
CWD Chawl: A Microcosmic Space in Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie*

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Abstract

'Chawl' is a distinctive urban housing type, typically inhabited by middle-class residents, offering a robust social support system that enhances the quality of life in contemporary Mumbai. Research on the historical development of chawls within Mumbai's urban landscape and their significant contributions to the social and cultural fabric of their inhabitants help us explore the profound divergence in principles, lifestyles, languages, cultures, and living patterns of its residents. Chawls emerge as a sustainable and viable model for middle-class housing, deserving of preservation and serving as a potential blueprint for future housing initiatives. This paper explores Nagarkar's innovative use of 'Digressions' as a powerful narrative tool to shed light on the cultural, social, and political realities embedded in the novel's plot and storyline. Its primary objective is to spotlight Nagarkar's authentic portrayal of the profound social, religious, and cultural disparities that divide the Hindus and Goan Christians inhabiting Chawl No. 17 of the Central Works Department in the Mazagaon district of Bombay. It illuminates how the seemingly harmonious and

homogeneous chawl environment eventually unravels, revealing gaping chasms of irreconcilable differences between these two communities.

Keywords: Chawls, realities, urban, cultural landscape, heterogeneity.

Think of a plus sign, now extend its horizontal arms ten times on either side. This is the main passage or corridor on each floor. On either side of the corridor arm are ten rooms. That's twenty rooms to the left of the vertical stroke of the plus sign and twenty on the right. (57).

The Chawl, a shared living space for individuals from diverse backgrounds, is depicted as a microcosm of the broader societal changes that were occurring in the metropolitan areas of Maharashtra after decolonization. Chawls have their origins in the historical context of Bombay, which is now known as Mumbai, during its colonial past. The city attracted a diverse workforce from various regions, as it served as a major hub for the East India Company's trade

activities. However, the distribution of land in the city was highly unequal, with British merchants and officials occupying large, spacious bungalows, leaving limited space for the working-class population. To address the housing needs of these laborers, Chawls emerged as a solution. These were compact one-room apartments shared by as many as five individuals. Despite their high cost compared to similar accommodations in other Indian cities, Chawls were characterized by extreme congestion, unhygienic conditions, and safety concerns.

The evolution of urban planning in Bombay was primarily triggered by concerns about the potential outbreak of a plague epidemic. In response, The City of Bombay Improvement Trust was established in 1898. Initial projects undertaken by the trust resulted in the displacement of a significant number of residents without providing adequate resettlement solutions. However, subsequent projects proved to be more successful. These projects included land reclamation initiatives aimed at connecting the Seven Islands of Bombay and the construction of modern apartments. These developments contributed to the availability of better housing options, leading to the decline of Chawls as a prevalent housing solution. Nevertheless, Chawls can still be found in the economically disadvantaged areas of Mumbai.

The Chawl serves as a metaphor for the larger challenges and aspirations of the newly independent nation. Its inhabitants, coming from different ethnic groups and cultures, mirror the diversity present in Maharashtra's metropolitan cities. The shared struggle for survival and betterment reflects the collective journey of a society striving to uphold secular values and navigate the complexities of postcolonial life. *Ravan and Eddie*, a novel written by Kiran Nagarkar, first published in 1994 is set in the bustling city of Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay). Kiran Nagarkar (1942 – 2019) stands as one of India's most distinguished novelists and playwrights, renowned for his remarkable courage and talent within the realm of modern Indian English fiction. His novel 'Cuckold' earned him the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in the year 2000. Nagarkar was a trailblazer, challenging established norms and conventions in his literary creations, all while striving to bring about social change and foster a comprehensive political perspective in the country through the artistic medium of his works. His novels masterfully capture the tragedy and alienation of contemporary existence, shaped by the socio-historical conditions of postcolonial India. Imbued with a strong sense of ideological commitment and social concern, his writings collectively offer a piercing critique of the prevailing social realities. "Ravan and Eddie"

represents Nagarkar's second novel, initiating the Ravan and Eddie Trilogy, with the subsequent two instalments, "The Extras: Starring Ravan and Eddie" and "Rest in Peace: Ravan and Eddie," published in 2012 and 2015, respectively.

The Chawl in the novel *Ravan and Eddie* represents a relatively confined space where the lives of its inhabitants are intricately intertwined, much like the difficulty of picking lice out of one's hair without inadvertently affecting someone else's. The essence of life in a chawl is that everything is public property. When you are constantly in each other's hair, it's almost impossible to get the lice out of your hair without picking a few out of somebody else's (47). The novel explores their lives as they navigate the challenges of growing up in a diverse and often chaotic environment. It delves into the complexities of their families, their aspirations, and the influences of the city on their lives. The story also highlights the cultural and religious tensions that exist in Mumbai. In the novel *Ravan and Eddie*, Nagarkar adeptly creates a historically and politically compact urban landscape that reflects the everyday realities of city life. The novel offers a nuanced exploration of Mumbai's cultural landscape, emphasizing the need to navigate issues of identity, social dynamics, and unity in the face of a complex and multifaceted urban environment.

The novel is known for its unique narrative style and humor, as well as its exploration of the lives of the two main characters, Ravan and Eddie. The story revolves around Ravan and Eddie, two boys who grow up in a chawl (a type of tenement housing) in Mumbai. They come from different backgrounds, with Ravan being a Hindu and Eddie being a Christian. Despite their differences, they share a common dream of becoming the neighborhood's greatest film stars. Ravan and Eddie's experiences and interactions shed light on how they perceive and interact with Mumbai's diverse spaces. Furthermore, the mention of the CWD Chawl adds a layer of authenticity to our analysis. By describing the Chawl as a residential building for the lower middle class and middle-class families, Nagarkar provides readers with an understanding of the socio-economic context in which the characters live and the unique dynamics of Chawl's life. The novel is a depiction of the genuine struggles faced by a diverse group of individuals who coexist within the same crowded space. This perspective highlights the complexity of the characters' lives and their shared human experiences. The emphasis on the comical and realistic struggles adds depth and relatability to the characters' stories. By showing their day-to-day challenges, the novel humanizes them and invites readers to empathize with their circumstances. "It was of course religion that was the source of all the differences between

the two communities. Hindus go to temples as and when they felt like it. Catholics, one and all, go to Moss on Sundays." (23) The presence of different religions, classes, and hierarchies within the narrative is crucial, while these factors are undoubtedly present and contribute to the diverse tapestry of the novel, they don't overshadow the overarching theme of shared belonging. This sense of belonging is what connects the characters, transcending the boundaries that might otherwise divide them. It underscores the unity that can be found even in a diverse and crowded environment like the chawls of Bombay. "Water, Blood. Is there a contrast? The water wars had begun. It had taken a long time, but the CWD chawl ladies had finally started to get it the esteem of water" (72).

"The smell of fish and the urine of the chawls right into our drawing rooms" (back cover of R & E) showcases Nagarkar's ability to evoke sensory details that connect the readers intimately with the atmosphere of the novel and the city it portrays. By dissecting the portrayal of the city through historical context, modernization, fictional representation, and characterization, starting with the historical lens allows readers to grasp the socio-cultural background against which the events unfold. The modernization of a city can have a profound impact on its architecture, infrastructure, and social dynamics, and this evolution plays a crucial role

in shaping the setting of a novel and influencing the lives of its characters. "[...] the prime mover is water. You snapped out of anesthesia, interrupted coitus, stopped your prayers, postponed your son's engagement, developed incontinence, took casual leave to go down and stand at the common tap, canceled going to church because water, present and absent, is more powerful than the Almighty. (70)"

The use of the city as not just a backdrop but as a living, breathing participant in the narrative further emphasizes the inseparable relationship between the characters and their urban environment. The depiction of the congested chawls, shared facilities, and the intertwining lives of Ravan and Eddie showcase the author's skill in portraying the nuances of urban living. By capturing the essence of the Chawl in Bombay, Nagarkar provides readers with an immersive experience that mirrors the complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. The exploration of reality and struggle within the congested spaces of chawls underscores the novel's commitment to reflecting the complexity of life.

[Ravan] had reached the Byculla bridge. A local train swept past without stopping at the station. Like a sponge being squeezed, the people on the platform shrank back. Commuters were hanging from the bars of the carriage windows. Some stood

precariously on God alone knows what between compartments. Every once in a while, a torn leg or an arm swung wildly but hurriedly got back to its owner when a signal pole of the support of a bridge rushed past. The sides of the train were bulging with the pressure of the people packed into it. (How many passengers does a Bombay 'local' hold anyway?

Twenty-five thousand? Thirty? Forty?) Any moment now that speeding solid iron shell, thousands of bodies were going to be flung all over Bombay, all the way to Borivali and Virar, some falling into the Thane creek, others into the Arabian Sea. (27)

Mumbai is a bustling metropolis with a fast-paced urban lifestyle. The novel explores the daily lives of its residents, including the struggles, aspirations, and dreams of individuals navigating the city. Describing Bombay as a city of various facets, including lust, black magic, fantasy, greed, and violence, portrays it as a multifaceted urban environment that goes beyond the simplistic image of a dream-building city. Nagarkar's ability to weave multiple themes together and create intricate narratives can indeed present challenges in understanding, but it also reflects the depth and complexity of his storytelling. Creating a historically and politically compact urban landscape is

vital to capturing the daily reality of spaces in cities. This involves highlighting unique activities that create both similarities and contradictions among various parts. The approach allows the novel to present a multi-dimensional portrayal of the urban landscape, where the lives of characters are intertwined with the city's dynamic history and contemporary dynamics. This portrayal aligns with the novel's exploration of the coexistence of contrasting elements in the lives of its characters. By touching on mysterious aspects of Bombay, such as lust and sexuality, Nagarkar adds depth to the novel's exploration of the human experience within an urban setting:

Sex was a grey area. Parvati was not just a fine-looking woman; there was a sexual charge in her, an animal magnetism, to use the current popular magazine phrase that she was completely unconscious of and that drove some men insane and others to asceticism and flagellation. -(4)

Nagarkar's portrayal of the dark side of Bombay, including destitution, open vegetable markets, whore houses, and the world of the Mafia, reflects the novel's willingness to tackle difficult subjects. Mafia themes and organized crime have been explored in other Indian novels, often reflecting the country's complex social, political, and cultural dynamics. While not as prevalent as in some other literary

traditions, several notable Indian novels delve into the world of the Mafia. These novels and non-fiction works offer a glimpse into the underworld and criminal activities in India, shedding light on the complexities of the Mafia and its impact on society. The Chawl's setting serves as a microcosm for Nagarkar to explore social dynamics and secularism in post-independence India. By portraying the Chawl's diverse inhabitants, he showcases the complexity of societal interactions and challenges the idea of a homogenous world within it. Life in the Chawl doesn't represent unity in diversity but resonates with the broader discussion about India's diverse society. The Chawl's heterogeneity, driven by factors like religion, caste, race, and gender, is a reflection of the complexities that exist within Indian communities. In essence, Nagarkar uses the Chawl as a lens to examine the intricacies of Indian society, challenging assumptions about unity and providing a nuanced portrayal of its multifaceted nature.

The depiction of Mumbai as a dynamic entity that both shapes and is shaped by the characters' experiences adds depth to the narrative. This interaction between characters and their environment further highlights the role of the city as a character in its own right, influencing and reflecting the lives of its inhabitants. The interwoven relationship between Mumbai, the characters, and the

broader societal context in Nagarkar's fiction brings to light the thematic significance of the city's portrayal and its role in conveying the complexities of post-independence India. The crowded Chawl as a significant setting emphasizes the communal nature of the environment and how everyone is interconnected, effectively highlighting the two primary identities within the Chawl: the children and the parents. The observation that the indigenous religions within the Chawl community create an interesting dynamic underscores the multi-layered nature of the environment. Despite their presence and influence, they may not always be overtly expressed or spoken about. This hidden yet influential aspect of the Chawl's culture adds depth to the narrative's depiction of the setting. His approach to these indigenous religions highlights his nuanced storytelling. William H. Whyte discusses this in *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, "People don't flock to empty spaces as a refuge from busy city life. People go to places where there are other people". (303)

Chawls represent not only physical structures but also social spaces where diverse communities interact and coexist. Through this lens, Nagarkar's work becomes a commentary on the rapid urbanization and the challenges it brings, including issues related to housing, overcrowding, and socio-economic disparities. In this sense, authors like him can indeed be labeled as

"strikingly postcolonial publishers" due to their ability to capture the nuances of a rapidly changing urban landscape and reflect on the challenges faced by the city and its inhabitants after gaining independence. Their works provide a more comprehensive and realistic representation of the postcolonial experience, expanding the literary exploration beyond community boundaries and shedding light on broader societal issues.

The characterization of Mumbai as a city where these concepts align with the metro's sociology highlights the novel's exploration of urban dynamics and societal norms that are specific to a metropolitan context. The city's influence on the characters' lives and the portrayal of how their livelihoods are intertwined with these themes add depth to the narrative and offer a lens through which readers can understand Mumbai's intricate socio-economic fabric. Nagarkar writes that in the CWD chawls:

Hindus spoke Marathi, Catholics, and English.... English was the thorn in the side of the Hindus. Its absence was their cross, their humiliation, and the source of their life-long inferiority and Inadequacy. It was a severely debilitating, if not fatal, lack that was not acknowledged, spoken of, or articulated. It was a great leveler. It gave caste Hindus a taste of their own medicine. It made them feel like untouchables. It

also turned the tables. The former outcastes could now look down upon their Hindu neighbors. (79)

The chawls play a significant role in depicting Bombay's urban dynamics and cultural diversity during the mid-20th century. Chawls are a distinctive feature of the urban landscape in Mumbai, characterized by multi-story residential buildings where individual rooms or units are rented by families. These chawls often house people from various backgrounds and communities, creating a microcosm of the city's diverse population. Nagarkar's plot uses the chawl setting to explore a wide range of themes and elements that were part of the social fabric of Bombay during that era. Creating a historically and politically compact urban landscape is vital to capturing the daily reality of spaces in cities. This involves highlighting unique activities that create both similarities and contradictions among various parts. By capturing the essence of the Chawl in Bombay, he provides readers with an immersive experience that mirrors the complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors. This approach allows the novel to present a multi-dimensional portrayal of the urban landscape, where the lives of characters are intertwined with the city's dynamic history and contemporary dynamics.

The Chawl's limited physical space mirrors the constrained living conditions that its residents experience.

Within the Chawl, there is minimal room for personal privacy or solitude. The proximity of living quarters fosters a sense of communal living but also leads to conflicts, misunderstandings, and confrontations due to the lack of personal space. The ambiguity and uncertainty of living in such close quarters are reflected in the interactions between chawl-dwellers. Nagarkar's portrayal of the Chawl as a space of both intimacy and tension captures the complex dynamics that emerge when individuals share confined living spaces. The Chawl thus becomes a microcosm of the broader urban landscape, highlighting the challenges and intricacies of coexisting within limited physical boundaries. This depiction emphasizes the interdependence of the Chawl's inhabitants while also acknowledging the potential for conflicts and clashes arising from their proximity.

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