

**A STUDY OF NEW URBAN REALISM IN SELECT NOVELS OF ARAVINDA ADIGA  
AND KARAN MAHAJAN**

Rabi Kanta Roy

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Kabi Nazrul College

(Affiliated to The University of Burdwan),

Birbhum, West Bengal.

robiroy111@gmail.com

**Abstract**

*Writing is a reflection of life in all its guises and configurations. In literature, realism is an approach that seeks to depict life without romanticizing or subjectifying it in an idealized way. It has mostly focused on the routines of middle-class and lower-class daily life, where character is shaped by social circumstances and environment plays a crucial role in the dramatic difficulties. In the 21st century, the Indian novel has become a dynamic and expressive medium. While new novels by well-known authors like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, and Vikram Chandra display the grand postcolonial gestures typical of the late-20th-century Indian novel, a number of new authors have also emerged during this time, exploring a variety of novelistic trajectories. Amitava Kumar, Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Githa Hariharan, Samina Ali, Karan Mahajan, and others are a few of these writers. In their works, the younger generation of writers has attempted to explore far more constrained regional and cultural narrative frameworks while simultaneously attempting to portray the fullness of life in modern-day India. Contemporary Indian fiction employs a very realistic style known as “new urban realism,” which prioritizes local specifics. Aravind Adiga and Karan Mahajan are the contemporary novelists of India. It is Aravind Adiga who won the prestigious Man Booker Prize for his novel *The White Tiger* in 2008. Karan Mahajan’s second novel, *The Association of Small Bombs* was a finalist for the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction. The present paper is to explore new urban realism in these novels to understand the contemporary India.*

**Key words:** Society, Realism, New Urban Realism, Adiga, Mahajan

## **Introduction**

Literature is an expression of life in all its manifestations. Literature serves as a window into society and life. Where the writer sets the mirror is up to him. Authors have occasionally examined the several facets of the interaction between society and man. A potent tool for presenting the period in a descriptive and analytical way is the novel. A potent tool for presenting the period in a descriptive and analytical way is the novel. In literature, realism is an approach that aims to depict life without romantic subjectivity or idealization. Realism is most frequently linked to the literary movement in 19th-century France, particularly with the French novelists Flaubert and Balzac, but it is not exclusive to any one century or set of authors. William Dean Howells brought reality to the United States, while George Eliot brought it to England. The commonplaces of middle-class and lower-class daily life have been the main focus of realism, where environment plays a crucial role in the dramatic difficulties and character is a product of social forces. In the drama, Henrik Ibsen's social plays are most strongly linked to realism. The authors later believed that social realism placed an excessive amount of attention on the outside world. Many of them, including G.B. Shaw, Anton Chekhov, and Henry James, therefore resorted to psychological realism, which painstakingly studied the intricate mechanisms of the mind.

Indian English novelists always stand different from other foreign novelists. Many Indian novelists depict realism in their novels. Novelists right from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Khushwant Singh show the realistic picture of life in their novels. *Anandmath* deals with the theme of East-West encounter. Another Indian novelist Mulk Raj Anand is also a realistic writer who shows the true and realistic picture of the contemporary Indian society. He focuses on the problem of untouchability and the poverty in India. In the twenty-first century, the Indian novel has been a dynamic and lively medium for expression. Although new works by well-known authors like Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, and Salman Rushdie exhibit the grand postcolonial gestures typical of the Indian novel of the late 20th century, a number of new authors have also emerged during this time, defining a variety of novelistic styles. Kiran Desai, Aravind Adiga, Githa Hariharan, Samina Ali, Karan Mahajan, and Amitava Kumar are a few of these writers. In addition to attempting to explore far more constrained regional and cultural narrative frameworks in their works, the younger generation of writers has attempted to portray the fullness of life in modern-day India

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of significant postcolonial novels were published as a result of a general shift away from ambitious literary fiction in the form of the "huge, baggy monster."

Three examples of this trend are Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), and Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). These books are still being published; Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006) and Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* (2008–2015) are two notable examples. However, the most vibrant and significant Indian literature is progressively experimenting with new novelistic forms and literary styles. The "large, postmodernist Indian English novel," according to Amit Chaudhari, is dedicated to a "mimesis of form, where the largeness of the book allegorizes the largeness of the country it represents."

Thus, since 2000, this is the most intriguing new work of Indian fiction. New Urban Realism is the name of the new kind of novelistic form. Contemporary Indian fiction employs a very realistic style known as "new urban realism," which prioritizes local specifics. Instead of focusing on national metropolises like Delhi and Mumbai, it frequently highlights regional cities like Patna or Hyderabad. Along with themes of criminality, violence, and corruption, the style also frequently portrays liberal Indian hypocrisy (particularly in a time when wealth accumulation and urban slum growth are occurring at the same time) and double standards regarding caste and religious biases.

The non-fiction book *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* (2004) by Suketu Mehta may have served as the inspiration for the writing explosion that highlighted this approach. Both Indian and Western readers were captivated by the book, which was a finalist for the 2005 Pulitzer Prize. A wave of interest in this kind of material was sparked by Mehta's ability to obtain candid stories of sex workers, crooked politicians, police-targeted killings (also known as "encounters"), Bombay gangsters, and Bollywood film stars and producers involved in all of this. Numerous writers are linked to the New Urban Realism movement. The conflict between state violence and the different types of religious extremism that fuel terrorism also interests them. In certain respects, New Urban Realism could be the Indian equivalent of "post 9/11 fiction" as it is published in the United States and Britain. Lastly, it seems necessary to recognize that New Urban Realism can be viewed as a means for a new generation of writers to set themselves apart from their predecessors; the subgenre typically eschews fantastical elements like Rushdie's magical realism or Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Although Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2005) was most directly adapted into the 2008 movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, the film's producers and screenwriters have openly acknowledged that they were also influenced by *Maximum City* when they portrayed Mumbai street crime. One could even argue that Roy's most recent book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), engages in a type of urban realism.

Aravind Adiga and Karan Mahajan are the contemporary novelists of India. The renowned Man Booker Prize was awarded to Aravind Adiga in 2008 for his book *The White Tiger*. *The Association of Small Bombs*, Karan Mahajan's second book, was a finalist for the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction. One of the main reasons of their success of fiction may be their realistic touch to their novels. The core content of this proposed research work is to explore new urban realism in their select novels to understand the Contemporary India. These writers have been chosen as for the similarities in the matter of their treatment of themes.

*The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga (b. 1974), which won the Booker Prize, is a prime example of the new urban realism movement, while it may also be interpreted as a globalization story. He attended Columbia and Oxford Universities, was born in Chennai, and was partially raised in Australia. He has stated that his trips, particularly to rural India, served as the inspiration for *The White Tiger*. He spent a number of years working as a journalist in India. This book humorously employs a first-person conceit to trace the ascent of a poor man from a low-caste background from his humble beginnings in a rural area of the "backward" state of Bihar (referred to as the "Darkness" in Adiga's book) to a position of great wealth and power in metropolitan Delhi—and ultimately the tech hub that is today's Bangalore. *Selection Day* (2016), another recent book by Adiga, continues the examination of class and urban life through the story of two boys who play cricket in a Mumbai slum. Since then, more authors have come forward to investigate the new urban realism.

Karan Mahajan (b.1984) is another urban realist from Delhi whose books, *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016) and *Family Planning* (2009), examine political and social challenges in modern Indian cities. Mahajan is a critic, essayist, and novelist of Indian American descent. He was raised in New Delhi after being born in Stamford, Connecticut. His first book, *Family Planning*, is a lighthearted and humorous coming-of-age story that explores the conflict between the globalist and cosmopolitan tendencies of the younger generation on the rise and the broken socialist legacies of Indian government bureaucracy, as embodied by the protagonist's parents, who appear completely incapable of "family planning" given their thirteen children. "The funniest book of the year, and the truest portrait of modern New Delhi I've read," said Suketu Mehta about the book.

*The Association of Small Bombs*, Mahajan's second book, is about a market blast in Delhi. More ambitious, the book examines how the bombing of a public marketplace affected a number of survivors, notably Mansoor, a Muslim kid whose two Hindu companions were killed in the attack, and Vikas and Deepa Khurana, the boys' parents. The Kashmiri insurgent Shaukat

“Shockie” Guru, who created the bomb that killed the Khurana children, is the protagonist of Mahajan’s parallel story. Shockie is a young guy of low circumstances who is driven more by a desire for vengeance than by religious fervor for past crimes committed against Kashmiris by the Indian government. He is consumed by his mother’s deteriorating health and the low compensation he gets from both his international and domestic employers. Mahajan is not really interested in delving into the inner workings of a terrorist’s mind because, for the most part, terrorists do not consider the human implications of their activities. Mahajan seems to humanize a terrorist as a (risk) careless participant in a vicious cycle of violence by fusing candid and moving information about Shockie’s daily life with objective reporting about his bomb-making. The novels of Aravind Adiga and Karan Mahajan explore the contemporary urban life in India, particularly through the lens of social, economic, and cultural transformations in modern cities. This literary approach reflects the complex realities of urban spaces, focusing on issues such as inequality, identity, migration, and the evolving urban landscape. By analyzing their works, we can gain insights into how urbanization affects individuals and communities, and how these authors critique the socio-political environment of India’s rapidly developing cities.

### **Aravind Adiga’s Urban Realism in *The White Tiger***

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) is a striking example of urban realism, offering a gritty and unflinching portrayal of contemporary Indian society. Through the lens of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, the novel critiques the socio-political and economic systems in India, particularly the stark divide between the urban elite and the rural poor. Adiga uses urban realism to expose the hidden layers of corruption, class struggle, and moral decay in the rapidly modernizing cities of India, primarily focusing on the urban center of Delhi. In the novel, Balram Halwai, a poor rural boy, narrates his journey from a humble village in Bihar to becoming a successful entrepreneur in the sprawling city of Bangalore. The novel unfolds as a letter to the Chinese Premier, in which Balram confesses his transformation from a servant to a murderer, ultimately asserting his agency by breaking free from the shackles of servitude. His story critiques the rigid class structures, the widespread corruption, and the moral contradictions of urban life in modern India.

For Balram, Delhi represents the urban elite, the rich and powerful, who live in lavish palaces and are insulated from the poverty and exploitation that characterize the lives of people like him. The city is portrayed as a symbol of wealth, corruption, and social inequity. Through his interactions with his employers, the stark divide between the opulence of the upper class and the

squalor of the lower class is sharply visible. Balram's move to Bangalore marks his rise as an entrepreneur. It is a city that represents modernity, opportunity, and rapid growth. However, even in this city of progress, the inequalities of the Indian caste system persist. The same corruption and exploitation that exist in Delhi are mirrored in Bangalore, where Balram ultimately becomes a part of the urban elite, albeit in a morally compromised way.

Adiga presents urbanization not as a hopeful, progressive force but as a catalyst for increased social division and moral decay. The cities are depicted as places of exploitation, where the urban elite thrive while the poor remain trapped in cycles of poverty, often resorting to unethical means to survive. The urban spaces are rife with violence, corruption, and crime—elements that are integral to Balram's rise to power.

One of the central themes of *The White Tiger* is the stark class divide that is prevalent in Indian cities. The novel paints a vivid picture of the urban class system and how deeply ingrained it is in society, even in a supposedly modern and urbanized India. Balram uses the metaphor of the "Darkness" to describe the rural and lower-class world from which he comes. In contrast, the "Light" symbolizes the rich, powerful urban world that he aspires to enter. This metaphor reinforces the social and geographical divide between rural India and the urban centers, highlighting the limited opportunities for upward mobility for those born into poverty. Balram's role as a chauffeur for his wealthy employers, the Stork family, exemplifies the modern-day servitude that exists in urban India. Even in the city, the hierarchical structures of caste and class are perpetuated. Balram's employer, Mr. Ashok, may appear liberal and progressive, but he is still complicit in a system that exploits people like Balram. The novel critiques the way in which the urban elite turn a blind eye to the suffering and exploitation of the working class.

Adiga's portrayal of urban life is characterized by a pervasive sense of moral decay, and *The White Tiger* focuses on the corruption that is rampant in both rural and urban areas. Balram's rise to success, which involves deceit, betrayal, and murder, highlights the compromises individuals must make to succeed in India's cutthroat, capitalist society. Urban realism in *The White Tiger* is heavily tied to the theme of systemic corruption. Whether it is the bribing of police officers, the illegal dealings of the Stork family, or the corrupt politicians in Delhi, Adiga shows that the entire system—political, corporate, and social—is built on corruption. The novel suggests that in such a system, morality is often sacrificed for survival, especially for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Balram's transformation into a murderer and a business owner is symbolic of the lengths one must go to escape the clutches of poverty in a city like Delhi or Bangalore. The

city does not provide a fair playing field for those born into the “Darkness,” and the only way to succeed is through ruthless self-interest, manipulation, and crime.

Adiga’s urban realism also extends to the psychological impact of urbanization on individuals. Balram’s internal conflict, as he navigates the worlds of servitude and entrepreneurship, reflects the deep psychological toll of living in a society where the divide between the rich and the poor is so extreme. Balram’s experiences in the cities lead to a profound sense of alienation. As he moves between worlds—the rural, the urban, the servant, and the master—he faces an identity crisis. This sense of alienation is amplified by the anonymity and isolation of urban life, where individuals, despite being surrounded by millions, often feel disconnected and powerless.

### **New Urban Realism in Karan Mahajan’s *The Association of Small Bombs***

Karan Mahajan’s *The Association of Small Bombs* (2016) is a powerful example of New Urban Realism, a literary movement that seeks to portray the gritty, complex, and often uncomfortable realities of life in contemporary cities. The novel addresses the impact of urban violence, terrorism, and social fragmentation in modern India, particularly in the context of Delhi, a city that is marked by stark social divides, tensions, and rapid modernization. Through a narrative that weaves together personal stories and the collective trauma of a city, Mahajan uses New Urban Realism to explore how terrorism and violence intersect with the lived experience of urban citizens.

*The Association of Small Bombs* follows the aftermath of a bomb explosion in a busy marketplace in Delhi, which kills two young boys, Tushar and Samir, and severely injures their friend Mansoor. The novel shifts between the perspectives of the victims, their families, the bomb maker, and a survivor as it explores the deep psychological, social, and political consequences of the attack. Mahajan’s narrative spans several years, examining how the characters grapple with trauma, loss, and their changing identities within a city marked by violence. New Urban Realism focuses on the intersection of the individual’s personal experience with the broader social, economic, and political forces that shape the urban environment. The “new” aspect of this realism emerges from an emphasis on the psychological and emotional impacts of urbanization, globalization, and violence, particularly in cities like Delhi, which are undergoing rapid transformations. In *The Association of Small Bombs*, Mahajan uses urban realism to dissect the complexities of contemporary urban life, focusing on issues such as terrorism, identity, alienation, and the fragmentation of social fabric in the wake of violence.

Mahajan's portrayal of Delhi in *The Association of Small Bombs* is one of fragmentation and division. Delhi is not just a backdrop but an active character in the narrative. The city is depicted as a space where social and economic inequalities are starkly visible, where elite and impoverished communities live in close proximity but remain psychologically and physically separated. The novel explores how these divides are exacerbated by violence and terror, which affect not only the immediate victims but also the collective consciousness of the city's inhabitants. The bombing that serves as the central event of the novel shakes the very foundation of the city. It's not just an isolated attack but a symbol of the pervasive sense of insecurity that grips the urban space. Mahajan emphasizes how the city's inhabitants are constantly in fear, and how terrorism becomes part of the urban fabric, changing the dynamics of public and private spaces.

New Urban Realism is not just about the physical landscape of the city but also about the emotional and psychological consequences of urban life. In Mahajan's novel, the aftermath of the bombing profoundly affects the characters, particularly the survivors and the families of the victims. This exploration of trauma and the fragmentation of the self is central to the novel's urban realism. For Mansoor, the survivor, the bombing alters his identity and his relationship with the city. The novel delves into how he processes the trauma of living through such an event, while his personal recovery is paralleled with the societal healing (or lack thereof) in the city. Similarly, the families of the victims—particularly the parents—struggle with loss and grief, and Mahajan presents their ongoing emotional devastation as a reflection of the city's inability to heal from such violence. The novel highlights how urban violence leads to a sense of alienation. In a globalized city like Delhi, where people are physically close but emotionally distant, the bombing serves as a catalyst for emotional dislocation. The characters often feel isolated within the city, as if their experiences are alien to the larger urban environment. This reflects a broader theme in New Urban Realism: the city is both a place of opportunity and a site of alienation.

One of the core elements of New Urban Realism is the focus on the stark economic and social divisions that define urban life. In *The Association of Small Bombs*, Mahajan's portrayal of the characters' social backgrounds emphasizes the disparities between the wealthy and the impoverished. While the wealthy are largely insulated from the violence that affects the lower classes, they too are impacted by the terrorism, either directly or through the societal unrest that follows. Mahajan also critiques the failure of the state to address both the root causes and the consequences of urban violence. The government's inadequate response to terrorism, the apathy of law enforcement, and the pervasive corruption within the system are key elements that

Mahajan weaves into his depiction of Delhi. This points to a larger critique of how urban centers, despite being places of power and influence, fail to create a just, equitable society.

*The Association of Small Bombs* also explores how globalization and urbanization have transformed Delhi, making it a global city with all the contradictions that come with rapid modernization. Mahajan juxtaposes the growing cosmopolitanism of the city with the deep-rooted socio-political tensions that still define many aspects of urban life. Delhi, as depicted in Mahajan's novel, is a city at the intersection of global and local forces. It is a space where global influences such as media, technology, and capitalism coexist with entrenched local practices, religious tensions, and economic inequalities. The novel examines how the globalized aspects of urban life often obscure the local realities, leading to an environment where violence becomes a coping mechanism for some marginalized groups.

A major theme of New Urban Realism is the questioning of moral and ethical norms in the face of urban violence and corruption. In Mahajan's novel, characters are often placed in morally ambiguous situations where their actions, even if violent or destructive, are driven by the larger socio-political forces they inhabit. The bomber in the novel, for instance, is a character who feels justified in his actions due to his political and religious beliefs, which speaks to the deep moral conflicts that shape urban life. The novel avoids easy answers about terrorism and violence. Rather than portraying terrorists as mere villains or the victims as pure innocents, Mahajan presents complex characters caught in the web of urban politics, class struggle, and religious conflict. This moral ambiguity is a hallmark of New Urban Realism, where no individual or social group is entirely innocent or entirely guilty.

### **Conclusion**

Adiga and Mahajan contribute to the growth of New Urban Realism by providing stark, unflinching portraits of life in India's cities. Their works reflect the complex realities of urban existence, marked by social alienation, economic inequality, and political unrest. The themes explored in both authors' works are not confined to India but resonate globally, as cities around the world grapple with similar issues related to urbanization, inequality, and violence. Both Adiga and Mahajan demonstrate the role of writers in not only documenting the urban landscape but also critiquing and questioning the systems that shape it. Their works compel readers to confront uncomfortable truths about contemporary urban life. The novels of Adiga and Mahajan shed light on the evolving portrayal of cities and urban life in contemporary Indian literature.

These authors use the urban setting not just as a backdrop, but as a critical space where the social and political tensions of modern India are brought to the forefront.

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