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Literary genre of Arvind Adiga and Amit Chaudhari: A comparative analysis

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive comparative analysis of the literary genre employed by renowned Indian authors Arvind Adiga and Amit Chaudhari. Drawing from their notable works, including Adiga's "The White Tiger" and Chaudhari's "Odysseus Abroad," the study explores the distinct narrative styles and thematic preoccupations that characterize their writing. By examining their portrayals of characters, settings, and plot structures, the article sheds light on how these two prominent authors employ different literary devices to convey their unique perspectives on contemporary Indian society. Furthermore, the analysis delves into the social, political, and cultural implications embedded within their works, investigating the contrasting viewpoints they offer on issues such as class struggle, identity, globalization, and the impact of historical legacies. Through this comparative study, readers gain insights into the literary strategies employed by Adiga and Chaudhari, facilitating a nuanced understanding of their contributions to contemporary Indian literature and the broader literary landscape. The findings of this research provide a valuable resource for scholars, students, and enthusiasts interested in Indian fiction and comparative literature studies, offering a deeper understanding of the evolving trends and narratives within Indian literary genres.

Keywords: Literary genre, The White Tiger, Indian literature, Indian fiction

Introduction

Many Indian writers have written on the cultural aspects of India in their fiction. Arvind Adiga and Amit Choudhary's fiction also throws light on the culture of India.

Aravind Adiga was born in 1974 in Chennai, and completed his schooling and advanced degrees in India, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. He is best known for his novel *The White Tiger*, which won the Booker Prize in 2008. He is also the author of several short stories as well as three additional novels: *Last Man in Tower* (2011) ^[9], *Selection Day* (2016), and *Amnesty* (2020) ^[11].

The white tiger broke new ground in Indian English fiction for its move away from some of the genre's common themes and aesthetics. In contrast to the writings of previous Indian winners of the Booker Prize, *The white tiger* noticeably eschews pathos and rejects the sensitive and emphatic portrayal of characters from marginalized sections of society as seen in the writings of Rohinton Mistry, and the righteous sense of injustice or anger against the system as seen in Arundhati Roy. Rather, Balram Halwai, *The White Tiger*'s protagonist, is a ruthless self-promoter, his frustrations at the obstacles put in the path of his social advancement generating a sense of gritty motivation that leads him to become a social climber at all costs. He uses the language of late capitalism to articulate his own aspirations; he is a self-styled "entrepreneur" (1). He is a member of an underclass that does not seek pity or empathy but faces challenges with a hard-nosed pragmatism that is at once cynical and agentive. If some of the most famous Indian novels in English of the 1980s and 1990s reflect a profound disillusionment with the failures of the Indian nation-state, Adiga's works mark a newer era in the genre, which we might call post-disillusion, when there is nothing of the illusion left at all and so rather than lament its loss the only thing to do is pick up the pieces and stitch together a livable life from them.

The white tiger is set in contemporary India that has been stripped of its moral values. Any symbol or model of moral righteousness – Gandhi, Nehru, literary icons, spiritualism, secularism, socialism – is presented in his works through a cynical gaze, upturning conventional morality so that, at its extreme, right is wrong and wrong is right. For instance when Balram walks into a tea shop for his first day at work, he sees the shopkeeper "sitting under a huge portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, and [he] knew already that [he] was going to be in big trouble" (31); the image of Gandhi, which might have once signaled virtue, now represents its opposite.

Balram scoffs at the men working in tea shops in rural India who “do [their] job well – with honesty, dedication, and sincerity, the way Gandhi would have done it, no doubt” (43), aware that their hard work will get them nowhere in life. By contrast, Balram claims, “I did my job with near total dishonesty, lack of dedication, and insincerity – and so the tea shop was a profoundly enriching experience” (43), while this is a humorous inversion of conventional ideas of education and enrichment, it is also a perceptive critique of the limitations on social advancement in contemporary India, where if you’re poor or otherwise marginalized, hard work is futile. Instead, Balram “used [his] time at the tea shop... to spy on every customer at every table, and overhear everything they said. [He] decided that this was how [he] would keep [his] education going forward” (43). Balram presents street smarts and cleverness, rather than belief in the virtue of labor, as the only option for social mobility in a profoundly broken system.

Although, *The White Tiger* advances a social critique, there is no hope of reform; patriarchy, capitalism, casteism, greed and selfishness have so completely taken over that the only “hope” (which is in fact a cynical gloss on hope) is to bend these forces to one’s advantage. Thus, victimhood can become an agency, even if that agency involves theft and murder. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga replaces the bleak/fatalistic attitude of an earlier generation of Indian writers in English with a more cynical/pragmatic perspective that is always on the lookout for an opportunity for breaking out of one’s social circumstances but is not at all interested in reforming the whole system. For this reason, *The White Tiger* has been criticized by some scholars as being neoliberal –celebrating a rags-to-riches, bootstraps narrative rather than offering a concerted critique of structural inequalities. Certainly, there is very little that is Marxist about *The White Tiger*; there is no class solidarity and the narrative of advancement is not only individualistic but actively anti-collective. This is less a progressive critique of capitalism than a perceptive recognition of a new world order in which the very possibilities for subaltern advancement have already been tainted by half-a-century of corruption that has saturated the very fibers of Indian society.

Indeed, one wonders if these critiques of *The White Tiger* had some influence in shaping the direction of Adiga’s subsequent novels. In all three, the cynicism is still there, as are characters who have no moral compass and who, like Balram, reject the language of liberalism and act in extremely self-serving and socially destructive ways. However, in contrast to *The White Tiger*, at the center of each of the three later novels is a protagonist who has a heart and who does his (they are all men) best to resist the forces of the deeply corrupt world around him. While Balram found criminality as the only path forward in a nation of criminals, the protagonists of the other novels try to remain ethical despite the pressures around them.

Last man in Towers Masterji is a former teacher and elderly resident of a Mumbai apartment building targeted by a builder for redevelopment, providing that all owners agree to the deal. The rest of the residents are gradually convinced, but Masterji remains steadfast in his refusal to sell, partly because of the memories of his deceased wife that still pervade his flat. The other residents get impatient as the deadline comes closer, and in a bid to get the deal through, one of them pushes Masterji to his death, off the

building terrace. In this novel, the middle-class society is represented as thoroughly amoral and materialistic. Though Masterji, tries to stay true to the values of learning, family, and morality, he is ultimately a victim to it.

Selection Day is also set in a world of characters, completely warped by violence and greed. Radha and Manju are brothers and cricket prodigies. They live with their unemployed, controlling, and at times violent father who treats them as his property. Manju, the younger brother, is the novel’s protagonist. Not only does he grow up in the shadow of his older brother and gradually outshine him in cricket, earning both Radha’s and his father’s anger, but he also finds himself sexually attracted to a wealthy boy, Javed, who treats him alternately with affection and disdain. *Selection Day* is a cricket novel – a critique of the business of cricket in contemporary India, from match fixing to corporate sponsorships to the recruiting industry. Manju resembles Balram in that he too must make compromises to succeed. But unlike Balram, who murders his boss and never faces the consequences, Manju’s denial of his sexuality and his abandonment of Javed for the sake of his cricketering career prove ultimately hollow. Manju remains a sympathetic character throughout, from his childhood when he is the victim of emotional and physical abuse by his father, through his adolescence and the eponymous selection day, and beyond, into his listless adulthood. Unlike Balram, the novel focalizes its narration through Manju, allowing us to glimpse his hazy memories of his mother who left when he was a child, his love of the television show CSI, his secret dream to work in a morgue rather than be a cricketer, his fear of his brother and his father, and his unarticulated desire for Javed. In the midst of the ruthless world in which he lives, and despite his own flaws, Manju remains profoundly human.

Danny, the protagonist of Adiga’s most recent novel *Amnesty*, is also a sympathetic character in an unforgiving world. As an undocumented Tamil Sri Lankan having escaped the Civil War and state repression, Danny lives in Sydney when the novel begins and works as a house cleaner. The novel takes place over the course of a single day that begins with Danny learning that a former client named Radha Thomas has been murdered. In a series of flashbacks, we learn more about Danny’s strange relationship with Radha and her extramarital lover, Dr. Prakash, who were both gambling addicts and highly unlikeable people. Additionally, they knew of Danny’s illegal status and were using it to try to control him. Danny immediately suspects Dr. Prakash as Radha’s murderer, having witnessed violent arguments between them, but realizes that turning Dr. Prakash in to the police would require implicating himself – living in Australia illegally – to the authorities. Danny struggles with the decision over the course of the day, calling the police hotline several times but ultimately hanging up. Finally, having realized that Dr. Prakash is planning to murder Radha’s husband next, Danny does the right thing. The last page of the novel is a press release that reports the tip that resulted in the arrest of Dr. Prakash and in preventing the second murder, but also notes that “the person who tipped police off on the hotline confessed during questioning to being illegally present in Australia and is now being processed for deportation to his home country” (217). Danny’s sacrifice of his own happiness – contrary to his repeated mantra, “I am never going back home” (207) – exposes, once again, the

immorality of the outside world through the foil of a character who is able to act morally despite it.

These various male protagonists who struggle to make it for themselves under the ruthless logic of late capitalism also demonstrate the ways in which Adiga links masculinity and class. We see this in the scene in *The White Tiger* where Balram tries to imitate Mr. Ashok, his employer by hiring a blonde prostitute. Balram is devastated when he discovers that her hair is dyed. The fact that the idiom of Balram's desire for social and economic mobility is that of sex suggests the deep imbrication of class and sexuality. The portrayal of sexuality is more nuanced in *Selection Day*, where Manju's burgeoning understanding of his own queer sexuality makes him the target of homophobic taunts from his father and peers, but – and more importantly – gives him a new perspective on ordinary things that allows him, at times, to detach himself from the world around him. In this novel, queerness is presented not only as a question of desire but also as a kind of secret world of survival that enables Manju to develop a sense of self which is at times magically distant from the crude material needs, both bodily and financial, of everyone else around him. Indeed, it is only when he turns his back on his own queerness does his life relapse into mediocrity.

Adiga's interest in questions of masculinity does not really extend to women, and across the four novels there are very few notable women characters. *The White Tiger's* Pinki Madam is a morally reprehensible, wealthy NRI who drives drunk one night, ends up killing someone sleeping on the street, and forces Balram to take the blame. In *Amnesty* Danny has a healthy relationship with Sonja (probably the only living healthy relationship across all Adiga's fiction), but the main female presence is the murdered Radha Thomas who appears in Danny's flashbacks as domineering, manipulative, and entirely reflective of the privilege of her elite class. Yet, while all the female characters verge on caricatures, most of the male characters do as well – the vast majority of characters in Adiga's fictional worlds are reflections of the corruption of the late capitalist order and have little redeeming about them at all.

Adiga also inhabits a new "transmedia" arena marked by a more complex relationship between literature and other forms of media. Arundhati Roy refused to authorize a screen adaptation of *The God of Small Things*, and while there have been adaptations of earlier Indian novels in English (perhaps most famously Deepa Mehta's adaptation of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and the BBC's recent miniseries *A Suitable Boy*), the classic IWE texts of the 1990s have rarely been adapted for the screen. But this changed in the first decades of the 21st century, not only with OTT platforms allowing for a wider distribution of varied types of content, but also because authors started writing with adaptation in mind. This is clear in the works of authors such as Chetan Bhagat and Anuja Chauhan, among others, whose fiction reads as somewhat filmi in its characterization, narrative arc, and at times rapid "cuts" between scenes. Both authors' books have been made into films. Adiga's novel *Selection Day* was similarly released as a series by Netflix in 2018, and three years later the film adaptation of *The White Tiger* was released on the same platform. As Sangita Gopal reminds us, this is not just a question of unidirectionally adapting fiction into film, but of upturning the idea of an original versus an adaptation; a transmedia project means that a film or television series is

not a secondary version of an original fiction but that the book too is a version that might find form in another medium. Adiga's participation in this arena is part of a new moment in Indian literary production in which the sanctity of the book is replaced by a more lateral proliferation of possible forms.

Unlike many contemporary writers, Adiga is a private person who stays largely out of the public domain. He is not active on social media and has never attended the high-profile Jaipur Literary Festival, despite his popularity and the critical acclaim garnered by his works. In this sense he seems to have avoided the pressures that contemporary writers often face to be political commentators as well as practitioners of their craft. But this reclusiveness does not lend his writings a sense of apartness; rather, his stories are marked by their contemporary quality, their grittiness and their refusal of pity or sentiment. For these reasons, his impact on the field of Indian writing in English will continue to grow.

Amit Chaudhuri is a versatile writer working in numerous genres. He has written fiction, poetry, stories, essays, memoir and literary criticism. His writings have appeared in *The Guardian* and the *London Review of Books*. He has written seven novels: *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991)^[2], *Afternoon Raag* (1993)^[12], *Freedom Song* (1998)^[4], *A New World* (2000)^[1], *The Immortal* (2009), *Odysseus Abroad* (2014) and *Friend of My Youth* (2017). Among his non-fiction writings are a critical study of D.H. Lawrence's poetry, *D.H. Lawrence and Difference* (2003), a book of critical essays, *Clearing a Space* (2008) and *Calcutta: Two Years in the City* (2013). He is currently working as a professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, England. He has also edited an anthology of Indian Writing, *The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*. Amit Chaudhuri's first novel, *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991)^[2] is about a boy of twelve years, Sandeep, who comes to spend his holidays at his uncle's home in Calcutta. Here, he cherishes simple joys of daily routine – cooking, bathing, eating, and sleeping in contrast to his organized and lonely life in Bombay. Chaudhuri tries to capture the faded comfort and happiness of childhood. The novel is about the pure innocent memories of small middle class homes in India.

Chaudhuri's use of language in this novel reveals an extraordinarily keen sensibility. A sense of nostalgia suffuses the novel. The little pure moments of childhood and the disappointments of daily life are brought out beautifully. The central point in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is the impression created on children's minds by the prevalent culture and lifestyle in a particular place. Chaudhuri's descriptions remind us of our childhood memories such as the sounds of radio babble "like a local idiot" and of thunder that, after a "moment's heavy silence," speaks "guru guru guru"

Each and every detail in *A Strange and Sublime Address* is described properly. The author tries to engage with human life in a detailed manner. The Character of Sandeep seems autobiographical. It is similar to Chaudhuri's childhood. Chaudhuri beautifully draws a comparison between the simple joys of childhood and the corporate world. The novel also move back and forth between the city of Calcutta and Bombay. Calcutta offers a carefree life whereas Mumbai offers an organized life. Sandeep feels trapped here in Bombay.

ee life whereas Mumbai offers an organized life. Sandeep feels trapped here in Bombay. Chaudhuri narrates the life of Sandeep as a grownup man. He lives with his parents in Mumbai in a multi-storey building. Life in Mumbai is rather excessively organized, mechanical and lonely. Sandeep feels closer to Calcutta and derives great pleasure in the company of his cousins. While describing Sandeep's big apartment in Mumbai, Chaudhuri suggests Sandeep's craving for a carefree life: He was like Adam in charge of paradise, given dominion over the birds and fishes; he was too much in the foreground. He hated being in the foreground; he wanted a housefly's anonymity. But here, in Chhotomama's house, he pulled into life and passed into extinction according to his choice, he had liberty. (A Strange and Sublime Address 28)

The phrase, housefly's anonymity" is marked by suggestion evoking the ordinariness and squalor of common people's lives. While Mumbai suggests a boring life, Calcutta offers a contrast as the place of Sandeep's childhood memories. Sandeep's impression of the city is built more on his hopes of recreating a lost childhood. The evoked mood is that of loss of a carefree life. The novel, thus, deals with two themes - simple joys of childhood and the evocation of a way of life. These themes are inextricably linked with each other. Chaudhuri describes simple acts such as a family having a lunch beautifully. He writing is lyrical which makes simple acts very unique. Chaudhuri points out that Bengalis are very specific about their food and eating-habits. He describes different food items prepared from the same material. For instance, the novel reveals Bengalis have cultivated a taste for good food prepared differently: Pieces of boiled fish, cooked in turmeric, red chili paste, onions and garlic, lay in a red fiery sauce in a flat pan; rice, packed into an oven white cake, had a spade like spoon embedded in it, slices of fried aubergine were arranged on a white dish; that was served from another pan with a drooping ladle; long complex filaments of banana flower, exotic, botanical, lay in yet another pan in a dark sauce; each plate had a heap of salt on one side, a green chili, and a slice of sweet-smelling lemon. The grown-ups snapped the chillies (each made a sound terse as a satirical retort) and scattered the tiny, deadly seeds in their food. If any of the boys were ever brave or foolish enough to bite a chili their eyes filled tragically with tears, and they longed to drown in a cool, clean lake. Though chhotomama was far from affluent, they ate well, especially on Sundays, caressing the rice and the sauces on their plates with attentive sensuous fingers, fingers which performed a practical and graceful ballet on the plate till it was quite empty. (A Strange and Sublime Address 6).

Chaudhuri even shows the shift in cultural values among two generations. Nehru's India is secular and stands in contrast to the India envisioned by Gandhiji the India of ceremony and custom (A Strange and Sublime Address 61). Chaudhuri gives importance to such spaces which have been marginalized. These spaces are ignored by others. Chaudhuri's fiction is made up of these spaces. Hilary Mantel observed in The New York Review of Books that it is difficult to categorize Chaudhuri. He writes seriously about unserious events. He does not illuminate tragic aspects of life. He observes random and unimportant details and colors them with wonder. There is childlike curiosity in his approach to life. Amit Chaudhuri is a miniaturist who has perfected the art of the moment. He follows Proust in

radiating tiny moments ("The Monster We Know"). Afternoon Raag (1993) ^[12] is a novel about arrivals, departures, new life, old memories, new world and old home. It delineates the experiences of a young Indian student of English Literature at the University of Oxford. The central but nameless character is caught in a complicated love triangle with Mandira and Shehnaz. Loneliness and melancholy trouble him. He has devoted his life to aesthetic pursuits. The novel is also a tribute to Indian classical music. Multiple emotions are evoked with the help of rāgas Amit Chaudhuri's forte is describing a life of domesticity, routine and small daily rituals. He enchants the reader with simple yet arresting narratives. In Afternoon Raag he uses language not primarily to tell a story but to evoke moods, atmosphere and frames of mind: the narrator visualizes Oxford town as it gets transformed into a kind of wartime township during the vacation "because all the young people, with their whistling, their pavement to pavement chatter, their beer-breathed, elbow-nudging polemics, are suddenly gone, leaving the persistent habits of an old way of life" (181).

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