



Narrating Precarity: Labor, Migration, and Identity in Aravind Adiga's Fictional World

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ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga's fiction consistently interrogates the fragility of human existence in a globalized, neoliberal world. His novels depict precarity as a lived condition shaped by the intersections of labor, migration, and identity, where social mobility is promised yet rarely achieved. From *The White Tiger's* portrayal of rural–urban migration and exploitative labor, to *Amnesty's* exploration of undocumented immigrant survival in Sydney, Adiga's fictional world highlights the social and psychological costs of neoliberal modernity. This article examines Adiga's oeuvre through the lens of precarity theory, drawing on Judith Butler's concept of precarious lives, Guy Standing's notion of the "precariat," and postcolonial studies of migration. By analyzing five major works—*The White Tiger* (2008), *Between the Assassinations* (2008), *Last Man in Tower* (2011), *Selection Day* (2016), and *Amnesty* (2020)—the study demonstrates how Adiga narrates inequality not as a fixed category but as a shifting ecology of vulnerability. It argues that his fiction situates India within global circuits of labor and migration, revealing how precarious identities emerge from the structural contradictions of neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, Adiga's narratives offer a critical rethinking of Indian English fiction, positioning precarity as a central category of twenty-first-century literature.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga; precarity; labor; migration; neoliberalism.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Aravind Adiga has become a major voice in depicting the harsh realities of neoliberal India. His first novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), exposed the deep divide between India's shiny new wealth and the exploitation that makes it possible. Throughout his work, Adiga shows how globalization and rapid economic change create precarity—a state of uncertainty, insecurity, and risk.

The idea of precarity is important in current scholarship. Judith Butler describes it as a socially produced vulnerability that affects some lives more than others, while Guy Standing identifies a growing "precariat" class defined by unstable work and weak protections. In postcolonial studies, precarity is often linked to migration, informal labor, and the disruptions caused by global capitalism.

Adiga's fiction brings these ideas to life. *The White Tiger* follows Balram as rural–urban migration traps him in exploitative labor. *Selection Day* shows how caste and class shape everyday insecurity in small-town India. *Last Man in Tower* reveals how urban redevelopment threatens middle-class stability. *Amnesty* portrays young migrants whose sporting dreams turn them into commodities. *Amnesty* moves the discussion abroad, focusing on an undocumented Tamil migrant living in constant fear in Australia.

Taken together, Adiga's novels present precarity as a global condition. Through stories of labor, movement, and identity, he portrays a world where economic systems make lives increasingly fragile and uncertain.

Literature Review

Adiga as a Chronicler of Inequality and Globalization

Since the publication of *The White Tiger* (2008), Aravind Adiga has been seen as a writer who exposes the contradictions of neoliberal India. Critics argue that his fiction confronts the darker sides of globalization—corruption, displacement, and broken social bonds—rather than echoing celebrations of rapid economic growth (Kumar, 2013; Mehrotra, 2014). Scholars also note his insistence on a realist style, avoiding allegory or magical realism in favor of direct depictions of inequality (Chandra, 2016). This has positioned him within a global literary market eager for narratives revealing the costs of modernization in the Global South, while also raising questions about whether his work caters to Western expectations of Indian poverty (Dutta, 2011).

Although *The White Tiger* remains the most discussed text, later novels such as *Last Man in Tower* (2011), *Selection Day* (2016), and *Amnesty* (2020) widen his thematic range. These works move from rural–urban disparities to middle-class insecurity and transnational migration, encouraging critics to read Adiga as a global writer mapping India's connection to worldwide circuits of labor, mobility, and precarity (Saha, 2020).

Labor and Precarity in Indian English Fiction

Labor has long been central to Indian English fiction, from Mulk Raj Anand's early working-class narratives to Rohinton Mistry's exploration of exploitation in *A Fine Balance* (1995). In the contemporary period, neoliberal reforms have reshaped employment patterns, producing new opportunities alongside deepening insecurity. Scholars such as Fernandes (2006) and Baviskar (2020) document how liberalization expanded middle-class consumer culture while heightening vulnerability for informal and migrant workers.

Adiga's fiction contributes to this discussion by showing how neoliberal capitalism depends on unstable and exploitative labor. Balram in *The White Tiger* remains trapped in servitude despite migration, while Danny in *Amnesty* survives as an undocumented cleaner in Sydney. As Bose (2018) argues, Adiga foregrounds labor instability as a defining element of contemporary identity, linking Indian experiences of exploitation to global forms of precarity.

Migration and Identity

Migration forms a recurring axis of Adiga's fiction. In *The White Tiger*, rural–urban migration offers aspiration but also entrapment. *Selection Day* shows boys from small towns migrating to Mumbai to pursue cricketing dreams, only to be commodified. *Amnesty* globalizes this theme through the story of a Tamil migrant in Sydney navigating survival without documentation.

Postcolonial theorists such as Bhabha (1994) and Hall (1990) emphasize that migration destabilizes identity, producing hybridity, alienation, or shifting forms of diasporic belonging. Mishra (2007) similarly describes diasporic identity as inherently precarious. Adiga extends these frameworks by focusing not on elite cosmopolitan mobility but on precarious migrant survival. His migrant characters confront structural vulnerability, revealing how contemporary Indian mobility is shaped by insecurity rather than empowerment.

Precarity Theory and Literature

Precarity has become an important concept in cultural and social theory. Butler (2009) distinguishes between precariousness—the universal vulnerability of human life—and precarity, the socially produced condition that disproportionately affects marginalized populations. Standing (2011) describes the “precariat,” a class shaped by unstable labor, lack of rights, and insecure identities. Nixon’s (2011) idea of “slow violence” also resonates with the gradual, systemic processes that create precarity.

In literary studies, scholars have begun to examine how fiction represents precarity as lived experience, including works by Arundhati Roy, Mohsin Hamid, and NoViolet Bulawayo. Yet Adiga’s fiction has received comparatively limited attention within this framework. While Bose (2018) and Saha (2020) offer initial analyses, a sustained study connecting labor, migration, and identity as overlapping forms of precarity in Adiga’s work remains lacking.

Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Three gaps define current scholarship on Adiga. First, most studies focus heavily on *The White Tiger*, neglecting later novels that broaden his critique of neoliberalism. Second, existing research often treats labor, migration, and identity separately, rather than as interconnected axes of precarity. Third, theoretical engagement with precarity studies—despite its clear relevance to Adiga’s concerns—remains limited. This article addresses these gaps by using precarity as a unifying framework to read Adiga’s five major novels as narratives shaped by the entanglement of labor, migration, and identity in both Indian and global contexts.

Conceptual Framework

To analyze precarity in Adiga’s fiction, this study draws on precarity theory, postcolonial migration studies, and sociological approaches to labor and inequality.

Precarity as a Condition of Modern Life

Butler’s (2009) distinction between universal precariousness and socially distributed precarity is central. In Adiga’s fiction, all characters experience some degree of vulnerability, but the poor, the migrant, and the marginalized suffer heightened precarity due to structural forces. Balram in *The White Tiger*, Danny in *Amnesty*, and the migrants in *Between the Assassinations* exemplify how systemic inequalities shape dignity, survival, and agency.

Standing’s (2011) notion of the precariat further clarifies how neoliberal economies create unstable labor conditions. Adiga’s characters—from servants and drivers to aspiring athletes and undocumented cleaners—inhabit this precariat, revealing how insecurity shapes modern life across class boundaries.

Migration and Identity

Migration intensifies precarity. While much diasporic literature celebrates cosmopolitan hybridity, Adiga emphasizes migration as a site of exposure and insecurity. Danny’s undocumented life in *Amnesty* illustrates how mobility can deepen vulnerability, creating fractured identities suspended between belonging and exclusion. Similarly, migrants in *The White Tiger* and *Selection Day* discover that movement toward cities brings new forms of exploitation.

Labor, Capital, and Inequality

Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capital helps explain how labor and identity intersect. Characters such as Balram lack cultural and social capital, making their economic precarity more severe. Young athletes in *Selection Day* possess talent but not the cultural capital needed to access elite cricket networks, leaving them vulnerable to commodification. Harvey’s (2005) idea of “accumulation by dispossession” also illuminates *Last Man in Tower*, where redevelopment threatens middle-class security and identity.

Integrative Lens: Narrating Precarity

Bringing these frameworks together, precarity in Adiga's fiction can be understood in three interlinked forms:

1. Labor Precarity – unstable, exploitative work and commodified bodies.
2. Migration Precarity – displacement, undocumented survival, and fragile belonging.
3. Identity Precarity – vulnerability shaped by caste, class, age, gender, and neoliberal exclusion.

Adiga's novels portray these forces not separately but as interconnected pressures that shape human fragility. Together, they form an ecology of precarity embedded in global neoliberalism.

Textual Analysis of Adiga's Novels

The White Tiger (2008): Labor Exploitation and Rural–Urban Migration

Adiga's debut novel places the precarious conditions of India's rural poor at its center, tracing how migration to the city intensifies rather than alleviates vulnerability. Balram Halwai's movement from village poverty to life as a driver in Delhi reveals how neoliberal capitalism creates dreams of mobility while sustaining exploitative hierarchies. His work as Ashok's driver subjects him to humiliation, surveillance, and dependence, aligning him with Standing's (2011) "precariat," a class marked by insecurity and lack of rights.

Migration does not free Balram from structural domination; it merely relocates him within a system in which his labor is cheap and his identity reduced to servitude. His eventual act of murder emerges as a desperate attempt to escape a system stacked against him. Butler's (2009) understanding of precarity as structurally produced helps clarify how Balram's fragility stems from unequal distributions of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) rather than personal failure. Adiga thus reframes migration not as opportunity but as entry into a deeper, more violent precarity that shadows India's economic ascent.

Between the Assassinations (2008): Everyday Precarity in Small-Town India

In *Between the Assassinations*, Adiga broadens his focus from urban centers to the fictional town of Kittur, depicting the precarious lives of workers, beggars, migrants, Muslims, and lower-caste communities between 1984 and 1991. Labor precarity is omnipresent: informal work, caste exclusion, and economic insecurity shape daily existence. Migrants within India face double marginalization—uprooted from their homes yet excluded in new environments—revealing that internal migration often worsens vulnerability.

Identity precarity is equally visible. Religious minorities and caste-oppressed groups live under the threat of violence and systemic neglect. Hall's (1990) notion of identity as contingent and continuously reshaped by power resonates with these characters, whose selfhood is fractured by the inequalities that define small-town life. By situating these stories outside the metropolitan centers typically associated with globalization, Adiga emphasizes that precarity permeates the everyday realities of India's overlooked regions.

Last Man in Tower (2011): Urban Redevelopment and Middle-Class Precarity

With *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga shifts to Mumbai's middle class, revealing how neoliberal urban development destabilizes groups assumed to be secure. The Vishram Cooperative Housing Society becomes the target of a redevelopment scheme spearheaded by builder Dharmen Shah, offering residents substantial compensation. Most accept, but Masterji, a retired schoolteacher, refuses, valuing dignity and memory over profit.

This conflict dramatizes Harvey's (2005) "accumulation by dispossession": redevelopment transforms homes into commodities and undermines residents' rights to their own space. Although middle-class life appears stable, Adiga demonstrates that it is precarious when confronted with aggressive forces of capital. Masterji's isolation and the hostility of his neighbors underscore how neoliberalism corrodes community bonds. His vulnerability—social,

moral, and physical—reflects Butler’s (2009) point that precarious lives are often rendered expendable within systems organized around profit.

Selection Day (2016): Youth, Sport, and Migrant Precarity

Selection Day explores precarity through the world of competitive sport. Brothers Manju and Radha Kumar migrate from a small town to Mumbai under the pressures of a domineering father determined to turn them into cricket stars. Their bodies become forms of economic capital within a sport dominated by patronage and competition. Labor here takes the form of athletic performance, subject to unstable opportunities and constant evaluation.

Migration brings them into spaces of both aspiration and exploitation. They must navigate institutions that reward talent but offer little stability. Manju’s struggle with sexuality adds another layer of identity precarity, exposing how neoliberal and cultural pressures intersect. Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital helps explain their vulnerability: although talented, they lack the cultural and social capital required to access elite networks. Adiga thus extends precarity to youth whose dreams are reshaped by commercialized sport.

Amnesty (2020): Migrant Labor and Global Precarity

Amnesty relocates Adiga’s exploration of precarity to a global setting. Danny, an undocumented Sri Lankan Tamil in Sydney, lives in a constant state of fear, invisibility, and surveillance. His cleaning work is informal and unprotected, and his undocumented status makes him vulnerable to exploitation and deportation. Danny epitomizes Butler’s (2009) precarious life: necessary to the city’s economy yet excluded from its protections.

Migration here produces a state of permanent insecurity rather than mobility. Danny’s fractured identity—shaped by displacement, undocumented survival, and cultural dislocation—reveals how global mobility often deepens vulnerability. His story links Adiga’s earlier Indian contexts to transnational experiences of migrant labor.

Synthesis

Across these five novels, Adiga portrays precarity as a defining condition of contemporary life. Labor remains unstable and exploitative; migration, whether rural–urban or global, intensifies vulnerability; and identity is continually unsettled by caste, class, religion, sexuality, and neoliberal pressures. Together, these works situate India within global circuits of insecurity, illustrating the reach of Standing’s (2011) precariat and exposing the fragile foundations of modern existence.

Critical Insights

Adiga’s fiction demonstrates that precarity is not an anomaly but a defining element of life under neoliberalism. His novels show how insecurity permeates labor, migration, and identity, shaping the experiences of people across social and regional divides. This aligns with Butler’s view that vulnerability is universal, yet intensified for those marginalized by power.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram’s journey reveals how India’s economic growth relies on exploiting rural migrants. *Between the Assassinations* portrays how caste, class, and religion trap communities in everyday insecurity. *Last Man in Tower* exposes the middle class to instability as redevelopment erodes solidarity. *Selection Day* depicts young athletes pressured by neoliberal ambition, while *Amnesty* highlights the extreme fragility of undocumented migrant life.

Across these works, precarity emerges as an interconnected web shaped by capitalism and state power. Adiga’s narratives humanize these forces, showing how they fracture dignity, relationships, and the hope for secure futures.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Aravind Adiga's fiction narrates precarity as a central condition of modern existence, shaped by the intersections of labor, migration, and identity. Through close readings of *The White Tiger*, *Between the Assassinations*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Selection Day*, and *Amnesty*, the study has shown that Adiga's characters exemplify the "precariat" of neoliberal capitalism—workers, migrants, and ordinary citizens whose lives are destabilized by systemic forces.

Adiga's fiction unsettles celebratory narratives of globalization by exposing the fragility beneath them: the servant who kills to escape servitude, the marginalized who remain excluded in small towns, the middle-class resident displaced by redevelopment, the young athlete reduced to economic capital, and the undocumented migrant forced to live unseen. These stories show that globalization generates opportunity alongside deep vulnerability.

Using a precarity framework, this article argues that Adiga's novels are not only realist portraits of India but also contributions to global debates on insecure lives. His work resonates with Butler's and Standing's theories while grounding them in distinctly Indian and postcolonial conditions.

Ultimately, Adiga urges readers to reconsider what security, belonging, and identity mean today. His fiction reveals how neoliberal systems shape fragile lives across regions, making precarity a lived, human experience rather than an abstract concept.

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