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Countering Global Metaphors of the India Growth Story through Local Ones in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*

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Abstract:

This article looks at Arvind Adiga's novels as a systematic critique of the various ideas about India and "Indianness" – particularly the much hyped India Growth Story that has found wide circulation in the popular global press. Given the uneasy relation that Indian English novelists have traditionally shared with their attempts to represent Indian stories beyond their class confines, Adiga's novels represent a closer social engagement with Indian realities that have become an integral part of India's lower and middle classes, post-Liberalization. The article explores the various ways in which Adiga deals with pressing concerns like economic inequity, greed, corruption and opportunism, in the context of a lopsided progress that has increased the divide between haves and have-nots.

Keywords: India growth story, moral corruption, class divide, 'Indianness', consumerism.

Many Indian English novels written in the post-independence period have uniquely attempted to define 'Indianness' through multiple strategies. These novels examine Indian ethos through the lens of caste, creed, class, gender, state, region (rural/urban) and so on. Interestingly, this examination happens in a socio-economic and political backdrop where the discourse of nation formation, state formation and class formation are constantly revisited. Accordingly, Indian English novelists mirror these discourses in their writing, depending on their unique position on the issues of the day. Without doubt this dialogue between the Indian English novelist and the discourse about unique socio-economic and political currents sweeping society over the last seven decades since Indian Independence, has at times, led to narrow discussions about the authenticity of the Indian English novelist to reflect upon the socio-economic and political concerns of the day. Oddly, the Indian English novelist may have also contributed to this perception by focusing on characters who not only appear to be representative of an elite class of individuals but who also seem to be alienated from just those issues and concerns occupying the popular national psyche. This article looks at Arvind Adiga's writings in particular, as a systematic examination of the burgeoning Indian middle class. It elaborates the various strategies used by the author to challenge

and contest the claims made in the global arena and explores the challenges associated with such forms of critique. Arvind Adiga's novels are unique in that they focus on the newly emergent Indian middle class rising from the ranks of the lower class, largely due to the select opportunities thrown up by liberalization.

Aravind Adiga's first novel *The White Tiger* (2008) and the latest one, *Last Man in Tower* (2011) problematize the dichotomy of being an Indian in an economy which is seemingly on the upswing. In the decade following Liberalization, India has been the subject of much attention. Just as, for the government of the day, the opening up of various sectors to foreign investment and investors was seen as the inevitable path to great economic progress and glory, for many global investment firms, investing in India meant riding an economic wave that would invariably lead to massive profits. Various narratives of economic progress followed in the wake of Liberalization – all of which did the job of creating a distinct identity in the global press. From among the many, the BRICS report authored by a Goldman Sachs economists went beyond the usual projections to come up with the startling claim that India along with China would become an economic superpower overshadowing even the mighty US by the year 2050, and many other G7 countries. Obviously one of the major premises for the claim lay in the idea that consumerism (or consumption) would lead to increasing demand for goods and services in highly populous countries like India thereby creating a virtuous cycle of growth for all. About fifteen years later, the novels by Adiga re-examine this thesis of growth from a cultural angle by vividly representing the flip side of this India growth story. In doing so they also raise fundamental questions about the ways in which the notion of “Indian-ness” has been conveniently redefined in the context of a nation that seems to be on a threshold of some great economic miracle. The emphasis of the novels is mainly on the moral corruption that such economies of consumption push well-meaning citizens to, by creating greed, aspirations of things which can be attained only at the cost of others, and forcing evil choices on the pretext of being worldly wise and pragmatic.

Whereas both novels dramatize the burning desire for growth at any and every cost – an interesting aspect of Indian identity that has been a dominant subtext in many rags to riches stories in post-Liberalization India, the focus is somewhat different in the two novels. While the more popular *The White Tiger* dwells on the rags to riches story of a loyal servant who transforms himself into a rich man by murdering his employer, *Last Man in Tower* focuses on the real estate boom in Mumbai and the real dilemmas faced by the middle class residents of a housing society that cannot easily get a retired school teacher, who survives on his pension, to sell his flat to a developer who is ready to give good money to everyone in the block, in order to build a new one in its place. Faced with the prospect of losing out on the business opportunity of selling their homes at twice the value the homes would fetch in the existing market, the social atmosphere of warmth,

trust and respect slowly developed over a long period of time, begins to fade away. Not everyone accepts the offer at once, but eventually almost everyone comes around either because they are promised something extra or bribed. It is the realization of the flat owners of the future value of their otherwise decaying property, that makes their regular day-to-day lives unbearable. The seeds of desire for a dream-home, once sown by the builder/developer, follow their own trajectory of waiting and watching while the residents become restless to the extent that when hardly one or two were willing to sell off in the beginning, the entire Vishram Society gets converted and converges upon Masterji, the only man who remains steadfast till the end.

In *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga's vision is not just restricted to the middle class locale he talks about. He also offers a panoramic view of Mumbai's slums and the real huge divide that exists between the slums of Dharaavi around Vakola, where Vishram Society is situated, and the resident pockets of Malabar Hill or Bandra, that are virtually unaffordable to this middle class population. With Dharaavi on one side and Malabar Hill on the other, the simple middle class residents of Vishram Society clearly know the choices they have to make in order to move up. Obviously, in their scheme of things, the fact that a retired old man does not want to trade a home that has memories of his deceased wife and daughter even for a huge sum of one and a half crore rupees, is not only unbelievable but rather unacceptable. In the words of the builder, "Mumbai is not a place where you can afford to aspire for nothing." (120). The promise of quick growth stretches traditional sensibilities and sensitivities to the point where otherwise well-meaning, sensitive people begin to harbor evil intentions of murder. Eventually, they end up committing a crime that shocks even the cold blooded builder. Frustrated by their inability to convert Masterji into selling his flat, even after using all means – bribe, flattery, boycott – the residents plan to push him off the terrace of the ten-storied building, and after a lot of struggle by the victim to save his life, they successfully throw him off the building, killing him at once. It may not be an exaggeration to say here that what happens in Vishram Society is perhaps Adiga's small scale reflection on what is happening across India on a larger scale. Though apathy has never been part of the traditional Indian psyche, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the Indian middle class, in its dream to attain sudden happiness by riding the illusive wave of development and growth, has become increasingly apathetic towards family, neighbours, and fellow citizens.

The White Tiger is written in the form of a letter addressed to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao by Balram Halvai, who describes himself as a loyal servant turned chauffeur turned murderer turned entrepreneur. Balram begins the letter by clarifying that he has heard the news about the Premier's impending visit to Bangalore to know about Bangalore and to "hear the story of some Indian entrepreneurs from their own lips". (4).

Balram's letter is basically an attempt to tell the Chinese Premier the truth about Bangalore, and its various Outsourcing units that practically run American businesses, by narrating his own life story. His story is supposed to be an honest account of what makes entrepreneurs in India, the account which is expected to enlighten the Chinese Premier and answer his questions. He writes, "...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. The century, more specifically, of the *yellow* and the *brown* man. You and me." (5).

Balram Halwai, the present Ashok Sharma, then, tells his story. He hails from a village in Bihar which he often refers to as darkness. He tells the Premier, "Please understand, Your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness". (10). As is the case with many rural pockets across India, Balram's village is a hotbed for class, caste, and gender based discrimination. Having grown up in a village that had a school but no teachers or any educational infrastructure, Balram was smart enough to once point out to a School Inspector that a White Tiger is the rarest of animals in a jungle. Impressed with his answer the Inspector had named him the White Tiger – the rarest of animals – of his school and village. Balram was even promised a scholarship when in school, but could not avail it as his family had to force him into a job to raise his sister's dowry. As a hardworking, clever and intelligent boy, Balram's only aspiration is to escape from the 'darkness' and enter the 'light' – metaphor for cities like Delhi and Bangalore. The 'light' however, does not offer any reprieve but introduces him to a more sordid world than the darkness he has left behind. As a loyal servant, Balram notices several interesting characteristics in his employers: they are ready to pay lakhs in bribe to politicians to secure their illegal property and businesses and at the same time, haggle with their servants for every single rupee. As a servant he is humiliated, underpaid, and finally made a scapegoat to cover up his employer's offenses. All along his sense of gratitude – for being employed as a driver and offered an opportunity to be a part of the 'light' – makes him respect his employer and put up with their questionable treatment. His sense of loyalty is only shaken when he is coerced into taking the blame for a murder committed by his employer's wife. Finally he realizes that he has no permanent security in being loyal and decides to begin a new life with a briefcase full of bank notes that his employer had arranged for to bribe someone for better business prospects. He murders his employer in cold blood and escapes to Bangalore with his money to start up a business.

Like *Last Man in Tower*, *The White Tiger* also portrays a corrupt, greedy, class and caste ridden India divided between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. Growth and prosperity apparently seems to have widened the gulf between the two, instead of reducing it. Moreover, cultural and traditional institutions seem to be now increasingly

facing the burden of this growth. In an interview given to Hirsh Sawhney, Adiga clearly explains why we need to be afraid of the future rather than exult in it, courtesy the new-found promise of becoming an economic superpower:

“The servant-master system implies two things: One is that the servants are far poorer than the rich—a servant has no possibility of ever catching up to the master. And secondly, he has access to the master—the master’s money, the master’s physical person. Yet crime rates involving servants are very low. Even though the middle class—who often have three or four servants—are paranoid about crime, the reality is a master getting killed by his servant is rare... You need two things [for crime to occur]—a divide and a conscious ideology of resentment. We don’t have resentment in India. The poor just assume that the rich are a fact of life... But I think we’re seeing what I believe is a class-based resentment for the first time.” (Adiga, brooklynrail.org).

While it may be interesting to examine what various economists have to say about Indian growth Post-Liberalization, it is nonetheless clear that most will agree on two distinct trends currently prevailing in the economy: increasing urbanization in select pockets across India and increasing urbanization of poverty in just those pockets. When introducing Liberalization it was widely believed that growth in urban consumption would have a trickle-down effect ultimately bringing down poverty levels in urban areas and gradually in rural areas through growth diffusion. However, this consumption has not been equitable in urban pockets with the result that overall poverty and inequalities have declined at a much slower rate since the 1990s as compared to those in the previous decade. In fact, a large percentage of the poor are now found in urban pockets in India. As he puts it in the interview:

“Despite the economic upswing that has enabled their bosses to decorate their homes with plasma televisions and purchase European cars, the lifestyles of domestic workers have only improved marginally in recent years. Their working conditions remain unregulated, and as India’s population continues to grow at exponential rates, their wages remain low...” (Adiga, brooklynrail.org).

For Balram and the armies of ayahs, maids, cooks – the helpers populating India’s neo-rich and middle class landscape, economic freedom is a distant reality. Moreover, their exclusion from the India growth story happens in systematic ways. Balram is reprimanded for not being able to find a fallen one rupee coin which he replaces from his own pocket by an employer who pays lakhs of rupees in bribe, is kept out of a mall because of his lowly appearance, is laughed at and humiliated for his poor English

pronunciation and made to repeat the words for further entertainment, and finally booked for a hit and run offense committed by the employer's wife.

Adiga's novels highlight the fact that the growth trajectory India now seems destined to ride, has the potential to create many more unscrupulous Balrams, Puris, Shahs and Kotharis – all characters from the two novels. The moral universe which these characters inherit and which is part and parcel of their Indian identity initially is slowly giving way to a different identity forged out of the desperate desire for growth, greed and corruption. It is another thing that the moral corruption in the classes they serve also plays a role in transforming servants like Balram into people who have no moral compunctions in harming others. Interestingly, with the general moral decay that sets in, the various protagonists in the two novels even rationalize acts of murder as the only option – the only way to survive. Arvind Adiga cannot be more in agreement with such characters. In his interview he puts this issue in perspective:

“If you don't have English, an education, or healthcare, then how are you going to do something to transform your life? A poor man in India making 4,000 rupees a month is never going to transform things. The only transformation possible is crime for someone like Balram, otherwise he's going to be surrounded by fantasies, dreams, and not make it out...Often life is so tough you just have to be brutal.”(Adiga, brooklynrail.org).

In a country where macro-level economic miracles are rubbing shoulders with various forms of deprivation and poverty on almost a daily basis, it may be a pertinent time to ask the question whether economic narratives of progress (like the reports of GDP growth or the stock-market boom in the popular press) can be countered by cultural narratives (like Adiga's novels) that question such forms of progress. Can rosy economic projections that gloss over economic inequities be treated as the final word on a nation's future identity? Or should novels like that of Adiga's which describe the underbelly of India's much touted progress represent the India story? If the large number of stories planted in the national and global business press is any indication of the tremendous collective desire to project India as a rising Asian tiger and an investment friendly haven with millions of skilled workers, then Adiga's counter is perhaps a much-desired reality check without which we may easily fall into the illusion of having reached a destination that might just as well elude us for quite some time. According to Adiga, this countering is much needed because that's one way of contesting what is being written about or said about India:

“At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society... the great divide.” (Adiga, theguardian.com).

Like most Indian English writers, Adiga also has his share of critics – some eager to congratulate and many others eager to berate him, on the authentic representation of India question. While the debate about authenticity of representation has been raging on for quite some time, it acquires some stridency when the writer in question has been awarded for his portrayal of India in a work of fiction. Now, by themselves, the terms of this debate continue to be the age old ones: he writes for a western audience, he is promoting a new kind of Orientalism that is exoticizing India, his account is that of a tourist visiting India, he grew up elsewhere and not here and so is not in a position to know, etc. According to Vikram Chandra, there is a near cult following in some circles with respect to the authenticity question. The Indian English writer is caught in a double bind – establish not only his ‘Indianness’ but also the ‘Indianness’ of his settings, characters, themes, concerns, and so on. (Chandra, bostonreview.net). And in case the portrayal turns negative, the writer is accused of projecting a false and malicious picture of the real India. It may be not out of context to claim here that in their different ways – be it economic, political, and cultural, various types of narratives on or about India project a particular identity for India. Adiga’s novels provide a counter to the various economic projections that have come to define Indian identity. In doing so, they not only question these rosy projections but also the bases on which such forecasts are created, and thereby provide a cultural corollary to the dreams of progress.

In a review of Kiran Nagarkar’s works, Makarand Paranjape points out the dilemma that the Indian English novelist, according to him, always faces:

“Because of the disjuncture between the language and social experience, because the text is written about people and events in a language which is not the language of those people, the natural tendency of an Indian English writer is to move away from society instead of towards it...the Indian English novel has by and large been a novel of retreat from social engagement.” (Paranjape, 14).

Adiga’s novels, through their conspicuous selection of stories, characters and locales which bring out the ethos of the non-English speaking class and section of society, posit a stance which counters such claims of elitism and social disengagement. They, in fact, represent a new kind of Indian-English writing which portends to social-realism, a trend mostly associated with vernacular fiction in India.

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