



The Ambivalent Nation: Class, Caste, and Social Classification in Aravind Adiga's Fiction

¹J. Keba Immanuel, ²Dr. S. Jesurajan

¹Part Time Research Scholar, Reg. No. P5449, Department of English, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

²Former Head and Associate Professor, Department of English, Arul Anandar College (Autonomous), Karumathur – 625514, Madurai District, Tamil Nadu

Abstract: Contemporary Indian writing in English has witnessed a significant thematic transition from romanticized depictions of cultural heritage to unvarnished explorations of socio-economic reality. Aravind Adiga stands out among contemporary novelists for his critical examination of post-colonial Indian society. Drawing upon a corpus that includes *The White Tiger* (2008), *Between the Assassinations* (2008), *Last Man in Tower* (2011), and *Selection Day* (2016), this paper analyzes how Adiga deconstructs the persistent caste hierarchies, class disparities, systemic corruption, and social ambivalence in modern India. Despite rapid economic globalization and technological advancement, traditional caste structures and subaltern marginalization remain largely intact. Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrates how Adiga exposes the friction between "Light India" and "Darkness," arguing that social mobility for the marginalized often requires radical subversion of established socio-legal norms.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, Caste System, Social Structure, Subalternity, Modernity, Economic Disparity, Contemporary Indian English Literature.

1. Introduction

Indian English literature has long served as a medium for reflecting societal expectations regarding ethics, justice, and social reality. While traditional literary canons frequently celebrated India's spiritual legacy and ancient traditions, contemporary writers like Aravind Adiga and Arundhati Roy adopt a critical lens to expose systemic inequalities. Born in Mangalore in 1974, Adiga began his career as a financial journalist, reporting on stock markets and investments for the *Financial Times* and serving as South Asia correspondent for *TIME* magazine. His journalistic background strongly informs his narrative approach, providing an empirical foundation for his literary critique.

Adiga's maiden novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), won the Man Booker Prize and shifted literary trends by depicting the harsh socio-economic conditions of contemporary India. While the nation is celebrated globally for its democratic framework and rapid economic growth, it remains deeply affected by caste discrimination, communal tensions, administrative corruption, and class division. Following independence and the onset of globalization, Indian society readily embraced Western technology, corporate structures, consumer habits, and modern attire. However, structural reforms regarding communal equality and caste hierarchies have lagged significantly behind. The subaltern classes remain trapped in poverty, while upward mobility is frequently restricted to those who navigate or exploit corrupt institutional networks.

2. *The White Tiger*: Caste, Servitude, and the Mechanics of the "Rooster Coop"

2.1 The Narrative Frame and "Half-Baked" Identity

In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai recounts his journey from a impoverished rural village to his status as a self-styled entrepreneur in Bangalore. The novel is structured as a series of letters written over seven consecutive



nights to visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. Balram addresses the foreign leader with a satirical and ironic tone, aiming to present the unvarnished realities of Indian entrepreneurship rather than official state narratives. Early in his correspondence, Balram openly mocks the official political spectacles surrounding foreign visits:

"When you have heard the story of how I got to Bangalore and became one of its most successful (though probably least known) businessmen, you will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man." (WT 6)

Balram identifies himself as a "half-baked Indian"—a term describing individuals whose formal education was cut short due to economic pressures. Born into the Halwai caste (traditionally associated with sweet-making), Balram is removed from school by his grandmother, Kusum, to work in a teashop in Dhanbad. However, Balram argues that being "half-baked" is an advantageous condition for an entrepreneur in India. Unencumbered by rigid academic schooling, such individuals develop adaptive, pragmatic minds capable of learning directly from their environment.

2.2 The Binary World: "Darkness" versus "Light"

Adiga establishes a clear geographic and socio-economic binary within the novel:

The Darkness: Rural, feudal India (symbolized by the ancestral village of Laxmangarh), where vulnerable populations are exploited by corrupt landlords nicknamed "The Animals", The Raven, The Stork, The Buffalo, and The Wild Boar.

The Light: Urban, globalized India (represented by modern Delhi and Bangalore), characterized by outsourcing, call centers, and corporate wealth. Balram's satirical view of divine order in Laxmangarh reflects the vast disparity between social classes:

"Up in the blue skies, God spreads His palm over the plains below, showing this little man Laxmangarh, and its little tributary of the Ganga and all that lies beyond: a million such villages, a billion such people. And God asks this little man: Isn't it all wonderful? Isn't it all grand? Aren't you grateful to be my servant?" (WT 88)

Despite his early academic potential, which earned him the nickname "The White Tiger" from a visiting school inspector. Balram remains constrained by his low social standing. His transition from a teashop worker to a chauffeur for Mr. Ashok (the Stork's American-educated son) highlights the pervasive master-servant dynamic that defines domestic labor in urban centers.

2.3 The Rooster Coop and the Ethics of Subversion

Balram attributes the submissiveness of India's working class to "The Rooster Coop", a metaphorical system of oppression that keeps the poor trapped in servitude. This mechanism operates not only through physical force, but through deep family obligations and fear of collective retribution. Servants understand that any crime committed against a master will result in violent retaliation against their family members remaining in the village. Neelakandan (2023) Balram invokes Sir Muhammad Iqbal's verse to capture this pervasive mindset:

"They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." (WT 40)

To break out of the coop, Balram chooses murder. Witnessing Mr. Ashok's systemic bribery of politicians and disillusioned by his master's moral degradation, Balram constructs a weapon from a broken liquor bottle, kills Ashok, steals a bribe bag containing 700,000 rupees, and flees to Bangalore with his young cousin Dharam.

In Bangalore, Balram establishes "White Tiger Drivers," a taxi service catering to night-shift call center employees. Ahasan (2024) He rationalizes his crime as a necessary step toward personal liberation, concluding that even if apprehended, experiencing freedom outweighs a life spent in perpetual servitude. Adiga thus



highlights a harsh social reality: within rigid caste and class structures, upward mobility for the subaltern often requires radical, subversive action.

3. *Between the Assassinations*: A Microcosm of Regional Stratification

3.1 Structural Overview

Adiga's second book, *Between the Assassinations* (2008), comprises linked short stories set in the fictional coastal town of Kittur in southwestern India. The events occur between the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984 and that of her son, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991. Formatted like a regional guidebook—complete with sections such as "Arriving in Kittur" and "The History of Kittur"—the work systematically examines how caste, religion, and economic status shape provincial life.

3.2 Caste Hybridity and Systemic Injustice

Between the Assassinations examines how traditional social hierarchies disrupt individual lives: Caste Alienation: Shankara, a student of mixed Brahmin and Hoyka parentage, is excluded by both social groups. His sense of social isolation drives him to detonate a chemical bomb in his classroom, illustrating how social alienation can trigger individual violence. Institutional Corruption: The story of Abbasi depicts a small-business owner attempting to maintain ethical working conditions for his employees. Longchar and Imsong (2023) However, local regulatory corruption forces him to participate in bribery simply to keep his business open, showing how ethical conduct is penalized within the bureaucratic system.

Occupational Stagnation: Chanayya, a low-caste cart driver, experiences severe physical toll from manual labor. Despite his awareness of class inequality, he finds no structural pathways for advancement, demonstrating the limited upward mobility available to rural laborers. Vasanathan (2023) Through these interconnected narratives, Adiga constructs Kittur as a microcosm of modern India, illustrating how caste divisions, religious tensions, and economic disparities shape everyday provincial life.

4. *Last Man in Tower*: Urban Real Estate, Greed, and Moral Erosion

4.1 The Battle for Vishram Cooperative Housing Society

In *Last Man in Tower* (2011), Adiga shifts his focus to urban Mumbai, exploring the conflict between aggressive real estate development and middle-class residential communities. The novel is set in the Vishram Cooperative Housing Society, a middle-class housing complex in the suburb of Vakola. The architectural setting itself hints at secretive social behavior:

"Perforated with eight-pointed stars, the wall along the stairwell resembles the screen of the women's zenana in an old haveli, and hints at secretive, even sinister, goings-on inside." (LM 5)

When wealthy developer Dharmen Shah (head of the Confidence Group) offers to purchase the housing society at double its market value to construct a luxury development called the "Shanghai Project," community ties quickly break down. Shah addresses the residents using familial language to mask commercial ambition:

"...to me you are now members of my own family. I say this, and the proof is in the motto of the Confidence Group: from my family to [your family]." (LM 104)

While the younger residents of Tower B agree immediately, the aging tenants of Tower A initially hesitate before succumbing to financial self-interest.

The primary conflict arises from Yogesh Murthy ("Masterji"), a retired 61-year-old science teacher and widower, who refuses to sell his flat. Attached to his home by memories of his late wife Purnima and deceased daughter, Masterji values his personal integrity and personal history over financial gain. Because the developer requires



unanimous consent from all flat owners to proceed, Masterji's refusal blocks the entire deal, turning his longtime friends into aggressive adversaries.

4.2 Urban Development and the Decay of Conscience

The novel demonstrates how material incentives can dissolve long-standing social bonds:

Erosion of Community Ties: Neighbors who lived peacefully for over thirty years including Mrs. Puri, Mr. Pinto, and Ibrahim Kudwa turn on Masterji as financial pressures increase. Respect for his work as an educator gives way to harassment, intimidation, and open hostility.

The Role of Capital: Dharmen Shah represents ruthless urban redevelopment. Having risen from poverty through compromise and determination, he uses his wealth to manipulate tenants into enforcing his interests, insulating himself from direct legal responsibility.

Collective Violence: The confrontation culminates in a conspiracy: the elderly residents of Tower A, led by figures like Mrs. Puri, collaborate to murder Masterji inside his flat to secure the developer's payout. Adiga emphasizes the complete lack of remorse among the residents following Masterji's death. They return to their daily routines while enjoying their new wealth, illustrating how material pressures in expanding urban centers can completely erode ethical considerations. However, the novel introduces a subtle symbol of resilience through the ancient banyan tree near the Juhu Housing Society.

"Behind these overlapping wires she saw banyan trees; all of which were hemmed in by the fencing; except for one greying ancient, whose areal roots, squirming through barbed wire and broken glass, dripped down the wall like primordial ooze until their bright growing tips, nearly touching the pavement, brushed against a homeless family cooking rice in the shade; and with each root-tip that had beaten the barbed wire the old banyan said: Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free." (LM 419)

Despite being enclosed by layers of barbed wire and glass fragments, its aerial roots continue growing toward the pavement. As the narrator observes, "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free," offering a counterpoint to the surrounding moral decay.

5. Synthesis: Social Ambivalence and Caste Dynamics in Adiga's Works

Across his literary works, Aravind Adiga critiques the structural contradictions defining contemporary Indian society. His narratives portray a nation navigating rapid economic integration while remaining bound to historical inequalities.

5.1 The Persistence of Caste and Subaltern Stagnation

Aravind Adiga demonstrates that post-colonial changes have modernized India's technological and corporate infrastructure while leaving traditional social hierarchies intact. In *The White Tiger*, Balram's low-caste identity as a Halwai initially binds him to physical servitude. In *Between the Assassinations*, characters like Shankara remain isolated by caste identities. Rather than dismantling caste distinctions, economic expansion often creates new avenues for caste-based leverage and exclusion.

5.2 Critique of the "India Shining" Narrative

Adiga's frame of work challenges optimistic portrayals of national development. Works such as *Selection Day* (2016) explore the pressures of social mobility through urban sports culture, contrasting official narratives of economic opportunity with the everyday struggles of lower-class families. By exposing the gap between corporate prosperity and subaltern hardships, Adiga highlights the deep economic divisions within contemporary urban centers.



6. Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's fiction provides an insightful, critical examination of contemporary Indian society. Through satire, realistic characterization, and acute socio-economic observation, his novels explore the persistent tension between traditional social hierarchies and modern economic ambitions.

From Balram Halwai's rebellion against servitude in *The White Tiger*, to the socio-religious divisions in *Between the Assassinations*, and the moral breakdown of middle-class Mumbai in *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga exposes the human cost of unchecked materialism and persistent caste discrimination. His fiction suggests that true national progress requires addressing deeply rooted social inequalities rather than relying solely on economic growth. By challenging romanticized depictions of modern India, Adiga's work emphasizes the urgent need for structural reform, ethical awareness, and social justice.

Works Cited

- [1] Ahasan, F. (2024). Cultural capital in schools as social institutions: Bangladesh rural government primary education. *ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies*, 2(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v2.i1.2024>
- [2] Adiga, Aravind, *The White Tiger*, New Delhi, Harper Collins, 2008, English.
- [3] ---, *Between the Assassinations*, 2008, Picador, English.
- [4] ---, *Last Man in the Tower*, Harper Collins, 2012, English.
- [5] ---, *The Selection Day*, Harper Collins, 2016, English.
- [6] Cynthia. Rev. of *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga. Goodreads. Goodreads. n.d. Web. 22 Jan. 2016.
- [7] Chris, Harman. "India: Poverty behind the tiger." *Socialistreview.org.uk. Socialist Review*. February 2009. Web. 22 February 2016.
- [8] Guha, Keshava. "Straight drive to stardom". *The Hindu*. August 21, 2016. Web. 10 May 2017.
- [9] Kamil, Nalini Shyam. "The Dystopic Vision of Aravind Adiga in His Novels." *The Indian Novel Today* Ed. Singh, Prabhat K. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2013. 149-61. Print.
- [10] Longchar, T., & Imsong, I. T. (2023). Contemporary Travel Literature: A Postcolonial Reading of Flâneur in Monisha Rajesh's *Around India in 80 Trains*. *ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies*, 1(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v1.i1.2023.4>
- [11] Mukherjee, Ankhi. "Yes sir. I was the one who got away". *Post-colonial Emergence and the Questions of Global English*. Etudes Anglaises, 2009. pp2 80-91.
- [12] Neelakandan, S. (2023). The Subjectivity and Otherness: Negotiating the Difference in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande. *ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies*, 1(1), 12–17. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v1.i1.2023.7>
- [13] Purdon, James. Rev. of *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga. 26 June 2011. Web. 22 March 2016. 358
- [14] Sebastian, Dr. A. J. "Is Adiga's *Between The Assassination* a Coop for *The White Tiger*?" book browse. Book browse. n.d. Web. 12.02.2016.
- [15] Swarup, Vikas. "Fiction Caste Away" Rev. of *Between the Assassinations* by Aravind Adiga. The guardian. The Guardian. 11 July 2009. Web. 22 Mar. 2016.
- [16] Tripathi, Savitri. "A Tale of Two Cities" Aravind Adiga's *The white Tiger*: An Unexpected Journey from Rural to Urban India.
- [17] Valdes, Marecla. Rev. of *Last Man in Tower* by Aravind Adiga. Washingtonpost. The Washington Post. Sept. 19, 2011. Web. 23 March 2016.



-
- [18] Vasanthan, R. (2023). Unveiling Conformity and Differentiation Through Derrida's "Differance". ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies, 1(1), 6–11. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhgyan.v1.i1.2023.6>

e- Sources

- [1] <http://www.aravindadiga.com/>
[2] <http://www.aravindadiga.com/books/index.html>
[3] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331248610_Indian_Writing_in_English_and_Regional_Literature_in_the_light_of_Indian_English