

# Culturalscape in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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**Abstract :** Aravind Adiga gained international acclaim with his debut novel, *The White Tiger*, published in 2008. The novel won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in the same year, bringing him widespread recognition as a talented and thought-provoking writer. *The White Tiger*, his debut novel, exemplifies his ability to capture the nuances of a changing India while addressing pressing socioeconomic issues. The novel's recognition and impact have firmly established Adiga as a prominent voice in modern literature. It serves as a commentary on the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, rural and urban, and the socioeconomic disparities that define contemporary India. It examines how cultural shifts influence the aspirations, choices, and morality of individuals as they navigate a changing landscape. "culturalscape," as introduced by Arjun Appadurai, refers to the dynamic and interconnected cultural landscapes that emerge as a result of globalization, highlighting the ways in which cultures interact, adapt, and evolve beyond traditional geographic and cultural confines. The paper discusses the culturalscape aspect of India, which is hidden in the exotic traditional narrative.

**Keywords:** globalization, culturalscape, economy, cultural shift.

## INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga is an Indian-Australian author known for his insightful explorations of contemporary Indian society and its complexities. Adiga's diverse cultural experiences have greatly influenced his writing, allowing him to provide nuanced perspectives on the modern Indian condition. Adiga studied at Columbia University and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he specialized in English literature and gained a solid foundation for his literary career. Before becoming a full-time writer, he worked as a journalist for publications such as TIME, The Financial Times, and The Wall Street Journal, which helped shape his keen awareness of social and political issues.

Aravind Adiga gained international acclaim with his debut novel, *The White Tiger*, published in 2008. The novel won the prestigious Man Booker Prize in the same year, bringing him widespread recognition as a talented and thought-provoking writer. The novel is a biting satire that explores the glaring disparities between the rich and the poor in India's rapidly developing economy. The novel is narrated by Balram Halwai, a young man from a lower-caste background who rises from being a chauffeur to becoming a successful entrepreneur. Balram's narrative provides a darkly humorous and often grim portrayal of the corruption, exploitation, and moral compromises prevalent in Indian society. Through Balram's perspective, Adiga offers a scathing critique of the inequalities perpetuated by India's caste system, the effects of globalization, and the harsh realities faced by those on the margins of society. The novel's title itself is symbolic, referencing a rare creature as an analogy for the exceptional individuals who manage to break free from their predetermined roles.

## APPROACH

Arjun Appadurai is an Indian-American anthropologist and cultural theorist known for his work on globalization, culture, and modernity. He introduced the concept of 'scapes' in his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996). One of these 'scapes' is the 'ethnoscapes,' which is a component of his broader theory of 'culturalscapes.' In Appadurai's framework, ethnoscapes refer to the movement of people across borders and cultures, including tourists, immigrants, refugees, and other individuals who traverse geographical and cultural boundaries. This concept highlights the fluidity and interconnectedness of cultures in a globalized world. The term 'culturalscape' itself is often used in the context of Appadurai's larger theoretical framework. It refers to the dynamic and ever-changing cultural landscapes that emerge as a result of the interactions between people, ideas, commodities, media, and technologies in the globalized world. Culturalscapes are not bound by physical geography but are shaped by the flow of cultural elements, influences, and practices across different regions and communities. Appadurai's work emphasizes the idea that culture is no longer constrained by national boundaries, and traditional notions of cultural authenticity and purity are challenged by the rapid movement of cultural products, images, and practices. The concept of culturalscape underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of cultural interactions and transformations in the context of globalization.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

*The White Tiger* challenges traditional narratives of the exotic and the shining India image often portrayed in Western media. Instead, it presents a more authentic and gritty portrayal of the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals striving to escape the shackles of their circumstances. Adiga's novel not only garnered critical acclaim but also ignited discussions about social injustice, economic disparities, and the consequences of rapid modernization in India. Its impact extended beyond literature to conversations about social and political issues in the country. The novel explores themes of social inequality, class struggle, and cultural shifts in modern India. The novel is narrated in the first person by Balram Halwai, a young man from a rural village who becomes a successful entrepreneur in the city of Delhi. Through his perspective, the novel delves into the stark contrast between the two Indias: the traditional, rural world of poverty and oppression and the modern, urban world of wealth and

opportunity. One of the central themes of the novel is the cultural shift brought about by economic globalization and urbanization in India. Balram's journey from a small village to the bustling city of Delhi is a metaphor for the broader societal transition from traditional agrarian life to a more urban, capitalist-oriented existence. This shift comes with both opportunities and challenges. Balram's transformation from a servant to a successful entrepreneur also highlights the changing dynamics of the Indian caste system and class hierarchy. The novel portrays the exploitation and corruption that persist within the social structure, even as new avenues for advancement become available.

In the novel, Adiga uses Balram's narrative to critique the dark underbelly of India's economic growth. He portrays the moral compromises and ethical dilemmas that individuals like Balram face in their pursuit of success within a system that often values power and wealth above all else. Balram's actions are a reflection of the cutthroat nature of a society that can propel individuals to greatness while also forcing them to compromise their integrity. The novel sheds light on the tensions and contradictions that arise from rapid development and the challenges of reconciling the past with the present in a society undergoing profound transformation.

Appadurai presents a compelling framework in which he identifies five distinct global scapes through which cultural flows manifest. These scapes, namely ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technoscapescapes, finanscapescapes, and ideoscapescapes, form the foundational elements of the modern world, as depicted in his work *Modernity at Large*. The simultaneous operation of these global scapes within a particular context, such as India, positions the country as a central hub of globalization. As cultural exchanges intensify through these scapes, it becomes imperative to strike a balance between preserving local cultural identities and embracing global influences. Appadurai delves into the tension that arises between the processes of homogenization and heterogenization, ultimately shaping the emergence of a more uniform society. He encapsulates this struggle succinctly, stating that "the central feature of global culture is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another" (Appadurai 334). This profound struggle forms the crux of the dynamics at play in a globalized world.

The focus of this analysis is primarily on the concept of ethnoscapescapes among the five identified scapes, particularly in their operation within Indian society, which serves as a focal point of globalization. Appadurai defines ethnoscapescapes as the movements of people from one nation to another, including individuals with aspirations to leave their home country. This category encompasses a wide range of individuals, such as refugees, immigrants, tourists, and other mobile groups. The ethnoscape, often described as "landscapes of group identity," lacks localization due to the considerable migrations occurring across the nation (Appadurai 588).

In the present era of globalization, the rapid proliferation of electronic media, advancements in technology, and substantial migration trends create novel lenses through which to examine consumer behavior and the intricate dynamics of multiculturalism. These trends also give rise to heightened ethnic tensions, which warrant careful consideration. In essence, Appadurai's framework elucidates how various scapes interplay within global contexts, notably India, leading to a dynamic interplay between homogenization and heterogenization. Among these scapes, ethnoscapescapes stand out as a critical conduit for understanding the movement of people, identities, and cultures in the era of globalization. This multidimensional exploration enables a deeper comprehension of the forces shaping contemporary societies and the complex interplay between local and global influences.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga explores the theme of globalization through the lens of Balram's experiences and observations. One of the most prominent instances where globalization is discussed is when Balram describes the influence of Western culture and technology on India, specifically through the example of the shopping mall:

'Mr. Premier, Sir. Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.'

'Globalization, sir. The whole world is opening up because of globalization.'

... That's why I started the taxi business, sir. That's why I bought the two air conditioners — one for the driver, one for the passenger — and that's why I put leather seats in the car, and why I installed a music system. For foreign tourists.

'I'm a foreign tourist, sir' (Adiga 149)

In this passage, Balram reflects on the impact of globalization on India, emphasizing how it has led to a shift in values and priorities. The mention of English as the language for certain concepts, the desire to cater to foreign tourists, and the aspiration for modern amenities like air conditioning and music systems in taxis all point to the influence of Western ideals and consumerism. Balram's observation of the contrast between the "old India" and the "new India" highlights the profound changes that have occurred due to globalization, both in terms of economic opportunities and cultural shifts (Adiga 142 & 159). Through Balram's perspective, Adiga illustrates how the influx of foreign influence, technology, and consumer culture has transformed India's socioeconomic landscape, creating both opportunities and challenges for individuals like Balram as they navigate this changing world. This passage showcases how globalization has contributed to the blurring of traditional boundaries and the reshaping of societal norms and aspirations.

...I used to go with a driver named Ram Persad. He was a simple man. He had a big family and no income. He used to tell me the prices of things when we went shopping in Chandni Chowk. 'This is the old India,' he'd say, pointing to some poor fellow passing by with a load of vegetables on his head. 'This is the new India,' he'd say, pointing to a shiny ambassador car driving by with a white man inside. Then he would smile and point up at the glass and chrome windows of the Hyatt Regency (Adiga 213).

The quote about the new India, where the past was condemned to be a sleeping partner in the plans of the future that encapsulates the theme of cultural shift and the profound influence of globalization on the Indian society depicted in the novel. The line signifies a significant cultural shift driven by the forces of modernization, economic growth, and globalization. Here's an elaboration on how this quote reflects the influence of globalization and cultural transformation in the novel. The phrase 'new India' emphasizes a departure from the traditional values and ways of life that have defined the country for centuries. It suggests a break from historical norms and practices, as the country rapidly embraces modernization and globalized ideals. The phrase condemned to be a sleeping partner in the plans of the future suggests that the past is no longer considered relevant or actively integrated into the present and future. Instead, it is relegated to a passive role, no longer guiding or shaping the nation's trajectory.

Globalization, characterized by the flow of ideas, technology, culture, and capital across borders, is driving this cultural shift. The quote implies that the forces of globalization are overpowering traditional values, erasing or marginalizing them in favor of new, often Western-influenced, ways of thinking and living. The shift brought about by globalization creates a conflict between traditional values and the aspirations of a modern, globally-connected society. The tension between old and new values is a central theme in the novel, with characters like Balram embodying this conflict as they navigate their changing world. The quote suggests a dichotomy between progress and loss. While the new India is positioned as a place of growth and opportunity, it also entails the loss of cultural heritage, identity, and authenticity as the nation strives to keep pace with the demands of globalization. It also underscores the complexities of modernization and globalization. While they offer economic growth and advancement, they also bring about cultural alienation, class disparities, and moral dilemmas, as portrayed through Balram's experiences.

In *Introduction of Globalization*, Appadurai elucidates the idea that “the expansive networks of economic and cultural exchange have engendered substantial waves of migration” (26). This intermingling of cultures has catalyzed the exponential growth of urban centers. Consequently, migration serves as a catalyst for the fusion of traditional practices with Western cultural paradigms. This amplification of globalization has, however, led to an uneven allocation of resources between urban and rural regions. While globalization encompasses the entire globe, its impacts, whether positive or negative, are contingent on the unequal distribution of resources across different locales. The concept of “selective globalization,” underscores that globalization originated in Europe, thereby influencing remote cultures at a delayed pace due to the disparity in access to technology and markets (Appadurai 15). Balram's experiences have imparted to him an acute understanding of the persisting disparities amidst the apparent prosperity of the modern era. His village represents the antithesis of the imposing societal, economic, and corporate structures prevalent in the broader landscape. He aptly characterizes India as divided into “an India of Light and an India of darkness” (Adiga 9). The village existence is entrenched in somber realities, sharply contrasting the shimmering ambience of progress evident in the urban settings of Delhi and Bangalore, which are illuminated by global advancements.

## SUMMATION

*The White Tiger*, captures the clash between tradition and modernity and the transformative impact of globalization on Indian society. It highlights the tension between preserving cultural roots and embracing the opportunities a rapidly changing world presents. Through characters and events, the novel delves into the multifaceted nature of this cultural shift, ultimately providing a thought-provoking commentary on the broader implications of globalization in a developing nation. Aravind Adiga's narrative traverses through three distinct landscapes within India. It commences in the quaint and rustic milieu of village Laxmangarh, then progresses to the bustling urban epicenter of the nation, Delhi, and culminates in the modern hub of technological innovation, Bangalore. This journey of internal migration undertaken by Balram, from the tranquil village of Laxmangarh to the cosmopolitan expanse of Bangalore, bestows upon him a profound awareness of the divergent facets of India. The narrative is a journey that not only spans geographical landscapes but also delves into the contrasting cultural, economic, and technological landscapes that define India. This portrayal of diverse settings allows for a nuanced exploration of the cultural shifts and disparities brought about by globalization, ultimately highlighting the multifaceted nature of contemporary Indian society.

## REFERENCE

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