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THE ROARING NINETIES AND BEYOND: A NEW HISTORICIST READING 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

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INTRODUCTION

India's transformation from a 'mixed' to a liberalised economy during the last decade of the Twentieth century divides the course of its post-colonial 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 socio-cultural, 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 'License-Permit-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 discomfoting 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.

Balram is an underclassman without the benefit of higher education, influential relatives, inherited wealth or political connections – the essential toe holds to clamber up the socio-political and economic hierarchy in India. In fact, he was abruptly taken away from school to break coal in a village tea-shop after his family had fallen into a vicious debt trap following the marriage of a cousin. Still, a few years later, one finds him thriving in Bangalore, as the owner of a business and with a destiny of his own making. Likewise, in *Last Man in Tower*, the urban middle-class residents of Vishram Tower A are also overwhelmed by a sweep of good fortune following a stupendous offer made by a builder who wants to demolish their ramshackle flat to make way for his magnum opus, an ultra modern skyscraper. Though India after liberalisation continues to suffer from several imperfections, the post liberalised world has increased the prosperity of the people and given them choices and opportunities they have been denied throughout the socialist years.

Echoing a tone synonymous with the political elite that gave political freedom to the nation after independence but denied its citizens the economic freedom to claw their way out of poverty (Mitra), Ashok, the US educated feudal scion in *The White Tiger* shudders at the prospect of parliamentary democracy in the hands of half-baked Indians like Balram. But, Balram takes pride in being a half-baked entrepreneur “born and raised in Darkness” (*The White Tiger*, 10). There are many in India like him who have not been able to finish their schooling but stuffed with too many half formed ideas picked up randomly from school books, soiled newspapers, and from snatches of radio bulletins. According to Balram a potpourri of such ideas turn these half-baked men into entrepreneurs but, since the odds are loaded against them, such men must school themselves with experiments in falsehood as opposed to the Gandhian experiments with truth. Balram confesses that he has always been a liar, and it is by lying that he has ensured his existence in a

fiercely competitive world. His disloyalties do not make him remorseful; instead, rage overwhelms him. Every time he steals his master's money, he is reminded of how much the feudal masters have stolen from him and however much he steals from them, he will never be able to match what they have stolen from him.

In a similar vein, Chenayya, Adiga's protagonist in *The Elephant*, a story set in socialist India, wonders why the poor remains poor forever. He later finds the answer that it is because the poor acquiesce and lack the courage to steal from the rich. Instead of supporting the poor thief who steals from the rich, they would catch and drag him back to the rich man for his vengeance. Since the poor are incapable of organizing themselves into vengeful, murderous bands that slaughter the rich, Chenayya desperately concludes that “we poor have built the prison around ourselves” (*The Elephant*).

But, unlike Chenayya who belongs to the bygone socialist phase and whose rebellion remains only in thoughts, Balram, the self-made businessman, whose identity is fashioned by the twin engines of liberalisation and globalisation, believes that his rise through India's stagnant class system, by breaking out and escaping from the fear of the ‘Rooster Coop’ that perpetuates the enslavement of the underdog, is exemplary of a good entrepreneur. In Balram's view even the Chinese who are superior to the Indians in every respect fall short of the Indians, at least in one aspect – it has thousands and thousands of entrepreneurs though “there's no reward for entrepreneurship in most of India (*The White Tiger* 35). Balram's keen observation, analytical mind, adaptability, execution skills and daring make him an entrepreneur and liberate him from slavery. As an entrepreneur Balram observes and listens to all that is happening and spoken around him and being a quick learner he easily understands how a society functions and what its chief purposes are. In Bangalore, he quickly learns that he should offer pick up and drop services for the hoards of employees working in the IT companies who must wake up and work when others sleep around them. Though there is cut throat competition and no leeway for a new player to squeeze into that market,

Balram shrewdly drives out the competition with the connivance of the police.

While tracing the economic history of India, Das points out that one of the best periods for Indian economy were the war years before Independence. Since then, during the protectionist, post-Independence socialist phase, business and industry plunged into a fatal nosedive. In *The White Tiger*, Balram also traces the tragic history of his family's fall, from entrepreneurship to slavery and deprivation, to the evil days into which the country had fallen after Independence. He rues that with independence, the order that had been established over several centuries became chaotic and in the dog-eat-dog world of free India the caste identities, fashioned by the pursuit of specific trades by social groups for generations, through several centuries, suddenly lost its occupational moorings:

And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on the fifteenth of August, 1947 – the day the British left – the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies. That was all that counted now, the size of your belly. It didn't matter whether you were a woman, or a Muslim, or an untouchable: anyone with a belly could rise up. (The White Tiger 38)

The multifarious distinctions among the various classes and trades of pre-independent India continue to exist in the post-liberalisation phase, but these are increasingly being melded together into a relatively simplistic Marxian bi-polar distinction of the haves and the have-nots. Such a distinction in the pre-liberalized India of *Between the Assassinations* is not prominent enough to demarcate Abbasi, the rich employer from his poor employees. Both are victims and none of them have any choices, or scope for any improvement or upward mobility in a socialist dispensation that has cheated them out of their destinies. However, Balram finds the emerging paradigms in post-liberalisation India offering two choices for the have-nots:

...in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up. (The White Tiger 38)

The dialectical conflict between the polar opposites of the haves and have-nots constituting the superstructures of the Western world is found transmuting into India, as it is increasingly becoming entrenched in capitalism and materialism, post liberalisation. Balram is conscious of the perpetual conflict between the rich and the poor and is also aware that there is little chance of the poor ever gaining an upper hand in the battle of wits it wages with the rich and powerful minority. To the visiting Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, Balram confides:

I won't be saying anything new if I say that the history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand-year war of brains between the rich and the poor. Each side is eternally trying to hoodwink the other side: and it has been this way since the start of time. The poor win a few battles (the peeing in the potted plants, the kicking of the pet dogs, etc.) but of course the rich have won the war for ten thousand years. (The White Tiger 151)

However, Balram no longer wants to remain as one among the teeming millions who invariably end up on the losing side. By reading Mirza Galib and other great humanists he finds the key to his liberty. He realises that it is unwise to bring down the mighty or to lead the ignorant masses to liberty when all he needs to do is to simply switch sides and join the rich and powerful minority by outsmarting them in their own game, "The rich are always one step ahead of us – aren't they? Well, not this time. For every step he'd take, I'd take two" (The White Tiger 161). Such acumen makes Balram a successful entrepreneur and the want of it makes his master Ashok, his victim.

After murdering Ashok, Balram escapes with a bag full of money to the India of light where men have choices which men in the darkness don't have. Balram is typical of an Indian subaltern who

must break free from the stagnation by redeeming his pride with his enterprising spirit. He must unshackle himself from the chains that bind his creativity and enterprise. The will to break free has been infused into the society in the wake of economic liberalisation and globalisation. It requires great entrepreneurship to free oneself from the rooster coop of servitude. Balram had to sacrifice his family and his own identity in order to liberate himself from the bottom rungs of the feudal hierarchy and from the terror instruments that keep underclassmen like him obedient and disciplined.

In the India of light he finds that the liberated individuals have set up countless of technology "outsourcing companies that virtually run America now" (The White Tiger 4). Balram doesn't have the technological background to found a tech start-up. But, with the knowledge of cars and drivers and the capital stolen from Ashok he sets up a business that serves the needs of the burgeoning IT industry. He thus secures an indirect toehold in the outsourcing world, and becomes a beneficiary of India's march towards globalisation.

Balram admits that he has never been an original thinker and acknowledges that all his best ideas have come from eavesdropping on his master's conversations about India, the US and life in general. Therefore, he prefers to call himself an original listener. He has no formal education but, has acquired skills in using technology that helps him manage his business efficiently. He proudly claims that Indians take to technology just as ducks to water in a vein similar to Friedman's observation that all over the world, it is the poor who adopt technology as their way out of poverty (The Lexus and the Olive Tree 382). For Balram, who migrated from the darkness of rural Laxmangarh, to step into the dazzling light of Bangalore, the cyber city presents a microcosm of the future of India which he wants to help build. He does not stand back and watch like all those trapped lives in *Between the Assassinations*, in the India of darkness. He wants to be a part of "all that is changing in this country" and shape the emergent identity:

It may turn out to be a decent city, where humans can live like humans and animals can live like animals. A new Bangalore for a

new India. And then I can say that, in my own way, I helped to make New Bangalore. (White Tiger 192)

He knows that he must sell the start-up he had built up, and gravitate towards where the next opportunity beckons him until he has enough money to set up an "English-language school – for poor children in Bangalore .... [to] teach children the facts of life... [not] to corrupt anyone's head with prayers, and stories about God or Gandhi" (The White Tiger 192).

Balram's vision is not circumscribed by manmade boundaries. It crosses borders, embraces cultures and dissipates distinctions in the true spirit of globalization and wants to unite itself in the universal brotherhood towards progress. He understands that both China and India are outsourcing destinations of the world. If China is its manufacturing base, India is its technological hub and both are going to be the superpowers of tomorrow. Balram predicts that "in twenty years time it will be just us yellow men and brown men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the whole world" (The White Tiger 183-184).

#### 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. (57)

A recent World Bank report, *Addressing Inequality in South Asia*, also notes that "the probability of a poor person moving out of poverty in India in 2014 was as



good as that in the U.S.” and that the “mobility among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has become higher than that of upper caste Hindus over time” (Mehra). Such contrasting views and data leaves further scope for a multidisciplinary approach in reading Adiga's fiction.

#### Conclusion

As India steps away from socialism to neo-liberalism 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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