



A Scholarly Comparative Analysis of R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga: A Literary Examination of Different Aspects of Their Writings

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga are two prominent voices in Indian English literature who portray India's socio-political fabric with distinctive perspectives. Narayan, with his subtle humour and deep understanding of human nature, captures the essence of traditional India, whereas Adiga, through his stark realism, delves into contemporary socio-economic issues of a globalised, postcolonial India. This article compares their narrative styles, themes of social injustice, and the depiction of class struggles along with their portrayal of female protagonists. Indian literature in English reflects the nation's cultural and moral shifts through the portrayal of its protagonists. R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* presents Raju, a man seeking redemption within a traditional society, while Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* depicts Balram Halwai, a morally ambiguous entrepreneur navigating India's capitalist landscape. This article also explores the depiction of women's experiences and issues in the works of R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga, two prominent Indian writers who represent different periods in Indian literature. While Narayan's portrayal of women reflects traditional societal values in mid-20th century India, Adiga presents a more contemporary and critical perspective on women's struggles in a post-liberalised India. By drawing comparisons between these authors, this article highlights the evolving representation of female agency, identity, and resistance in Indian English literature along with other aspects of their writings.

Keywords- Socio-political Fabric, Postcolonial India, Gender Representation, Cultural Values, Social Realism, Class Struggle.

Introduction

Indian English literature has evolved through various phases, from colonial to postcolonial narratives, reflecting the shifting socio-cultural dynamics of the country. R.K. Narayan, considered one of the foundational pillars of Indian English writing, depicts an idyllic yet complex India through his fictional town, Malgudi. In contrast, Aravind Adiga, a Booker Prize-winning author, presents a gritty and unembellished portrayal of contemporary India in *The White Tiger*. While Narayan employs humour and satire to critique societal norms, Adiga uses brutal realism to expose the harsh realities of caste, class, and corruption. R.K. Narayan's works, especially *The Guide* and *Swami and Friends*, present a postcolonial India grappling with tradition and modernity. Narayan's Malgudi is a microcosm of India where characters like Raju and Swami navigate the cultural transitions brought about by colonial influence. Critics such as William Walsh argue that Narayan's "sense of timelessness" reflects the continuity of Indian traditions despite colonial disruptions (Walsh 78). In contrast, Adiga's *The White Tiger* offers a stark portrayal of postcolonial India marked by globalization and economic liberalisation. Balram Halwai, the protagonist, represents the new Indian entrepreneur who rises from the "darkness" to the "light" through morally questionable means. According to John Thieme, Adiga's novel "critiques the myth of the shining India by

exposing the exploitative practices of the socio-economic system" (Thieme 32). Both authors address the tension between tradition and modernity, but their approaches differ significantly. Narayan's characters adapt to change while preserving their moral compass, whereas Adiga's protagonist challenges traditional values, embracing moral ambiguity to achieve success.

Social injustice and class struggle are another central themes in both Narayan's and Adiga's works. In *The Guide*, Raju's transformation from a corrupt tour guide to a spiritual leader highlights the fluidity of social roles and the possibility of redemption. Narayan's portrayal of caste and class dynamics is subtle yet impactful, reflecting the inherent social hierarchies of traditional Indian society. Adiga, however, presents a more brutal picture of class struggle. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai's rise from a village boy to a successful entrepreneur involves murder and betrayal. Adiga exposes the dark side of India's economic miracle, critiquing the "servant-master" relationship. As critic Ulka Anjaria notes, "Adiga's narrative underscores the dehumanising effects of capitalist ambition in a society still shackled by caste hierarchies" (Anjaria 54). While Narayan depicts social injustice as a moral failing that can be rectified through personal growth, Adiga portrays it as a systemic issue requiring radical change.

Narayan's narrative style is characterised by gentle humour and irony. His works reflect a deep understanding of human nature, making his characters relatable and his critique more palatable. For example, in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Narayan uses humour to address serious themes of greed and power. M.K. Naik notes that Narayan's "comic vision is deeply rooted in Indian ethos, making his satire effective without being harsh" (Naik 92). In contrast, Adiga's narrative style is direct and confrontational. The epistolary format of *The White Tiger* allows Balram to narrate his story unapologetically, exposing the harsh realities of his life. The humour in Adiga's work is dark and often uncomfortable, reflecting the brutal socio-economic divide. As critic J. T. Matthews observes, "Adiga's use of dark humour serves to highlight the absurdity of India's socio-economic disparities" (Matthews 47).

Both authors explore moral corruption, but their perspectives on ethical ambiguity differ. In Narayan's works, characters often face moral dilemmas, and redemption is possible through self-awareness and transformation. For instance, in *The Guide*, Raju's journey from a fraudster to a revered figure shows the possibility of moral redemption. Adiga, however, presents moral corruption as a necessity for survival in a competitive world. Balram's rise to success involves the murder of his employer, reflecting the ethical compromises required in a corrupt system. According to Priyamvada Gopal, "Adiga's protagonist embodies the moral ambiguity of contemporary capitalism, where success often comes at the cost of ethical values" (Gopal 63).

The protagonists created by R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga embody contrasting perspectives on morality, success, and societal expectations. While Narayan's Raju is rooted in traditional Indian values, striving toward self-realisation through redemption, Adiga's Balram symbolises the post-liberalisation era, where survival often necessitates moral compromise. Both characters, though separated by time and context, reflect India's changing ethos, making them ideal for a comparative study. Raju's transformation from a tour guide to a spiritual leader is rooted in his desire for redemption. Initially a self-centered man, he undergoes moral growth through a series of personal failures. His gradual shift toward self-sacrifice is evident in his final decision to undertake a fast for the welfare of the villagers. In the novel's climax, Raju declares, "If by avoiding food I should help the trees bloom and the grass grow, why not do it thoroughly?" (*The Guide* 247). This statement highlights his acceptance of moral responsibility, a theme central to Narayan's narrative. Raju's arc symbolises the traditional Indian value of self-sacrifice and spiritual awakening, even if it arises from self-deception. Balram's transformation is driven by rebellion against India's socio-economic system. Unlike Raju, Balram's moral compromises are deliberate, stemming from his disillusionment with the "Rooster Coop" — Adiga's metaphor for societal oppression. He justifies his murder of Ashok, his employer, by asserting that moral integrity is impossible for the poor. Balram states that "The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. The moment you recognise what is wrong with the system, you start to crack it open." (*The White Tiger* 175). This line captures Balram's rationale for rejecting traditional morality. His journey from a submissive servant to a self-made entrepreneur embodies modern India's cutthroat capitalist ethos, where success often demands moral ambiguity.

Raju's ethical choices are guided by traditional Indian values. Even his deceptive actions stem from a desire to fit into societal expectations. His final act of fasting demonstrates his belief in the karmic cycle, where good deeds lead to redemption. In contrast, Balram's ethical choices challenge the very foundation of traditional morality. He openly rejects the idea of karma, stating, "I was looking for the key for years, but the door was always open." (*The White Tiger* 209). This line reflects his realisation that societal boundaries are self-imposed. His rejection of ethical norms illustrates the shift from a morality-based society to one driven by material success. Narayan's Raju is a product of a traditional society that values spiritual growth and community welfare. His transformation aligns with the Gandhian ideal of self-realisation through service. His fasting is both a literal and symbolic gesture toward societal harmony. In contrast, Balram's rebellion symbolises modern India's rejection of traditional norms. He views his rise to power as a break from the shackles of poverty. Adiga critiques the widening class divide in India, with Balram remarking, "The world is divided into two kinds of people — those with big bellies and those with small ones." (*The White Tiger* 64). This stark division underpins Balram's belief that morality is a privilege of the wealthy, a sentiment far removed from the ideals that guide Raju.

Both the authors paint two different sides of India. Narayan's Malgudi represents a timeless, harmonious India where societal values are grounded in tradition. The villagers' faith in Raju's transformation reflects their belief in community and spiritual guidance. For example, when the villagers tell Raju, "You are our saviour. You will bring the rains." (*The Guide* 231), it demonstrates their trust in traditional values and collective faith. Adiga's India, in contrast, is fragmented by capitalist ambitions and corruption. Balram's rise to power is symbolic of a society where traditional values have eroded under the pressures of modern economics. He sarcastically remarks, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness." (*The White Tiger* 14), highlighting the socio-economic divide and the hypocrisy of modern India.

The depiction of women in Indian literature has evolved significantly from the colonial to the postcolonial period. R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga, representing two different eras and ideologies, offer unique insights into women's lives. Narayan's works, primarily set in the fictional town of Malgudi, focus on traditional Indian women confined by societal norms, whereas Adiga's narratives, set in urban and globalised India, highlight the harsh realities of women's oppression, inequality, and survival in a capitalist world. According to Anupama Mohan, "The portrayal of women in Indian English fiction has been shaped by the changing socio-cultural realities of India" (Mohan 45). The stark differences are found in portrayal of female experiences and issues in Narayan's *The Dark Room* (1938) and Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011), after analysing their thematic differences and commonalities.

R.K. Narayan's depiction of women reflects the traditional patriarchal structure of mid-20th century Indian society. In *The Dark Room*, Savitri, the protagonist, symbolises the submissive and self-sacrificing Indian wife. She endures emotional and psychological abuse from her husband, Ramani, who represents patriarchal authority. Savitri's silence and eventual retreat to a dark room reflect the suppression of women's voices. Narayan's portrayal of Savitri is a critique of gender inequality, yet it also reinforces the notion of women's compliance. According to Ranga Rao, "Narayan's women characters seldom break the shackles of tradition. They endure, but their endurance is a quiet rebellion" (Rao 32). Savitri's attempt to escape her oppressive household can be seen as a symbolic act of resistance, but her return highlights the limitations imposed on women by societal norms. In contrast, Aravind Adiga presents a more critical and accurate portrayal of women in contemporary India. In *The White Tiger*, Pinky Madam, the wife of Ashok, represents a woman caught between tradition and modernity. Unlike Savitri, Pinky asserts her individuality by leaving her husband and returning to the United States, a bold move that challenges patriarchal expectations. Adiga's female characters are often portrayed as victims of both gender and class oppression. In *Last Man in Tower*, the female residents of the Vishram Society, such as Mary and Purnima, navigate a male-dominated space and assert their agency in subtle ways. Mary's struggle as a maid in a patriarchal society highlights the intersectionality of gender and class oppression. According to Madhavi Menon, "Adiga's women characters reflect the double marginalisation faced by women in a capitalist, patriarchal society" (Menon 88).

Narayan and Adiga both address the issue of patriarchy, but their approaches differ significantly. While Narayan portrays women's endurance within the confines of tradition, Adiga presents women who resist and challenge

patriarchal norms. In *The Dark Room*, Savitri's silent rebellion is symbolic of the limited agency available to women in traditional Indian society. However, in *The White Tiger*, Pinky Madam's departure signifies a more explicit rejection of patriarchal control. This shift reflects the changing socio-political context of India from the mid-20th century to the post-liberalisation era. Adiga's portrayal of women also highlights the impact of globalisation and capitalism on women's lives. In *Last Man in Tower*, women characters like Purnima must navigate the complexities of urban life, balancing tradition with modern aspirations. As Gopal and Sen note, "Adiga's women characters are emblematic of the struggles faced by urban women in a rapidly changing India" (Gopal & Sen 45). Narayan's language is simple and rooted in traditional Indian storytelling, reflecting the cultural context of his time. His narratives often contain moral undertones, emphasizing the importance of family and social harmony. In contrast, Adiga's language is more modern, satirical, and critical. His use of irony and dark humour exposes the hypocrisies of contemporary Indian society. According to Susan Bassnett, "Adiga's narrative style is a powerful tool for critiquing the socio-economic realities of modern India" (Bassnett 76).

Conclusion

R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga offer contrasting yet complementary portrayals of postcolonial India. While Narayan's works reflect a nostalgic view of traditional India with a focus on personal morality, Adiga's narratives critique contemporary socio-economic realities with brutal honesty. Both authors, however, highlight the pervasive issues of social injustice, class struggle, and moral corruption in Indian society. Their distinct narrative styles and thematic concerns provide valuable insights into the complexities of Indian identity in the postcolonial era. By juxtaposing Narayan's timeless humour with Adiga's gritty realism, readers gain a comprehensive understanding of the evolving socio-political landscape of India. The contrast between Raju and Balram reveals the evolution of Indian protagonists from traditional, morally bound individuals to modern, morally ambiguous characters. Raju's journey reflects a traditional India rooted in self-sacrifice and redemption, while Balram's narrative embodies a pragmatic, rebellious approach to success in capitalist India. Narayan's portrayal of Raju highlights the enduring value of spiritual growth, whereas Adiga's depiction of Balram critiques the socio-economic realities of modern India. Both characters serve as reflections of their respective societies, offering a comprehensive view of the cultural shifts in Indian literature. The comparison between R.K. Narayan and Aravind Adiga's handling of female experiences and issues reveals a significant shift in the portrayal of women in Indian English literature. Narayan's women endure and comply, reflecting the traditional values of his time, while Adiga's women resist and challenge societal norms, reflecting the complexities of contemporary India. This evolution in female representation highlights the changing socio-political context of India and the growing awareness of gender issues in literature. As Indian society continues to evolve, the portrayal of women in literature will likely continue to reflect these changes, offering new insights into the experiences and struggles of women in both traditional and modern contexts.

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