Social malaise and Cultural Implication in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*- A Thematic Study

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to explore how Aravind Adiga, in his debut novel titled *The White Tiger* depicts the social malaise and cultural conflict in Indian society by raising the essential and pertinent issues like poverty, hunger, oppression, social inequalities and injustice based on the grounds of caste, religion and class through the story of a man who rose from a humble background to achieve success in the upper echelons of Indian society. Also, this paper describes how Adiga portrays the chaos of the current social structure with stark realities like the rich dominating the poor and ‘the Rooster Coop’ revolt. Breaking out of the Rooster Coop is nearly impossible and requires highly unethical actions including murder and betrayal of one's family, which keeps almost everyone trapped in the Rooster Coop indefinitely. Adiga indirectly suggests reforms in social, economic and political system by eradicating individual vices, social evils and disintegrating systems. Most of the issues raised by Adiga are prevalent in third world nations and they are to be understood with their complexity and addressed properly.

Key words:

Social malaise, cultural implications, injustice, oppressions, poverty

The emergence of literature is born from painful and pleasant memories and from the experiences of histories. Writing is the evidence of a writer’s tremendous power and evolution, which plays an effective means to express the colossal human problems in a wide context. A creative writer can grow his wings of creative expression to offer a truthful,
accurate and objective representation of the world. Srinivasa Iyengar in the work *Indian Writing in English* mentions that Literature has been the means of giving form and utterance to hopes and despairs, the enthusiasm and apathy, the thrill of joy and the stab of pain, in a nation’s history as it moves from freedom to slavery, from slavery to revolution, from revolution to independence, and again from independence to the tasks of reconstruction involving further experiences of success and elation. (694)

The creation of the literary works in different genres, with diverse narrative techniques and approaches is the natural outcome of the issues and the incidents which are actually seen by the writers in the society. Every creative work is thus a scientific study of human society. Subhrajit Chatterjee in the article “The Historical Development of Sociology of Literature” quotes the views of W. F. Ogburn who highlights that “Sociology is a body of learning about society. It is a description of ways to make society better. It is a social ethics and a social philosophy. However, it is generally defined as a science of society” (39) and Allan Swingewood in his book *The Sociology of Literature* denotes that “Sociology is essentially the scientific, objective study of man in society, the study of social institutions and of social process; it seeks to answer the question how society is possible, how it works, why it persists” (11). Thus human society and literary creations are indispensable to each other. There is a shared relationship between them.

Creating an ideal society is the first preference of the writers with social concern and they want people to get rid of all their predicaments and acquire advancement and betterment in their life. The sociological approach of the writers is the distinguished one in literature which is used by many social thinkers to depict the relationship of literature and society. It is the imitation of the human action which presents their thinking, saying, and doing in the society. Wilbur Scott in the book *Five Approaches of Literary Criticism* conveys his views that sociological approach“. . . starts with a conviction that art’s relations to the society are vitally important, and that the investigations of these relationships may organize and deepen one’s aesthetic response to a work of art. Art is not created in a vaccum; it is the work not simply of a person, but of an author fixed in time and space, answering to a community . . .” (123). Scott also has stated the views of Henry Levin who regards that “. . . the relationship between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes; it is also the cause of social effects (126).
and Scott concludes that “It is clear that . . . literature maintains bonds with society . . . the sociological approach . . . will continue to be a vigorous force . . .” (126).

Literary creations under sociological approach highlight the existing colossal problems like socio-economic conditions, the political problems, the poor and the sluggish functioning of social and political organizations and the social ills affecting thoughts, attitudes, behaviors and the violations of established conventions and in the human life. The social concern authors write about the societal happenings to bring the awareness and to find the remedial measures. The writers who have highlighted the social problems in their works adopt the visual art technique also. It is known as ‘Social Realism’ which reflects life as it is, without any romantic subjectivity. Such works impart the social life as an idealized one for the posterity. As per the definition given in *Dictionary of Literary Terms*:

> Realism in literature is a manner and method of picturing life as it really is [that is] untouched by Idealism or Romanticism. As a manner of writing, Realism relies on the use of specific details to interpret life faithfully and objectively. In contrast, Romanticism has more concern with its bizarre and psychological approach to character, presenting an individual rather than the type. Often, fate plays a major role in the action. (163)

In ‘Social Realism’, writers faithfully present peoples’ attitudes and behavior in their relationship with others in given situations. They also describe the ways of life of the people of all social classes in the society. However, the incidents depicted in their works are neither made beautiful with the writers’ imagination nor they are described with exaggeration. The writers explain all the trials and tribulations of the neglected and the discriminated people in the society with the naked reality. Md. Amir Hossain in his article “Sherman Alexie’s Literary Works as Native American Social Realistic Projections” has given an explanation to the word ‘Social’:

> ‘Social,’ as a word, is like an omnibus, covering all aspects of human activity, displaying an awareness of others. Simply speaking “Social Realism” is an extraordinary reach of understanding of social life. Still better, it is an intellectual power of probing into the nature and function of society, its various institutions and traditions, and their functioning. It is an
intellectual penetration of social process. (384)

Aravind Adiga gives a sardonic and dark picture of India in his writings, which is an accumulation of his acerbic and bitter experiences. His intolerance against the social evils – poverty, corruption, the growing difference between the rich and the poor, brutality of the caste system etc., are elaborated and projected brilliantly in his three major works *The White Tiger* (2008), *Between the Assassinations* (2008), and *Last Man in Tower* (2011). He gains immediate success as a notable writer and wins one of the most prestigious literary awards the Booker Prize for his very first novel, *The White Tiger*.

Aravind Adiga’s short stories *The Sultan’s Battery* (2008), *Smack* (2008), *Last Christmas in Bandra* (2008) and *The Elephant* (2009) visualize the same thematic concept of class injustices, poverty, and degradation of social-cultural values et cetera. Adiga includes the two short stories – *The Sultan’s Battery* and *Smack* in his second work *Between the Assassinations*. *The Sultan’s Battery* is an intriguing story about a quack sexologist Ratnakara Shetty who sells fake pills for venereal diseases but he justifies his profession that he has three daughters who in need to get marry that requires huge amount of dowry. Aravind Adiga throws light on the social stigma – dowry system which plays a devastating role to heighten the burden of a poor. *Smack* is the story of a smack addict Ramachandra who has no shame in sending his children Soumya and Raju to beg for getting smack. The writer describes the uncompromising truth that the parent’s negligence is one of the key components to increase the number of child labourers in the society.

Technical and scientific advancements are often used to camouflage the dark side of India. Aravind Adiga unmasks this truth in *Last Christmas* by depicting the perils of the poor who are scared of the global economy. This story depicts the multiple levels of the deprivation faced by a scavenger woman Saraswathi at the hands of an unnamed judge. In *The Elephant*, Adiga chooses Chennayya as a protagonist to represent the marginalized existence of the working class people in India. The author proves with the life of Chennayya that poor people are under paid, under privileged and the most neglected groups in the elite society.

Aravind Adiga in his novels has shown a picture of different sides of India – the villages and the cities. He peels off the glossy surface of the economic miracle to expose the rot beneath. The author throws light on the facts that political and other disturbances in
the society only affect the poor people. His works are a ‘sorrowful parade of humanity’ and an investigation of the naked reality of the predicaments of India, through which he reveals the plights and pains of his nation.

The novel *The White Tiger* is presented in the form of epistolary novel, a series of letters written over a period of seven nights, in which the protagonist, Balram, narrates his rags to riches story, to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, who plans to visit Bangalore on a fact finding mission about the entrepreneurial spirit of the country. Through the letters, Balram narrates how he becomes a successful entrepreneur starting his journey from a small village, Laxmangarh to the city, Bangalore.

Balram Halwai’s village Laxmangarh, in Bihar is adversely affected by poverty. He is an intelligent student, christened by the inspector of schools as ‘a rare white tiger’. Unfortunately he is taken out of the school and put to work in a tea shop to repay their family debts, incurred for his sister’s marriage. Trapped in the vicious cycle of exploitation, he declares that he would not stay as a slave and would make his life beautiful. He soon learns the indispensable skills to succeed in new India – the ability to break the law to do anything to lift his life from the darkness to light.

Balram dreams of becoming a driver and his destiny lands him at the mansion of the landlord of Laxmangarh ‘the Stork’ alias Ramdev in nearby city of Dhanbad. There he becomes a driver to the landlord’s son Ashok and his wife Pinky. Balram gets a chance to go to Delhi with his master. To move out of the village Laxmangarh is a chance to escape from the village of dark and feels glad to enter Delhi, the city of light. But he is totally disappointed and terrified to see the inhuman behaviours of the rich people and decides to unchain him from his slavery existence. He understands the influence of money and wants to become rich.

To fulfill his desire of a rich living, he slits the throat of his master Ashok and steals his capital. With his looted money, he escapes to Bangalore and starts his own taxi service and he becomes a great entrepreneur. Thus the novel *The White Tiger* is a dark tale of suffering, solitude and despair of a man for whom madness and murder become principles of liberation.

The novel *The White Tiger* voices the social injustice of modern India. It is the torch light in the darkness where the writer projects the millions who live in undesirable
conditions. Neeru Tandon, in the article “The Theme of Poverty in the 21st Century Indian English Novel with Special References to Kiran Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Aravind Adiga” quotes the words of Michael Portillo who comments about the novel *The White Tiger* stating that

It 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 new territory, the dark side of India . . . It’s a book that gains from dealing with very important social issues, the divisions between rich and poor and the impossibility of the poor escaping from their lot in India. (58)

The novel *The White Tiger* represents socio-economic realities of modern India with a view of helping reconstruct India with a more comprehensive development programs. It is an urgent plea to the haves to bridge the dangerous class-divide. R. K. Dawan quotes the views of Amlanjyothi Patra in the book *Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger: A Symposium of Critical Response* who says that the novel *The White Tiger* aims “. . . at direct attack at the system of democracy in India. The corrupt politicians and the unholy nexus among politicians, executives and the business community are ruthlessly exposed, [It is] making a poor show of the much advertised “Shining India”” (132). The novel is an open letter to the dead conscience of the nation but at the same time it is a powerful warning that crime and terror will escalate until social inequalities are removed.

Adiga beautifully brings out how truth is suppressed in today’s world through the character of Gururaj Kamath, a journalist who is on a mission to discover the truth involved in an accident. In this bureaucratic world, truth is the first casualty as is discovered by the upright journalist, Gururaj. The writer further reveals the fact that media is a means of doing business and nothing more than that; and how man with the power of money and influence is able to manipulate both police and judicial system.

Adiga focuses on how venereal disease is a taboo in the society. People do not go to hospitals for fear of censure in society and resort to treatment from quacks and suffer in the process as in the case of Ratnakar Shetty, father of three daughters. He toils day and night to save money for the daughter’s dowry. In order to earn more, he adopts the
profession of fake sexologist to fulfill the needs of the family. To his horror he finds that the groom he has fixed as the match of his eldest daughter suffers from a sexually transmitted disease, which he picks from a prostitute. Ratnakar Shetty directs him to go to a doctor but the young man refuses to go for fear of social discrimination. Ratnakar Shetty helping the young man is against the larger backdrop of moral, social and political degradation in the country.

Aravind Adiga, in *The White Tiger*, exposes Hindu – Muslim disharmony in Delhi through the life of a Muslim boy, Mohammed, who is forced to change his name as Ram to get a job from a Hindu family. The writer includes many such incidents to bring forward the unpleasant nexus between the two communities. The authors’ unadorned portrait of the religious conflicts put forward that these contravene represent the gradual depletion of India.

“Aravind Adiga's contribution to Indian writing in English” deals with the analytical study how he deals with hovering multifarious corruption in India, the agony of unprivileged people, the burning issue of the atrocities against the poor. The focus is tried on his art of tackling the complex and urgent subject and bringing the stories to the colours of life which keep the readers find themselves hooked to his lines. His newest novel, *Selection Day*, was published in 2016. The main theme of Aravind Adiga’s writing is hovering multifarious corruption in India. Aravind Adiga has a finely alert eye and ear. He has been gutsy in tackling a complex and urgent subject. For the first-time Aravind Adiga has created a memorable tale of one bloodthirsty murderer taxi drivers hellish experience in modern India. With close attention to detail, Aravind Adiga brings the story to the colours of life which the readers like the most.

Aravind Adiga’s third novel *Selection Day*, is a moving, worrying and fascinating story of ambition and its discontents in contemporary urban India. Selection Day in many ways is a very different novel but it tilts to the territory of Aravind Adiga’s Booker winner debut, *The White Tiger*. Like Balram Halwai, the Kumars, the father and two sons at the heart of *Selection Day*, are driven by liberalisation’s most seductive promise – social mobility. The novel, as the title suggests is about the event when judges choose Mumbai’s next cricket stars. *Selection Day* presents the story of the Kumars, a family living in Mumbai, India. Its main character is Manjunath “Manju” Kumar, the younger of two brothers. His brother Radha is
about one year older, and their father, Mohandas “Mohan” Kumar, has been training them as
cricket players from a very young age. The vehicle of their aspirations is cricket; more
specifically, batting. Mohan’s ambitions seem to fly fast like the ball when it flies for a six.
Having been moved by his son Radha’s ability to hit a cricket ball Mohan Kumar minds to
move his family from rural Karnataka to Mumbai.

The Kumars are very poor, and they moved to Mumbai from a village in Western Ghats.
Not long after moving to Mumbai, Mohan’s wife (Manju and Radha’s mother) left the family
and went off on her own. The family was dipped in sorrow, but Mohan soon decided to focus
his energies on training his sons to be professional cricket players with the hope that they may
be raised out of poverty. Mohan prays to the Hindu deity Subramanya, asking for Radha and
Manju to become the number one and number two batsmen in the world (Aravind Adiga,
Selection Day) respectively. When the boys are in their early teens, they attract the attention
of a man called Tommy Sir, who is a talent scout for the Mumbai Cricket association. He
helps negotiate a sponsorship deal for them with a wealthy man named Anand Mehta the
U.S.-returned son of a rich stockbroker. Mehta agrees to support the Kumars financially in
exchange for a percentage of Radha and Manju’s future cricket earnings if they become
professionals. For Rs. 5,000 a month, and a one-time loan, Mehta purchases the right to
onethird of the boys’ earnings for life.

There Mohan Kumar eventually also finds unfulfilling work as a chutney-seller. His
only cherished aim, however, is turning his sons into the two best batsmen in the world. He
studies, and develops theories — alternately ingenious and eccentric — on every aspect of the
mental, technical, and physical education of cricketers. Much more than just a cricket book,
Selection Day is one of the finest novels written about the game, combining smart judgments
with accounts of individual innings marked by a modest lyricism. Aravind Adiga may be the
first novelist to truly capture the post-1983 phenomenon of cricket as a kind of energy for
social mobility. Cricket writing, both in fiction and otherwise, is often charged or marred by
sentimentality; Selection Day is an unromantic book, because to love the game is a luxury
denied to those like the Kumar brothers, who play it not out of choice but necessity. Aravind
Adiga has often been compared, most notably with The White Tiger and Last Man in Tower,
to Charles Dickens, but Selection Day is evocative of a very different Victorian novelist:
Thomas Hardy.
The plot’s forward movement is deterministic, its characters incarcerated for life by their circumstances. This is most true of the book’s dramatic centrepiece, the passionate, homo-erotic friendship between Manju and his wealthy teammate Javed Ansari. Every development in this relationship is telegraphed, there is never any doubt of its tragic resolution; yet it loses none of its emotional force. There are three principal dangers on their path to glory: premature shaving, pornography, and car driving.

Mohan’s ambitions are shattered when he catches Radha with a girl in the house. There also occurs a physical dispute between Mohan and his sons, resultant Mohan finds himself in hospital with a broken leg. Also, Manju secretly wishes to be a forensic scientist, and he forms a friendship with Javed Ansari, who encourages Manju’s non-cricket interests. Selection Day is written at an angle to conventional realism; beyond any illusion the reader takes a glimpse of the literary world not through the eyes of the characters but through the author’s eyes; so what on the nose emerges most powerfully, as with Hardy, is the author’s own personality: the force of his humanity and his social and political vision. In the end, Manju is selected to play cricket professionally, and Radha is not.

Later Manju is hired as a talent scout for the Mumbai Cricket Association. Being unemployed Radha is likely receiving financial support from Manju. Neither Radha nor Manju keep in close contact with their father. By this time, Javed has become a swindle man and a failing actor, and Tommy Sir has died of a stroke not long after Manju’s selection day. But Aravind Adiga’s story is not about the path to glory in cricket as much as it is about the paths closed off by it. Manju is held like a pendulum hanging between the labyrinthine financial and psychological entrapments of both youth-league cricket and society at large. To Aravind Adiga success in sport is the most temporary state and never is without a personal cost. Cricket in India has a checkered history.

Cricket is money in India. Cricket is, of course, a wonderful way of writing about shattered dreams – both personal and national. Aravind Adiga as a novelist has grown in lofty art to talk about all matters through his characters and their compelling stories. Each sentence sputter and glisten like a match with life. Aravind Adiga plunges in his characters’ inner voices with peculiar accuracy to kindle the thoughts, fascinations, signs, and icons with his laser-like views.

Adiga’s advice to the nation regarding preservation of the power of the youth is highly
admirable. He articulates through his narration, penetrating and discerning analysis of what troubles Indian politics, society and the economy and advises what needs to be done to set it right. The characters and the situations of Aravind Adiga are extremely realistic, rather than being supernatural. Aravind Adiga has carved a niche for himself in the mind of readers worldwide with his unique Indian style of writing characterized by satirical description of his and, Indian social milieu, fluidity of language and melancholy vibes and no wonder he as a writer is definitely adored by critics and common popular alike.

**References**


