

## Portrayal of Environmentally Denatured India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Dr. Dhanesh Mohan Bartwal\*, Dr. Kavita Tariyal

Department of Applied Sciences and Humanities, THDC Institute of Hydropower Engineering and Technology, B. Puram, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand, Pin Code-249001

\*Corresponding Author: Dr. Dhanesh Mohan Bartwal

Email: [dbartwal81@gmail.com](mailto:dbartwal81@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, which was awarded the 'Man Booker Prize' in 2008, is in the epistolary form which presents the burning issues of this developing era. The novel is a form of seven- parts letter written by the protagonist Balram of the novel to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. In this kind of style the protagonist not only explains his struggle story, from his dark native place Laxmangarh to shining city Delhi and then bright metropolitan city Bangalore, but also presents the condition of our environment which is in the margin for the sake of development. Adiga in the novel not only concentrates on population growth which is one of the biggest causes of environment degradation but also highlights other issues like water pollution, air pollution and other prevailing issues that affect human life as well as the ambient atmosphere as an alarm. The present paper is an effort to explore the environmental issues in the novel through Eco- Criticism. This emerging theory reveals the relationship between literature and physical environment. The paper also explores the consequences of environmental degradation in human life and its long lasting evil impacts on our unique planet.

**Keywords:** Eco- Criticism, Environment, Environmental degradation, Pollution, Population

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### INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga in his debut novel *The White Tiger*, which won the Britain's esteemed Booker Prize in 2008, highlights the suffering of a subaltern protagonist in the twenty first century known as materialism era [6]. Through his subaltern protagonist Balram Halwai, he highlights the suffering of lower class people. This novel creates two different India in one "an India of Light and an India of Darkness" [1]. The first one represents the prosperous India where everyone is able to dream a healthy and comfortable life. The life of this "Shining India" reflects through giant shopping malls, flyovers, fast and furious life style, neon lights, modern vehicles and a lot of opportunities which creates hallucination that India is competing with western countries and not far behind from them [6,11]. But, on the other side, the life nurtures with poverty, scarcity of foods, life taking diseases, inferiority, unemployment, exploitation and humiliation, homelessness and environmental degradation in India of darkness [6].

### Reflection of Environmental Degradation in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Environmental degradation is nothing but an outcome of the dynamic interplay of socio-economic, institutional and technological activities. Environmental changes can be governed by many factors including economic growth, population growth, urbanization, agricultural intensification, mounting energy use and transportation. In the era of industrial revolution and

sustainable development, poverty still resides as a problem at the root of several environmental problems [5]. The basic intertwined liaison between environmental degradation, poverty, and violent conflict has been a prominent theme contained within the literature on sustainable development and conflict resolution since the mid-twentieth century. Although, some analysts have argued that violence has not been limited to the poor and deprived, but many have concluded from various studies that the devastation of the environment, poverty, and conflict are inextricably knotted [5,6]. As a Journalist in *Times of India*, Adiga travelled a lot in different places in India and got unveiling realities with his novel. Therefore, he portrays these realities in the novel through the story of Balram's, who belongs to a poor and low caste *shudra*, sufferings in this Materialist era and his journey for lightness from his native place Laxmangarh, situated in the darkness of Jharkhand (India), to the materialistic world of Delhi and Bangalore. He admits in the novel, "like all good stories; mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness." [1] Adiga portrays the real picture of India of light with the colour of bitterness, conflict, cunningness, corruption, murder and massive toxic traffic jams.

This paper is an effort to highlight a crucial issue which is untouched by other scholars as well as academicians till now. Instead of other issues, Aravinda Adiga presents in the novel the issue of deplorable

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condition of our environment which is more deteriorated in this twenty first century because every country as well as human being is ignoring the health of environment for the sake of development. Since the onset of human evolution, some thousand years ago, man had started interfering with the environment [5,14]. By cutting trees for wood and other household needs, he devastated forests. Nevertheless, with the scientific and industrial revolution in the recent past, there has been massive impact of man on environment. With the technical advancement, explosive increase in human population, scarcity of space and food, deterioration of hygienic conditions, depletion of natural resources and socio-economic problems, there arises a great need of extensive and exhaustive study of the environment, particularly in relation to human survival and benefit [8,10]. Man is considered the most successful and dominant animal of the biosphere in present epoch. His cerebral capabilities have enabled him to explore, understand and interpret the natural phenomenon in the world around him. He is strong enough to manipulate the environment according to his desires. In this way he is posing a threat to environment and also to humanity. This ignorance and arrogance of man for his environment is reflected in Adiga's *The White Tiger* [1,5,6,14].

#### **A Face of Environmentally Degenerated India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***

The novel is an account of human beings' uncontrolled activities which is making environment unhealthy for surviving all living creature. Due to population growth, water pollution, air pollution, radioactive pollution and other kinds of pollutions are resulting as the causative agents for contaminating our ecology [5,8,9]. In our eco-system every living creature is linked, directly or indirectly, with another one for their existence and this thing creates a healthy balance among all creatures. But these elements of pollution have created imbalance in our environment and some animal species have become extinct from our planet and some are in the verge of extinction [13,14]. Science and technological development is appreciable as it contributes to livelihood and human development but at the same time environmental degradation is associated with these developments. The expanding human activities have resulted in global warming and climate change. It also has affected the whole mankind at a global scale regardless of any particular country, region, or race. The entire world is a stakeholder and this raises issues on combating environmental degradation. Although, India has made a lot of advancement since independence, yet the increasing needs and aspirations of escalating human population have forced a change in land use and imposed excessive demand on the natural resources [5,9].

Adiga also highlights the other environmental issues like degradation of land, deletion of water resource, poor life style of remote areas' people,

helpless and suspecting nature of upper class, devastating poverty and unhealthy surroundings for existence across the novel [2,8,11]. Environmental degradation, including land degradation has been persistent for the past two decades to worsen exacerbating further poverty and food insecurity [5]. If we accept that hard core rural poverty is increasingly an observable fact associated with marginal lands, then new strategies are required that integrate poverty alleviation and environmental management [9]. Adiga explains through his novel how industrial development is harnessing the beauty of our biosphere. Clustered industry in urban and semi-urban areas, surrounded by densely populated, low-income localities, continues to corrupt the environment with impurity [9,10]. In recent years, man has realized the fact that environmental pollution will affect today and tomorrow and to overcome this situation protection of our environment and to sustain the development of environment is very much essential. One cannot disagree with the fact that climate change has caused heavy damage, resulting to environmental degradation of many types. Whenever natural habitats are destroyed or natural resources are depleted, environment is tarnished. Although, manufacturing and transportation sectors are the vital parts for the development of any nation, but these are the one of the basic reasons of the air pollution. The polluted emission of gases from these sectors which is full of other life taking gases and elements like sulphur dioxide, Carbon monoxide, Nitrogenous oxides contaminates the healthy environment of our surroundings and also the life nurturer gas like Oxygen [5]. Adiga reveals these things in the novel through the condition of metropolitan cities which are the symbol of development and just for the sake of development fill the environment with polluted gases. In addition, long-term exposure to air pollution can cause cancer and damage to the immune, neurological, reproductive, and respiratory systems. In extreme cases, it can even cause death. The inter-mingling relationship between environmental degradation, poverty, and violent conflict has been a prominent subject contained within the literature on sustainable development and conflict resolution since the mid-twentieth century [1,2,3]. It can be assumed that the environmental devastation, poverty, and conflict are inextricably correlated. The protagonist of the novel Balram says about Delhi, the capital and one of the famous metropolitan cities of India,

Rush hour in Delhi. Cars, scooters, motorbikes, auto-rickshaws, black taxis, jostling for space on the road. The pollution is so bad that men on the motorbikes and scooters have a handkerchief wrapped around their faces- each time you stop at a red light, you see a row of men with black glasses and masks on their faces,.....the air is so bad in Delhi that it takes ten years off a man's life [1].

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Instead of this, Adiga also presents the endless annoying traffic jams and pollution that is prevailing in Delhi as one of the reasons of air pollution. These toxic traffic jams increase frustration inside the people and they act like abnormal ways for conquer their frustration. Somehow, their substandard acts like spit on the road, abusing and scolding other vehicle drivers, smoking and other kind of tobacco actions increase the pollution and dirt in the atmosphere [2,5]. According to estimation by The World Health Organization (WHO), about a quarter of the diseases facing mankind today occur due to prolonged exposure to environmental pollution. Most of these environment-related diseases are however not easily detected and sometimes those may be acquired during childhood and manifested later in maturity. Many Indians are living today in areas where urban smog, particle pollution, and toxic pollutants pose serious health concerns. People exposed to high enough levels of certain air pollutants may experience irritation of the eyes, nose, and throat; wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, and breathing difficulties; worsening of existing lung and heart problems, such as asthma; and increased risk of heart attack and many more [3,9,10]. Also, long-term exposure to air pollution can cause cancer and damage to the immune, neurological, reproductive, and respiratory systems. In extreme cases, it can result to death. Balram, on the way to Gurgaon from Delhi, explains the scene:

Everyone honked. Every now and then, the various horns, each with its own pitch, blended into one continuous wail that sounded like a calf taken from its mother. Fumes filled the air. Wisps of blue exhaust glowed in front of every headlight; the exhaust grew so fat and thick it could not rise or escape, but spread horizontally, sluggish and glossy, making a kind of fog around us. Matches were continually being struck- the drivers of auto-rickshaws lit cigarettes, adding tobacco pollution to petrol pollution [1].

Some elements in polluted air like sulphur dioxide, ozone etc are not only harmful for living beings but also for abiotic components of environment. Balram explains about it, "To my left I saw the domes of the President's House- the place where all the important business of the country is done" and due to the air pollution "the building is completely blotted out from the road." [1] Construction is also one of the faces of development and without it one country cannot reach to furnished decoration for the betterment of society. But in the debris of the construction there lies a polluted surrounding as well as air. When Balram reached Bangalore, famous metropolitan city of India especially in IT sector, he found the entire city under construction and, "Piles of mud everywhere. Piles of stones. Piles of bricks." And this thing makes "The entire city is masked in smoke, smog, powder, cement dust" [1].

### **Poverty: A Major Factor for Environmental Degradation in *The White Tiger***

Another environmental issue presented by Adiga in *The White Tiger* is poverty and the slum areas of poor class. This realization of relationship between man and environment has resulted into the dictum that poverty leads to environmental degradation [2,6]. This claim is made on the ground that poor people directly depend on the environment and therefore involve in over exploitation of natural resources for their sustenance because this is the only preferred way they know. Further their ignorance towards scarcity of resources and its consequences make them free to over exploit the natural resources and adversely affect the natural system of environment and put a question mark over the notion of sustainable development [4,11]. It may be possible that other scholars are not considering the unhealthy and unhygienic atmosphere of the slum areas as an alarm for environmental degradation but somehow it effects the environment through its tainted condition. Other writer like Mulk Raj Anand, one of the fathers of Indo- Anglian fiction, also presents the pathetic condition of underclass people in his first and classic novel *Untouchable* (1935). He portrays the scene of slum areas with these words,

A group of mud walled houses that clustered together in two rows under the shadow both of the town and the cantonment, but outside their boundaries and separate from them. There lived the scavengers, the leather-workers, the washer men, the barbers, the water carriers, the grass cutters and other outcasts from Hindu society. A brook ran near the lane,[.....], now soiled by the dirt and filth of the public latrines situated about it, the odour of the hides and skins of dead carcasses left to dry on its banks, the dung of donkeys, sheep, horses, cows and buffaloes heaped up[.....]and the biting, choking, pungent fumes that oozed from its sides[.....]And altogether the ramparts of human and animal refuse that lay on the outskirts of this little colony, and the ugliness, the squalor and the misery which lay within it, made it an 'uncongenial' place to live in [4].

These slum areas are also deteriorating the major rivers of India because these are not having proper sanitation infrastructure and people of slum areas are compelled to use the fetid water of rivers. The heap of carcasses, human excreta, domestic garbage and other things on river banks are the reasons for water pollution and "the wind wafted the stench of fresh shit" [1] in the atmosphere. In this way the poor waste management poses a great threat for civilians, particularly those living adjacent the dumpsites due to the potential of the waste to pollute water, food sources, land, air and vegetation [4,6]. The poor disposal and

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handling of waste thus leads to environmental degradation, destruction of the ecosystem and poses great risks to public health. Poverty, rapid population growth, economic stagnation, unemployment and environmental degradation are found to coexist and thus seem to be reinforcing each other. Poverty also contributes to environmental degradation in most of the agriculture based developing countries for example farmers living in poverty may ignore the consequences of spoiling the fertility of land in a hurry of producing more and more food [11]. Over exploitation of natural resources like land, forest and water etc have often been held responsible for the environmental degradation. Poverty is said to be both cause and effect of environmental degradation. The circular link between poverty and environment is an extremely complex phenomenon. Disparity may foster un-sustainability because the poor, who rely on natural resources more than the rich, deplete natural resources faster as they have no option of gaining access to other types of resources. In this way, environmental degradation can speed up the process of impoverishment, again because the poor depend directly on natural resources [8,11].

#### ***The White Tiger: Presenting Water Pollution as One of the Major Issues***

While approaching drinking water continues to be a problem, getting assured that it is safe and pure is a challenge itself. The core reasons behind water quality problems are pollution and over-exploitation of resources. The swiftness of industrialization and greater emphasis on agricultural growth combined with financial and technological constraints and non-enforcement of laws have led to generation of huge quantities of waste and pollution [9,13,14]. Water quality is degenerated by both point and non-point sources of pollution. These include sewage discharge, discharge from industries, run-off from agricultural fields and urban run-off. Water quality is also worsened by floods and droughts and can also arise from lack of awareness and education among users. Adiga highlights the issue of water pollution through the pathetic condition of the holy river Ganga, “No! - Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids ” [1,2]. The condition of water is worst in the villages. The reason behind it is that there is only one source for water and human beings and animals share the water at a same time from that particular source. Balam, the protagonist of the novel, explains this thing with the special reference to his village Laxmangarh, “ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies.” [1,2]

#### **CONCLUSION**

Adiga, through these environmental issues, draws our attention towards the environmental

degradation and aware our minds about consequences which are arising. Infirmity towards making our life more and more luxurious is leading us to nowhere. The natural calamities, which are the signs of ill- health of environment, are the wake- up call for human beings to do special efforts for improving our surroundings as well as environment. High time has come for doing positive endeavors towards this direction otherwise we would not see our offspring nurturing in the healthy environment of this unique planet. For this one need perseverance for the betterment of humanity.

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