explain that? Did we not have goals? Did we not have development plans? Did we not have experts to guide our steps on the slippery slopes of modernization? (*Hopes* 156)

Nigeria, undoubtably, had all of that. Achebe concludes that what was lacking was in fact imagination. Later on, he puts forth the paradox of “*People create stories create people*; or rather, *stories create people create stories*. Was it stories first and then people, or the other way round?” He answers by reminding us that “[m]ost creation myths would seem to suggest the antecedence of stories—a scenario in which the story was already unfolding in the cosmos before, and even as a result of which, man came into being” (*Hopes* 162). In brief, stories existed since time immemorial. Achebe explains that sometimes stories are used to validate existing, and

¹³ For the title of this essay, which was presented at a lecture in 1986, Achebe may have been inspired by the 1984 song “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” by Tina Turner, a sign of intertextuality between all forms of art and creativity which he advocates for.

usually not desirable, social and political systems. While the purpose of such stories is to protect and reinforce the status quo, Achebe maintains that stories “also serve to sanction change when it can no longer be denied” (*Hopes* 163). In the megacities of Mumbai and Lagos, certain socio-political issues such as fraud, corruption, and infrastructural hardships that result in informal settlements, lack of sanitation, debilitating traffic, and shortages of clean water require a change which “can no longer be denied,” and the contemporary literatures of these cities are striving to bring about that change. This argument would have received support from Achebe who urged us to “not see the role of literature only in terms of providing latent support for things as they are, for it does also offer the kinetic energy necessary for social transition and change” (*Hopes* 167). Achebe’s own canonical work, *Things Fall Apart*, was a pioneer in that regard and became instrumental in transforming postcolonial studies.

Literature does not just count on the imagination of the author; it also relies upon the imagination of the reader. According to Simon Gikandi, literature offers the reader “a [seductive] space of thinking outside the strictures of codes and custom” (10), but more importantly, “the power of literature [is] in its sociality, its ability to intervene in social life and change society” (11). As early as the 1930s, India’s Progressive Writers Movement was already supporting the approach “that literature does not merely reflect society but is an active agency for change” (Alter 23). Adiga, who, with novels like *The White Tiger* and *Last man in Tower*, “constructs a virulent critique of contemporary social issues such as growing economic inequality, casteism, greed, consumerism, middle-class hypocrisy, and government corruption” (Anjaria “Realist” 115), also believes in the transformative powers of literature. He argues that

it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result,

England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination. (qtd. in Jeffries)

When the middle classes start to self-examine, as opposed to seeing themselves as victims of colonization, Adiga argues, they will see that “corruption, [and] lack of health services for the poor” are some of the issues that are holding India back (qtd. in Jeffries).

How significant is literature’s impact in general? Needless to say, the changes literature brings about are not easy to quantify. This dissertation supports the argument that “narratives,” whether in fiction or in policy documents, “frame, question, and shape the future and our possibilities to act upon it” (Ameel 1327). Narrativity, which is the backbone of a novel, has more power than dry lists or graphs of data. Douglas C.D. Pocock, who has long been an advocate of the interface between geography and literature, maintains that “[t]he truth of fiction is a truth beyond mere facts.” Facts and statistics can be obtained elsewhere, whereas “[f]ictive reality may transcend or contain more truth than the physical or everyday reality” (11). “Literary revelation,” Pocock also argues, “as opposed to reporting, is implicit, suggestive. This is so because the reader is no neutral receiver, but is also a creative, interpretative being” (11). Precisely because the readers of fiction—in the case of this research, primarily the middle-class inhabitants of Mumbai and Lagos—are not neutral receivers, they are more likely to interpret what they read in connection to their own experience and behaviour, and therefore more likely to make personal changes. As Christian Benne explains “[n]arrative in all its historically evolved variants gives meaning and coherence to discrete events and phenomena” (389). When there is “a war over the nature of reality,” Salman Rushdie argues, “literature can, and perhaps must, give the lie to official facts” (*Imaginary* 14). For every government that claims to have

eradicated corruption, poverty, or homelessness, there are dozens of literary works that document these troubles as ongoing.

Multiple Englishes

I wish to address my dissertation's limitation that arises from having read only the works written in English. English as a literary language is well-suited to the analysis of global city narratives because of its own role in globalization. I must acknowledge Ahmad's objection to working

with the few texts that become available in the metropolitan languages and then to posit a complete singularization and transparency in the process of determinacy, so that all ideological complexity is reduced to a single ideological formation and all narratives are read as local expressions of a metatext. (23)

While Ahmad's point is hardly disputable, it can be argued that, during the three decades that have passed since he wrote these words, global movements and literary trends saw significant changes. As urbanization and globalization radically increased in the twenty-first century, the production of narratives of Mumbai and Lagos also multiplied. In this rich literary urban era, especially when there are plenty of works in English, I argue that there is good value to be obtained by studying them. Since my research involves dozens of works from each of the case study cities, I hope not to fall into reductionism Ahmad is concerned about.

Both India and Nigeria are multi-lingual nations¹⁴ and their literatures contain a plenitude of texts written in languages other than English. The long and rich history of narratives in many

¹⁴ While India has 22 official ("scheduled") languages, more than 19,500 languages or dialects are spoken as mother tongues, and 121 of these are considered to be distinct languages since they are spoken by 10,000 or more speakers (Census). English is not one of the 22 scheduled languages; however Official Languages Act of 1963 allows the use

local languages of these two nations is evidenced by the fact that in India, written Sanskrit literature goes all the way to 1500 BCE, and “Nigeria’s vast and varied treasury of oral literature” (Achebe, *Hopes* 167) goes back for millennia. Writing and publishing in English started in the nineteenth century in India, and in the twentieth century in Nigeria. *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, published in 1864, is the first Indian novel written in English. Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, and Raja Rao followed suit with seminal works such as Anand’s *Untouchable*. In Nigeria, Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, published in 1952, is considered to be the first Nigerian novel written in English, and Achebe’s acclaimed postcolonial novel in English, *Things Fall Apart*, was published in 1958. Therefore, the substantial wealth of English writing in India and Nigeria contributes to their rich literary histories.

Writing in the language of the colonizer has always been contentious. On this ongoing debate, I wish to make two remarks. First is that the value, knowledge, and awareness contributed to literature at large through the English writings of India and Nigeria may compensate for some of the shortcomings. The second is that most of the Indian and Nigerian

of English, alongside Hindi—written in Devanagari script—for official purposes, “such as parliamentary proceedings, judiciary, communications between the Central Government and a State Government” (World Heritage Encyclopedia). In Mumbai, many street and public service signs are either in Hindi and English, or just in English. Indian authors have been writing in a number of languages “including Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, Bengali, Bihari, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayalam, Oriya, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Lahnda, Siraiki, and Sindhi, among others, as well as in English” (Britannica “Indian Literature”).

In Nigeria, while English is the official language, there are over 500 spoken languages. Hausa is the most widely spoken language, followed by Yoruba, Igbo, Fula, and others. English, as the official language, is common, but a vernacularized version, called the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) is more widespread, especially in big cities. In Lagos, traffic signs are almost entirely in English. Poetry in Hausa and Yoruba go as far back as the 17th century when they were written using the Arabic script. Early in 1930s, Pita Nwana’s *Omenuko* in Igbo, selections from a literary competition in Hausa, and Isaac B. Thomas’s *Itan Emi Segilola Eleyinjuege Elegberun Oko Laiye* in Yoruba became the first novels published in indigenous languages. (Fasan, “He(art)” 24-25).

authors of literature in English make every effort to include one or more native languages of their countries in their narratives. This “presence of other languages” (V.T. Kumar 104) is a point worthy of examination. As Chaudhuri once remarked, “most modern Indian writers emerge from a multiplicity of languages. Languages are not so much in simple opposition to each other as they are in a state of commerce with each other” (“A State of Commerce”). This is true of Nigerian authors as well. In Indian and Nigerian contemporary urban narratives, there is an abundance of culinary and clothing terms, exclamations and forms of addresses, and traditions and proverbs in the native languages, as well as localized expressions that use English words, like the traffic jams called *go-slows*, and city thugs called *area boys* in Lagos. In his introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie discloses that, in his novels, he had an “interest in creating a literary idiolect that allowed the rhythms and thought patterns of Indian languages to blend with the idiosyncrasies of ‘Hinglish’ and ‘Bambaiyya,’ the polyglot street slang of Bombay” (xi). Indeed, in Rushdie’s writings, the English language is one that includes the Hindi and Urdu suffixes ‘*ji*’ and ‘-wallah,’ as in “motherji” and “rickshaw-wallah,” and double adverbs such as “slowly, slowly” which are common in Hindi and Bangla. Neel Mukherjee’s 2017 book, *A State of Freedom*, is interspersed with Bengali and Hindi. Sentences such as “Arrey, leave all that, tell me, jaldi jaldi, what will you take for dinner?” (80) are not uncommon. In some instances, Mukherjee even goes into some linguistic detail. Regarding their cook Renu whom the narrator calls “cooking-aunty,” he explains that he “could never bring [him]self to call Renu by her name and add a suffix such as ‘di’, older sister, or ‘mashi’, aunty, either of which would have been the expected or normal thing to do” (28). Later, when the narrator has more opportunity to converse with Renu the cook, he notes that Renu’s language, “although identifiably Bengali, had flecks of hybridity marking it – she had earlier

used the Hindi expression for ‘quick quick’, now she said ‘palak’ for spinach” (38). Amitav Ghosh, when asked about being “described as a writer who thinks and writes in English,” but whose novels have a “presence of other languages” (V.T. Kumar 104), explains that Indian writers, regardless of which language they write in, “live in a society where heteroglossia is commonplace. It’s a society where, if you seek to represent that society in a single language, no matter what that language is, you are in some profound way distorting the reality of that society” (qtd. in V.T. Kumar 104). This is an undeniable fact. A logical summary of this dilemma comes from Alter. “Writers,” he argues, “invariably select and limit their audience through the language they employ and in India, more than any other nation, this is a crucial problem with sixteen major languages from which to choose.” However, he allows, English “has been adapted and assimilated into Indian culture and many writers have succeeded in making it uniquely their own” (14-15). While the challenges and restrictions of writing in one—possibly any—language are valid, the quality, the range, and the contribution of these works should be celebrated. Referring to “the late twentieth-century,” Said had claimed that “‘English’ has become not just the linguistic possession of one people but a world language” (“Narrative” 83).

On the legitimacy of English, both Achebe of Nigeria and Ahmad of India provide similar reasonings, bringing up the emergence of Arabic or Swahili in Africa and Sanskrit in India: all of the languages came, at some point, from somewhere, they argue. Ahmad puts it succinctly: “English is simply one of India’s own languages now” (77). Elsewhere, he also acknowledges that “every book written by an Indian, inside the country or abroad, is part of a thing called ‘Indian Literature’” (245). Paraphrasing Achebe’s statement about Africa and European languages, it can be said that a language spoken by a people on that people’s soil, and a language in which the people write, is their own language (93). Dawson and Larrivée argue that English

has become a “unifying force” for “Nigerian pluralism” (921). In fact, most contemporary Nigerian authors incorporate Nigerian Pidgin English in their writings, which is arguably not just pidgin “but an independent distinct language in its own right” (Klima 460).¹⁵ The following example from Okri’s *Dangerous Love* illustrates this natural inclusion when the central character Omovo challenges the neighbourhood children to a little math:

‘I go give una money if una fit do arithmetics.’

The children nodded. Omovo found himself staring at the protruding stomach of a little girl. She had a yellow-brown complexion. A boy with a head like a pear broke the silence.

‘Oya now. Give us the arithmetic.’

Omovo turned to the boy. ‘Okay, you, wetin be three times seven?’

The boy counted with his dirty fingers, racking his brain. ‘I don get am!’ he soon announced. ‘Na twenty one! Oya where di money?’ (90-91)

While Okri’s narrator is telling the story in English, the characters in the excerpt are speaking in pidgin, one of the languages of the official languages of Nigeria. In Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, Nigerian Pidgin is used a great deal, and the author advises the readers who may not be familiar with this language, “to just relax your mental ear, chill, and remind yourself that there’s English in there. Some of it will start coming through” (“Insight”). Soyinka, whose works are an inspiration for Okorafor, makes extensive use of his roots in the Yoruba culture and his works employ multiple languages including English, Nigerian Pidgin English and Yoruba. His play *The Road*, with its

¹⁵ Linguists B.O. Elugbe and A.P. Omamor have theorized the Nigerian Pidgin English in their seminal work *Nigerian Pidgin: Background and Prospects*. They argue that this “ethnically neutral” language would serve Nigerians well if it were used “as a language of education” a(Klima 460).

songs in Yoruba, introduces the reader to many cultural aspects of Nigeria, from Agebo, the masked festival, to Ogun, the god of hunters, blacksmiths and the perilous roads of Nigeria.

Different versions of English, such as the Indian English and the Nigerian English are owned—made their own—by different communities. The author of *We Need New Names*, NoViolet Bulawayo, a Zimbabwean writer, draws attention to the pluralities of the English language: “There are multiple Englishes out there. Mine is the English I arrive at through Ndebele, my native language from Zimbabwe; my English gets its pulse from my intimacy with another language” (7). I am hoping that these multiple Englishes abound in the Mumbai and Lagos narratives explored here will make up for the lack of analysis of literatures written in one of the many languages of India (such as Hindi, Marathi, or Urdu) or Nigeria (such as Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa). When the narratives delve deep into a culture including its language, in other words, write in the idiom of that culture, then they can convey most of that culture’s intricacies to their readers. The abundance of urban literature in English speaks to the English language’s suitability to the analysis of global cities possibly because of its own role in globalization. While the choice that is available to me in English may be only a fraction of what it could have been if it were possible for me to include some of the other languages of India and Nigeria, the selection is still so vast that I hope that the impediment has been minimal.

In the following chapters, using comparative analysis, I demonstrate how the recent production of literature in India and Nigeria has taken an urban turn while at the same time gradually shifting its focus from postcolonial writing to depictions of present-day social problems. In the exploration of the primary texts, I will highlight how the contemporary city novels of Mumbai and Lagos aim to inspire their readers to make positive changes in their

communities. Twenty-first century city novels are targeting what Lieven Ameel calls a “heightened awareness of agency” while arguing that “fictional stories can act as models to empower readers” (1329). I will show that, while the commentary on the negative effects of colonialism still exists, the interest in the immediate reality is now at the forefront of contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos, and that there is a new momentum on representing current issues in innovative styles to better appeal to the readers in our technological age. In chapter 1, I provide brief descriptions of Mumbai’s and Lagos’s geographical, social and political characteristics, and outline their literary histories in order to better understand the role these two case-study cities play as the main protagonists in the contemporary narratives I examine in the subsequent chapters. The following three chapters are organized thematically, and the works examined all indicate a social purpose: they aim to educate the readers on prevalent problems, and to encourage personal and communal transformations. As these contemporary narratives focus on themes of corruption, disparities in standards of living, the impact of redevelopment projects on the less privileged, and debilitating traffic and infrastructural issues, they employ diverse literary strategies such as plot reveal in reverse order, embedded narratives, loosely connected threads and perspectives, and visual and textual interferences, among other techniques.

In chapter 2, I examine how Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002) and Chibundu Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* (2017) engage with the prevalent corruption in their respective cities, Mumbai and Lagos. These two novels were chosen for their common message, which is that corruption is not a victimless crime and causes significant injury to the society. The two narratives also complement one another as *Family Matters* concerns the individual responsibility to fight corruption, and *Welcome to Lagos* questions the ingrained corruption in Nigeria’s institutions.

Family Matters, while having been published in the twenty-first century, is the earliest work among the primary sources studied in this dissertation. This is worth noting because *Family Matters* employs a more traditional form of storytelling. Other works in this dissertation, published in later years, have more experimental qualities. These differences in literary styles will be highlighted as we move from one text to another. The characters in *Family Matters* are representative of ordinary citizens who normally lead honest lives. When these characters, who are recognizable as everyday people, get embroiled in corrupt activities, the readers inevitably examine their own conduct. The novel, using the toxicity of corruption which contaminates anyone who comes near, highlights the lack of social aids and services which leave the denizens vulnerable to corrupt means for survival. When the central character of *Family Matters* becomes tainted by corruption, he tries to cleanse himself through religious purification, and thereby the novel's employment of the concepts of taint and purity comes full circle at the end. *Family Matters* contains passages that border on didacticism and urges the readers to re-evaluate their own behaviours with respect to the prevalent corruption in their city. In *Welcome to Lagos*, while the poisoning aspect of corruption is also represented, the characters who succumb to it are contrasted with those who resist the temptation in a less didactic way. The narrative architectures of the two works are very different. *Family Matters* employs fable-style moral lessons early on in the narrative which foreshadow the central character's downfall. On the other hand, *Welcome to Lagos*, in spite of several stylistic innovations, relies on the traditional trope of poetic justice for the conclusion, and offers better outcomes for the good and punishment for the immoral.

In chapter 3, I will analyse the housing dichotomies present in Mumbai and Lagos by contrasting the gated communities of the wealthy against the slum settlements. While in the upper-class residences water is never lacking and power outages are easily remedied by

generators, in the settlements the lack of sanitation and the floods are as common as the risk of the entire neighbourhood being razed to the ground. These juxtapositions will be examined through Adiga's Mumbai novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011) and Abani's Lagos novel *Graceland* (2004). Both novels contrast the living conditions and imminent demolition of the settlements with the better circumstances of the wealthy while tackling the devastating outcomes of rebuilding projects in Mumbai and Lagos. *Last Man in Tower* draws analogies between the city's current dilemmas and the role it had once played in India's independence. The novel makes use of multiple foreshadowing signals while building up the suspense towards the protagonist's demise in a disturbing and shocking scene. The purpose of employing the shock element in this text is to unsettle and provoke the reader. *Last Man in Tower* applies this device with a twist for maximum discomfort to the readers, aiming for their self-critique and change in personal behaviour for the protection of Mumbai and its most vulnerable. Abani's *Graceland* provides a teenager's perspective as a member of the slum dwellers, one of the most marginalized groups in Lagos. The novel depicts the contrasts between the luxurious high-rises and the privation of the settlements. While *Graceland* also employs the device of shock-effect by depicting harsh realities of Lagos, it nonetheless offers respite from the dystopic images it paints through Nigerian tradition and folklore. Like some contemporary Nigerian novels, *Graceland* also showcases the value of African heritage in its reimagination of solutions. The grim reality the novel portrays shocks and outrages the readers and compels them to work towards a change that will reduce inequality and restrict redevelopment projects that benefit only a minority of Lagosians.

In chapter 4, I will consider the traffic and infrastructure narratives of Mumbai and Lagos. I chose Murzban F. Shroff's short story collection, *Breathless in Bombay* (2008), and Altaf

Tyrewala's experimental novel *No God in Sight* (2006) for Mumbai. For Lagos narratives, I will analyse Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story "Birdsong" (2010) and excerpts from her novel *Americanah* (2014). These works strengthen my overarching argument that contemporary urban narratives focus on present-day issues that plague Mumbai and Lagos, and demonstrate a noticeable move away from the traditional concerns of postcolonial literature. Short stories in *Breathless in Bombay* are valuable primary sources for the representations of traffic and infrastructure. Due to the limited number of characters, settings and storylines short stories can have, they are able to devote their entire premises to a single issue. Therefore, Shroff has been able to focus on traffic and infrastructure in his short stories in a way that a long-form narrative cannot sustain. The moral-lesson aspects of short stories are also more straightforward than the intimations found in novels. I included Altaf Tyrewala's novel *No God in Sight* to offer another example of original forms used by contemporary city narrators to better engage with their millennial audience. *No God in Sight* is significant for its portrayal of almost every present-day problem of Mumbai in a unique narrative chain. Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* is a quintessential Lagos narrative as well as an Afrofuturist novel. While dissimilar to other works in this dissertation because of its science-fiction genre, it complements other works analyzed here with its depiction of Lagos's traffic, dangerous roads and environmental pollution using the aesthetics of African traditions and mythology. *Lagoon* allows the readers and critics alike to consider alternative theories to postcolonialism and diverse modes of writing through which we can analyze contemporary works. Adichie's short story "Birdsong" uses the motif of a traffic jam in Lagos to tell the story of a dead-end romance. It exemplifies the use of traffic as a metaphor for other difficulties, as has been done by Okri in his novel *Dangerous Love* and by Shroff in his short story "Traffic." Adichie's *Americanah* depicts the infrastructural deficiencies of Lagos by

first defamiliarizing the central character, and thereby alerting the readers to their own acclimatization to the problems. The defamiliarizing technique allows all that has turned invisible through habituation to become visible again, thereby increasing reader awareness.

Comparing contemporary Mumbai and Lagos narratives, I will demonstrate that, while issues of corruption, housing inequality, redevelopment projects, demolition of slum neighbourhoods, traffic jams and infrastructural issues are depicted similarly, there are significant thematic and stylistic differences between the literary representations of these two cities. Some examples of these differences are: contemporary Mumbai literatures show far less violence compared to Lagos narratives; while water shortages are more frequently portrayed in the literary narratives of Mumbai, power outages are predominant in Lagos narratives; and more mythological and spiritual background is found in Lagos narratives than in Mumbai narratives. However, both cities' literatures employ intertextuality with real and fictional works to demonstrate the value Mumbai and Lagos place in art and literature. All primary sources used in this dissertation are attentive to the recent and current events of Mumbai and Lagos, and they signal the role these cities' contemporary narratives play in the solutions of present-day problems. These works, in Felski's words, "infiltrate and inform our lives" and they demonstrate the "real-world consequences" (5) of the themes examined.

Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities - Mumbai and Lagos

A city is like a poem. You enter it, and you are into a world of concentrated time.

— Odia Ofeimun

The feet traverse the city while
leaning on the day's shoulders
They became weary;
if one can't tell a few stories, then what should one do?

— Narayan Surve

Beginning as a representation of the cosmos, a means of bringing heaven down to earth, the city became a symbol of the possible.

— Lewis Mumford

All large cities resemble one another in certain ways. Their problems are similar: traffic and transportation, infrastructure that cannot accommodate fast population growth, expensive real estate, crime, pollution, dirt, and noise. The attractions of big cities are alike too: opportunities of employment, entrepreneurship and education, anonymity and freedom, diversity, fast life and excitement, proximity to art, entertainment and politics, and all the liveliness big cities offer. The protagonist in David Davidar's 2007 Bombay novel *The Solitude of Emperors* specifies some of his reasons for wanting to leave his small town as the "lack of opportunity, the slow pace of life, the petty jealousies and small concerns" (8), and his desire "to escape to the big cities where I'd heard you could do as you pleased, marry who you liked, go wherever you wanted" (10). Globalization contributed to the sameness of cities in tangible ways too: same brand names, same stores, same restaurants. Darran Anderson, author of *Imaginary Cities*, recounts a time

when he wakes up in a hotel room not being able to determine which city he is in. The inside of his hotel room is just like any other hotel room he has stayed in during his many travels. He looks outside the window, but the view of the city is not much help either. He could have been “in any number of metropolises across the globe. From the window, I saw only the signs of ubiquitous brands, such as Subway, Starbucks, and McDonald’s.” While this dissertation examines contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos for their thematization of corruption and fraud, settlements and inequalities, and infrastructure and traffic, it must be noted that these urban problems are not exclusive to Mumbai and Lagos: all large cities, to varied degrees, have comparable hardships. Mumbai’s and Lagos’s beauty, charm and vivacity are not unique to them either.

While representing distinct cultural and institutional characteristics, Mumbai and Lagos literatures demonstrate similarities in the issues they prioritize. They represent their cities’ cosmopolitanism and the diverse peoples that forge a common existence. Contemporary Mumbai and Lagos narratives also depict wide-spread corruption, dichotomies in living conditions, extreme disparities between the rich and the poor, never-ending construction, traffic and infrastructure. Charles Igbinidu, a Lagosian columnist, contemplates some of the parallels between the two cities during his visit to Mumbai. In fact, when he lands in Mumbai, “Welcome to Lagos,” he says to himself. He observes the “blatant display [of] wealth amidst screaming poverty on our streets,” and compares Mumbai’s traffic jams and the behaviours of its drivers with those of Lagos, his home town. The city narratives of Mumbai and Lagos, when examined side-by-side, reveal these similarities. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a background of the histories and literary evolution of Mumbai and Lagos to set up the discussion of the urban and social realist turn in the works examined in the following three chapters.

When Soyinka was understandably upset about the abject depiction of his city in a three-part BBC2 documentary series, *Welcome to Lagos*,¹⁶ in 2010, he argued that a comparable documentary about London would not look very different:

One could do a similar programme about London in which you go to a poor council estate and speaking [*sic*] of poverty and knifings. Or you could follow a hobo selling iron on the streets of London. But you wouldn't call it *Welcome to London* because that would give the viewer the impression that that is all London is about. (qtd in Dowell)

Ofeimun has also made a similar point by noting “how much of a family resemblance exists between the city of London and Lagos in spite of superficial differences” (14). This commensurability between Lagos and London also exists between Mumbai and London. Rushdie, in his humorous way, makes a comment similar to that of Soyinka’s while expressing his debt “to those great Indian novelists Jane Austen and Charles Dickens—Austen for her portraits of brilliant women caged by the social convention of their time, women whose Indian counterparts I knew well; Dickens for his great, rotting, Bombay-like city” (xi). Needless to say, the comparisons of Bombay/Mumbai and Lagos with London are no coincidence. London was the exemplary metropolis which British colonization wanted to replicate—in ways that mostly benefited the colonizers—in Bombay and Lagos. The point Soyinka, Rushdie and many contemporary scholars such as John McClusky are making is that large cities of today’s globalized world have common features, and their literatures may share certain characteristics. However, this does not mean that there is a homogenization or a universalization of cities, or that cities have become generic. Jason Finch narrows the universal aspects of cities down to diversity

¹⁶ This should not be confused with Chibundu Onuzo’s 2017 novel *Welcome to Lagos* which is one of the contemporary works examined in this dissertation.

and socio-economic inequality (xiii). Correspondingly, McClusky asserts that the “presentation of human drama” ties city literatures to one another and offers the links between the narratives of Lagos and New York as an example (211). When we read in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* that the anti-riot police arrives at a nonviolent gathering “with tear-gas guns and batons and helmets and bamboo shields” (175); a baton hits a peaceful protestor on the head; the air is “filled with scared wails and shrieks” (176); and “a pregnant asthmatic [is] asphyxiated by tear gas” (182), we may be reminded of a city in the United States of America in the year 2020. The fact that large cities share some of the widespread urban problems does not indicate uniformity across them. As Finch argues, there is diversity not just within cities, but between cities as well. He also mentions the “diversity of literary forms” and “diversity of approaches to cities” which are represented by the works studied here.

Mumbai and Lagos owe part of their vibrancy and chaos to being massive ports. Anthony D. King makes the intriguing assertion that Britain’s colonial port cities—there were dozens of them—came to resemble one another in “their built and spatial environments” (199). He argues that these port cities eventually came to have more in common with each other than they had with the interior cities of their own countries and continents (199). While this view is debatable, Mumbai and Lagos, both having grown out of small fishing communities into megalopolises, do manifest certain similarities as port cities.¹⁷ Their waterfront locations had made them attractive to the colonizers in the first place since ports were crucial for trade, whether it was for sugar, tea, opium or slaves. The port cities were among the first places in their respective regions which

¹⁷ Richard Grant and Jan Nijman, in their examination of global economic restructuring of Accra, Ghana and Mumbai, India, compare their case study cities in ways that are similar to mine: “historical experience as colonial port cities in the British Empire,” “primary economic centers since the end of colonialism,” and “major gateway cities, and as such they are significantly exposed to forces of globalization” (226).

colonizers chose as settlements. Their harbors connected them to the rest of the world, and the incoming colonial officials, military personnel, tourists and all sorts of Western objects first arrived there. They were also stage to humanity's worst activities such as the slave trade and the indentured labour. Both cities enjoy and suffer a water versus land binary. What Kaye Whiteman suggests as "an essential part of [Lagos's] soul" is also true for Mumbai; they are both "laid out in a tangled dichotomy between land and water" (35). Both Mumbai and Lagos have reclaimed land from the sea, as Rushdie calls it "something out of nothing" and "reverse Atlantis rising from the waves" (*Moor* 185). Their oceanfront status is both an attraction for Mumbai and Lagos, as well as the cause of their floods, and many infrastructural problems. Both cities use bridges, links, reclamation projects and construction of new neighbourhoods on the reclaimed areas¹⁸ in order to gain control over the surrounding waters. This ongoing quest to gain mastery over the ocean, however, is also connected in multiple ways to some of the topics of this dissertation, such as corruption, traffic and clearings of settlements. Possibly because of this entanglement with the water, Mumbai and Lagos poetry often features the ocean. Lagosian poet Niyi Osundare places the waters of Lagos at the core of the city's magic and its might (9). A Mumbai poem titled "Where I Live" opens with these verses: "I live on a wedge of land / reclaimed from a tired ocean / somewhere at the edge of the universe" (Subramaniam 15). The beaches of Mumbai and Lagos are often the backdrop in these cities' novels and short stories, and their characters go to the beach to contemplate the bigger questions in their lives.

¹⁸ Lagos reclaimed a brand-new peninsula from the ocean upon which it is currently building the Eko Atlantic City, a massive neighbourhood estimated to accommodate 250,000 wealthy Lagosians. Whiteman, calling this colossal project one of the most "ambitious maritime scheme," writes that Lagos is "once again taking in land from the lagoon as [it has been doing so] since the middle of the nineteenth century, the most spectacular part being the Bar Beach reclamation scheme on which work has already begun with Eko Atlantic City as the goal" (248).

Before outlining Mumbai and Lagos's literary histories, it is appropriate here to say a few words on the ties between the city and literature. Finch proposes that "urban form and literary form resemble one another" (xiii),¹⁹ and maybe for this reason cities have always been conducive to the production of literature. Robert E. Park suggests that sociologists owe "writers of fiction for our more intimate knowledge of urban life" (McNamara 3, 15n16). Who can disregard the value of Dickens' chronicles of nineteenth-century London? Equally, Balzac and other French novelists had meticulously recorded the Parisian life with its "material world and the social processes (desires, motivations, activities, collusions, and coercions)" (Harvey 65). Every urban detail finds itself in literature. The narratives of my case study cities tell the readers, with great precision, about the highlife dances of Lagos and the *ghazal* singings of Mumbai. The readers learn that the non-alcoholic cold beverage of choice in Lagos is Coca-Cola, and the alcoholic preference is beer, whereas Mumbaikars prefer whisky. In Lagos, "[a] cold Coca-Cola," Abani confirms, "tastes like everything the ads on TV promise" ("Lagos: A Pilgrimage"). In *Americanah*, we also learn that non-alcoholic malt is a veritable rival of Coca-Cola. Cultural differences aside, McClusky claims that "the flux and chaos of the urban experience have proven typical enough to link thematically writers in diverse cultures (211). Indeed, Mumbai and Lagos authors tackle the themes of corruption and informal settlements, as well as infrastructure deficiencies. But what is even more comparable in the narratives of Mumbai and Lagos is that their story tellers—in Ruth Vanita's characterization, "truth tellers" (xi)—are concentrating on their cities' present-day predicaments. Complex and vast—or a "gigantic mass" as de Certeau

¹⁹ Finch, referring to the readability of cities like literature is read, offers this comparison to support the resemblance between them: "Both are productions of humans with almost infinite amounts of surface variation and yet recurrent categories in them understood by their human users, residents, visitors and readers; both contain patterning and extent or quantity; both combine art and materiality" (xiii).

calls it (91)—a city might be best comprehended through its literature. David Harvey asserts that the authors of the city novels “helped make the city legible and provided ways in which seemingly inchoate and often disruptive processes of urbanization might be grasped, represented, shaped, and molded to human wants, needs, and desires” (65). Raymond Williams, on the topic of Dickens’s London, posits that the approach of Dickens—“the method of characterization”—was such that the city was the fiction and the fiction was the city (224). In other words, the realities of city life merge—or sometimes even switch places—with fiction. One example of this fusion of the city and its fictional depictions is found in the story of Lomba, a journalist who wants to be a novelist in Habilा’s *Waiting for an Angel*. In one of his newspaper articles, the protagonist Lomba rather imaginatively writes that, due to the fuel shortage, women in Lagos “rampage the streets, tearing down wooden signboards and billboards and hauling them away to their kitchens to use as firewood.” The editor of the newspaper finds this part unrealistic—a fictional reality that seems to be too far-fetched for fiction—and asks Lomba to cut it out. Later, when Lomba is going back home, he sees a horde of women “carrying hoes and axes and machetes” who then go on to take down a large wooden billboard, “hacking and sawing.” Lomba learns that the women were, in fact, gathering firewood, just like the part he had made up in his column, “[i]t was [his] writing acting itself out.” In this instance of ‘fictional reality imitating fiction,’ Lomba concludes that “there is so much we can’t understand because we are only characters in our story” (118-19). Similarly, Mumbai novels, as Minerva claims, “present the city as a powerful force that defines individual residents just as much as it is defined by them” (“Communal” 111). In city novels, the characters feel one with the city they are imagined in, and the fictional and historical realities are intertwined. In Chaudhuri’s *The Immortals*, as Nirmalya, a teenager, contemplates Mumbai, this dialectical relationship is at play. Nirmalya senses that

“he was now to be caught up, if not as player then as bystander, in a story of ambition; he wasn’t sure whose—perhaps his own, but if not his entirely, then his parents’, or other people’s, or could it be even the city’s itself?” (69).

When Kevin McNamara writes that “[t]he history of the city in literature is as lengthy and rich as the histories of literature and cities themselves[,]” he means it quite literally. We can match the first known literary work, Gilgamesh, to one of the earliest cities, Uruk (1). Gilgamesh, “the oldest surviving epic,” from third millennium BCE, tells the story of the ancient Sumerian, and later, Babylonian city Uruk that epitomized the Mesopotamian urbanization in the mid-fourth millennium BCE. Since then, literature never stopped making the city one of its main protagonists. From Homer’s Troy to Joyce’s Dublin, from Balzac’s Paris to Dickens’ London, from Dostoevsky’s St. Petersburg to Dreiser’s Chicago, the examples of literature and city partnerships are endless. Inga Bryden, when reaffirming the enduring practice “of representing (or attempting to represent) the city/urban space in literature,” specifies that this tradition existed “in a western context” (213). The sections on the literary histories of my case study cities will show that the city as a narrative text has not been exclusive to the western literary tradition; rather, the city has been present in the literatures of the global South for almost a century now. Lagos and Mumbai are overflowing with stories waiting to be told. What Emma Bird asserts about Mumbai is also true for Lagos: each is a “larger-than-life metropolis, teeming with stories” (382). What allows these stories to surface and make their way into the national and global discourses is “the continuing pull that the city exerts on the individual imagination” (Bird 384).

Scholars of urbanization have long been predicting that megacities were the future, but they do not always mean it as a compliment. When, for example, Matthew Gandy concludes that Lagos might be *ahead* of other cities, he is actually suggesting that most megacities around the

world may end up as calamitous as Lagos (“Learning” 42). Elsewhere, Gandy contends that “[t]he cities of the global South have begun to assume a far more prominent role within urban theory to the extent that these cities do not represent an anomalous category but rather a fundamental dimension to the global experience or urbanisation (“Planning” 374). Gandy seems to warn us that the gains the urban theory will receive from megacities of the South will not necessarily improve their conditions, on the contrary, the circumstances of the megacities elsewhere may just catch up with them. Neil Smith argues, in the same vein, that

[c]ities like São Paulo and Shanghai, Lagos and Bombay, are likely to challenge the more traditional urban centers, not just in size and density of economic activity—they have already done that—but primarily as leading incubators in the global economy, progenitors of new urban form, process, and identity. (436)

Famed architect Rem Koolhaas is well-known for his affiliation with Lagos. When he and his crew went to Lagos in 1997—Nigeria, at the time, was under its last military rule—they were able to acquire a helicopter to see the city from above. Koolhaas later commented that “[w]hat seemed, at ground level, an accumulation of dysfunctional movements, seemed from above an impressive performance, evidence of how well Lagos might perform if it were the third largest city in the world” (177). Notwithstanding this positive take, when it is said that Mumbai or Lagos is the future, one cannot help but sympathize with Suketu Mehta’s humour in anxiety: “Bombay is the future of urban civilization on the planet. God help us.” (3).

The solutions to the issues particular cities struggle with will also come from within those cities. By imagining solutions and by encouraging the readers to get involved in those solutions, contemporary urban literatures play a role in the future of cities. Cole thinks cities “might be our greatest invention. They drive creativity, they help us manage resources, and they can be hives of

tolerance” (*Known* 85-86). Furthermore, cities are conducive to collective involvement in problem solving. Several of the contemporary Mumbai and Lagos narratives studied in this dissertation depict inhabitants of these cities coming together to make protests or to petition the government. What is so wonderful about cities is that their denizens must choose “shared decision making as a permanent way of life” (Ofeimun 12). According to Ofeimun, same problems are encountered by different people and they can only be resolved by “common solutions” and not “individualistic” ones (12). The contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos appeal to the readers to envision common solutions.

The following survey of the rich literary histories of Mumbai and Lagos has two purposes. First, I wish to demonstrate how the urban and social realist trends that this dissertation examines have evolved over time. Second, beyond the works that are studied in this dissertation, there are many others that engage with the themes of corruption, slum settlements and vast inequalities, and traffic and infrastructure. This is an opportunity to highlight some of those works.

Bombay/Mumbai, Jewel by the Arabian Sea

it wasn't long until September 21st, 1668, when the Company at last got its hands on the island ... and then off they went, with their Fort and land-reclamation, and before you could blink there was a city here, Bombay, of which the old tune sang:

Prima in Indis,
Gateway to India,
Star of the East
With her face to the West.

— Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

We were like cartographers, mapping the city, much as Google Maps does.

— Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Moraes Zogoiby, or Moor, the narrator of Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* declares that "Bombay was central" (350). Moor explains that Bombay, despite being "the bastard child of a Portuguese-English wedding" happened to be "the most Indian of Indian cities" (350). "Bombay was central," Moor repeats, because in Bombay, "all Indias met and merged" (350). Moor reiterates a few more times that Bombay was central to India and adds that "all rivers flowed into its human sea. It was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators, and everybody talked at once" (350).²⁰ His use of past tense is due to the tragedies Bombay suffered in the 1990s. In reference to those agitated times when one ethnic group claimed exclusive ownership of the city, Moor bewails: "O Beautifiers of the City, did you not see that what was beautiful in Bombay was that it belonged to nobody, and to all? Did you not see the everyday live-and-let-

²⁰ Many scholarly as well as literary texts concur with the view of this fictional character on the centrality of Bombay. Alice Thorner, for one, elaborates that "[t]he city's cultural life, as indeed of its economy, is constituted by its openness to winds blowing from all directions, from across the seas and from the mainland of India; its availability as a meeting ground for diverse communities; its prime function as a place of exchange" (xii).

live miracles thronging its overcrowded streets?” (350-51).²¹ Who the supposed “Beautifiers” were, how they forged an ownership of Bombay, and how it all connects to literature are outlined below.

The Portuguese called this city of seven islands on the Arabian Sea “*Bom Bahia* meaning ‘Good Bay’. They also called it Boa-Vida, for the pleasantness of its surroundings and the abundance of food” (Ciocca, “Mother India” 105). Previously known all over the world as Bombay, now Mumbai, is the capital of the state of Maharashtra, and it is one of the largest cities in the world with more than twenty million residents. Bombay’s name was formally changed to Mumbai in 1995 through the efforts of the Maharashtrian nationalist party, Shiv Sena. Hindu fundamentalists publicly argued that the name Bombay was an anglicized version of its original form, and that the purpose of the name change was to move away from the colonial relic towards a more authentic name. This argument is considered by many as a pretext for Shiv Sena to proclaim the city’s Hindu identity. Caroline Herbert argues that “Bombay’s renaming was central to the Shiv Sena’s project to position ‘Mumbai’ as an exclusively Hindu-Marathi space,

²¹ Rushdie and others have indicated that the peaceful cosmopolitanism of Bombay began to disintegrate with the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya in December of 1992 which triggered “a wave of violent confrontations in many parts of India. In Bombay, an outbreak of destruction of government property by enraged Muslims was met with police shootings and attacks on Muslim homes and [businesses]” (Patel and Thorner ix). A month later, another bout of riots claimed over 500 victims in Bombay. A third round of violence came in March of 1993 “with the nearly simultaneous explosion of powerful bombs at the Stock Exchange, the Air India building, the Century Bazaar crossroads and other key spots symbolic of Bombay’s economic prominence” (Patel and Thorner ix). The character Moor, in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, is sentimental about the olden Bombay where “such things never happened” (350). He immediately doubts himself and admits that “never is too absolute a word” (350). Caroline Herbert points out that “[w]hile the communal violence that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya marked a key turning point in the city’s reputation for secular civility, scholars have noted that Bombay’s ethnicization throughout the 1980s and the 1990s has its roots in the Shiv Sena’s emergence in the 1960s” (“Spectrality” 945). Farah Godrej believes that “the ‘story’ of Bombay’s epic cosmopolitanism and the ‘story’ of its death are both equally mythic” (2). She argues that “the fundamental caste, class and religious divides” have long been present in Bombay and “the structural forms of emotional, mental, economic and indeed physical violence” that existed before the riots of early 1990s were “no less dire than the violence that the rise of fundamentalism has inflicted upon the city” (13-14).

central to a nation reimagined as a sacred Hindu homeland” (“Spectrality” 945), and the move from Bombay to Mumbai is largely seen as an exclusion of the non-Hindu population of the city.²² “Under most circumstances,” Fernandes agrees, “the erasure of a colonial identity would have been welcomed by everyone. But coming as part of the Sena’s campaign of hate, the rechristening of the city is still remembered for what it is—a refutation of Bombay’s inclusive history” (112-3). In Mistry’s *Family Matters*, the renaming and its instigators are tackled early on. After grandfather Nariman fractures his ankle by tripping into a trench without any barriers, a medical assistant jokes as he casts Nariman’s leg in plaster of Paris:

“With so much daily practice, we could all become gold medalists in the obstacle race, we Bombayites. Or should I say, Mumbaikars.”

He lowered his voice, but only half-jokingly, “These days you never can tell who might be a Shiv Sena fanatic, or a member of their Name Police. It is my understanding that some Shiv Sainiks have infiltrated the [General Post Office], subjecting innocent letters and postcards to incineration if the address reads Bombay instead of Mumbai.”

(48)

The medical assistant, here, foreshadows the critical role this “Name Police” is going to play later in the novel, and one man will end up dead because he refuses to change “Bombay” into “Mumbai” in the name of his store.

²² To better understand how Shiv Sena’s Hindu nationalism transformed Bombay, I benefited from Arjun Appadurai’s “Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai” (2000), Rashmi Varma’s “Provincializing the Global City: From Bombay to Mumbai” (2004), and from the many essays collected in twin books, *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture* and *Bombay: Metaphor for Modern India*, edited by Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner (1995). Herbert also lists Thomas Blom Hansen’s *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (2001) as a valuable source (“Spectrality” 967n13).

Shiv Sena movement is an important part of Bombay/Mumbai and the state of Maharashtra. Mumbai literature—including the works that this dissertation analyses—often refers to Shiv Sena’s ideological impact on the city and its inhabitants. Since multiple contemporary narratives of the city engage with Shiv Sena policies, it is necessary to briefly talk about this political movement here. Shiv Sena (Army of Shivaji) was formed in Bombay by political cartoonist Bal Thackeray in 1966. Its conservative ideology of Hindu nationalism gained significant following in Maharashtra, particularly in its hometown, Bombay. Thackeray, with a specifically anti-Muslim agenda, promoted the idea that Bombay was getting overcrowded because of the non-Hindu immigrants flowing into the city.²³ On December 6, 1992, a large group of Hindu activists and Thackeray supporters demolished the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque located in the township of Ayodhya, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Hindu fundamentalists were claiming that the site was the birthplace of Lord Ram, a Hindu God, and they wanted to create a Hindu Temple in the place of the mosque. The attack triggered riots in Bombay and all over India. Two thousand people were killed, many of them Muslim, and “tens of thousands fled [Bombay]” (Siddiqi 1218). Rashmi Varma argues that the riots dissolved “Bombay’s iconic status as the nation’s cosmopolitan center” (66). Thackeray was accused of promoting violence, and in 2000, he was arrested on charges of having incited the Bombay 1992-93 riots. Due to statute of limitations—or the pretense thereof—he was not convicted. In spite of the “allegations that it employed illegal and sometimes violent tactics, [Shiv Sena] grew into a major political force in Maharashtra” (Hollar). In 1995, Shiv Sena came into power as the state government in a

²³ The inadmissibility of similarly exclusivist positions is aptly expressed by Odia Ofeimun in a Nigerian context: “The sheer spectacle of members of one ethnic group or nationality being expelled from a city to give living room to supposed indigenes offends the idea of the *civis[/civism]*” (15).

coalition with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).²⁴ Shortly after gaining the control of the state, it officially changed the name of Bombay to Mumbai,²⁵ arguing that Bombay was the city's colonial name. The renaming was controversial. The name Mumbai, inspired by Mumbadevi, the patron goddess of the city, is seen as aggrandizing Maratha heritage to the exclusion of the other ethnicities. Contemporary Mumbai narratives record these transformations of the early 1990s. In addition to Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, which is arguably the most famous satirization of Bal Thackeray and Shiv Sena, and Chandra's *Sacred Games*, which is a social realist representation of Shiv Sena's activities in the underbelly of Mumbai, there are many other contemporary narratives that engage with the watershed sociopolitical tides of the 1990s. The third novel in Manil Suri's Mumbai triptych,²⁶ *The City of Devi* is another good example. *The City of Devi* signals in its title the symbolism of the city's name change. In Suri's pre-apocalyptic Mumbai, Shiv Sena is portrayed as "the right-wing HRM, the Hindu Rashtriya Manch organization, responsible for so much of the nation's bloodshed" (55). Employing a fictional Bollywood film titled *Superdevi* as an agitator, the novel satirizes Shiv Sena's insistence on the name change, and the relentless ethnic strifes continue even as Mumbai is on the brink of extinction by nuclear attacks. As the narrative parodies the real events of the 1990s one by one, the greed to capitalize on the popularity of the movie *Superdevi* takes hold of the plot, and a

²⁴ As of 2021, Shiv Sena's position in Maharashtra can be summarized as follows: The coalition of Shiv Sena and the BJP lost the 2004 state elections. Until 2019, while still active as an opposition party, Shiv Sena has not been in power. In November 2019, even though BJP and Shiv Sena entered the elections in alliance, and won the majority as an alliance, Shiv Sena refused to support BJP to form the government. Eventually, Shiv Sena formed the government with National Congress Party (NCP) and Indian National Congress (INC), and Uddhav Thackeray, the current leader of Shiv Sena and son of its founder, became the Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

²⁵ Author and satirist Khushwant Singh, who wrote *Train to Pakistan* (1956), a novel about the Partition of 1947, claims that "[n]o educated Indian calls [the city] anything other than Bombay" (25).

²⁶ Suri's Mumbai trilogy consists of *The Death of Vishnu* (2001), *The Age of Shiva* (2008) and *The City of Devi* (2013). The author considers Mumbai as a representation of India, and he indicates that he may write more Mumbai novels by saying "I feel that I haven't yet finished with Mumbai" (qtd. in NPR).

movement demanding Mumbai be renamed as the City of Devi gains strength. When the HRM, the novel's spoof of Shiv Sena, attempts to consecrate a famous Mumbai landmark as a uniquely Hindu accomplishment, savage ethnic rampages are triggered. The dark sarcasm of the novel culminates in one character's summary of the situation: "Every group seemed to join in lustily, as if the national goal of religious integration had finally triumphed, and the bloodbath were a grand celebration of multiculturalism, of equal opportunity" (103). While Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Suri's *The City of Devi* satirize Shiv Sena under different names, Mistry's *Family Matters* uses the organization's proper name. *Family Matters*, which is examined in detail in the next chapter for its treatment of corruption in Mumbai, first brings the ethnic bloodshed to focus in the character of Husain, a Muslim labourer whose entire family was burned alive during the unrest. The novel then implicates Shiv Sena in multi-faceted corrupt activities. Finally, Shiv Sena becomes an important part of the plot in a violent act.

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *Sacred Games*, *The City of Devi*, *Family Matters* and in other contemporary narratives, in addition to the representation of Shiv Sena and the events of the 1990s, we also find a resistance to the homogenization the government carries out. Mumbai fictions not only voice their criticism of the sectarian violence, but they also promote a peaceful coexistence with mutual understanding and acceptance. "This House of Mine," a short story in Shroff's *Breathless in Bombay*, which will be examined in chapter 4, uses an apartment building of many diverse tenants as a metaphor for India, and imagines a return to Mumbai's former cosmopolitan and peaceful communal spirit. Ulf Hannerz, in his influential essay "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," makes a distinction between two groups: there are cosmopolitans and there are locals. Bombay, however, was seen to be a city where everyone was local and cosmopolitan at the same time. As one Rushdie character quoted earlier expresses,

people of Bombay felt that the city belonged to no one, and to everyone (*The Moor* 350-51). Contemporary narratives demonstrate a desire to recapture the “live-and-let-live miracles” (Rushdie, *The Moor* 351). Prakash explains, with a cheerful and proud tone, how

immigrants from villages and small towns have managed their assimilation into the modern metropolis by maintaining their native tongues and cultures in their homes and neighborhoods. Mumbai’s map is a jigsaw puzzle of distinct neighbourhoods marked by community, language, religion, dress, and cuisine. As a means of communicating across differences, the city has even concocted a hybrid but wonderfully expressive vernacular for everyday communication—Bambaiya. (11)²⁷

The “jigsaw puzzle” settlements may not indicate a true intermingling between the diverse communities. In fact, today in Mumbai, many neighborhoods and apartment buildings only house strictly one religion in a practice Tyrewala calls Mumbai’s “legendary residential discrimination” (“End of a Romance”). However, contemporary Mumbai literatures often urge the readers to work towards a “live-and-let-live” attitude in their urban coexistence, and even to continue creating some miracles. One daily miracle many Mumbaikars are proud to mention is the one that takes place at the train stations during rush hours. As the trains are leaving the stations, people who arrive on the platform a few seconds too late, run beside the moving train, and passengers on the train reach out and pick them up and pull them into the compartment. As Mr. Kapur of *Family Matters* witnesses, this happens

over and over: hands reaching out to help, as though it were perfectly normal, a routine commuter procedure.

²⁷ There are variations of the spelling/transliteration of the word Bambaiya, such as “Bambaiyya” (Rushdie, *Midnight* xi), and “Bambayya” (Mazumdar, *Bombay Cinema* 44).

Whose hands were they, and whose hands were they grasping? Hindu, Muslim, Dalit, Parsi, Christian? No one knew and no one cared. Fellow passengers, that's all they were. (Mistry 146)

Mr. Kapur of *Family Matters* is so touched by what he witnessed that he is convinced that there is “still hope for this great city” (Mistry 146). Such positive sentiments—also expressed in other contemporary Mumbai texts—encourage readers to demonstrate a similar kind of trust to their fellow denizens.

Mumbai, as asserted by Rossella Ciocca, is a “source of fiction: an aestheticized metropolitan scene inspiring stories and lifestyles” (“Mother India” 106). The change of Bombay’s role from a complex geography upon which the plot is set to a city-character—a protagonist in its own right—may have started in the first half of twentieth century with the short stories of Saadat Hasan Manto in Urdu language. More recently, however, it was Rushdie, with three Bombay books in English—*Midnight’s Children*, *The Satanic Verses*, and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*—who solidified the city’s place in literature. *Midnight’s Children* made a significant impact on Indian literature, and specifically on Mumbai narratives. Ashcroft suggests that “contemporary Indian literature entered a decisive, cosmopolitan and globally popular phase with the publication of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981” (“Beyond” 6). While the book’s “status as a representation of India has been challenged” (Kortenaar 4), *Midnight’s Children* remains a literary landmark of Mumbai. According to Minerva, *Midnight’s Children* accounts for the “marked increase in the number of novels that focus on Mumbai” (“Communal” 111). Among all of Rushdie’s books, *The Moor’s Last Sigh* is said to be the novel “that focuses most squarely and passionately on Bombay” (Siddiqi 1234n1). The book’s satirization of Bal Thackeray got it banned in the state of Maharashtra (Hollar). In the novel, Rushdie playfully switches

Thackeray's literary name for another one, Fielding,²⁸ and changes the name Shiv Sena to Mumbai's Axis. Referring to Thackeray/Fielding as "Mainduck," Moor, the protagonist-narrator of the novel explains that the cartoonist, "now a full-time communalist politician, [was] one of the founders of 'Mumbai's Axis,' the party of Hindu nationalists named after the mother-goddess of Bombay, which was growing rapidly in popularity among the poor" (230). Fielding, the fictional counterpart of real-life Thackeray, verbalizes his sectarian view by calling the city "*Marathi Mumbai*," as well as declaring "[o]ne day the city—my beautiful goddess-named Mumbai and, not this dirty Anglo-style Bombay—will be on fire with our notions" (Rushdie, *Moor* 293). Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* came out in 1995 which was also the year Shiv Sena came to power. The representation of Bombay in *The Moor's Last Sigh* is often contrasted with the city's portrayal in Rushdie's 1983 novel, *Midnight's Children*. Gyan Prakash observes that, in *Midnight's Children*, Bombay is depicted "as an island of raucous and colorful coexistence of different communities," whereas in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, the city "is lashed by angry tides of ethnic strife churned up by cynical and corrupt politicians and businessmen" (13). The reason for the change in the tone Rushdie uses in portraying Bombay can be attributed to the violent events that occurred during the time between the writings of the two novels. Rushdie who calls himself a Bombaywallah (a Bombay person, a Bombayite), had written in 1982—a decade before the ethnic violence started—that Bombay was "a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience" (*Imaginary* 16). After the 1992-93 riots and Shiv Sena's coming to power at the state level in 1995, the

²⁸ The literary reference is to English novelists William Makepeace Thackeray and Henry Fielding. Bal Thackeray's father's last name at birth was Panvelkar. In his adulthood, he adopted the name Thakre, which he later anglicised after the author Thackeray whom he admired. Incidentally, the author Thackeray was the son of a colonialist and he was born in India. In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Rushdie changes Bal Thackeray's name to Raman Fielding after Henry Fielding.

character of Bombay Rushdie spoke of changed. Prakash notes that “[t]he chaotic but robust coexistence of different communities and cultures now appears as a remote figment in the city’s imagination” (13). Referring to Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, as well as to Chandra’s *Sacred Games*, Herbert offers a reading in which “the 1992-1993 post-Ayodhya violence [is represented] as a key turning point in the city’s secular history” (“Spectrality” 948).

Shiv Sena, as well as being frequently referred to in contemporary narratives, has other connections to literature. As mentioned above, the coalition government of Shiv Sena banned *The Moor’s Last Sigh* in the state of Maharashtra. Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*, which also does not depict Shiv Sena in a positive light, used to be a staple in many syllabi in Indian universities. However, it was dropped from the curriculum by the University of Mumbai in 2010 after protests—that included burning of books—organized by Shiv Sena under the leadership of Aditya Thackeray, the grandson of Bal Thackeray, then a student of history at the university (Burke). Mistry condemned the book burning and banning of events, saying of the young Thackeray:

As for the grandson of the Shiv Sena leader, what can – what should – one feel about him? Pity, disappointment, compassion? Twenty years old, the beneficiary of a good education, he is about to embark down the Sena's well-trodden path, to appeal, like those before him, to all that is worst in human nature. (Burke)

Mistry’s *Family Matters*, whose corruption narratives are examined in chapter 1, implicates the organization in many corrupt practices. The twenty-first century saw Shiv Sena actively protesting, banning, or disrupting many cultural events from concerts to cricket games,²⁹ hence the inevitability of its presence in contemporary literatures. Ongoing oppression of authors, and

²⁹ For a partial list, see “Shiv Sena’s Protests Over the Years.” *The Hindu*. thehindu.com, 19 Oct. 2015.

the disregard for freedom of expression are detailed in an open letter to the current prime minister by Murzban F. Shroff whose short story collection *Breathless in Bombay* is analyzed in chapter 4. Shroff, in his address to the prime minister, recounts many of the abuses writers and their works have suffered in recent years, including those targeting Mistry and himself.

In the late nineteenth century, as two Indian literature giants Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore were responsible for Calcutta's literary moment, Bombay became, in the early twentieth century, “the place to be if you were a writer, an artist, or a radical political activist” (Prakash 119). Saadat Hasan Manto (1912–1955), who moved to Bombay in 1936 and experienced its everyday life in the style of Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*, became one of the first chroniclers of the city. Prakash argues that Manto was “drawn to the urban reality,” and wrote about “the ordinary, the flawed, the minor, the social outcast” (121). Manto's engagement with social concerns and the “urban reality” long before the independence is a precursor to the new social realism we find in today's Mumbai's narratives. In Bombay, Manto became good friends with Ismat Chughtai (1915–1991) who also wrote in Urdu, and they enjoyed “the space Bombay afforded [them] for relationships based on literature and art” (127). Chughtai became a pioneer in giving women a voice and writing about sexuality and femininity. In a short story titled “Lihaaf” (Quilt), she may have been one of the first who depicted a lesbian relationship in literature. Manto and Chughtai, in their uninhibited quest for exploring new forms and topics, would have been in good company today among Mumbai's contemporary short story writers such as Shroff, R. Raj Rao, and Jerry Pinto who put the lived lives of Mumbai's denizens up front. The narratives in *Mumbai Noir*³⁰, a short-story collection edited by Tyrewala, tackle current concerns

³⁰ The urban narratives included in this collection introduce some of the up-and-coming authors of our times. These contemporary Mumbai authors, in agreement with this dissertation's findings, tackle all present-day issues of their

such as gender harassment, homophobia, prostitution, and the ostracism of the *hijras*.³¹

Therefore, Manto and Chughtai's "concern with the ordinary, the flawed, the minor, the social outcast" (Prakash 121) is also shared by contemporary narratives.

In the early 1930s, progressive writers and intellectuals formed the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). Under the influence of this group, Bombay writers moved "in the direction of social realism" (Prakash 130), and "used their work to advocate for social justice" ("A Writer"). Here, in the 1930s, we already find a literary goal that had the betterment of society at heart. Arguably, today's new urban and realist turn has its roots in Bombay's literary history. Together with other art organizations of the time, Bombay's artists, writers, poets and intellectuals primed the city for the literary boom of the 1950s and 60s. Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004) who moved to Bombay in 1946, was one of the early practitioners of "realist prose" (Anjaria, *Realism* 6) and had already made a mark with "his social realist novels in English—*Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936)" (Prakash 128). Anand told the stories of Dalits and brought the injustice of the caste system to light. This was significant for the city because, as

city in multiple genres and new forms: Ahmed Bunglowala is the author of hard-boiled detective stories featuring private investigator Shorty Gomes; Namita Deviayal focuses on women's stories; Sonia Faleiro is an investigative journalist of Mumbai's underbelly, and her literary reportage *Beautiful Thing* exposes the lives of city's bar dancers; Smita Harish Jain is a mystery and crime writer; A prolific multi-faceted artist Devashnish Makhija is the author of the short story "By Two" which is about Mumbai's autorickshaw drivers and their plight; Riaz Mulla's only published story "Justice" focuses on the unrest in Bombay after the attack of the Babri Masjid; Jerry Pinto, in addition to his 2016 novel *Em and the Big Hoom*, is also—along with Naresh Fernandes—one of the editors of *Bombay, Meri Jaan*, a collection of writings on Mumbai; Kalpana Swaminathan and Ishrat Syed collaborate under the name Kalpish Ratna; Abbas Tyrewalla is better known for his screenplays and directing; Altaf Tyrewalla, in addition to writing short stories, experiments with new narrative styles in his novel *No God in Sight*; Paromita Vohra, a documentary maker, a writer and an actress, focuses on sex education and gender equality; and Annie Zaidi is a short story and essay writer whose story in this collection, "A Suitable Girl," employs a parallel-narrative style. *Mumbai Noir* collection is just one example of many anthologies that bring together the new generation of city chroniclers who write in a variety of new forms.

³¹ While many authors—Smita Harish Jain and Sonia Faleiro are two examples—use the word *hijra*, others prefer *kinnar* which is a term more common in scholarly essays.

Mumbai poet and social activist Narayan Surve's poems illustrate, dalits³² pour their hard work into the city each day. "The dalits and the workers alone," Surve's poem *Mumbai*³³ claims, "are truly entitled to call themselves the architects of the metropolis" (Bhagwat 118). Vidyut Bhagwat, digging into the poem, explains that "[t]he dalits and the toilers go on enhancing the beauty of the city day after day all through their lives, yet [the voice of Surve's poem] and his people find themselves on the rotting heaps of garbage produced by the other half of the same city" (119). In addition to bringing to light "the oppressions of colonialism and capitalism," the realist writers and intellectuals of 1930s Bombay, also "represented and criticized caste, gender, and class inequalities with new eyes" (Prakash 128) as do present-time narrators of Mumbai. Prakash explains that these writers "excoriated religion and religious divisions as backward" (128). However, in the representations of the multiplicity of religions in the twenty-first century literatures of Mumbai, only the fundamentalist, violent and intolerant forms of religious acts are rebuked. Today's Mumbai narratives—for instance, Mistry's *Family Matters* or Suri's *The City of Devi*—present religious *divisions* as bigoted, cruel and uncivil, and encourage a harmonious co-existence between different religions and traditions.

Some Mumbai narratives do not receive publicity out of India. One example is an exquisite trilogy by Kiran Nagarkar: *Ravan and Eddie* (1994), *The Extras* (2012) and *Rest in Peace: Ravan and Eddie* (2015). These three books cover Bombay/Mumbai through the decades starting

³² "The word *dalit* means 'ground down', 'depressed', 'oppressed', 'broken'" (Bhagwat 113). In India, Untouchable and Dalit used to refer to "any member of a wide range of low-caste Hindu groups and any person outside the caste system" (Britannica "Untouchable"). Discrimination against peoples deemed to be 'untouchable' has been illegal in India since 1949; however, to eradicate its practice has proven to be difficult. Both terms are now considered condescending, as well as an earlier term, Harijan, which had been introduced by Gandhi. "The official designation Scheduled Caste is the most common term now used in India" (Britannica "Untouchable").

³³ A portion of this poem, which was originally written in Marathi, is quoted in an epigraph at the start of chapter 3 of this dissertation.

from 1960s all the way to the twenty-first century. Nagarkar writes both in English and in Marathi, and draws from his own experiences living in *chawls*.³⁴ While the world gets to know increasingly more about Indian novels in English that get picked up by prestigious award systems, and the diasporic writing which has easier access to publishing and marketing spheres of the North, the fact is that there is a massive literary production and circulation within India that does not make it into the global circuits. Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*, for example, was originally published in 2005 and was widely read in India before the world got to know about it only after 2008 when it was made into an Oscar-winning Hollywood movie titled *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Any study of Mumbai literatures must take the city's massive movie industry, Bollywood,³⁵ into account. A spirited impetus to art production, Bollywood is linked to literature in multiple ways through a long-term coexistence. As "the world's largest producer of movies," Mumbai's "identity has been inextricably tied to the film industry" (Varma 73). Bollywood has been part of the imagination of the populace, both in Mumbai and in the rest of India, for over a century. Its stories set in Mumbai and filmed in its public places, its connections to Mumbai's underworld, its employment of hundreds of thousands of the city's inhabitants, all create an intense association with Mumbai and Mumbaikars. This strong bond between Bollywood and the city is intertwined with the textual narratives of Mumbai. A common motif in the city's literatures, Mumbai cinema sometimes get entangled in literary plots through reciprocal references. Since cultural production breeds more cultural production, Bollywood's longevity, prolificacy and world-wide success act as a catalyst in the city's literatures. It can be argued that some of the

³⁴ Vohra defines *chawl* as "that Bombay phenomenon of one-room tenements with common bathrooms and a communitarian balcony corridor" (40). Once created for the textile workers of Mumbai, today *chawls* are only one step up from the slum settlements.

³⁵ The nickname Bollywood, derived from Hollywood, is not looked upon favourably in India. Bombay cinema is older than Hollywood, and both its viewership and the number of films produced are the largest in the world.

city's literary production come to being as an opposition to Bollywood narratives. The characters in Shroff's short story "Traffic" express their wish to see more Bollywood movies "that depicted real lives, real tragedies, without gloss and visual manipulation" (28). The social realism we find in contemporary narratives counter the unrealistic fairytale-style romanticism that Bollywood movies are famous for. In Swarup's novel *Q&A / Slumdog Millionaire*, while watching a Bollywood movie which "shows life too realistically," the protagonist, Ram Mohammad Thomas, verbalizes the need to escape the sufferings of real lives and to have something to dream about. He questions "the point of watching a film if you can see the real thing in your neighbor's house just across the street" (218). Bollywood movies and their numerous songs are an important part of life in India as they bring "poetry to mundane lives" and give voice to "aspirations and desires" (Varma 72). This escapist entertainment offered by most Bollywood movies are countered by the social realist aspects of contemporary Mumbai literatures. While the movie makers of Bombay create "collective dreams" (Mehta "Dreaming"), contemporary authors of the city, aiming for improvements in the society, form the collective consciousness.

In contrast to Lagos narratives which refer to other—both real and fictional—authors, poets, dramatists, and journalists, in Mumbai novels we find intertextuality between the written text and the visual text. Most notably, in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, one of the two main characters is a famous Bollywood star. The entanglement between Bollywood and Mumbai manifests itself in literature to such an extent that the inter-referencing may become cyclical like in the case of the novel *Q&A* and the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, or surreal as in the case of *The City of Devi* in which a fictional movie forges the plot of the story. In *Q&A / Slumdog Millionaire*, the intertextuality between Bollywood and written narratives supports Varma's assertion that Mumbai is experienced through film by most of the Mumbaikars, as well as the rest of India.

(Varma 73-74). When Ram Mohammad Thomas and his best friend Salim see Mumbai for the first time, they are not only overwhelmed by the “sights and sounds” of the city, but they are also in complete awe of how much they know of it through films:

Churchgate Station looks exactly as it did in *Love in Bombay*. Salim half expects to bump into Govinda singing a song near the church. ... He looks at the stalls selling soft drinks and snacks. “That is where Govinda and Raveena had *bhel puri*,” he points out excitedly.

(87)

The dialogue between film and literature in *The City of Devi* is more complex. The novel contains an adventure movie titled *Superdevi* which brings about the apocalyptic riots and terrorist acts reminiscent of the unrest of 1992-93 and the terrorist acts of 2008. The movie in the novel features a lead actress who is supposed to be a “real-life discovery from the Dharavi slums” (88); possibly a reference to the young heroes of the novel *Q & A*, and to the real lives of the child actors who represented them in the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.³⁶ In other cases, semi-autobiographical narratives materialize in Bollywood, like that of Saadat Hasan Manto’s Bombay stories; half fiction, half memoir. The movie *Manto*, classified as a biopic, “weaves together its subject’s life and his stories,” further complicating the intertextuality where it is hard “to tell which tales were invented and which reported” (“Maxed-out City”). In another example of Mumbai fictions’ intertwinement with Mumbai’s movie industry, Shroff’s short story “Meter Down,” narrates a real-life incident regarding Mumbai’s road and traffic infrastructure that involves an actual Bollywood movie star. Another connection between Bollywood and

³⁶ Two child actors of *Slumdog Millionaire* were in fact from the Mumbai settlements, and in spite of a trust fund established for their education and well-being by the director of the movie, as of 2009 they were still living in their old neighbourhoods in make-shift shacks. Later, they are reported to have moved to better living quarters (Boulton and Roberts).

contemporary Mumbai narratives is their advocacy of unity and harmony. Just like the written narratives' resistance to giving up on the cosmopolitan nature of Mumbai, the city's film industry also defies homogenization. Ashcroft, who calls Bollywood a "phenomenon" ("Urbanism" 507),³⁷ argues that, "with its indiscriminate mixture of Hindu and Muslim, of north and south Indian," the city's movie industry "seem[s] to be the embodiment of Bombay cosmopolitanism" ("Urbanism" 508).

In their quest for representing Mumbai realistically and from different perspectives, contemporary narratives of the city also tackle its organized crime. Varma notes that in the 1980s, "the rampant growth in real estate value . . . catapulted Bombay into the company of 'global cities' such as New York, London, and Tokyo." This, Varma posits, "unleashed the forces of the underworld in virtually all spheres of the city's life—encompassing business (film production, real estate, gold smuggling), administration, and politics, establishing a shadowy counterpoint to the supposedly above-ground entry of global capital" (75). These shadowy dealings abound in contemporary novels such as *Sacred Games* by Vikram Chandra, *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil, and the *Mumbai Noir* short story collection, as well as in creative nonfiction such as Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*, Sonia Faleiro's *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars*, and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. While today Mumbai is considered to be "a gritty, glamorous epitome of modern urban life, a

³⁷ Ashcroft provides the background to today's Bollywood as follows:

Cinema was born in Paris with the Lumière show that opened on 28 December 1885. Maurice Sestiere, the Lumière man, was on his way to Australia, but owing to shipping routes between the colonies he had to stop over in Bombay, where he decided to screen the Lumière film. Thus, virtually by an accident of history and imperial geography, the Indian film industry was born. But that industry, appropriating and transforming a technology from the west, became a profoundly different cultural phenomenon with a different range of effects upon "other" modernities outside the scope of western modernity. Bombay cinema quickly gained a very important place in the consciousness of the city. ("Urbanism" 507)

capital of noir for the whole world to admire, or revile[,]” Bollywood has always reveled in the underworld and “film, fiction and filth have been chasing one another up and down the city’s streets for decades” (“Maxed-out City”). In *Mumbai Noir*, which is “an unflinching gaze at the underbelly,” the editor Tyrewala argues that previously “[t]he city’s chroniclers—its novelists, essayists, poets, journalists, and filmmakers—often seemed overawed by the idea of Mumbai, rendering its quotidian realities in brushstrokes of grandiose narratives” (16). While this may be true to an extent in the case of Bollywood, my research shows that Mumbai novelists were hardly ever guilty of not reflecting Mumbai’s realities genuinely or succumbing to grandiose narratives. Mumbai literatures of the last few decades, as we see from the texts chosen for this dissertation, meticulously recount the city’s contemporary realities in every conceivable facet. Emma Bird argues that “[c]aught between celebratory accounts of its hybridity and cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and foreboding tales of its dark underbelly, on the other, it seems that contemporary Bombay, and the ordinary lives of its citizens, have been overlooked” (383). This has not been my observation. I have found Bombay’s ordinary lives in all Mistry novels, Chaudhuri’s *The Immortals*, Suri’s *The Death of Vishnu*, Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*, and Mukherjee’s *A State of Freedom* among many others. I posit, as one illustrative example, that nothing explains the lives of washers in Mumbai’s famous open-air laundry area as does Murzban F. Shroff’s short story “Dhobi Ghat.” Ciocca’s assertion that, along with “other cultural, or explicitly political forums, [Mumbai] stories have multiplied the city’s potential for producing meaning, thus opening up a space for a specifically literary epistemic value” (“From Nation” 224) is in direct accordance with this dissertation’s postulation.

Alongside Mumbai’s many dichotomies which I examine in chapter 3, there are also the dualities of dream versus nightmare, and reality versus magic. In Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long*

Silence, for someone arriving from a smaller town, Bombay is at first “nothing but gray, uniform ugliness” with its “endless rows of looking-exactly-alike, ramshackle, drab buildings” (54). Later, however, the newcomer is awed by the streets of Bombay, by “the magic of their teeming life” and watches “in utter fascination the mobs, the brawls, the drunkards, the school children, the coy newly-weds. And processions” (54). Like all big cities, Mumbai is noisy. In figuratively-titled *That Long Silence*, the city is never silent. The narrator Jaya finds “the diverse sounds of Bombay” difficult to get accustomed to; they seem to her “an endless assault on the ears” (56). What is an “assault on the ears” for the uninitiated, is a symbol of liveliness and catalyst for creativity for those who are addicted to the city. To those who “never leave” Mumbai, Jerry Pinto and Naresh Fernandes ask “Why would you live in a matchbox, breathe bad air, drink foul water, offer yourself as mosquito-fodder and roadkill? Because Bombay is an addiction. It isn’t good for you but you need the high of neon and insomnia, concrete and opportunity” (xi). Suri, who wrote three Mumbai novels in the twenty-first century—*The Death of Vishnu* (2001), *The Age of Shiva* (2008), and *The City of Devi* (2013)—agrees:

If you grow up in Bombay and learn to thrive on its noise and fumes and crowds, if you can coexist with the rich biodiversity in its water and survive its homicidal traffic and killer trains, then trust me, you will have lots to write about should you ever become an author. Look at me: leaving the city when I was 20, and still beholden to it 33 years later.
(Guardian)

This city whose “metropolitan region will be the third-largest urban agglomeration in the world by 2025 with over 25 million people” (Harris 2959)³⁸ mirrors the boundless complexity and

³⁸ Andrew Harris notes that “there are some predictions” that Mumbai’s population may reach “40 million by 2050” (2959).

diversity of India. This historically, economically, and culturally significant city, or its enigmatic motherland cannot be contained within a few books. What this dissertation hopes to offer is only one sliver of a massive, multi-dimensional mural.

The works analyzed here, namely *Family Matters*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Breathless in Bombay* and *No God in Sight*, as well as many other Bombay/Mumbai texts that have provided me with relevant quotes, are the culmination of a long literary build up that started in the 1930s with the Progressive Writers' Association's realist influence and social consciousness, and Manto's brutally truthful Bombay stories. Undoubtedly, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *The Satanic Verses* in magical realism, and *The Moor's Last Sigh* in picaresque realism are the novels which strengthened Bombay's literary reputation in the world leading up to the twenty-first century. Bombay/Mumbai is a city where historic events take place more frequently and with a greater intensity than in other large cities around the world. The city's narratives cannot and have not ignored these watershed historic incidents. The rise of Shiv Sena, the riots after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, and the terrorist bombings of 1993, have all found their way into the city's literatures. Cultural and historical content Bombay/Mumbai offers accounts partly for the profuse literary production of the city. The other part comes from the vibrancy and the spirit of its twenty-million strong community.

Lagos, City of the Imagination

Atop the bridge, with the water stretching out on both sides and the lights shimmering on its undulating surface, it struck Abel, forcefully, that Lagos was a lovely city if only it could be quiet and clean and calm for a moment. But then he shook his head and laughed softly to himself. Make the city quiet and clean and calm and it would no longer be Lagos.

— Toni Kan, *The Carnivorous City*

But Lagos keeps swaying triumphantly,
dancing as a city that breaks
the twilight grey of dusk and explodes
into a patch of colors and traffic. A city
overflows with beautiful chaos, ecstatic
its lagoon, detached from the Atlantic
that calls you away.

— James Yeku, “Away from Lagos”



— Pius Utomi Ekpei / AFP via Getty Images

Fascination—we may even call it *obsession*—with Lagos is common both in Nigeria and around the world. Leona, the narrator of Obinna Udenwe’s 2019 novel, *Colours of Hatred*, explains her enchantment with the city through this befitting imagery:

It is like a giant sea animal—its mouth wide open, swallowing everything on its way, fishes of all sizes, crabs, seaweeds, and gulping water steadily. And I think it is this feature of Lagos that keeps people continuously on their toes, moving and walking fast, exploring and breaking grounds, and rising from poverty to riches, from wealth to more wealth, before sometimes descending to the abyss of penury. (147)

It is not only Leona who is captivated by Lagos. Being the main protagonist of countless twenty-first-century novels and short stories, Lagos keeps us all—reader, visitor, inhabitant—spellbound. As mentioned earlier, there are some basic similarities between Mumbai and Lagos. Both cities accommodate multiple religions, ethnicities, and languages. Tade Akin Aina defines “Lagos Life” as “mixtures and interspersions,” indicating the cosmopolitan nature of Lagos (176). He explains that Lagos’s “variety and differences are the very parts of its make-up and are pure in their very existence and expression” (176). Lagos developed from a modest fishing community into a world city today with an estimated twenty million inhabitants; its metro area boasting fourteen million residents (Aina 182). According to an estimate by the United Nations, there is one person moving to Lagos every minute, seeking, as McClusky puts it, its “magic glitter” (214), or simply a better life.

Fictional Leona’s remark about people “moving and walking fast” is easy to observe in real life. “Lagos is a city that’s very anxious” says Kunlé Adeyemi, a Nigerian architect and urbanist, “[e]veryone is always in a hurry. Everyone needs to get ahead of the other” (qtd. in Michael). This incessant motion is reflected in literature. As Nnolim puts it, “[m]ovement is a defining aspect of the new Nigerian novel.” He argues that the contemporary narratives often depict “a group of people on the move, flitting as it were from one Nigerian city to another, while also restless within the city (mainly Lagos), in which night clubs, bars, hotels and choice restaurants

engage their waking hours” (210). Indeed, motion and action abound in contemporary Lagos narratives as we see in Abani’s *Graceland*, Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos*, Kan’s *Carnivorous City*, Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, and many other twenty-first century Lagos literatures. The restlessness of the city comes through in its narratives. There is also a significant night life in Lagos which all narratives of the city have been tackling since Ekwensi led the way in 1950s with multiple Lagos short stories and novellas. Abani, himself a Lagos novelist, insists that “Lagos never sleeps. Ever” (*Lagos Noir* 19).

Lagos used to be both the capital of the Lagos State and the federal capital of Nigeria. In 1975, Ikeja replaced Lagos as the state capital, and in 1991 the seat of government was moved to Abuja. But Lagos retained its economic, political and social significance (Adisa 95, Osundare 8). Jinmi Adisa, a researcher of Lagos’s street culture, emphasizes the city’s “strategic position in national life,” and maintains that the move of the federal capital from Lagos to Abuja “amuses rather than infuriates the average Lagosian who considers it a fruitless attempt to undercut the significance of the metropolis” (95). In fact, Lagosians enjoy mocking the move by saying that the government can take the capital-city status away from Lagos, but no one can take away its ocean (Osundare 9). Indeed, the ocean is an integral part of Lagos life, and Lagos literatures often incorporate the lagoon and the beaches into their narratives. In Okorafor’s science-fiction novel, *Lagoon*, the aliens who appear in Lagos’s lagoon declare that they “have chosen to live here,” and they clarify that it is Lagos the city they want, “[a]nd the waters” (40). Both *Lagoon* and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain*,³⁹ a novel depicting the atrocities and corruption of a despotic government, use Lagos’s Bar Beach as their primary settings. Many other novels, such as

³⁹ *Arrows of Rain* takes place in Madia, an imaginary country in Africa. It is understood that Madia is modelled after Nigeria and the novel starts with the death of a woman on “B. Beach” which clearly stands for Lagos’s famous Bar Beach.

Abani's *Graceland* and Okri's *Dangerous Love* feature Lagos's lagoon and beaches extensively. In Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*, the characters end up settling in a slum village which one character calls "the water city" (296). This "soggy swamp crisscrossed with wooden planks" (297) and navigated by canoes corresponds to Lagos's infamous floating slum village, Makoko which is constructed on stilts on the west coast of the lagoon. When the protagonists settle in this watery neighbourhood built on beams, another character is said to have "looked at a map of Lagos and seen no mention of their new home but they were there nonetheless, their residence defying cartographers" (350). Today, real Makoko is represented in Lagos maps; as legitimate as any other neighbourhood. This interlace of "land and water" is called "a tangled dichotomy" by Whiteman who observes that the ocean is "an essential part of [Lagos's] soul" (35). Similarly, Lagosian poet Niyi Osundare's performance poem "Eko"⁴⁰ emphasizes this aspect of Lagos's geography by repeating the verse "The sea is Lagos; Lagos is the Sea" (6). Lagos narratives include representations of this intricate urban layout since many contemporary issues of Lagos such as road infrastructure and commute, settlements in marshy areas, and flooding of the coastal neighbourhoods, all directly connect to this topography of the city.

The city's original name was Eko, given by its first king, Oba Ado, during its early history. Eko was the land area now known as Lagos Island where the king's palace used to stand. Abani notes that the Lagosians "call themselves Omo-Eko, children of Eko" (*Lagos Noir* 15). The Portuguese arrived in Eko in the fifteenth century and named it Lagos—the same Portuguese who gave Bombay its name. In naming Lagos, they may have been inspired by the Portuguese word *lagos* which means 'lakes,' or they may have named it after a lively port town in Portugal

⁴⁰ Also called a choreopoem, this mode of poetry is "a combination of all forms of theater storytelling" (Gardiner qtd. in Seibert). The term choreopoem was first coined by African-American poet Ntozake Shange who included movement and dance into the recitation of her poems (Seibert).

of the same name. Lagos, Portugal was a main port from which Portugal conducted its African expeditions. Abel, the protagonist of Toni Kan's *The Carnivorous City*, contemplates the name of the city:

Lagos, named by the Portuguese after the lagoon that girded its waist, was like a river swollen with flood and every time it threw up there was chaos. That was what made it Lagos; the wild garden where men and women came to harvest dreams, some lean and some bounteous. (159)

Abel summarizes a few features of Lagos in this short reverie: the origin of its name, its land and water dichotomy, and the seemingly endless migration of people filling up its streets which are said to be paved with gold, just like it is said for the streets of all large cities. Each day, tens of thousands of people arrive in Lagos, some for temporary business, some for life. How does Lagos welcome these travellers and new residents? It says, "This is Lagos!"

"This is Lagos" is a loaded expression that conveys possibility, hope, danger or frustration, or it may be employed as a shorthand to explain the maelstrom that is Lagos. Referring to Chibundu Onuzo's 2017 novel *Welcome to Lagos*, Habila informs us that the title of the book "is an in-joke referencing the fact that, unlike most cities, Lagos has no Welcome sign" ("High Hopes"). This insider joke—a fable from Nigerian popular culture—Habila hints at might be the one Noo Saro-Wiwa⁴¹ explains:

When describing the character of our biggest city, Nigerians always like to tell a wry anecdote about the man who steps off a plane and is greeted with a sign that reads: THIS

⁴¹ Noo Saro-Wiwa, author of creative nonfiction *Looking for Transwonderland – Travels in Nigeria* (2012), is the daughter of writer, television producer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. Noo Saro-Wiwa writes that in the early 1990s, her father "had started a campaign against government corruption and environmental degradation by Shell." He was arrested and tortured. Later, in 1995, the government executed him (23).

IS LAGOS. The message offers him nothing in the way of a cheerful welcome, nor can he even take it as a warning (since such a gesture would imply that the authorities actually care for his safety). What the sign provides is an indifferent announcement of his arrival in a city that he is visiting at his own risk; a blunt disclaimer. If he can't handle the squalid, uncompromising callousness then he should tuck his tail between his legs and go somewhere else, because This Is Lagos – *take it or leave it.* (11)

Abani remembers seeing this sign when he returns to Lagos with his family as a little boy: “When we arrived in Lagos, by the tollgate out near Mile 12, the sign by the roadside simply said: This is Lagos. Not welcome to, or enjoy your stay, I remember even then thinking it sounded like a warning.” He adds “I may be lying, of course” since he was so young at the time and since “this is Lagos” is so engrained in the collective memory (“Lagos: A Pilgrimage”). Lagos narratives often make use of the “this is Lagos” adage to explain Lagos to a newcomer, as in the fittingly titled Nwapa short story “This Is Lagos,” when Mama Bisi says “This is Lagos. Anything can happen here” (19), or when Cole, in *Every Day Is for the Thief*, says to himself “I have no right to [listen to] Coltrane here, not with everything else going on. This is Lagos” (69).

While Lagosians profess not wanting to live anywhere else, for those arriving in the city for the first time, Lagos may seem harsh and chaotic. Whiteman, author of several books on Lagos, warns that “when confronted with Lagos,” it is not immediately conspicuous that the city has “a deep and complex cultural richness” that is brought about by “multiplicity of creativities” (89). In spite of its somber realities, Lagos is also a city of tremendous creativity, imagination, and liveliness. It has the energy to produce an abundance of literature, music, art, photography, movies, fashion, and journalism. Habila regards Lagos as “this incredible mix in one place,” and sums it up by saying that it is “so perfect for a writer” (“Sense”). By mid-twentieth century,

Ekwensi's chronicles of Nigerian city life in *People of the City*,⁴² *Lokotown and Other Stories*, *Jagua Nana*, and *Jagua Nana's Daughter* all demonstrated the wealth of Lagos stories waiting to be told. Habila muses that “[y]ou could be sitting by your window and looking out into the street, and you have the whole story happening right there in front of you.” Cole, visiting his childhood town, expresses coinciding thoughts. “The air in the strange, familiar environment of this city is dense with story,” he reports from Lagos. “The narratives fly at me from all directions. Everyone who walks into the house, every stranger I engage in conversation, has a fascinating story to deliver.” Cole concludes that all the Lagos stories are awaiting “their recording angel” (*Every Day* 64).

After Ekwensi's multiple Lagos narratives, with Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, and Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, Lagos was already becoming a focal point in Nigerian literature. This early trend set the stage for the urban turn of the twenty-first century, and Lagos, like Bombay, came to be “one of the world's preeminent fictionalized cities, as with London and Paris more than a hundred years before” (Dunton 68). Nnolim argues that “Lagos as setting, has come to assume a special place in contemporary Nigerian fiction” (206), and furthermore, it has become a veritable source for the narratives of social hardships. Lagos, with its “counter-hegemonic quality” on the one hand, “growing poverty and corruption, a shortage in infrastructure and working sanitation system, as well as a deficit in effective urban administration” (Hugo 47) on the other hand, is a fertile source not just for contemporary Nigerian writers, but for researchers from multiple disciplines as well. Before the increase in the production of contemporary Lagos narratives, Lagos had made its mark with “polemical journalism” (Whiteman 91). It is fitting that some of

⁴² *People of the City* starts by declaring that the events to follow take place in a West African city (which shall be nameless) (3); however, in later pages Lagos is identified by name multiple times.

the most well-known Lagos novels feature fictional newspapers and journalists; Ekwensi's *People of the City*, Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, Okri's *Dangerous Love*, and Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*, to name a few. Whiteman points out the significance of "the journalist as a hero in Nigerian fiction and non-fiction" by calling them the "bearers of the keys of the city." Dunton asserts that "the journalist features as a character in the Lagos novel," and had a dominant presence since the publication of *People of the City* (74). The central character of this 1954 novel is an aspiring journalist, and since then, the tradition of featuring journalists and newspapers in literary Lagos narratives continues to this day. Not only the main protagonists of many Lagos narratives are journalists, but often, there are also references to real and imaginary newspaper articles. In *Welcome to Lagos*, Ahmed Bakare is a journalist who establishes a newspaper titled *Nigerian Journal* which he hopes will provide honest news. In its pilot edition, the paper introduces itself as follows:

On this historic day, fresh and independent journalism has come to Nigeria. We say down with the *brown envelope*. Down with news without intelligent analysis. Down with bad-quality ink on even worse-quality paper. No more the drab arts and culture section, the lifeless politics pages, the cliché-ridden sports section. The *Nigerian Journal*, for the inquisitive mind, has arrived. (200; emphasis added)

Fictional Ahmed Bakare knows about *brown envelopes*, because his own father had made his fortune through questionable means. Ahmed has part ways with his family and his family's wealth, and now aspires to publish real and independent news, refusing to be corrupted by politicians. It does not go as planned. His secretary is kidnapped, his offices are ransacked, and he tries to protect himself by leaving the country. Similar stories abound in Lagos literatures. In *Waiting for an Angel*, real life and fiction merge. The novel includes an actual account of the

assassination of Dele Giwa, the founder of *Newswatch Magazine*, who was killed in 1986 when he tried to open a parcel bomb that was mailed to his house. Along with this real-life event and real news magazine, *Waiting for an Angel* also tells the story of *The Dial*, a fictional magazine, and its fictional editor James Fiki. *The Dial* and its editor are under attack by the same dictatorial regime that murdered Dele Giwa. They burn the magazine's offices, and James tries to leave the country to avoid arrest. In another blurring of life and art, James warns a journalist that it is impossible to not write about politics. "In this country the very air we breathe is politics," he says (112). In real life, Nigerian journalists who refuse bribes and insist on doing their jobs fairly and truthfully run into similar difficulties, and literary narratives honour them. Whiteman further argues that, to understand Lagos, one "has to grasp the powerful attraction of the journalist as a prophet, a figure outside society depicting its ills, pointing the way" (108). Whiteman conveys playwright Femi Osofisan's suggestion that "the prominence of writers and journalists in Nigerian fiction represents a kind of displacement" (108). The "writers," Osofisan alludes to are poets and playwrights, as well as authors of novels and short stories. These writers appear in literary narratives as frequently as journalists. Soyinka and Ken Saro-Wiwa come up in fiction regularly. In Otiono's short story "One Day in the Life of an Applicant," the protagonist carries a copy of Festus Iyayi's novel *Violence* with him during his daily trials and tribulations in Lagos (*Night* 206). Similar literary self-references—or, as Ruth S. Wenske calls them "often-humorous self-reflective ruminations"—are so common that Wenske asserts they have "been part of the African realist tradition since the publication of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and [have] become an important element of the African realist novel" (132).⁴³ I have earlier noted the blurring of

⁴³ While *Things Fall Apart* is the *sine qua non* of postcolonial studies, arguably, some of Achebe's other works, such as *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* are better archetypes of his realist fiction.

reality and fiction in Habila's social realist novel *Waiting for an Angel*. In one uncanny instance in the narrative, the author himself makes an appearance, and many well-known literary figures follow suit. The novel, using the presence of real-life authors and poets such as Toni Kan, Chiedu Ezeanah, Maik Nwosu, Nduka Otiono, Obi Nwakanma, Mike Jimoh and Odia Ofeimun—some of whose works are included in this research—situates the imagined realm in the contemporaneous times and connects their fictional struggles to the real world.

The “displacement” noted by Osofisan in relation to literature referring to itself, can be understood in multiple ways. Firstly, it indicates a move from the rural to the urban since many poet, novelist, or journalist characters of contemporary Nigerian novel live in the big cities, like Lagos, Ibadan, or Abuja. Secondly, under the dictatorial regimes portrayed in the narratives, the notion of displacement signals exile, imprisonment, and death. The real-life oppression and suppression of intellectuals—such as Soyinka who suffered two years in solitary confinement and Saro-Wiwa who was killed after ten years of imprisonment—are reflected in literature. Many fictional journalists—Lomba and James Fiki in *Waiting for an Angel*, and Ahmed Bakare in *Welcome to Lagos*, to name a few—are either jailed or choose exile to avoid jail. A third interpretation of displacement might be the significant brain drain since many accomplished poets and authors now have academic roles in the universities of England and the United States. Otiono remarks that “the worst years of military dictatorship in Nigeria in the 1980s” precipitated the “intra- and intercontinental brain drain” (“Tracking” 7). This timeline coincides with the events of *Waiting for an Angel*, in which, most of the real-life intellectuals attending the fictional poetry-reading party, including the author himself, have all moved on in real life to become professors in North American universities, or elsewhere in the global North. Finally, and more importantly, the recurrent references to revered literary figures as well as to journalists and

newspapers—both fictional and real—demonstrate solidarity with free press and a well-deserved pride in Nigeria’s illustrious literary field. References to Nigeria’s literary greats, and oppressed, jailed or murdered intellectuals render them indestructible and timeless, and solidify their influence. This method of literature’s self-reference is just one of its mechanisms to cope with the social malaise of its time.

Next to journalism, the Onitsha Market literature was another important influence on Lagos literatures. Township of Onitsha is about 450 kilometers from Lagos, and it is famous for having the largest market in Africa. In addition to its massive size, Onitsha Market is also known for the literary pamphlets sold there. A “uniquely Nigerian creation” of the mid-twentieth century, Onitsha Market literature “had tremendous popularity in Lagos and often covered Lagos subject matter” (Whiteman 91). The literary production offered in the Onitsha Market became popular in the 1950s and 1960s, and consisted of pamphlets, books and other publications that provided good information on the social life of the time. In fact, the origins of *People of the City*, arguably the first Lagos novel, can be traced back to the Onitsha Market pamphlet literature (Nnolim 72). Nnolim likens the pamphlets to “Boccaccio’s Decameron” in that they were “literature for the masses” (72), and they contained easy access to Lagos narratives.

Nigerian literature is generally analyzed by loosely grouping writers in three generations. The categorization of Nigerian writers into first, second and third generations tells the story of how contemporary Lagos narratives came about, and what their primary concerns are. Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton explain that the first generation of Nigerian—and, in general, African—writers were born under the rule of the colonizer, and therefore their texts were “massively overdetermined by that experience” (14). This first generation of Nigerian and African writers, a group which famously includes Achebe, strived to counter the dominant

narrative, namely the Western conceptions of Africa and the Africans. The second-generation writers were also born in the colonial times, “but their formative years were mostly shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and statis” (Adesanmi and Dunton 14). Adesanmi and Dunton argue that, for the third-generation writers, the “absence of a ‘centre’ constructed on a foundation of historical and traditional totalities [made] for a much more expansive creative space, fluid plot, faster-paced narrative” as well as an urban setting (16). This description of third-generation Nigerian writers encapsulates the main argument of this dissertation: that there is an urban turn and a post-postcolonial focus. Among the writers who belong to the third generation, Adesanmi and Dunton list Nwosu, Abani, Atta, Kan, and Habila (16) whose works are examined here.

Encompassing the petroleum-rich Niger Delta, Nigeria is Africa’s largest oil producer, a fact which contemporary literatures of the nation do not treat warmly because of the corruption directly related to it, the livelihoods lost and the environmental damage caused by its extraction. Onuzo’s *Welcome to Lagos* summarizes the armed unrest in the Niger Delta as follows:

The militants said they were fighting for compensation for the millions of gallons of crude that had gushed out of the ground since the 1950s, when a Shell-BP drill struck oil in ‘commercial quantities’, the magic phrase that would draw the French, the Dutch, the Chinese to this small corner of Nigeria, destroying the land and water from which the Niger Deltans gained their livelihood. (17)

As in this example, we see more and more contemporary authors engage with the environmental destruction and the vastly uneven distribution of the benefits related to petroleum drills. Another representation comes from Sefi Atta’s novel *Everything Good Will Come* when the heroine connects oil reserves with bribery and corruption, remarking that “oil leaked from the drilling

fields of the Niger Delta into people's Swiss bank accounts" (46). Finally, in Okorafor's *Lagoon*, the environmental devastation brought on by crude oil extraction is one of the central themes of the novel. These examples illustrate the preferred engagements of twenty-first century urban narratives: current events and current problems.

Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, written in 1960, is an earlier look at Lagos as a large city plagued with corruption and already suffering from traffic-related issues. Soyinka, a stern critique of corruption in Nigeria, set some of his plays and stories in Lagos; notably, *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1996) is, as its subtitle claims, "a Lagosian kaleidoscope." Soyinka's first novel *The Interpreters* (1964) also takes place in Lagos (as well as in Ibadan) and recounts the dilemmas of Nigerian intellectuals, as well as the "disintegration of urban infrastructure, the mismatch between existing infrastructure and the needs of the population it must serve" (Dunton 72). When BBC2 released the Lagos documentary mentioned earlier, Soyinka rebuked the grim portrayal of Lagos as "condescending" and "colonialist." He framed his objections "as a concerned citizen" who knows Lagos "intimately." Soyinka maintains that this "pulsating city" may be "too pulsating" at times, and that is why he lives "a little way out of it[,]" but it is "a place where human beings live and work," and the documentary did not include the essence of Lagos, "a modern African state" (Dowell). It should be noted that Soyinka's 1965 play *The Road* is an incisive inquiry into that "too pulsating" aspect of Lagos and a verdict on its dangerous roads. All of these earlier works are precursors to the abundancy of twenty-first century literary Lagos narratives. In 1980, Okri wrote *Flowers and Shadows*, and a year later he published *The Landscapes Within*, both set in Lagos. With these two early Lagos books, Okri became, a "harbinger of the contemporary Nigerian novel, the link between the old and the new" (Nnolim

206). The abundance of Lagos writers kept growing in spite of the condition Ofeimun puts forward: Lagos is not “a writer-friendly city.” He argues that

Lagos is not a city where you may read a book in the comfort of a bus or train or recollect emotion in Wordsworthian tranquility. Perish the thought! Lagos conjures images of traffic lock-jaws, progressively decrepit roads and rickety public transportation systems, crude commercialism, indifference to the products of the human mind, lack of places of genuine public relaxation, . . . and, in general, the tendency for brash materialism and uncouth and abrasive human relations to overcome good sense and aesthetics. (138)

In *Every Day Is for the Thief*, Teju Cole concurs. One day on the *danfo*,⁴⁴ he sees a passenger carrying a thick Michael Ondaatje book. He muses that “an adult reading a challenging work of literary fiction on Lagos public transportation [is] a sight rare as hen’s teeth.” Like Ofeimun, Cole too concludes that Lagos “is a hostile environment for the life of mind” (42). But he also agrees with Ofeimun that, in spite of everything, the creativity, and the creators keep emerging, “and they are essential because they are the signs of hope in a place that, like all other places on the limited earth, needs hope” (131). It is “a city that breathes creativity” (138) and many Nigerian authors make Lagos an active participant in their narrations. “[I]n a country which appears to be running out of dreams,” Ofeimun believes that Lagos “provides the finest Archimedean [*sic*] points from which dreams may be regenerated and a new way found of gaining access to the future” (138). This is testified by a new generation of authors and publishers who are willing to take on new themes, new styles, and a few risks. Analyzing Lagos novels from the perspectives of entropy—the disorder that tends to increase as per the second law of thermodynamics—and the positive energy of creativity and imagination that endeavours

⁴⁴ *Danfos* are Lagos’s infamous yellow buses. Chapter 4 has more information on *danfos*.

to counter it, Dunton suggests that contemporary narratives characterize Lagos “not only as a site of disorder and decay but as an environment in which creative energies are nurtured that are held to constitute a corrective and liberatory force” (68). In the following chapters, I will identify these attempts at correction and liberation in recent Lagos novels including the fictional news items in *Welcome to Lagos*, diary entries in *Graceland*, and the incorporation of African mythology in *Lagoon*.

Any discussion of Lagos must also include a mention of Nollywood, Nigeria’s Lagos-based film commerce. Nollywood is one of the world’s largest motion picture industries,⁴⁵ and its impact on Lagos and on Lagos’s literary narratives is indisputable. Produced mostly for small screens, Nigerian movies are set and shot in Lagos, and feature Lagos streets and landmarks even when it is unintentional. Comparable to the interplay between Bollywood and Bombay, there is also an inevitable reciprocity between Nollywood and Lagos: the movie industry is not only a part of the city, but it also uses the city as a visual and material resource (Haynes 133). Lagos not only “imposes its images” on the movies, but also “Nollywood’s imagination” makes Lagos’s images “public emblems of fear and desire” (Haynes 133). Similar to contemporary Lagos literature, Nollywood films, as Connor Ryan argues, engage with topics that have “a degree of immediacy for audiences, sometimes even sourcing stories from newspaper headlines or popular rumours.” Ryan further notes that this engagement with the immediate present is ongoing “because stories of proximate experience resonate with audiences” (296-7). While many

⁴⁵ Both in revenue and in number of movies produced, Nigeria’s movie industry has been in the top three for a couple of decades now. In 2009, United Nations reported that Nollywood had surpassed “Hollywood as world’s second largest film producer” as well as closing “the gap on India, the global leader in the number of movies produced each year” (UN News). In 2013, it was reported that Nollywood “has been rated the most valuable movie industry in the world, behind Hollywood and Bollywood” and that it ranked “third globally in revenue” (Osae-Brown).

Nollywood productions are known to emerge from story ideas, some movies are screen adaptations of famous Nigerian novels, one example being *Swallow* (2021), directed by Kunle Afolayan, which was based on Sefi Atta's 2008 Lagos novel of the same name.

Since one of the main topics of this dissertation is corruption, a brief note needs to be made about the cybercafés of Lagos and the notorious 419, or the “Nigerian Prince” e-mail scam “which originated in Lagos” (Packer, “Megacity”). Also known as the advance-fee scam, 419 refers to the Article 419 of Nigerian Penal Code which criminalizes the acquisition of goods or funds under false pretenses. While some literary narratives may refer to this phenomenon in passing, some recent works make the 419 fraud one of their main plot points. In a 2009 novel, *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, author Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani employs the infamous scam to demonstrate the socio-economic difficulties that confront young Nigerians. The protagonist, despite having graduated from university with a degree in engineering, faces a lack of opportunities to support himself and his family. When he is reduced to “[b]lasting SOS emails around the world, hoping that someone would swallow the bait and respond” (177), the readers are offered the human side—a face, a name, and a background—of a 419er. Similarly, in Okarafor’s Lagos novel *Lagoon*, one internet fraudster is depicted as a struggling medical student while another one is an American-Nigerian who had majored in engineering. In *Lagoon*’s “Testament Cyber Café” (194), all scammers are “manipulating the same weaknesses” (195). In real life, Cole considers it akin to discovering “the source of the Nile or the Niger” when one day, completely by accident, he sits next to a perpetrator of this infamous scam at an internet café and observes as his neighbour composes the emails we are all familiar with (*Every Day* 26). He sees the scammer posing as the “Chairman of the National Office for Petroleum Resources,” as well other letters claiming to be “from the heirs of fictional magnates, from the widows of oil

barons, from the legal representatives of incarcerated generals[.]” Cole likens the “fanciful iterations” of the stories these emails tell to the Arabian Nights stories told by Scheherazade (*Every Day* 27). Okorafor, in an afterword to *Lagoon*, summarizes the whole scheme as follows:

You know, when Nigerian Prince So-and-So sends you an e-mail claiming he’s got billions sitting in the bank, but he needs “you” (a total, complete, gullible, and greedy stranger) to send him a minimal fee to get it out of the bank, and gosh, when he does, he’ll send “you” a nice cut for helping. The number 419 is a reference to the section of Nigerian law that the scam violates. (305)

While many recent Lagos books, including *Lagoon*, do tackle the 419 scam, I chose not to make it one of the main topics of my research because of its ubiquity. I was reassured in this decision by Okorafor’s comment that “[i]f all you know about one of Africa’s most powerful and innovative nations is that there is an abundance of 419 scammers from there, that’s on you, not me” (306).⁴⁶

In the Mumbai section above, I mentioned that Hannerz differentiated between cosmopolitans and locals. Until the 1990s, this division was never the case for Mumbai where everyone was local and cosmopolitan at the same time. Osundare makes the same point for Lagos suggesting that it “may be no one’s city because it is everyone’s city;” however, he goes on to say that “[e]thnic and class tensions simmer under the blanket of cosmopolitan uniformity” (“See Lagos” 9) as it is also the case for Mumbai. Lagos, or “city by the lagoon” in Ofeimun’s terms, is the site where multiple ethnicities and nationalities intermingle (138). Lagos continues

⁴⁶ The equivalent of Nigeria’s 419 in India is 420. Varma, who analyzes the 1955 Bollywood movie *Shree 420* (transliterated as *Shri 420*, meaning Mr. 420) explains that “the 420 in the title of the film references that section of the Indian Penal Code that is enforced for crimes of petty fraud and trickery” (68). In the opening scene, when the film announces that “Bombay is 420,” Varma posits that it implies “Bombay is a trickster” (67-68).

to receive migrants from all African nations which adds to its plurality. Initially, it may be difficult to notice and praise the positive energy, the vitality, and the creativity that is generated in Lagos. As Lensing points out, Lagos “offers both opportunity and exploitation, both cultural diversity and chaos” (91), and to see the anarchy and lawlessness as limitless creative energy, it is necessary to keep an open mind in this largest city of the continent. Because of these qualities of Lagos, the literary history of the city indicates a tendency growing over time that favours present-day content, and more engagement with urban life and the difficulties associated with it. Early Lagos novels such as *People of the City* (1954), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *The Interpreters* (1964), and *Flowers and Shadows* (1980) are some examples that may have started the trend. Lagos narratives found in Onitsha Market pamphlets have also created an interest in narrating the vitality and the animation present in this city. While the postcolonial condition continues and postcolonial commentary still has its place in literature, urban trials and tribulations that came to affect millions of people—and therefore, have large representational value—may have pushed Lagos to the forefront of many twenty-first century Nigerian narratives.

Now that we have reviewed the literary histories of Mumbai and Lagos, we are equipped with the foundational knowledge to thematically explore the contemporary narratives of these two cities. The following chapters will showcase new and innovative literary forms, blurring of genres, and employment of defamiliarization and shock techniques. Reading through the lenses of ecocriticism, infrastructuralism and Afro/Africanfuturism, we will highlight individual and institutional responsibilities in representations of corruption, disparities in living conditions, and traffic and infrastructure.

Chapter 2: Corruption Narratives

Whether it works or not depends on how we view corruption. Is corruption just a matter of legality, of financial irregularity and bribery, or is it the currency of a social transaction in an egregiously unequal society, in which power continues to be concentrated in the hands of a smaller and smaller minority?

— Arundhati Roy, *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*

Armed robber him need gun
 Authority man him need pen
 Authority man in charge of money
 Him no need gun, him need pen
 Pen got power gun no get
 If gun steal eighty thousand naira
 Pen go steal two billion naira

— Fela Anikulapo Kuti, “Authority Stealing”

Individual and institutional corruption is regularly depicted in contemporary Mumbai and Lagos narratives. This chapter examines Mistry’s 2002 novel *Family Matters* for Mumbai, and Onuzo’s 2017 novel *Welcome to Lagos* for Lagos. While *Family Matters* depicts corruption in the daily lives of ordinary Mumbai citizens, *Welcome to Lagos* tackles corruption in the government and institutions, as well as illustrating Lagos’s street thugs. A comparative analysis of these two literary works illustrates the debilitating aspects of a social disease while providing insight into the role each citizen plays in the wellbeing of an entire community. Both works, emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility, strive to deliver the message to the readers that corruption has consequences for the society at large and that it is not a victimless crime. Some of the characters in *Family Matters* and *Welcome to Lagos* display individual

responsibility, and some others abandon such obligations. The texts imagine, at different levels of the society, the personal and collective outcomes when moral and legal obligations are eschewed. The depth and layers of the characters allow the readers to contemplate their actions from a variety of angles and arrive at sound judgements about them. This in turn, helps the reader make changes in their own behaviour and hold others to account as well. *Family Matters*, while also briefly commenting on institutionalized corruption, mainly focuses on three types of characters whom the readers can recognize: those who are generally decent, but still cheat on their taxes; those who are exemplary citizens all their lives, however, financial difficulties force them to consider unscrupulous methods to take care of their families; and those who are just disreputable and always looking for a kickback. The readers may see themselves in the first two categories of characters, and they may be outraged by the behaviour of those in the third. All three groups of characters elicit a reaction from the reader. *Welcome to Lagos* focuses on systematic corruption in the ranks of the government officials while also commenting on street-level corruption and extortion. Like *Family Matters*, the characters in *Welcome to Lagos* cover a wide range of morals. Some characters are absolutely irreproachable, some are mostly fair but not above acting unscrupulously when the opportunity arises, and some engage in appallingly dishonest deeds. *Welcome to Lagos* presents the morally upright and the crooked side by side to illustrate that it is possible to resist corruption and that other recourses are available. The taint of corruption—anyone who comes near becomes contaminated—is a central import in both *Family Matters* and in *Welcome to Lagos*. However, this point is developed differently in the two works. In *Family Matters*, the central character's financial difficulties make it almost impossible for him to support his family, and he is left with no choice but to resort to illicit acts. Whereas in *Welcome to Lagos*, the rampant extortion and plunder in the higher levels of the government set

an example for one cabinet minister who makes a conscious decision to steal large amounts of money even though he does not need it.

As all works studied in this dissertation, *Family Matters* and *Welcome to Lagos* also comment on present-day issues in Mumbai and Lagos, respectively. They prioritize the immediate reality over critique of colonialism, even though both works do remind the readers the long-lasting impact of colonization. For example, in *Family Matters*, Indian children reading British author Enid Blyton's books is a recurring motif. The central character, Yezad, correctly identifies this colonial remnant as one that “did immense harm, it encouraged children to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged, made them hate themselves for being who they were, created confusion about their identity” (89). He tells his children that “[w]hat they really needed was an Indian Blyton, to fascinate them with their own reality” (107).⁴⁷ In *Welcome to Lagos*, a corrupt government minister tries to deflect blame by telling a British journalist that Britain had stolen all of Africa’s resources (271). In contemporary narratives which primarily focus on the here-and-now, occasional instances of colonial critiques acknowledge that there is ongoing impact of the colonial past; however, these works nonetheless advocate for self-examination as a pragmatic approach to finding solutions to current problems.

Family Matters is an older text and it is written in a more traditional style in comparison to the other works examined in this dissertation. Like most texts chosen for this dissertation, *Family Matters* exhibits a social function and participates in the general critique of the society. The novel does this by employing a conventional form of storytelling, and at times, its realist depictions of social, political, economic, and infrastructural issues of late-1990s Mumbai are

⁴⁷ In an affirmation of the universality of Britain’s cultural domination over the peoples it colonized, in Adichie’s *Americanah*, two characters realize “how similar their childhoods in Grenada and Nigeria had been, with Enid Blyton books and Anglophilic teachers and fathers who worshipped the BBC World Service” (136).

accompanied by overt messages that border on didacticism. The novel accomplishes what two of its characters, aspiring dramatists who are socially conscious, strive to do: “We need urban themes. Basically, our mandate is to awaken the urban poor to their plight” (192). *Welcome to Lagos* is a newer text, and while it also strives for the same goals as *Family Matters* does, its style has a fresh and modern feel that can better compete for an audience in this technological era of rapid information sharing and knowledge production. While *Family Matters* is a multigenerational saga of one family, *Welcome to Lagos* has a suspenseful and fast-moving plot of diverse characters. The fictional news items that are of humorous, sarcastic or informational in nature are interspersed throughout *Welcome to Lagos*, and this fictional intertextuality not only offers comic relief from serious themes, but also arouses curiosity at the beginning of each chapter. While *Family Matters* and *Welcome to Lagos* both employ social realism in their engagement with present-day Mumbai and Lagos, respectively, their narrative representations of corruption differ in style and context.

Individual responsibility promoted by *Family Matters* and *Welcome to Lagos* can be understood through Eze’s conviction who, paraphrasing Edward Gibbon’s arguments in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, states that

the success of every society depends largely on the individuals’ sense of responsibility towards it; it rests squarely on the ability of such individuals to imagine the consequences of their actions on society. The decline of every society also goes back, in large part, to individual persons’ loss of moral responsibility towards it, or the loss of basic civic virtues[.] (*Postcolonial* 102)

When the individual sense of responsibility as described by Eze is lacking, there are consequences to the greater community. Most contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos

that thematize corruption also depict these consequences to the society. Both *Family Matters* and *Welcome to Lagos* illustrate that every bribe, every unpaid tax dollar, every short-cut at the expense of quality has repercussions for the society at large. I will highlight the strategies these works employ to urge the readers for taking individual responsibility and holding government officials accountable.

What is corruption? Nigerian journalist and politician, Segun Osoba, defines corruption as a form of antisocial behaviour by an individual or social group which confers unjust or fraudulent benefits on its perpetrators, is inconsistent with the established legal norms and prevailing moral ethos of the land and is likely to subvert or diminish the capacity of the legitimate authorities to provide fully for the material and spiritual well-being of all members of society in a just and equitable manner. (372)

Recognizing corruption as an antisocial behaviour parallels Eze's argument about each individual's duty to the community at large. Contemporary Mumbai and Lagos narratives compel the readers to see the effects of corruption in their society and urges them to recognize unethical behaviour in themselves and others, and work towards a personal and societal transformation.

Vikas Swarup, a career diplomat and author of *Q & A / Slumdog Millionaire*, talking on the role of literature, explains that his "books may highlight corruption, brutality and venality, but they also show that if these things come to light, there is rectification. The voiceless do have a voice; democratic mechanisms and accountability do exist" (qtd. in Singer). In another validation of literature's powers, Akhil Gupta expresses his conviction that "scholars of contemporary India who ignored stories of corruption missed something tremendously important in social life" (5). He argues that corruption in the popular imagination should be taken seriously because "the

phenomena of corruption cannot be grasped apart from, or in isolation from [the] narratives of corruption” (6). Gupta posits that the reason why corruption stories must be studied is because most corruption takes place in secret, and the only record of it may be found in texts that are openly fictional. The Kapurs and Hiralals of *Family Matters*, as we will get to know them in the following section, exemplify the logic behind Gupta’s argument. A perfectly nice acquaintance may be cheating on their taxes unbeknownst to their social circle. Or, as in the case of *Welcome to Lagos*, the media, afraid of severe consequences, may choose not to report on corruption in higher places. For as long as storytelling has existed, things that could not be said otherwise were said in fictional forms. But, the illicit nature of corruption is not the only reason why popular imagination in literary narratives should be taken seriously. These narratives offer what sociological studies or media reports may not be able to. Scholarly articles have limited reach, even within the academia at large. They are read mostly by those who are already studying the topic. The media rarely focuses on day-to-day corruption that takes place on the streets and in small businesses. The kind of petty tax evasion portrayed in *Family Matters*, or the police officer who extorts Madam Caro, the owner of the make-shift bar in Abani’s *Graceland* do not make it to the news. It seems that bribery or misappropriated funds should involve millions of banknotes to be worthy of a mention on television. This latter is not rare either, but does not serve as a wake-up call for the middle classes; the amounts are too large, and the perpetrators are too high up in the bureaucracy for the news item to connect with the ordinary people. Literature may not reach large audiences in the way online platforms or popular movies and television shows do, but it has better odds of making a mark on the people it does reach: the middle classes. Matthijs Bal and Martijn Veltkamp argue that “the experience of *fictional narratives*” plays a different role in the consumption of messages and make a deeper—more personal—impact on the readers (1).

They argue that, because “fiction is processed differently than communications that aim to persuade a reader” (advertisements, scientific or opinion articles, news items), it has an effect on feelings of empathy. Through this personal connection, fiction strives to move the readers to act towards individual and societal betterment.

It is inconceivable for a contemporary novel set in Mumbai or Lagos to not confront the prevailing corruption and its impact on the daily lives of these cities’ inhabitants. The texts selected for this chapter illustrate the range of corrupt practices in different layers of society, from the regular street-level extortion to the redirection of public funds by top government officials. The impunity of the civil servants who keep breaking the law comes to light. These stories raise the consciousness with regard to this social disease, subvert the secrecy associated with illicit acts, and expose the harm brought on the society and its individual members. They put the emphasis on the victims of corruption and remind the readers their obligations as citizens. Once immersed in these narratives, the readers may want to exert change through individual actions, or by participating in larger forms of opposition. In other words, the immunity of the middle-class readers who are the primary audience of most contemporary Indian and Nigerian literatures, is challenged.

“Turning honest people into crooks”: Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*

Family Matters is a Bombay novel narrating the struggles of a Parsi family trying to make ends meet in the late 1990s. The story takes place in a severely wounded Bombay, still reeling from the ethnic tensions that have culminated in several bombings and riots that threatened the city’s cosmopolitan image. The novel tackles the corruption issue prevalent in the city by presenting a variety of recognizable characters who behave unscrupulously in their own different ways. If the readers are acting in similarly dishonest ways—however small their transgressions

may be—they may feel exposed and endeavour to make corrections in their actions. They may also be emboldened to work towards preventing others engaging in corrupt practices.

In addition to corruption, *Family Matters* deals with other serious matters of the time, such as water shortages, lack of financial and social help for the elderly, and public transportation. The novel also tackles a significant event in Mumbai's recent history: the bloodshed of 1992 fuelled by the Hindu fundamentalist movement pursued by the far-right political group, Shiv Sena. Shiv Sena's operations offer a pertinent backdrop to the novel's corruption narrative since the movement also employed illegal activities in its pursuit of ideological dominance and oppression. The corruption narrative of the novel is cleverly tied to Shiv Sena's misdeeds in such a way that the central character Yezad's fall from grace will be directly connected to this faction's operations. The characters in *Family Matters* are acutely aware of the tampering that is going on with their city, and some elements of the novel connect to the alterations of the Bombay's mosaic, including its name change.⁴⁸

The family in *Family Matters* consists of the patriarch grandfather Nariman, a retired professor of literature, his two stepchildren who live with Nariman in his large apartment, and the Chenoy family consisting of Neriman's daughter Roxana, his son-in-law Yezad, and his two grandsons Murad and Jehangir, who live in a modest flat. Neither household is well-off, but they are economical, and they manage. When Nariman, who is afflicted with Parkinson's disease, breaks his ankle walking around the neighbourhood, the dynamics within the extended family

⁴⁸ In line with this dissertation's argument that contemporary narratives are primarily concerned with recent and current events, the books analyzed represent their times' contentious topics. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the subsequent civil unrest are events that have implications in the present-day lives of Mumbai citizens, therefore, contemporary Mumbai literatures pay attention to these issues. Similarly, in Nigeria, the depletion of natural resources in the Niger Delta, the heavy-handed suppression of rebels and civilians who resist the devastation of their livelihoods, and the embezzlement of oil profits are all current issues that contemporary Lagos fictions focus on.

change. Nariman, with his leg stabilized in plaster of Paris, now requires around-the-clock care, and depends on his children for his every need. However, it is an onerous task to carry the financial, physical, and mental burdens of caring for an immobile elderly. When Nariman's stepchildren leave him at the small apartment of the Chenoys, the family's modest lifestyle becomes difficult in the congested quarters and soon the domestic harmony starts to crumble. Nariman's pension does not cover all his medical expenses, and Roxana, who has a strictly organized budget, is forced to put less and less food on the table every night. Even the two little boys seek ways to lessen the family's hardships. Especially little Jehangir, who wants nothing more than his family to be happy, starts thinking about how to alleviate his parents' concerns.

Jehangir succumbs to corruption at the age of nine, and this sad incident serves multiple purposes. First, it foretells what is to come, but more importantly, a young innocent child's participation in unethical schemes at school is designed to act as a wake-up call for the readers. This heartbreakingly event illustrates the prevalence of corruption and will, no doubt, shake some of the readers out of their complacency. Jehangir's breach of the trust of his teacher, Miss Alvarez, is foreshadowed at his grandfather's birthday dinner when the whole family comes together, and his parents urge him to talk about his prestigious role in the classroom. Jehangir explains that he was chosen as the Homework Monitor, and his job was to see if the students had done their assignments. Jehangir's uncle suggests that "if this Homework Monitoring system was a Government of India scheme," then rich students, instead of doing their homework, would "offer bribes to the teachers." Jehangir's father, Yezad, adds that "the principal would threaten to sack the teachers unless he got a percentage." When Roxana, the mother, chides the two men for corrupting the children, Yezad reminds the family that "[c]orruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks" (28), and with that the premise of the

novel is established and Yezad's own downfall is foreshadowed. Little Jehangir's lapse becomes a precursor to his father's illicit and exceedingly dangerous acts. As Peter Morey points out, *Family Matters* demonstrates how the "moral taint that everywhere affects Bombay life" penetrates even the lives of decent, principled citizens (64). As predicted by Jehangir's father and uncle, it does cross the mind of a rich student to bribe Jehangir for undone homework, unstudied history, and unmemorized poems. He is able to successfully coerce Jehangir to overlook his delinquency by slipping him a twenty-rupee note under the desk. The fact that bribery is something that can cross the mind of a child at the early age of nine is demonstrative of its pervasiveness. Arguably, children learn in their families, maybe at dinner tables, that bribery is a method that can be used to solve problems and to overcome obstacles. Jehangir, who had never experienced anything even close to a corrupt behaviour in his own family, is still vulnerable to this shady way of doing things due to the financial difficulties at home. The novel, through Jehangir's—and later, his father Yezad's—giving in to corruption, demonstrates the mechanics of bribe taking and giving. As Harendra Kanti Dey explains, there is a supply and demand aspect to bribery; it takes two parties for it to transpire (504-5). The rich boy offers money in exchange for a checkmark in the homework book. Jehangir has the authority to put that checkmark in the book. But Jehangir also needs something as much as the rich boy needs the checkmark: peace and happiness at home which has recently been shattered due to the extra financial burden of taking care of their grandfather. In the context of corruption, this is called "an exchange phenomenon" where "[o]ne party demands something that the other party supplies and vice versa" (Dey 504), and both parties benefit from the transaction. The story places Jehangir in a compromised position early on in the novel to set the tone, to indicate that worse is yet to come,

and to send a warning to the readers. Afterall, even the people who think nothing of small kickbacks and tax frauds, want to protect their children from criminal activities.

The novel's Homework Monitor system is an irony which serves the purpose of giving a background on this social ill that debilitates India, as well as allowing the author to lecture the readers through the character of Miss Alvarez, Jehangir's beloved teacher. The twist is that the teacher had come up with the Homework Monitor system specifically to teach her students a non-corrupt way of living:

The goal, she said, was to inculcate the qualities of trust, honesty, and integrity in her students. She told them the classroom was a miniature model of society and the nation. Like any society, it must have its institutions of law and order, its police and judiciary. And it could be a just and prosperous society only when the citizens and the guardians of law and order respected and trusted one another.

"If you are good citizens of my classroom," said Miss Alvarez, "you will be good citizens of India." She believed this was the way to fight the backwardness and rot and corruption in the country: classroom by classroom. (201)

The failure of this system, in fact, its propagation of the exact opposite of what it was designed to do, is the novel's indictment of India. The message is that if the problem can seep into the classroom where ethics are being taught, then maybe there is no solution. This fatality serves to urge the readers to do their part to stop corruption from getting as far as this imagined scenario.

There is another angle to Jehangir's offence; that corruption has dire consequences for innocent people. Jehangir had heard about the villagers who starved to death because aid earmarked "for food and irrigation" was pocketed by "corrupt district officials;" about the four hundred and fifty children crushed to death" during a school event because the builder "had

cheated on the cement;” and about the dozens of movie goers “who were burnt alive” at a cinema fire because the safety inspector was bribed to look the other way (201-202). These events recounted by the author, possibly inspired by real-life events, serve to illustrate the consequences of corrupt behaviour. Knowing that fraudulent behaviour could result in unspeakable harm and sadness, Jehangir, the sensitive and compassionate boy that he is, had pledged with all his heart to “fight corruption and save lives,” and to “make things better for everyone in the country. He [had] resolved to be the best Homework Monitor possible, hard-working, and impartial and scrupulous” (202). But when there is a need on one side and a willingness to pay on the other side, and especially when “[c]orruption is in the air we breathe” (28), then, like in a quicksand, decent individuals get swallowed up in deceit. As soon as Jehangir took the money from the rich but lazy student, “[h]is head swam with the *enormity* of what he had just done” (204; emphasis added). He is well aware of the *enormity* of what he did; however, the need for money at home is so great, and its acquisition in this manner so easy that Jehangir, in spite of feeling the weight of his misdeed, continues to take money from students who are willing to pay for that little checkmark beside their names in the homework chart. This incident demonstrates how corruption contaminates everyone in a community, even the most innocent and well-intentioned.

While Jehangir’s lapse is heart-breaking—for himself, for his parents, for his teacher, and for the readers—further evidence in the novel points to a lesson learned, and Jehangir grows up to be a good citizen as his beloved Miss Alvarez wanted. What is much more disheartening is the failure of the Homework Monitor system, in other words, the teacher’s hopes for an honest, law-abiding next generation. When she learns of the scheme, the character of Miss Alvarez displays a hopelessness and a resignation. She explains to Jehangir’s parents that she

wanted to lay a firm foundation for my boys, make honesty a permanent part of their character. So they would be able, as adults, to resist the corruption in our society. Especially those who might enter politics or the [Indian Administrative Service]. Instead, that very evil has already infected my classroom. How will things ever get better for our country? (261)

The despair of the teacher is aimed to move the readers in the other direction. The readers may consider the outcome feared by Miss Alvarez—corruption is now contaminating the youngest in the sanctity of a school environment and this spells gloom for the country—and work against this possibility.

The readers also know that worse is yet to come because Jehangir's indiscretion was simply a foretelling of his normally upright father's giving in to illicit acts due to a lack of options available to him in times of distress. The narrative provides clues of Yezad's downfall by first introducing the readers to his incorruptible honesty. Roxana, admires her husband's contempt for corruption. She loves and respects Yezad all the more because he stands up to clients who want to bribe him. The readers sense the impending doom as Roxana thinks of Yezad's clients who "invariably [angle] for kickbacks from the money they [spend] to purchase sports equipment for the schools or colleges or corporations they [represent]" (107). Yezad detests one particular customer; he had abhorred him "ever since the time he had hinted, in his oily manner, how they could both make a little extra on the side if Yezad played the game" (132). We know that Yezad's firm stance against corrupt clients at this time is a harbinger for when he will give in under financial duress, and mirror his son's predicament. Nigerian author Cole expresses that "difficult circumstances wear people down, eroding them, preying on their weaknesses, until they do things that they themselves find hateful, until they are shadows of their best selves"

(*Every Day* 69). Indeed, Yezad will engage in acts he himself finds repugnant with increasingly severe consequences.

Corruption narratives often portray characters who justify cheating on their taxes or taking bribes using the everyone-does-it argument. This specious defence functions as a trigger for those readers who had, in fact, never engaged in such unethical actions. Those readers would be sufficiently upset to try and do something about this widespread misconception. *Family Matters* juxtaposes the opposing convictions of two characters, Yezad and Kapur; one who has never cheated in his life, and one who defrauds the government on the pretext that everyone does it. Yezad works at a sporting goods store and gets along well with the owner, Mr. Kapur, an upper-middle-class business person. Mr. Kapur, for the most part, is a fair and decent man who tries to repair the unity of religions and ethnicities in Mumbai which are broken at the time the novel is set in. However, Yezad knows that all the cash transactions of the store go into Mr. Kapur's "hard-shell suitcase" (142). Mr. Kapur justifies his tax evasion by arguing that everyone does it, "thanks to the government's absurd tax laws" (143). In corruption narratives we often see the *mine is small potatoes, the others do much worse* argument. In Deshpande's novel *That Long Silence*, another Bombay narrative that tackles corruption, the disgraced civil servant Mohan claims that he has only "accepted a few favours" (11). Elsewhere the same character claims that "[s]o many men are in this situation. Can anyone live on just a salary?" (30). A lack of confidence in the others to be honest can partly explain the everyone-does-it attitude represented by the fictional characters such as Mohan of *That Long Silence* and Kapur of *Family Matters*, as well as Chief Sandayo of *Welcome to Lagos* which we will examine in the next section. Caryn Peiffer, co-author of Developmental Leadership Program's 2015 research paper "Corruption and

Collective Action,”⁴⁹ argues that one of the perspectives that need to be taken into account is “the fact that when corruption is widely seen as the norm, individuals will have little to gain from resisting temptation to be corrupt, if they can’t trust others in their group, community or society to do the same” (Peiffer). Dey asserts that the proliferation of corruption weakens its social stigma, and this “contributes to further spread of corruption” (509). This ordinariness is both the cause and the excuse of corrupt behaviour by otherwise decent people. Some readers who think that cheating the system here and there is harmless, may see themselves in Mr. Kapur, and perhaps question their own behaviour. In the character of Mr. Kapur, *Family Matters* also brings to life a behaviour pattern Veena Das calls the “double valence.” Das explains that “[t]he same people who are vocal about the decline of the moral fibre of the nation in one register of speech either fail to notice their own actions or find support for these actions in another set of norms” (323). Kapur, while complaining about the simple-minded selfish men who are destroying Bombay, is stealing from the treasury by not paying taxes on purchases made in cash in his store. This “double valence” is sure to be noticed by the readers, and some of them may even feel that they themselves are incriminated.

In *Family Matters*, tax evasion and everyone-does-it defence arises again in a different setting, and this time, since the unlawful deed actually benefits Yezad, he is less critical of it. When Yezad and Roxana decide to sell their small apartment, the buyer, Mr. Hiralal, a diamond

⁴⁹ Co-authors Heather Marquette and Caryn Peiffer argue that effective anti-corruption initiatives must make use of three different but equally insightful perspectives: 1. Principal-agent theory which takes into account an individual’s deliberations whether or not to engage in illegal acts, considering the possibilities of getting caught and punished. 2. Collective action theory which supports the idea that when corruption is the norm, there is less incentive to avoid it. 3. Corruption as a problem-solving mechanism which settles or makes disappear certain social, political, and economic stress (Marquette and Peiffer).

merchant, regrets that the transaction cannot be done in a legal manner. “So nice it would be,” he laments,

“if I could write a cheque for you. But government regulations force us into different procedures. Black money is so much a part of our white economy, a tumour in the centre of the brain—try to remove it and you kill the patient.” (421)

In addition to the collective action defence, both Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal place the blame on the government. They claim that it is the system’s fault for not providing lenient rules the people can obey without having to cheat. Needless to say, high tax rates do not justify circumventing the state’s tax laws and defrauding the society. There are some countries where corruption is nearly non-existent in spite of high tax rates. Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal, two wealthy men who can easily afford to pay what is due to the state, instead choose to lay the blame on “government’s absurd tax laws” (143) for their own dishonesty. The characters’ attempts to make their illicit acts sound inevitable and justified create the opposite effect on the reader who sees that such behaviour is neither inevitable nor justifiable. The more the characters allege that their hands are tied by the government’s excessive demands, the more the reader is outraged. In essence, the behaviour of Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal is “private accumulation at the expense of the public” (Osoba 384). The readers see that they themselves are the ones being robbed by such unethical deeds. Osoba explains that crimes committed by the likes of Kapurs and Hiralals

tend to divert resources earmarked for running and maintaining public institutions in their charge (institutions like hospitals, schools, universities, public utilities, the judiciary, the police and even the armed forces) to corrupt private purposes. By so doing, they subvert these institutions and their capacity to perform their assigned tasks efficiently, thereby

damaging the substantive interests and endangering the lives of citizens whom these public institutions are meant to serve. (384).

Family Matters depicts the consequences of these diverted funds. From a lack of proper sidewalks for Nariman to take a stroll to the inadequacy of social services for the elderly and the ailing, the plot of the novel is driven by the shortfall in well-funded and well-functioning public institutions.

In *Family Matters*, the presentation of Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal as likeable, socially pleasant individuals, aids the novel's aim of shaking the readers out of their complacency. The novel demonstrates that, tax evasions and petty deception are injurious to the society at large, no matter how kind, proper and pleasant the perpetrators are otherwise. Hopefully, readers who engage in similar fraudulent acts which they consider to be "harmless" will rethink their actions. When we compare how charmingly Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal are portrayed as opposed to the sleazy customers who ask Yezad for kickbacks, we see that the contrast is deliberate. *Family Matters* reveals the ugliness of corruption even when it is embodied in ordinary individuals the readers can relate to. The narrative illustrates that, at the end, there really is no difference between Yezad's client who asks for kickbacks "in his oily manner" (132), and the amiable Kapurs and Hiralals. Through Mr. Kapur and Mr. Hiralal, Mistry deftly implicates his middle- and upper-middle-class readers who may have, at times, chosen to avoid paying their fair share of taxes, hiding behind the everyone-does-it logic.

When it comes to Yezad's own indiscretions, however, there is a difference. Like his son who gave in to bribery before him, Yezad is acting out of dire financial difficulties and not for wealth accumulation like Kapur and Hiralal. It has been established that "in countries where alternative sources of essential goods and services are more limited, corruption is more common"

(McMann 2). Most issues that oppress ordinary people can be solved with sufficient funds and honest management, and once they have access to social services, they will not need turn to corruption. If the Chenoy family could have secured government aid for their sick and elderly father, or if Nariman had a retirement income that covered all his health expenses then Yezad would not have resorted to corruption. When Yezad is clearly in distress, his boss, Mr. Kapur, who is friendly with Yezad and appreciates all the hard work he does for the store, is blind to Yezad's financial anxieties. As Yezad becomes desperate to put food on the table, he starts contemplating other ways of making money. When honest people have to choose "between remaining honest and remaining in office" or in other words, between honesty and poverty, their resolve to remain honest is weakened (Dey 510n4). Osoba, referring to Nigeria, makes a similar case. He posits that corruption in the higher strata of the society, "[teach] a dangerously disruptive lesson to the generality of the people: being honest and law-abiding does not pay" (384). Therefore, finding no legitimate options, Yezad has no other course than to start considering alternative ways to take care of his family.

Yezad first tries playing the illegal lottery, Matka.^{50, 51} The carefully-designed Matka episode portrays complex entanglements, and illustrates the corrupt dealings of officials from multiple levels of the administration, as well as implicating the Shiv Sena party in playing both sides of the political spectrum in order to accumulate funds for their election and coercion campaign. The

⁵⁰ Matka initially started in Bombay in the early 1960s. Original Matka consisted of betting on the opening and closing rates of cotton at the New York Cotton Exchange. Those numbers were being transmitted to the Bombay Cotton Exchange using tele-printers. After New York Cotton exchange stopped providing the cotton rates, Matka took on various different forms. In Bombay, at the height of the Matka craze, monthly bets would add up to amounts as high as five billion rupees. Police crackdown in 1995 dealt a serious blow to Bombay's Matka; however, the lottery survives around the country under several variations of its earlier name and form (Parmar).

⁵¹ For other fictional accounts of Matka and the workings of Bombay's underbelly, Anosh Irani's *The Matka King*, published along with *Bombay Black* in a collection titled *The Bombay Plays*, is a valuable source.

novel's engagement with Matka also shows how contemporary narrators of Mumbai attempt to tackle as many present-day issues of the city as they can. While Yezad's first experience with Matka brings him some cash, his friends inform him that Matka funds the "Shiv Sena machinery," and they explain that "Matka money paid for the plastic explosives with which the terrorists blew up the stock exchange," referring to the series of bomb blasts of 1993. "You see the paradox?" they warn Yezad, "[t]he enemies of the nation, and political parties that claim to be defenders of the nation, all rely on the same source" (191).⁵² Here, Mistry connects the illegal lottery to Shiv Sena, implicating it in multiple nefarious activities. One friend sums it up with "[t]hose who play [Matka] should know they're supporting a criminal enterprise," and Yezad responds that this would be his "first and the last time" (191). As readers, we want to believe Yezad's resolution, but we fear the worst. Even after learning that Matka is run illegally by Shiv Sena, a group he detests, Yezad continues to play, almost regularly, winning some and losing some. His winnings help with the kitchen expenses and the family starts eating better. One day, tired of daily struggles and the lack of advancements at his job, Yezad takes all of the 785 rupees from his wife's carefully planned monthly housekeeping budget, and visits their downstairs neighbour, Villie, who makes a living as a Matka bookie. Yezad asks Villie to play it all. After an agonizing night, he is at Villie's door early in the morning to get the final result. When she opens the door, Yezad finds before him, not "the jovial Matka Queen," but "a stricken woman." (250) Yezad finds out that, he had, in fact, won, but before anyone could cash their winnings, the

⁵² On 12th of March 1993, in a carefully choreographed sequence, 13 bombs exploded at Bombay's strategic locations, starting with the Bombay Stock Exchange. 257 people were killed, and 1,400 people got injured during the blasts. This attack came a year after the riots caused by the attack on the Babri Mosque incited by Shiv Sena. As a revenge, 1993 explosions targeted Shiv Sena party headquarters among other landmarks (Karkaria). Here, by suggesting that Matka was run by Shiv Sena, and that Matka money was also used to fund the bombing of the stock exchange, Mistry places the shady dealings of Matka on both sides of Bombay's plight.

police had raided the Matka offices. Learning all of this from a distressed Villie, Yezad is not ready to accept the reality just yet. He argues that “this has happened before, no? A big shor-shaar closes Matka for a few days, then everything calms down and it starts again.” Unfortunately, unlike the previous times, this time the raid was for *real*. “Those previous raids were pre-arranged among the Matka chiefs, police, and the politicians,” Villie explains, “only some small bookies ever went to jail. Last night was a surprise to everyone. And this time they have smashed Matka completely” (251).⁵³ Here, the narration indicates the concentric circles of corruption, and Villie further charts out the whole fraudulent setup:

the police were arresting people from top to bottom – big bookies and small, kingpins and little safety pins. Rumour was that since those terrorist bombs had blown up the stock exchange and shattered Bombay, they had to do something about Matka. Even the crookedest politician didn’t want Bombay to be the next Beirut. (251)

In other words, until the night before, the illegality of Matka was a money-making tool for the authorities, the police, and the politicians. It was in their best interest to let the unlawful lottery continue because Matka chiefs paid them to stay open. Every now and then, the police raided Matka, and it was all for show. Small-time bookies went to jail for a few days, and Matka resumed its operations as before. Only this time, the raid was for real because of Matka’s involvement in the recent bombings. It is not the greatest of reassurances that “[e]ven the crookedest politician didn’t want Bombay to be the next Beirut” (251). The Matka episode of the novel, while bringing Yezad to a heightened level of desperation, also functions as an indicator of bigger networks of corruption.

⁵³ In India today, particularly in the state of Maharashtra, various versions of Matka, while still illegal, continue to operate.

Having lost the whole month's household budget, Yezad's despair pushes him towards more daring schemes, and the novel builds up towards a climax. Mr. Kapur's decision to run for office, and later his change of heart will lead to tragic events that reveal more consequences of corrupt behaviour. Mistry uses Kapur's desire to go into politics to solidify the novel as a distinctly Bombay narrative, and to illustrate how immoral acts can bring about disastrous outcomes. Kapur's love for Bombay is deep and unconditional. His plans to run for office, and then his about-face supply us with relevant observations about the city. Mistry, himself from Bombay, wants his readers to know everything about Bombay's last decade before the new millennium. Mr. Kapur, an outspoken devotee of Bombay, explains to Yezad, why he wants to be a candidate in the upcoming municipal elections. Kapur points out how the two of them, a Parsi and a Hindu, an employer and an employee, were sitting together, talking and drinking beer. In apparent anti-Shiv-Sena sentiments, he explains that Bombayites have always lived peacefully, side by side. He argues that this inclusiveness was "why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here." This statement acknowledges all of Mumbai's infrastructural issues as well as the city's tolerance and resilience. Kapur tries to convince Yezad that "[w]ithin this warp and weft is woven the special texture of its social fabric, the spirit of tolerance, acceptance, [and] generosity" (145). The peaceful diversity of Bombay had always been the city's proudest quality until the unrest that started with the bombing of the Babri Masjid.⁵⁴ The ensuing violence threatened Bombay's cosmopolitan image and the associated

⁵⁴ While there were always tensions before, literary narratives depict the attack on the Babri Masjid as a turning point. Moor, in Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, explains that, up until the demolition of the sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya, Bombay's "powers of dilution" were able to ease the tensions. However, "what was unleashed [in Ayodhya], that corrosive acid of the spirit, that adversarial intensity which poured into the nation's bloodstream"

anxiety is sufficiently represented in the city's narratives. Bombay's tolerance, acceptance, and generosity Mr. Kapur believes in is also reflected in other contemporary narratives, including Shroff's short story collection, *Breathless in Bombay*, and Suri's near-future, dystopic Mumbai in *The City of Devi*. In a case of intertextual reinforcement, the Beirut comparison we have seen earlier in *Family Matters* comes up again in *The City of Devi*: "Bombay was too cosmopolitan, its population too diverse, its communities too interdependent to ever become another Beirut or Belfast" (33). Sarita, *The City of Devi*'s heroine, listens to the challenge her father rhetorically issues to the powers to be:

'Bring on whatever havoc you will—the city will remain united even if the rest of the country splits apart.'

For a long time, he was right—even the Pakistani guerilla attack in 2008 seemed to only increase the city's cohesive resolve. 'See these people holding hands?' he asked, at the candlelight vigil outside the still-smoking Taj Hotel. 'They're neither Hindus nor Muslims, but citizens of Bombay first.' (33-34)

Family Matters is set during a time which is about a decade before the Taj Hotel⁵⁵ attack, but Mr. Kapur shares the same conviction as Sarita's father in *The City of Devi*. The two characters expressing comparable feelings on their city's peaceful cosmopolitan existence is an indication of the conviction contemporary narratives share: Bombay will overcome its current troubles and its literatures represent this hope.

proved too much for "the great city's powers of dilution" (351). In another example, the narrator in Riaz Mulla's short story "Justice" professes, right before the bonfires and gunshots erupt in Bombay, that "[t]he demolition of the Babri Masjid was the first sign that the game was beginning to change" (28).

⁵⁵ Taj Mahal Palace Mumbai

The novel reiterates how lack of individual responsibility can destroy Bombay in Kapur's final Shakespearean appeal to assure Yezad that running for office is a good idea. Kapur is convinced that he has to act now, before it is too late:

This beautiful city of seven islands, this jewel by the Arabian Sea, this reclaimed land, this ocean gift transformed into ground beneath our feet, this enigma of cosmopolitanism where races and religions live side by side and cheek by jowl in peace and harmony, this diamond of diversity, this generous goddess who embraces the poor and the hungry and the huddled masses, this Urbs Prima in Indis, this dear, dear city now languishes—I don't exaggerate—like a patient in intensive care, Yezad, my friend, put there by small, selfish men who would destroy it because their coarseness cannot bear something so grand, so fine. (147)

In *Family Matters*, through Kapur's acts and speeches, the readers observe a manifestation of an urban focus. Here, Kapur voices Rushdian notions. Rushdie put forth "the nature of Bombay" as "a metropolis in which the multiplicity of commingled faiths and cultures curiously creates a remarkably secular ambience" (*Imaginary* 16). Kapur wants to work specifically for Bombay as a local politician; he is not interested in becoming a member of the federal parliament. His speech brings Bombay's current difficulties to the forefront of the novel: Bombay's tolerant unity is all but gone, the city is deteriorating "like a patient in intensive care," and its plight has been brought about by "selfish men." Kapur lists all of Bombay's exceptional qualities that are presently under attack: diversity, peace and harmony, and living together with acceptance and cooperation. He lays the blame on "selfish men" among whom, certainly Shiv Sena and the government of the time have their place, but ironically, people like Kapur himself who embezzle public funds are included as well. Kapur, now that he is going into politics, will not have time for

the Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. He promises Yezad the manager's role and a pay raise. The extra money would offer great relief to the financial problems at home, and Yezad warms up to the idea of taking Mr. Kapur's place at the store.

Family Matters next employs a strategy that presents an argument that is the opposite of what the novel actually aims for. The reader reaction that is hoped for may be achieved through Kapur's next lecture after he changes his mind on becoming an elected official to work towards righting all the wrongs. A short time after his earlier poetic and noble speech, Mr. Kapur makes an about face and decides *not* to run for office after all. The news comes as a big disappointment for Yezad. Kapur's excuses for the change of heart, after having argued for it so passionately, seem weak: his wife does not like the idea, it is not realistic to think one man can make a change, he has high blood pressure (274). Later, when the topic comes up again, he makes an analogy to India's national tree, the omnipresent banyan tree. A banyan tree's "long branches send down aerial roots that go deep, become columns to support the branches that grow even larger while the roots spread over acres and acres[,"] he explains, "[a] municipal councillor tackling corruption is like a penknife trying to dig up a banyan tree" (306). It is true that the widespread corruption should be dealt with by a top-down overhaul. In real life, anti-corruption activists, have used the tree analogy as well. One activist verbalizes her frustration at the governments' failure of attacking corruption from the top down:

In the corruption tree, they are just cutting off the leaves and the branches, they are not cutting the roots. In spite of all the mechanisms and laws, why is corruption going on unabated? . . . Once you punish the last fellow in the chain, the poorest guy, nothing will happen because the chain is still there. (qtd. in Doshi and Ranganathan 188).

In the tree of corruption, the root is found in the highest of ranks, in government offices and institutions. A penknife—Kapur’s metaphor for a municipal councillor—is not enough. The tree metaphor is effective in explaining how corruption should be tackled, and just like the real people participating in Sapana Doshi and Malini Ranganathan’s sociopolitical study, fictional characters like Kapur also make use of it. Here, we see an example of the frustrations depicted in contemporary literatures in a new social realism style correspond to the frustrations of real people. However, what is different in fictional Kapur’s argument is that he could do something about it. The fact that he considers acting and make a difference, then decides against it, strikes the readers as cowardly. The readers would undoubtedly view someone like Kapur—smart, opinionated, well-spoken, and cares for the city and the country—as someone capable of running for office and winning, therefore, he now comes across as a citizen running away from his individual responsibility. When Kapur says that a penknife is insufficient to dig up a massive banyan tree, the readers may want to counter with ‘how about hundreds, or thousands of penknives?’ The problem with Mr. Kapur’s logic is that it is on a par with the everyone-does-it attitude, and both are significant contributors to the status quo. In reality, if more honest people were in office, and if less people participated in corrupt behaviour then suffocating the proverbial tree’s roots could have been possible. Mr. Kapur’s journey from one extreme—*I have to act now before it is too late*—to another—*how can I, as a lowly municipal councillor make an impact?*—is more than a little suspicious considering his own “hard-shell suitcase.” Mistry hints at a possible afterthought on Kapur’s part: as a public servant, he would be under constant scrutiny, and his tax evasions might be discovered. The story forces the readers to consider their own reasons for not tackling Bombay’s problems. Do the readers have similar skeletons—hard-shell suitcases—in their closets? If they do, how do they react to Kapur’s change of heart? Do the

readers also fall back to their comfortable old habits, or are they going to fight for Mumbai? These are the questions the novel is urging the readers to ponder.

In *Family Matters*, we find an example of what Ashcroft defines as “a sense,” in Mistry’s novels, “that real choices are impossible for the marginalized and oppressed” (“Urbanism” 503). The inaccessibility of reasonable options is a significant factor in ordinary people’s turn to illicit acts. After Kapur bails out of running for office, Yezad, having lost the promotion he was counting on, becomes desperate. He knows that it is no longer possible to make ends meet. In a more equitable society in which corruption did not take away from social services, Yezad would have had some assistance. But here, he is in the marginalized group, and left without any real choices available to him. He sees no other option than devising a scheme with the two young aspiring actors he knows. Their plan makes use of Shiv Sena policies which all of them, including Mr. Kapur, despise. The two actors, impersonating Shiv Sainiks, will pay a visit to the store and inform Mr. Kapur that commercial business titles cannot contain the name *Bombay*. Kapur must either change his store’s name to *Mumbai* Sporting Goods Emporium, or pay thirty thousand rupees now, and then five thousand rupees for every month that the name *Bombay* stays on the windowfront. The ruse relies on Yezad’s conviction that Mr. Kapur would refuse to play Shiv Sena’s game, and neither change his business’s name nor accept the extortion. He would instead resolve to run for office again to rectify such harassments. However, as it is with all best laid plans, things do not go according to design, and Mr. Kapur chooses to pay the blackmail money. He places thirty-five thousand rupees in an envelope and gives it to Yezad to save it in his drawer until the Shiv Sainiks make their appearance again. The envelope full of money meant for the imaginary Shiv Sainiks becomes a burden and a temptation for Yezad. One day he takes it home. He plans to tell Mr. Kapur that the two Shiv Sena bullies had arrived and collected the

money. However, Yezad is not a natural thief. After being an exemplary citizen all his life, he is now pushed to the brink by the hardships his family face and a lack of options. Mistry makes this point clear by showing the readers Yezad's point of view on that sleepless night of his transgression:

What had possessed him? Desperation, he knew. And he was still desperate, nothing had changed in twenty-four hours, [his father-in-law] was still suffering, Roxana still driving herself to exhaustion, there wasn't enough to eat, and here was money to ease all the difficulties, if he would only open the envelope, start spending ... (347)

People who become desperate with no other recourse for survival will consider illegal acts. Still, Yezad cannot bring himself to open the envelope, and takes it back to the store before anyone could notice that it was missing. At this moment, Yezad might be thinking that he redressed his breach from the previous day and averted a personal disaster. It was all good again, he had not done anything wrong. However, a few days later, in an unexpected twist, two real Shiv Sainiks show up to ask Kapur to change *Bombay* to *Mumbai* in his store's name. Yezad is horrified by this "crazy coincidence" (359). Naturally, Kapur thinks that this new visit is related to the earlier fake one which Yezad had told him about. He treats these new—and this time, real—Shiv Sena men with utter contempt and there is an altercation. Later on in the day, the thugs return and kill Mr. Kapur. This dramatic turn of events causes deep wounds in Yezad whose inadvertent role in Kapur's death is undeniable. The plan to trick Mr. Kapur in order to reignite his political aspirations so that Yezad could get the much-needed promotion had gone terribly wrong. The unintended consequences and the accidental victims of corrupt behaviour are embodied in this one twist of fate.

Yezad, who was not able to protect himself from the contamination of corruption seeks purity in religion. While previously he never had any religious faith, and made fun of those who did, he can now find solace only in his ancestors' Zoroastrianism. He embraces religion with a fervency that excludes everything else, and becomes obsessed with the purity of his religious relics. It seems that he can only soothe his own impure conscience, by taking his newly-found religious devotion to the extreme. The consolation Yezad seeks in religion can also be explained through the words of a side character in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*:

Society was orchestrated by what [Swatilekha] called grand narratives: history, economics, ethics. In India, the development of a corrupt and closed state apparatus had 'excluded the masses of the people from the ethical project'. As a result, they sought ethical satisfactions in the oldest of the grand narratives, that is religious faith. (551)

As well as the correlation with Yezad's pursuit of ethical purity when he is in fact contaminated by corruption, above excerpt is also useful for us to demonstrate the intercommunication between different types of texts. The words of the character Swatilekha in *The Satanic Verses* sound less like an excerpt from a novel than from a non-fiction text such as a sociology article. This is because contemporary literary fiction is not disconnected "from the material world," instead, it "interact[s] with other producers of knowledge" (Ameel 1329). "Literary texts," Ameel argues, "function as a part of a broader network of texts and narrative agents that describe possible courses of actions towards the future" (1329). It has become possible to read one fictional excerpt alongside a sociological study or to compare it with a government policy. The nonfictional sources of knowledge are increasingly using narrative as a tool to better communicate with their audiences. This, combined with the social realist techniques of contemporary fiction, add to the blurring of genres as Clifford Geertz had argued four decades

ago, that “in recent years there has been an enormous amount of genre mixing in social science, as in intellectual life generally” (165). Geertz’s “Blurred Genres,” as he titled his essay on the topic, work as a device in achieving the new social realism aspect of some literary urban narratives.

Family Matters, as an exemplar of the Mumbai novel, portrays all the significant events of the time that impact the city, as well as commenting on many of Mumbai’s current issues like water shortages and ethnic conflicts. While this book is analyzed here as a corruption narrative, it also treats many infrastructural problems sufficiently to be examined as an infrastructure narrative. The novel, with multiple foreshadows, develops its plot carefully, highlights all the messages it wants to convey to the reader, and illustrates that corruption has personal and collective consequences and that it is not a victimless crime. Each citizen has a role to play in the wellbeing of the entire community, and *Family Matters* imparts that moral. When Kapur and Yezad both forfeit their personal duties and commit fraud, they themselves end up becoming victims of corruption. They are both ordinary citizens; decent men overall, trying to do good things for the society. Nonetheless, first Kapur, to accumulate wealth, and then Yezad, to support his family, engage in unethical and fraudulent activities. Both Yezad and Kapur, despite their flaws, are relatable characters. They are portrayed as multi-faceted individuals with strengths and flaws who make rational and irrational decisions. Their real-likeness allows the readers to recognize them as everyday people. This familiarity may help the readers consider making changes in their own behaviours. As an exemplar of the urban and the social realist turn, *Family Matters*, while also containing incisive colonial critique, focuses on the present-day urban issues. The novel provides compelling social commentary on the individual and collective behaviour as well as on the institutional failings of the current times.

"Ten million dollars to improve literacy": Chibundu Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*

Moving from Mumbai to Lagos, we see the literary depictions of corruption at an institutional level. In contrast to Yezad's indiscretions in *Family Matters*, corruption at the state level in *Welcome to Lagos* is about wealth accumulation and not about survival. While *Welcome to Lagos* also portrays characters who are in extreme hardships, their fight for survival is irreproachably honest. Through the juxtaposition of a wealthy government minister who steals millions of dollars and the marginalized group of five individuals who have to sleep under a bridge but who nonetheless act with utmost integrity, the novel effectively showcases the importance of personal responsibility and the repercussions of corrupt behaviour. As *Welcome to Lagos* highlights the contagion of corruption in the ranks of the government officials, it also comments on the present-day issues of Lagos, such as the inequality in living conditions, oppression of free press, slums, extortion by street thugs, traffic and infrastructure. The novel focuses on Lagos's immediate reality while at the same time reminding the readers the nation's colonial past and its lingering remnants. Like in *Family Matters*, the societal impact of corruption is highlighted in *Welcome to Lagos* as well. The novel's powerful representation of the primary education system when its capital is redirected to private bank accounts is just one example of what happens to the community when funds are plundered away from social services. Showing the victims of corruption, *Welcome to Lagos* compels the readers to combat unethical behaviour wherever they see it. The novel's display of impunity afforded to corrupt civil servants and the violent attacks received by the newspaper which attempts to bring them to light, also pinpoint the necessity of fiction in the illumination of these underhanded mechanisms. The readers are urged by these narratives to exert change either through individual actions, or by participating in larger forms of opposition.

Welcome to Lagos, like most other works examined in this dissertation, can be analyzed as a new social realist work which uses creative aesthetic strategies to appeal to younger audiences who are accustomed to fast knowledge production and sharing. The novel has a fresh, attractive style, and a complex, suspenseful and fast-moving plot narrated through the perspectives of diverse characters. Rippl argues that “young writers today imaginatively engage in sociopolitical issues that they translate into cultural-critical aesthetics and innovative formal modes” (268). One such innovative formal mode employed in *Welcome to Lagos* is the epigraph-style news items from a fictional newspaper called the *Nigerian Journal*. The author strategically places these newspaper excerpts at the top of each chapter, and they subtly hint at the topic of the chapter while at the same time serving as vivid snapshots of Lagos. These imaginary newspaper clips are sometimes an ekphrastic description of an interstate bus station—full of energy, naivete, villainy, opportunity, and danger—and other times an advertisement, a riddle, a gossip column, a statement from the government, news of a tragedy, or a letter to the editor. This fictional intertextuality provides a brief respite from the grim storyline, but more importantly, it connects the narrative to the journalists and print media of Lagos whose historic prominence was discussed in chapter 1.

Welcome to Lagos engages with institutionalized corruption right from the start by placing the entry point of the plot in Bayelsa State of the Niger Delta region which is the source of flagrant corruption related to petroleum production. One of the main characters in the novel, Officer Chike, and his friend Private Yemi are runaways from the army base in Bayelsa. Their battalion is fighting the Niger Delta militants⁵⁶ who demand retributions for the land and water

⁵⁶ Noo Saro-Wiwa explains the plight of the Niger Delta with this concise passage in *Looking for Transwonderland – Travels in Nigeria*: “Our ethnic group, the Ogoni, have relied on the Delta for fishing and farming for centuries,

destroyed by the oil companies' digging day and night, "filling and floating barrels of oil to overseas markets" (6). The oil spills, or "black poison" as Chike calls them, "running over the waters, fish gone, fishermen displaced, flora destroyed" (6).⁵⁷ Chike and Yemi abandon their posts in their military division because they do not want to shoot ordinary civilians of the Niger Delta for allegedly harboring militants. This early portion of the novel is just one of the real-time issues *Welcome to Lagos* tackles. Chike and Yemi will become part of an odd group of five individuals, and their story is one of the three intertwining threads of the novel that work together in representing corruption in higher levels of the government from the perspectives of ordinary people, the perpetrators, and the media. Chike, Yemi, Fineboy, Isoken, and Oma are the five characters who are brought together by coincidence on the way to Lagos, each fleeing from their personal adversities. Fineboy, fittingly named by himself, is a young boy who aspires to be "fine." He affects an American accent, he is childishly pretentious, and he hopes to be a radio host one day. Isoken, a teenage girl, who strives to go to school and get an education, and Oma is a level-headed woman escaping from her abusive husband. These five unlikely individuals form a bond in the face of their uncertain futures, and together they venture into the chaos of Lagos with no money, no connections, and no prospects. The novel's multi-thread narrative structure goes back and forth in time and provides the background stories of these five protagonists as well

but ever since oil was discovered in 1956 ad extracted primarily by Shell Oil, this fertile agricultural region has suffered oil spills and pollution from gas flares, which are used for eliminating waste gas, a by-product of oil extraction. A succession of corrupt governments squandered profits that should have developed the region economically, leaving the Ogoni and other Delta peoples in a bind: we are unable to develop industrially, yet we struggle to cultivate our polluted land and we're fishing gradually emptying rivers" (7).

⁵⁷ The protagonist of Atta's novel *Everything Good Will Come* also highlights bribery and corruption related to oil, remarking that "oil leaked from the drilling fields of the Niger Delta into people's Swiss bank accounts" (46). The environmental and economic problems associated with crude oil extraction are developed in creative ways in Okorafor's *Lagoon* examined in chapter 4. The abundance of petroleum-related themes in contemporary urban novels is another evidence of these narratives' preference of the here and now over colonial critique.

as other central characters who will later join the plotline. On the bus from Bayelsa to Lagos, Chike, who will soon become the natural leader of the unusual team, contemplates Lagos. He has never been to this city before, and while he admits that he is “scared of Lagos” (67), he is also confident that he will be able to start anew in this crowded city. In a sign of designating the novel as a distinctly Lagos narrative, the character of Chike thinks that there is “a new life waiting for him in Lagos. He would make his way” (68). This reasoning is common to millions who arrive at Lagos year after year. As the bus approaches the city, billboards appear on the sides of the road welcoming travellers to Lagos. As mentioned earlier, Lagosians like to joke about the existence, or the lack thereof, “Welcome to Lagos” signs. More than welcome signs, however, there are anti-corruption messages on billboards all around Lagos: “We Will Not Tolerate Corruption,” “Corruption is Deadly - Stop It,” “Corruption Kills,” and “Don’t Give or Take Bribes.” The travellers in the story also notice several road-side signs as they approach to Lagos. Here, Onuzo brings in a visual aspect to the novel by switching fonts and centering the text so that the readers can *see* as well as *read* the signs. One of the billboards reads, “Welcome to Lagos [/] Pay Your Tax” (72). With this foreshadowing, Onuzo takes the readers deep into a fictional account of corruption that takes place at the highest levels of the government.

While Chike, Yemi, Fineboy, Isoken, and Oma are approaching Lagos, we are introduced to two other threads of the story. One thread presents Ahmed Bakare, a journalist and founder of the *Nigerian Journal*. As noted earlier, Nigerian literature often includes reporters and newspapers—real and fictional—to draw attention to the significance of journalism and news media in providing the lie to the official accounts. Ahmed aspires to be an honest reporter-editor who cannot be bribed into omitting or modifying certain news to hide wrongdoings in higher places. His father had made his money in unscrupulous ways, and Ahmed refuses to benefit from

his family's wealth. Five years ago, he had founded a newspaper, the *Nigerian Journal*, which he runs as a tool for speaking truth to power. During the five years the journal has been in print, Ahmed had not failed in his commitment "to publishing at least one anti-corruption piece in each issue of the paper" (40). This embedded narrative of a principled journalist reinforces the value placed on independent news media by the millions of Lagosians who want their elected officials to be ethical.

Another thread starts in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, introducing a high-profile villain: "Chief Sandayo, the Honourable Minister of Education for the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (53). Fifteen years ago, when Sandayo was the Education Officer of the Yoruba People's Congress, he and others in the congress had "slimmer waistlines and larger ideals" (56). Today, as the Minister of Education, he finds himself

at the head of a body paralysed with bureaucracy, almost laughably so, his orders reaching their destination months after being issued, replies reaching him after a year. He could not find his way to the field of illiterate Nigerians he was supposed to educate, his path blocked by strategy meetings and Powerpoint presentations. (59)

Sandayo is disillusioned with the ideals of bringing education to the people. Just like the Kapurs and Hiralals of *Family Matters*, Sandayo now subscribes to the everyone-does-it reasoning and no longer has any qualms about participating in corrupt acts. The newly- and suspiciously-elected President of Nigeria had just secured ten million dollars from the World Bank for Basic Education Fund. "Ten million dollars to improve literacy at primary level[,]” Sandayo contemplates, “[t]en million dollars to leak through the bureaucratic holes in his ministry" (59). This thought process illustrates that if Sandayo does not appropriate this money, then someone else will. Sandayo does not have any economic difficulties and the readers cannot see any reason

for him to steal. However, ‘if I don’t take it someone else will’ line of thought is powerful. In analyzing the character of fictional Sandayo, it is useful to seek a framework from social sciences. Dey, a professor of economics, argues that, in addition to curtailing the economic needs that lead to misconduct, the ease with which fraud can be carried out must be reduced as well. One factor in corrupt behaviour is the availability of cheating; the facility with which it can be done. Dey suggests that there must be measures “designed to reduce the urge to indulge in corruption” (510). Dey also identifies, as another contributor to embezzlement, “the possession of quasi-monopoly or authority by one of the parties” (503). If we apply this theory to fictional Chief Sandayo, we see the problem with which handing over the control of a large amount of cash to one single person. When presented the opportunity, Chief Sandayo, the Honourable Minister of Education for the Federal Republic of Nigeria will appropriate the funds received from the World Bank for the purposes of education. He will take it because he can do so with ease. Before Sandayo commits this crime, the narrative builds up to it by offering examples of the illicit ways with which money change hands at the street-level.

It is estimated that 300,000 homeless Lagosians live under bridges (Kellogg). That reality is represented by the fictional group of five in *Welcome to Lagos*. Once in Lagos, having nowhere else to go, the five characters resort to sleeping under a bridge.⁵⁸ In Oma’s reflections about their current circumstances, the readers hear the voice of homelessness as they have “[t]o stretch out to sleep knowing there were no walls around you; to bare the soles of your feet to passing strangers; to wake and show your face immediately to the world” (92). After the first night,

⁵⁸ This particular bridge is not identified. Lagos has many overhead bridges and the homeless live underneath most of them. In Chika Unigwe’s short story “Heaven’s Gate,” a character named Ifeatu “had spent his first weeks in Lagos sleeping under the Third Mainland Bridge” (42). For an account of under-bridge dwelling, see Vera Wisdom-Bassey’s reporting titled “Life Under Lagos Bridges.”

someone called Chairman makes his appearance and informs them that they have to pay him twenty thousand naira—four thousand per person—to stop “armed robbers and bad people from coming to this place” (96). When Fineboy says that he had been a freedom fighter in the Niger Delta, the price is reduced to eight thousand, and “Chairman’s thug [makes] a show of writing out a receipt, a neat tabulation that [includes] the price before and after the discount” (97). Chike wonders about “the idiosyncrasies of this city. Where else must one pay to be homeless?” (97). In Lagos, extortion starts under the bridge.

The next example comes when, after a couple of weeks of fruitless job search, Chike and Yemi finally agree to share someone else’s job of directing the traffic at a busy intersection. They become off-the-record employees who must share their income with the real traffic warden. The latter, taking fifty percent of the salary, will go find a side job elsewhere. This arrangement demonstrates the difficulty of making a living in Lagos: at the lower strata, side-jobs and bribes are common supplements of income. At the end of the first month, Chike is handed seven thousand naira, and he knows he is cheated. He challenges the traffic warden:

‘The money is not complete. It should be ten thousand, half of twenty.’

‘My brother, it’s twenty they write on the paper but it’s only fourteen they give me yesterday. Sometimes they can give you the complete salary. Sometimes they’ll remove some money, add it to next month’s own. That’s why it’s so difficult to live in this Lagos. You always have to be doing something on the side.’ (114)

While the readers know, just as Chike knows, that the traffic warden is lying, what complicates the situation is that everything the warden says is, sadly, plausible. This street-level swindling is a symptom of a larger pattern, and *Welcome to Lagos* is highlighting the impact on the labourers. Nigeria’s state governments routinely fail to pay their civil servants for extended periods of

time,⁵⁹ and “[t]housands of school teachers, nurses and other civil servants are forced to turn to other private means of earning a living to survive doing everything from taxi driving to petty trading” (Adegoke). Irregularities in salary payments leave many state-run schools and hospitals without qualified professionals. This, in turn, drives parents and patients to turn to private institutions they can barely afford (Adegoke), and creates the need for additional income. The novel illustrates that corrupt behaviour up top not only sets the standard and serves as a model, but also causes a chain reaction victimizing the general public and inciting more illicit methods of survival.

The readers will discover how the individual responsibilities of each character are represented in the novel when a plot twist brings together a wealthy government minister who steals from the public funds and five marginalized individuals who maintain their integrity at all costs. This happens when the company of five odd characters start searching for a shelter that will offer better living conditions than their bridge and discover a “fully furnished two-bedroom basement apartment” (117) behind a large rusted metal trap door among the overgrowth of an abandoned construction site. Upon the discovery of this hidden underground flat, Chike’s first thought is that “[h]onest people don’t build such places” (117), and he is right. The secret apartment, in fact, belongs to Chief Sandayo, the Minister of Education who had just made off with a large amount of cash belonging to his own ministry; the fund that was meant for the improvement of literacy at the primary school level. Clearly, this hidden place was built for the day Sandayo knew he would need it. An advertisement in the *Nigerian Journal*, the newspaper

⁵⁹ The “culture of late payments” is also explored in Noo Saro-Wiwa’s narrative travelogue *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria* (17-18).

of idealist journalist Ahmed Bakare, foreshadows the upcoming encounter of the group of five and the corrupt minister:

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission is offering a N10 million reward for reliable information on the whereabouts of Chief Remi Sandayo, former Minister of Education. He was last seen in Maitama, Abuja, at 5 p.m. on March 22nd. A recent picture is pasted below. (131)

In spite of Chike's premonition about the kind of people who own underground hiding places, the group could not reject running water, a fully functioning kitchen, and real beds with walls around them, and they settle in, unknowingly, Chief Sandayo's den. About a month later, they find an 'intruder' in the living room; "[l]ike a thief in the night, the owner had returned and they were at a loss" (133). Of course, the owner is indeed a thief. Sandayo, "shouting, almost hysterically" demands to know who they are, and what they are doing in his house (134). His level of entitlement and hubris is at such a high that, he, a thief, even threatens to call the police. Fineboy, the shrewd, is the one who calls Sandayo's bluff: "Call the police," he says, "I've seen you in the papers. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission will be glad to know of your whereabouts, Chief Sandayo" (134). With this turn of events, our group is now in a predicament: what to do with Chief Sandayo, and his two bags stuffed with ten million dollars? The five poor and homeless characters could simply divide the money up amongst themselves and each could get going on their own path, building a new life for themselves. The option does cross their minds and Fineboy suggests it out loud. Chike had already decided that "he was no thief" (138), and Isoken says that they could not take the money "[b]ecause that's stealing" (155). Isoken's use of the verb 'to steal' is a direct condemnation of Chief Sandayo, who as the readers understand, is neither embarrassed nor contrite. Through this juxtaposition of the integrity

displayed by five individuals who have absolutely nothing with the entitled greed of a man who had been entrusted with the education system of Nigeria illustrates the significance of personal duty each citizen owes to the society. What does Chief Sandayo think when he realizes that he cannot buy off this odd team of five? He, Minister of Education, an already wealthy man who nonetheless stole public funds from Nigeria's education system, is now in the presence of Isoken, a teenage girl who owns nothing, and whose only desire is to get a good education. Their ironical apposition is striking, and serves the purpose of illustrating that there is a real victim to every corrupt act. Isoken suggests that, since the stolen money was earmarked for the Basic Education Fund, it should be used for education (146). And, just like that, it is decided: the stolen money will be used for what it was originally intended for. In other words, it will be returned back to the "victims of politicians such as Chief Sandayo" (Habila "Welcome"). A new routine starts for the group. They ask school principals what they need, and then they go about buying computers, books and playground equipment, and they refurbish grade schools. Eventually, Chief Sandayo joins the group's school fixing project, not out of a desire to do good, but out of boredom in his captivity in the underground apartment. His acumen in negotiations and his pompous manners become useful to the group in acquiring more equipment for less money. When Chike takes Sandayo to a school to show the improvements they have made, "'We've done well,' [Sandayo] said, meaning it for a short moment" (198). While Sandayo is not relatable like Yezad or Kapur in *Family Matters*, he is not a cut-and-dried villain either. He is multi-layered like all the characters we encounter in the works chosen for this dissertation.

Sandayo's corruption is not an isolated incident. His act was a result of corruption breeding more corruption. *Welcome to Lagos* next sets to establish inherent systematic corruption in higher offices through a convergence of all three threads of the narrative. When Sandayo, trying

to deflect from his own crime, tells the group that he had “witnessed first-hand the theft that has destroyed [Fineboy’s] homeland,” the Niger Delta (153), they decide to publicize what Sandayo knows to inform the society at large. They invite Ahmed Bakare, the founder and editor-in-chief of *Nigerian Journal*, to do an interview with the Chief. During the interview, Sandayo’s what-I-did-is-peanuts attitude allows the narrative to depict even bigger crimes. “What is ten million dollars?” Sandayo asks. “I was in Aso Rock two months ago and I saw the Central Bank governor himself, taking to the President an amount of foreign currency that would make you weep for Nigeria.” (173). A little later on, he follows up with what he considers the “real corruption,” and suggests the journalist “find out how [one gets] allocated an oil block” (174). While incriminating the President and the First Lady—he is even ready to provide bank accounts in Dubai—Chief Sandayo does not deem the ten million dollars he stole significant enough to be newsworthy when there are bigger fish to fry. He is of the opinion that what he did was not “real corruption” (174). He considers the group’s charity work with “his money” as a self-righteousness, and his own deflections as a way of “[putting] whatever he was accused of in perspective” (180-81). Chief Sandayo, former Minister of Education, does not feel that he has any obligations to the society and has completely abandoned his responsibilities as a citizen. The hypocrisy is that, Sandayo, while unashamedly trying to justify his crime, cannot admit it to his own son; he tells him that what the news say about his father is a lie (181).

Through the character of journalist Ahmed Bakare, the author Onuzo effectively urges the readers to not allow the pervasiveness of corruption become the norm. The character of Sandayo represents the opposite: corruption is so wide-spread that it is the ordinary way of doing business, and one honest person will not make a difference. When Ahmed asks him if he knows

that “Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of children out of school in the world,”⁶⁰ Sandayo defends having taken the money:

‘Stop parroting things you’ve read off the internet to me. Open your eyes and see what’s on ground. Let’s say this money I allegedly stole was budgeted for primary schools. If it hadn’t disappeared with me, it would have disappeared with my second in command; if not him, then the principals of those same primary schools. Whichever way, the money would not reach where it was meant to go.’

‘So it might as well be you.’

‘Supposing I took the money, then yes.’ (189)

When Sandayo learns that journalist Ahmed Bakare is the son of “Perm. Sec. in the Ministry of Petroleum,” he is quick to accuse him: “So you’re disturbing me when you have thieves in your family?” (189). Here, the reader once again notes the word “thief” seen earlier, as well as the word “steal.” The author, by choosing a blunt language, emphasizes the real nature of the crimes committed. Sandayo knows that no euphemisms are required for what he and Ahmed’s father have done. It is simply stealing and they are thieves. Regardless of this straightforward label, Sandayo resorts to pot-kettle-black argument. His defense includes ‘it would not have mattered anyway’ and ‘everyone does it’ arguments. We notice that, just like the protagonist Yezad in *Family Matters*—as well as the character Obi in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, one of the first Lagos corruption narratives—Sandayo was not always corrupt; he became disillusioned with his youthful ideals and allowed the environment to bring the worst out of him. These characters’ capitulations demonstrate the toxicity of corruption; it taints anyone who comes close.

⁶⁰ According to Lagos statistics from the beginning of this century, “half of [the population of Lagos] are less than 16 years old,” and of those, 60% do not attend school” (Barredo and Demicheli 299).

Through Sandayo's thought process, the readers see him as an embodiment of systemic corruption. Sandayo remembers that he

had spent his thirties driving to the remotest parts of the South West, living the national pledge, serving with all his strength so a few could learn to read and write. And to what end? This was a country that could not be dragged out of the mud. Mud became Nigeria. Filth was her natural covering. And if people like Chike did not know this, it was out of wilful ignorance, a delusion dangerous for these children. What would these new chairs do? Or the computers? Or the textbooks? The statistics did not lie. If these children could read it was only to learn that their country was not made to work for them. (198-99)

The implication here is that there is a vicious loop and it cannot be broken. According to the self-fulfilling prophecy in Sandayo's reasoning, Nigeria was made to work only for individuals like him: the rich and the powerful who keep accumulating wealth at the public's expense. The man who steals from the people laments that there is no hope for the people. Onuzo's use of irony here can only outrage the middle-class readers and push them to act; to break the cycle. The character of Sandayo, just like Kapur of *Family Matters*, cannot convince the readers that nothing can be done to fix corruption. Sandayo's fatalist assertion functions as a deterrent to this kind of normalization and resignation.

Similar to *Family Matters*, *Welcome to Lagos* also makes references to colonialism. While all of the contemporary works dissected in this research focus on the immediate reality, they also acknowledge the ongoing impact of the colonial past and make postcolonial commentary, albeit only in passing. Chief Sandayo, a good manipulator and master of deflection and projection, blames the British colonizers for the predicament he now finds himself in. Once the interview with Sandayo is published in Ahmed's *Nigerian Journal*, foreign news organizations start

showing interest in the case, and Sandayo welcomes the international attention, hoping that it may save him from a death penalty. But when foreign reporters show up to talk to him, Sandayo's arrogance flares up at the first mention of 'embezzlement.' In a reference to colonialism, he duly reminds the English journalists the wrongs the United Kingdom had committed:

'In your country, the descendants of the biggest thieves, are they not the ones making the decisions? Your House of Lords. Who made them so? Was it not by oppressing the poor, by swallowing all the land? Today, we are calling them "my Lord", calling them "Honourable". Your banks built on the slave trade, Lloyds, have they returned any compensation?' (270-71)

Shortly after this outburst, he makes a more direct connection to colonial and neocolonial practices by asking the British journalist where "all of the stolen money in Africa" goes (271). The author's insertion of this rebuke is significant. While I argue that contemporary novels of Nigeria and India have shed their postcolonial cloak, they do acknowledge their colonized past and the ongoing neocolonial abuses that continue to deplete the resources of the global South.

Even though Sandayo is able to recruit the support of the Western media, it does not end well for him. In his attempts to deflect from his own crime, he implicates everyone above him, including the President and the First Lady, for major offenses. BBC and other news organizations publicize all his accusations around the world. When they finally come for Sandayo, he offers two million dollars to the police officers to let him go free. The commanding officer contemplates that now "[i]t was their turn to eat. Who knew when next they would be invited to the table?" (311). In the end, Sandayo is arrested, but spends only a brief time in prison thanks to his successful campaign to convince the foreign media that he was a patriotic Nigerian

who was wrongfully accused. But the upper echelon of the government he had already incriminated will not allow him to get away with it. Soon, his remains are found in the mud: he was beheaded.

Chike, Yemi, Oma, Isoken and Fineboy do find peace, albeit in very modest circumstances. Isoken, the young girl whose dream was to get an education, fares the best. She ends up going to school paid by journalist Ahmed Bakare's father. It seems that the elder Bakare was searching for redemption for his part in past corrupt practices and sending Isoken to school was one way to soothe his guilty conscious. The rest of the group find accommodations in a squalid Lagos lagoon, a settlement not found in the maps; "their residence defying cartographers," Chike muses (350). This unplanned settlement in the lagoon is understood to be Makoko, a real watery neighbourhood in Lagos where huts are built on stilts in the water. Onuzo's characters pull together as a family. While their new home does not have any sort of sanitation, they are not hungry either. This fictional group is now part of the two thirds of Lagos's real population who live in slums (Akinwale).

It is worthwhile to note that while Yezad in *Family Matters* is portrayed without agency, the spontaneous team of five, as well as the journalist Ahmed in *Welcome to Lagos* have plenty of it. This contrast manifests itself in significantly different outcomes for the characters. *Family Matters* renders Yezad as a stubborn and a seemingly strong character, but Yezad has no control over his destiny. This failure enslaves him to a religion which he did not previously believe in. He becomes more and more ineffective as a member of the society and his family. Yezad does not have much control over the happenings in his life; they just happen to him. Even his financial comfort at the end of the novel simply materialized for him. On the other hand, the characters of Chike, Yemi, Fineboy, Isoken, Oma and Ahmed of *Welcome to Lagos* have agency to make

decisions; they are actors and doers. The control they have over their own futures, no matter how destitute they are, helps them move on with their lives. They do not become bitter like Yezad, instead, they continue to be working, contributing members of the society, even though they end up much poorer than Yezad.

Chief Sandayo's actions remind us of an Indian short story, "The Salt Inspector"—*Namak ka Daroga* in the original Hindi-Urdu—written over a century ago by Munshi Premchand.⁶¹ In this story, Premchand, one of India's most acclaimed literary figures, offers an explanation of the ease and serenity with which the government officials are able to take bribes and engage in other corrupt ways of wealth accumulation. The father in the short story advises his young son who is in search of employment to keep his eyes on the "offerings":

The monthly salary is like the full moon which is visible only for a day, and wanes each successive day and then disappears. The over-and-above income is like a flowing stream that regularly quenches your thirst. Salary is given by man, that's why it does not take you far; the over-and-above income is the gift of God, which leads to prosperity. (Ghai)

If bribes and other favours are seen as gifts of God—in other words, they come easily, almost *naturally*, and seem to carry no consequences—it is then possible to accept them without losing any sleep. The father in the story urges his son "to be tough" with those who need favours; it is easy to tame them, he says. He completes his sermon with "[t]his is my lifetime's accumulation" (Ghai). What the old man has learned during all his years on this earth is that one must extort and fleece; the more the better. Here, we are reminded of an inference reached by Osoba. He has concluded that "[r]ampant corruption among the ruling class cabal has, over time, taught a

⁶¹ For an instructive analysis of this story see "Corruption and the Possibility of Life" by Veena Das. Das has translated the short story from Hindi-Urdu herself. In her translation, the title is "The Salt Superintendent."

dangerously disruptive lesson to the generality of the people: being honest and law-abiding does not pay" (384). This is exactly what the old father in Premchand's story has learned in his lifetime.

Onuzo's antihero Sandayo does not think bribes or stolen money are gifts from God, metaphorically or otherwise. But the point is that Sandayo and others like him act as if the funds they appropriate are coming out of nowhere, as if they are boundless and inexhaustible; as if they are, indeed, God's gifts. Written in 1907 (V. Das 324), "The Salt Inspector" serves the purpose of raising awareness about this prevalent reasoning. In Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, which is set in 1958, a village elder asks Obi, the protagonist, why he wants "a job in the civil service? So that you can take bribes?" (46). This kind of inquiry was unexceptional. In a similarly matter-of-fact manner, Nissim Ezekiel's poem "The Railway Clerk" demonstrates the ordinariness of bribery in the employment of the government

My job is such, no one is giving bribe,
while other clerks are in fortunate position,
and no promotion even because I am not graduate. (134)

In a poem about financial and other difficulties of life, the ordinariness of corruption is mentioned almost in passing. The voice in Ezekiel's poem sums up, in the most reductive form, that more desirable jobs are the ones that bring in more bribes. He further implies that more prestigious positions that are naturally occupied by educated people bring in even more bribes, and with this remark he implicates the elite, the educated. While Premchand's story, Achebe's novel, and Ezekiel's poem are critiques of long-established mentalities, in my own culture there is an expression that actually encourages public servants to steal: 'Government's treasure, endless / one who doesn't filch, mindless.' This ethos allows people to treat stealing from the

public funds as a regular and expected utilization of a resource that is available to them, or a gift from God. In order to be able to eliminate this kind of attitude, Achebe advocates for a mindset that views the state, the government as *us* and *our*. His character, Obi, contemplates that “[i]n Nigeria the government was ‘they.’ It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble” (37). This *us-versus-them* mentality overlooks the victims of corruption. When it is all about taking as much as possible from “an alien institution,” the victims and the consequences for the society become invisible. Contemporary literatures of Mumbai and Lagos are making the invisible visible. These recent narratives bring the effects of embezzlement to the forefront and showcase the casualties of stolen public funds.

In *Welcome to Lagos*, Onuzo often allows Sandayo, the antihero, to deflect blame by referring to Nigeria’s colonial history and the misdeeds of the British. These allusions to the colonizers correspond to the connection made by many scholars between the present-day corruption in India and Nigeria, and these nations’ colonial pasts. It has been argued that the source and/or the increase of corruption is directly related to the British colonization. Angeles and Neanidis argue that “corruption in developing countries has deep historic roots; going all the way back to the characteristics of their colonial experience” (1). Mulinge and Lesetedi, in their study of corruption in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that there is “a link between colonialism and corruption,” and that colonizers institutionalised corruption by their “systematic use of material inducements to compel African chiefs/administrators to collaborate with them in the pursuit of their colonial project of dominating and exploiting their [the African] peoples” (15). In the Nigerian case, Cole observes that after centuries of oppression, now “your oppressor is likely to be your fellow citizen,” and he suggests that it must be because “his ethics eroded by years of

suffering and life at the cusp of desperation” (*Every Day* 69). A member of the Indian parliament, economist, author, and scholar Shashi Tharoor acknowledges that the British are not responsible “for everything that is wrong in my country today,” and colonialism should not be used “to justify some of the failures and deficiencies that undoubtedly still assail India” (235). Nonetheless, he goes on to suggest that

[c]orruption, though not unknown in India, plumb[ed] new depths under the British, especially since the Company exacted payments from Indians beyond what they could afford, and the rest had to be obtained by bribery, robbery and even murder. (Tharoor 9-10)

Arguably, the connection is well-established, and some even refuse to discuss corruption unless its colonial roots are not acknowledged. Regarding a 2016 anti-corruption summit between Britain’s Prime Minister David Cameron and Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, journalist Hadassah Egbedi asks: “wasn’t the art of looting perfected and then institutionalised by the colonial enterprises of the erstwhile British Empire?” He goes on to assert that the failure to “address the colonial roots of corruption,” will make “any attempt to tackle the problem” unsatisfactory. These links between corruption and colonization are entirely legitimate and they appear in contemporary fiction as a reminder of history. The references to colonialism, however, serve less as a rejoinder to the Western perspective than a pragmatic acknowledgement of the past. Undoubtedly, contemporary authors of Mumbai and Lagos trace the sources of corruption to colonialism, just like the character of Sandayo spells it out in no uncertain terms (270-1). However, the fictional Sandayo’s multiple references to the colonizer’s crimes, and yet consciously repeating them himself indicate the intention of the author to seek solutions in

personal and institutional responsibility. In this sense, it can be said that contemporary authors aim to stir up action against corruption regardless of its historic root causes.

Corruption is a ubiquitous theme in Lagos narratives. This trend may have started with Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Achebe's protagonist, Obi, resists corruption even though he knows that 'everyone does it.' Being employed in the scholarship department of the state government, he refuses when parents offer money or young girls offer sexual favours in return for consideration for a university scholarship. Obi's friend reminds him that one of the girls Obi had turned away might be sleeping with the board members who make the final decisions on who gets the grants. Obi acknowledges the possibility; nonetheless, he responds that "perhaps she will remember that there was one man at least who did not take advantage of his position" (138). In spite of his principles, Obi also gets infected by corruption when faced with financial difficulties of his own, and gives in to the ease with which a public servant can take bribes. He becomes one of 'everyone.' A law-abiding idealist individual's conversion, under financial difficulties, into a corrupt one is a common theme in fiction. What is different in *Welcome to Lagos* is that Chief Sandayo is presented as a wealthy and powerful man who had no need to steal public money. It is understandable that Sandayo is disillusioned with his younger-self ideals, but his final downfall can only be attributed to the prevalence and contagion of corruption. The novel pinpoints the contagious aspect of wide-spread corruption: it poisons all those who are near.

In closing, it makes sense to make a brief note of the entertainment industry's recent initiative in the global South. It has been proposed that one way to discourage corruption might be through a television show in the style of popular singing, dancing and talent shows that are now all the rage around the world. The anti-corruption show was first started in Nepal, in 2014,

and it was originally called *Integrity Idol*. It is now called *Integrity Icon*, and in addition to Nepal, it broadcasts in Liberia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Mali, South Africa, and Mexico. The creators of the show invite us to “[i]magine a show, not focusing on celebrities, but instead on government officials.” The website explains that *Integrity Icon* “is a global campaign run by citizens in search of honest government officials. It aims to generate debate around the idea of integrity and demonstrate the importance of honesty and personal responsibility.” Indeed, as they claim, the show has become “a *movement* to celebrate, encourage and connect honest civil servants who demonstrate exemplary integrity in their work” (*Integrity Icon*; emphasis added). Their goal is to inspire “a new generation of responsible leaders” and motivate the youth “to be more effective public servants.” (*Integrity Icon*). With its millions of followers, the show certainly contributes to the national conversations in the countries it airs. The producers’ hope is that “a network like this can shift behaviors and build the trust that is essential for [a] functioning, [and] accountable government;” however, as *The Economist* reports “[c]hange may be gradual.” In 2018, as the Nigerian finalists were being announced, two civil servants from the Federal Ministry of Power, Works and Housing were “in court for embezzling funds earmarked for International Anti-Corruption Day” (“*Integrity Idols*” 41). One of the two corrupt public servants was the Deputy Director and the other was the chairman of the ministry’s Anti-Corruption and Transparency Unit (“*Nigerian*”). Due to the rampant corruption that contaminates all levels of public service from top to bottom, the show has difficulty finding eligible nominees in Nigeria. One candidate, for instance, withdrew his nomination “after he realised that background checks might dig up old dirt” (“*Integrity Idols*” 41). Regardless of these problems, *Integrity Icon* did “generate debate around the idea of integrity and demonstrate the importance of honesty and personal responsibility” (*Integrity Icon*). We must acknowledge that the *Integrity*

Icon, as a television show, has a much larger audience than contemporary literatures. The narratives we examine in this dissertation are more likely to be read by middle-class readers. Television, especially entertainment shows, are consumed by a much wider audience. Due to the nature of television, however, the show can only present one slice of the lives of the participants. The narrative aspect, the merits of which was discussed in the introduction, is missing from these television shows. The public officials who are spotlighted on the show are celebrated and rewarded as trustworthy, principled, and ethical workers. However, the format of a television show does not allow for a coherent narration of how their personalities, behaviours and ethics are shaped by their backgrounds and past experiences. By contrast, our investigation of literary narratives of corruption reveals multiple layers of the characters, and this depth allows the readers to contemplate their actions from a variety of angles. In Yezad and Kapur of *Family Matters*, and in Sandayo, Chike, Fineboy and Ahmed of *Welcome to Lagos*, we find multi-dimensional characters who did good and bad, who succeeded and failed, and who showed strengths and weaknesses. Literary narratives, in comparison to many other forms of representations including the aforementioned television show, offer a more complete picture of the conditions in which people have no other choice than to engage in corrupt practices, as well as those who are simply tempted due to the prevalence of this practice in their community.

Family Matters and *Welcome to Lagos* offer insight to the significance of individual responsibility in the fight against corruption while also highlighting the victims of this social disease. The works demonstrate that corruption is indeed a virulent disease that contaminates many members of the society. Mr. Kapur in *Family Matters* and Chief Sandayo in *Welcome to Lagos* abandon their responsibilities as citizens of their respective nations. The authors, Mistry

and Onuzo, allow these characters to make lengthy speeches in which they try to defend their unethical practices, diminish the value of a few honest people doing the right thing, and conclude that the problem of corruption is unsolvable in their countries. These monologues function as persuading the readers to the opposite and to encourage them to do their part in combatting corruption. The readers do not sympathize with fictional characters who eschew their responsibilities to the society. Kapur's and Sandayo's attempts at defending the indefensible can only embolden the readers to fulfil their own obligations to their communities. *Family Matters* and *Welcome to Lagos* highlight the society's losses when individuals fail in their duties as citizens. Afterall, as mentioned earlier, "the success of every society depends largely on the individuals' sense of responsibility towards it; it rests squarely on the ability of such individuals to imagine the consequences of their actions on society" (Eze *Postcolonial* 102). Contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos imagine these repercussions and present them to their readers.

Chapter 3: Dualities in the City - Formal and Informal Neighbourhoods

he let his mind drift as he stared at the city, half slum, half paradise. How could a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time? he wondered.

— Chris Abani, *Graceland*

Two Names the City has, two souls,
One native and inexpressibly deep,
The other a rapid baptism from a pale altar;
The two sometimes kiss and sometimes quarrel.

— Niyi Osundare, *Eko*

We live in hell-holes
And clean your streets;
Yet like stray hawkers
Cops drive us out.

— Narayan Surve, *Mumbai*

Unsuitable for song as well as sense
The island flowers into slums
And skyscrapers, reflecting
Precisely the growth of my mind.
I am here to find my way in it.

— Nissim Ezekiel, *Island*

Contemporary literatures of Mumbai and Lagos, in an urban and realist turn, highlight present-day problems related to insufficient affordable housing and relentless urban renewal projects, as well as the stark disparities between the living conditions of the privileged and the poor. Twenty-first century literatures of Mumbai and Lagos alert readers to the urgent conditions and inequalities in their cities and embolden them to work towards reducing some of these difficulties. The primary narratives I will probe in this chapter are *Last Man in Tower* by Adiga

(2011) for Mumbai and *Graceland* by Abani (2004) for Lagos. These two contemporary social realist works draw attention to the endless construction in their cities, the demolishing of slum settlements to make way for expensive residences or shopping malls for the rich, and the contrasts between the wealthy neighbourhoods and the substandard living conditions in the settlements the majority of the denizens live in. Both texts represent current urban concerns while at the same time painting vivid images of Mumbai and Lagos that transport the readers to the settings of the events where we feel the heat, smell the food, and hear the sounds of the hawkers. *Last Man in Tower* and *Graceland* use the aesthetics of shock and outrage to elicit a heightened level of emotional response from the readers. In *Last Man in Tower*, Mumbai's ordinary people act in outrageous ways; they go to extreme lengths to get what they want. These egregious acts evoke commensurable sentiments in the readers. In *Graceland*, certain descriptions of Lagos life are quite brutal and hard to read. Both works illustrate the vast inequalities present in their cities. Some of the grim, even cruel realities of Mumbai and Lagos may have become commonplace for the residents through habituation. We get accustomed to what we see every day, and the sights that surround us start to become invisible. *Last Man in Tower* and *Graceland* seek to make what has become invisible visible again. They aim to shake the readers out of their numbness so that they can start seeing anew the conditions in the slum settlements and their demolition to make way for new luxury apartment buildings, the stark inequalities, and the endless constructions. The shockingly intense and harsh depictions may disturb the audience enough to get involved in the improvement of their cities. As Felski argues, the shock effect not only allows literary narratives such as the two probed in this chapter to “punch us in the gut” (108), but also “to blur the distinction between self and other, [and] to unravel the certainty of one’s own convictions” (110). Alarming and daunting portrayals in *Last*

Man in Tower and *Graceland* produce the aesthetic experience which, in Felski's words, causes a breach in the reader's consciousness and defenses, and its "after-shocks can reverberate in the psyche for some time" (113). This is the desired effect of *Last Man in Tower* and *Graceland*: their strong and lasting impact causes the reader to challenge the status quo and imagine alternate ways of thinking and acting for the betterment of urban life.

Since the fourth century BCE, when Plato pointed out the dualities of cities in *The Republic*, many poets, authors, and scholars have restated it again and again: the city is Manichean and it contains two opposing extremes. Plato claimed that "any city, however small, is in fact divided into two, one of the city of the poor, the other of the rich; these are at war with one another" (92). This is an unequal war; the rich side has all the power and the poor side never wins. In 1870, French author Louis Lazare, in *The Poor Neighborhoods of Paris: The 20th Arrondissement*,⁶² declared that there were two cities in Paris, and they were "quite different and hostile: the city of luxury, surrounded, besieged by the city of misery" (qtd. in T.J. Clark 29). With colonization, the binary acquired other forms: colonized/colonizer, white/non-white and European/native. In a 1950 novel, *The Sea Wall*,⁶³ Marguerite Duras introduced the duality of nineteen-twenties' Saigon (present-day Ho Chi Minh City) as follows: "As in all colonial cities, there were two towns within this one: the white town—and the other" (135). Doshi and Ranganathan elaborate that "[s]erviced administrative and residential areas, known as 'white towns,' constituted the exclusive space of the white elite who were set apart from native 'black towns.' Entire cities were carved up and enclosed as property for the Europeans and a few native elites"

⁶² *Les quartiers pauvres de Paris: le XXe arrondissement*.

⁶³ *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.

(“Contesting” 186). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon described the colonized city’s Manichean aspects in great detail:

The colonist’s sector is a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It’s a sector of lights and paved roads, where the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers. … The colonist’s sector is a sated, sluggish sector, its belly is permanently full of good things. …

The colonized’s sector … is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people, You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It’s a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized’s sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. (4)

61 and 74 years after the colonizers left Nigeria and India respectively, the only difference from Fanon’s descriptions is that the two divisions of major cities—the sections Fanon calls the white town and the native town—are now both native towns. “This compartmentalized world, this world divided in two, is inhabited by different species,” (5) Fanon had written in 1961. Today, the “different species” belong to the same place, to the same nation, but the “economic reality, inequality, and enormous disparities in lifestyles” (5) remain. In the above excerpt, if the word ‘colonist’ is replaced by rich, and ‘colonized’ is replaced by poor, the rest of the characterization would be valid for Mumbai and Lagos. Hansen and Verkaaik posit that “[c]olonial cities were founded on a distinction between the proper colonial citizens, living in regulated and planned spaces, and masses of urban poor and recent migrants who were concentrated in slums, favelas, souks and bidonvilles” (10). Following independence, the “regulated and planned spaces” of the colonizers quickly became the model for the residential areas of the privileged and the elite of the nation, and the migrants arriving in the city to make a living, as well as the urban poor, had

no choice but to create their own unplanned neighbourhoods.⁶⁴ Neera Chandoke uses the term *unintended city* to refer to slums and squatter towns (2871), adding to the lexicon of the new binaries: planned/unplanned, intended/unintended and vertical/horizontal. In Mumbai and Lagos, both of which also possess an innate “dichotomy [of] land and water” (Whiteman 35), none of these post-independence dualities are inevitable. Contemporary literary narratives of these two case study cities treat these contrasts in all their complexities, as well as bringing in more vocabulary—heaven/hell, ugly/beautiful, peaceful/violent—to define them. In Chris Abani’s *Graceland*, the protagonist Elvis looks at Lagos and laments: “half slum, half paradise. How [can] a place be so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time?” (7). Salman Rushdie also touches upon the duality in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* by calling Bombay “my old hovel’n’highrise home town [*sic*]” (145). As a poet, Osundare notices ideational dualities such as “myth and reality,” “esoteric indigeneity and imported alienation,” and “dream and nightmare” (8-9). Ranjani Mazumdar argues that “[t]he most persistent image of Bombay is the cheek-by-jowl coexistence of skyscrapers and slums, each inhabiting a different experience and world” (*Bombay Cinema* 46-47). Writing about Lagos, Osundare points out the duality even in the names of the cities:

‘Lagos’ being offspring of its foreign baptism, while ‘Eko’ remains its rooted, authentic identity. ‘Lagos’ dominates map of politics and high commerce; ‘Eko’ rules the lore of a

⁶⁴ There are many terms for what is commonly known as a slum: unplanned, unintended, informal settlements, or squatter towns, hutments, shantytowns etc. Nikhil Anand and Anne Rademacher express their preference for ‘settlement’ and ‘settler’ since the alternatives, ‘slum’ and ‘slum-dweller,’ bring about negative connotations such as “dirt, criminality, and vice” (219n3). Others agree that “‘slum’ is a stereotype that inevitably casts a slur;” however caution against using “the term ‘informal settlement’ as a euphemism” (Dovey et al. 2). While the discussion on finding and defining the right term continues, I decided to rely on the choices already made in scholarly and fictional texts I refer to.

deep uncharitable nativity; ‘Lagos’ measures the waters by the circumference of the coastline, ‘Eko’ issues forth from the vortex of a fluid abyss. (8)

Similarly, Bombay and Mumbai have also come to remind the city’s inhabitants of two different eras. ‘Bombay,’ proudly diverse and inclusive, and ‘Mumbai,’ a reminder of Shiv Sena’s “exclusivist program of establishing a militant Maharashtrian and nationalist Hindu identity” (Varma 53n8).

“Property,” Edward Said argues, “authorizes schemes, establishes discourses, founds ideologies,” and he attributes the skillful exhibition of this, through the analysis of literature, to Raymond Williams. Said explains that, thanks to Williams, we now understand that “a remarkably varied set of structures deriving from the land, over and on which rights and ideas dispute each other, as also of course do classes and individuals” (82). These disputes over land and property listed by Said are epitomized by urban renewal projects in both Mumbai and Lagos. Continuous rebuilding, restructuring and redevelopment impact the slum settlements the most. Over time, the land on which the settlers reside have become increasingly valuable prime locations. This puts the settlers in a very precarious situation. Contemporary literatures aid in establishing the discourse about the plight of these most vulnerable denizens of Mumbai and Lagos. Lagos is approximately forty times larger today than it was in 1950, and Mumbai’s conurbation is expected to reach 33 million by 2025 (Davis 2,5). Millions of these city dwellers—estimations vary between 40 and 60 percent for both cities—live in the settlements. Davis believes that “no one knows whether such gigantic concentrations of poverty are biologically or ecologically sustainable” (5). This bleak forecast is reflected in Lagos and Mumbai narratives. There is “a growing body of literature concerned with the precarious lives of those living in the growing slum or informal housing areas of postcolonial cities” (Herbert,

“Postcolonial” 209). Indeed, I had a large pool of contemporary literature to choose from for this chapter.⁶⁵ What I did not find, however, is an attribution of the current settlement issues and vast inequalities to the colonial practices even though this connection has been well established by scholars. Fanon, Duras, and many others, in spite of coming from varied backgrounds, and possibly possessing different ideologies, have incontrovertibly laid out that colonial cities were strictly divided into two, and this division was maintained by not just “the barracks and the police station” (Fanon 3), but also with mind games of disdain and mockery, and the “destruction of the indigenous social fabric” (Fanon 5-6). The ongoing preservation of these methods is depicted in literature as Elvis, the hero of Abani’s *Graceland* remarks, “high metal fences patrolled on the inside by stone-faced guards armed with automatic rifles” (164). Notwithstanding this continuity of the colonial practices, the separation by economic and social class, and the dichotomy of the poor and the rich have been an urban issue since time immemorial as Plato had already identified in the fourth century BCE. Today, the literary narratives of postcolonial cities focus on the existing society and the mismanagement by current governments. They depict the housing problem as a failure in the functioning of their cities, the responsibility of which lies with extant participants: the state that does not provide sufficient safety nets (Mendes and Lau 119), the corrupt city managers and greedy developers ready to bribe them, the privileged gated community members who prefer to maintain the status quo, and the middle classes who turn a blind eye to the plight of the homeless and the slum dwellers. In the following analyses of Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* and Abani’s *Graceland*, we will study the literary representations of housing problems in Mumbai and Lagos, respectively.

⁶⁵ Some of these works are: *Ravan and Eddie* by Kiran Nagarkar (1995), *A State of Freedom* by Neel Mukherjee (2017), *Sacred Games* by Vikram Chandra (2007), *Invisible Chapters* by Maik Nwosu (2015), and *Dangerous Love* by Ben Okri (1996).

“Good housing for good Indians”: Aravind Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower*

Any discussion of Mumbai’s dualities must start with the high-rise ‘home’ built in 2010 by the richest man in India, Mukesh Ambani.⁶⁶ When Arundhati Roy, author of *The God of Small Things* (1997) and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), visits the outrageous edifice, she is incredulous:

I’d read about this most expensive dwelling ever built, the twenty-seven floors, three helipads, nine lifts, hanging gardens, ballrooms, weather rooms, gymnasiums, six floors of parking, and six hundred servants. Nothing had prepared me for the vertical lawn—a soaring, twenty-seven-story-high wall of grass attached to a vast metal grid. The grass was dry in patches; bits had fallen off in neat rectangles. Clearly, Trickledown hadn’t worked. (7)

The Ambani family’s extravagance of a house is often contrasted with the “48.5 per cent of Bombay’s population” living in shanty towns (Fernandes 10). When the members of the Ambani family look out of the windows of their twenty-seven-floor abode, they see slum settlements and pavement dwellers. Pico Iyer summarizes this phenomenon of India’s “capital of capital” as an extreme contrast between the “five million of its people [who] live in slums or on the streets, [and] those above them [who] recline in apartments more expensive per square foot than anything in Tokyo or New York” (3). Contemporary Mumbai literatures, in diverse and engaging forms, but nonetheless through aesthetics of realism, depict these dualities by placing wealth and

⁶⁶ When Charles Igbinidu, a Lagosian columnist, visits the Ambani residence in Mumbai, he draws parallels between the “super rich Nigerians [who are] ostentatious and insensitive with their crazy display of wealth and affluence by acquiring fleets of expensive cars and private jets.” In writing his impressions of Mumbai, he contrasts this city with his hometown Lagos finding many similarities from the informal neighbourhoods to the traffic.

poverty side by side in an attempt to raise reader awareness of the inequalities present in their city.

Even if the Ambani building is taken out of the equation for being an extreme case, the disparity between wealthy lives in high-rises and the destitution in the settlements is so stark that even children notice them. In his literary nonfiction work *Maximum City*, Suketu Mehta recounts his little son's reaction during his discovery of Bombay for the first time. The little boy, who was growing up in New York before his family relocated to Bombay, says to his father: "On one side villages, on the other side buildings." Mehta remarks that his son "has identified the slums for what they are: villages in the city. The visual shock of Bombay is the shock of this juxtaposition" (14-15). Ciocca suggests that the slum villages in the city changed the geography of centre and periphery ("Casa e vicinato" 120). When the government gets the chance, it continues to push the slum neighbourhoods farther and farther away, but the ones right in the middle of the city make the juxtaposition with modern high-rises even more jarring. Kiran Nagarkar, who explores the living conditions of the *chawls* in his novel, *Ravan and Eddie*, explains why the proximity is needed: "Now you need those very poor people because the floor has to be swept and swabbed, the car has to be washed, someone has to cook, someone has to take care of your newborn baby. That's why all high rises come with attached hutments or slums." In his novels, Nagarkar, who himself grew up in the *chawls*, "wanted the chawl-dwellers to be given their due of human dignity" (qtd. in Nerlekar 47). The disparities between the affluent and poor neighbourhoods, which are now in close proximity of one another, are frequently depicted in contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai. A slum settlement, even if it is adjacent to an upper-class apartment building, may still be out of sight. Mukherjee demonstrates this proximity and

invisibility in *A State of Freedom*, a work that is a cross between a novel and a short story collection, through a dialogue between the narrator and his mother about their maid:

‘Does she come from far?’

‘No, no, she lives just around the corner, in the slum along the sea wall on that side,’ she said, indicating with her hand the direction towards Taj Land’s [sic] End, the luxury hotel which sat on the tip of this centre-west finger of Bombay . . .

‘Is there a slum there? I asked; I had no idea. ‘But where? I thought there was only the sea on the other side of the wall.’ (37)

It is not strange that the narrator does not know there is a slum settlement “just around the corner,” because he lives in a gated apartment complex with high walls and security guards, and when he goes out, his father’s driver takes him around. Physical proximity does not imply any meaningful interaction between the residents of two vastly unequal quarters.

Adiga’s *Last Man in Tower* employs what Felski calls “literature’s power to disturb” (105) by agitating the readers through a shocking turn of events. A novel about Mumbai’s housing problems, *Last Man in Tower* illustrates multiple degrees of contrasts present in the city. From pavement dwellers to extravagant demonstrations of wealth, the narrative goes through all levels of disparities while building up to a shocking finale the effect of which stays with the readers long after the novel is over. The narrative tackles all the disparities between tiered living conditions as well as juxtaposing luxurious high-rises and the unplanned settlements without water and sanitation. Urbanists Nikhil Anand and Anne Rademacher remark that Mumbai “is a city of many layers and layered levels” (204), and the city in Adiga’s novel is similarly layered. Using the premise of the city’s redevelopment projects, *Last Man in Tower* demonstrates the divisions between the society’s multiple economic levels. Through the defiance of one man, a

hold-out in an old apartment building, middle-class readers may see the city's restructuring enterprises from a different perspective that is not necessarily central to their own short-term self-interests. The interrelationships—or the lack thereof—between different strata are also reflected in *Last Man in Tower*. The residents of the apartment complex that is the topic of the novel have different visceral mechanisms to cope with the socio-economic differences between themselves, and those who are above and below their own economic status. Firstly, they deal with the inequalities between their own lives and the lives of those in the neighbouring slums by ignoring their existence: the protagonists of the novel "leave the gate of Vishram every morning, process to the main road, and pretend there was no other world near by [sic]" (35). Secondly, the same characters manage the disparities between themselves and those who live in luxury through envy, yearning, pandering, cheating, and ultimately, committing many unconscionable acts. Arjun Appadurai asserts that "[h]ousing—and its lack—are the stage for the most public drama of disenfranchisement in Mumbai." He suggests that housing might be "the single most critical site of this city's politics of citizenship" (28). In the narration of the multiple facets of Mumbai's housing-related disenfranchisement, to use Appadurai's theatre analogy, *Last Man in Tower* first stages a comedy and then a tragedy.

Last Man in Tower gets its aesthetic inspiration from a real-life news item. Adiga recounts that he "read an article in the *Times of India* in early 2007, describing a redevelopment offer by a builder [in Mumbai], opposed by one old man in the building." He remembers that he "went to the building and spoke to some of the residents—so it evolved out of real life" (qtd. S. M. Das). Adiga's fictional rendition takes place in the Vishram Society, an apartment complex consisting of two towers in a walled compound. In my reading of the novel, the residents of this apartment building represent the Mumbai society at large. When Mumbaikars place their individual short-

term benefits over the well-being of their city, like the members of the Vishram Society do, then the urban problems persist, the vicious cycle of redevelopment continues, and communities start tearing themselves apart. Through many metaphors, the novel urges the readers to question their own behaviours, and consider what they can change in their relationship to the city.

The symbolism and layers of irony employed by Adiga appear early in the novel. Vishram Society's residence, Tower A, is an older construction. It was once a respectable building made of solid materials and expected to last forever, in other words, “*pucca* – absolutely, unimpeachably *pucca*” (3).⁶⁷ While the readers may think that the solidity, permanence and respectability of this *pucca* tower extend to its residents as well, they soon discover that neither the building nor the community it shelters are that solid, that permanent or that respectable. This modest six-storey tower, built in 1959, was one of the first of its kind—a modern apartment building for the petite bourgeoisie—and therefore “the most famous building in the area” (108). While it is now an old building in need of repairs, with its once-middle-class residents, it is still considered sufficiently upscale compared to the surrounding slum neighbourhoods. The novel describes a marble plaque placed at the entrance at the time of the building’s construction. According to the plaque, this *pucca* building is “GOOD HOUSING FOR GOOD INDIANS.” This inscription’s aesthetic function is twofold. As readers, we find the slogan an elitist, uncaring jab at the slum settlements that have, over the years, completely surrounded the walled compound of the Vishram Society. The marble plaque seems to be saying that the residents within the compound are “good Indians” while those that are outside of the walls are not good Indians since they do not live in good housings. Following the upstanding members of the Vishram Society as they deal with a dilemma that will soon face them, a second interpretation of

⁶⁷ Pucca refers to housing that is solid, permanent and respectable.

the plaque becomes possible: the ironies in “good housing” and “good Indians.” We will see that neither the residence nor its residents are that good; both the building and its community will soon start to crumble and fall apart. A developer’s proposal to buy Towers A and B of the Vishram Society to build a lavish high-rise in their place turns the central character, Masterji, into an antihero full of hubris, and engenders his own violent demise. Through the aesthetics of excessive pride and stubbornness ascribed to an otherwise decent, well-meaning and loveable hero, the callous duplicity and greed of the “good Indians” in “good housing” will come to light, and all that was supposed to be permanent, solid and respectable will disintegrate and disappear. Masterji’s critique of the redevelopment projects exposes their long-term harm to the city, and compels the middle classes, who stand to profit through urban renewal schemes, to consider the cost to Mumbai. As Anjaria expounds *Last Man in Tower* “exposes the hypocrisy of bourgeois respectability in the face of greed, and as such [intends]—once again—to stir the middle classes out of their political apathy” (“Realist” 124).

Last Man in Tower depicts the dichotomies of housing and living conditions by contrasting Vishram Society’s circumstances with those of the novel’s villain, Dharmen Shah, a construction magnate. One of Shah’s own residences is located in an upscale beachfront area and has a beautiful ocean view as well as a “palace-of-sin plushness” (89). The beach his apartment faces is Versova beach which is not exempt from the divisions of Mumbai. “Here, in this beach in this posh northern suburb of Mumbai, half the sand was reserved for the rich,” Shah’s assistant mulls, “the other half for slum dwellers” (83) who did not have proper sanitation systems, and had no choice but to use the beach for their most essential needs. “Residents of the slum that had encroached upon the beach” were separated from “the bankers, models, and film producers of Versova [who] were engaged in tai-chi, yoga, or spot-jogging” by “[a]n invisible line [that] went

down the middle of the beach like an electrified fence” (83). This dichotomy is the view from Shah’s and every other ocean-front high-rise residents’ window. In Mumbai, the disparities are in plain sight but not everyone is able to see them. Some urban realities become too commonplace for many of the city inhabitants to notice. The every-day familiarity renders certain sights indiscernible, and “the visual shock of the two worlds” (Mazumdar *Bombay Cinema* 114) may no longer seem as shocking to the inhabitants of Bombay. Contemporary urban narratives make such sights visible once again through defamiliarization and the force of literary shock becomes effective. Mazumdar remarks that there are few places in the city “which can hide inequality,” and she emphasizes the jolt one feels walking “through a slum into a tall building manned by security guards” (*Bombay Cinema* 114-115). The kind of apartment complexes she describes are just like Shah’s apartments in *Last Man in Tower*. Both of Shah’s residences have parking garages and security guards, and we can assume that they have even higher walls than the Vishram Society. Mazumdar describes the interiors of such buildings where we have elevators that take us to well-designed apartments with large windows. If we go high up in the building, then the slums down below do not catch the eye. Rather, the expanse of a sprawling city provides a picturesque view. Those who live lower down in the high-rise can see the squalor just outside their apartments. (*Bombay Cinema* 115)

For those who may risk seeing the squalor, new apartment buildings make use of “high walls, tall podiums and other architectural screens to protect residents from even visual engagement with people deemed undesirable” (Fernandes 121). None of these measures, however, can prevent contemporary Mumbai literatures from seeing and showing what’s behind the high walls.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The walls erected to keep slum areas hidden bring to mind the story of Annawadi settlement located near the Mumbai Airport. In her literary non-fiction, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Katherine Boo recounts the plights of

Mumbai's water shortages, which are depicted by many contemporary Mumbai narratives, give Adiga another scene for staging the disparities between the socio-economic classes. Adiga, who himself worries about not having running water in his apartment, paints Shah living in luxury, and taking his showers in bathrooms laid with "green onyx" and "the hot water flow[ing] through gilded fittings" (89). This is in contrast to the Vishram Society which receives running water only twice a day: between "four to six in the morning and 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m." (7). In an interview, the author had explained that, when he returned back to India after having lived and studied abroad for many years, he was struck by the inequalities. He remarks that "[t]he rich are so rich. The Indian economy is booming but the money was not really getting down to the poor and the difference in the world between the rich and the poor was phenomenal." Adiga adds that "[t]he shameless way wealth is flaunted is extraordinary," and that his "concern is to look at the vast disparity" (qtd. in Pais). Adiga's real-life observations are exemplified in *Last Man in Tower*. While the crooked construction mogul showers in extravagantly luxurious bathrooms where water flows unencumbered, the residents of Vishram Society must collect water in buckets and pots to use throughout the day. Adiga himself, a well-educated journalist and author of award-winning novels, worries that, come summer, he may not have running water in his own apartment due to major water shortages (qtd. in Pais).

Annawadi residents. Annawadi is located on land that belongs to the airport. The contrasts are nowhere as stark as they are between the airport's projected image and Annawadi's reality. Boo writes that, in spite of "an abundance of young, cheap, trainable labor," Mumbai is not thriving with foreign investment like some of the megacities of Asia. Boo suggests that this might be partially due to the reputation of Mumbai "as Slumbai." She remarks that "international businessmen descending into the Mumbai airport," may not regard the sight of a large slum neighbourhood nearby "as evidence of a high-functioning, well-managed city" (42). Eventually, the airport "erect[s] tall, gleaming aluminum fences" to hide the slums (36). This barrier is covered with floor tile advertisements that run "the wall's length: BEAUTIFUL FOREVER BEAUTIFUL FOREVER BEAUTIFUL FOREVER" (37). Behind the beautiful forevers lies the Annawadi slum settlement.

The construction business, to which Dharmen Shah belongs, exacerbates inequalities and gross disparities through endless redevelopment projects which leave slum dwellers either homeless or in transit camps where the conditions may be even worse than in their slum neighbourhoods. The demolish-and-rebuild cycle is very profitable for some people, and detrimental to the well-being of many others. According to contemporary literary narratives, the development industry is a corrupt world. Shah's unruly son, Satish, when scolded for spray painting other people's cars, thinks that what he had done "was nothing compared to what his father did in *his* line of work" (99). As if to confirm his son's thoughts, Shah contemplates that "[t]he path to a new building in Mumbai sparked with small stones—police, litigation, greed—and he would need every ounce of his body fat to crush those stones, one by one" (91), and describes a builder as "the one man in Bombay who *never* loses a fight" (115). His next building project puts Shah and the Vishram Society at odds, and the readers may wonder what he might do to not lose that fight. Shah wants to buy the Vishram Society's two buildings, Tower A and B. He will demolish them, and in their place, he will erect "a new super-luxury residential" building (90). Redevelopment projects are common in Mumbai. As Varma explains, "[c]apital's endless capacity to first invest in built environment and then destroy it in order to create newer opportunities for capital accumulation has been of course key to Bombay's capitalist development" (75). The infinite loop of building, destroying, and rebuilding gives the impression of never-ending construction all around Mumbai, and the novel represents the ongoing developments by featuring many half-completed buildings. Anjaria argues that *Last Man in Tower* "hypostatizes this elusive temporality in the various images of unfinished building projects that appear throughout the book, as metonymies for the always only partially built

landscape of Mumbai's postliberalization present" (127). There is one character in the novel who will try to put an end to this vicious circle, or, at the very least, help spotlight the problem.

Adiga uses humour to caricature some of the ostentatious architectures that are the results of relentless rebuilding projects. For example, Shah's new skyscraper will be his best work yet; an edifice he will call the Shanghai, the architectural styles of which will combine "Gothic, Italian, Indian, Art Deco styles, all in one," symbolizing his life-long work (91). Written in the author's mocking tone we know from his previous novel, *The White Tiger*,⁶⁹ this comical blend of architectural styles, along with the name Shanghai, will no doubt lead to a gaudy formation. The narrative style in *Last Man in Tower* is as darkly humorous as in *The White Tiger*. In both works, Adiga makes use of satire in narrating grievous events. On the "dark humour" in his books, Adiga comments that "[o]utsiders don't realize how funny we Indians are—how much wit and sarcasm is present in the day-to-day speech of poor people in states like Bihar" (qtd. in Pais). Adiga's choice of the name Shanghai for the building Shah wants to build in place of Vishram Society is not accidental. In Mumbai, in 2004 and 2005, "the state government demolished an estimated 90,000 hutments, and rendered 400,000 people homeless—described in some sections of the media as 'Operation Shanghai'" (Harris 2964). With destruction of the Vishram Society and demolition of neighbouring settlements, the name Shanghai, previously of the 'Operation Shanghai' infamy, is just another piece of Adiga's dark humour.

⁶⁹ In *The White Tiger*, Adiga had already confronted some of India's present-day problems; corruption, the stark contrast between how the rich and the poor live, and "the servant-master relationship, the class system in India" (qtd. in Pais). Unlike *Last Man in Tower*, *The White Tiger* is not a city narrative, and its plot does not take place in Mumbai. However, it is an innovative work of self-critique written in an epistolary form, and another example of new social realism. Adiga explains that *The White Tiger* "makes a passionate case for the better treatment of two-thirds of [the population of India] who are poorer. It is an attack on the system that governs India" (qtd. in Pais). In *Last Man in Tower*, a distinctively Mumbai novel, Adiga continues to call attention to "the divide between the rich and the poor," a problem, he insists, "is omnipresent, its manifestations keep changing, and literature and the arts have to keep responding" (qtd. in Pais).

In *Last Man in Tower*, the emotions and inner deliberations of the central character, Masterji, offer an antidote to many of Mumbai's problems: overburdened infrastructure, water and air pollution, endless construction, inequality, homelessness, and poverty in the settlements which are under imminent threat of being demolished. Yogesh Murthy is a retired science teacher and he is affectionately called Masterji by the residents of the Vishram Society because of his wisdom, knowledge and general gravitas. Masterji is a well-developed character; complete with many flaws and strengths. From an anecdote told by the security guard of the Vishram Society, we understand that Masterji may be tight-fisted, but he believes in equality. The guard reveals that Masterji never tipped him, but he did include his daughter in the tutorial classes, defying the objections of the other parents. While the other residents of the building saw a class difference between their children and the guard's child, Masterji simply regarded all of them as students. We also learn, as a part of his character development, that Masterji's teenage daughter had died in a train accident some years back, and recently, he had lost his wife as well. Masterji is given a past that makes him a sympathetic character, and the readers may be more inclined to align themselves with Masterji in the upcoming crisis. Getting to know Masterji as a kind and honourable man motivates the readers to consider his perspectives which are to the benefit of Mumbai, the slum dwellers and the environment. This decent man, whose heart has been broken by the deaths of his daughter and his wife, is respected by all who cross paths with him. Dharmen Shah's intention of buying the buildings of the Vishram Society to construct a luxury high-rise in their place will change everything. Shah's offer to each household of the Vishram Society is generous. He proposes to pay them more than double the market value for their current apartments. In addition, he will give each family an equivalent of eight weeks of rent money so that they may have a place to live while they search for a new apartment to buy. With the arrival

of this offer, the readers “witness the progressive deterioration of neighborly sociality” (Anjaria “Realist” 125), and this can also be read as an indictment on the city as a whole since the Vishram building epitomizes Mumbai. As part of this prefigurative symbolism, the author implies a connection between the independence of India and Vishram Society’s pending decision. The deadline set for the Vishram Society to unanimously accept Shah’s problematic offer and to sign the contract is 3rd of October which happens to be the day after *Gandhi Jayanti*, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. Another significant date is 15th of August, India’s independence, for which Gandhi’s efforts were instrumental. Once Shah’s proposal is officially made to the Vishram Society, the countdown towards 3rd of October starts. By including the dates of the Independence Day and Gandhi’s birthday in the plot, the novel draws in the history associated with them into the narrative. Preparations for the two commemorations can be observed in the background at every stage of the story, and the parallels between the expectations of independence and Mumbai’s transformation become clearer. Gandhi, during the push for independence, had made Bombay apprehend “that reform wasn’t a process effected merely by institutions or governments—it demanded individual responsibility and effort. Bombay had also learned that achieving real change required the participation of people across class, caste and religious lines” (Fernandes 81). Today, narratives of Mumbai, like *Last Man in Tower*, place the onus once again on Mumbaikars; they have to recall how they had owned and performed their personal duties then, and do so again. Masterji’s reluctance to sell his apartment may be correlated to the “individual responsibility” asked by Gandhi, or as Marcela Valdes suggests, it may be an allegory for old India’s resistance to transformation. Another interpretation is that Masterji believes in the institutions of independent India until they, one by one, fail him. When he sees little children rehearsing for the Independence Day ceremonies, dressed in uniforms and

waving flags, he remarks that these young kids “*still believe in Independence Day*” (245). As if he suddenly decides to believe in it too, he reassures his friend and co-resister. “We live in a Republic, Mr. Pinto,” he says, “[a] man has his resources here.” He goes on to count them on his fingers:

Police.

Media.

Law and order.

Social workers.

Family.

Students and old boys. (245)

However, all of the Republic’s institutions fail to protect him, not unlike the promise of new India which fizzled before reaching the most vulnerable. Simmel had argued that, in the metropolis, money reduced “all qualitative differences of things in terms of ‘how much?’” (27). Masterji’s resistance to selling his apartment is interpreted by everyone as a ploy to get more money from the developer. His neighbors, his son, his students, the vendors in the market, the priest, the lawyer, the journalists, and the police, all ask Masterji, “how much?”

Adiga uses the 3rd of October deadline as a stylistic feature to portray the tension in the Vishram Society, and as the calendar moves forward, the behaviours of the residents against Masterji become increasingly shocking. As the cutoff date becomes the driving force behind the plot, Adiga titles each section with a date moving closer and closer to the day beyond which “[t]he offer will not be extended one minute” (80). This is reminiscent of the countdown calendar the British had put up in their offices in June of 1947, marking the days until August 15 when they would have to leave, or quit India as Gandhi’s movement was called (McDermott and Ok

Lee 416). The novel's similar countdown style increases the suspense, and the readers follow the residents, as they accept the offer one by one, leaving Masterji all alone as the last holdout. Masterji's former community, "warm, human, familiar" (95) becomes cold, inhuman and alien. People who were once Masterji's good friends and decades-old neighbours are now trying to get him to sign the contract through coercion, begging, insulting, boycotting, threatening, intimidating, terrorizing, and eventually, violence. As the harassments unsettle the readers more and more, Masterji remains calm and positive, refusing to believe that his neighbours had turned so malevolent. When they stop greeting him, he attributes it to absentmindedness. When the residents' frosty behaviour is brought to Masterji's attention, he says that he had not observed a difference. "Our neighbours are solid people," he adds (184). He is consistently patient and tolerant. While the readers' revulsion and outrage at the neighbours' baseness deepen, Masterji's restraint and decency make it difficult for the same readers to see him as an antihero in spite of his growing hubris. This combination encourages the readers to consider the merits in Masterji's rationale and to doubt the other characters' need for extra money and a new apartment.

The self-critique the novel asks of the readers is encapsulated in Masterji's new-found social awareness. The indignities Masterji suffers during these tough and lonely days make him reflect on the city's problems and his own attitudes towards them. In contrast to his neighbours who "dreamed of bigger homes and cars," Masterji's "joys were those of the expanding square footage of his inner life" (150). He is alone among his fellow Mumbaikars who are consumed with "weighing, calculating, with numerical determinations, with a reduction of the qualitative values to quantitative ones," as Simmel had observed about many trapped in the money economy of the metropolis (26). Masterji, on the other hand, wants to continue to learn and to teach. He leads a modest life but he is proud. His reasons for not accepting the offer change as the deadline

approaches, and in these changes we see the development of his concerns for his community and for Mumbai. First, his motive is to support his friends Mr. and Mrs. Pinto. Mrs. Pinto is nearly blind and she may not be able to move around in new surroundings. They would rather stay in the Vishram Society, and Masterji supports them in their decision. Later, Masterji's reason for fighting on—even after the Pintos agree to take the offer—becomes his emotional connection to the building; the memories of his late daughter and wife. As time passes on, he starts to consider the well-being and future of Mumbai. “The area already had a water shortage, how would it support so many new homes... and what would happen to the roads?” he thinks (163). Subsequently, he develops this concern more: “There’s something bigger than us involved here, Mr. Pinto,” Masterji says. “Things are changing too fast in this city. Everyone knows this, but no one wants to take responsibility. To say: ‘Slow down. Stop. Let’s think about what’s happening.’ Do you understand me?” (227). This is a direct plea from the novel to the readers: take responsibility, slow down, think. Whether or not Mr. Pinto understands, he is too weak to refuse the offer. Even though he has a good reason to refuse and no pressing need to accept, he soon gives in and leaves Masterji the last man standing against the demolition of Tower A of the apartment complex. The lone warrior Masterji on one side, and the rest of the residents collaborating with developer Shah on the other side, the standoff becomes existential, and in spite of the approaching deadline, eternal. Valdes aptly likens the endless agony placed on one another by all the parties in the novel to the claustrophobic existentialist drama *No Exit* by Jean-Paul Sartre. In Vishram Society’s deadlock, like in Sartre’s 1944 play, the characters’ hidden psyches, and past deceits start to come out one by one, including their capacity for harming their long-time neighbour. As for Masterji, Valdes questions if his refusal is due to a fear of change; or for the gratification of holding power over others; whether it is “rooted in incorruptible

principle or dictatorial ego?" Whatever the real reason, as the deadlock persists and the calendar advances, the readers start to suspect that maybe Masterji's pride is getting in the way. One day, after many harassments, Masterji contemplates accepting the offer to put an end to his isolation, and clearing the way for Shah's "super luxury" complex. He admits to himself that he would have to swallow his pride (219). Although Masterji deals with every affront without badmouthing his long-time neighbours or attempting to reciprocate, he still comes across as lacking empathy for the better life they hope for themselves. While Masterji's pride and stubbornness make him the antihero of the story, the readers are not willing to disapprove of him for blocking his neighbours from getting a deal they so desire. Since Shah is a corrupt and violent man, anyone who stands up to him seems like a hero. Adiga provides the readers with other rationale as well: Masterji's neighbours of 35 years are menacing a respectable retired teacher. In addition, Masterji has an inkling of the bigger picture and he is concerned about the long-term impact of relentless redevelopment projects. All of these factors soften Masterji's hubris and he remains a likeable character whom the readers root for. This sympathy for him allows the readers to re-evaluate their own priorities in the light of Masterji's worries.

Masterji's concern for the city is persuasive. It would be for the benefit of Mumbai if more people resisted unnecessary constructions. Masterji alone is able to see beyond short-term advantages. He tries to explain to a young neighbour that "[t]here are more parties involved in this dispute than just Mr. Shah, my neighbours, and me. Millions are involved. Even after you leave Vishram, you will still be involved" (312). He is conscious of the fact that the redevelopment projects impact all Mumbaikars. It is possible that Masterji shares the worry of another fictional character, Nasreen Chamchawala of *The Satanic Verses* who is concerned that, with each new high-rise, a "piece of old Bombay" is lost (550). These sentiments may come

across as old-fashioned and anti-progress, but they do problematize the relentless rebuilding in Mumbai. Dharmen Shah—if he keeps his promise and pays the residents of Vishram Society the amounts he said he would pay—will bring a dozen lower-middle-class families one level up in the socio-economic hierarchy. However, the long-term effects outweigh these families’ small profit. Will the infrastructure support all these new developments? This is what Adiga urges his middle-class readers to contemplate. Alex Clark who interviewed Adiga, asserts that the author is angry with an India in which the cities’ “rapid economic expansion comes at an impossible price for a vast swath of their inhabitants, and in which the slow fading of the caste system has not been accompanied by a rise in social egalitarianism.” *Last Man in Tower*, A. Clark posits, is Adiga’s “project of shining a light on the changing face of India.” Mumbai author and editor Naresh Fernandes asserts that construction tycoons “are making too much money to even pretend to be bothered by the damage their projects are inflicting on the urban fabric” (120). If builders, who are represented in the character of our fictional Shah, do not lose any sleep over the consequences of their greed, then maybe the readers of Mumbai’s contemporary literary narratives will. Shah not only does not “even pretend to be bothered,” but also claims that he will make Mumbai “one of the greatest cities” (115). He is, in fact, creating yet another dichotomy: vertical city versus horizontal city (Ciocca, “Casa e vicinato” 128). Shah, projecting his greed onto the people living in huts and tents, “point[s] to a spot near the bushes. ‘In five days that will become an entire slum. No property deeds, no titles, legal rights. What a hunger for land’” (107). No doubt, Adiga wants the readers to contrast Shah’s and the Vishram Society residents’ desires with the existential requirements of those who are setting up tents in the bushes and near dirty streams. This juxtaposition, like much of the novel, has an ideological purpose where, as Felski puts it, “literature serves extra-aesthetic aims through its aesthetic features” (5).

In order to illustrate the disparity between classes, Adiga incorporates the predicaments of the settlements near the Vishram Society into the story. While Vishram Society's lower-middle-class residents are dreaming of becoming upper-middle-class Mumbaikars, the informal settlements right next to them are in danger of losing their make-shift homes. Mary, Vishram Society's cleaner, lives in a settlement by the black and flood-prone waters of the *nullah*, a stream, in a tent made out of blue tarpaulin "held aloft by a wooden pole" (142). The slum neighbourhoods also have several classifications: "fully legal slums, semi-legal slums and pockets of huts" (143). The *nullah* settlement, with its polluted black canal running through the rows of tents, is one of "the most precarious existence" (143). Adiga, going beyond the aesthetic and merging with the political, blurs genres between fiction and an urban studies essay, and reports that these settlers are not covered by "the last government's amnesty for illegal slums," and they do not have

the right to be relocated to a *pucca* building if the government bulldozed [their huts]. Municipal officials had repeatedly threatened the dwellers by the *nullah* with eviction, yet someone had always intervened to save them, usually a politician who needed their votes at the next municipal election. (143)

Here, we understand that this repeated threat is a common occurrence, and nonfiction confirms that it is indeed "an experience that is familiar in Mumbai":

The poor come the city from all parts of India, looking for a livelihood. They build shantytowns, often on marshes, and make the land habitable. . . . But once the poor have made the land livable, it becomes a valued commodity. The residents are evicted, often by force, or a combination of muscle and political power, and the lands are cleared for the construction of apartments and office buildings. (Prakash 310).

All texts, whether fiction or nonfiction, shape knowledge in their own distinctive way (Felski 84). The excerpts above—a fictional account and a factual account—indicate that demolitions and evictions are common occurrences, and they deliver this information in their unique styles. In *Last Man in Tower*, when one such bulldozing threat arises, Mary hears men in the market, shouting “Slum clearance! The men are here!” She rushes to the *nullah* where her blue-tarpaulin tent is located. She finds her sparse belongings intact. A neighbour informs her that it was a false alarm. “They won’t come till after the monsoons,” she says, “[w]e’re safe till then” (142). This very real—or realistic—precarity invites the readers to make comparisons between multiple economic levels: slum dwellers like Mary, whose lives are already on the fringe and who are in constant peril of losing what little they have; the residents of the Vishram Society who have fairly comfortable lives but who are all too willing to make a deal with the devil; and the immensely wealthy like Dharmen Shah who have every material commodity imaginable, but not interested in the well-being of their city or the society at large. These contrasts urge the readers to think about their own positions in the hierarchy and how they can work towards or demand from their institutions less disparate citizenships.

One of the residents of the Vishram Society, Mrs. Rego,⁷⁰ initially opposes making a deal with a corrupt developer. However, after a short while, she too falls in line and she is now willing to sign Shah’s contract. Mrs. Rego is a social worker, and partly because of her job, she is one of the few characters who seems to show compassion for the settlement dwellers. She

⁷⁰ In another case of literature referring to itself, Mrs. Rego, nicknamed “The Battleship” (38) or “Communist aunty” (40), has “[a] black-and-white photograph of Arundhati Roy [hanging] from the bedroom wall next to a framed poster for a Vijay Tendulkar play performed at the Prithvi Theatre” (165). Tendulkar, who spent some years of his youth in tenements, represented the lower middle-class of Mumbai in literature. Adiga’s fictional Mrs. Rego, sympathizes with the political views of both Roy and Tendulkar. Even though Mrs. Rego distrusts builders and the construction industry, she eventually puts her principles aside and agrees to sell her apartment for more than twice its market value. As a defence mechanism, she asks “Who am I, Arundhati Roy?” (182).

occasionally visits the *nullah* settlement and provides updates regarding demolitions from the municipality or the government. She correctly believes that “[e]very day their slum survived should be considered a miracle” (143). She tells Mary that “sooner or later they will come to demolish this place.” She suggests that Mary should move while she can. Mary protests: “This is my home madam. Would you leave yours?” (143). Having been offered a lavish deal, Mrs. Rego would—and will—leave her home, and go live in a better apartment. Mary does not have that option. If her informal neighbourhood is razed to ground, she and her son will have no choice but to join Mumbai’s hundreds of thousands of sidewalk dwellers.⁷¹ Still, Mary has more capacity for empathy than the residents of the Vishram Society. When Mr. and Mrs. Pinto send her to Masterji to deliver the message that they too are abandoning him, Mary tells Masterji to not worry about being pushed out of his apartment: “God will protect us. They’re trying to throw me out of my home too. I live by the nullah” (291). Mary is capable of empathizing with Masterji even though their circumstances are not even remotely proportionate. At this moment, Masterji experiences a new awareness, and he is honest with himself about not having considered Mary’s circumstances before. He “did not know whether to look at Mary. In all these years, he had not exchanged, except on matters directly related to her work, even a dozen words with the cleaning woman of his Society” (291). For the first time, he notices Mary’s hands which “were scored with rat-bites and long scratches” (291), and realizes that Mary is scavenging Mumbai’s piles of garbage as a way to supplement her income. In spite of all his flaws, Masterji is the only one with this kind of self-reflection among the multitude of characters in *Last Man in Tower*. While a majority of the wealthier classes want to maintain their distance from the lower strata, Masterji,

⁷¹ In 2000, Appadurai estimated the number of pavement dwellers around 600,000 (646). In 2011, an official census “pegged the number of those [who] are not living in a ‘structure with a roof’ at 57,416, a figure much disputed by activists” who claim the number is somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 (Nair).

even in the past, was the sole member of the Vishram Society who was willing to break the barriers. Until he was ostracized from his community, Masterji had been giving top-up science classes to the children of the building. In an anecdote mentioned earlier, we learned that the parents in the Vishram Society did not want the daughter of the building's security guard to attend Masterji's tutorials along with their own children. However, Masterji said "nothing doing. She is a student like everyone else" (314). As Appadurai asserts, "in all societies based on financial apartheid," the poor are wanted "near at hand as servants but far away as humans" (637). It is possible that Fernandes was correct when he asserted that Mumbai's "financial institutions and advertising agencies have seduced India's middle class into believing that greed is good, that empathy for the less fortunate is unnecessary, that extreme individualism is a virtue" (6). Even judges may lack empathy: "A judge in Bombay called slum dwellers pickpockets of urban lands. Another said, while ordering the bulldozing of unauthorized colonies, that people who couldn't afford to live in cities shouldn't live in them" (Roy 1). Masterji, on the other hand, already in possession of qualities such as fairness and equality, experiences several awakenings during the agonizing time he goes through, his sensibilities having been honed by the loneliness he is banished to.

Last Man in Tower does not stop at the settlements. Through Masterji's observations in his new state of awareness, the book places the families who live on the sidewalks side by side with Shah's luxuries for the readers to contrast. Masterji sees a cow, recently milked by a man who is carrying the fresh milk in "a mildewed bucket." A woman in a sari is "squeezing gruel into balls." Another woman is bathing two children. "Half a village crammed into a crack in the pavement," Masterji thinks (286). The author juxtaposes this scene with Shah's dinner in his luxurious apartment. Shah is walking around with a silk handkerchief in his hand, and observing

the food put on the table by his servant: “White rice, spinach curry, curried beans, and *pappad*, around a *hilsa* fish, grilled and chopped, mixed with salt and pepper, and served in a porcelain bowl” (287). But he does not have an appetite because he is upset that one old man is blocking his dream of building the Shanghai. He orders his servant to throw the food out. The comforts of the expensive apartment are in stark contrast with the difficulties of life on the pavements. Even the mildewed milk bucket and the porcelain fish bowl are placed next to each other by Adiga. There is no escaping the disparity. As Ciocca has established with respect to Mumbai narratives in general, here too, literature is not just “playing a mirroring role but problematizing its metamorphoses,” and articulating “ethical and critical discourses” (“From Nation” 224). Further dichotomies become visible when Shah looks down his window, he sees, “in the gutter outside his building, a man in rags [scavenging] for empty bottles” (287). He wonders what the “beggar with the gunny sack” would think of Masterji. He concludes that even the beggar “would be appalled by this old teacher. A man who does not want: who has no secret spaces in his heart into which a little more cash can be stuffed, what kind of man is that?” (287). At this moment, Shah—a man who, unlike Masterji, wants more and more—observes the scavenger and does not experience the kind of discomfort or self-reflection Masterji does. Even the occasional tips he hands out to the poor fail to create sympathy on the readers part. Instead, he comes across as an arrogant person who thinks a few rupees will make a difference in the lives of the disadvantaged. When he visits one of his buildings still under construction, he notices that some of the families who worked at the construction site were living in the unfinished structure. He contemplates that that very space would soon be occupied by “a technology executive or a businessman.” He “touched the workers’ washing, which hung in the alcoves where Versace would soon hang; their little bars of soap and detergent did the work that expensive perfumes would soon do”

(118). Shah does not feel a pang of conscience in the face of this vast division; rather, he wants to keep the layers of inequality in place. He does not, for example, consider the current residents of the Vishram Society worthy of living in the new Shanghai residence he wants to build. When asked about it, he reasons as follows:

‘In most redevelopment projects, as you know, the residents are offered a share in the new building. In the case of the Shanghai, however, the new place will be super-luxury. A mix of Rajput and Gothic styles, with a modern touch. There will be a garden at the front, with a fountain. Art deco style. Each place will cost two crores or upwards. The current residents certainly have the option of purchasing in the Shanghai, but they will be better served by moving elsewhere.’ (112)⁷²

Shah, who does not possess any of the qualities a respectable teacher like Masterji has, still does not find him and his ilk good enough to live in his ostentatious apartment complex. In order to obtain the collaboration of Vishram Society residents, one of Shah’s coercion tactics is to invite them to his opulent residence or to expensive restaurants. Just the display of his wealth through rides in his Mercedes—“the air-conditioned air, the soft cushions, the floral fragrance” (220)—and offer of fancy food seem to work on most members of the Vishram, except Masterji who finds the extravagance makes him more uncomfortable (220). Shah’s manners are reversely proportional to his wealth. While offering food and other luxuries to Vishram residents, he is, in fact, insulting them, once even calling Mrs. Puri “a beggar” (317). The only person bothered by all of this is Masterji who is determined to maintain his dignity.

⁷² “A crore is 10,000,000 rupees,” Adiga explains in a note at the beginning of the book (n.p.). Each apartment at the Shanghai will cost upwards of twenty million rupees which is roughly about 350,000 CAD (112). “The average per capita annual income in India in 2008-9 was 37,490 rupees,” (n.p.) around 650 CAD.

As the attacks on Masterji increase by the day, and he becomes public enemy number one, his empathy towards the less fortunate grows. Upon learning that Mary lives with the threat of being kicked out of her home, Masterji considers her situation. “How could they throw a poor woman like that out of her hut?” he thinks. Then it dawns on him that it is not just Mary: “How many were being forced out of their homes – what was being done to this city in the name of progress?” (292). None of the characters in *Last Man in Tower* seems to understand or share Masterji’s concern for Mumbai. It takes a foreigner to say it out loud. In a scene where Mrs. Rego’s family is enjoying street food, the social worker’s American brother-in-law says, “I know why he’s doing this.” As Rego, who knows the housing dilemma of Mumbai well, hides behind her snack, the American brother-in-law continues: “It’s a statement, isn’t it? Against development. Against *unplanned* development” (355). For Adiga to make a foreigner spell it out is like a slap on the face for the middle-class readers who have always known, and now have to own the fact, that the never-ending restructuring deals were never to the benefit of Mumbai. Now that it has been pronounced, by an outsider no less, they have no choice but to acknowledge this reality. No matter how much Mrs. Rego pretends to be preoccupied with her *bhelpuri*, she and the middle-class readers are implicated in Mumbai’s plight.

The novel’s deliberately violent ending unsettles the readers. Literary critic Ciocca points out that the murder of Masterji was not carried out by the henchmen of Shah but by his respectable neighbours (“Casa e vicinato” 131), and this fatal blow to their once-beloved Masterji is Adiga’s design to shake up his readers. Shah remembers the good old days when “a builder had a problem, that problem would end up in pieces in the wet concrete: it became part of the building it had tried to obstruct.” He laments that “those days were gone: the lawless days of the 1980s and 90s” (289). Shah considers the fact that “Vishram was a middle-class building: The man was

a teacher. If he died suddenly, there would be an immediate suspect. The police would come to Malabar Hill and press his doorbell the next morning” (289-90). Therefore, the good people of the Vishram Society, Tower A had to be convinced to do a ‘simple thing.’ They oblige. Masterji is gagged, hit on the head with a hammer multiple times, and thrown over the terrace. This violent act had to be committed by “good Indians” instead of the true criminal, Shah, so that the middle-class readers’ outrage would be complete. The readers are left no choice but to contemplate how far *they* would go in their own complicity in Mumbai’s difficulties. The readers would have been let off the hook if Adiga had allowed Shah to do what Shah always did, namely,

order Shanmugham (as he had done in his most recent redevelopment project, in Sion) to go all the way: to shove a man’s head out of a window and indicate that the rest of him would follow in three seconds – unless a signature appeared on the appropriate document.

(It did.) (89)

This scenario would have been easier on the reader; after all, the known mobster would have done what was expected of him. However, it is crucial for literature’s role as an agitator to not let the readers get off lightly. The aesthetics of shock, like the one we find at the end of *Last Man in Tower*, “[pulls] the rug out from under bourgeois complacency” (Felski 108). In this fictional sequence of events, it ends up being the ordinary people, like the readers themselves, who conspire for a tragic end. Among all the symbolism Adiga employs—Masterji as Mumbai, the apartment building as the society at large—the readers must recognize their own destructive behaviour—to the city, to their community—whether it is through their indifference or by their preference for short-term benefits. When, Mrs. Rego needs to defend her own hypocrisy or inaction, she says, “Who am I, Arundhati Roy?” (182). Roy is as well known for her human

rights and environmental activism as she is for employing social realism in her own novels. Maybe, the readers sometimes have to behave as if they were Arundhati Roy.

Last Man in Tower, full of irony, foreshadowing and symbolism, started with a phrase inspired by the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita: “I was never born and I will never die; I do not hurt and cannot be hurt; I am invincible, immortal, indestructible” (5). The presence of this excerpt from the Bhagavad Gita in the novel is another reference to Gandhi who had studied the Gita deeply, and who was greatly influenced by it. The introduction of the notions of invincibility, immortality, and indestructibility early in the novel signals the danger Masterji’s earthly presence is in. However, it also encapsulates Mumbai’s, and symbolically, Masterji’s endurance. The first Hindi resident of the Vishram Tower, Yogesh Murthy, respectfully referred to as Masterji, had never knowingly hurt anyone. While his hubris may have led to his earthly destruction, it also exposed the hypocrisy of the only people he had known and cared for. They turned against their Masterji and they did not stop at anything, not even murder. The community of the Vishram Society disintegrated just like its dilapidated buildings. The man who started it all, Dharmen Shah, may not live long enough to see his legacy, the Shanghai completed. Ironically, he is dying because of all the toxic construction dust he has been ingesting for years. We will never know if the former residents of Tower A of the Vishram Society, now dispersed, will fully receive what was promised to them; the money for which they committed the biggest sin. Adiga, who likes employing foreshadowing often, gave many hints to the readers ahead of time. After his wife’s death, a neighbour proposes that Masterji give up something, for example eggplants, to remember her by; “each time you crave a brinjal, you’ll remember Purnima,” she said (69).

Masterji thought about it. ‘I will give up my scooter.’

‘No no,’ she protested. ‘That’s extreme. Brinjals will do.’

Masterji relished the extreme: the scooter went. (69)

Masterji goes to the extreme regarding his apartment as well, and ends up being violently killed. He chooses the extreme because someone has to. In the end, we are reminded of the adage Adiga began the story with: “I was never born and I will never die; I do not hurt and cannot be hurt; I am invincible, immortal, indestructible” (5). Masterji did not hurt, and believed that he could not be hurt either. Maybe he was “invincible, immortal, indestructible,” or maybe he was just as vulnerable against mistreatment as Mumbai is.

Last Man in Tower uses an extreme scenario to force the readers out of their comfort zones. For a perceived ‘better life,’ the residents of an apartment building commit the ultimate crime against a neighbour they have known for many years. The shock effect of this unspeakable act drives home the point that things cannot continue as they are. There have to be changes in Mumbai’s housing situation and its endless redevelopment projects. How is that change going to come about? What can the reader do to instigate that change? *Last Man in Tower* puts the readers on the spot and makes them ask themselves if they are prepared to be inconvenienced for the benefit of Mumbai. Will they be able to say no to lucrative redevelopment offers when their own apartment buildings are targeted? Are they going start noticing the slum neighbourhoods and the gross inequalities? *Last Man in Tower*, through jarring portrayals of drastic acts by regular people, aims to disturb the readers so that they may stop and think about the characteristics of their city that are at stake.

“Half slum, half paradise”: Chris Abani’s *Graceland*

Graceland, like *Last Man in Tower*, also employs the aesthetics of shock, particularly in its realistic portrayals of multiple urban difficulties of the present time. Like many other

contemporary novels of Mumbai and Lagos, *Graceland* experiments with form as well. The stylistic innovations employed in this Lagos novel include the use of traditional recipes, proverbs and kola nut ceremonies at the top of each chapter. While the extraneous materials do not seem to be relevant to the flow of the story, their connection to various culinary, healing and ceremonial traditions ground the novel as uniquely Nigerian. Distinguished with a different typeface, these indigenous recipe ingredients, healing herbs, aphorisms, and traditional ceremonies are entries from the diary of the central character Elvis's late mother. The chaos and dysfunction in the Lagosian life of the protagonist Elvis is countered with order, beauty and purpose through these excerpts which connect him to a mother whose loss he mourns. His mother's writings also function as fictional intertextuality, a literary method we have already seen in *Welcome to Lagos* through the inclusion of imaginary newspaper reports. Most contemporary urban narratives of Mumbai and Lagos employ similar literary devices to offer additional content as well as to provide historical and cultural background. *Graceland* contains many scenes that are startling and troubling which shock the readers. The mother's diary pages with serene and positive messages coming from a deep-rooted heritage offset the brutal depictions of Lagos and the privation in its slum settlements where Elvis lives. The excerpts also temporarily suspend the dizzying pace of criminal activity portrayed in the novel. The use of Nigerian and African folklore and mythology in contemporary novels is common, as we will also see in our analysis of the fantasy and science-fiction novel *Lagoon* in the next chapter. While focusing on current issues, through the incorporation of African heritage and ontology, *Graceland* and *Lagoon* both express the continuity and significance of their cultural history.

In *Graceland*, through many shady events that take place in rapid succession, fewer than a dozen characters keep getting involved and uninvolved, separating and reuniting, losing and

finding one another in a city packed with more than twenty million people. The novel opens on Elvis's sixteenth birthday, and the year of this new age for the central character turns out to be more eventful than the novel can treat in depth. In spite of this shortcoming, the novel tackles all ills present in Lagos—from public transportation to housing, from corruption to floods, from disparities in wealth to youth crime—but the most profound sections are the depictions of Maroko, its lived experiences, its juxtaposition to nearby luxurious residences, and ultimately, its demolition. Displacement or homelessness due to renewal projects is as common in Lagos as it is in Mumbai. However, Maroko is a large wound in the soul of Lagos, and most contemporary authors, for whom the bulldozing of Maroko is a recent experience, do not wish the injustice done to its residents forgotten.

As soon as Maroko is mentioned in the opening pages of *Graceland*, the story takes on a predestined order. Maroko, which features in many contemporary Lagos narratives, including *Invisible Chapters* by Maik Nwosu, was a real informal settlement which was demolished by the government in 1990, leaving 300,000 people homeless. As the narrator of *Invisible Chapters* remarks, “[t]he scramble and partition of Maroko by the affluent [is] a well-known story” (40), recounted many times by contemporary Lagos narratives in different forms, as well as in poems and songs.⁷³ Maroko’s demolition is an important part of Lagos history, therefore it is natural that it has quickly become part of the cultural production. Ashley Dawson agrees that “Abani’s novel is but one of the many works of Nigerian literature to memorialize this notorious act of destruction” which the government of the time had called the “Operation Clean the Nation” (27). In a yet another literature-in-literature case, the character of Prinzi in *Invisible Chapters* is

⁷³ Maroko’s demolition has been depicted “in poems by Ogaga Ifowodo and J. P. Clark-Bekederemo and in Wole Soyinka’s fiercely satirical ‘Song of the Lagoon Nomad’” (Dunton 73). It is also the partial subject of Soyinka’s play *The Beatification of Area Boy*.

writing “the great Nigerian novel” (8), and in it, Maroko will have a dominant role, in fact, “Maroko is the great Nigerian novel writing itself” (9). Telling Maroko’s story is necessary and urgent because, as Sule Egya clarifies, the authors have lived through this significant event, and “they embark on a historicism that seeks to dramatize their own experiences.” Egya argues that, since the contemporary writers are “recreat[ing] socio-political realities that they have all lived, witnessed, interrogated,” they approach their narratives “with a sense of duty” (“Idiom” 109). Their goal is not to write a postcolonial novel; instead, it is a query into their present truth. They feel they have a duty to tackle the nature of the inequalities and oppressions they live and observe in their cities. Recently, one Nigerian tweeted that “[t]he colonialists aren’t our problem anymore. It’s the political class with their excessive greed and wickedness” (@literarygansta). Contemporary authors have to—and do—respond to these sentiments of our times.

Elvis Oke, the novel’s young protagonist, had arrived in Lagos with his father from a smaller town named Afikpo a couple of years previously. The narrative alternates between the two settings: early childhood in Afikpo, and a couple of teenage years in Lagos. At the present time of the novel, Elvis and his father are living in “the swamp city of Maroko” (6) and this settlement could not be more antithetical to the title of the novel. Lagos’s contrasts and disparities as illustrated in the novel are encapsulated in its title, *Graceland*, and its protagonist’s name, Elvis. Elvis was named after Elvis Presley by his late mother who loved Presley’s songs. Aspiring to become a dancer, Elvis Oke becomes an Elvis Presley impersonator to earn a little money. Elvis Oke is, of course, as unlike the world-famous rock and roll king as possible, just as his settlement Maroko is as different from Elvis Presley’s estate Graceland in Memphis, Tennessee. There is nothing graceful about Maroko. The novel begins with Elvis waking up in his family’s run-down home and observing, through the window of his decrepit room, “the foundations of a building,”

across the street: “the floor and pillars wore green mold from repeated rains. Between the pillars, a woman had erected a buka, no more than a rickety lean-to made of corrugated iron roofing and plastic held together by hope” (3).⁷⁴ Their neighbourhood is not an easy place to live:

The road outside their tenement was waterlogged and the dirt had been whipped into a muddy brown froth that looked like chocolate frosting. Someone had laid out short planks to carve a path through the sludge. . . .

Elvis and his father lived at the left edge of the swamp city of Maroko, and their short street soon ran into a plank walkway that meandered through the rest of the suspended city. (6)

The plank walkways are so narrow that only one person at a time can walk through. Elvis reflects on the living conditions of the wealthy, contrasting their life styles with the images of his own settlement. He knows that “Lagos did have its fair share of rich people and fancy neighborhoods.” A relatively new arrival from the country, he had already discovered that one-third of the city seemed transplanted from the rich suburbs of the west. There were beautiful brownstones set in well-landscaped yards, sprawling Spanish-style haciendas in brilliant white and ocher, elegant Frank Lloyd Wright-styled buildings and cars that were new and foreign. (7-8)

Analogous descriptions of Lagos’s affluent areas are found in other contemporary Lagos narratives. In Jude Dibia’s short story “What They Did That Night,” we encounter a similar account of a gated community that is far removed from the settlements where water is scarce and power shortages cannot be remedied by generators:

⁷⁴ *Bukas* are popular food shacks in Nigeria.

The housing estate was like the others—gated, clean, and pretentious. They parked their vehicles away from the prying eyes, in the part of the estate with the industrial-sized water-treatment facility and giant electricity generators. Gabriel imagined that, like the other housing estates ... the occupants of this one also had no idea about real Lagos life, about constant power failure and taps with no running water. Everything worked here. Everything here was a big lie. (38-39)

In both of the examples provided above, as well as in many other Lagos narratives, the scenes that contrast excessive luxury and gruesome poverty also note the fact that the peripheries of wealthy residences are always fortified. Osundare, with a poet's vision, remarks that

Lagos is an uncanny combination of myth and reality, of esoteric indigeneity and imported alienation, a city where zinc-walled, paper-windowed shacks tremble in the concrete shadows of ultra-modern skyscrapers; where tears and laughter erupt and wrestle before seeking a fitful trance in the belly of the sea. (qtd. in Aina 176)

The juxtaposition of the above fictional and empirical accounts symbolizes what Felski convincingly argues: literature contains “distinctive configurations of social *knowledge*” (14). In Osundare’s real-life observation we find every aspect of *Graceland*’s fictional account such as “new and foreign” cars and shacks-versus-skyscrapers dichotomy. The fictional reconstructions make the known—but not necessarily seen—realities visible again.

Lagos of Abani’s *Graceland* is a city of vast conflicts just like Mumbai of *Last Man in Tower*. Lagos, like Mumbai, has been described as a “dual city marked by contrasts between extreme poverty and extreme wealth” (Herbert, “Postcolonial” 209), and these disparities find their ways into contemporary narratives, because what the authors imagine reflect the realities of the city. Similarly, Adisa, a researcher of Lagos’s street culture remarks that “Lagos is a city of

sharp contrasts” exhibiting “the latest constructions in modern architecture, skyscrapers with imported furnishings,” adjacent to “the crowded tenements of the inner city, the slums and the shanty towns where the majority live and sweat” (94-95). *Graceland* portrays these dichotomies from Elvis’s perspective who knows he is well aware that the social and material infrastructures have collapsed all around him.

As in Mumbai of *Last Man in Tower*, Lagos of *Graceland* is also full of construction sites that give the impression that the city is always in the process of rebuilding itself. Elvis observes that “new high-rise apartment complexes and office blocks [are] going up seemingly overnight” (27). When Elvis’s aunt Felicia briefly visits Lagos, she stays at the upscale condo of a friend. Elvis, on his way to see Felicia, is “stunned by the smooth tarred roads, well-laid-out grounds, huge villas and mansions in white, high metal fences patrolled on the inside by stone-faced guards armed with automatic rifles” (164). Elvis can see Maroko from the balcony of the apartment where Felicia stays. This proximity is realistic. Indeed, “Maroko is located near the heart of downtown Lagos, just opposite the chic neighbourhoods of Victoria Island and Ikoyi” (A. Dawson 27). The contrast between the two locations is stark, and Abani juxtaposes the two types of residences multiple times throughout the novel. Highlighting the proximity of these vastly different living conditions is intended to cause outrage among the middle-class readers against disparity and inequality. Elvis had earlier remarked that

nothing prepared you for Maroko. Half of the town was built of a confused mix of clapboard, wood, cement and zinc sheets, raised above a swamp by means of stilts and wooden walkways. The other half, built on solid ground reclaimed from the sea, seemed to be clawing its way out of the primordial swamp, attempting to become something else. (48)

In addition to this grim sight, Elvis also observes residents relieving themselves in the mud, because the settlement does not have proper sanitation. Some of these portrayals, employing “literature’s power to disturb” (Felski 105), are intentionally gruesome and shocking. Dawson considers these descriptions in *Graceland* “an accurate physical account of the life-threateningly unsanitary conditions in contemporary slums” (A. Dawson 20). An Ifowodo poem titled “Homeland” also portrays the gloomy conditions of “dwelling-places” which we may assume are like those in Elvis’s ghetto: “Houses bitter like a weeping face / homes grievous like smoke-pipes / walls held up by pillars of anguish, / where lament makes bed and roof” (49). Ifowodo, whose poetry always takes on the inequalities and oppressions of the times, personifies the dwellings with bitterness and anguish, and the dwellings weep, grieve and suffer just like those who live in them. “And how do children grow here?” Ifowodo asks. *Graceland*’s Elvis is one such child trying to grow up in a slum neighbourhood, where “informal survivalism” (A. Dawson 21) reigns over children and adults alike.

In *Graceland*, we do not just find the story of Elvis’s struggle to survive in Maroko, but we also have the tragedy of the residents of Maroko whose lives go from bad to worse. Maroko had never been a nice, clean, pleasant, and safe neighbourhood, but it was the only place its residents had. In fact, a journalist in *Invisible Chapters* asks why everyone is “talking as if [Maroko is] some sort of paradise or oasis rather than a festering slum in need of liberation” (Nwosu 71). As decrepit as Maroko was, it was still better than being homeless or being relocated to an unknown area where not only things did not improve, but also put the residents farther away from their work places. According to one character, the significance of relocation is not the moving. “Every morning,” he says, “Maroko moves to Greater Lagos, to Queenstown, to power it – as factory hands, security guards, mechanics, and everything else. We are not afraid to move. What you are

proposing is not motion; it's erasure" (Nwosu 88). *Invisible Chapters* offers a solution to the authorities, who "even in their decadence, know that what they're about to do is evil." What the government really needs to do is "to clean up that Shit Lagoon" (Nwosu 70). In *Graceland*, Elvis is looking at that very lagoon, and what he witnesses in the black filth of the swamp disgusts him. However, one moment later, he notices something that stands in stark contrast to his own settlement:

a white bungalow. Its walls were pristine, as though a supernatural power kept the mud off it. The small patch of earth in front of it held a profusion of red hibiscus, pink crocuses, mauve bachelor's buttons and sunflowers. The sight cheered him greatly. (48)

Upon seeing a clean, well-maintained proper house, Elvis's mood improves, and this conveys a dream, a desire for his own future. However, as the novel progresses, we see that Elvis, like most residents of his neighbourhood, is caught up in an environment where there is little hope for a better future. In true realist form, the fictional residents' existing hardships will get worse, and they will all be rendered homeless when the government comes to bulldoze Maroko. Their neighbourhood is in constant threat of being demolished; reminiscent of the situation Mary's settlement is in in *Last Man in Tower*. In both works, the residents of unplanned neighbourhoods are depicted in precarious circumstances. The lands their homes are located on have become highly profitable for construction companies and certain officials who also benefit from renewal schemes. In the case of Maroko, some of the residents actually have deeds to their lands either through purchases or inheritance from their native ancestors. Maroko settlement is in an area that is considered as prime real estate and there are many parties who want to make money off of it. Therefore, the legal and illegal statuses of the residents do not make much of a difference to the powers who want to flatten Maroko out. The residents will try to stop the bulldozers from

coming into their settlement, but as one character laconically claims, the barricades “will only slow dem down. You cannot stop dem” (264).

When the residents of Maroko learn that the government is about to raze their settlement to ground, they plan a resistance led by Elvis’s father, Sunday. The notorious demolition—erasure—of Maroko is an event which contemporary realist fictions of Lagos cannot ignore. Therefore, the preparations for the protests are similarly depicted in *Graceland* and *Invisible Chapters*, as well as in other Lagos narratives. These works complement one another in recording the story of Maroko. The narratives of protests and their planning mirror the resistance the real-life residents of Maroko put up in 1990: they write placards, build barricades and rally the neighbours. During this planning stage, they also agree to seek the help of nearby neighbourhoods of lower-middle-class residents who are also not content with the way the city is treating them. “Dese people have been treated badly by the authorities all their lives. Dey pay high taxes, get low wages, poor accommodation, no clean water,” Sunday argues (254). Elvis is doubtful:

“It is one thing to think [what the government is doing] is wrong, but why do you think they will risk anything for you?” Elvis asked.

“Not for me, son, but de cause.”

“What cause? Who do you think you are, Malcolm X?” (253)

This is reminiscent of Mrs. Rego’s retort in *Last Man in Tower*: “Who am I, Arundhati Roy?” (182). The authors of both of these books aspire to concern their readers sufficiently enough so that they may, perhaps, act a little bit like Arundhati Roy or Malcolm X. In this father-son exchange, Sunday has a legitimate reason to assume that others in the society would be willing to get involved, because that is how the ‘civism’ of the city works, as Ofeimun has put it (15). It

simply cannot be that every person is for themselves. Sunday and his friends go door to door, inform their neighbours, make placards and banners, and they build barricades at the four main entrances of Maroko.

Graceland, like *Last Man in Tower*, ends with a shocking scene which impairs the readers' "sense of equilibrium" and leaves them "unable to piece together a coherent response" (Felski 113). The shock technique, "literature serv[ing] extra-aesthetic aims through its aesthetic features" (Felski 5) is effective in getting the novel's social message across. Through the portrayal of the four-layer-deep barricade the residents construct, and the placards they prepare, the narrative builds the tension up towards the brutal end of Maroko. The inhabitants' efforts end up being successful in repelling the government's first attempt to enter the ghetto with bulldozers. After a few hours of standoff, the police, the fire fighters and the bulldozer operators retreat, failing to push through the protestors into Maroko. When a few days later, they show up unexpectedly, they find no resistance and start taking the shacks down. Sunday, who had successfully led the resistance during the previous attempt, is caught off guard this time around. When he is urged to leave because the demolition was already in progress, "Go where?" he asks, "Dis is my land. I buy dis house, it is not dash to me. Why I go?" (285).^{75, 76} Sunday's words and his resistance to leaving his home remind us Masterji's stance and his demise. Sunday too will meet a similar end. When the bulldozers arrive on his street, a policeman challenges Sandayo who is still on his porch. "You deaf?" the policeman shouts, "I say move before I move you!" Sunday, outraged, grabs a cutlass and lunges "with a roar at the 'dozer." Sunday's madness can

⁷⁵ 'Dash' means 'gift' in Nigerian English. Sunday is saying that his house was not given to him as a gift.

⁷⁶ Agbola and Jinadu's research finds that "most of the residents were not squatters." Some of them had been resettled there earlier and paid an annual rent to the Lagos Executive Development Board. Some others had purchased their lands. "The reason given for clearing Maroko which related to its [low] height above sea level," turned out to be "erroneous" as well (280).

be explained as a consequence of the wrecking of his neighbourhood, “an act that tears apart the threads of vital cognition and meaningful action its inhabitants have succeeded in pulling together” (Dunton 73). As soon as the policeman perceives the attack, he shoots Sunday and he falls “in a slump before the ‘dozer, its metal threads cracking his chest like a timber box as it went straight into the wall of his home” (287). While this tragedy is taking place, Elvis is held captive in an unlawful jail, and being tortured to provide information about his friend, King of Beggars, to a vengeful colonel. After his torturers finally have enough of him, they drop Elvis off, badly beaten and disoriented, in Maroko. When he wakes up, he finds himself “lying in the rubble of what used to be his house” (304). Elvis, in his stupor, takes in the scene:

All around, scavengers, human and otherwise, feasted on the exposed innards of Maroko. They rummaged in the rubble as bulldozers sifted through the chaos like slow-feeding buffalo. Here some article of clothing still untorn; there a pot; over there a child’s toy with the squeaker still working. There was a lot of snorting coming from a clump of shrubs as a pack of hungry dogs fed. The hand of a corpse rose up from between the snarling dogs in a final wave. (303-4)

If Masterji of *Last Man in Tower* were to encounter this scene, he would have wondered “what was being done to this city in the name of progress?” (292). Elvis is similarly devastated with the gruesome scene. In another shocking twist, he realizes that the corpse is that of his father. He wants to remove him from the debris and give him a proper burial but a policeman surveying the wreckage does not allow him to do so unless he pays him a bribe. Elvis does not have any money, therefore he is obliged to leave his father there. All these appalling depictions give the readers pause. The novel effectively creates a lasting record of Maroko in the minds of the readers as well as highlighting injustice and inequality in its existence and its erasure.

The description of the bulldozed settlement, rendered from the perspective of a physically and mentally battered Elvis, is the final image of Maroko *Graceland* leaves the readers with. Elsewhere, the author offers this observation of the same location in post-Maroko years:

In Ikoyi Bay, boats dot the sea, sails like lazy gulls catching the breeze. Across the bay, the millionaires' village that was once Maroko sits in a slight mist. I think it is the ghost of that lost place haunting the rich to distraction so that even their twelve-foot high walls, barbed razor wire or broken glass crowning them, or the searchlights, or the armed guards, cannot make their peace with the moans of a woman crying for a child crushed by the wheels of bulldozers. Or maybe it is just the wind sighing through palm-fronds. (“Lagos”)

This is the present-day view of where Maroko used to be. In *Graceland*, we do not learn what happens to Maroko and its displaced residents after the demolition. However, another fictional account picks up where *Graceland* leaves. Nwosu's *Invisible Chapters* starts one year after the residents' forced eviction.⁷⁷ In Nwosu's portrayal, evicted Maroko residents create a new settlement, “off the coast of the Atlantic Ocean” (14), which they call New Maroko. On the first anniversary of the day they “were bulldozed to the brink of extinction” (10), they decide to go on a pilgrimage to the site of their former homes. They feel this act of “remembrance of where [they] came from” may “appease whatever spirits remain to be pacified” (30), and provide them with closure. What the characters of *Invisible Chapters* see, once they reach the site of their former neighbourhood, might offer the readers of *Graceland* with a picture of Maroko a year in the future. “It was as if the shantytown they once lived in had never existed.” In its place, now

⁷⁷ The date used in *Invisible Chapters*, the Christmas Eve, is an imaginary date. The actual date of the demolition is July 14th, 1990, after “several threats and minor clearing rehearsals carried out within and around the settlement during the 1980s” (Agbola and Jinadu 279).

they saw “a self-announcing, almost immaculate New Queenstown in which the buildings were like competing chest thumpers” (40). Their homes were replaced with “spectacular houses with names such as Villa Shinkafi, Glory Castle, Cloud Palace” (39). Once the procession reaches this new shocking site—their old marketplace—one of the organizers of the pilgrimage makes a speech. He reminds everyone that when they were driven out, they were given “safety and development as excuses.” He adds that, a year later, they see “[d]evelopment, yes, but for robbers and contractors” (41). In their investigative research, Tunde Agbola and A.M. Jinadu concur with the aforementioned fictional assertion. They suggest that “the evicted population were simply victims of the greed of the Nigerian ruling élite and of an inappropriate urban development policy” (280). Here, we see another incident of scholarly research and analysis going hand-in-hand with fictional accounts, as well as the blurring of lines in both literary fiction and narrated research.

Okri, author of another Lagos ghetto novel, *Dangerous Love*, commends new generation Nigerian writers for possessing “an awareness of social responsibility,” and considers that being a “social critic” is part of his own writing as well. Abani and other contemporary Nigerian authors put literature into use, in Felski’s words, for “political enlightenment and social transformation” (6). *Last Man in Tower* and *Graceland* give the readers, in Okri’s words “aesthetic shocks,” as opposed to telling them “[t]he world is as you think it is. Please carry on in the same old way” (qtd. in Guignery 1061). Anjaria argues that Mumbai’s literary chroniclers “stir the middle classes out of their political apathy” (“Realist” 124); this is also true for Lagos authors. It is clear that the new social realist urban narratives of Mumbai and Lagos we examined in this chapter aim to shock and outrage the audience enough that they may get involved in political activism and try to contribute to the improvement of their cities. In Habila’s novel

Waiting for an Angel, one young character, Kela, who is about the same age as Elvis, tries to convince a couple of investigators from State Intelligence that “[a]ll we need is a little imagination to discover that things are not as fixed or impossible as we believe” (185-86). The novels *Last Man in Tower* and *Graceland* have the same aspirations as *Waiting for an Angel*’s Kela; they aim to show the readers that they can improve their city with some imagination, even if the issues may seem insurmountable.

Chapter 4: Traffic and Infrastructure

When the sky claps
to call down rain

rush out your bowl
till roofs dry their brows

— Ogaga Ifowodo, “No Water”

Every day my people dey inside bus
Every day my people dey inside bus
Forty-nine sitting, ninety-nine standing
Them go pack themselves in like sardine

— Fela Anikulapo Kuti, “Shuffling and Shmiling”

The high court on Wednesday directed the government to come up with a comprehensive plan to decongest Mumbai’s roads, to which 400 vehicles are added every day.

— *The Times of India*, 22 August 2008

The airport was at the other end of Bombay. Having rigged the meter that morning, Mohitram could hope to pocket nothing less than four hundred rupees. More, if he went into bottlenecks and traffic jams.

— Murzban F. Shroff, “Meter Down”

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘infrastructure’ as “the system of public works of a country, state, or region,” as well as “the resources (such as personnel, buildings, or equipment) required for an activity.” The dictionary notes that the word was first used in 1927 to indicate an “underlying foundation or basic framework” (“Infrastructure”). However, the best conceptualization of the term comes from Caroline Levine:

I am relying on the smooth workings of multiple infrastructures to write this essay. I have sent my children on safe buses along good roads to public schools. I trust that if

something happens to one of them, someone will contact emergency services immediately by phone. The hours the children are out of the house allow me to work in an air-conditioned room on a computer that operates reliably on a steady stream of electricity and internet connectivity. As lunchtime nears and I get hungry, I can walk safely along well-kept sidewalks to a nearby restaurant that is compelled by my government to maintain excellent standards of hygiene. ... I depend on all these infrastructures in an unthinking way most of the time, and when one fails, as each occasionally does, I am shaken. (587)

In other words, infrastructure includes roads, public transportation and traffic; hospitals and health care; clean running water, electricity, natural gas and other utilities; sanitation systems; well-maintained public buildings and public spaces, including parks and recreation; postal and telecommunication networks; law enforcement and a justice system with efficient courts; public schools and vocational institutions; and dependability and accountability at every level of municipal and federal institutions. In short, all public works, institutions and networks that are necessary to provide decent living conditions for the citizens and the proper function of the society fall under infrastructure. Today, there are modern structures that did not exist before, such as wireless telecommunication networks, and programs that are designed to protect the environment and ensure unpolluted air and water. Arguably, the conservation of the earth and nature for future generations is also part of contemporary infrastructures. In our investigation of Okorafor's *Lagoon*, we will see that safe oil extraction and alternative modes of energy creation are major parts of infrastructure as well. Just as the mixing of sewage with the rivers poses an infrastructural issue, so does the leaking of crude oil into the ocean. Almost a century after the term was first used in its current sense, there is a need to contextualize 'infrastructure,' to make it

better address the needs of cities. In this quest, Chattopadhyay, who posits that the current vocabulary is insufficient in theorizing the city, redefines infrastructure as “the central trope of modern urban thought; it is the basis for imagining, describing, and planning communities. [Infrastructure] forms the very channels for the movement of commodities, power and information that sustain cities,” and she makes a direct connection between a city’s infrastructure and “its economic and political robustness” (ix-x). “In our daily lives,” she explains, infrastructure impacts everything. Chattopadhyay makes a long list of both tangible—from pipes to traffic lights—and intangible networks—from bylaws to data collection systems—that constitute the infrastructure of a city, and under this expanded definition of infrastructure, we find many new goods and services that may be provided, regulated, or subsidized by governments. In our age, recycling facilities and renewable energy matter as much as good cell phone coverage.

In both Mumbai and Lagos, the population increase has vastly surpassed the existing infrastructural systems. Rapid and uneven development brought down water and electric supplies, and public housing, roads, schools and hospitals are not sufficient or sufficiently maintained to accommodate the demand. Contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos highlight all of these infrastructural problems. As Levine points out, “we are likely to notice [infrastructures] only when they disintegrate and fail,” therefore, literary representations make them visible to the readers who may be “otherwise inclined to overlook” (588). Levine argues that “the specific defamiliarizing strategies of realist fiction work well to unsettle the privileged obliviousness that prevents some readers from noticing” the importance of infrastructure (588). This defamiliarization works differently than the aesthetics of shock studied in the previous chapter. While shock, through extreme-case scenarios and unapologetic depictions of unsavory

realities, functions to unsettle the readers so that they may move out of their comfort zones and contribute to the solutions of presented problems, defamiliarization renders what has become mundane new, visible and urgent, in other words, “renew[s] our perception” (Nin 25).⁷⁸ Levine’s assertion of the positive role of realist fiction is supported by this dissertation. The difficulties posed by the lack of electricity or water may slip the minds of those too accustomed to their privileges, like the wealthy in Lagos who own “completely noiseless” generators (Adichie, *Americanah* 485) that make the power outages inconsequential, or the affluent in Mumbai who do not suffer from water shortages because their large and well-maintained water tanks are filled with clean water brought by trucks. “Novelistic description,” Levine argues, “must unsettle those habits of dulled acquiescence” (590). She suggests that we—readers, researchers, critics—pay attention to infrastructure “in literary studies,” because doing so “provides access to the most fundamental material stratum of social life” (598).

A special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* introduces a new theoretical frame called “infrastructuralism,” and the essays included in this issue focus “on literary fictions that try to make infrastructure, as well as its absence, visible” (Rubenstein et al. 575). The authors explain that infrastructuralism pays attention “to the difference between the ‘planned violence’ of infrastructures of control and coercion, often imposed from above in the interests of power, and the infrastructures of provision and entitlement, often demanded from below.” They also support the “literary-critical method” advocated by Levine, one of the authors of this special issue (Rubenstein et al. 581). Levine, from a literary studies perspective, characterizes infrastructuralism as “the practice of attending closely to the jostling, colliding, and overlapping

⁷⁸ Here, it is useful to remember, in full, oft-quoted words of Anaïs Nin: “It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see. The writer shakes up the familiar scene, and as if by magic, we see a new meaning in it” (25).

of social, cultural, and technological forms” (qtd. in Rubenstein et al. 581). The four books analyzed in the previous chapters—*Family Matters* and *Last Man in Tower* for Mumbai, and *Welcome to Lagos* and *Graceland* for Lagos—deal with issues pertaining to traffic and infrastructure in those cities, and they could all be read within an infrastructuralist framework. The latter three of these four works contain brutal depictions of life in the slum settlements—with no water or electricity, and with sewage ravines running through them—that can only be summarized with this borrowed expression: the settlements that fall “outside the ends of infrastructure” (Rubenstein et al. 582). While infrastructuralism as a theoretical approach is deeper and broader than the limits of this dissertation, my attention to the urban infrastructure and traffic in contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos certainly belongs under the basic outlines of infrastructuralism. All contemporary urban narratives of Mumbai and Lagos take note of the problems related to the water and electricity supply, the roads and transportation, the hospitals and schools, and all the other services which should be provided by the municipalities and the government. My investigation in this chapter focuses specifically on these literary representations. The treatment of traffic and infrastructure in Mumbai and Lagos literatures differs from how the same books, as well as different ones, approach the themes of corruption, informal settlements and the disparities between the two extremes of living conditions discussed in earlier chapters. The particularity of the traffic and infrastructure themes is that while they may not be the main concern of the diegesis, they often appear in descriptions of the setting, as vignettes within the plot, or simply, as elements of the day-to-day urban life. Usually, the brief passages about the traffic and infrastructure in Mumbai and Lagos narratives set the stage for other, more in-depth explorations of the urban condition. In many instances, these short references to infrastructure function as a reminder of the high populations of Mumbai

and Lagos, and illustrate how these two cities' current frameworks are failing them. Traffic, in particular, may be employed as a means to construct the city in the imagination of the readers, the way James Joyce had done for Dublin in *Ulysses*. The following excerpt is one such example from Toni Kan's *The Carnivorous City*. The novel's two characters, Ada and Abel are driving in silence out of Ilupeju down to Town Planning Way and onto Ikorodu Road. Ada cruised past Obanikoro, Onipanu, Fadeyi and Jibowu, into Surulere.

Ojuelegba was busy, and they slowed in the traffic leading to the bridge that would take them into Western Avenue, . . . (54)

All the streets and neighbourhoods referred to in the above excerpt, as well as all other landmarks, bridges, colleges, stadiums, plazas, hotels, churches and banks that are mentioned throughout the novel, are all real places in Lagos. This kind of detailed mapping gives the novel its authenticity, and traffic is a good literary tool to genuinely outline the city where the story is set. Sometimes, a comment on the traffic or infrastructure may show up only in passing, or it may even just consist of a single word, like "potholed" in "each time I turned off the potholed road in Victoria Island and into that compound full of birdsong I felt as though I were home" (Adichie, "Birdsong" 98). The adjective "potholed" indicates that, in Lagos, even the affluent neighbourhood of Victoria Island does not possess smooth and well-maintained streets.⁷⁹ These are some of the diverse methods the twenty-first century novels, short stories, and literary nonfiction employ in bringing to life the difficulties stemming from inadequate road maintenance, debilitating cultural and managemental attitudes towards traffic, over-burdened and

⁷⁹ A similar example is found in Kan's *The Carnivorous City*: "The house was a lovely mansion in Parkview Estate, Ikoyi where . . . a plot of land sold for about \$2 million, even though the roads were potholed and filled with water" (43).

poorly maintained public transportation, and road infrastructure that simply cannot handle massive numbers of vehicles in circulation. Since traffic and infrastructure rarely sustain the overarching plot of a novel on their own, in order to present a fuller picture of their literary depictions, this chapter will make use of multiple works, including shorter texts, as well as excerpts from longer texts. I will analyze short stories from Murzban F. Shroff's 2008 collection *Breathless in Bombay*, and excerpts from Altaf Tyrewala's 2006 debut novel *No God in Sight* for Mumbai, and Nnedi Okorafor's 2014 science-fiction novel *Lagoon*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2010 short story "Birdsong" and 2013 novel *Americanah* for Lagos. These works differ from the novels studied in the previous chapters. Short stories, closer to oral narratives which were traditionally associated with moral lessons, usually focus on one main theme and a single message. This allows the short literary form to place any one topic—like traffic—in the forefront making it suitable for the exclusive treatment of a single current urban issue. Some of the short stories in *Breathless in Bombay*, devote their entire premises to infrastructural problems, and the author freely ventures into the domain of parables. Tyrewala's novel *No God in Sight* can be likened to a short story collection as well. This experimental work with an unconventional narrative chain which makes each short episode almost independent of all the others, touches upon nearly every extant concern in Mumbai. The inclusion of this recent work exemplifies the diverse styles used by contemporary authors to represent their city in new and fresh forms. In the Lagos section of this chapter, I examine yet another singular work, one that departs from social realism; a hybrid speculative fiction that includes elements of multiple forms mixing fantasy and science fiction with African mystical and mythological heritage, and offering significant social commentary on present-day Lagos. I conclude the Lagos section with two works of Adichie: a short story titled "Birdsong" and excerpts from her novel *Americanah*.

Traffic is an urban phenomenon that lends itself as a metaphor for multiple obstacles we face in life. Shroff's short story "Traffic" and Adichie's "Birdsong" both employ traffic as a trope in telling the personal stories of two young women, from Mumbai and Lagos, respectively. *Americanah*, like *Lagoon*, uses defamiliarization device to frame infrastructural problems in new light and render them palpable again. While *Lagoon* creates the defamiliarization through aliens who arrive in Lagos, *Americanah* employs the same technique by re-acquainting its narrator who returns to Lagos after having lived in the United States for many years. In my examination of *Lagoon*, I will draw from Soyinka's influential play, *The Road* (1965) which is a work that cannot be avoided in any discussion of Lagos's, and more generally Nigeria's, roads and traffic accidents. Due its age, this famous work had already benefited from multiple scholarly studies, and I will only engage with it in connection with the theme of 'the road' in *Lagoon*. *Ravan and Eddie* (1995) by Kiran Nagarkar and *Dangerous Love* (1996) by Ben Okri are also seminal works depicting infrastructure problems in Mumbai's and Lagos's settlements, respectively; however, because of their earlier publication dates, I chose to refer to them only briefly, and reserve deeper analyses to more contemporary texts. Before getting to the main analyses, I will use this introductory section to illustrate the attention contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos pay to present-day issues; they engage with the most common infrastructural themes in addition to commenting on many other current problems. Their focus on the immediate reality pushes postcolonial critiques to the background.

Rossella Ciocca stresses that "[o]ne of the recurrent topics of novels set in [Mumbai] consists in rhetorically exuberant descriptions of terrible rush-hours" ("Mother India" 111). One example that supports Ciocca's assertion can be found in an appropriately-titled short story, "Traffic," from Shroff's short story collection, *Breathless in Bombay*:

Cabs, scooters, cars in a rush; the signal, a steadfast green. Swirls of traffic sweeping in and merging. Then honking. Then cursing. That failing, empathizing. What to do? This was South Bombay, the rush hour. Everybody in a hurry to get home. Everybody in a sweat to reach their destinations. And some just to get away. (33)

While it can be argued that the ubiquitous descriptions of rush-hour traffic are “rhetorical,” it is clear that this aspect of the city has considerable impact on Mumbaikars, and therefore, makes its way into the city’s literary narratives. At the time of the above observation, the story’s protagonist, Vicki, is in a dark place mentally, but arguably, the rush-hour traffic descriptions are not more flattering even when the fictional characters are in better moods. This story will be analyzed in depth further down by drawing parallels between the actual city traffic and the character’s state of mind.

Another short story in Shroff’s *Breathless in Bombay*, “The Queen Guards Her Own,” is about a victoria⁸⁰ driver who is a self-appointed foster parent to a prostitute and her little daughter. While the story tackles the predicaments of Mumbai’s prostitutes, as well as corruption and poverty that surround them, it also offers a sense of the city’s traffic:

The evening traffic flew past: dusty BEST buses spitting fumes, opportunistic taxis cutting into lanes, large crouching cars with stiff-backed chauffeurs and impassive owners who read a lot behind tinted windows. Occasionally a bike roared past: a hint of showmanship from its rider, a sequel of delight from the pillion. (*Breathless* 100-1)⁸¹

⁸⁰ Victorias are historic horse-drawn carriages that used to be popular tourist attractions in Mumbai until 2015 when they were banned to prevent animal cruelty. In 2021, their battery-driven modern versions are re-introduced to Mumbai streets (“Victoria Carriages”).

⁸¹ Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) is a public institution which, in addition to providing electricity, operates Mumbai’s buses and ferries.

The reference to the BEST buses places the story definitively in Mumbai, and provides the ambiance of the city for the plot that follows. The reader gets a sense of the chaotic character of the city: the pollution of the air by the buses, the collective ethos of the drivers, and the alarming speed of the two-wheelers. Mazumdar acknowledges that “[f]or many residents of [Mumbai], the traffic, the commuter train, and the acceleration in construction are part of a daily urban nightmare” (“Friction” 151). Therefore, descriptions of rush-hour traffic in fiction may be more than rhetoric. In addition to traffic, shortage of water, sanitation, and the living conditions in settlements and *chawls* comprise the majority of Mumbai’s infrastructure narratives within the contemporary literatures. It is often noted that there are established businesses in slum settlements, and most residents have television sets or other ‘luxuries;’ however, as Ciocca points out, “[t]he real luxuries are running water, private toilets, sewerage and drains.” She adds that “[s]pace and privacy are real treats” (“Mother India” 113). The transit camps designed for the temporary relocation of settlers whose neighbourhoods are appropriated for redevelopment are also commonly tackled by Mumbai narratives. Vikram Chandra, author of literary crime novel *Sacred Games*, says in an interview that everyone in Mumbai is “acutely aware of the creaking infrastructure and social breakdown” (qtd. in Chambers 47). Others point out that “the infrastructure in this city of slums and high-rises has already reached a breaking point, and the suburban trains are packed four to five times their capacity” (Prakash 12-13), and that Mumbai “lives with the crisis of water and housing shortages, daily toil, and the explosive heat generated in the city” (Mazumdar “Friction” 151). Contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai reflect these ongoing realities.

In Lagos, infrastructural complications have been connected to the succession of military dictators who ruled the country after the 1983 coup d'état. Packer asserts that these military

dictators “treated Lagos, the country’s center of democratic activism, as a source of personal enrichment.” No thought was given to “the infrastructure necessary to absorb millions of new arrivals” (“Megacity”). The government’s neglect of city services caused the “slum dwellers to become self-sufficient through illegal activity. They tap into electrical lines, causing blackouts and fires; they pay off local gangs to provide security” creating “vigilante justice” (Packer, “Megacity”). In *Graceland*, for instance, we see sixteen-year-old Elvis living in a world where “political and social structures have all but collapsed” (Mason 215). This breakdown is reflected in the disintegrating physical infrastructure. Due to the lack of familial, social, and infrastructural networks, Elvis has no choice but to gravitate towards criminal activities. Dunton aptly connects “the lack or breakdown of infrastructure” directly to the misery of the citizens (71). In Nwosu’s *Invisible Chapters*, there is a salient interaction between two characters who used to live in Maroko before it was infamously demolished. One character remarks that she had never suffered back in her village like she suffers in Lagos, and when the other asks her, “[w]hich kin’ life you wan go back to – no job, no money, no electricity, no tap water, nothing,” the retort is acute: “For Lagos nko?^[82] The same thing – no job, no money, no electricity, no tap water, nothing” (50). This fictional exchange seems to capture life in Lagos for many of its inhabitants.

Ciocca’s assertion quoted earlier about the recurrence of “rhetorically exuberant descriptions of [Mumbai’s] terrible rush-hours” (“Mother India” 111), is also true for Lagos. In fact, no characterization of traffic is a hyperbole in Lagos narratives since the traffic is among the most crippling aspects of Lagos. One of the epigraphs at the top of this chapter informs us that, by 2008, 400 vehicles were being added to Mumbai’s roads each day (Times of India). A similar study for Lagos reports that the average number of vehicles per kilometer was 227 in 2017

⁸² What about Lagos?

(Zaccheaus). These numbers are as difficult to grasp as the rate of growth and the massive populations of these cities are not matched by the available space. As Mehta points out, all these “new cars have only the same old roads to use” (26).

In Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, one character uses the phrase “the problem of locomotion” (2), an expression that has become popular with the scholars studying the traffic of Lagos. It seems obligatory for any Lagos narrative to tackle “the problem of locomotion,” whether it is published 70 years ago or just recently. Road conditions in Lagos proper as well as the intercity highways leading out of Lagos, behaviour of drivers, robberies, deadly accidents and non-fatal ones that simply start fights and cause gridlocks, and the traffic police who ask for and receive bribes, *danfos* (also called *molues* or *molue* buses),⁸³ *okadas*,⁸⁴ and *agberos* (touts)⁸⁵ are found in every Lagos story. Lagos narratives, including Ekwensi’s novellas about Lagos night life from the 1950s, Achebe’s postcolonial novel *No Longer at Ease* from 1960, Nwapa’s short story collection *This is Lagos* from 1971, and the twenty-first century works examined in this dissertation all describe the city’s traffic. Lagos traffic has significant mental and financial consequences for Lagosians. Stress and loss of time—time required for business or creative production, or for family, health and leisure—are only the most common outcomes. In *The*

⁸³ *Danfos*, *molues*, *molue buses*, *yellow buses*, *bolekajas* and *mammy wagons* are different versions and/or different names of the small public buses that operate in Lagos. They have a driver and a conductor (*agbero* or *tout*) who dangles out the door during the entire trip. Adepitian explains that the word *bolekaja* is more than a name, it is a statement, a challenge: “Why don’t you step down and let’s sort it out?” (101). It is an apt name since these transportation systems are very contentious, not the least because the commuters are tired and irritable, the space is limited, and the traffic is intolerable. Bickerings and altercations are common during these long rides. That is why *bolekaja*—“Bo’le: step down. K’aja: let’s fight” (101)—seems like a fitting name.

⁸⁴ *Okadas* are motorcycle taxis popular in Lagos. In *The Carnivorous City*, Kan calls them “ubiquitous motorcycle taxis with demoniac riders” (186). *Okadas* were banned in February of 2020 due to high accident rates.

⁸⁵ *Agberos* are bus conductors who encourage potential passengers to get on their buses, carry their luggage and collect the fares. They are infamous for being badmouthed troublemakers. Adepitian explains that *agbero* is a Yoruba word for *tout*. “They are as terrible as you’ll ever get. Maybe we have the prime selection of bus conductors and touts anywhere in the world for their cantankerousness” (101).

Carnivorous City, the narrator comments that “some parents never got to see their children awake during the week” due to “the energy-sapping traffic” (69). Later, the narrator expounds that

people left home as early as 4am from far-flung locales on the mainland in order to beat the morning traffic leading into the island. ... then snatch an hour or two of sleep in the car park before work started. At night they would wait till 9pm before they headed home. Lagos was a city of men and women who had forgotten how to sleep and lived out their insomnia in gridlocked traffic. (146)

Once again, to demonstrate the realist aspect of contemporary urban narratives, we can compare that remark from fiction, with this account from a scholarly study:

Access to leisure time was reduced as poor people worked longer hours for less income, spent longer periods on the roads to get home either as a result of the traffic hold-ups, non-availability of public transport or their incapacity to afford the fares leaving them to trek very long distances. (Aina 185).

In their probes of urban hardships, we often find different genres and different sources of knowledge converge as they do in the excerpts above. The messages are similar: the traffic of Lagos prevents Lagosians from seeing their children and getting sufficient sleep. Lagos traffic also has perceptible negative effects on readers as discussed in chapter 1. In addition to reduced leisure time for reading, it is almost impossible to concentrate on a book while on public transportation due to the intense activity levels both on the streets and inside the buses.

Edgar Pieterse, an urban scholar who accords great credit to literary works in his studies of African urbanisms, professes that Okri’s *Dangerous Love* convinced him “that there were much more compelling ways of bringing *cityness* and mundane beauty to life than the wooden

development tropes that remain the stock in trade of developmentalist academic discourses and NGOs” (10). In *Dangerous Love*, the protagonist Omovo, an artist, sits down “to paint in order to escape the traffic jam of his thoughts” (201). After working at the canvas for a while, he realizes that he is painting “a Lagos traffic jam” (202). Then, he starts “to name the images he was bringing into being, began to chant them[:]

Metal. Hot road. Copper sun. Sweating drivers. Busy hawkers. Policemen accepting bribes. Lights on painted metal. Yellow and black taxis. Glittering windscreens. Weather-beaten faces. Struggling faces. A million colours of sun and city. The faces of my people. Hallucinatory sunlight on the green lagoon. Gasoline fumes. Beggars. Soldiers everywhere. Traffic jams everywhere. Noise. Chaos. Everything jammed. Motion. Confusion. Houses jammed. Streets jammed. A child eating mango. Clear above, jammed below. No birds in the air. (202)

Omovo’s chanting turns into a prose poetry describing Lagos traffic. In this staccato manner, Okri recreates the urgency and the disorder of the streets. The discomfort the road exudes is both visual and physical. The person observing from the sidewalk is equally fatigued as the person sitting in a car. In fact, the reader can feel the distress as well. Okri goes through the senses that are under attack: auditory, visual, olfactory. Many words, such as metal, sun and jam, are repeated for full impact: “copper sun,” “million colours of the sun,” and the “hallucinatory sunlight” depict a sweltering and blinding heat; “hot road” and “lights on painted metal” increase that effect; “chaos,” “motion,” and “confusion” add to the pandemonium; “traffic jams everywhere,” “everything jammed,” “houses jammed,” “streets jammed,” and “clear above, jammed below” collectively convey the claustrophobia felt both by drivers and pedestrians; “weather-beaten faces,” “struggling faces,” and “the faces of my people” portray the tedium; and

finally, “gasoline fumes,” and “no birds in the air” describe a polluted environment which is hostile to animals and humans alike.

Because traffic is a fundamental part of the city, and because it has a cumulative impact on the society, a story set in Lagos without a realist reconstruction of its traffic is inconceivable. Even narratives that do not have an urban focus, or do not take place in Lagos, still make a reference to traffic. Udenwe’s *Colours of Hatred* is one such example. This contemporary Nigerian novel is only partially set in Lagos; however, its protagonist Leona cannot resist painting Lagos traffic on Monday mornings as complete chaos. It is “often thick and congested,” she describes,

with cars stretched over two, three kilometers, stuck, and their horns blaring incessantly, while Danfos tried to sneak their way out of the traffic, hitting road curbs and denting people’s cars and causing a commotion. It is a usual sight to see two people, one finely dressed and the other not-so-finely dressed, engaged in a shouting match and sometimes a fist fight, and a lot of people trying to separate them at the same time, most times causing multiple fights to start, with everyone hitting everybody and pickpockets taking advantage of the situation. (163)

In this lone portrayal of Lagos traffic, and with a reference to drivers getting into fights, *Colours of Hatred* concurs with its contemporary counterparts. The excerpt depicts the pandemonium that ensues when, at the smallest provocation, vehicles, people and sounds get all entangled up. Even

if the plot requires only a brief visit to Lagos, it still cannot ignore something Lagosians are so preoccupied with.⁸⁶

Noo Saro-Wiwa, in her literary travelogue *Looking for Transwonderland: Travels in Nigeria*, gives real-life examples of the impact of Lagos traffic on its denizens. But first, she offers a view of infrastructural impact on life at the home of her aunt and her cousin where she stays during her visit. “Some days, before going to work,” her cousin

would spend a good half-hour collecting back-breaking heavy buckets of water from the well behind the house, and pouring them into big water drums in the kitchen and bathrooms. Life inside the home seemed as arduous as life on the streets, a seamless transition from one exertion to the next. (17)

Both in Mumbai and Lagos, water shortages are bigger infrastructural problems than traffic. Lagos additionally suffers from frequent power outages, and the luxury of having generators is noted by most contemporary narratives. While at home one must fill all the empty pots and pans with water when it is running, or make sure that there is gas for the generator in case the power goes out, life outside of the house is just as grueling. When Saro-Wiwa ventures outside on her own, she notes

that curious mix of patience and bloody-mindedness required to negotiate Nigerian traffic successfully. Anyone wanting to drive through the city’s ungoverned crowds has to assume right of way at all times. Politeness and compromise will get you nowhere. Lagos drivers, governed not by the Highway Code but the ‘My Way’ Code, will routinely pull

⁸⁶ In Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*, a young boy who arrives in Lagos for a short stay has this first impression: “The highway from the airport was packed with huge lorries and rusting *okadas* and shiny Mercedes, all honking, one long steady whine of annoyance, the whole city singing the same nasal dirge” (167).

out of T-junctions without checking for oncoming traffic for fear of showing weakness to other drivers. (18-19)

The traffic culture and driver mentality in Lagos contribute to the danger and anarchy as much as the sheer number of vehicles, and insufficient road infrastructure.

Then there are the *danfos/molues*, *okadas* and *agberos* in Lagos traffic. In an interview, Titi Adepiton⁸⁷ re-enacts, with a mixture of humour and ghastliness, “the electric atmosphere of public transportation in Nigeria” while defining key transportation-related terms. For *molue* buses (also called *danfos*), he offers this grim definition: “When those buses first came on Nigerian roads, they were very prone to accidents. When such an accident happened, you couldn’t tell limbs from faces and torsos. Everything had been twisted beyond recognition. They had been re-molded.” He attributes *molue*, the Yoruba corruption of the word ‘molded’ to the tragic end of the travellers who looked like “mauled, or re-molded, you know, mangled by metal” (101). Saro-Wiwa remarks that *danfos/molues* are “so decrepit that one can watch the tarmac moving beneath one’s feet” (19). One good example of how fiction treats *molue* buses comes from Elvis’ perspective in Abani’s *Graceland*:

Molues were buses unique to Lagos, and only [Lagos] could have devised such a hybrid vehicle, its “magic” the only thing keeping it from falling apart. The cab of the bus was imported from Britain, one of the Bedford series. The chassis of the body came from surplus Japanese army trucks trashed after the Second World War. The body of the coach

⁸⁷ Adepiton’s conversation with Sarah Krose, which took place in 2000, is about the Yoruba Thorn Wood Carvings that are on permanent online display at the website of the Museum of Anthropology, of the University of British Columbia. Adepiton’s explanations of Nigeria’s lorries and buses are in relation to a wood carving of a “mammy wagon” on display at the exhibition. *Mammy wagon*, *molue*, *danfo*, and *bolekaja* are all names given to Lagos buses. In Soyinka’s *The Road*, an old *mammy wagon* is used as a spare-parts store: “*Thrusting downstage from a corner of the shack is the back of a ‘bolekaja’ (mammy wagon), lop-sided and minus its wheels. It bears the inscription—AKSIDENT STORE—ALL PART AVAILEBUL*” (151).

was built from scraps of broken cars and discarded roofing sheets—anything that could be beaten into shape or otherwise fashioned. The finished product, with two black stripes running down a canary body, looked like a roughly hammered yellow sardine tin.

The buses had a full capacity of forty-nine sitting and nine standing, but often held sixty and twenty. People hung off the sides and out of the doors. Some even stood on the back bumpers and held on to the roof rack. The buses wove through the dense traffic so fast they threw the passengers about, and caused those hanging on to sway dangerously.

(8-9)

While Eze argues that this description of the *molues*, constructed with parts of British, Japanese and other “transcultural” discards, “conceptualize [the] hybridity” of Lagos (“Cosmopolitan” 107), it makes more sense to liken them to the shacks in Elvis’s neighbourhood. Both the settlements and the public buses are built with whatever materials were available, and both are overcrowded and dangerous. Here, it should be noted that in February of 2021, the Lagos state government announced that “it will soon phase out the commercial yellow buses because they are not conducive for a mega city” (Adebulu). The *danfo* and the *molue* will be replaced with new modern buses that will be “ecofriendly, air-conditioned, comfortable,” and they will also be cheaper for the commuters and easier to maintain (Bashua-Alimi). Certainly, some of the character of Lagos will disappear along with the dreaded yellow buses, however, the new buses will, hopefully, bring some relief to commuters.

Being coastal cities, both Mumbai and Lagos are prone to flooding which are often mentioned in their literatures. Infrastructure issues are always aggravated when there is a natural disaster, and floods bring these two cities to their knees. One notorious Mumbai flood is described as follows in a narrative nonfiction:

On July 26, 2005, the rain gods attacked Mumbai with relentless intensity. Over thirty-nine inches of monsoon rain lashed the city within a twenty-four-hour period, submerging some areas under fifteen feet of water. Transportation came to a standstill, flights were canceled, the stock exchange was closed, and schools and colleges were shut down. People in the streets tried to wade or swim to safety. Over four hundred people drowned or were killed in stampedes while trying to escape the onrushing water. (Prakash 13)

A comparison of this account with a fictional one on the same flood illustrates how realist depictions in contemporary literatures and nonfictional reports have converged. The blurring of genres becomes more noticeable as the narrativity in news articles, scholarly studies, statistical reports and other nonfictional texts increase, and the realism in contemporary urban literatures becomes more pronounced. The text I wish to juxtapose with the one above is from a short story titled “Mental about Mumbai”⁸⁸ by Shroff. This account of the 2005 flood is narrated by the character of an old Mumbaikar woman who is upset about the news that the city will cut five thousand trees to build an underground metro. She fears that

[b]y cutting the trees, the underground water table would be affected; the risk of floods would increase. Had the city planners gone mad? Had they forgotten that terrible flood of 2005, when the city had received, over two days, 94 centimeters of hard rain? Then, the highways had been flooded, the airports had been closed, railway platforms and railway tracks had disappeared underwater. In certain parts of the city, the water level had risen up to four and a half metres. Trees had been uprooted, walls and fences had come

⁸⁸ This short story, along with “The Gypsies of Grant Road,” was published in *Transnational Literature* under the title “Mumbai in Focus: Two Stories.”

crashing down, cars had turned turtle, and a landslide had swept away a hundred lives belonging to the poor. They should know: when it came to floods, Mumbai had a history, or rather a propensity. The drains would choke easily, and sometimes it was days before the floods would recede. (“Mumbai in Focus” 1)

The latter account creates a rhythm with the flow of words and repetition (“had been flooded,” “had been closed,” “had disappeared,” and so forth), and employs rhetorical questions (“Had the city planners gone mad?” and “Had they forgotten[?]”), as well as sarcasm and humour (“cars had turned turtle”). In spite of these aesthetic differences, the two excerpts are comparable, not only because the accounts are factual, but also because both texts employ narrativity. The authors, Prakash and Shroff, find fault with the government. Prakash asserts that “[t]he urban government and infrastructure appeared defenceless against the wrath of the celestial powers” (14), and Shroff posits that “what happened during the great flood of July 2005 is evidence of a city abandoned by its rulers, a city left to find its own methods of survival” (*Breathless* xi). Other forms of verbal arts also took note. One Bhojpuri song called “Museebat mein Bambai” (“Bombay in Trouble”) honours the day of the big flood with these lyrics: “Every mobile phone went silent / When the cloudbursts struck Bombay / Darkness prevailed when the power went out” (qtd. in Prakash 15). Once again, the message is the same: the breakdown of all structures, from power grids to mobile networks, was preventable through proper infrastructural foundations.

In Lagos, flooding occurs with every rainy season and, as is the case in Mumbai, slum settlements endure the worst of it. In Abani’s *Graceland*, every time it rains, Elvis’s room is flooded, and he wakes up to a room full of water with rats swimming in it (32). Abani’s heart-breaking depictions of water invading the homes of slum dwellers can be hard to read at times. In

one scene of *Graceland*, the home of a family with three children is flooded and they have to eat their dinner with their feet ankle deep in the water. The storm does not ease up for days. Elvis sees “a young boy standing around at a public tap waiting for his bucket to fill up” (314). This child is cheerful, as a child would be, in spite of the bleak conditions he is surrounded with. “Picking up a thin piece of metal, the boy rapped out a tune on the metal peak of the tap, dancing in the puddles, laughing” (314). As soon as the narrator informs us that the “public tap was situated directly below a high-voltage power line,” we, the readers, fill up with dread, knowing very well what will come next:

There was a brief flash like a bolt of lightning and then, scarcely disturbing the heavy air, its fragrance alluding to death, a choking smell filled the nostrils as only the smell of burning flesh can. Elvis watched the boy’s body float away in the deluge, while another took his place and took the full bucket of water to whatever destination would pay for it.

(314)

Similarly brutal episodes abound in contemporary literatures. As argued in the previous chapter, the authors may feel that they need the shock value to make a significant impact on middle-class readers so that they too can strive for the improvement of such living conditions.

In this introductory survey, I tried to show that traffic and infrastructure are topics that feature regularly—almost inevitably—in the contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos even when the main subject is something entirely different. Most twenty-first century fictions of these two cities mention water and power shortages, dangerous roads and traffic jams. Their presence in literature is an indication of how much Mumbaikars and Lagosians care about these issues. In the following sections, in the works of Shroff, Tyrewala, Okorafor and Adichie, we

will see the employment of the defamiliarization technique used to re-acquaint the middle classes with problems that have become commonplace and unnoticeable.

“Its burning issues, its swamping chaos”: Murzban F. Shroff’s *Breathless in Bombay*

Shroff’s Mumbai stories, like all works studied in this dissertation, are likely to cause a transformation in the readers so that individual and collective pursuits towards the betterment of their society may become second nature to them. The short story format allows the author to focus on one single theme and impart a moral message to the readers. In some cases, Shroff’s stories go back to the earliest forms of storytelling and take on parable-like qualities. All stories in *Breathless in Bombay* have a purpose, whether it is to cause an epiphany in the readers, to teach a moral lesson, or to make a social commentary. They aim to bring about an enlightening, a transformation in the reader. Shroff, a Mumbaikar himself, explains his love-and-hate relationship with the city as “[l]ove for its sense of history and security[,] and hate for its failure to provide us a decent standard of living: clean roads, clean water, clean air, and of course a clean system of living without the constant despair of bribes and corruption” (*Breathless* x). As this statement indicates, Shroff, like many other contemporary authors of Mumbai and Lagos, is concerned about the infrastructure and current living conditions in his city, and aspires to contribute to the improvements. In 2014, in an open letter, Shroff reminded Prime Minister Narendra Modi, then newly-elected, some of his campaign promises: “providing health care to the poor, rehabilitating slums, . . . , improving sanitation, providing water and electricity where none exist, bringing subsidized food and housing to the poorest of the poor, . . .” (“Letter” 5). These infrastructure-related hardships are at the top of this contemporary author’s concerns, as well as corruption and inequality issues which have been discussed in the previous chapters. Since these difficulties are part of every-day life in Mumbai, in the short story collection

Breathless in Bombay, Shroff employs them as part of the setting upon which the stories are situated, and in some cases, the plot is directly connected to infrastructural deficiencies.

Shroff's portrayal of present-day Mumbai confirms his own social consciousness. He depicts his city in all its glory and hardships in the new social realism style, and as he himself reveals, hopes to "deliver insights that—however momentary—make a difference to our readers" ("Letter" 9). He professes that he had a "reason" for writing "all of the Breathless in Bombay stories," and that was to "sensitize people to the needs of Mumbai's have-nots" ("Letter" 7). This declaration of a purpose corroborates the conviction this dissertation presents: that, with a focus on the present-day, the urban turn in Indian literature has a social purpose. Shroff is also clear about the "messages" ("Letter" 9) contemporary writers like himself are sending to the readers through their narratives. Shroff and his contemporaries are hoping for a transformation in the readers' engagement with public life. In one of Shroff's stories, the characters express their wish to see Bollywood make movies "that depicted real lives, real tragedies, without gloss and visual manipulation" (28). Shroff's stories fulfill the wishes of his characters. He portrays real lives and real tragedies with a mellow, amiable, optimistic writing style sprinkled with Indian words which add to the authenticity of the stories. It is hard to find a Shroff story, in *Breathless in Bombay* or elsewhere, that does not tackle the issues of floods, settlements, water shortages, disparities in living conditions, or corruption that plague Mumbai. All renditions of these serious problems are delivered with hopeful, encouraging messages for the unity of the city's diverse groups, and for solving common problems through cooperation. The engaging storylines, the gripping plot twists and surprising endings of Shroff's narratives reinforce Felski's belief that "aesthetic value is inseparable from use" (8). Shroff's stories depict Mumbaikars from all classes and all walks of life; their trials and tribulations reflect some of the most prevalent problems of the city. In this

section, I will examine some of the stories in *Breathless in Bombay* highlighting the anxiety caused by urban problems that pertain primarily to infrastructure and traffic.

Breathless in Bombay starts with a story titled “Dhobi Ghat” which takes a common, well-known icon of Mumbai, and through defamiliarization, renders it visible. The story is about one of the significant landmarks of Mumbai—“part of the city’s history of livelihoods” (6)—an open-air manual laundry site occupying a large area in the heart of the city. *Dhobi ghat*, or simply *ghat*, is where Mumbai’s linens, uniforms, saris, kurtas, blue jeans and t-shirts are washed, dried, ironed, folded, and then delivered to their owners. Inhabitants of Mumbai are so accustomed to passing by this large washing area, and to the sight of hundreds of white table cloths and bed sheets hanging on clotheslines, that they almost do not notice it anymore. Considered a tourist attraction, the *dhobi ghat*, due to habituation, no longer provoke attention or scrutiny in Mumbai residents who go about their own businesses all around the site, every day. In order for Mumbaikars to ‘see’ beyond the touristic landmark, to think about the actual community of the *ghat*, and to consider their trials and tribulations, this historic soul of Mumbai had to be shown anew to the readers.

Hundreds of thousands of items are cleaned daily in the *ghat* by *dhobis*, also called *laundrywallas*, who live with their families right there in the *ghat* or in the surrounding slums. While “Dhobi Ghat” features the life and work in the *ghat* in poignant depth,⁸⁹ and brings to light the difficulties of *dhobis* and their families, it also connects their hardships to the city’s more general problems. For example, when situating the physical location of the *dhobi ghat*, Shroff makes use of the traffic around the site:

⁸⁹ Having seen the *dhobi ghat* myself, I found the story’s exhaustive and detailed descriptions to be accurate.

Outside, cars would rush to well-appointed destinations; buses would honk fiercely, admonishingly; taxis and two-wheelers would dart out of their way; signals would flash and fail; cops would arrive; men in cars would roll down their windows and peer anxiously, then look at their watches and make frantic calls on their cell phones. (6)

The author contrasts this commotion surrounding the *dhobi ghat* with the “serenity” inside “this piquant little community holding its own, frozen, by its own choice, in time” (6). The hustle and bustle of the traffic—of both vehicles and people—around the *ghat* locates it in central Mumbai. While the outside world is moving in time and space, the *ghat* and its community are staying put, and hoping to “keep it so” (6). However, in the age of movement, the *dhobi ghat* cannot stay still and it may have to move with the rest of the city.

At the beginning of the story, we learn that washing machines are gaining popularity and they may cause loss of some business to the dhobis. This foreshadows bigger problems such as an upcoming fifty percent cut in their water supply, because “the water is being diverted to the new buildings coming up in the area. They get priority over us” (13). The *dhobi ghat* is already surrounded by high rises. Similar to the dichotomies discussed in the previous chapter, here too, luxury apartment buildings nearby contrast the *dhobis’* “small, dingy houses” within the *ghat*: “The houses faced each other, in rows, with long narrow lanes in between—just enough space for a single person to pass by. In the houses, there were no doors, windows, or vents—only curtains, drawn back at all times” (3-4). This group of toilers of Mumbai live in dismal conditions, even though their community, unlike most of the other settler neighbourhoods, have legal status. Still, their homes are “cramped and dark” and “made of old wooden boards and sheets of asbestos, plastic, and tin” (4). In spite of these disheartening conditions, the *dhobis* are depicted as hopeful, almost contended. This is a trademark of Shroff’s short stories. There is

warmth and tenderness in all of his representations, no matter how sad or grim the conditions he details in his stories might be. The optimism of the stories functions as an inspiration for the readers to get involved in social matters. In spite of the positive outlook on the part of the *dhabis*, the looming water cut, by as high as fifty percent, dampens their spirits. They discuss this matter in their meeting. Mataprasad is the “head *dhabi*, officially in charge of [the Mumbai] *dhabi ghat* with eighty-nine families and their problems” (3). That makes him also the chair of the *ghat panchayat*, their community council that holds regular meetings, and makes decisions on all of their personal and communal affairs after discussing them. When the threat of water cut is brought up in the *panchayat*, their first thought is to offer a bribe to the municipal officials. We have seen in chapter 2 how common it is to try to solve an issue by exacerbating another one: the malaise of corruption. But the *dhabis* are told that “a little hand *maska*^[90]” would not work in this case. The builders of fancy apartment complexes in the vicinity “have great influence. They have to get their buildings up in time” (13). The infrastructural quandary becomes clearer with the second idea of the *dhabis*: “If we can’t get water from the municipality, we will buy it. We will call for a tanker daily.” Due to regular water shortages, it is common in India to buy water by the tanker and have it pumped up to a water tank at the top of the building. Some institutions such as schools and hospitals, as well as wealthy businesses and apartment complexes do this. But, needless to say, this is not a sustainable method for the *dhabi ghat* where water is the main element of their livelihood. The idea is shot down on the grounds that the “tanker pipes are not long enough to go through the *basti*^[91] and reach the rinsing tanks. Besides, by parking on the main road the tanker will create a traffic jam, and we will have to face the wrath of the traffic

⁹⁰ Butter; buttered

⁹¹ A settlement in a very small area; colony; another word for slum.

police" (14). Indeed, anyone who has seen the *dhobi ghat* in Mumbai would be in agreement with the rejection of this plan based on the reach of the pipes and the traffic jam. This idea seems to be not only financially unfeasible but also logically impractical. The third idea presented at the meeting, and the one that causes heartache to Mataprasad, comes from the *ghat's* union leader. He begins his proposal with some preamble:

You have seen what is happening to the city today, and particularly to our area: construction everywhere—old buildings being broken down and new buildings coming up. A lot of this is under the city's slum removal plan, which allows builders to remove slums and put slum dwellers up in new flats of 225 square feet each. In exchange for housing the slum dwellers free of charge, the builders get space to build tall buildings, thirty to forty stories high, which they can sell at a great profit. (16)

The first comment of the above excerpt—"construction everywhere"—is in line with what has already been discussed in the previous chapter. Many contemporary authors of Mumbai highlight this very point: construction is omnipresent in the city, and old buildings are being replaced with new ones. We have seen Masterji in *Last Man in Tower* lament that the endless redevelopment projects were hurting not only the most vulnerable of Mumbai, but Mumbai the city itself. The infrastructure is not sufficient to support all the new developments; slum dwellers are either rendered homeless or relocated under dismal conditions; and there is a devastating impact on the environment. In Shroff's "Dhobi Ghat," we once again find social commentary in literary form on redevelopment projects. As we have seen in *Last Man in Tower*, here too there are many denizens who cannot resist the individual benefits they may receive from these constructions. The above overture to a proposed solution to the predicament the *dhobi ghat* is in comes from one such person who would prefer to receive his commission and not worry about the bigger

picture. The union leader's approach calls to mind the preferences of Mrs. Rego, the social worker we have seen in *Last Man in Tower*. They are both acting against the principles of their positions as the protector of the labourer and the vulnerable. The authors place the emphasis on this hypocrisy to enrage the reader, as well as to point out the wants and needs of the population at large. Arguably, the authors are trying to convey the dissatisfaction among the working class to the point of betraying their own convictions. While the union leader is depicted as a person who does not take into account the emotional aspect of his suggestion, he also makes valid points: the manual laundry trade is dying, and the demand had already decreased due to the widespread use of washing machines. They could register the *ghat* as a slum and then give the land to a builder in exchange for a large modern apartment which they can then sell for "over rupees twenty lakhs."⁹² Upon hearing this new idea, some of the *dhabis* are dismayed. How can their life-long trade be reduced to "something negotiable" (17)? Other *dhabis* take warmly to the offer: "Rupees twenty lakhs is a lot of money. If we invest it wisely, it can take care of our old age. It can buy us land in our village and pay for our sons' educations and our daughters' marriages" (17-18). They cannot be reproached for thinking this way. After having toiled all their lives under difficult circumstances, they are now finding their income dwindling instead of increasing. As we have seen in *Last Man in Tower*, the redevelopment projects thrive on these dilemmas. Given their circumstances, those who are offered money and new apartments by mostly shady developers cannot be blamed for believing the promises of a better life; however, these dreams rarely come true, and even if they do, alarming consequences to the city's human, environmental and infrastructural well-being remain.

⁹² A lakh is the name given to one hundred thousand. Rupees twenty lakhs is two million rupees.

When settlers whose make-shift homes are considered ‘legal’ and they are given temporary accommodation in what is called a transit camp, their fortunes turn out to be not much better than those who are ‘illegal’ and rendered homeless through the same redevelopment project. Mataprasad, having lived this once, tries to explain to his colleagues the difficulties associated with transit camps: “no sanitation, no power, rationed water, the location some God-forsaken place outside the city where there’d be no opportunities for work and where they would be easily forgotten” (19). Mataprasad had arrived in “Bombay, in his teens, to earn and save, so that he could get his family out of the transit camp. But he had failed to do so. His younger twin brothers had died, one from dengue, the other from typhoid” (19). Here, Shroff makes use of one infrastructure issue—insufficient water supply to the general area of Mumbai where the *dhobi ghat* is located—to call attention to another infrastructure problem: the transit camps with no water, power or sanitation, and where people may die of dengue or typhoid. The issues present in transit camps may be found in many other neighbourhoods of Mumbai. Prakash notes that the *Human Development Report* for Mumbai paints “an unremittingly dismal picture for the majority of the citizens. Malnourishment, cramped and unhygienic housing, diminishing open space, and ever more crowded suburban train travel to work characterize [the inhabitants’] lives” (288). For example, basic services do not reach most of the *chawls* either. *Chawls* were originally built as living quarters for the mill workers and their families. Most of them are managed by public institutions, but the buildings receive poor services and are in dilapidated conditions. One *dhobi*’s son-in-law is trying to find a *kholi*⁹³ to live with his wife and future baby. He needs thirty thousand rupees as a deposit for a small room which also requires “an extra charge for water,

⁹³ A *kholi* is a one-room residence in a *chawl*. A *chawl* consists of rows of small dwellings (*kholis*) with common toilets and balconies (also see note 33).

electricity, and personal protection—yes, that, too” (8). He explains that all of these expenses are for a dwelling that has “[j]ust enough space to crawl in, water one hour a day, and long queues and fights, and rats, mosquitos, and dogs with disease, and in between huts places serving illicit liquor” (8). Queuing and fighting for water is a fact of life in the *chawls*. Just like the slum settlements, *chawls* are also seen as valuable real estate and they are one by one going under redevelopment projects. In *Ravan and Eddie*, the author Nagarkar, who grew up in the *chawls* himself, characterizes the challenges of filling a bucket at the municipal tap as “The Great Water Wars.” The narrator of *Ravan and Eddie* muses that the residents of the chawl could have “killed for water,” and argues that “[p]eople have been known to kill for less: religion; language; the flag; the colour of a person’s skin or his caste; breaking the queue at a petrol pump” (Nagarkar 67). The narrator, in a factual manner, points out the reason: “supply cannot meet demand. Planning and execution have met the needs of the population figures of a decade or two earlier” (Nagarkar 68); a statement which could have easily come from a news article or a scholarly essay. The flexibility recently adopted by multiple genres allow for such crossovers, in other words, blurring of the genres. Severe water shortages epitomized in *Ravan and Eddie*, as well as the dilapidated conditions of the buildings and lack of sufficient sanitation, it does not make sense to continue with relentless building and rebuilding projects. Contemporary literary narratives take note of this fact: the infrastructure must be improved before any new high-rises are built. However, as we see in “Dhobi Ghat,” and in *Last Man in Tower*, construction and redevelopment are lucrative businesses, and the government officials who may be on the developers’ payroll allow them to go ahead whether or not there are funds—or the will—to install the required infrastructure or to improve the existing one first.

In “Dhobi Ghat,” when Mataprasad explains the lack of services in transit camps, such as sanitation, water and electricity, health care, and transportation to their jobs, his fellow *dhabis* do not wish to listen to him, just like the residents of the Vishram Tower did not want to listen to Masterji of *Last Man in Tower*. As Masterji wanted the society of the Vishram Tower to continue as before—in harmony and in tradition—Mataprasad also hopes to preserve the community of the *ghat*, “his extended family” (20). He tells his colleagues that “he had tried to build them a village within a city, a home with traditions not unlike those of the one they had left behind” (20). However, soon he realizes that “[t]he city had crushed the village,” and that there was no other choice for the *ghat* “but to dissolve itself into the earth, to melt and mesh with the ways of the city” (20). Shroff’s stories usually do not end with a definitive answer; instead, the author likes to make suggestions and leave the rest to the imagination of the reader. In “Dhobi Ghat,” the ambiguous ending works well since Shroff cannot give the readers a conclusion that matches the actual status of the *dhabi ghat*. The *dhabi ghat* is a real place and, at the present time, it is still intact as seen in a recent photograph in figure 1. However, the possibility of the *ghat*’s valuable real estate being taken over by developers has to be a debate that is probably taking place both inside and outside of the *ghat*. In 2016, of the 5000 huts in and around the laundry area, 2350 were demolished. While Mumbai’s *dhabi ghat* “is more than a century old and is a city heritage structure” (Kamath), the redevelopment projects are encroaching the site. The photograph in figure 1 shows the nearby high-rises and the constructions moving closer. The *dhabi ghat* is clearly not as secure as it once had been. Mataprasad, the fictional chief of the *ghat* understands this, and the story closes with a lesson he learns. When Mataprasad is shopping at the fresh foods market, one fish-seller woman tells him that she protects her fish from the stray cats by placing ginger around her baskets. The smell of the ginger prevents the cats from coming

near her fish. Mataprasad finds this very smart. The fish seller “had learned the tricks of guarding her business, of protecting her trade against greedy intruders” (22). Are the *laundrywallas* of “Dhobi Ghat” able to protect their trade from “greedy intruders”? Is Mumbai strong and smart enough to safeguard itself from not only greedy intruders and also greedy insiders? Shroff leaves the readers with these thoughts and, if one day, the world-famous *dhobi ghat* is replaced by high-rises, the readers will remember this short story.



Figure 1. Dhobi Ghat, Mumbai, 2018. Photograph by Lale Eskicioglu.

“Dhobi Ghat,” and the next story I discuss from the *Breathless in Bombay* collection, “This House of Mine,” both demystify transit camps which are an enigma for the regular middle-class reader. Transit camps, having existed for almost five decades⁹⁴ are largely known to the middle classes as a phenomenon that has always been part of Mumbai; one that does not directly relate

⁹⁴ *The Times of India* had reported on September 16, 2011 that a woman who had been living in a transit camp for 33 years was finally allotted a place to live in and call her own. She was relocated to a transit camp “when her tenement was demolished in 1978 and has not yet been reconstructed” (Sequeira).

to them. The news items that report on transit camps do not necessarily connect with the readers on an emotional level, and when they do make an impact, it is not long-lasting. “Dhobi Ghat” and “This House of Mine” defamiliarize transit camps and highlight the hardships of living in one, as well as questioning whether all redevelopment projects are really needed. In the parabolic story “This House of Mine,” the titular ‘house’ is an allegory for Mumbai, and the building’s infrastructural problems represent various present-day issues of the city. The diversity in religion, class, ethnicity, language and sexual identity of the long-time tenants of the story’s ‘house’ constitute a metaphor for the cosmopolitanism of Mumbai, and the characters present a unified front to deal with all the difficulties the physical structure their building—and therefore their lives, homes and businesses—face. The solidarity of the tenants, in spite of their various backgrounds—from illiterate shopkeepers to intellectuals like the narrator—is employed as a tool by Shroff to ask the readers to unite against the problems of their city and their country. As Mumbai was feared to be on the brink of collapse after the atrocities of the 1990s, the old but solid apartment building is similarly brought to a precarious state, through analogous causes such as mismanagement, corruption, and inequality. The ‘house’ in the story will not give in to intolerance against minorities. The story acknowledges all current problems of Mumbai; however, solidarity with one another always comes on top, and the story ends with a message on unity: through working together in harmony, the residents may save their building, and accordingly, the denizens of Mumbai may save their city.

The narrator, one of the tenants of the complex that houses many small businesses as well as resident families, receives “the eviction notice,” and reads it out loud to his neighbours: “Our building was among those slated for redevelopment. It had been examined, it had been inspected, and it had been condemned” (79). Now, they have a month to relocate to a transit camp at a

distant and impractical location (79). Unlike the residents of the Vishram Society of *Last Man in Tower* who owned their apartments, the residents in “This House of Mine” are renters, therefore, they will not receive any perks or cash offers, and they do not have the option of refusing the redevelopment. The actual construction company is unknown to them; they are not directly in communication with the developer. Their adversary is the government. They consider their building “old but sturdy” (79), and the decision to demolish and rebuild seems to be another case of money-making arrangements between developers and some corrupt government officials. “There had been no tremors, no parts of it falling or crumbling—so where did this threat of eviction come from?” the tenants wonder (79-80). The narrator realizes that he and his diverse neighbours are all united in their “fear of the unknown.” They find it difficult to trust the government, “which, as per the newspapers, had the best of intentions, but which remained just that: intentions. In a country of over 1 billion, it was easy to be moved and forgotten. There were several stories to this effect” (80). To lend credence to this possibility of neglect and abandonment, one tenant tells the story of an aunt who is still in a transit camp after twenty-two years (80). According to a city official, they “have a nice transit camp [in Powai]. Nice Greenery. Nice Silence. Hundreds live there” (83). But the math professor among the tenants of the story paints a more realistic picture: “Poor construction, cramped spaces, common bathrooms and toilets, and regular instances of theft. Besides, many of the rooms had been rented out unofficially to locals, and among these were goons who presided and collected protection money every month” (85). Furthermore, unnecessary redevelopments of old and sturdy buildings cause severe disruptions to life and work; the elderly and the sick suffer, artisans’ and small business owners’ livelihoods are lost, and children’s studies are interrupted. The infrastructure to counter these additional difficulties are simply not in place. The transit camp, which itself lacks the most

basic elements of infrastructure, can only take care of the absolute minimum: shelter. Therefore, this diverse community of residents and shopkeepers decides against leaving their homes, and their determination is voiced by one of them as follows: “Over my dead body will we go. Let’s take on those bloody bulldozers. Let’s show them” (81).

As in “Dhobi Ghat,” the first solution the tenants in “This House of Mine” can think of is to offer a bribe to “get the eviction notice changed” (80). After the official at the housing board is presented with a thick brown envelope, the eviction order is rescinded. Instead of demolishing and constructing a new one, the housing board decides on repairing the existing building. Unfortunately, due to lack of proper supervision from the municipality and rampant corrupt practices, the repairs turn into a disaster. The contractor hired by the housing board—presumably chosen based on the bribes received—is a swindler who uses cheap defective materials that leave the building in far worse shape than before the repairs started. The workers replace beautiful mosaics, “the kind that had stood up to the Bombay rains for eighty years,” with cheap terracotta tiles. They bring termite-invested logs into the once-solid building, and anything that is made of wood starts to crumble (87). “Such an old structure would have solid wood, a solid foundation[,]” and the residents wonder “how it came to be infected” (88). This is in reference to the terror years when in Mumbai, “an old structure” with “a solid foundation,” intolerant fundamentalism festered to the point of ruining its diverse fabric. “The edifice of our building was collapsing[,]” the narrator laments, “[i]t was being eaten into, while we ate, slept, and dreamt” (91). Furthermore, the cost of the so-called ‘repairs,’ an unknown amount, will be added to their monthly rent, for an unknown duration, apparently forever. They decide to write a letter explaining their dilemma and send copies to the housing board and to the Bombay Municipal

Corporation.⁹⁵ After listing the difficulties they have suffered and costs they incurred during the ‘repairs,’ the indeterminate amount they are now asked to pay every month, and the termite infestation they are left with due to the inferior quality wood used by the contractor, they close their letter with this poignant plea:

We are bringing this to your notice as dutiful citizens of Mumbai, as people who have lived all our lives in the city. We hope you will take notice of our complaint and ensure that no citizen of Mumbai is put through the indignity of seeing the strong foundation of his/her home and his/her proud possessions reduced to dust. (93)

This is one of the most significant passages in “This House of Mine.” The characters in the story are “dutiful citizens of Mumbai” and they are directly appealing to the readers, also “dutiful citizens of Mumbai,” to not treat their fellow denizens with indignity, to imperil their lives, or to reduce their shared city and its “proud possessions” to dust. Arguably, the “proud possessions” is a reference to the destruction of mosques and temples, and to the thousands of Muslims killed in riots. This is a reminder of the “strong foundation” of Mumbai as a cosmopolitan society, and an entreaty to work together towards fixing the problems such as infrastructure, inequality and corruption.

In the following paragraphs of the story, the author makes his plea even more explicit. Olaf, the neighbour in charge of getting the letter signed by all the dwellers, shows the narrator the thumb prints many have used in lieu of signatures, and says “[t]hese *ghatti*^[96] buggers don’t even know how to sign” (93). He suggests to the narrator that he should only mail the pages that have

⁹⁵ BMC, formerly Bombay Municipal Corporation, now Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation.

⁹⁶ *Ghati* is a colloquial term for Maharashtrians, in other words, the people of the Maharashtra state whose capital is Mumbai. In 2009, Shroff was sued for using the term in a derogatory manner in “This House of Mine,” and after a drawn-out investigation and court case, he was able to convince the judge of the unifying message of the short story and have the case thrown out of court (Shroff, “Letter” 7).

proper signatures. The narrator's reply to this proposal is a lesson that must be grasped if Mumbai is to stand strong against all attacks whether from termites, ethnic intolerance, corruption, or infrastructural deficiencies. "I can't do that," the narrator says, "if I do that I will be no different from the housing board. I will have denied our building its foundation. I will have snipped at its roots" (94). Their building is the metaphor for Mumbai, and if some of the residents of the building/Mumbai are denied their rights, then the foundation of both the building and the city will be on shaky grounds and might be toppled at any time. "This, dear Olaf," the narrator continues, "is not a letter anymore. It is a piece of Bombay, as strong and as real as the ground we stand on" (94). The narrator further ruminates that maybe what they, as a small community in an apartment complex, experienced was simply "to understand the level of coexistence we were capable of" (94):

We were meant to understand that, in some strange way or the other, we were all driven by the same motivations, the same hopes, the same dreams and regrets. It was not just a matter of saving our property or our pride, but that of saving the validity of our entire lives: our past, our present, our future. (94)

This parable-like short story's moral message to the reader is clear: we are all the same, we have the same past, and we are living the same present. If we are to have a future, we must come together and work for Mumbai. The narrator ends the story by wishing to share a drink with each of his neighbours, and to do it soon "just in case the bulldozers come once again. They come without warning" (95).

The last two short stories I have chosen from *Breathless in Bombay*, "Meter Down" and "Traffic," attest to the importance of roads and traffic in the daily lives of Mumbaikars by using them as pretexts in weaving two different tales. While "Meter Down" employs traffic to

highlight several other urban issues, “Traffic” employs it as a metaphor for a troubled time in the life of a professional and independent young woman. The short story “Meter Down” allows the author to offer his readers the perspectives of a taxi driver on matters of traffic and infrastructure. This defamiliarizes the reader who may have seen the issues related to the roads and traffic as a private car owner, a public transport user or a pedestrian. The thought process of the taxi driver in the story brings another layer to the depictions of traffic. In fact, the story presents multiple sides of several public debates on issues of the time the story is set. The protagonist Mohitram has a taxi cab which he parks in front of the luxurious Taj Intercontinental Hotel in Mumbai and waits for customers. He does not take in just anyone who needs a ride; he wants a rich customer whose destination is far away and who will tip well. Twelve years ago, when Mohitram first arrived in Mumbai by train, he was very excited to see this famous city. Everyone on the train had rushed to the door to catch the first impressions of the big city, where dreams could take shape, where fortunes could be built, if one persevered long enough. First the city put you through the grinder, the *chakkhi*, as his uncle would call it. It pummeled you and pushed you, strained you and stretched you, and broke you in, bit by bit. Then it would immunize you to its hardships. Once you were seasoned, it would reward you for your penance—lavishly, in a way no other city could. (209-10)

This information was communicated to Mohitram by his uncle who had been living in Mumbai for a long time. In this speech, the part about getting used to the hardships of Mumbai is a realistic expectation; however, the lavish awards only happen to a very small minority. The uncle who delivered this inspirational message lives “in a dark, cheerless hovel in a South Bombay slum,” where “black soapy water gathered and foamed outside and toxic fumes from frantically primed kerosene stoves rose” (210). Given the conditions in which his uncle is living, Mohitram

takes the promises made on behalf of Mumbai with a grain of salt. The uncle, however, tells the truth when he says that Bombay has “seen many tragedies, faced many hardships,” and lists “a fire, a riot, three bomb blasts, and a flood” as examples of those calamities (210). As he adapted to the difficulties of living in Mumbai, Mohitram also became a hardened, somewhat merciless man. He hated

all those who made him sweat and toil, who commanded him to *fly* them to their destination, who made him slave for his survival, driving him through narrow lanes and crowded spaces while they worked in plush air conditioned offices and drew fancy salaries and went home at a reliable hour, knowing that their savings were gaining interest in the bank. (211)

Here, we see, once again, the highlighting of inequalities and contrasts between the lives of haves and have-nots. Who can blame Mohitram for not being sympathetic to his customers’ trials and tribulations which are trivial compared to what he suffers on a daily basis? He refuses customers for short distances and turns a deaf ear to their urgent appeals. In this short story, he finally gets a foreign customer who wishes to go all the way to the airport, and in addition, he looks like a rich businessman who might not “begrudge some extra baksheesh” (212).

When the long drive starts with the foreigner in the back seat, Mohitram starts to warm up to this pleasant looking young man, while feeling a little “shame” for having “to rip him off” (213). He wishes to converse with his passenger “about the harassment to Bombay’s *taxiwallas*: the threat of introducing harsh pollution norms, the expense in changing to CNG cylinders, the sharp increase in road taxes” (213). These measures proposed by the municipality in order to reduce Mumbai’s air pollution have consequences for taxi drivers, and Shroff leaves it to the readers to

consider both sides of the debate. When the passenger and the taxi driver arrive at Peddar Road⁹⁷ “slowing for a traffic jam” (213), Mohitram starts contemplating

the issue of the flyover, the overpass. The government wanted to construct an overpass over the main road, between the residential buildings, to diffuse traffic jams and keep the traffic flowing. It made sense, for so much time was wasted on this stretch, especially during the peak hours. The overpass would have been built had it not been for the bulbul^[98] of Bollywood, India’s nightingale sisters who joined hands with the residents and led a protest march. (213-4)

This is a fictional account of a true project. According to Mohitram, the two Bollywood singers and actresses even “threatened to stop singing, threatened move out of Bombay, to leave the country” (214). As a result, the overpass proposal gets suspended. The lack of an express flyover for this busy road causes our protagonist to wait “in his taxi, sweating, swearing, while around him people in luxury sedans cooled themselves under the throb of powerful air conditioners and tapped away to soft, pounding music” (214). It is a thought-provoking exercise to compare this fictional account with the actual news items on the controversial overpass. The flyover was proposed in 2000, and after much back-and-forth among the public and the involved parties, the project was finally shelved in 2016. Bollywood’s nightingale sisters mentioned in “Meter Down” are Lata Mangeshkar and Asha (Mangeshkar) Bhosle, and they did oppose the flyover, along with many other residents of the downtown area where Peddar Road is located. The Peddar Road Residents Association has also been influential in overturning the decision. “The Peddar Road viaduct would have bypassed 10 [traffic lights]” between the two end-points of the proposed

⁹⁷ While the “Peddar” spelling is common, the correct name of this famous downtown road is Pedder.

⁹⁸ Bulbul is a songbird which is different than a nightingale; however, in India, it does refer to a nightingale.

plan. Currently, it takes up to “45 minutes” between those two points, especially “[d]uring rush hours” (Shaikh). Therefore, Mohitram, the taxi driver in Shroff’s story, has a point in regretting the cancellation of this project. The rumours about the threat of the singer sisters—that they would leave Mumbai if the crossover was built—also existed in real life; however, Lata Mangeshkar denied that she ever made such a threat (“Flyover”). In 2006, Mangeshkar, who had been living in the area for 45 years, explained her reasons for opposing the project: “This is a very narrow road and it is proven that it is [in a] seismological zone. If there is drilling on the road, the foundations of many buildings will be shaken” (“Flyover”). She expounds that the residents of the road “have expressed their fear that there would be pollution, noise and a threat to their buildings if this flyover comes up” (“Flyover”). In other words, had the viaduct been built, it would have fixed one infrastructural issue, but like a band-aid solution, it would have engendered other infrastructural problems. The fictional rendition of this real-life debate represents both sides with hyperbole and sarcasm as the narrator explains, from Mohitram’s perspective, that the bulbul’s songs “were classics: they had made people fall in love, fall out of love, families rejoice, lovers unite, prime ministers weep, and soldiers rise in nationalist fury” (214). This flowery and sarcastic version renews the matter in the readers’ awareness.

After the Peddar Road, Mohitram and his passenger arrive at the Mahim Creek. The foreign customer starts complaining about the smell, “looking at the black marsh, a slime of subterranean neglect, and wrinkling his nose in disgust” (216). Mohitram explains that it is “The Mithi River. It runs through half of Mumbai and drains into this creek, but people here treat it like a gutter, throwing things in it, so it changed color” (216). Once again, this is a portrayal of an actual place. A recent study published in the Indian Journal of Ecology found that the “faecal coliform (FC)—an indication of human and animal excreta—in the [Mahim] creek is 180 times the safe

limit prescribed by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)," and the "untreated domestic sewage flowing into the creek through the Mithi river" makes the survival of any aquatic life in the creek impossible (Chatterjee). Shroff peppers the route of Mohitram's taxi with real places and real stories, not only to realistically portray Mumbai as the setting of the story, but also to invite the reader's attention to several issues.

Mohitram's nice-looking foreign passenger informs him that he will not be getting on a plane at the airport; instead, he is going there simply to give a friend a package. When Mohitram hears that his customer will need "a taxi—your taxi—to come back" (217), he is overjoyed. Now he will be making double the money. This upbeat mood of the protagonist gives the author the right occasion to provide us with another snapshot of Mumbai's traffic. Mohitram's "taxi flew past buses, rickshaws, scooters, and a row of factories that looked abandoned. Cars heaped with luggage honked sharply and whizzed past. Trucks came in close, then moved away, as if they had no intention of hurting this fly of a cab" (217). Unfortunately, the nice, rich foreigner in an expensive suit turns out to be a smuggler. Soon, the police is at the tail of Mohitram's taxi. Guns are drawn, and both the driver and the passenger are taken to the police station. Mohitram ends up losing a day with zero earnings. The foreigner that seemed to be the savior was actually a criminal trying to exploit Mohitram's country. Given Shroff's inclination for fortifying his tales with moral lessons, the plot twist of the story may be read as one. The message here might be that the solutions to Mohitram's or Mumbai's problems will not come from the outside, rather, they can only come from the inside; from Mohitram himself, from Mumbaikars—some of whom he rejected to take into his cab—and from the readers of this story. Had Mohitram not spurned the more modest customers earlier in the day, he would have made money and he would not have been held at the police station until midnight, missing the arrival of his sister; something he was

looking forward to and had great plans for. Instead, he deluded himself with the conviction that a foreigner was better than his own people, and would help him with his troubles. Just as Mohitram cannot receive any relief from a stranger, reducing Mumbai's air pollution, easing its traffic, cleaning up its creeks and rivers, solving the sanitation issues can only be done by the proper inhabitants of Mumbai.

The last *Breathless in Bombay* story I would like to discuss is “Traffic” which illustrates the innovative new forms employed by contemporary authors in tackling Mumbai’s ongoing problems. While the story is ultimately about a troubled time in the life of a strong, independent young woman in Mumbai, telling it in correlation with the city’s traffic defamiliarizes the latter. The readers see the traffic in tandem with the protagonist’s emotions which allows for renewed observations. The title “Traffic” signals the presence of both literal and metaphorical aspects of the word ‘traffic’ in the narrative. Since Mumbai’s traffic is one of the defining characteristics of the city, Shroff is able to connect this innate urban element with the mental traffic—confusion, doubt, lack of clarity—of the story’s protagonist. By painting chaotic pictures of the traffic, the author is also offering an insight into the frame of mind of Vicki, the heroine. The double connotation of traffic is introduced in the opening paragraph of the story:

It was that time of the day when everybody was scrambling toward something. The streets were in a scramble, the traffic was in a scramble, and minds, unwittingly, were in a deep scramble, most of them possessed by certain untoward events of the day, which had done nothing to please or elevate them or lead them to believe in their luck and invite a feeling of well-being. (23)

The story, starting with this chaotic and somewhat foreboding scene, matches the actual traffic in the streets with the psyche of its protagonist, Vicki. The hectic landscape of the story’s beginning

suggests the turmoil in Vicki's mind; she is, in fact, scrambling with her thoughts, just like the traffic and the people on the streets of Mumbai. "The cars honked. The city rose and scattered the dust of twilight into her eyes" (25). With this, we get a sense of Vicki and her city becoming one.

Vicki is hoping for a phone call "that would make her heart leap" (25), and from her anticipation we understand that she had been separated from her boyfriend at the time of the above traffic scene. The text that follows goes back in time and starts narrating the beginnings of a relationship between Vicki and a young artist. At various stages of this relationship, to embody Vicki's state of mind, the story reverts to traffic. As we keep learning more, through flashbacks, about Vicki's domestic life with her boyfriend, we get a sense of her thoughts in the language of Mumbai's traffic. For example, when Vicki feels trapped—"stuck"—in her relationship, we see that the traffic slows down, and even comes to a halt:

Now the traffic had slowed, stopped, a burgeoning sheet of hot metal flowing in cool colors. Vicki readied herself to cross. In her state it was important not to be stuck; she'd been that way too long, and today was actually her way out. She mingled with the walkers and crossed obediently, looking over her shoulder, and it occurred to her why she was there among them, why she needed *their* presence, *their* panic, in front, at the side, shoulder-to-shoulder, and bottom-close, even that! She was scared of being alone. (37)

Vicki is actually happy to be among the rush-hour crowd, among her fellow denizens; she wants to be with them, and cross the street with them. She is scared of the traffic but not as much as she is scared of being alone. Once again the traffic, the activity, the crowd that are the soul of Mumbai parallel Vicki's emotional state. While the traffic distresses and comforts her at the same time, she knows that she would have felt similarly "if she had continued living with

Nandkumar” (37-38). The streets of Mumbai reflect her uneasy relationship with her boyfriend; mollifying her loneliness but presenting many perils.

When the flashbacks tell the readers about Vicki’s life with her boyfriend taking a turn for the worse, Vicki’s presence in the traffic is also imperiled:

Parp. A sharp horn beeped in her ear. She shrank back. Oh, her concentration was wavering. She was crossing once more and needed to be careful. There was no signal here, no cops to control or to direct the flow. The traffic was coming from all sides, an unplanned anarchy, a free flow of metal, the city left alone to find its own method, its own discipline, which just wasn’t there. It happened because the cars were too many and the roads too few. (46)

Her experience with the traffic in this excerpt mirrors the precarious status of Vicki’s domestic life: there is instability both at her home and on the street. Like the sharp horn beeping in her ear in the traffic, she receives a warning—or maybe even a threat—from Nandu at home. Her concentration wavers in the chaos of the traffic and she needs to be cautious. Similarly, at home too, the security she used to feel is in jeopardy, and she must be careful. The balance has been upset, and she no longer feels that there is a structure in her love life just as there is no structure at this intersection of Mumbai which does not have any traffic lights or any other form of regulation. Vicki, like the city, is “left alone to find its own method, its own discipline” (46). Shroff uses this parallel style not only as an aesthetic device to make the readers feel Vicki’s dilemma, but also to deliver social commentaries on Mumbai’s traffic such as “the cars were too many and the roads too few” (46). This remark is quite accurate since, as indicated by one of the epigraphs at the top of this chapter, 400 vehicles were being added to Mumbai roads on a daily basis by 2008. (“Prepare”).

In the earlier stages of the story, Vicki is in search of a settled and happy life with Nandu whom she had just met at the time. During those hopeful pursuits of a warm, charming family life, “the traffic kept coming” (33) symbolizing all the possibilities, but she was also unsure, “at a crossroad, waiting” (34), maybe even aware of the crisis that awaited her; “everything looked dangerous, capable of running her into the ground” (34). Now, after having been thrown out by her drunk and virulent boyfriend, Vicki has suicidal thoughts and her meandering in the traffic aligns her with the direction of the traffic. “She and the vehicles were headed the same way, to the same destination,” she contemplates (55). In her dark frame of mind, she observes that the cars are lined “bumper to bumper” (55) on Mumbai’s beautiful Marine drive. She sits facing the traffic and reflects on her plan to kill herself. While watching the traffic, which might have been part of her fatalistic plans, she has an epiphany: “The trick was to be out of the traffic—out of the chaos, the noise, the blare of horns, the rush of acceleration, the screech of brakes, the brinkmanship of cutting in and out, and the clever last-minute dodge to avoid hurt” (56). By its avoidance, the traffic, that was once so threatening, even deadly, becomes a life saver; not just Vicki’s life, but also her unborn child’s life, for it is during this revelation we also learn that Vicki is pregnant. The readers are left to deduce that Vicki will eliminate the turmoil in her life that was caused by the toxicity of an unstable and addict man, and she will not seek a reconciliation with him. She decides to stay out of the literal and metaphorical traffic to live a life free of turmoil and toxicity, and to provide the same to the child she is expecting.

All stories in Shroff’s short story collection, as per the author’s aim, sensitize the readers to many of Mumbai’s extant problems such as the redevelopment projects, water shortages, transit camps, road infrastructure or the aids epidemic. Mumbai residents, who may have been hardened to certain common sights and topics, see and consider them anew through these stories. The short

story format is suitable for concentrating on one single theme at a time which allows Shroff to dig deeper into the issues he wants to address. This theme-oriented quality of the short story makes a different kind of impact on the readers: sudden and incisive, and therefore, effective. The short form also permits Shroff to parabolize and offer moral lessons. All stories in *Breathless in Bombay* end in messages, if heeded, would improve the lives of Mumbaikars in their beloved city.

“Our great municipaltee”: Altaf Tyrewala’s *No God in Sight*

Tyrewala’s debut novel *No God in Sight*, an experimental work, consists of short episodes, not unlike short stories, each connected to the next by a different thread. *No God in Sight* is included here to emphasize the innovative new forms employed by contemporary authors in highlighting present-day issues of Mumbai.⁹⁹ The characters in *No God in Sight* pass the narration onto one another, and the stories travel Mumbai, touching upon a multitude of lives in diverse settings. Jumping from voice to voice, all the anecdotes come full circle by returning, at the end, to the first two characters we have met at the beginning. The common thread that holds the novel together is Mumbai whose infrastructural problems had once despaired the author himself. “I searched high and low in Mumbai and its surrounding towns and villages for a suitable place to call home,” he says, “I could not see myself living in places without electricity, water supply, sewage, or pliable roads” (qtd. in Rota 3). *No God in Sight*, in concurrence with the other works studied in this dissertation, concentrates on Mumbai’s immediate reality containing

⁹⁹ Tyrewala’s subsequent work, *Ministry of Hurt Sentiments* (2012), is long poem that focuses on Mumbai’s day-to-day problems. The depictions of Mumbai in this work are intentionally gruesome, and therefore shocking. The author’s purpose is to not hold anything back, and to shock the readers in the hopes of getting the message across: Mumbai needs a transformation and Mumbaikars should not get too accustomed to its current grim sights.

far less postcolonial commentary than the novels from few decades ago. Tyrewala explains in an interview that his work was never described as ‘postcolonial,’ and that he would not have liked it to be categorized that way (qtd. in Rota 2). He writes from his own experiences, and the readers can discern from *No God in Sight* that the Hindu-Muslim division that was precipitated by the riots of 1990s is one ongoing issue he feels very strongly about. While addressing multitudinous urban issues in each of the brief episodes that constitute *No God in Sight*, ethnic and religious divide is referred to in multiple sections, and this theme appears to be the one that Tyrewala wishes to tackle the most. However, as in other contemporary narratives, infrastructure and traffic appear regularly, and in some instances, the accounts may be gruesome:

There is an open gutter at the market’s entrance (this is where rats breed whole generations). Our great municipaltee, instead of fixing the gutter, put planks over the four-feet-deep sewer so people can cross over.

One evening some months ago, a drunk slipped into this gutter. No one dared to help. He languished for twenty minutes amid dead fish from the pet shop, phlegm from the grocer’s chest, curdled white slush from the milkwallah, blood from Medina Chicken, and liter upon liter of piss from all of us. When the fire brigade came for him, there was a huge audience. (158-9)

If there is a hyperbole in this sketch, it works to defamiliarize, and then re-acquaint the readers to the bleakness of the sights they may no longer noticing. This story takes place in the fictional “Medina Chicken Mart,” which is part of the market described above. In *Last Man in Tower*, we have seen a similarly polluted black water running through the slums near the Vishram Tower. In the short story “Meter Down” from *Breathless in Bombay*, we read about the “black soapy water gathered and foamed outside” (210). Contemporary chroniclers of Mumbai do not shy away

from depicting some of the grimdest realities in their city, and the readers are being confronted with characterizations they may find disturbing. When the readers start thinking outside of their comfort zones, the desired transformation for the city may start.

In one of the chapters of *No God in Sight*, Tyrewala, introduces the readers to “[a] slum on the top of a building” (61). This is a phenomenon that is not commonly seen in contemporary literary narratives: slums on the roofs of high-rises. We saw in the previous section that *Last Man in Tower* featured a few construction workers and their families living on some of the higher stories of a building under construction. But Tyrewala’s small slum settlement is actually on the roof of a finished high-rise where all the apartments below are inhabited. Suleiman, one of the many characters in the novel, describes this tiny settlement as consisting of “nine shacks and two toilets with running water” (61). When it rains, water flows into the huts and the wind rattles the tin roof (62), but, as far as the dwellers of this roof hamlet are concerned, the only catch is to climb “seventeen floors (since us slum-dwellers may not use the lifts)” (62). Suleiman and his bride count themselves lucky to live in a roof slum, but when the young couple’s great aunt comes to live with them, she considers the place a “hellhole in the sky,” and is not pleased with their “ten-by-ten tin shack; too tinny and suffocating.” She hates the curtains drawn “across the room for privacy,” and “the two loos shared by nine other slum-dwelling families” (60). While rooftop shanty towns are a common occurrence in Hong Kong and other megalopolises, they are not widespread in Mumbai. The author is drawing attention to the increases in both slum settlements and the high-rises in Mumbai. As more and more slum neighbourhoods are encroached by redevelopment and gentrifying projects, lower income families may have no other choice than to utilize whatever space they can find, and that may include the rooftops of fancy buildings. This scenario, as those that are already discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrates

the massive disparity between affluent and poverty-stricken residences, and the proximity of the two—a literal juxtaposition—cannot be more profound.

In *No God in Sight*, Tyrewala makes several brief references to traffic such as “the auto[rickshaw] is forced to move at the pace of a sick snail” (119), “the din of traffic and the dusty heat” (120), and “[t]he car moves for some minutes, and halts for twice as much time” (189). In his nonfictional writings, the author complains about “the existential torture of being trapped in rush-hour traffic jams” and admits that Mumbai’s “realities became harder to gloss over” (“End of a Romance”). After their futile search for an affordable as well as liveable place in Mumbai, Tyrewala and his wife become disillusioned with the city. Tyrewala asserts that “Mumbai’s real estate market is the single-most frustrating aspect of life in the metropolis” (“End of a Romance”). During this period of long and disappointing search for a place to live in, he explains that they had a few hopeful finds in the suburbs: “We almost zeroed in on several spacious flats in pleasant complexes, until we unearthed the infrastructural flaws of life in Mumbai’s suburbs[:] iffy water supply, outrageous electricity tariffs and the threat of being marooned during monsoon” (“End of a Romance”). In *No God in Sight*, Tyrewala voices his young family’s seemingly unrealistic expectations through sarcasm as one character blames it all on the “people.” In the story, a police station is closed in the middle of work hours in a weekday, because the entire police force has gone to provide security for the visiting Prime Minister’s procession. A woman who comes to the police station to report her missing husband finds the station empty and locked. The sole officer present—waiting to be dismissed at the end of the day due to corruption charges—is subjected to the woman’s surprise and dismay: “How can a police station be closed?” (126). The officer laments the expectations of Mumbai’s denizens: “These people, these people are the problem. The police station must always remain open, the streets

must always be clean, the neighbourhood must always be quiet” (126-7). In other words, there would be no problems in Mumbai if only its people, the author Tyrewala among them, stopped expecting proper services from their institutions.

The episodes in *No God in Sight*, like the short stories in *Breathless in Bombay*, make everyday sights that have become unnoticeable visible again. Literary works, as Felski suggests, “infiltrate and inform our lives” and they have “real-world consequences” (5). These two twenty-first century Mumbai fictions aim to bring about positive outcomes and a change for the better in Mumbai. The short stories in *Breathless in Bombay* and the semi-independent stories in each of the episodes of *No God in Sight* allow the authors to address their readers in a more personal manner and solicit immediate response. The two works, both peppered with social commentary on all aspects of life in Mumbai, employ different strategies in defamiliarizing the issues. The short stories in *Breathless in Bombay* take well-known topics and, having rendered them new with a twist in the storytelling, bring them back into the readers’ consciousness. *No God in Sight* experiments not just with the format of the novel but with the delivery of its messages as well. Sometimes with sarcasm, sometimes with heavy-handed descriptions, the novel urges the readers to see what they have become used to not seeing.

“The Bone Collector”: Nnedi Okorafor’s *Lagoon*

Okorafor’s *Lagoon* brings us to Lagos narratives. While *Lagoon* is a quintessential Lagos novel, it is dissimilar to other works in this dissertation because of its science-fiction/fantasy genre. Okorafor calls her work an “organic fantasy” and maintains that it is the kind of fantasy that grows out of reality. She explains that fantasy in general “has the power to make something familiar strange,” and her version of fantasy “blooms directly from the soil of the real” (“Organic” 278). *Lagoon*, a city novel that takes place in present-day Lagos, makes extensive use

of this direct growth out of the real, and depicts many real-life problems such as corruption, savage military, internet fraud, manipulation of the believers by greedy religious leaders, economic inequality, dangerous roads, and environmental disasters caused by oil extraction. Because urban settings are suitable for realist themes, we are able to find commentary on social problems in twenty-first century speculative fictions that are set in Mumbai and Lagos. When the plot is situated in a real city at the present-time, the narrative is inevitably connected to actual locales which lend themselves to social commentary. This is particularly true in megacities where millions of inhabitants experience daily life. In fact, some authors choose these urban settings for their speculative fiction narratives precisely to engage in social critique.¹⁰⁰ *Lagoon* is a rich and multi-layered work which can be read as an allegory of colonialism, as an ecofiction, or, as the author prefers, through the lenses of Africanfuturism and Africanjujuism.¹⁰¹ While the novel integrates African mythology and spirituality with science fiction, it also offers

¹⁰⁰ Another speculative fiction narrative that is of interest to this dissertation is Manil Suri's *The City of Devi* which has been mentioned earlier. *The City of Devi* is a near-future dystopia novel set in Mumbai. It defamiliarizes the city's ethnic unrest that followed the terrorist events of the 1990s by taking the crisis to an extreme level. This dystopic novel also addresses other real issues present in Mumbai such as corruption and water shortages.

¹⁰¹ Okorafor calls herself "an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist." She defines the terms as follows: "Africanfuturism is a sub-category of science fiction. Africanjujuism is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative" ("Africanfuturism"). *Lagoon* has been read through the lens of Afrofuturism, a term the author does not think truly represents her works. One concise characterization of Afrofuturism is that it is an alternative to "colonially inherited meanings of Blackness and therefore presents the possibility of a future that is neither a violent revolution nor a repetition of the past" (Marquis 404). Moira Marquis further adds that Afrofuturism is an "awareness to a creative re-imagining of Blackness." This creativity can "cultivat[e] new social realities, as people enact their beliefs about themselves and others" (416). The author argues that the term she coined, "Africanfuturism," is better suited to Africa while Afrofuturism better corresponds to the African diaspora. She explains that

"Africanfuturism" is similar to "Afrofuturism" in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West. ("Africanfuturism")

commentary on daily struggles of Lagosians, and urges the readers to imagine and contribute to solutions.

Lagoon is unlike the other works studied in this dissertation most of which conform to the new social realist framework. However, *Lagoon*'s innovative hybrid form and its portrayal of contemporary Lagos makes it a valuable addition to the other literary narratives I engage with. The book's fantasy aspect, its aliens and its deities and spirits—"other things inhabiting Lagos besides carbon-based creatures" (122)—defamiliarize problems extant in Lagos and inspire the readers to reimagine Lagos without those issues. As one character, an internet fraudster, wows to reconsider his actions after having seen Ijele, the God of the Masquerade wreak havoc at a Cyber Café (199), the readers are also urged to re-evaluate their habits and convictions as they learn and re-learn something about themselves and about their city. At the core of *Lagoon*, as suggested by Esthie Hugo, there is "a mythological merging of visible and invisible, reality and fantasy, local and global, human and nonhuman" (48). Okri, another Lagos author, has been blending his narratives with fantasy for decades. His Lagos novel *Dangerous Love* does not possess the conventions of realist literature; however, it combines mythology and fantasy with elements of social realism. Okri, who sees "the presence of myth" in reality, believes that the supernatural can be a useful aid in depicting the real more fully or delivering it more forcefully. In *Lagoon*, for example, the personification of Lagos's most dangerous highway as a monster who eats the travellers and collects their bones drives home the message emphatically: a reform on road safety policies and procedures is badly needed. Today, there are new movements which "[explore] current social issues through the lens of sci-fi," and whose "purpose is social change and societal transformation" (brown 197), as well as new arguments that suggest realist fiction may not be sufficient to represent all the complexities of our contemporary world (Burnett 121).

In *Lagoon*, I found meaningful threads of realism that guided my analysis of Lagos traffic and infrastructure depicted in the novel. Science fiction, Lisa Yaszek contends, “as a modern literary genre has always had an activist agenda” (3). She further explains that “SF authors have used the genre to promote various social, political, and economic agendas” (3-4), and she adds that it is “an ideal way to allegorically explore the here and now” (4). Okorafor clearly has an activist agenda, and *Lagoon* is a deeply personal project for her.

Lagoon, a fundamentally original and distinct work, is about ‘change.’ Aliens land in Lagos and declare: “We are change” (112). Later, a tale-spinning spider reminds the readers that “[c]hange begets change” (193). The novel, using the message of change brought to Lagos by the aliens, aims to inspire the readers so that they too make changes for the better. As multiple incidents in the novel either implicitly or explicitly feature deities and spiritual beings from African folklore, the story of the aliens landing in Lagos is narrated by diverse creatures, such as a swordfish or an arthropod, as well as by humans. The aliens and the African spirits partner to solve Lagos’s daily problems one by one, and these amendments cause the characters to profess to change—improve, correct—their own behaviours and outlooks. Change begets change, and at the end, through the ‘alien mist,’ a part of every Lagosian becomes a little alien; they are alienated, defamiliarized. They recognize in themselves the will and the power required for transformation. Okorafor’s goal is to represent Nigerians truly and realistically with their flaws and strengths, and to highlight present-day problems she would like to see fixed first such as the dangerous roads, and the environmental and economic impact of oil extraction.¹⁰² In fact, the

¹⁰² Okorafor explains that she had written *Lagoon* partially in response to Neill Blomkamp’s 2009 movie *District 9* which is set in South Africa (Marquis 403). *District 9* is a problematic text from race and representation perspectives. The highly questionable portrayal of the Nigerian minority in the movie had upset Okorafor, and she decided to write a science fiction novel that contrasted *District 9*, and represented Nigerians realistically and

novel begins and ends with the themes of roads and fuel, and a swordfish is the novel's first and the last narrator. At the beginning, the swordfish pierces a crude oil hose, or "the dead snake" as she calls it (5), and at the end, she reports that she is now able to enjoy "the clear water" (289), and thus the novel comes full circle.

The individuality of *Lagoon* is established at the top with this unusual dedication: "To the diverse and dynamic people of Lagos, Nigeria—animals, plant, and spirit." Spirits, or "divine essence[s]" as Soyinka calls them (*The Road*, 149), are vital to both Okorafor's and Soyinka's works. In addition to unique form and content elements, as this dissertation maintains, this contemporary Lagos novel strives to improve life in Lagos by emphasizing daily issues, and encouraging the readers to play a part in their resolution. In this particular reading, I argue that the book suggests a positive change which will come from within the people of Lagos through a reassessment of the current individualistic and short-sighted habits present in the society. These habitual manners have been tainting everything from driving to earning a living to governing. While the aliens correct and repair some of these problems on the spot, the readers understand that the real solutions are inside Lagosians and all they need is a change in mentality and a recognition of their own agency. The narrative, by making Lagosians ingest the aliens' fog, defamiliarizes them with the daily issues, and allows them to notice the roads that eat human flesh and the ocean that is poisoned. The story proposes a re-adaptation of Nigerian values and traditions for the transformation of the society as a whole. The author is a true believer that "[s]cience fiction carries the potential to change the world. Literally. It *has* changed the world"

equitably. *Lagoon* may have been conceived, in part, out of that desire. It depicts all the good and the bad of contemporary Lagos, including the "crooks and saints" ("My Response").

(“African”). In this case, it will do so, not necessarily by inspiring technological and scientific advancements, but by calling attention to the problems of Lagos that can be improved by individual and communal acts. *Lagoon* asks the readers to imagine what would happen if there were more sensible approaches to fuel production and consumption. Fuel, a key theme in the story, is also a keyword in the aliens’ first contact. In fact, *Lagoon* may be read as petrofiction (Jue 172).¹⁰³ The term petrofiction was first used, in 1992, by Amitav Ghosh as the title of his review of Abdelrahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt*. While the concept is not recent, there is growing interest in reading contemporary novels as petrofiction. Ghosh, in his seminal text, suggests that the stink of oil is emanating from “unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises” and that it is now also reeking of “pollution and environmental hazards” (30). Ghosh remarks that the stink was seeping into the “rooms where serious fiction is written and read” (30) which is a reference to the lack of literature—at the publication time his “Petrofiction” text—that tackled issues arising from oil extraction and consumption. As one of the reasons of the inadequate treatment of oil in literature, Ghosh offers the multinational and international aspect of oil. He suggests that “the novel is never more comfortable than when it is luxuriating in a ‘sense of place,’ reveling in its unique power to evoke mood and atmosphere” (30). The brilliance of *Lagoon* comes exactly from the fact that Okorafor is touching upon all of the sources of the stench—the oil leak, the pollution, the environmental impact, the loss of livelihoods, the corruption—as well as vividly evoking the mood and atmosphere of Lagos. As Melody Jue points out, *Lagoon* is asking the

¹⁰³ As noted in chapter 1, there is a “rich tradition of environmental writing in Nigeria” (Egya, *Nature* 2), and two notable examples are Kaine Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* (2006) and Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010). While many texts in the Nigerian canon of ecocriticism are not Lagos-based, most Lagos narratives, such as *Welcome to Lagos* and Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*, make a point of including commentary on Niger Delta and oil extraction issues.

readers to imagine “what a postpetroleum Nigeria might look like” (175), a very bold proposition. This suggestion defamiliarizes—alienates—the readers more than the aliens in the story do. The readers are encouraged to imagine the craziest, wildest possibilities. When the readers can imagine the ultimate, then they can easily consider more pragmatic and balanced alternatives. The aliens cause all Lagosians to become a little strange, a little alien. They inhale the aliens’ mist and are transformed by it. The change Okorafor wants to engender in her readers is like the aliens’ fog: “Do you all remember that fog? You should if you were in Lagos; wherever you were, whether you were inside or outside, you inhaled the fog” (287). Okorafor is telling the readers that change is possible; all they need is a mental shift, the kind the aliens’ mist gave to all Lagosians in *Lagoon*.

In *Lagoon*, nature, and all the plants, creatures and spirits in it have important roles to play. The swordfish, first narrator of the novel, is on a mission. It wants to stab and kill “the largest predator in these waters,” the one that brought “the stench” and “the noise and made the world bleed black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water’s surface” (3). She stabs into the “giant snake” which starts deflating (4). This episode of the swordfish was inspired by a news story from 2010 when a “[s]wordfish punctured part of an oil loading pipe in Angola” (“Swordfish” and Okorafor, “Insight”). Just as the swordfish “swims away in triumph,” the aliens arrive, and the ocean becomes “wilder and more alive,” like a paradise the swordfish had once seen and lost. Now, “the water here is clean and clear” (5). As the aliens make contact with ocean’s creatures, the latter become bigger and healthier; missing body parts re-grow and injuries heal. As the narration of the swordfish ends, the text briefly reverts to a different format to issue the following proclamation:

Despite the FPSO Mystras's^[104] loading hose leaking crude oil, the ocean water just outside Lagos, Nigeria, is now so clean that a cup of its salty-sweet goodness will heal the worst human illnesses and cause a hundred more illnesses not yet known to humankind. It is more alive than it has been in centuries, and it is teeming with aliens and monsters. (6)

Similar to a narrator's voice in a documentary film, a footnote in a report, or an excerpt from a news item, these comments in italics, inserted at several places throughout the novel, step out of the narrative flow, and offer another layer to the story in an original format. Nigeria is one of the largest oil producers in the world. While oil has been providing "approximately 90% of foreign exchange earnings and 80% of federal revenue" for Nigeria, the negative effects have been calamitous. Firstly, Nigeria's "natural resources have enriched a small minority while the vast majority of people have become increasingly impoverished," and secondly, the negative impact on Nigerian biodiversity has been devastating (Ugochukwu and Ertel 139). Crude oil leaks and tanker explosions do happen in Nigeria, and many people have lost their livelihoods because of them. Preventing further damage to the Nigerian people and to the environment is a cause close to Okorafor's heart, and many other contemporary authors share her conviction. Abani, for one, outlines the plight as follows:

If Lagos is a body, and the oil pipelines crisscrossing it are veins, then the inhabitants are vampires. This vampirism is new. It started slowly. Someone somewhere bored a hole into the pipelines to steal some oil – a drum here and there. Then it began to grow and the

¹⁰⁴ According to the website BalticShipping.com, "FPSO Mystras is a chemical/oil tanker, built in 1976," and owned by Nigeria Petroleum Development. Its home port is Lagos, and it sails "under the flag of Nigeria." FPSO stands for Floating Production Storage and Offloading unit.

people like hungry mosquitoes began to drill more and more holes, taking greater and greater risks.

The city bled thick sweet crude into containers that were sold and resold and then the city rebelled and the veins, tapped too much, too quickly, too dangerously began to explode. Like a victim reclaiming its body from a deadly virus, the city began to kill its parasites, its succubae. (“Lagos: A Pilgrimage”)

Therefore, it is plausible that the “*loading hose*” of FPSO Mystras, a real and extant tanker which is older than four decades, is leaking crude oil. The swordfish narrator knows about the “black ooze that left poison rainbows on the water’s surface” (3), but today she notices something else, something beautiful. It seems that the aliens who have just arrived in Lagos’s lagoon have somehow wiped out all the pollution from the waters, and this newly decontaminated wholesome water will be both a blessing and a curse for humankind. While it will cure all known diseases, it will also cause many others as yet unknown. There is a lot to unpack in this crucial opening statement which encapsulates the purport of the entire novel. Firstly, the focus is on the crude oil extraction and its human and environmental impact. This issue is of utmost importance to the author, and it is revisited throughout the novel. Okorafor is asking the readers to imagine an ocean and marine life without the “black ooze,” the crude oil poison. Clearly, this is a very desirable thing. But Okorafor is not proposing this as a utopic outcome. The novel does not entertain black and white solutions, rather, it shows multiple perspectives and leaves it to the reader to imagine the rest. Therefore, the water’s “*salty-sweet goodness will heal the worst human illnesses and cause a hundred more illnesses not yet known to humankind*” (6) indicates that a positive transformation will improve the quality of life while remaining realistic about

other problems that may—in fact, certainly will—arise in the future. Okorafor is not promising a utopia, instead, asking the readers to imagine a better future together.

Lagoon starts at Lagos’s famous Bar Beach. From the perspective of Adaora, one of the main characters, we are offered a description of this legendary locale which is referred to in all Lagos narratives:

In many ways, Bar Beach was a perfect sample of Nigerian society. It was a place of mixing. The ocean mixed with the land, and the wealthy mixed with the poor. Bar Beach attracted drug dealers, squatters, various accents and languages, seagulls, garbage, biting flies, tourists, all kinds of religious zealots, hawkers, prostitutes, johns, water-loving children, and their careless parents. The beachside bars and small restaurants were the most popular hangout spots. Bar Beach’s waters were too wild for any serious swimming.

Even the best swimmers risked a watery death by its many rip currents. (7)

This lively characterization is necessary for the readers to get a sense of Bar Beach since most of the novel’s action takes place here. Ayodele, the ambassador of the aliens, will come out of the water at this beach, in human form, and meet with the three protagonists Adaora, Agu and Anthony whom Ayodele had empowered with superhuman attributes and then summoned to this beach. The alliteration of their names helps to connect these four beings, all alien or alienated, in a common mission. In this excerpt, we already see some of Lagos’s issues such as drug dealing, homelessness, littering and uncollected garbage. Adaora is a marine biologist, and her profession and science-based open-mindedness not only comes in handy in dealing with the aliens who are now in the waters surrounding Lagos, but also adds another layer to the story’s environmentalist message. Adaora is a Lagosian and she “couldn’t imagine living anywhere else.” She finds the ocean life around Lagos both fascinating and problematic. “It needed her. Lagos needed her”

(65). The narrative, while telling the readers that Lagos needs Adaora, it is also suggesting that Lagos needs them, the readers, too. Adaora is frustrated by those who do not share her sense of civic duty. The author's message to the readers through Adaora is to avoid turning into “[s]tupid members of the populace,” and not to become “[i]nsignificant, powerless civilians” (89). This fictional hero wants all real-life Lagosians to be heroes. If the readers recognize their own powers, then they will not be insignificant civilians, instead they will be agents of change.

Lagoon touches on multiple infrastructural issues with short comments such as “[t]he power in his apartment went out constantly. NEPA took the lights like God took human lives” (185).¹⁰⁵ However, the two Lagos predicaments the novel addresses throughout are the traffic and the environmental pollution; two topics that are close to the author's heart. Early on in *Lagoon*, Okorafor sets the pretext for multiple references to the poor road conditions, traffic jams, and violent hold-ups on the highways. At the start of the novel, the protagonist Adaora sits on Bar Beach and remembers her father who

was killed along with thirty others during a botched robbery of a luxury bus on the Lagos-Benin Expressway, one of Nigeria's many, many, many dangerous roads. The thieves had demanded that all the passengers get off the bus and lie in the momentarily empty road. In their stupidity, the thieves hadn't anticipated the truck (speeding to avoid armed robbers) that would run over everyone including the thieves. (8)

Adaora's father's death is based on a real event from 2011. CBS News recounted the real accident as follows:

¹⁰⁵ National Electric Power Authority, now the Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN). Okorafor explains that NEPA is “to blame when the power goes out.” Even though the name has been changed, “people still refer to the governmental electricity company as NEPA” (*Lagoon* 297).

A bus driver ran over and killed 14 travelers who had been ordered by robbers to lie in the middle of a highway after their bus was robbed on its way to Nigeria's capital, police said.

Robbers stopped an overnight bus early Tuesday and made passengers disembark and lie down on the busy highway that connects the commercial hub of Lagos to the capital of Abuja, Kogi state police spokesman Ajayi Okasanmi said Wednesday. Another bus then ran over them and drove off. (“14 Robbed”)

The news report also adds that the bus driver who ran over the robbery victims sped away from the location and did not report it to the police. The news item notes that “[m]ore than 30 other people are missing, but authorities say that they could have continued with their journeys” (“14 Robbed”). This terrible event seems to have been the premise of the story about Adaora’s father in *Lagoon*. Elsewhere, Okorafor recounts a bus ride from her childhood. She remembers a family trip in Nigeria when they were “travelling in a very rickety bus.” The bus almost tips over twice “due to the potholes (caused by the rainy season),” and the author considers that bus ride as “fantastical and surreal” (“Organic” 278). The childhood memories of the author traveling in Nigeria certainly affected her strong words about roads and traffic in *Lagoon*. She reveals her thought process in a blog post titled “What’s Up with the Road Monster” as follows:

The roads of Nigeria are unsafe, often scary, and in poor shape in far too many parts of the country. They’re monstrous and they’ve swallowed many lives. I’m not going to lie; I have seen terrible things on Nigeria’s roads. I’ve seen death there multiple times.

Pause to remember the dead on the road.

More specifically to *Lagoon*, there was a super graphic photo circulating the Internet back in 2010 [*sic*] of a horrific accident on the Lagos-Benin Expressway. ... The incident caught my writer's eye, and it made it into *Lagoon*. ("Insight")

Later in the novel, in a section portentously-titled "The Bone Collector" and narrated from the perspective of a tarantula, the import ascribed to Lagos-Benin Expressway becomes clearer. The tarantula attempts to cross the road, but does not survive the oncoming "human vehicle," and his body "*sinks into the road's sun-warmed surface like fresh palm oil on hot bread*" (122). It is unfortunate that the same simile the author uses here for the crushed tarantula applies to many people died on the same "portion of the Lagos-Benin Expressway [which] stretches its old tired asphalt with ease and comfort" (122). The Lagos-Benin Expressway, personified thusly, does not care about the bodies melting on its hot asphalt, and it "*has named itself the Bone Collector. It mostly collects human bones, and the bones of human vehicles*" (122). Okorafor contrasts the Lagos-Benin Expressway with Ahmadu Bello Way which is "the best road in Lagos. With its thick smooth asphalt, it is nothing like the deathtrap known as the Lagos-Benin Expressway. If that highway is full of ghosts," she says, "then Bello Way is full of angels" (188).¹⁰⁶

The road, given a special role in *Lagoon*, comes up again later, this time fully anthropomorphized and ready to 'consume' human flesh. In this instant of the plot, Lagos is already in an apocalyptic atmosphere, and everyone is trying to get to a place they perceive to be safer. A group of thugs and email scammers are planning to make money by abducting the aliens

¹⁰⁶ Just like Rushdie had received letters about the inaccuracy of the bus routes in *Midnight's Children (Imaginary 23)*, Okorafor may also receive complaints about the comparison of the Lagos-Benin Expressway with the Ahmadu Bello Way. Lagosians may object to the comparison of the expressway with an inner-city road. Rushdie attributes the errors or imprecisions in his novel to his character's unreliability as a narrator. Rushdie explains that Saleem, the narrator "is capable of distortions both great and small. He is an interested party in the events he narrates (*Imaginary 24*). In *Lagoon*, the discrepancies may also be due to the main character's being invested in the plot, since she had lost her father on the Lagos-Benin Expressway.

and forcing them to use their matter-changing molecule-rearranging abilities to print world currencies. When they are on the murderous highway pursuing their scheme, they hit a pedestrian woman. Jacob, one of the thugs, gets out of the car to help the woman who is now “lying in the street like a discarded doll” (170). As he gets near the severely injured woman, “[t]he concrete beneath Jacob’s feet shifted. No, not *shifted, softened.*” The road becomes “squashy like a pillow,” and it emits “a deep guttural growl that intensified into a roar.” The next thing Jacob notices is that the wounded woman “was sinking. The road was trying to swallow her” (171). Jacob tries to pull the woman’s body “from the softening asphalt and, ignoring the angry roar of a creature denied a meal, slung her over his shoulder and carried her to the car” (171). As they speed away, “the road behind them was rearing up like a serpent of asphalt. It swayed this way and that, the two sets of yellow stripes clear in the darkness” (171-2). It is easy to see here that the author was inspired by Soyinka’s play *The Road*. Soyinka, “committed to curbing the bloodshed and breakdowns on African roads,” had helped create and chair more than one road safety organization in Nigeria in order to reduce traffic accidents and fatalities (Green-Simms 53). While he has written multiple texts on perilous Nigerian roads and Lagos traffic, including essays and poems, Soyinka’s most influential work on the topic remains to be *The Road* which was first staged in 1965. Drawing from African myths and traditions, Soyinka associates the road “with its patron god Ogun—also the god of metal, iron, new technology, and transition” (Green-Simms 53). In *The Road*, Samson, a bus conductor (*agbero*), urges Kotonu, driver of the bus named “No Danger No Delay,” to not leave Ogun hungry and sacrifice a dog to the deity of the road to save human lives: “When other drivers go out of the way to kill a dog, Kotonu nearly somersaults the lorry trying to avoid a flea-racked mongrel. … Don’t you know a dog is Ogun’s meat? Take warning Kotonu. Before it’s too late take warning and kill us a dog”

(165). Similarly, in Okorafor's fiction-fantasy, the road comes to life because it must feed Ogun, its patron god. In *Lagoon*, instead of a dog, an alien sacrifices herself to the road, so that it will not need to eat humans anymore. It is natural for Soyinka and Okorafor to attribute human characteristics to 'the road,' because, in Nigeria, 'the road' has always been seen as a monster, a murderer.

Like *The Road*, *Lagoon* also merges mythology, governmental responsibility, and personal duty in connection with traffic accidents. As mentioned earlier, the main character Adaora's father was killed during a botched bus robbery on a highway. The readers learn this fact at the beginning of the novel. At the very end, the book returns to this sad event in a dialogue between Adaora's husband and an alien named Stella:

“Why did you people allow your roads to be so dangerous?” Stella asked.

“We didn’t ‘allow it,’ he said. “Our government—”

“Your wife’s father was eaten by the road monster, though. You never went to the road and asked it to give her father his life back.”

“That doesn’t even make sense!” he snapped. “When a man dies, he goes to heaven or hell. He doesn’t . . .” He frowned. “Her father was hit by a truck. He wasn’t eaten by a road.” (282-3).

Here, the author is encouraging the readers to consider all three possibilities: is it the fault of Lagosians, or the government? Could the road accidents be better understood within the African spirituality? Okorafor is passionate about African traditions and folklore, and believes that they are not a thing of the past for African communities. In a tweet, she explains that they are part of the ethos today, and that she is “talking about the present and the future” (qtd. in Marquis 409). Okorafor is also convinced that both individual and institutional responsibility, as well as

preventative action are required to make Nigerian roads safer. In our exploration of corruption narratives, we had noted Habila's comment about "imposing a traditional African moral vision on the city" regarding Onuzo's *Welcome to Lagos*. *Lagoon* also embraces "African moral cultural things," as Okorafor calls them (qtd. in Marquis 409). As a result, in *Lagoon*, we find a recommended merging of traditional morals with individual and institutional responsibility. It is not futile to think of the road as a monster if the people and the government are ready to tame that monster.

When the aliens' ambassador Ayodele speaks to the Lagosians, she tells them that they have "*come to bring you together and refuel your future.*" The aliens have made the accurate assessment that Nigeria "*is full of a fuel that is tearing you apart.*" Ayodele's wording—"a fuel"—hints at other forms of energy which are sustainable and will not tear Nigerians apart. She assures Lagosians that the aliens do "*not seek your oil or your other resources,*" and that they will "*nurture your world*" (113). They had already cleaned the waters around Lagos as soon as they arrived. To put an end to the so-called 'curse of the oil,' the aliens are suggesting a different approach to obtaining and consuming fuel; one that will not poison the rivers, the ocean, or the marine life, and will not ruin the livelihoods of farmers, fishers and entire villages. They are advocating for change. After the aliens' first address to the Lagosians, we hear the perspective of Udide, the tale-spinner spider. This narrator spider is yet another spirit from the Nigerian folklore, Udide Okwanka, the God of stories and storytelling, and she expounds the message of the aliens based on her belief that the alien invasion "goes deeper":

It is in the dirt, the mud, the earth, in the fond memory of the soily cosmos.

It is in the always-mingling past, present, and future.

It is in the water.

It is in the powerful spirits and ancestors who dwelled in Lagos.

It is in the heads and hearts of the people of Lagos.

Change begets Change. (193)

The wise and ancient Udide, the spider, will be proven right. Her reflections foreshadow the end of the story when the Lagosians inhale the alien fog and every one of them becomes a little altered. They are now a changed people as the readers might be when they finish the novel. We have already seen the aliens in the waters of Lagos, in the marine animals, and in the three main protagonists Adaora, Agu and Anthony. We have also seen them in the African myths and spiritualities. They exist in Lagos air which the Lagosians breathe in. The aliens and the alienation of Lagosians precipitate change, and change will bring about more change. Mythological spider Udide “possesses the power to gather fragments of any object and shape them into a new object” (Okorafor, “Big Idea”), and now Lagosians can shape their own city, the roads and the environment. In another chapter of *Lagoon*, titled “Road Monster,” the Lagos-Benin Expressway speaks; “I collect bones,” it says, “I have always collected bones. I am the road” (206). An alien in the shape of a woman offers herself as a sacrifice to the road. “Collect my bones and then never collect again,” she tells the road. The road eats her, and becomes satisfied. A man watching the terrifying scene realizes that “[s]he and her people were indeed agents of change. I could feel the change in me then, while I knelt there. I’m sure I was not the only one, either” (206-7). Change, like fuel and the road, is one of the main themes of the novel. The President of Nigeria, addressing the public, also emphasizes change. He himself is changed by the alien touch; he is now stronger, healthier and clear minded. He talks to his people about change. “Last night, Lagos burned,” he says, “[b]ut like a phoenix, it will rise from the ashes—a greater creature than ever before” (276). Here, we see that Lagos itself is a creature too, but a

much better one. Like the President, Lagos and Lagosians are shifting, similar to the shape-shifting aliens. “This shift,” says the President, “is cause for celebration, not panic” (276). They will combine the “fresh ideas” of the aliens with their own, and together, they will bring about change. There will be an end to corruption and “the land would be pure and palm nuts, cocoa and other crops would grow as they never had before” (278). It seems like the aliens solve many of Lagosians’ problems. However, the aliens and their transformative ‘change fog’ are like placebo pills. In reality, the ‘change fog’ has been in Lagosians all along. The push they need may come, in part, from contemporary literary narratives like *Lagoon*.

The President’s thoughts after being ‘changed’ by the aliens, and his speech to Lagosians offer evidence of *Lagoon*’s engagement with Lagos’s present-day social, political, environmental and infrastructural problems:

Since taking office, he’d found himself powerless to fight against Nigeria’s soul-crushing corruption. Wherever he tried to make changes, people around him were always trying to drain some sort of shady profit from his efforts. If he tried to create a program to improve schools or hospitals, someone set up a fake contract that would bleed money from the program. When he tried to address unemployment, health care, inflation, electricity, education, agriculture, any time there was money to be spent, it was the same result: The vampires always came. This had worn him down. It had made him feel futile, useless.

Now, for the first time, he felt like a president. (274)

The President of Nigeria, thanks to the aliens’ alteration—or to his belief that he has been altered—now finds the strength in himself to tackle all the social ills in his country. In his speech, he notes that they “have reached a tipping point.” He goes on to declare that “in Lagos, we have passed it” (276). It may be that a tipping point was the necessary catalyst for the

Lagosians to find their own will and power to transform their city. One character at the Cyber Café, after witnessing Ijele, the God of Masquerade, take down all the internet fraudsters, feels a profound transformation. He professes his “pride and love for Nigeria,” and he vows to live, die and create for his country. He will never commit email scam ever again. The novel’s purpose is to ignite a similar transformation in its readers.

Lagoon, effectively blends African traditions and mythology with the science-fiction/fantasy genre in representing Lagos’s issues in a new light. The novel, by rendering the known strange, re-acquaints the readers with the traffic jams, the dangerous commutes to and from Lagos, and the environmental pollution, particularly in the ocean where oil rigging systems regularly leak crude petroleum. The presence of the aliens, the appearance of millennia-old African deities, anthropomorphized roads and computers are so strange that imagining a world with honest governance, sustainable energy, clean oceans and safe roads becomes possible. The spider deity Udide Okwanka, in ending the story she has weaved, says that her loyalty is to Lagos and that she will join her people in the fight for making and keeping Lagos beautiful. That is all she asks of her readers.

“In the swirl of motorcycles and hawkers”: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “Birdsong” and *Americanah*

Adichie’s short story “Birdsong” is about a love affair the narrator had with a married man which she recounts, in flashbacks, while sitting in her car, stuck in a traffic jam. This story can be compared to the short story by Shroff titled “Traffic” which is analyzed under Mumbai narratives above. Both “Traffic,” and “Birdsong” use traffic as a metaphor for the headspace the narrators currently find themselves in. In both stories, the protagonist is a woman, telling her story in flashbacks, and through parallels of her city’s traffic and her own circumstances. In

“Birdsong,” the protagonist does not have a name, and she is the first-hand narrator of her own story. She describes the traffic as “a standstill, unusual this early in the afternoon.” The nameless narrator considers that maybe a tanker had “fallen across the road—tankers were always falling across roads—or a bus had broken down, or cars had formed a line outside a petrol station, blocking the road” (98). In Nigeria, a country that possesses significant petroleum resources, gasoline shortages are common and most contemporary literary narratives make a note of this fact. During a traffic jam, or ‘go-slow’ as it is called in Lagos, the vehicles are surrounded by a great number of hawkers who add to the chaos. Adichie writes that they are trying to sell “magazines, phone cards, plantain chips, newspapers, cans of Coke and Amstel Malta dipped in water to make them look cold” (98-99). Hawkers are always present in Mumbai and Lagos fictions when traffic is mentioned. Packer explains that “[t]raffic pileups lead to ‘improvised conditions’ because there is no other way for most people in Lagos to scratch out a living than to sell on the street,” and considers hawking as one example of “collective adaptation to extreme hardship” (“Megacity”). Sometimes, hawking and the pandemonium it brings about may be a welcome diversion in traffic jams. Since “space for recreation and entertainment [is] a contested terrain,” Aina posits that people have no choice but to improvise. Therefore, he explains, one finds spectacles at bus stops, market places, in between traffic on major road networks in which the intention is to entertain, to sell, to cheat, or even to steal from the unwary onlooker. Even the commuter buses known as “Molue” became sites of this multi-functional entertainment and diversion as depicted by Ben Okri (1988) in the short story “Stars of the New Curfew.” 188

Indeed, Okri’s “Stars of the New Curfew” is yet another short story that should be read for its portrayal of the *molues*, accidents on bad roads, sanitation, and hawking. The protagonist of the

story is a hawker himself and his impression of the *molue* buses is not any better than the regular commuters. He remarks about the “unstable bodywork” of the buses, the “stank of sweat and dried fish” that comes off of the commuters “crammed in every available space,” and laments that there is no room for him on the bus to address the passengers and tell them about the miracle drug he is selling (100-1).

In “Birdsong,” a woman in the car next to our narrator, “in the swirl of motorcycles and hawkers” (97), is relentlessly staring at her. The narrator considers the possibility that this well-groomed and rich-looking woman who keeps looking at her might be her lover’s wife. The narrator is both captivated and troubled by the beauty and self-assurance of this woman who is sitting at the backseat of an expensive Jeep which is “miraculously free of scratches.” The narrator wonders how it is “possible in this city where okada after okada sped through the narrow slices of space between cars in traffic as though motorcycles could shrink to fit any gap?” To prove her point that it is almost impossible for a vehicle out in Lagos traffic to be in pristine condition, the narrator examines the car in front of her which “had a gash on its tail light; it looked like one of the many cars that dripped oil, turning the roads into a slick sheet when the rains came.” Then she turns her attention to her own car which is also “full of wounds” (100). She goes on to recount the cause of the biggest damage to her car. The brief anecdote of a taxi rear-ending her car when she stops at a red-light is significant for two reasons. Firstly, the taxi driver behind the narrator’s car does not obey the red light and assumes that she would not either. This speaks to the lack of adherence to even the simplest of traffic rules in Lagos. Secondly, the reaction of the taxi driver after hitting the narrator’s car is symptomatic of the general behaviour of male drivers of Lagos towards female drivers. “Stupid girl! You are a common nuisance. Why did you stop like that? Nonsense!” he screams at the narrator (100). He calls a fellow driver

“stupid,” “girl,” and “nuisance” because he considers this fellow Lagosian, who is clearly a better driver, below himself for she is a woman. Later at the office, a female co-worker, upon hearing about the incident, tells the narrator that had she been “wearing a wedding ring, he would not have shouted at you like that” (100). This may be true because, in the opinion of male Lagos drivers, a single woman, lacking the protection of a man—financial and otherwise—is lesser than that of her married counterparts. The narrator of “Birdsong” continues with her observations as she sits in the traffic jam:

The traffic had started to move a little. I saw an *okada* in my side mirror, coming too fast, swerving and honking, and I waited to hear the crunch as it hit my car. But it didn’t. The driver was wearing a helmet, while his passenger merely held hers over her head—the smelly foam inside would have ruined her hair—close enough so that she could slip it on as soon as she saw a LASTMA^[107] official ahead. (102)

It is not just the *okada* passengers who ignore the helmet rules, some drivers also get into Lagos traffic without them. Adichie’s narrator tells the story of an *okada* driver, “bareheaded and blindly speeding,” hitting her car. The driver apologizes with an “Auntie, sorry oh!” and runs a spit-wetted finger over the scratch he created. He dismisses the damage by saying “[n]othing happen to the car” and drives away (102). In this portion of the short story, once again we observe the careless and lawless driving, flippant attitude towards accidents, and the poor treatment of female drivers.

In contemporary Lagos literatures, potholes, which are part of Lagos commute, are often acknowledged in a matter-of-fact manner. The narrator of “Birdsong” lives in her wealthy lover’s mansion in an upscale area of greater Lagos. She comments that her drive to this opulent

¹⁰⁷ Lagos State Traffic Management Authority

house included “turn[ing] off the potholed road in Victoria Island and into that compound full of birdsong” (98). In Adichie’s novel *Americanah*, the protagonist, Ifemelu, who returns to Lagos after having studied and lived in the United States for some years, remarks that Lagos, with its “roads infested with potholes [and] houses springing up unplanned like weeds,” was “unpretty” (477). Ifemelu’s friend picks her up from the airport, and on the drive back home, “she slow[s] down to sink into, and then climb out of, a large pothole,” saying “I need a jeep [*sic*]. Do you see how terrible the roads are?” (481). Later, in her apartment—with plush carpeting and a latest-model television—Ifemelu’s friend explains that the power outages have been really bad and she had been “running [her] generator for one straight week” (481). In Lagos, as in Mumbai, even the upper scale living quarters are not immune to power and water shortages. While contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai focus more on the scarcity of water, Lagos narratives mostly focus on power outages. These portrayals correspond to the actual scope of these two issues in Mumbai and Lagos. In Mumbai, water is the bigger of the two problems, while in Lagos, it is the electricity.

In contrast to Mumbai narratives, we find references to armed robbers in traffic in the literary texts set in Lagos. In “Birdsong,” the narrator remembers that Lagosians are often taught not to “help people whose cars have broken down, because they [may be] armed robbers.” She laments the fact that Lagosians relate to one another “through rituals of distrust” (102). Within the love triangle of the story, the notions of trust and distrust have specific meanings. The narrator has reason to doubt her lover’s feelings for her, as well as his loyalty and intentions. Stuck in traffic and stuck in a dead-end relationship, the narrator wonders if the woman in the next car, who is staring at her, might be the wife of her lover. Her suspicion indicates that the wife might know of, or suspect, her husband’s infidelity. While the narrator was taught to see all Lagos

interactions through these “rituals of distrust,” she had also witnessed an incident when someone on a crowded bus returned a visitor’s lost wallet. This act of honesty and goodness, symbolically, takes place in the context of the most problematic of all Lagos activities: being in traffic. She recounts the anecdote to her lover in the hopes of reversing the distrust between them.

On a less metaphorical level, it is regrettable if in fact it is true that people of Lagos are discouraged from helping those who are in distress due to widespread crime that takes place on the roads. Lagosians are known to be accessible and helpful not just to one another, but to foreigners as well. However, even if it contributes to the propagation of the kind of distrust noted in “Birdsong,” Lagos narratives depict scenes of robberies and other crimes in traffic. In Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, we examined the tragedy of bus passengers who were killed by another bus while being robbed by highway thugs, an incident based on a real-life robbery. In the *Lagos Noir* collection, a short story titled “Choir Boy” by Pemi Aguda deals specifically by a bus robbery which is aided by the bus driver and his conductor (*agbero*). Aguda’s fictional portrayal of the holdup on a poor quality road in “Choir Boy” corresponds directly to what many studies have identified as the most common form of road burglary. In “Choir Boy,” the robbery of “that sardine tin of a bus” (171) takes place on a “dirt road with no lights” (172). In a study on the correlation between road accidents and road robberies in Nigeria, it is noted that criminals prefer roads in poor conditions because the drivers have to slow down on such roads, and this “creates an opportunity for the criminals to raid the commuters” (Ajide 2). In Saro-Wiwa’s literary travelogue, *Looking for Transwonderland*, the author’s aunt lectures her “on how to identify rogue buses, pay for tickets and avoid thieves” before allowing her to use the public transport (19). Cole’s relatives in *Every Day Is for the Thief* behave similarly. They tell him he “must not travel by danfo. The danfo is a death trap. It is a haven for practitioners of black magic, and is

full of thieves. This much is known” (33). While the narrator in “Birdsong” is right to worry about the distrust issue, given the ubiquity in Lagos narratives the criminal activities that target commuters, it is understandable for readers to be fearful of those who seem to need help. “Robbery is a common crime in Nigeria,” and naturally, it “elicits strong feelings of fear [from] the Nigerian public” (Badiora and Ntamark 1). It has been reported that some robbers get on the buses pretending to be passengers, or they set up road blocks disguised as police officers (Ajide 2). These accounts are common in news items, police reports and statistical studies. The deceit does happen, and in Kan’s novel *The Carnivorous City*, there is an episode in which a driver has a legitimate reason for not taking the advice of a fellow Lagosian. Two characters, Ada and Abel are driving in Ojuelegba, one of the most crowded neighbourhoods of Lagos—“a pure melee of cars, people and sounds” (54)—when a young man points to the hood of their car, and tells them that there is smoke coming out of it. Abel, who has recently arrived from a small town, believes the man: “Ada, stop, stop. He says there is smoke coming out from the engine” (54). But Ada, a seasoned Lagosian, knows the ruse: “It’s a trick, Abel. There is no smoke. If you stop, you are in trouble. Once you open your engine they will disconnect something and that’s where it starts. You could get robbed or killed or made to part with some money” (54). The narratives of traffic cons may instill fear in the readers or they may serve as fair warnings. The desired effect is to be cautious without becoming paranoid. It is up to the readers to find the right balance between being unnecessarily distrustful of their fellow citizens as the narrator of “Birdsong” urges, and being legitimately vigilant to protect themselves from road crimes as *The Carnivorous City* suggests.

In Adichie’s *Americanah*, high school student Ifemelu lives with her parents in an apartment where water and electricity shortages are big problems. When Ifemelu visits her aunt’s large and

luxurious home, she is fascinated with the bathroom's "hot water tap, its gushing shower, its pink tiles" (89). She is impressed that the kitchen is air-conditioned and that there is a satellite for watching many television shows. Ifemelu's own home does not have any of this. Water and power are often out. She asks her parents if she can stay with her aunt during the week. Her aunt, who is a medical doctor, does not make enough money to have a decent living on her own. She had become the mistress of a rich man who provides for her. When Ifemelu asks her parents if she could live with her aunt during weekdays—on the pretext of being closer to school—her mother agrees with her: "She can study well there, at least there will be light every day. No need for her to study with kerosene lamps" (90). Later in the novel, when Ifemelu goes to the United States to study, she forgets what it was like to frequently lose power. When her mother tells her that "there had been no light for two weeks," Ifemelu "could no longer remember what it felt like to spend an evening in candlelight" (196). This is what Levine explains about getting used to a properly running infrastructure and only noticing it when it fails (587-8). Ifemelu, now having been accustomed to non-stop electricity, finds it hard to relate to her mother's complaint. What her mother reports seems very foreign to her. It is easy to get used to properly working, and therefore, 'invisible' infrastructures. That is why contemporary literatures "ask searching questions of urban infrastructure" in order to remind the middle-class readers of lacking or malfunctioning networks in their cities. There are "various forms of human intervention, including the literary" that interact with and mediate infrastructural deficiencies, and demand improvement. In short, "creative practice can explore and negotiate, and at times disrupt and reconstruct" those interventions (Boehmer and Davies 395).

Years later, when Ifemelu returns to Lagos, she has to get reacquainted with the city. On the road from the airport to her friend's residence, Ifemelu starts noticing things she had not noticed

when she lived in Lagos. Levine posits that, with the return of Ifemelu, Adichie is able “to make readers aware of infrastructures” (601). In order for the middle-class readers of Lagos to notice what they have gotten used to, Adichie employs “a time-honored defamiliarizing strategy: the perspective of the outsider” (Levine 601). As an outsider, Ifemelu now sees buildings that have a “patina of decay” on them (475) and “roads infested with potholes, houses springing up unplanned like weeds” (477). When they get out of the car, Ifemelu is welcomed by “the loud, discordant drone of generators, too many generators; the sound pierced the soft middle of her ears and throbbed in her head.” Her friend explains that they have not had light for a week (478). The word “generator,” which rarely comes up in daily conversation in places where continuous power supply is taken for granted, is part of the everyday vocabulary in Lagos. Later in the novel, Ifemelu and her friend visit a potential employer, a wealthy woman, at her home in an affluent area of Lagos. When they leave the luxurious house, Ifemelu’s friend remarks that their host’s “generator is as big as my flat and it is completely noiseless,” and asks Ifemelu if she had “notice[d] the generator house on the side of the gate” (485). A generator’s presence is already an indicator of a higher income level; however, its large size and noiseless functioning is a whole different socio-economic stratum. But, the noise of generators is even more telling. According to Levine, “[w]hat the noisy Lagosian generators indicate is the absence of public investment in a networked electricity structure” (602). At another instance in the novel, Obinze, Ifemelu’s former boyfriend, reminds her how they “would heat the iron on the stove when NEPA took light” (533). Like the commonality of the word generator, in contemporary Lagos novels, we see a specific language for all infrastructure issues, such as “NEPA took light.” In *Lagoon*, where “NEPA took the lights like God took human lives” (185), we had learned that NEPA, the National Electric Power Authority, was the main body held responsible for power outages. Even

though the name of the institution had been changed to Power Holding Company of Nigeria (PHCN), NEPA stayed as a part of the infrastructural vocabulary. Obinze, who is a wealthy man now and can afford one of those large generators that has its own house, is a little nostalgic about his modest circumstances while growing up. He remembers that

his neighbor downstairs used to shout ‘Praise the Lord!’ whenever the light came back and how even for me there was something so beautiful about the light coming back, when it’s out of your control because you don’t have a generator. But it’s a silly sort of romance, because of course I don’t want to go back to that life. (533)

This is another instance of defamiliarization. Obinze, who has not suffered power outages in a long time, is being re-acquainted with it through reminiscing. The readers with big and noiseless generators are asked to join in the memory and familiarize themselves again with the fact of power outages. What is pertinent in the last sentence of Obinze is that he remembers the difficulties fondly but does not wish to live them again. Adichie is showing the readers that “wealth and ease too quickly and smoothly come to feel habitual” (Levine 601). Both Ifemelu and Obinze have comfortable lives. However, they are still sensitive to the plights of their fellow Lagosians and they acknowledge the privileges of their current lives. When Ifemelu writes in her well-established and successful blog about the slum settlement she can see from her window, she notes “the waterlogged neighborhood crammed with zinc houses, their roofs like squashed hats” (585). In this fictional intertextuality, Ifemelu is raising awareness in her blog, just like her creator, Adichie, is doing in *Americanah*.

In this chapter, I tried to show some examples of how literature depicts traffic and infrastructure in Mumbai and Lagos. The works I examined in this chapter, like other contemporary literary narratives analysed in this dissertation, offer social commentary on urgent

urban issues. Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies view “literary texts as active, instrumental contributions to the understanding of city-space that exhibit a dynamic interventionist aesthetic” (396), and I tried to underscore these interventionist aesthetics in the twenty-first century stories of Mumbai and Lagos. Boehmer and Davies are convinced that the “literary language, with its investigative and transformative possibilities, has an important part to play” (398). This has been the argument of this dissertation all along. The works studied in this chapters urge the readers to *see* what may have become habitual, and therefore invisible. The texts achieve this goal through the defamiliarization technique. *Breathless in Bombay* stories take what is well-known, like the *dhobi ghat* or transition camps, and render them new, bring them back into the awareness. The short stories about Mumbai’s and Lagos’s traffic, Shroff’s “Traffic” and Adichie’s “Birdsong,” respectively, employing traffic as a metaphor for struggles in two women’s lives, allow the readers to perceive traffic indirectly. City traffic in literature has always been conducive to symbolism, and the liminality in the lives of the female characters depicted in these short stories represents the mundaneness of traffic as something nonetheless life-altering. *No God in Sight* attains defamiliarization through its innovative experimental form. As the narrators and the storylines keep changing rapidly, depicted issues remain unresolved, thereby leaving the readers with a lasting impression of the distress they engender. *Lagoon*, a “seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative” (Okorafor, “Africanfuturism”), defamiliarizes every known problem of Lagos by making it strange. Roads where people are killed, computers on which fraud is committed, and the ocean which is polluted by petroleum extraction are all rendered fantastical. The works studied in this chapter, while demonstrating an urban and present-day focus, employ defamiliarizing methods to make it possible for the readers to see common issues and sights anew.

Conclusion

The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.

— Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*

In this dissertation, I investigated literature’s role in combatting present-day problems in two postcolonial cities: Mumbai and Lagos. The examination of the contemporary urban narratives of these two megacities focused on how literature informs and sensitizes the readers to current problems; encourages readers to contribute to the solutions; and adds to the discourses that are necessary for transformation. Literature is imbued with the capacity “to challenge our own beliefs and commitments” (Felski 7), and the works studied in this dissertation ask the readers to reconsider their own actions and convictions. These recent narratives aim to defamiliarize and stir the readers to *see* what has become invisible. With an emphasis on the immediate reality, contemporary urban narratives of Mumbai and Lagos offer social commentary, and disrupt what has become habitual, familiar, and unseen. Producing stylistic innovations, contemporary authors aim to move the middle classes out of their comfort zones and to inspire them for individual and institutional transformations. These transformations may not be earth-shattering, and Felski warns against the “absurdly high hopes of the transformative energies of texts” (109). However, she argues that even if “works of art cannot topple banks and bureaucracies, museums and markets,” they still possess the “power to challenge perception or shake up the psyche” (109). She asserts that there is always “the possibility of more muted or qualified transformations”

(109). Furthermore, as Rushdie once stated, before we can start making improvements, we must first illustrate our world as it is (*Imaginary* 14).

My research discovered an urban and present-day focus in Indian and Nigerian literatures. The works analyzed here explicitly or implicitly recognize the “on-going cultural legacies of colonial and imperial rule” (Barnett 163). However, they do not necessarily conform to postcolonial literature defined as writing that “critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship” or “sets out in one way or another to resist colonialist perspectives” (Boehmer 3). This aspect of earlier Indian and Nigerian literary narratives has not completely disappeared; however, it is no longer the primary preoccupation of contemporary writers. Today, self-critique, as well as a more here-and-now approach prevail in urban literatures. In our globalized age, with new technologies, and diverse methods and formats of sharing and consuming knowledge, it is natural that literatures of formerly colonized nations have moved beyond colonial legacies and postcolonial aesthetics. Genres, as “communicative constructs” (Goebel and Schabio 1) must adapt to the times, and contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos have transformed, both thematically and stylistically, to better engage with today’s readers. During the process of formulating the topic of my dissertation, I was inclined to research the decolonizing characteristics I might find in literature, and I was convinced that the contemporary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos would lead me to what Said calls “a sustained reaction and response to the metropolitan literature of the British centre” which “plays a very important decolonizing role” (“Narrative” 83). I did find “reaction and response” in the novels of Amitav Ghosh, Sefi Atta, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy and others; however, what I did additionally—and to a greater extent—find in contemporary works was an engagement with the pressing urban issues of the day.

The twenty-first century urban narratives of multiple genres and themes resist categorization, and do not necessarily conform to the theories that have served us well in the past. Even if we are able to force them under certain headers, we still need to use, at least additionally, newer—we might say, post-postcolonial—theories that suit our times better. Today there are emerging categories—and some that are not that new but have recently become popular—such as the world bank literature,¹⁰⁸ petrofiction, environmentalist literature (ecofiction), climate change (cli-fi), infrastructuralism, Afrofuturism—as well as Africanfuturism as defined by Okorafor—and many others with which to frame our analyses. These newer frameworks, employed in conjunction with more established theories like feminist and queer theory, offer more benefits in the examination of contemporary literatures. Furthermore, twenty-first century authors find the labels ‘postcolonial literature’ or ‘postcolonial writer’ problematic. Many authors—Ghosh, Tyrewala and others—disclosed in interviews that they preferred not to be called ‘postcolonial.’ For these reasons, in spite of my initial conceptions, I chose to go where the contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos led me, and they led me to plenty of social commentary on the present-day city, as well as self-criticism.

I discovered that contemporary novels offer more insight when they are read, in addition to the postcolonial lens, with newer frameworks. My findings concur, and maybe take one step further, the multi-lens approaches scholars have been employing in the twenty-first century. Clive Barnett provides the following examples:

¹⁰⁸ Amitava Kumar explains that he uses the term ‘World Bank Literature’ “to invite inquiry into globalization, the economy, and the role of literary and cultural studies” (xvii). Bret Benjamin expounds that engaging with “World Bank Literature as World Literature” is, in part, “to address the role that literary critics can play in the emerging scholarship about development and globalization,” and adds that “there is a pressing need to theorize the relationship between literary discourses and political realities, between texts and contexts” (201). Gautam Premnath argues that “‘World Bank Literature’ might well be a new name for postcolonial studies in the twenty-first century” (253).

Current research agendas informed by postcolonial studies include work on the relationship between postcolonialism and climate change (e.g. Chakrabarty 2012); investigations of the relationships between nature, religion and the meanings of contested landscapes in colonial and postcolonial societies (e.g. Jazeel 2013); work on commodity histories and the long history of globalisation (e.g. Hazareesingh and Curry-Murchado 2009); and debates on the nature of comparative method in the social sciences and the politics of knowledge (e.g. Jazeel and McFarlane 2011, Robinson 2011). (163)

This dissertation examined, to give a few examples, contested landscapes in Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* and Abani's *Graceland*, ecocriticism in Okorafor's *Lagoon*, and infrastructuralism in the *Breathless in Bombay* short story collection. These frameworks were mostly built up on the postcolonial lens. Future literary texts may require other frameworks in addition to, or in place of the postcolonial. As Anjaria suggests, we do not know what to expect from "the new modes emerging that reflect a continued investment in representing contemporary life" ("Realist" 114). She argues that "the globalization of literary styles and the intensified transnationalism of characters and settings" ("Realist" 114) have compelled the twenty-first century novels coming out of the formerly colonized communities to self-transform. Writing in the context of African literature, Otiono suggests that "the quantity and character of literary works by new African diaspora writers increasingly call for attention outside of the circumscribed disciplinary spaces of African Studies or Postcolonial Studies" (Foreword xiii). This is also true for the quantity and the quality of the literary works of contemporary Indian writers.

My choice of Mumbai and Lagos as case study cities was primarily based on the sheer amount of literature pouring out of these cities. Not only India's and Nigeria's literatures have both been historically influential, but in the short distance we have come in the twenty-first

century, the literary production of Mumbai and Lagos has been tremendous. These two cities' literary wealth made them perfect choices for this dissertation. Additionally, they had common points to base my comparisons on: they are both megalopolises with populations of around twenty million, they are former British colonies and they are located by the ocean. Mumbai and Lagos have similar urban problems like corruption, massive slum populations juxtaposed with extravagant affluence, traffic congestions that all their inhabitants complain about, and infrastructural issues which cause water and power outages. It has been argued that the city is the place that makes it possible for things to improve, and one that "offers the potential for something different to emerge" because it is "a site of assemblage, multiplicity, and social interaction" (Robinson 229). Contemporary literary narratives of Mumbai and Lagos make use of this potential.

Literature imagines solutions and urges the readers to implement those solutions. Achebe, in "What Has Literature Got to Do with It?" asserts that "development or modernization is not merely, or even primarily, a question of having lots of money to spend or blueprints drawn up by the best experts available[,"] rather he argues, it is a matter "of the mind and the will[,"] and "the mind and the will belong first and foremost to the domain of stories" (*Hopes* 168). My research has found that these stories exist today in Mumbai and Lagos, and they are targeting "the mind and the will" of their readers, who are mostly middle-class citizens. Ciocca eloquently argues that, along with "the most relevant passages of its recent history," the city's "narratives have thematized, discussed, helped to elaborate, and somehow also negotiated the most serious engagements with change, development, and crisis" ("From Nation" 224). She further explains that

the dialogue between the city's narrations and all other forms of thought and communication at work in the contemporary popular public sphere has taken an increasingly active part in the ongoing process of concerned conversation about the conditions, and the destinies, of the city. ("From Nation" 224)

This research, in agreement with Ciocca's assertion, has found that Mumbai and Lagos narratives, together with other forms of knowledge, have great potential to engender positive change in these cities. The contemporary narratives, to borrow a metaphor from *Lagoon*, are placing the nurturing 'alien fog' inside the middle-class readers.

The intra-connectivity of the themes explored in this dissertation made it difficult to compartmentalize the main topics. The texts that are investigated in one chapter could also have been the main primary source for any of the other chapters. Most contemporary urban literatures tackle corruption, informal settlements and their demolition, dichotomies in living conditions, infrastructure and traffic, all at the same time because these issues are related to one another. Where there is construction, there is likely to be corruption as well; where there is an informal settlement, there is also an infrastructure issue; where there is a traffic accident, there may be a police officer taking bribes, and so forth. In my research, I have discovered numerous texts with the same or similar themes of present-day urban problems. Most twenty-first century narratives of Mumbai and Lagos tackle at least one of the topics studied in this dissertation. Dozens of recent texts explore corruption, urban dichotomies, and traffic and infrastructure. It is my conviction that contemporary city novels will continue to focus on issues that matter to the current inhabitants of their cities. Habilo explains that "the things that matter to [the people] most, [are] their safety, their corporate and individual survival, [and] the question of their rights as citizens" (qtd. in Edoro). He concludes that, in Nigeria, "[t]here is an emerging middle class

whose tastes are the same as any middle class in the world, and they need a literature to address their day to day issues” (qtd. in Edoro). Adiga defends the relentless recurrence of these themes with a witty remark: “[I]f I told you romantic love has been adequately covered in the works of Shakespeare—*Romeo and Juliet* for instance—and there is no need for anyone to write ever again about love, would that strike you as a clever suggestion?” He argues that issues such as the disparity between the lives of the wealthy and the poor are “profound and [of] perpetual importance. The problem is omnipresent, its manifestations keep changing, and literature and the arts have to keep responding” (qtd. in Pais). Narratives of megacities, like those of Mumbai and Lagos, will indeed keep responding to the daily struggles of the millions who live in those cities without ever becoming dull. Adiga claims that “[n]o one who is alive to the poetry, anger, and humour of India is ever going to be in danger of writing a boring book” (qtd. in Pais). The same goes for Lagos. Out of dozens of books examined in the research of this dissertation, there never was one that was not engaging, or not aesthetically pleasing. Mumbai and Lagos will continue to generate compelling and stimulating literary narratives in many—yet unknown—forms and genres that creatively bring their present-day lived experiences alive. Needless to say, not all contemporary urban narratives are about the themes examined here, but they still engage with diverse current topics such as gender and sexual identities, environmental concerns, human rights, and other matters of interest for our global times.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ There is support for my conviction on this:

Not all recent Lagos novels explore the breakdown of infrastructure and the deprivation of the majority of the city’s inhabitants. See, for example, Jude Dibia’s *Walking with Shadows*, a work that explores its central character’s life crisis (as he is forced to admit his homosexuality) and the resulting renegotiation of his personal relationships, with only occasional reference to the city’s problems (flooded roads, traffic jams, power outages, and so on). (Dunton 77n3)

I found that the literary methods used in contemporary urban narratives to encourage the readers to act on social, political, individual, and institutional transformation in their cities are always unique and exciting. Contemporary authors of formerly-colonized nations are creating new literature infused with the energy and intensity of daily urban life. The twenty-first century is marked with the pervasiveness of visual—and now with podcasts, a return to auditory—forms of knowledge and information sharing. Not only that contemporary literatures must compete with these new mediums, but also, since most of today's city authors are millennials, they themselves feel the need for experimenting with and inventing new formats. In addition to innovative forms, contemporary urban narratives also contain passages that approach, in composition or in essence, a nonfictional text, like a report or a news article. With the use of narrativity increasing in nonfictional writing, and new social realist turn of the contemporary city literatures, the two forms of knowledge and culture production seem, at times, to be converging one another, and blurring the contours of genres (Geertz 165). In contemporary literary narratives, we often find literature referring to itself and to other forms of writing, such as journalism and poetry. The reason for this is to create exciting and meaningful connections to increase reader enjoyment and engagement, as well as to supplement the subject matter. This intertextuality strengthens the power of all written forms, and calls attention to the significance of diverse modes of knowledge sharing. In addition to intertextuality, contemporary literary authors also include other fictional texts within their own works. All of these experiments, innovations, and departures from known forms make contemporary urban narratives refreshing and inspiring. I am happy to be part of this new and exciting era of literary urban studies.

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