

Article

Cricket, Concrete, and Consciousness: Urban Magical Realism as Psychogeographic Critique in Arvind Adiga's *Selection Day*

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Accepted version published on 5th August 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16744985>

Abstract: Arvind Adiga's *Selection Day* moves beyond straightforward realism by weaving elements of magical realism into its portrayal of Mumbai, converting the city from backdrop to sentient psychogeographic actor. Throughout the novel, the fantastical seeps into everyday life, and through cricket's rituals, dreams, and cruel statistics, Mumbai is portrayed as both stage and player in a game shaped by merciless economic and social divisions. This imagined city beats with a surreal heartbeat: dusty playgrounds become haunted arenas, crumbling tenements whisper curses, and every six, miss, or poorly timed run echoes the weight of history that refuses to stay buried. Against this vivid landscape, brothers Manju and Radha Kumaraswami chase shining ambitions even as shadows of poverty, corruption, and family expectation twist their identities and scrape the ground beneath their feet. Building on these images, this paper argues that Adiga means his urban magic less as pure flights of whimsy and more as concrete proof that the city's bricks and concrete can brand mind and fate, and that recognising this link may be the first act of defiant possibility.

Keywords: Urban Magical Realism; Psychogeography; Mumbai; Cricket; Systemic Inequality

Introduction

Contemporary postcolonial Indian fiction often examines the dislocations caused by rapid urban expansion. However, Arvind Adiga's *Selection Day* stands apart for its purposeful blend of the surreal with Mumbai's harsher truths. Stepping away from the strict social realism that won him the Booker Prize for *The White Tiger*, Adiga depicts a city where the everyday rubs shoulders with the uncanny in uneasy tandem.

Mumbai acts less like a passive setting and more like a predatory actor, bending the destinies of people such as the cricket-hungry Kumaraswami brothers, Manju, and Radha. Their uphill run from ragged marginal neighbourhoods to the cruel spotlight of elite cricket anchors the story while framing larger questions of hope, shame, and city-driven alienation. At its heart rests a thesis built on urban magical realism, where wonder-seated undercity, viral match-day omens, and ghostly recollections cling to the city's brick-and-cement map.

Rather than pulling readers away from the world, the magical and surreal moments in these works serve as a sharp lens, laying bare the psychological scars—the lived emotions and mental echoes the city leaves—that stem from Mumbai's wealth extremes and merciless building boom (Stojanović and Maurya). Central to this reading are two precise ideas: urban magical realism, the way wonder or the uncanny springs directly from a particular mix of power, memory, and fractured city space, and psychogeography, the deliberate or hidden rules by which streets, rooms, and marks of inequality shape how people feel and act, sometimes almost before they know it (Stojanović). As Maurya notes, eastern cultures helped colour the hodgepodge of images that the Latin American modernists drew on when they were dreaming up their new style, starting a long and passionate exchange between those writers and far-off readers. One clear sign of that exchange was how Indian authors almost rushed toward García Márquez's stories, finding something familiar yet fresh in his blend of the everyday and the impossible. After his moment and the larger Boom, Latin American prose gave Indian regional languages a decisive push, encouraging them to explore new rhythms and politics. The subaltern voice, already a staple of Indian verse and fiction, found in this mode an additional way to speak for lives usually kept off centre in print (Maurya 231).

Urban Space and Literary Surrealism

Adiga's crowded, noisy Mumbai is best understood when critics link its real, mapped spaces to the literary tricks he uses, since that partnership pulls realism apart and shows a stranger city beneath the familiar surface. Henri Lefebvre's idea of the production of space gives us an important starting point for thinking about how cities are built and rebuilt. He insisted that space is not an empty backdrop but a product of social struggles and arrangements (Stojanović), and that insight underlies much recent urban theory. In *Selection Day*, the range of buildings, from the cramped towers of Navi Mumbai to the bright, gated cricket arenas such as the Wankhede Stadium, emphasises how Mumbai's layout orders opportunity and exclusion. The slums stand for conceived space (the orderly, pre-approved realm of planners), holding the Kumaraswami brothers in place. At the same time, the stadiums drift between lived space-experience, aspiration, and unrest, and yet another form of rigid, elite control (Stojanović). Edward Soja's later work on the post-metropolis helps us read that terrain. He portrays the late city as fractured, polarised, and grounded in a perpetual sense of unreality produced by hyper-urbanisation and the flood of data (Stojanović). *Selection Day's* Mumbai embodies that model, with its massive density turning everyday motion into a positive spark for the novel's magical moments—the city's force becoming luck or ghosts hovering over a

cricket ball, for players like Manju, the rush and noise of the post-metropolis blur the edges of what feels real and what seems borrowed from a dream (Stojanović and Sukoco).

In its urban form, magical realism becomes a telling lens for the psychogeographic worlds Adiga charts. Sharon Zukin's study of the "life and death of cities" shows how cultural symbols and power clashes redraw city space, an idea echoed in Adiga's pages (Stojanović). The mythic gloss on cricket or the guided gamblers at the "underworld" also makes room for a cultural resistance, pushing back against the erase-and-replace impulse stirred up by fevered growth and yawning inequality (Tribunal and Stojanović). These signs insist on a dark, stubborn pulse even within the bleakest skyline (Tribunal and Stojanović). Adiga's practice also slots into a wider, cross-border strain of magical realism that turns everyday wonder into a critique of power, stretching from Hiligaynon town tales in the Philippines, whose spirits and blessings still map local neighborhoods, to the Latin American arcs first forged by García Márquez and felt later by Indian writers (Tribunal and Stojanović). With that gambit, Adiga folds Mumbai's jagged social lines into a global story about the surreal weight of modern cities, letting the local and the worldly speak through the same shimmering, off-kilter frame (Tribunal and Stojanović). Adiga treats Mumbai not merely as a set of streets and buildings but as a living landscape that blends geography with the inner feelings of its people, and he uses touches of magical realism to blur that line, inviting readers to see the city through both eyes at once.

Cricket Fields as Liminal Zones

In Adiga's fiction, cricket, a fourth-dynasty religious practice, becomes the main canvas for his urban magic realism. Fields of play, especially Wankhede Stadium, rise beyond bricks and turf to form liminal zones—thin thresholds where the ordinary touches the extraordinary, where aspiration rubs shoulders with despair, and where personal will sometimes bows to bigger social forces. The game is steeped in jagged fantasy: Mumbai itself appears as a living actor, its underworld breathing underneath, nudging outcomes and whispering warnings. Each match carries supernatural weight, as if success depends on spiritual favour as much as on skill; winning feels less like a point on a scoreboard and more like a skirmish against the city's shadowed will. Early on, Radha's near-mythic talent shines brightly; yet, later the story hints that unseen hands may have stacked the deck. Psychogeography unfolds crisply: the stadium, designed for spectacle and national pride, absorbs the characters' aching hopes and the city's heavy, grinding routine.

The city embodies two conflicting possibilities: the hope of transcending poverty through fame and fortune, and the harsher reality of demanding training, the market-driven use of talent, and the weight of public expectation. This charged environment makes it feel as if players confront not only rival teams but also Mumbai's restless spirit, a spirit deeply split along lines of class and privilege (Stojanović).

Urban Transformation and Trauma

The novel's most decisive moments of magical realism grow out of its sharp contrast between Mumbai's frenetic change and the psychological scars that change leaves, especially on Manju. His story is marked by vivid visions and spells of detachment that follow him as he tries to move through the city simply. One telling episode places him side by side with the crowded lanes of Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, while cranes and billboards signal development racing onward. Stagnant water, clutching heat, and the evening chant of labourers coalesce to form shadows that settle deep in his mind, warping sound and light into something menacing. Manju's scientific quest to name a new species of bat becomes both an escape hatch and an outward sign that the city is hurting him.

This inner tug-of-war echoes Lefebvre's idea of lived space, the terrain of feeling and memory that overpowers planners' diagrams (Stojanovi). For Manju, Mumbai's lived space is stitched together from dread; pavements crack, fortunes vanish, and each setback undermines the boundary between what happens outside him and what torments him inside. The novel's magic is thus more than colour or whim—it is part of the city's psychogeography, showing how bricks, contract notices, and written-off lives can ripple through a psyche until nightmare and market report are the same thing (Stojanovi and Sukoco).

In *Selection Day*, Aravind Adiga charts Mumbai not with tourist highlights but with the streets and byways that Manju, Radha, their authoritarian father Mohan, and the scheming scout Tommy Sir are forced to tread. From distant slum corners to glittering practice nets and packed stadiums, their routes mimic the uneven climb the boys attempt as they chase a better life. Even deciding which alley to walk down quietly defies the city's maps and the class rules they dictate. Where N.K. Jemisin's New York in *The City We Became* rises in fierce, protective unity against outside danger and defends its people (Stojanovi).

Mumbai's awareness in *Selection Day* feels closer to a watchful predator than a guardian friend. Its interior logic often pushes the brothers back to where they started while pretending opportunity is still within reach. Rather than lifting them, the city's silent energy keeps reinforcing the very hierarchies that grind them down daily. Adiga's touch of magic realism does not turn the streets into fairytale pathways; instead, it makes concrete the barriers that the boys, trapped in an unyielding psychogeography, must constantly fight against. For Manju and Radha, every step forward is shadowed by the fear that the ground beneath them will give way, an all-too-familiar sensation for anyone trying to move up in a city built on rigid class lines.

Conclusion

In *Selection Day*, Arvind Adiga employs urban magical realism not simply for decorative effect, but as an incisive psychogeographic method that remakes Mumbai into a contested arena where spatial and social divides appear as both a psychological burden and a supernatural force. Viewed through the lens of cricket, a national legend yet marked by class and market pressures, the novel lays bare the ruthless machinery

of hope and ruin that drives life in today's overcrowded, hyper-commercial city. Fantastical moments emerge from the specific traumas of siblings Manju and Jagdish, as well as from the city's heavy, almost sentient atmosphere, offering a critical language that traditional realism struggles to convey. Through these devices, Mumbai ceases to be a passive backdrop; its eerie, almost vengeful magic reveals and amplifies the same fragmentary, unequal world the characters must navigate every day.

This study broadens the conversation about contemporary Indian urban fiction in several essential ways. Most narratives about Mumbai lean toward a strict realism that charts life in slums or contrasts fortunes along the city's economic fault lines, yet Adiga forges another path and channels the cities psychological heat and strange undercurrents through magical realism; doing so starts to fill a gap in scholarship that usually reads *The White Tiger* almost exclusively as a social indictment. Grounded in psychogeographic theory—Lefebvre's rhythm analysis and Soja's concept of the third space—and aligned with a global line of magical realism from Latin America to the Philippines, Adiga's work provides critics with a fresh lens for reading the postcolonial metropolis itself. Within that frame, cricket acts as a flickering emblem of fragile hope inside the urban nightmare—a pastime that offers brief routes out, yet at the same time props up many institutions it appears to surpass. *Selection Day* thus portrays Mumbai as a terrain where concrete steadily moulds thought and where only the weird, raised above census data, can honestly record the deep trouble of today's city.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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