



Available online at www.jlls.org

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC STUDIES

ISSN: 1305-578X

Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 17(3), 2228-2232; 2021

A Study of the Portrayal of Postcolonial India in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

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APA Citation:

Sakthivel, S., & Ganesan, S. (2021). A Study of the Portrayal of Postcolonial India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(3), 2228-2232.

Submission Date:08/10/2021

Acceptance Date:22/12/2021

Abstract

The onset of globalization has only sharpened the tremendous socio-economic divide that marks the postmodern, postcolonial India. Even after many decades of independence, millions of Indians suffer from a lack of basic amenities. On the one hand, we have smart cities, metro trains, flyovers and airports; on the other hand, there are millions of villages which lack basic amenities of life. The predicament of the have-nots has caught the imagination of the Indian English writers, starting from Mulk Raj Anand. Aravind Adiga is a critically acclaimed novelist to emerge in current times. His *The White Tiger* got him the Booker Prize. He has mercilessly probed the woes that plague modern India in this work, combining realism, humour and satire. This article analyses Adiga's depiction of contemporary India in *The White Tiger*.

Keywords: *globalization, postmodern, postcolonial, realism, humour, satire.*

1. Introduction

European colonial powers invaded, occupied and exploited a huge global area for centuries. During the twentieth century, they covered a vast area that included parts of Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Caribbean Islands and Ireland. The English people colonised and established their culture in countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In India and Nigeria, they introduced their culture by compelling and imposing their institutions and norms. Indian independence in 1947 marked the postcolonial era. Immediately after independence, the terms often used were 'independence' and 'post-independence'. However, slowly and gradually, terms like 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' came into use.

Postcolonial literature means the literature written after the withdrawal of the imperial power from the territories of the erstwhile colonized countries. Having freedom from colonial rule, the Postcolonial people thought of having their identity. So they raised their voice against past exploitations and oppressions and attempted to establish their identity. Postcolonialism represents an attitude to resist colonialism, step outside its influence, and reclaim an autonomous and free identity.

This present article discusses postcolonial India in Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Some recent novelists like Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Githa Hariharan and Amitav Ghosh have been highlighting the postcolonial issues in their works in unique ways. Thus, pressing issues like people's ignorance, illiteracy, starvation, poverty, suffering and humiliation got expressed in contemporary Indian writings in English. Aravind Adiga, who belongs to the current crop of Indian writers in English, has realistically projected the image of postcolonial India, which has been experiencing varied effects of globalization. On the one hand, globalization has paved the way for making millions and has given birth to many Indian millionaires; on the other hand, the fruits/benefits of globalization have not reached the subalterns languishing in backward parts of India, the vast land of differences. The subalterns often suffer from poverty, caste-ignominy, and lack of education and opportunities. Youngsters from the subaltern sections who have experienced city life become ambitious and, at times, are ready to adopt any means to taste material success. All these things have caught the imagination of Adiga and found their place in his *The White Tiger*. Balram Halwai is the protagonist of the novel *The White Tiger*. The story is told in flashbacks, in the mode of letters written by Balram to Wen Jiabo, the Chinese Premier. When the novel begins, Balram enjoys a high position in society. He is getting all the facilities from all levels because now he is in 'Light', but he was born and raised in 'Darkness'. So he explained to Wen Jiabo, "Please understand, your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of darkness (TWT14). The protagonist intends to give the premier an idea of "real" India beforehand, through the details of his own life story.

Adiga reveals the corrupted education system in postcolonial India. Balram Halwai explained to Wen Jiabo how the government schools were functioning during his school days. Through these descriptions, Wen Jiabo (and the readers) can realize the Indian school system.

There was supposed to be free food at my school. At lunchtime, a government programme gave every boy three rotis, yellow daal, and pickles. but we never saw rotis, or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money, Once, a truck came into the school with uniforms that the government had sent for us; we never saw them, but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighboring village. (33,TWT).

There is no duster in this class; there are chairs; there are no uniforms for the boys. How much money have you stolen from the school funds, you sister-fucker?'(34, TWT)

From these lines, we can understand how and why the government programme is exploited. To start with, the pay of any government job in India is poor. The government exploits the schoolteacher, and the schoolteacher swindles the school children and their funds; these things mark India's darkness.

The 'Darkness' is a reminder of the 'Darkness' in V.S. Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*, where he ruthlessly exposed the hypocrisy in Indian society, the fairy-tale land of Anglo-India, of clubs and sahibs. He says,

It is the amazing mimicry of an old country without a native aristocracy for a thousand years. It has learned to make room for outsiders, but only at the top.

The mimicry changes, the inner world remains constant; this is the secret of survival (44, TWT)

In the novel, Adiga probes the economically degraded state of Balram's father. After all, one nurtured rosy hopes at the dawn of the country's independence in 1947. However, what happened was people killing and looting each other. There was widespread lawlessness. People were most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up and grown big bellies. "To sum up-In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat- or get eaten up" (TWT 64).

Thus, there were significant social upheavals which affected people in different ways. Balram's father-a real Halwai, a sweet-maker, lost his shop. Persons from some other caste must have stolen it from him with the help of the police. As a result, he was reduced to a rickshaw-puller. That is, his total family was uprooted from its socially respectable position. In those days, there were several castes, but nowadays, according to Adiga, in India, there are only two castes-rich and poor; this is the accurate picture of the Indian subcontinent. While the affluent sported big bellies, the poor who had not eaten correctly were reduced to small bellies.

According to Nigel Collett, Adiga gives us a view of India from the bottom up. It is not a pretty panorama, the pungent smells of sewage, the personal detritus of slum dwelling life, the skin disease and the rotting, betel-juice reddened teeth which disfigure the poor, the flutter of cockroach wings over their faces as they mutter in their sleep on the roadsides and concrete floors of their bosses' outhouses (91, *TWT, Roman Critical Contexts*).

The government's health care system also is under Adiga's scrutiny. On the one hand, the poor lacked proper medical facilities; they were affected by killer diseases like tuberculosis, jaundice etc. On the other hand, the rich enjoyed modern medical facilities. Worse, even in the public health care system, corruption had spread its tentacles. Balram explains to Wen Jiabo the state of the government hospitals.

I came to Dhanbad after my father's death. He had been ill for some time, but there is No hospital in Laxmangarh, although there are three different foundation stones for a Hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections. There was A rickshaw-puller on the other side of the river who recognized my father; he took the Three of us to the government hospital. there was no doctor in the hospital. The Ward boy, after we bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening. The hospital rooms were wide open; the beds and metal springs sticking out of them,
 Two little girls came and sat down behind us; both of them had yellow eyes. Jaundice. She gave it to me.' I did not. You have I me and now we'll both die!'[47-49). No , sir... it's skin disease. I've got it here too, behind my ear-see-all those pink spots?' A lot of people have this disease, sir. A lot of poor people.' No, sir. The disease of the poor can never get treated. My father had TP and it killed him.' (237,TWT).

Adiga is obsessed with the great economic divide he has witnessed in India, even in the basic medical system. The government hospitals lack facilities and doctors and are steeped in corruption. This is a matter of great concern. In India, almost half of the people are reeling from poverty. They cannot afford to take treatment in private hospitals. Hence, poor people are compelled to go to government hospitals for their health care; but the tragedy is that there are no doctors in the hospital. The problem is a deep-rooted one. For their government jobs, doctors have to bribe corrupt politicians. As a result, after becoming government doctors, they have no interest in serving with devotion. Instead, they work in private hospitals for extra income. This state of affairs has claimed countless lives of the poor. Balram's father could not get proper treatment for his tuberculosis and died. This prevalence of affairs in Indian society is both lamentable and condemnable.

Dr.A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, in his work, *India 2020*, opines that the need for better nutrition comes after a good and clean environment with necessary food supplements. The next steps are preventive healthcare systems-inoculation, vaccination, immunization, periodic health checks and medical treatment. These should be made available and affordable to all Indians. Employers, Central, State and Local Governments should bear the responsibility to assure people of this health security cover (220).

Denis Rogers, the Director of BWPI (Brooks World Poverty Institute, Manchester) is reported to have said, "Bestsellers such as Indian writer Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*' and Indian-Canadian Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*", he said, " convey complex ideas in most powerful way... we are not arguing that poets should replace finance Ministers" . . . "but we are stressing that novelists make

distinctive and important contribution to the border store house of knowledge on process, experience and consequence of ‘development.’”(36, *Aravind Adiga, An Anthology of Critical Essays*).

Poverty is the central issue plaguing people's lives in postcolonial India. Even after many years of independence, people suffer from a lack of proper jobs and financial difficulties. Many have been reduced to hand-to-mouth existence, and many others do not even have that possibility. Many people suffer from a lack of basic needs. They do not have proper food, cloth, water and shelter. In the big Indian cities, one could see people living in slums, under bridges, and inside a giant, abandoned pipes. The White Tiger speaks of one such poor woman:

“Oh, she was one of those people. Who live under the flyovers and bridges, sir. that’s my guess too.’ In that case, will anyone miss her...? ‘I don’t think so, sir. you know how those people in the darkness are: they have eight, nine, ten children sometimes they don’t know the names of their own children. Her parents- if they’re even here in Delhi, if they even know where she is tonight- won’t go to the police.”(164).

This incident gives a stark picture of the children of the poor loitering here and there, wasting their life. It is poverty which cripples the lives of many. It makes them homeless and live under the flyovers and bridges. Poor people have no control over breeding. Many of the poor sacrifice their life for their success. In this novel, Ram Persad is a Muslim boy, but he changes his identity as a Hindu, compelled by poverty. Many poor people sell their votes to the politician who pays them. Such incidents mark the dark areas in the social fabric of postcolonial India.

According to Michael Portillo, it [Adiga’s novel] changed my view of certain things like what is the real India and what is the nature of poverty...what set this one apart was its originality. For many of us this was entirely a new territory, the dark side of India...it’s a book that gains from dealing with very important social issues, the division between rich and poor and the impossibility of the poor escaping from their lot in India” (58, TWT, A Symposium of Critical Response).

2. Conclusion

To sum up, Adiga has strongly presented the present reality of India in his novel. During British Rule, people suffered from want of freedom and identity in our country. Their woes were of various kinds. They had rosy notions of political freedom in which they saw the solutions to the problems they suffered. True, after a long struggle, India got independence and got the status of postcolonial identity. India is democratic; it has its own power and government, but issues like poverty and corruption are yet to be addressed. Adiga has to be credited for his sincere attempt to expose the loopholes in the democratic system in India, which, he feels, may be removed through social awareness. As he says, “At a time when India is going through significant changes and with China likely to inherit the World from the West, it is essential that Writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That’s what I am trying to do- it is not an attack on the country, it’s about the incredible process of self-examination.(web,The Guardian. Oct, 16, 2008).

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