



Social Realism And Capitalist Critique In Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger, Selection Day, And Last Man In Tower

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Abstract:

Aravind Adiga's novels are a compelling exploration of contemporary India's socio-economic realities, portraying the stark divide between wealth and poverty, ambition and morality, and tradition and modernity. *The White Tiger* critiques the illusions of the Indian success story through Balram Halwai's journey from servitude to ruthless entrepreneurship. *Selection Day* interrogates the commodification of talent and the psychological pressures of ambition within India's cricket-obsessed culture. *Last Man in Tower* examines urbanization and capitalist greed, showcasing the clash between ethical resistance and financial desperation. This paper explores the recurrent themes of economic disparity, corruption, ambition, and ethical dilemmas in Adiga's works, positioning them as critical commentaries on India's evolving socio-political landscape.

Keywords:

Social Realism, Capitalism, Corruption, Urbanization, Class Struggle, Ambition, Ethical Dilemmas.

Introduction:

Aravind Adiga, a prominent voice in contemporary Indian literature, uses fiction to unearth the darker realities of Indian society. His novels serve as social critiques that expose the fallacies of economic liberalization, neoliberal capitalism, and social mobility. Through an analysis of *The White Tiger*, *Selection Day*, and *Last Man in Tower*, this paper explores how Adiga dismantles the myth of a meritocratic India, offering instead a grim portrayal of the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality.

The White Tiger:

The Illusion of Social Mobility *The White Tiger* (2008), Adiga's debut novel and Booker Prize winner, presents a scathing critique of India's class divide through the protagonist Balram Halwai. Balram's transformation from a submissive village boy to a self-made entrepreneur exposes the exploitative structures that govern India's economy. The novel critiques the "Rooster Coop" metaphor, which signifies the entrapment of the poor within a corrupt and oppressive system. Adiga portrays a nation where social mobility is not achieved through merit but through moral compromise and violence.

Balram, born into poverty in a rural village, is initially confined to the fate of a servant. His journey to Delhi, where he becomes a driver for the wealthy Ashok Sharma, offers a glimpse into India's rigid class hierarchy. Despite his intelligence and ambition, Balram realizes that systemic barriers prevent his upward

mobility. His eventual act of murdering Ashok and seizing his wealth is portrayed as an act of rebellion against an unjust system, rather than an unequivocal crime. This radical transformation highlights Adiga's commentary on the necessity of moral corruption for financial success in contemporary India.

The novel also challenges the glorification of globalization and economic progress. While India's economy is booming, Balram's narrative reveals how these advancements predominantly benefit the elite while leaving the lower classes in a cycle of exploitation. The dichotomy between the "Light" and the "Darkness" that Balram frequently references serves as a metaphor for the glaring disparities between urban affluence and rural deprivation.

Furthermore, Adiga's portrayal of India's democratic institutions underscores their failure to provide justice for the underprivileged. Corruption is rampant among the police, politicians, and business magnates, reinforcing the idea that legal and moral structures serve the powerful. In this context, Balram's ruthless rise to power is not just a personal victory but a symbolic dismantling of a deeply flawed system. Ultimately, *The White Tiger* serves as a powerful critique of social mobility in India, illustrating how ambition and intelligence alone are insufficient to overcome entrenched inequality. Adiga forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the cost of success in a society where ethical compromise is often the only means of survival.

Selection Day: The Commodification of Ambition:

In *Selection Day* (2016), Adiga shifts his focus to the world of cricket, an institution deeply embedded in Indian culture. The novel follows two brothers, Manju and Radha Kumar, whose lives are shaped by their father's relentless ambition to turn them into cricketing stars. The narrative delves into the commercialization of talent and the psychological toll of parental expectations. Through the protagonist Manju, Adiga questions the illusion of meritocracy, revealing how systemic corruption, corporate interests, and social pressures shape destinies. The story underscores the way economic forces influence sports and personal ambition. Mohan Kumar, the father of Manju and Radha, treats his children as investments, believing that their cricketing success will lift them out of poverty. His rigid expectations and harsh discipline reflect the pressures placed on young athletes in a society where sports serve as a rare opportunity for upward mobility. However, Adiga exposes the reality that true merit often succumbs to corporate sponsorships, favouritism, and unethical practices within cricket academies.

Manju, unlike his elder brother Radha, struggles with his identity and the rigid expectations forced upon him. His internal conflict is heightened by his complicated relationship with Javed, a wealthy and confident cricket player. Through their friendship, the novel explores themes of masculinity, personal freedom, and sexual identity. Manju's hesitance to fully embrace the role his father and society expect of him highlights the restrictive nature of traditional success narratives. Additionally, *Selection Day* critiques the commercialization of sports, where talent is commodified, and young athletes are pressured to conform to marketable identities. The relentless competition, corporate sponsorships, and media scrutiny create an oppressive environment where individuality is often sacrificed for broader economic interests. Ultimately, *Selection Day* deconstructs the myth of meritocracy in Indian sports and, by extension, society at large. The novel highlights how dreams are manipulated by larger economic and social forces, leaving individuals like Manju struggling to define success on their own terms.

Last Man in Tower: Capitalism vs. Ethical Resistance:

Last Man in Tower (2011) explores the consequences of rapid urbanization and capitalist expansion through the story of Vishram Society, a cooperative housing complex in Mumbai. When a real estate developer offers its residents a lucrative buyout, the novel dissects the ethical dilemmas of material greed versus communal loyalty. Masterji, a retired schoolteacher and the sole dissenter, becomes the moral centre of the novel, embodying resistance against capitalist encroachment. Adiga's portrayal of urban India highlights the erosion of traditional values in the face of financial incentives, critiquing the ethical compromises that accompany economic development.

Vishram Society serves as a microcosm of India's urban middle class, where financial struggles and aspirations collide with ethical concerns. The residents, initially united, become divided when faced with the offer from the developer. While some view the buyout as an opportunity for economic upliftment, others, like Masterji, resist, believing in the sanctity of their community and home. This ethical conflict is at the heart of the novel, revealing how capitalism can undermine personal and communal values. Masterji's unwavering resistance symbolizes the lone voice of morality in a world driven by profit. His refusal to accept the buyout stems from his deep-seated belief in integrity and justice. However, his isolation and ultimate fate in the novel illustrate the cost of standing against corporate greed. His tragic downfall is a stark reminder of how dissenters are often silenced in a system that prioritizes wealth over ethics.

Adiga also critiques the illusion of progress that urbanization promises. While high-rise buildings and luxury developments symbolize modernity and economic growth, they also signify displacement, erasure of history, and loss of communal ties. The destruction of Vishram Society for corporate development represents the broader reality of India's rapidly transforming urban landscape, where the weak are often sacrificed for the benefit of the powerful. Ultimately, *Last Man in Tower* is a compelling examination of the moral dilemmas posed by urban expansion and capitalism. It questions whether financial security can ever compensate for the erosion of ethical values and communal harmony. Through the fate of Masterji and the shifting loyalties of the Vishram Society residents, Adiga paints a bleak yet realistic picture of a society where survival often necessitates moral compromise.

Recurring Themes in Adiga's Novels:

1. Economic Disparity and Class Struggle –

Adiga consistently portrays the widening gap between India's rich and poor, dismantling the myth of equal opportunity. Economic disparity is a dominant theme in Adiga's novels, reflecting the harsh realities of a deeply stratified society. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai's journey exemplifies the challenges of breaking free from entrenched class structures. His rise to power is not a result of genuine economic mobility but rather a consequence of crime and moral compromise, underscoring the brutal reality that success is often inaccessible to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Similarly, *Selection Day* presents a different facet of class struggle, where talent and ambition are commodified, and systemic barriers hinder genuine progress. Manju and Radha Kumar, despite their cricketing potential, are subjected to exploitation by corporate interests and their own father's oppressive ambitions, highlighting how financial disparities shape personal destinies. *Last Man in Tower* further examines class struggle in the context of urbanization, where the promise of economic progress comes at the cost of ethical erosion. The novel illustrates how capitalist expansion disproportionately benefits the affluent while displacing the economically vulnerable. Through these narratives, Adiga critiques the illusion of a meritocratic India, exposing a society where class and wealth dictate opportunities and social mobility remains a distant dream for the underprivileged.

2. Corruption and Moral Ambiguity –

Adiga's novels frequently highlight the deep-rooted corruption that governs Indian institutions, revealing the moral ambiguity that accompanies ambition. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai's ascent to entrepreneurial success is not a tale of hard work and perseverance but one of calculated crime. His decision to murder his employer, Ashok, serves as a chilling commentary on the ethical compromises necessary to break free from systemic oppression. Balram's moral conflict is minimal, underscoring the normalization of corruption as a survival strategy in an exploitative society. Similarly, *Last Man in Tower* exposes the insidious reach of financial coercion within urban development. The residents of Vishram Society, initially bound by community values, succumb to bribery, deceit, and betrayal under the pressures of real estate expansion. Masterji, the lone voice of ethical resistance, faces alienation and ultimately tragic consequences, reflecting the overwhelming power of corruption. Adiga's portrayal of institutional decay highlights the bleak reality that moral principles are often compromised in pursuit of economic gain, reinforcing his critique of India's socio-political landscape.

3. Ambition and Identity –

Adiga explores how ambition shapes identity and the compromises individuals make to achieve success. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai's transformation from a naïve village boy to a wealthy entrepreneur is driven by his relentless ambition to escape poverty. His journey, however, involves moral transgressions, illustrating how ambition often demands ethical sacrifices. Similarly, in *Selection Day*, the protagonist Manju grapples with his father's towering expectations and societal pressures that equate success with self-worth. While Radha embraces the competitive nature of cricket, Manju struggles with the rigid definitions of ambition imposed on him. The novel highlights the internal conflicts of identity, where personal desires are often at odds with societal expectations. Through these narratives, Adiga critiques the obsession with success in contemporary India, showing how it can both empower and entrap individuals, forcing them into difficult moral choices.

4. Urbanization and Capitalism –

Last Man in Tower provides a critique of urban transformation and the moral conflicts it generates. The novel portrays the battle between corporate greed and the human cost of urbanization. Vishram Society, a cooperative housing complex, symbolizes the struggle of the middle class against rapid development. As real estate developers attempt to buy out the residents, ethical dilemmas emerge—should they accept financial security or resist in the name of communal integrity? Masterji, the only holdout, becomes a representation of moral resistance against capitalism, but his isolation and ultimate demise highlight the cost of defying economic forces. Adiga critiques how urban development in India prioritizes profit over human lives, displacing long-established communities in favour of high-rise modernity. The novel exposes the systemic inequalities of urbanization, where progress comes at the expense of the vulnerable, forcing them to choose between economic survival and ethical principles.

Conclusion:

Aravind Adiga's novels serve as powerful indictments of India's socio-economic realities, challenging the grand narrative of a progressive, opportunity-laden nation. By weaving personal struggles with larger systemic critiques, Adiga underscores the complexities of ambition, morality, and survival in a rapidly changing society. His works remain essential readings for understanding the intricate relationship between capitalism, corruption, and social justice in modern India.

Works Cited:

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