

CAPITALISM AND CONSUMER CULTURE IN SELECT NOVELS OF ARAVIND ADIGA

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ABSTRACT

*This research paper examines the intersection of hyper-capitalism and social identity in the selected novels of Aravind Adiga, specifically *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower*, and *Selection Day*. Since the 1991 liberalization of the Indian economy, the nation has undergone a radical metamorphosis, transitioning from a Gandhian ethos of self-sufficiency to a market-driven “New India.” This study utilizes Marxist literary theory and Saskia Sassen’s “Global City” framework to analyze how Adiga utilizes social realism to expose the dehumanizing effects of this transition. Central to the analysis is the metaphor of the “Rooster Coop,” which illustrates how consumerist culture and structural poverty trap the marginalized in a cycle of perpetual servitude. The study further explores the commodification of urban space, the human body, and personal dreams, arguing that market values have effectively supplanted traditional morality. By investigating the dialectic between the rural “Darkness” and the urban “Light,” the paper demonstrates how modern prosperity relies on the exploitation of an invisible labor class. Ultimately, the research concludes that Adiga’s narratives serve as a critical warning against a predatory globalist ideal that transforms citizens into commodities and neighbors into competitors, thereby eroding the communal fabric of the nation.*

KEYWORDS: *Hyper-Capitalism, Social Realism, The Rooster Coop, Commoditization, Urban Gentrification.*

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Introduction

The literary works of Aravind Adiga, particularly his Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger*, offer a piercing look into the contradictions of modern India. Below is an exploration of how his narrative dissects the shift from traditional values to a market-driven reality. The year 1991 remains a turning point in Indian history. It marked the transition from a closed, socialist-leaning economy to a liberalized, globalized market. This “New India” promised a golden age of technology, malls, and middle-class wealth. While the skyline changed with glass skyscrapers, the social fabric underwent a deeper, more turbulent transformation. Adiga captures this era not through the eyes of the winners, but through those left in the shadows of this rapid growth. Adiga’s writing style is defined by “grit.” He moves away from the romanticized, exotic depictions of India often found in older literature. Instead, he employs social realism—a blunt, honest way of showing the world as it truly is. His characters aren’t heroes in the traditional sense; they are survivors navigating a landscape of corruption and extreme inequality. By highlighting the “darkness” of rural poverty alongside the “light” of the tech hubs, Adiga forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of progress. One of Adiga’s most powerful metaphors is the Rooster Coop. He describes how hundreds of chickens sit in a cage at the market, watching their peers being slaughtered, yet they do not rebel. In “New India,” consumer culture serves as this coop. The desire for shiny gadgets, better clothes, and social status keeps the working class trapped. They are so busy competing with one another for crumbs that they never challenge the system keeping them down. This entrapment prevents true social liberation because the dream of “making it” keeps everyone obedient. The central argument of Adiga’s work is that in a hyper-capitalist environment, market values have replaced moral values. In the quest for upward mobility, traditional ethics like honesty and loyalty are seen as weaknesses. Individuals are no longer treated as humans with intrinsic worth. People become tools or “commodities” to be used for profit. Ultimately, Adiga suggests that to escape the “Darkness,” individuals often feel forced to shed their humanity, proving that a society built solely on financial gain inevitably erodes the soul.

Literature Review

To understand the power dynamics in Adiga’s work, one must apply the Marxist concept of the Base and Superstructure. According to Karl Marx, the “Base” consists of the means of production (tools, factories, land) and the relations of production (the roles people play). The “Superstructure” includes culture, law, religion, and literature, all of

which grow out of the Base and serve to justify the status quo (Eagleton, 2002). In the Indian context, the shift to a neoliberal economy in 1991 fundamentally altered the Base. As India moved toward global capitalism, the Superstructure-the stories we tell ourselves about success-changed too. Adiga illustrates how the legal system and social hierarchy are designed to protect the wealthy elite who own the “Base,” while the poor are kept in check by a Superstructure of low-wage service and domestic servitude. Saskia Sassen’s (2001) *Global City Theory* provides a lens through which to view Adiga’s depictions of urban centers like Bangalore and Delhi. Sassen argues that certain cities become “nodes” or command centers for global finance. These cities are disconnected from their local geography and are instead plugged into a worldwide network of capital.

In Adiga’s novels, these cities are portrayed as islands of extreme wealth. Sassen points out a “dual city” phenomenon: for every high-tech hub, there is a massive increase in low-end service jobs. The glitzy malls and IT parks cannot function without the invisible army of drivers, cleaners, and security guards. Adiga captures this friction, showing how the “Global City” creates a physical and psychological wall between the tech-savvy elite and the laborers who facilitate their lifestyle. A significant portion of literary criticism focuses on how Adiga deconstructs the “entrepreneurial spirit.” In postcolonial India, the figure of the self-made man is often celebrated as the ultimate symbol of freedom. Critics argue that Adiga’s portrayal is a critique of “predatory capitalism” (Mondal, 2012). While the protagonist Balram Halwai calls himself an “entrepreneur,” his path to success is paved with blood and betrayal. This highlights a grim reality: in a system of structural poverty, social mobility is almost impossible through legal means. Existing research suggests that Adiga’s work challenges the myth that hard work alone leads to success. Instead, he suggests that the only way for the marginalized to enter the capitalist class is to adopt the same ruthless tactics used by their oppressors. This “Postcolonial Capitalism” doesn’t bring freedom; it simply creates new masters.

Methodology

The primary method used is close reading. This involves a meticulous examination of the narrative’s specific language, tone, and structure. Rather than just summarizing the plot, we look at: Why do individuals like Balram Halwai choose crime over compliance? How does the physical environment-from the dusty roads of Laxmangarh to the glass towers of Gurgaon-reflect the protagonist’s internal state? We interpret recurring motifs, such as the “White Tiger” (representing rarity and power) and the “Chandelier” (symbolizing the overwhelming and artificial nature

of wealth). To ground the literary analysis in reality, two major sociological concepts are applied: This theory explains how the elite in “New India” use luxury goods-expensive cars, designer clothes, and gold-to signal their social status. In Adiga’s world, buying is not about need; it is a performance of power intended to provoke envy in the lower classes. This framework examines how the modern workplace strips individuals of their humanity. The study utilizes a comparative lens to map the geography of capital. By looking at the “Darkness” (rural heartlands) and the “Light” (urban tech hubs) as more than just locations, we see them as stages of economic development. By analyzing the movement of characters from the rural interior to the urban coast, we can track the geographical movement of capital. This movement shows how money migrates toward the cities, leaving the countryside drained of resources and talent. This comparative method reveals that the “Light” can-not exist without consuming the “Darkness.”

The Commodity of Freedom

Balram Halwai’s transformation from a humble village “Sweet-maker” to a Bangalore “Entrepreneur” is not a story of merit, but of survival of the fittest. This journey is best viewed through Social Darwinism-the idea that only the most ruthless individuals survive in a competitive social environment. In the “Darkness,” Balram is expected to be docile. He realizes that in “New India,” the old rules of morality are barriers to success. To become an entrepreneur, he must shed his empathy and adopt a predatory mindset. His decision to murder his master is presented not just as a crime, but as a calculated business move. Adiga suggests that in a hyper-capitalist society, the “Entrepreneur” is often just a predator who was smart enough to escape his cage. Balram’s success proves that when the system is rigged, the only way to climb the ladder is to kick others off it. The most chilling concept in the novel is the Rooster Coop. This is Adiga’s metaphor for how the capitalist structure maintains control without needing physical chains. The coop works because of the internalization of servant-hood. The “roosters” (the poor) stay in the coop because they are terrified of the consequences of escape-not just for themselves, but for their families. The masters exploit the servants’ sense of duty and love, using their families as collateral. This creates a psychological trap where the oppressed police one another. Even when the cage door is left open, the inhabitants stay inside because they have been conditioned to believe that their identity is defined by their service. Balram’s “freedom” only begins when he decides that his own life is more valuable than the lives of his relatives back home.

Adiga uses specific objects to show how consumerism replaces internal identity. This is known as Material Fetishism-attributing magical power or deep significance to physical goods. When Balram sees a man with a yellow tattoo, it represents a “cool,” globalized identity. It is a mark of belonging to the modern world, far removed from the dirt and soot of the village coal mines. In the final stages of his journey, Balram becomes obsessed with chandeliers. A chandelier serves no practical purpose other than to signal wealth. To Balram, the “Black Chandelier” is the ultimate symbol of his arrival. It represents the light he has finally found, yet it is artificial and hangs over him, reflecting the hollow nature of his victory. “The desire for the chandelier is the desire to be seen as someone who has conquered the darkness.” These items are not just decorations; they are the “commodities of freedom.” They prove to the world that Balram is no longer a servant. Adiga leaves us with a haunting question: if freedom is achieved through murder and measured by shiny objects, is it truly freedom, or has Balram simply moved into a more expensive cage?

Urban Space and Gentrification

In the world of *Last Man in Tower*, Mumbai is not a collection of neighborhoods but a map of investment opportunities. Real Estate Capitalism describes a system where the primary goal of land is to generate profit through speculation rather than providing shelter. The apartment building, Vishram Society, is an aging structure that represents the old middle class. To the builder, Dharmen Shah, this building is “dead capital.” By demolishing it and constructing a luxury highrise, he can unlock immense value. This reflects a global trend where gentrification pushes out original residents to make room for the ultra-wealthy. In this framework, the historical or emotional value of a “home” is completely erased by its “exchange value” on the market. The heart of the conflict lies in the character of Yogesh Murthy, known affectionately as Masterji. He is a retired school-teacher who refuses to sell his flat, despite being offered a life-changing sum of money. Masterji represents a pre-liberalization era where identity was tied to memory, community, and integrity. To him, the apartment is where his late wife and daughter lived; it is his sanctuary. In a hyper-capitalist city, his refusal is seen as an act of madness or selfishness. Masterji becomes a “structural obstacle” to the flow of capital. Adiga uses his struggle to show that in a society obsessed with progress, there is no room for the past. The “price” of his resistance is not just financial; it becomes physical and psychological as he is gradually isolated from the world he once knew.

The most tragic element of the novel is the transformation of

the other residents. Initially, the neighbors are a tightknit group. Once Dharmen Shah offers them massive payouts, their morality begins to crumble. This is a stark look at how market forces erode community. The promise of a “modern lifestyle”—complete with elevators, swimming pools, and gated security—acts like a poison. Friends who have lived next to Masterji for decades turn into his enemies. They convince themselves that Masterji is the “villain” holding back their children’s futures. The neighbors eventually move from social shunning to active hostility. Adiga highlights a grim reality: when money is the only metric of success, human relationships become transactional. The residents are not “evil” people, but their consumerist greed makes them participants in a crime. By the end, the community is destroyed from within, proving that the luxury tower will be built on the ruins of human empathy.

The Professionalization of Dreams

In Selection Day, the two brothers, Radha and Manjunath, are not viewed by their father as sons, but as human capital. Their father, Mohan Kumar, is obsessed with turning them into the next cricket superstars. To him, their muscles, stamina, and reflexes are biological investments that must yield a financial return. This reflects a broader trend in modern India where parents from lower-income backgrounds view their children’s talents as the family’s only ticket out of poverty. The boys are subjected to a brutal regimen of diet and exercise, stripping away their childhood. Their bodies are no longer their own; they belong to the “brand” the father is trying to build. Adiga uses this to show how capitalism reaches into the most intimate spaces—the relationship between a parent and a child—turning love into a business contract. Adiga sets this story against the backdrop of a changing sports landscape in India. Cricket is no longer just a game; it is a massive marketplace fueled by the Indian Premier League (IPL) culture. Players are auctioned like goods. Talent scouts and sponsors look at young boys not for their passion, but for their “marketability.” The novel portrays the cricket world as a predatory system where wealthy benefactors and agents trade in the potential of young men. This “professionalization” means that the joy of the sport is replaced by the pressure of the transaction. The cricket pitch becomes a stage where the drama of global capital is performed, and every “selection day” is essentially a trade show where human lives are the products on display.

Perhaps the most poignant part of the novel is its exploration of failure. In a meritocratic, market-driven environment, success is credited to the individual, but so is failure. If you don’t “make it,” the system suggests it is because you weren’t fast enough, strong enough, or determined enough.

Adiga highlights the psychological trauma of those who fall short. When Manjunath realizes he doesn't actually love cricket, he faces a vacuum. His entire identity was built on being a "future star." In a consumer culture, the "winner" gets the endorsements and the glory, while the "loser" becomes invisible. From the father's perspective, a child who fails is a "bad investment." The "Failed Consumer" is the person who bought into the dream of the market but was discarded by it. Adiga argues that the pressure to be a "success" in "New India" creates a profound sense of alienation. For every one boy who becomes a millionaire athlete, thousands are left with broken bodies and no education, having spent their youth chasing a market-driven fantasy that had no room for them.

Discussion

In the world Adiga constructs, the traditional compass of right and wrong has been discarded. He portrays "New India" as a landscape where morality is a luxury that only the rich can afford to discuss, yet seldom practice. The most striking observation across his novels is that poverty has been criminalized. In a society obsessed with wealth, being poor is no longer seen as a misfortune; it is treated as a moral failure. Characters like Balram Halwai or the residents of Vishram Society realize that the legal system and social codes are designed to protect those with property. Consequently, traditional "sins" like theft or even violence are reclassified as "business necessities" by those trying to escape the bottom of the ladder. Adiga suggests that when money becomes the only measure of worth, a moral vacuum is created where empathy disappears, and the only true "sin" is to remain at the bottom of the economic food chain. A recurring theme in Adiga's work is the deceptive nature of freedom in a consumerist society. Modernity offers a "veneer of freedom"-the ability to choose a brand of toothpaste, a mobile network, or a cricket club-while keeping the actual social structure incredibly rigid. This is the Illusion of Choice. While the "New India" looks like a land of opportunity, the "Rooster Coop" and the "Global City" dynamics ensure that the poor remain a permanent serving class. Consumer culture encourages the marginalized to spend their small earnings on status symbols, which keeps them in debt and dependent on the system. Even when a character like Balram "makes it," he does so by becoming a master himself, thereby reinforcing the very hierarchy he once hated.

The freedom offered by the market is a horizontal movement; people can change their clothes or their gadgets, but moving vertically-changing one's actual class and power-remains a violent and nearly impossible feat. Adiga famously divides his setting into "The Darkness"

and “The Light.” He argues that these are not two separate Indias, but two sides of the same coin. The “Darkness” (the slums and impoverished villages) is the necessary byproduct of “The Light” (the glittering cities and tech parks). Capitalism, as Adiga describes it, is an extractive process. The “Light” survives by draining the “Darkness” of its labor, its youth, and its resources. The luxury towers of Mumbai cannot exist without the labor of the slumdweller who build and clean them. The “Aesthetic of the Slum” serves as a constant reminder and warning to the middle class of what happens if they stop running in the capitalist race. Ultimately, Adiga’s synthesis reveals that “New India” is a paradox. It is a place of incredible growth and crushing stagnation existing at the same time. The “Darkness” is not a shadow that will eventually disappear with more light; it is the fuel that keeps the lamps of the wealthy burning.

Conclusion

The primary finding of this research is that Adiga’s novels serve as a stern warning. Through his visceral depictions of the “Rooster Coop” and the cutthroat real estate markets, he illustrates how unchecked capitalism strips away human dignity. His stories prove that when progress is measured only by wealth, the individual is reduced to a tool. Whether it is a driver in Delhi or a schoolteacher in Mumbai, every character faces the same grim reality: in a market-obsessed world, people are treated as disposable commodities. Adiga’s work maps a profound cultural transition in the Indian subconscious. We see a clear move away from the “Gandhian Ideal,” which prioritized village-level self-sufficiency, communal harmony, and spiritual simplicity. In its place stands the “Globalist Ideal,” a philosophy rooted in endless consumption and individual competition. This shift has created a society that is wealthier in material goods but bankrupt in communal ethics. The “New India” portrayed by Adiga is one where the desire for a shiny car or a luxury flat has successfully replaced the pursuit of social justice. This study contributes to the field of Contemporary Indian English Fiction by positioning Adiga not just as a storyteller, but as a vital social critic. While many writers focus on nostalgia or the diaspora, Adiga uses fiction as a tool for “grit.” He provides a necessary counter-narrative to the “India Rising” slogan, ensuring that the voices of the marginalized—those trapped in the “Darkness”—are heard. By bridging the gap between literature and sociology, this analysis highlights how modern fiction can be a powerful mirror, reflecting the uncomfortable truths of a nation in transition.

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