

The Politics of Environmental Degradation in The White Tiger: A Political Ecocritical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Exhaustion and unthinkable destruction of the natural world resulted from the misuse and contamination of natural resources, which were fuelled by exponential industrial growth and a materialistic attitude toward global dominance. Ecological devastation, biodiversity loss, and climate change as a result of increased industrialization are no longer hypothetical issues in the current global environment (Beck 2008). Whether understood through the frameworks of the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, there are various planetary threats affecting not only a particular geographical region, but the whole world, endangering both human and non-human lives. In addition, it has been critically observed that human day-to-day life activities toward the environment have a direct and extensive negative impact on the health of the planet, which depends on the lushness of its surrounding ecosystems and the various species that inhabit them. Here comes a dire need to protect our environment through sustainable development, which certainly refers to a better path of establishing a fruitful and symbiotic relationship amongst living, non-living and the natural world. Ecological disasters are manmade disasters such as different nuclear wars, air pollution, water pollution, population explosion, as well as depletion of valuable natural resources. Writers like Aravind Adiga has performed a significant role in arousing environmental and ecocritical concerns through his literary creation. The human association with the green nature is the central aspect of ecocriticism; however, the political aspects towards ecocriticism should be addressed with critical analysis through which the role of government and political perspective will be explored. This research paper will explore the political ecocritical perspective of The White Tiger.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, environment, Ecological Disaster, Politics, political ecocriticism.

INTRODUCTION

Growing awareness of the planetary problem has led to a huge increase in scientific, artistic, and literary discourses that aim to depict events like ecological disasters, global warming, and the climate catastrophe that defy (conventional) representation. In these efforts, the concept of the Anthropocene is very important. As Timothy Clark asserts in *Ecocriticism on Edge*, it “names a newly recognized context that entails a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force of change in human affairs, as compared to the numerous economic, meteorological, geographical and microbiological factors and population dynamics, as well as scale effects, such as the law of numbers, that arise from trying to think on a planetary scale” (2015: 21). It is time to move beyond anthropocentric thinking to avoid our nature getting polluted. In newspaper headlines oil spills, deforestation, global warming, cloud bursting, toxic waste, acid rain, death of top soil, droughts and floods, hurricanes, cyclones and other disasters, but the outside literary world is limited by its hot topics, like class, gender and race, it ignores and never suspects that the earth's life system is in a critical situation. The environment or ecology has been one of the most important topics in the Western world for the last few decades in the scientific and social sciences. And men with those literary, social and political responsibilities should be taking on such a challenging situation and provide a solution that works. We should protect our Mother Nature as we live in a threatening environment that is unprecedentedly contaminated with human pollution in terms of pollutions that have a direct impact on nature. The urgent need of the hour is to construct a future where man and nature are in harmony. Mankind, for centuries, had been the master of all that he surveyed. He believed that nature exists for his purpose of use only. So he worked hard to exploit it. The modern man is facing ecological disasters. Within this framework, eco-criticism emerges as a literary theory in the 21st century. "A study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalists' praxis" (Buell-p-430) is the definition of eco-criticism given in the book *The Environmental Imagination*. The relationship between humans and nature, particularly with regard to the physical environment, is the subject of ecocriticism in literature. It focuses on the green problems that the modern world is dealing with. "The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between humans and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one

in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other" (Frederick p-147).

Environmental degradation is the result of human activity. Global learning is a result of activities like this and we must consider the environment and its balance. It is time for us to come together and challenge environmental injustice. Most of all, the environment is the foundation for human survival. So it's time to live a life that is ecologically and socially responsible. Ecocriticism asserts that literature has the power to change society. In her book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty provides a definition of the term. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (xviii).

In his Man Booker Prize-winner *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga lashes out at the hollowness of India's economic rise by revealing the darker side of its vaunted growth, and the socio-political deception that it brings with it (Choudhury, 2015). This paper will scrutinise how Adiga uses political ecocriticism to uncover the vicious entanglement of catastrophic urbanisation, environmental destruction and widening socio-economic disparities defining modern India (Doshi, 2018). In particular, the narrative lucidly describes obscene inequities and environmental destruction visited upon fringe communities (Scandes, 2011) directly resulting from the relentless unchecked growth of capitalism and a culture of endemic bribery. As a result the novel is more than simply a social critique but also an ecocritic, understanding how the physical environment reflects the moral rot of a society contending with uneven progress (Baral, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I examine some of the existing scholarly dialogue surrounding *The White Tiger* and the different critical perspectives it has been interpreted through—including postcolonialism and sociology—its ideas of class and corruption, and the legacy of economic liberalization. While some academic works partially recognize the textual treatment of environmental problems, a full political ecocritical examination is yet to be initiated, focusing on how the urban degradation portrayed in the novel is, in fact, a direct result of an aggressive (economic) system (Walther 2014). This essay seeks to amend that oversight by reading Adiga's representation of the urban environment as an extension of the natural environment, characterized by ecological destruction and social inequality, contending that the material environment is not passive but an active antagonist in the novel's critique of contemporary Indian development. The second section examines how Adiga uses the decay of urban space as a metonym for moral degeneration and social schism under a neoliberal economy (Baral, 2021). This provides a way to analyze how the novel weaves together human exploitation and environmental exploitation in a cycle in which the destruction of the one prefigures the downfall of the other. However, this review will also look at how Adiga's story is in line with some of the larger ecocritical concerns about anthropocentric attitudes embedded in developmentalist paradigms and how in general they lead to ecological destruction and social injustice (Pancholi & Mishra, 2021). Just as in Adiga's condemnation of the serious societal and ecological dangers of such development, literary works like Musa Ismail's *Novel Pudu's Cries* have also stressed the dangers of untamed capitalism to the environment and the economic and social inequality (Hayuningtyas & Wiyatmi, 2022). Ecocriticism's central concept of examining how humans interact with nature in literature is based on this view as the environment is not a passive observer (Tajane, 2024). This approach does not stop at the observation of how political and economic systems affect the environmental landscape and is also reflected in the urban decay portrayed in the story, but goes beyond simply the acknowledgment of environmental issues.

METHODOLOGY

We analyze *The White Tiger* in a political ecocritical manner, focusing on how these three parties were depicted in the novel in relation to the environment, economy and power. This model allows us to see how environmental degradation in the novel is largely a structural feature of political and economic practices that place profit and development before ecological conservation and social justice. This method shows the inequality of environmental burdens and benefits in a fast-paced and world-changing India through the lived experiences of characters like the protagonist Balram Halwai and the way that urban decay, pollution and depletion of resources are connected to poor people's socio-economic vulnerabilities. This is in line with ecocritical thinking of the interdependence of human and non-human beings and environmental factors is considered as an active agent that shapes and influences human socio-political structures instead of a passive observer (Iheka, 2017). It also explores how the novel's depictions of physical decay (the polluted rivers and garbage-strewn streets) reflect the moral and ethical decay of a society driven by unchecked ambition and corruption that makes a strong argument about what actually costs "progress." This framework also allows us to look at how Adiga's conception of the city is allegorical and mirrors the moral corruption and social fragmentation in the corporate world in neoliberal India. Postcolonial ecocriticism will also be incorporated into this analysis because colonialism's effects and historical power

relations still shape environmental policies and urban development in India, thereby allowing for the ongoing exploitation of natural resources and human labor (Nayak et al., 2023). This interdisciplinary approach allows an integrated view of how the environmental situation is embedded in the larger social, economic and political context and the negative impact of uncontrolled urbanization on the human and ecological world. The approach will also consider how literature can increase ecological awareness and a better understanding of the connection between human behavior and environmental impact (Tajane, 2024). This is consistent with ecocriticism's larger goal of shedding light on the many aspects of people's interactions with the world, including natural phenomena and a variety of life forms (Dhar, 2020).

In this context, the novel's depiction of rapid urbanization and its environmental fallout provides a fertile ground for exploring the complex interplay between human ambition, societal structures, and ecological degradation. Specifically, this analysis will engage with how the novel critiques the "toxic growth" paradigm, wherein rapid economic expansion disproportionately burdens the environment and marginalized communities, leading to visible urban decay as a manifestation of systemic injustices. The environmental and ecological effects of urbanization in India, where growing cities increase in both number and density, frequently at the expense of ecological health, are directly correlated with this toxic growth (Nagendra et al., 2013).

By revealing the socio-political deceit that lies beneath India's much-lauded development, Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* exposes the superficiality of the country's economic rise (Choudhury, 2015). This essay will examine Adiga's use of political ecocriticism to expose the pernicious connection between India's current socioeconomic divide, environmental deterioration, and fast urbanization (Doshi, 2018). In particular, the story eloquently illustrates how unbridled capitalist growth and a widespread culture of corruption directly result in the systemic injustices and environmental harm inflicted upon marginalized communities (Schotland, 2011). Thus, the book goes beyond simple social criticism to explore how the physical world reflects the moral decline of a society struggling with unequal development (Baral, 2024). Writers like Aravind Adiga has performed a significant role in arousing environmental and ecocritical concerns through his literary creation. Even though nature is the main focus of all ecocritical works, not all nature writings fall under this category. Ecocritical literature is based on the human connection to the environment and physical world. Ecocriticism examines the environment from interdisciplinary perspectives in addition to studying literature from an ecological standpoint. It discusses the destruction of the physical environment, the premature extinction of natural species, and the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation. It alerts people to environmental issues such as pollution, deforestation, natural degradation, and the environmental catastrophe. It also makes recommendations for potential fixes for significant ecological problems of the modern era.

DISCUSSION

Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* is in my opinion a sharp critique of the class system in India, economic disparities and inequality, moral decay and hypocrisy. But when applied to political ecocriticism we can better understand how the first chapter of the novel portrays the irreversible destruction of the environment and how the political power at the time is supporting this degradation so that it can make money through its exploitation of the underprivileged. It shows how power and politics are intimately connected. Political ecocriticism takes environmental issues and social injustice into account and how ecological exploitation can be exploited and re-enacted to the ends of class-based, caste-based, gender-based and global capitalism. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is not an environmental book but it does make environmental degradation and ecological injustice a part of a larger critique of inequality and exploitation in contemporary capitalism. The novel's environmental catastrophes are not abrupt or catastrophic as we typically think of them, but rather chronic, and they reflect the long-term, slow degradation of ecosystems that has an adverse effect on the poor, mirroring Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence. This graphic portrayal of the polluted Ganga River speaks to the failure of the state and the hypocrisy of religion. The sacred river that has so much to do with Indian spiritual and cultural life has been transformed into a toxic dump: a symbol of the disconnect between Indian culture and industrial practice. The pollution is a symptom of ecological disaster, and the poorest people have to drink, bathe, and work in this polluted water.

NATURE OF PROBLEMS

- How does the writer present issues of ecological disaster or crises in a specific country where there is a sharp distinction between rich and poor?
- Incorporation of new concepts like Political Ecology, Environmental literacy, Ecological Crisis, Environmental Injustice, Eco-anxiety, etc.

White Tiger, by Aravind Adiga, is a novel that focuses on the impact of environmental degradation on the characters and society as a whole. The biggest environmental issues in the book are the profit-driven attitude of the top class towards land degradation, the growth of cities in the name of capitalism, air pollution, water shortages, and poverty. Some examples of environmental injustice are found in *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. While the novel is primarily about broader social and economic inequalities, there are instances of environmental

injustice that are in the novel as well. Examining the environment from an ecocritical perspective, we can see how the environment is connected to power and oppression in the novel. In *White Tiger*, degradation of the natural environment is used as a metaphor for the decay of Indian society.

The polluted air and water, the disappearing forests and wildlife, and the rampant industrialization all represent the corruption and moral decay that pervades the society in which Balram lives, "To my left, I saw the domes of the President's House-the place where all the important business of the country is done. When the air pollution is really bad, the building is completely blotted out from the road..." (P 134).

The study of such questions relevant to the fundamental and inventive movements in the Indian-English context has been done by Adiga. The study of post-provincial migration, multi-cultural nativism and the importance of social-political interaction is also of great importance and successful. Indian writers are able to deal with them in a very deft manner and show the reality of these problems. We see Balram's transformation from a poor rural village to a successful entrepreneur in the city and how the environment shapes his worldview and how he acts. And as his involvement with the corrupt system deepens, he starts to see the environment as not a precious and finite ecosystem but as something for oneself to use for personal gain. The degradation of the environment also has a direct impact on the characters in the novel. In Balram's village, for example, the family must drink polluted water, which will lead to illness and death. And the disappearance of forests and wildlife also threatens the lives of those who depend on them for survival.

But environmental degradation also perpetuates inequality and reinforces power structures. Those in power are able to exploit the environment for their own benefit and the marginalized and oppressed suffer the worst. Rural communities are exploited for the benefit of urban development in the novel. Balram Halwai, in particular, is from a rural background and sees the contrast of the underdeveloped villages with the rapid growth of urban centres. Pollution and the health and well-being of different social groups in the novel are addressed. The city of Delhi where Balram works is very polluted and so pollution levels are high, and this results in health problems for poor residents who cannot afford medicines, protection or healthcare.

"Rush hour in Delhi. Cars, scooters, motorbikes, auto rickshaws, black taxis, jostling for space on the road. The pollution is so bad that the 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" (P 133). As the novel portrays the rapid urbanization of Indian cities, it also hints at the displacement of poorer communities to make way for new development, "I could see multitudes of small, then grimy people squatting, waiting for a bus to take them somewhere or with nowhere to go and about to unfurl a mattress and sleep right there. These poor bastards had come from Darkness to Delhi to find some light-but they were still in the darkness. Hundreds of them, there seemed to be, on either side of the traffic" (P 158). While *The White Tiger* does not extensively explore environmental injustice, it does provide glimpses into how environmental disparities can intersect with broader economic and social inequalities.

In this story, political ecology is key. Political ecology is an interdisciplinary field that studies how the economy and politics impact society and the environment. It examines how power relations, socio-economic structures, and political beliefs shape how we make choices about the environment and environmental justice. Aravind Adiga weaves environmental degradation, industrial pollution, and human suffering into one narrative to make a very emotional story, and this is in line with the philosophy behind political ecology. Political ecology looks at how the environment interacts with political, economic, and social forces. The discipline has a normative awareness that there are probably better, less exploitative, less coercive, and more sustainable ways to do things, Robbins says. (2005).

These presumptions allow political ecology to be utilised for:

- Better environmental governance can be achieved by educating policymakers and organisations about the complexities of the environment and development.
- comprehending how communities make decisions regarding the environment in light of social norms, economic pressures, and political environments;
- Examining the ways in which unequal relations within and between societies impact the environment, particularly regarding government policy.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga illustrates this kind of violence vividly in the rural village of Laxmangarh, where environmental degradation, poverty, and systemic exploitation quietly destroy the lives of its inhabitants. The novel doesn't describe any actual physical violence in Laxmangarh; it shows how generations of villagers live under conditions that are structurally violent: polluted water, broken infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, hunger, and denial of education. These slow-moving harms are politically and environmentally embedded, so Laxmangarh is an excellent example of environmental injustice and slow violence. Literature is a narrative weapon, and he's proved it. In this context, it is all very relevant to quote Rob Nixon, who has truly posed some questions:

How can we turn long-term, slow-moving disasters, anonymous disasters that star no one, and attritional disasters that are of little interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world into images and narratives? This is a crucial strategic and representational question in a time when the media exalts the spectacular, and public policy is largely based on perceived immediate need. How can the protracted emergencies of slow violence—whose aftermaths have led to some of the most pressing issues of our day—be transformed into tales dramatic enough to rouse public emotion and demand political action? (3)

Dhanbad is seen as a microcosm of eco-political violence. It is a city built on environmental plunder and sustained by political corruption, class domination and ecological dereliction. The exploitation of coal, the silencing of the poor and the systemic inequality make for a slow violence where the earth and its people are mined and discarded. Dhanbad's working class and poor live close to these polluted areas while the rich live in well-kept homes with water, transport and services. This is an environmental injustice, and is a key issue of political ecocriticism. The mines also represent extractive capitalism: land is stripped and workers are exhausted and replaced, much like the environmental landscape itself. From a political ecocritical perspective, Dhanbad represents a **sacrificial zone**, where **the land and the labor of the poor are exploited to fuel national development**. The so-called elite class never compromise their way of living to save the planet; no matter how polluted the earth becomes, the insatiable greed of the industrialist will keep on exploiting nature to produce profit-driven materials by means of exploitation of labour and nature.

The villagers lack access to clean water and safe sanitation, which leads to chronic illness and premature death. But because these deaths occur slowly, invisibly, and without spectacle, they are ignored—both by government and by upper classes who are supported by the government. This is **slow violence in its purest form**: life is drained quietly over time. The four landlords—Stork, Raven, Wild Boar, Rand, Buffalo—own most of land and demand rent and taxes from impoverished farmers, despite contributing nothing to the village's development. The arrival of the Stork is not just a narrative development, rather, it embodies a picture that reveals the **ecopolitical structure of domination** in rural India. The Stork is more than a greedy landlord—he represents **ecological control** as his political influence depicts the monopoly over the environment:

He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village. His brother was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. (P24-25).

And they extract the money without investing in the land and the people are left depleted and stagnant. Balram describes how elections are rigged and the villagers are manipulated to vote for corrupt leaders who never return. Without political voice, the people do not have resources or development. Political ecocriticism contends that powerlessness leads to environmental destruction as those without agency don't have the capacity to ask for clean air, healthcare, education, and safe housing. In Laxmangarh the environment becomes a weapon that consolidates caste and class hierarchies and its destruction is so slow and local as to not alarm national consciousness. Balram ponders how the villagers have accepted their fate as permanent. "They remain animals in a coop," he says, referring to the metaphorical "Rooster Coop" that keeps the poor obedient despite their suffering. Using Rob Nixon's lens, we can see so well that Laxmangarh is not just a poor village; it is a silent battlefield where lives are cut short not by war or disaster, but by generations of neglect, pollution and political abandonment. Adiga's narrative makes this slow violence visible.

CONCLUSION:

In an overtly populated country like India, environmental issues should be addressed with utmost concern as disaster, whether natural or man-made, always disrupts social, political, economic and cultural aspects. At the same time, environment is politically affected in terms of its usage it. For the sake of building skyscrapers, high-rises, we are cutting off big trees; for the sake of tourism, we are destroying hills and mountains, chopping down forests, killing wild creatures and as a result, the human race is destroying itself through the adoption of a lifestyle which is not sustainable. The money generated by such aforementioned issues is enjoyed by the elite and rich class of the society; on the other hand, the doers and makers of such things are suffering as means to everything. A nation's overall development and its level of environmental security are closely intertwined. Poverty and environmental degradation coexist in a developing country like India. For daily survival, people desperately require resources, fertile land, and clean water. The land on which the people reside is intertwined with their way of life and culture. The economics, culture, and daily lives of the populace are all adversely impacted when that land is destroyed or contaminated. We need to shift the paradigm from the anthropocentric to the ecocentric system of values. The writer suggests the development of deep ecological vision and the awareness of environmental justice as the solution to the ongoing ecological crisis, which is politically intensified. So the research shows there is a crying need to preserve nature because humans are at the heart of the natural world and governments, as one of the forces driving a nation, should keep in balance between capitalistic profit and keeping things as they are.

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