

THE ROARING NINETIES AND BEYOND: A NEW HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S MOST PROSPEROUS DECADE OF ARAVIND ADIGA'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT: Aravind Adiga's 2008 Man-Booker Prize winning novel, *The White Tiger* and his second book, *Between the Assassinations* (2008) are about two different Indias: India, before and after globalization. The stories of *Between the Assassinations* are set in a specific time frame in pre-liberalised, socialist India, between the assassinations of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi, in a world that disintegrates into the world of *The White Tiger* which telescopes the reader to the India of the Nineties and beyond. Adiga's latest novel, *Last Man in Tower* (2011) narrowly focuses on the burgeoning real estate scene in Mumbai, particularly on an epic struggle between the past and the present. The study attempts to place the literary works of Adiga in their proper historical, socio-cultural, political and economic context – in the 'India of Darkness' and in the 'India of Light' – and critically examine how his fiction has been shaped by a great structural shift in India's post-colonial economic landscape and in turn fashions the evolving dimensions.

Keywords: Globalisation, Liberalisation, Socialism, Capitalism, Economy, New Historicism

INTRODUCTION

India's transformation from a 'mixed' to a liberalised economy during the last decade of the Twentieth century divides the course of its postcolonial history into two distinct periods – India before, and after globalisation. The decision to liberalise the economy was primarily driven by an economic exigency but, the impact of globalisation on the socio-cultural and political environment of India has been far greater than that of the Emergency, which marked the darkest phase in India's post-independent political history. The socialist phase finally came to an end with the liberalisation of the economy and its multifarious permutations in the personal and public domains of life form the foundations of Aravind Adiga's major fictional works such as *The White Tiger* (2008), *Between the Assassinations* (2008), and *Last Man in Tower* (2011).

Literature Survey

Despite an ever growing body of literature on the theme of Globalisation, including contributions by Indian writers in English like Vikas Swarup and Chetan Bhagat, its impact on India's very ancient civilization has never been so comprehensively gauged by anyone until the arrival of Adiga into the Indian English literary scene. No other writer has dealt with the subject of Globalisation and its impact in Indian life with as much depth, insight and seriousness as Adiga who has made significant cultural explorations into the much celebrated Indian growth story. Adiga's entire body of fiction is centred on the theme of Globalisation, the single most decisive force in shaping the socio-cultural and political discourse in India, since the dawning of the last decade of the Twentieth century and into the New Millennium.

Aims and Objectives

The characters in Adiga's *Between the Assassinations*, a collection of stories set in the last six years of socialist India, are all “resigned to their fates” as they have all been shaped in a socialist environment with “excessive regulations and patronising doles” (Mitra). Contrastingly, *The White Tiger*, set in an India increasingly tending towards capitalism and global integration, has a protagonist who is the proud master of his own destiny. Adiga's latest novel, *Last Man in Tower*, set in the commercial capital of India, is also peopled by an impatient bunch with a common goal to become shapers of their individual and collective destinies. It warrants a close scrutiny to judge how far Adiga's fiction is moulded by the overarching economic practices of the temporal and spatial elements to which it belongs and how much it fashions the historical context.

Methods

Adiga asserts that, “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” (Jeffries). By taking human lives affected by Globalisation and fashioned by the tectonic shift in the economy as raw material, Adiga's artistry fills in what has been left untold by highly articulate socio-cultural, economic and political commentators, like Thomas Friedman and Gurcharan Das who vociferously support the new economic paradigms of globalisation. Adiga's works describe “an India between major historical conflicts” (Sharp) and capture the essence of “the great divide in modern Indian history,” when India finally rid itself of the dull certainties of its socialist past and started gravitating increasingly towards the uncertainties of its liberalised future (Malachi). Hence the reading of Adiga's fiction offers a comprehensive picture of the changing sociocultural, economic and political paradigms and how these transform human lives in India. Therefore, a reading of his fiction using the tools of New Historicism and in the light of

globalisation theory becomes essential to fathom the socio-cultural and economic conditions that have yielded these cultural artefacts as well as to ascertain its deeper imprints in the emerging context.

Analysis and Findings

Between the Assassinations is a fictional exploration into the final six years of socialist India, between the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi, which Adiga considers as a period of broken promises and sad let downs after several decades of economic mismanagement and painfully slow growth, notoriously termed the Hindu Rate of Growth. The pre-liberalized India of *Between the Assassinations* is evocative of a charming, idyllic world of simplicity when compared to the complexities of the later years of globalised India as depicted in *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*. But, Adiga is neither nostalgic about an India before the Nineties nor apologetic about the turbulence of its liberalised years.

An entrepreneur's experience of socialism forms the theme of *Day Two: The Bunder*, a story in *Between the Assassinations*. In those days even a petty government official could destroy an entrepreneur because in the socialist discourse he is seen as a ruthless profiteer and not recognized as one who contributes to the nation building process by increasing productivity, providing employment, and generating wealth for the individual, the community and the state. The rot had set in during the Nehruvian phase when a mixed economy was imposed upon the nation as the means to equitable distribution of wealth. Under the aegis of socialism the political elite created a self serving 'LicensePermit-Raj', which empowered a monstrous and insensitive bureaucratic machinery to hound and enslave the entrepreneur. Abbasi is a small time exporter serving the nation by earning precious foreign exchange and providing employment to women in particular. Like the rest of the nation, Abbasi had great expectations when Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister after his mother's assassination. The young leader's initial attempts to rejuvenate the ailing economy were a welcome relief after decades of socialist stasis.

But, the early bloom did not last long and Abbasi's exasperation is evident, "I thought things would get better with the fellow Rajiv Gandhi taking over" (33).

When the conscientious Abbasi learns that his women workers are being gradually blinded by the intricate nature of their embroidery work, he shuts down his business. Embroidery being their only means of livelihood, the women continue in the same line of work by joining other factories in the locality.

Abbasi's economic standing also becomes precarious as he finds no other meaningful entrepreneurial opportunity in his neighbourhood. He finds it hard to survive without becoming a smuggler like his less fortunate Muslim brethren who have all been driven to shady businesses like selling stolen cars, smuggling drugs and illegal money changing in an economy choked by stifling regulations. When Abbasi reopens his factory all his former employees return to work for him but, he no longer betrays any pity for them because he now realises that like them he too is a victim of the socialist stranglehold on human enterprise. Neither the capitalist nor the proletariat is left with any choices.

Socialism stifles the just aspirations of the people as their lives and actions are controlled through excessive regulations. Aspirational goods are so prohibitively taxed that it has led to the creation of a thriving black economy at a scale equal to or bigger than the formal economy of the country. Despite all the policing, the nanny state has turned into a breeding ground for criminals and unlawful activities so much so that Abbasi observes with wry humour: When it comes to three areas... blackmailing, counterfeiting and corruption, we [Indians] are the world champions. If they were included in the Olympic Games, India would always win gold, silver and bronze in those three. (31)

Abbasi assumes that he encounters so much corruption because he is a rich man. Little does he realise that his poor brethren are worse affected by it as the enterprising among them are left with no choice but to engage in criminal activities. The story can be seen as an indictment

of the debilitating economic climate engineered by the "fatal conceit" of the Indian political masters (Varma).

However, in the liberalised India of *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*, the bureaucracy no longer seems to enjoy the same upper hand as it did during the socialist years. Economic prosperity has also raised the per capita income of the country and significantly reduced the number of people below the poverty line. But, income disparities between the rich and the poor have widened so much that Gurwara feels compelled to criticise that little has changed in India: Millions are left in the lurch; unable to make a mark; to manage to have even two square meals a day; to command respect from their brethren. It is discomfiting to see the plight of those living below the poverty line, without the bare minimum to make both ends meet; bereft of all that should be guaranteed for a dignified living; forced to lead a life full of sleaze and squalor. (162)

Balram Halwai, the protagonist of *The White Tiger* asks wistfully, "The dreams of the rich and the dreams of the poor – they never overlap, do they? (133) In an interview given to Brad Frenette, Adiga observes that "rapid economic growth and great disparities of wealth" marks the post-liberalized world of *The White Tiger* and finds it intriguing that in spite of the astounding economic growth in India, the bulk of the country is made up of servants and the poor. Though the ever widening economic disparity between the rich and poor has become rather alarming, it must also be acknowledged that globalisation has also been a great leveller, a rising tide that lifts all boats as Friedman avers in *The World is Flat* (2005) and Das in *India Unbound* (2000). It is erroneous to think that the positive impact of Globalization is restricted to the educated middle-class and the new economy millionaires as it has been affecting everyone; even those in the periphery are not left alone.

Major Suggestions

Critics such as Dubey and Begum seem to dismiss Adiga's faith in free market capitalism as a redeemer of the underdog. Having no delusions about the IT industry as a haven of

equality, they reject Adiga's choice of Bangalore as "the right place for the Dalit hero of the novel to escape and find emancipation," by pointing out that the majority of the resources in the city are appropriated by the upper castes who control all the major businesses and administration (150-151). But, Adiga's faith in Globalisation as a Messiah for the underclass echoes the prognosis of Das in *India Unbound*: We have good reasons to expect that the lives of the majority of Indians in the twenty-first century will be freer and more prosperous than their parents' and grandparents' lives. Never before in recorded history have so many people been in a position to rise so quickly.

Conclusion

As India steps away from socialism to neoliberalism and capitalism, the old India of Between the Assassinations must disintegrate for the new India of *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* to emerge. Balram escapes from the India of darkness to the India of light with murder and destruction in his trail but, the process transforms him from a slave to the creator of his own destiny. Likewise the middle-class residents of Vishram Tower A also script a future of their own by asserting their collective will. By embracing the winds of change brought in by economic liberalisation and globalisation, they fashion their identities and in turn become shapers of the world beyond.

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