

Societal Pragmatism and Cultural Binaries in the Fiction of Aravind Adiga

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's fiction presents a sharp critique of contemporary Indian society by foregrounding the pragmatic survival strategies adopted by individuals caught within rigid cultural binaries. This research article examines how Adiga's selected novels and short stories articulate the binary nature of Indian culture—such as tradition versus modernity, morality versus corruption, rural versus urban and privilege versus deprivation—while emphasizing societal pragmatism as a response to these oppositions. Drawing upon postcolonial theory and cultural studies, the paper argues that Adiga portrays pragmatism not as moral degeneration but as a necessary mode of survival in an unequal socio-economic landscape. Through close textual analysis of *The White Tiger* and select short stories, the study reveals how Adiga dismantles idealized notions of Indian culture and exposes the contradictions inherent in a rapidly globalizing nation. The article concludes that Adiga's fiction offers a realistic and unsettling portrayal of Indian society, where pragmatic choices redefine ethics, identity and agency.

Keywords- Aravind Adiga; Societal Pragmatism; Cultural Binary; Indian Writing in English; Postcolonial Literature; Class Conflict; Moral Ambiguity; Globalization

Introduction

Indian society has long been characterized by deep-rooted cultural binaries that shape social relations, moral values and individual identities. These binaries—tradition and modernity, poverty and affluence, spirituality and materialism—continue to influence everyday life even in post-liberalized India. Contemporary Indian English fiction frequently interrogates these contradictions and among its most incisive voices is Aravind Adiga.

Adiga's works challenge romanticized portrayals of India by focusing on the lived realities of marginalized individuals navigating oppressive social structures. His fiction reveals a society where survival often demands pragmatic, morally ambiguous decisions. This research article explores how Adiga represents **societal pragmatism** as a response to the **binary nature of Indian culture**, arguing that his characters operate within these binaries not as passive victims but as active agents negotiating power, survival and selfhood.

The Binary Structure of Indian Culture

Indian culture is structured around several enduring binaries—caste and class hierarchies, rural and urban divides, colonial legacies and indigenous traditions. These oppositions are not merely cultural abstractions; they manifest materially in access to education, employment, dignity and justice.

In Adiga's fiction, these binaries form the backdrop against which characters make choices. The divide

between the "India of Light" and the "India of Darkness," as famously articulated in *The White Tiger*, symbolizes this stark cultural and economic polarization. The binary is not static; it is constantly negotiated through pragmatic actions that challenge moral absolutes.

Societal Pragmatism: Conceptual Framework

Societal pragmatism in Adiga's fiction refers to the practical, often morally flexible strategies individuals adopt to survive within an unjust social system. Unlike idealism, which presupposes ethical purity, pragmatism acknowledges compromise as a necessity.

From a postcolonial perspective, such pragmatism emerges from structural inequalities inherited from colonialism and perpetuated by contemporary capitalism. Adiga does not glorify corruption or violence; instead, he situates them within a system that leaves little room for ethical idealism. His characters embody what may be termed *survival ethics*—choices dictated by circumstance rather than moral absolutism.

Pragmatism and Moral Ambiguity in *The White Tiger*

The White Tiger stands as Adiga's most powerful exploration of societal pragmatism. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, rises from rural poverty to urban entrepreneurship through deception, betrayal and ultimately murder. Balram's narrative challenges conventional moral frameworks by questioning whether ethical purity is possible within a corrupt system.

Balram exists within multiple cultural binaries: servant and master, village and city, obedience and rebellion. His pragmatic rejection of servitude reflects a radical critique of Indian social morality, which often glorifies patience and submission among the oppressed. Balram's crime, while ethically troubling, is presented as a consequence of systemic exploitation rather than individual pathology.

Adiga thus reframes pragmatism as a form of resistance. Balram's ascent dismantles the myth of meritocracy and exposes the hypocrisy of a society that condemns individual transgression while tolerating institutional corruption.

Binary Identities and Pragmatism in Adiga's Short Stories

Adiga's short stories further elaborate his critique of Indian cultural binaries through condensed, incisive narratives. In stories such as "Smack" and "Last Christmas in Bandra," characters confront the contradictions of middle-class morality, urban alienation and economic precarity.

These narratives highlight how individuals oscillate between ethical ideals and pragmatic necessities. Middle-class characters, often assumed to be morally secure, are shown engaging in opportunism, self-deception and emotional exploitation. Adiga thus destabilizes the binary between moral respectability and corruption, suggesting that pragmatism permeates all social strata.

Women characters in particular reveal how gender intersects with cultural binaries. Their pragmatic negotiations within patriarchal systems underscore the limited agency afforded to them and the costs of resistance.

Urban Spaces and the Pragmatics of Survival

Urban India in Adiga's fiction functions as a site where cultural binaries intensify. Cities represent opportunity and anonymity but also exploitation and moral erosion. Characters migrate to urban centers seeking economic mobility, only to encounter new forms of marginalization.

Adiga portrays urban life as governed by pragmatic calculations—relationships are transactional, ethics negotiable and success contingent upon adaptability. This urban pragmatism reflects the broader impact of globalization on Indian society, where traditional moral frameworks struggle to accommodate rapid economic change.

Critique of Idealized Indian Culture

A central concern in Adiga's fiction is the dismantling of idealized narratives about Indian culture. Concepts such as spiritual superiority, moral resilience and communal harmony are interrogated through the lens of lived experience.

By emphasizing societal pragmatism, Adiga exposes the gap between cultural ideals and social realities. His characters' actions force readers to confront uncomfortable questions: Can morality survive systemic injustice? Is pragmatism a betrayal of values or a form of truth-telling?

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's fiction offers a compelling exploration of societal pragmatism within the binary framework of Indian culture. Through novels and short stories, he portrays characters who navigate contradictions not through idealism but through adaptive, often morally ambiguous choices.

This study concludes that Adiga's representation of pragmatism challenges traditional ethical narratives and compels readers to reconsider notions of success, morality and resistance in contemporary India. By foregrounding cultural binaries and pragmatic survival, Adiga establishes himself as a critical voice in Indian Writing in English—one that refuses comforting illusions and insists on confronting social reality in all its complexity.

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